

Indigenous Islamic Conflict Resolution: The Case of General Santos City, Mindanao, Philippines

BONN JUEGO, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ, FINLAND

MUSS LIDASAN, AL QALAM INSTITUTE, ATENEO DE DAVAO UNIVERSITY, PHILIPPINES

Abstract

This article examines the Shari'a Atas Bitiara (SAB) program implemented by the City Government of General Santos in Mindanao, Philippines. Recognized with the Galing Pook Award in 2023 for excellence in local governance, SAB integrates indigenous Islamic conflict resolution practices into public administration. It addresses the absence of dedicated Shari'a courts for the city's Muslim constituents by offering culturally relevant, efficient, and cost-effective alternative dispute mechanisms. Through documentary research and expert interviews, this study highlights SAB's notable accomplishments and innovations in creating value for the improvement of the quality of life in a multicultural society. Although the narrative of success often points to SAB's satisfactory results, such accounts may obscure the indigenous Bangsamoro roots of the practice and the Islamic foundation of the principles underpinning it. SAB emphasizes the community's sensibility for restorative justice, healing, and reconciliation over punitive measures. These are reinforced by Islam's concepts of *shura* (consultation), *sulh* (conciliation), and *tahkim* (arbitration). By institutionalizing a tradition of public service delivery with deep cultural alignment, yet adaptable to modern elements such as human rights considerations and gender sensitivity, SAB has effectively resolved numerous disputes, ranging from marital issues to land conflicts. In both its practical performance and theoretical grounding, the SAB case exhibits a promising faith-based, non-Western framework of governance that can further enhance conditions for mutual understanding, communal bonds, and social cohesion.

Keywords: indigenous Islamic conflict resolution; Shari'a Atas Bitiara; Bangsamoro; Muslim Mindanao; non-Western public administration

1. Introduction

The Philippines, home to a predominantly Catholic population of 115 million, is one of the few countries still grappling with persistent armed conflicts, stemming from both communist insurgency and Islamist militancy. Approximately 6.4% of Filipinos are Muslims, primarily residing in the southern island of Mindanao. Since the establishment of the post-colonial Philippine nation-state in the 1940s – whether despite or because of it – the region of Muslim Mindanao has become a hotspot of varied conflicts, wars, resistance, rebellion, and armed insurgency with ethnic, religious, political, and socio-economic dimensions.

The concept of "Bangsamoro" represents the shared identity of various Muslim communities in southwestern Mindanao, including the Sulu archipelago, and their aspiration for self-determination against the colonizing notions of the Filipino nation and the modern Philippine state (Alonto 2016). From the early 1970s, local Muslim rebel groups – initially the Moro National Liberation Front and later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front – have been engaged in cultural, ideological, and military confrontation with the central government's assertion of territorial integrity and sovereignty. The violent process of constructing a unitary Philippine state entailed the gradual annexation of the Moros, who were independent and sovereign sultanates that resisted Spanish and American colonization (Canuday and Sescon 2022). This state-building formation, part of the modernization project, has also resulted in the minoritization and marginalization of Muslims (Abinales 2020).

While resolving sovereign-based conflict in the historical relationship between the Bangsamoro communities and the national state authorities remains the ultimate governance objective over the long term, it is equally significant to address the everyday intra-communal conflicts between Muslim individuals and groups (Lara 2014). Although less visible on the international stage, community-level conflicts have profound impacts on the daily lives of people and can exacerbate larger issues. If left unresolved, the various sources of communal conflicts – ranging from personal grievances and marital disputes to family feuds and clan rivalries – can escalate the cycle of violence implicating the broader society. There have been instances when the local "rido" phenomenon (i.e., feuding, retaliatory violence, vendetta, or intertribal warfare between families and kinship groups) triggered large-scale conflicts involving Muslim separatist groups and the military (Torres 2014). *Rido* refers to blood feuds, or chains of killings provoked by an affront to family's honor, including violent disputes over politics, land, and other material resources. Bloody rido, in which a tit-for-tat clan war is dealt with through armed violence in the name of family pride and honor, is a manifestation of a weak state's failure in governance and its inefficient justice system against a backdrop of prevalent informal economic activities and shadow economies (Durante et al. 2014; Torres, 2014; Lara and Schoofs 2016). In the context of persistent and interrelated causes of conflicts, conflict resolution is a critical function of governance. An exploration of indigenous and culturally informed approaches is necessary due to the apparent shortcomings of conventional mechanisms in governing conflictive relationships.

Public administrators often deal with societal, organizational, institutional, and ethnic conflicts – highlighting the importance of enhancing scholarship and skills in the governance of conflict resolution, not least in non-Western societies (Lan 1997; Esman 1997; Drechsler 2013, 2025; Juego 2023). This article reflects on the success story of the Shari'a Atas Bitiara (SAB) program of the City Government of General Santos (GenSan) in the island of Mindanao as a promising example of how indigenous Islamic practices have been – and can be – incorporated into public administration to manage conflicts and create public value. As such, the aim is to contribute to an emerging research agenda to build an empirically grounded theory of "Islamic public value" by examining a real-life case of "non-Western public administration" in Southeast Asia against a global backdrop of a "pluriverse" of good governance practices and a diversity of administrative cultures of human living-together (Drechsler 2015; Kothari et al. 2019; Drechsler et al. 2024; Juego 2023). Through documentary research and expert interviews, this study showcases SAB's significant achievements and innovative approaches

in enhancing the quality of life within a multicultural society. It advances the argument that while SAB's success in service delivery is often highlighted, it is crucial to recognize the indigenous origins and Islamic principles that form its foundation. SAB prioritizes restorative justice, healing, and reconciliation over punitive measures, drawing on Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultation), *sulh* (conciliation), and *tahkim* (arbitration). By institutionalizing a culturally aligned program that also adapts to modern considerations like human rights and gender sensitivity, SAB has successfully resolved numerous disputes, from marital issues to land conflicts, thereby strengthening communal bonds and social cohesion among the city's diverse population.

2. General Santos City: Governance for Harmonious Coexistence

About 10% of GenSan's 700,000 inhabitants identify Islam as their religious affiliation (Philippine Statistics Authority 2023). GenSan, a highly urbanized coastal city situated in the province of South Cotabato in Southern Mindanao, is often referred to as the "Boom City of the South" and the "Tuna Capital of the World" due to its booming economy, especially in agriculture and fishing. Like much of Mindanao, GenSan's history is marked by colonial land grabs and dispossession, displacing indigenous inhabitants from their ancestral domains. The *Lumads* (meaning "natives"), specifically the B'laan and T'Boli ethnic groups who practiced animism, along with the Muslim Moros, were significantly affected by colonization (World Bank 2017).

Originally called Dadiangas, the area saw waves of migration during the 1930s when Christian settlers from Luzon and Visayas arrived as part of the American colonial Commonwealth government's migration program to populate and "develop" parts of Mindanao. This socio-economic development process, including the state-orchestrated enforcement of land titling and privatization, entailed a cultural shift toward Christianization (Villano-Campado 2007). In 1954, a decade after the Japanese occupation and a few years after Philippine independence from the United States, the area – then known as the Municipality of Buayan – was renamed General Santos, in honor of General Paulino Santos, the former chief of the national army who led the establishment of settlements in the region. In 1968, the municipality was elevated to city status and is now viewed as an interactive "melting pot" of Christians, Muslims, and Lumads (Hall 2010).

In a multicultural environment, conflicts – arising from differences in opinions, beliefs, interests, goals, or values – are inevitable and integral to community life and societal evolution. Their outcomes, whether positive or negative, depend on their management. Effective conflict management, which promotes tolerance, dialogue, and diverse interest accommodation, can lead to increased understanding, collaboration, and economic development.

Across Mindanao, Muslim communities have cultivated indigenous conflict resolution methods over generations. Their cultural beliefs and traditional practices are regarded as tacit knowledge and community wisdom in dealing with conflicts. These approaches may be more effective than conventional ones as they consider the distinct socio-cultural fabric of the communities involved. Particularly in sensitive cases and challenging instances, indigenous methods of conflict resolution have proven indispensable in averting conflict

intensification (Durante et al. 2014; Macabuac-Ferolin and Constantino 2014). Such success stories of governing entities institutionalizing local ways of conflict management serve as governance templates for lesson drawing for any modernizing city government like GenSan.

For many decades throughout Mindanao, families of different ethnic groups have learned to coexist peacefully. This is notable in GenSan, where diverse groups such as the Maranaws, Maguindanaos, Tausugs, and other ethnicities have built close relationships and mutuality. However, despite the best intentions of everyone, misunderstandings can arise over time. Conflicts over land, resources, personal relations, or other issues may escalate into longstanding feuds that can affect not only the concerned individuals but also the entire community. In such situations, an essential task of governance is to promote dialogue and understanding to prevent the exacerbation of conflicts and to find peaceful solutions that benefit the common good.

3. The Shari'a Atas Bitiara Program: Galing Pook Awardee 2023

GenSan's SAB initiative is a winner of the prestigious Galing Pook Awards 2023, specifically cited for being a "comprehensive and balanced conflict resolution mechanism for Muslims." Since 1993, the Galing Pook Awards have annually recognized excellent programs of local government units through a multilevel selection process and competitive national search (Carizo et al. 2024). On 16 September 2023, SAB was one of the 10 awardees from a pool of 17 finalists. At this 30th anniversary of the Galing Pook Awards, there were 166 nominees from across the Philippines, commendable for several dominant themes (notably, agriculture, food security, environment, climate change adaptation, health, and social welfare). All of them showcase "the enduring spirit of innovation and community-driven solutions," as well as "the remarkable evolution and resilience of local governance" (Galing Pook 2023).

SAB was created by virtue of City Ordinance number 55, series of 2018, through a consultative process among stakeholders, designating the Office of the Mayor's Integrated Cultural Communities Affairs Division (CMO-ICCAD) as its main implementer. The ordinance's rationale is premised on the collective observation that there has been an absence of a dedicated Shari'a court for adjudicating legal disputes between the city's Muslim constituency. As a result, whenever there was a need to mediate disputes, Muslims would resort to non-formal means of arbitration, which are costly and time-consuming. They would first turn to the *Kadatuan* (traditional Moro leaders), whose services come at a cost. As fees are levied for facilitation work, the aggrieved parties were often left with a portion of the settlement. If the party disagreed with the arbitrator's decision, they sought redress from other avenues, such as religious authorities or other instrumentalities. Cases related to personal and civil laws were lodged with Islamic scholars, who provided resolutions based on their interpretation of the teachings of Islam in the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith. However, the scope of this channel is limited and overlooks certain matters – including those related to marital, family, household, and land issues – which require formal court scrutiny, decision, and action.

To address these existing shortcomings, the SAB program has been designed as an alternative conflict resolution mechanism. Guided by Islamic Jurisprudence, the Code of Muslim Personal

Laws, and Moro customs and traditions, it is geared to satisfy the actual governance needs for justice in the day-to-day life of the Muslim community in the city. Parties that need mediation may seek SAB's services cost-free, without any financial burden on them. SAB resolves disputes through amicable settlement, considering specific circumstances and the perspectives of clients to find the most feasible and acceptable solutions. It provides a platform for open dialogue to attain peace within households and communities, covering various social issues, including those related to marriage, divorce, claims for dower (*mahr*), betrothal, property relations between husband and wife, as well as conflicts over land and community leadership. A key objective is to fairly and promptly resolve conflicts affecting the social lives of individuals and the well-being of the community to prevent escalation into violence.

4. SAB's Notable Accomplishments and Promising Innovations¹

The SAB program has made significant strides in creating public value through its innovative and culturally appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms. Its notable accomplishments and promising innovations excel in five key criteria: effectiveness with a view to results and impacts; promotion of people's empowerment and participation; legal alignment, organizational innovation, and local adaptation; sustainability of the program and resiliency of the office infrastructure; and efficiency of service delivery and transferability. These defining characteristics and compelling features of SAB were also noted in the Galing Pook recognition

4.1 Effectiveness: Results and Impacts

The effectiveness of SAB has been demonstrated not only in terms of expenditure for the government and cost for individual citizens, but also in its practical resolution of conflicts within GenSan's Muslim community. As of 20 May 2023, it had successfully settled 352 cases. Through effective organization and communication, SAB is achieving desired outcomes, producing results with invaluable societal impacts without costing a lot of money for the city government.

Since its inception on 1 July 2019 with an initial budget of PHP 454,800, the SAB has been proactive in addressing cases as soon as they are brought forward. The project coordinator prioritizes cases requiring immediate intervention. In contrast to the Shari'a courts, where filing a simple case can cost clients between PHP 40,000 and PHP 60,000, SAB resolves cases free of charge. This substantial cost-saving aspect is a major benefit for the community. For instance, with 423 cases filed, the total amount saved by clients, who would otherwise spend PHP 40,000 per case in formal courts, amounts to PHP 16,920,000. The government's spending on the program is roughly PHP 5 million over five years, yet the value of services provided translates to PHP 14,080,000, reflecting a return on investment of 281.6%.²

¹ Notes and data from this section are sourced from documents provided by General Santos City's CMO-ICCAD and from expert interviews.

² Currency conversion: 1 Euro is around 60 Philippine pesos (PHP).

More than the value that SAB generates from optimizing resources in delivering results, its effectiveness and success can be largely attributed to its organizational configuration that inspires public trust. For every case accepted, it conscientiously mobilizes a mediation team composed of a Shari'a counselor, an Islamic scholar, and a *Kadatuan*. Led by the Shari'a Action Officer, the team is carefully selected to competently advise and work with disputants through the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, Islamic Jurisprudence, and Moro customary law. The team's optimal composition paves the way for efficient management. Dialogues are often scheduled within a week after filing, unlike the lengthy waits in formal courts.

Before mediation, clients undergo counseling sessions to understand the root causes of their problems and the relevant laws. During mediation, efforts are made to diffuse tensions and restore relationships among disputants, a process not typically emphasized in court settlements. Recognizing that most cases involve marital conflicts, SAB ensures the protection of Muslim women's rights, financial support for children of divorced couples, observance of visitation rights, and fair property division according to Islamic or customary law.

Having a marriage certificate is one basic right that married Muslim couples have often been denied. An additional service of SAB is in response to this problem by facilitating the registration of marriages. From 2021 to 2023, it has assisted in the processing of delayed registrations for 827 couples and 347 conversions.

To enlarge its reach and maintain public's trust in quality service, SAB strategically communicates stories of successful mediation through its Facebook page, the most used social media platform in the country. Occasionally, the Facebook posts of resolved cases, often using the hashtag #ShariaInAction, include relevant reminders on the pillars and teachings of Islam (Shari'a Atas Bitiara Program n.d.). To illustrate the effectiveness of the SAB program, consider examples or scenarios of pragmatic and faith-based actions on prominent cases related to marital and land issues.

In one instance, a marriage problem may involve a wife seeking SAB's help due to her husband's neglect and failure to provide financial support. The mediation team could guide the couple through the process, resulting in the husband agreeing to provide regular financial support. Such resolution cares for the well-being of the wife and children, restoring stability and hope for the family.

A distressed beneficiary of SAB activity might express relief and gratitude for the support received. In a case of separation or divorce, women – particularly mothers – could feel a sense of compassion and professionalism from the counselors and mediators, who guide them through the process with respect for their customs. As a result, they could have some peace knowing their rights are upheld and their children's welfare is protected, such as through co-parenting and visitation arrangements for fathers to improve the father-child relationship.

Another case may involve two families in conflict over a piece of land that both claimed as their ancestral property. Due to intense anger between the parties, SAB mediators may resort to shuttle mediation by communicating separately with each family. Through careful negotiation and reference to Moro customary law, the team may facilitate an agreement to respect new boundaries where the land would be divided equitably. By this way of resolution,

the escalation of conflict into violence can be prevented, and a notion of fairness and reciprocity is enabled.

A family feud involving two brothers disputing over their late father's estate provides another illustration. The SAB team can offer counseling to help them understand the applicable laws and the importance of family unity. Through mediation, the brothers can reach an agreement on the division of the estate that honors their father's wishes and maintains family relations. Such resolution settles a legal dispute, heals the rift between the brothers, and allows them to support each other moving forward.

Timely resolution of a land dispute that causes tremendous stress would be appreciated by conflicting parties and valuable for the larger community. SAB's intervention is capable of not only resolving conflicts but also restoring harmony within the community, demonstrating the program's effectiveness in keeping social cohesion.

4.2 Promotion of People's Empowerment and Participation

The establishment of SAB was done through the city council's legislation and policy-making procedure. The democratic process followed comprehensive public hearings that included consultations with Muslim religious and community leaders. Their reflections and suggestions were incorporated into the ordinance. Hence, SAB's legislative basis is well-aligned with the lived experiences, needs, and expectations of the community.

Muslim constituents actively participate in the workings of SAB by encouraging disputing parties, especially those who feel aggrieved, within their communities to bring their cases forward. This grassroots involvement has greatly contributed to the program's growing popularity and commendation. The SAB Consultative Body has been particularly effective in resolving or helping to settle differences among conflicting parties, leading to wider acceptance and support within the Muslim community.

Influential figures from the city's masjids, communities, and civil society organizations are credible messengers for information dissemination about SAB's activities. Their collective efforts are aimed at sustaining peace within Muslim communities. Moreover, the GenSan office of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) has also been endorsing cases filed in their office to the SAB. The NCMF is an attached government agency with regional offices under the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) with a mandate to preserve and cultivate the culture, traditions, and institutions of Muslim Filipinos. The cooperation of SAB with the NCMF-GenSan and other partners broadens the program's reach, making services more accessible to everyone, regardless of their status in life. Whether a party is the complainant or respondent, their mutual rights are respected, and their obligations are justly set.

4.3 Legal Alignment, Organizational Innovation, and Local Adaptation

The SAB program exemplifies a blending of innovative organizational practices with legal compliance and local adaptation. It complies with Section 16 of Republic Act (RA) 7160, the Local Government Code of 1991, which mandates that local government units exercise powers necessary for efficient and effective governance and the promotion of general welfare. It also complements RA 9285, the Alternative Dispute Resolution Act of 2004, which promotes party autonomy in dispute resolution and encourages the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) to achieve speedy and impartial justice and reduce court dockets. In accordance with these statutes, the GenSan city government passed the SAB Ordinance, establishing the program as an innovative project. By aligning with national laws, SAB's operations are legally sound and supportive of broader governance goals.

At the same time, SAB introduces unique elements that are sensitive to social dimensions of culture and gender, thus distinguishing it from other conflict resolution mechanisms. Building on its tacit cultural instinct, SAB integrates key personalities in its mediation processes. Although there may be similarities in other local governments, GenSan's SAB uniquely brings together three groups – *Kadatuan*, Shari'a Lawyers, and Islamic Scholars – to help settle conflicts. Disputes in Muslim communities are often settled by Moro traditional leaders (*Kadatuan*), who apply arbitration based on Moro customary law. SAB enhances this approach by also applying Presidential Decree (PD) 1083, the Code of Muslim Personal Laws (Shari'a law in the Philippines), which governs the affairs of Muslim Filipinos. SAB has facilitated advocacy on PD 1083 in Muslim communities and among barangay chairpersons, helping them understand Islamic institutions and the legal system of Muslims as part of Philippine law.

A refreshing and peculiar characteristic of SAB's organizational structure and relations is its apparent regard for gender inclusion, particularly women's representation. Traditionally, mediators are usually men; however, in SAB, the Shari'a Action Officer is a woman, and there are other women mediators to make sure that all rights are protected.

Related to the need for professional counseling on marriage issues and community support to family life is the recognition that many Muslim clients need to be more knowledgeable about Islamic jurisprudence. For example, it has been observed that incorrect divorce procedures are sometimes applied by other arbitral bodies. SAB addresses these inadequacies and tendencies by conducting follow-up activities such as *kumustahan* (check-ins) and *da'wah* or moral values lectures, especially if one of the parties is not complying with the signed agreement. SAB has also become an avenue for fathers to hand over support to their children, which proves convenient for former spouses residing far away from each other. Likewise, the SAB Consultative Body contemplates a plan to encourage all Imams and Solemnizing Officers to require would-be-married Muslim men and women to undergo pre-marriage counsel based on Islamic law. This orientation would provide knowledge about marriage in Islam, the rights of husbands and wives, and how to avoid family disintegration.

No other local government unit has implemented a project of this kind with such coherence in legal, cultural, social, and organizational aspects of service delivery. Among its many noteworthy features in effective local governance, it can be said that the GenSan city's

SAB program observes both needs-based and rights-based approaches to development programming.

4.4 Sustainability of the Program and Resiliency of the Office Infrastructure

Having been institutionalized through an ordinance, SAB has become a key division of the city mayor's office. The ordinance provides a stable foundation for SAB, in which the structure of CMO-ICCAD includes the IP (Indigenous Peoples) Development Program and the Moro Development Program. This institutionalization process increases the certainty of the program's continuity, regardless of changes in mayoral leadership, unless it is repealed by another democratically scrutinized policy.

All cases filed with SAB are meticulously documented, with complaint forms, attached documents, settlement agreements, and promissory notes compiled and kept intact. The thorough documentation procedure warrants transparency and accountability. Given its successful implementation and contribution to the overall peaceful situation in the city, it is highly unlikely that local officials would abrogate the program.

In compliance with the local government's Quality Management System, SAB operates within an established process flow that guides CMO-ICCAD personnel and clients. As a major project component of CMO-ICCAD, second only to the Madaris for Peace Project, SAB receives an annual budget appropriation. This budget covers operational costs, including provisional fees for the members of the SAB Consultative Body, as stipulated in the ordinance. The program is included in the Program, Projects, and Activities and the Annual Investment Plan, thus with the assurance of adequate funding each year.

The 13 members of the SAB Consultative Body, who regularly receive monetary honorariums, constantly reflect on ways to facilitate a more efficient budget liquidation. SAB's financial stability supports ongoing operations and its ability to provide free services to the community.

Furthermore, the built environment of the SAB office, including the hardy infrastructure supporting it, is vital for sustainability in a calamity-prone area. The CMO-ICCAD office, a newly constructed two-storey building, is engineered to withstand earthquakes and is located in a flood-free area. All staff are trained to respond to fires and other disasters with the safety of clients during emergencies in mind. In the event of an epidemic recurrence, SAB can continue its operations by utilizing larger facilities, such as the gymnasium behind the CMO-ICCAD building, to allow for physical distancing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SAB adapted by offering online consultations and counseling, providing uninterrupted services through phone calls and online chats. The building's design, with glass windows allowing natural ventilation and light, also supports operations whenever power outages occur.

During mediation sessions at the office, a safe environment for conflict resolution is ensured with the presence of security personnel. This is to manage the risk and potential of violent confrontations between conflicting parties. If a dialogue cannot be completed in one sitting, additional meetings are scheduled promptly, with up to three attempts before referring the case to an appropriate agency.

The predictability of SAB’s sustainability can also be ascertained in cultural and political spheres. Culturally, SAB addresses concerns about the preservation of Moro customs and traditions by including *Kadatuan* in the consultative body. This inclusion suggests that customary practices are respected and integrated into conflict resolution processes, provided they align with public welfare. Politically, SAB enjoys support across different administrations because of its proven importance for local peace and order. It operates independently of political influences, initiated by the previous administration (Mayor Ronnel Rivera) and sustained by the incumbent administration (Mayor Lorelie Pacquiao).

In summary, the resilience of the infrastructure and sustainability of the SAB program are evident in its well-designed facilities, adaptive operational strategies, and strong cultural and political foundations. These elements collectively signify that the program can continue to provide vital conflict resolution services under various challenging circumstances.

4.5 Efficiency of Service Delivery and Transferability

SAB’s organizational structure is well-defined to deliver services efficiently and effectively. The program is headed by the Shari’a Action Officer, supported by two technical staff members who handle client interactions, record complaints, schedule mediation sessions, document proceedings, prepare agreements, and maintain records for safekeeping. Unlike the perennial delays and red tape in trial courts, SAB tries to immediately intervene in conflicts, as early as a week after a case is filed.

Mediators facilitate the mediation sessions, providing counseling and ensuring that the parties understand and comply with the agreements reached. Compliance is monitored by the staff, who provide clients with contact numbers to report any violations. If a party fails to comply with the agreement, SAB will summon the violating party for further action.

The performance of the SAB program is evaluated annually. The members of the consultative body convene at the end of each year to review cases, identify challenges, gather feedback, and develop action plans to address any issues encountered. This systematic evaluation process ensures continuous improvement and adaptation.

The success of the SAB program has inspired other communities and local government units to adopt similar initiatives. For instance, the Muslim community leaders of Barangay Siguel in GenSan have requested a copy of the Shari’a Atas Bitiara Ordinance and localized the project in their barangay, calling it *Walay na Bitiara*. Similarly, Barangay Fatima has adopted a conflict resolution mechanism through its own Muslim Affairs Office and submits their accomplishments to the SAB.

Since 2020, various local government offices and officials from provinces, cities, and municipalities in Mindanao – such as Sultan Kudarat, Davao Oriental, Cotabato, and Sarangani – have visited, contacted, and consulted with SAB. Their goal was to study, learn, and benchmark the SAB program and other initiatives for Muslims in GenSan, with the intention of lesson-drawing and replicating good practices in their respective localities. In

Glan, Sarangani Province, a Shari'a settlement under its Office on Muslim Affairs is being implemented, initiated by SAB's former member, a Shari'a Counselor.

When SAB received the Galing Pook Award in 2023, its popularity attracted attention and interest from national and international organizations. It has been featured in the media, and university managers, teachers, and students have shown interest in studying it through visits, research, and interviews. The SAB program was also presented by GenSan city officials at a workshop organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a model for preventing and countering violent extremism. The CMO-ICCAD has welcomed study visits and accepted invitations from other local government units, extending their willingness to guide and support those interested in learning about SAB and its potential for emulation in other communities.

The efficiency in service delivery and transferability of the SAB program is evident. These are manifested in its structured approach, systematic evaluation, and the interest it has garnered from several sectors and locales. SAB has been both efficient and effective, proving its capacity to serve as a model for conflict resolution and community empowerment.

5. Indigenous Bangsamoro Traditions in Resolving Disputes

In the usual way, storytelling from mainstream news and public appreciation tend to depict SAB's excellence vis-à-vis the criteria of the Galing Pook Award. Yet, beyond and beneath the narratives of success based on SAB's effectiveness, innovation, resiliency, sustainability, efficiency, and transferability is the program's indigenous Islamic foundation.

The ideas of the SAB program are deeply rooted in Bangsamoro traditions of dispute resolution. The mechanisms that underpin SAB today are path-dependent and have a long history within Mindanao's Muslim population, often predating colonial or external legal systems. In comparison with "Western" liberal philosophy in the administration of justice, SAB is characterized by several distinctive features.

First, the principles of SAB are embedded in cultural and spiritual beliefs that are perceived as fair, just, and effective. Unlike punitive systems, SAB focuses on healing and reconciliation rather than punishment and retribution. This restorative justice approach aims to repair harm and restore relationships between individuals and within the community. SAB promotes the goal of peace through social cohesion while maintaining cultural identity and autonomy. Punitive measures such as imprisonment and fines are secondary to reconciliation and community well-being. Although in some instances an imposition of penalty may entail monetary indemnification such as "blood money" for damages, harm, or loss, these can be construed not merely as material compensation but as a deeper symbolic and religious act toward the path to forgiveness, mercy, and moving on in life (Torres 2014).

Moreover, SAB addresses the broader social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of conflicts, aiming to rebuild interpersonal relationships and uproot systemic injustices. The program recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals, families, communities, and the natural

world. There is often a deep connection to land, sacred sites, natural resources, and the ecology, which is integral to the Bangsamoro way of life. In essence, SAB's approach is holistic, considering the entire context of the conflict and the well-being of the community. This method not only resolves disputes but also strengthens the social fabric. At the same time, justice is served in a manner that is culturally and spiritually fulfilling.

5.1 Historical Context and Cultural Practices

SAB's mechanisms are organic to the cultural traditions, customs, and values of GenSan's Muslim community. In general, various indigenous communities in the Philippines have passed down traditional dispute settlement methods to future generations as part of their cultural heritage (Ragandang 2017). In Muslim Mindanao, peaceful conflict resolution processes are known by different names, yet a common feature is the important role played by leadership and the council of elders (Daturanong et al. 2013).

The community elders or members of the *Bitiara*, who mediate disputes and form decision-making bodies, are selected based on their lineage and experience in resolving conflict. They are perceived as wise and impartial authorities. Traditional leaders exercise authority and possess knowledge of customary laws to facilitate reconciliation and prevent escalation. The work of these trusted leaders and elders emphasizes dialogue and mutual understanding to restore community harmony. Founded on the community's cultural and spiritual beliefs, the communication process through consensus guarantees that resolutions are respected and upheld by all parties involved.

Although indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms may seem rigid, the SAB experience demonstrates adaptability to changing social, political, and environmental contexts. The actions and decisions of SAB mediators are grounded in local customs and Islamic teachings; hence, they are culturally appropriate and spiritually accepted. The involvement of elders lends credibility and legitimacy to the process to foster trust and cooperation among disputing parties.

5.2 Integration of Modern Elements

The City of General Santos is one of the more recent local government units that integrated indigenous Islamic tradition into its formal governance institution. Particularly in the Muslim Mindanao region, hybrid mechanisms that institutionalize Moro customary methods in municipal policies, combining traditional and mainstream approaches to resolving conflicts and providing spaces for peace, have already been in place. These can be observed, for example, in the provinces of Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, and Sulu (Torres 2014).

Operating against the background of the country's liberal-democratic constitution and statutes, the city's SAB program has integrated modern socio-legal elements without compromising cultural integrity. This includes embedding human rights and gender sensitivity in decision-making processes, alongside the utilization of technology in its public relations.

For instance, women mediators are included to ensure that the rights of all parties, especially women and children, are protected. The prominence of women mediators and beneficiaries is also observable in SAB's online communication.

The inclusion of women as managers and mediators is a substantive innovation in Muslim community governance. Perspectives and rights of women are recognized, increasing guarantees for a more representative and equitable resolution. In marital disputes, the presence of a female mediator would help the wife to feel more comfortable and supported. In land dispute cases, mediators enforce property rights in accordance with both Islamic principles and liberal standards.

6. Islamic Concepts: Shura, Sulh, and Tahkim

In contemporary law studies and practice, the SAB program can be categorized as an ADR mechanism, focused on the civil justice system where compromise is preferred over litigation. Although the success and increasing legitimacy of SAB are attributable to the efficiency, simplicity, and cost-effectiveness of similar ADRs globally, it is important to recognize that the guiding principles of SAB's existence and operation take inspiration from Islamic civilization, which predates Western colonialism of Asian and African legal systems (Hassan 2006; Rashid 2012). From its conception and formation to implementation and evaluation, SAB has embodied and exhibited key concepts from Islam – notably, consultation (*shura*), conciliation (*sulh*), and arbitration (*tahkim*).

6.1 Shura (Consultation)

Mutual consultation, or *shura*, in a participatory manner has been integral to the planning, formulation, and promotion of SAB as a trustworthy institution. Established through the city government's legislative branch based on an actual need and demand to solve a social problem involving Muslim communities, it has undergone a thorough public hearing process. The program's primary stakeholders, especially the Muslim religious and community leaders, were duly consulted. Their invaluable participation and Islam-informed suggestions shape the spirit and letter of the ordinance.

The SAB processes of institution-building and trust-building are inclusive and consultative efforts. Part of SAB's takeoff involved a series of collaborative reflection and visioning activities of the city government with civil society organizations and other concerned groups. In its first month, the city's CMO-ICCAD organized the "Forum on Traditional Justice System," which, inter alia, led to the formation of an advisory body, the "Muslim Religious Council," composed of *Ulamas* or scholars who graduated from local and foreign Islamic educational institutions (Kinjiyo 2019).

The capability of SAB's Consultative Body to effectively resolve conflicts and settle differences is credited for its growing acceptance. Rather than being perceived as an intimidating venue, SAB is promoted as a welcoming and encouraging space for prospective clients. Word of mouth from the network of groups who partook in its institutionalization contributed to the legitimation of this mechanism. Imams from local masjids, Moro traditional leaders, non-governmental organizations, and voluntary associations and civic activists all play crucial roles in disseminating information about the services offered by SAB in line with their common goal to sustain peace and harmony within Muslim communities.

Knowledge about SAB, as well as its scope and jurisdiction, is expanded by its links to other government units and agencies. The NCMF and the *Lupong Tagapamayapa* of Muslim-dominated barangays in GenSan endorse cases they deem appropriate for SAB to hear. The NCMF, formerly under the supervision of the Cabinet Secretary of the Office of the President before it was relegated to department-level bureaucracy, has a statutory mandate to promote the rights and welfare of Muslim Filipinos as citizens of the republic. The *Lupong Tagapamayapa*, or Pacification Committee, is a village council of citizens established to reduce the caseload of lower courts by effecting extrajudicial settlement of minor cases between neighbors and community residents. There is a conciliation body in each *lupon* (committee) whose main function is to bring together in dialogue opposing parties and effect amicable settlement of differences. While said committee does not have a punitive mandate, its decision is binding.

To further enhance outreach, SAB maintains an active social media presence. Its Facebook page posts regular updates on conducted mediations and relevant news. This communication strategy promotes greater awareness and participation in the program, reaching out to potential clients, especially the needy and indigent persons.

6.2 Sulh (Conciliation) and Tahkim (Arbitration)

The communication materials used by CMO-ICCAD to introduce SAB to the public emphasize SAB's mission consistent with Islamic teachings on the virtues of conciliation and arbitration (Shari'a Atas Bitiara n.d.). First, "Islam teaches that there is an excellent reward for those who facilitate reconciliation between disputing parties." Second, "The best among you are those who bring the most benefit to others."

For Muslims, reconciling people is a virtue. Reconciliation means resolving disputes, mending relationships, and restoring harmony among individuals or groups. It is about finding a middle ground and encouraging conflicting parties to compromise for the sake of unity. This is considered a virtue in Islam because it aligns with the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet on the importance of unity and brotherhood among Muslims.

There is a connection between reconciliation and the broader principles of faith in Islam (Othman 2007; Al-Ramahi 2008). These principles include sincerity, honesty, and goodwill. Sincerity refers to the purity of intention in one's actions, honesty involves speaking the truth and being trustworthy, while goodwill is about wishing and doing well for others. These

principles are not only virtuous in themselves but they also guide Muslims in their interactions with others and with Allah.

The Prophet is quoted as saying, "Truthfulness leads to righteousness, and righteousness leads to Paradise." This *hadith* underlines the value of honesty, which is seen as a pathway to righteousness and ultimately, to Paradise. In the context of reconciliation, honesty could involve admission of mistakes, being truthful in dealings, and upholding justice. In other words, the act of reconciling conflicting people is not only about resolving disputes but also about living with the values of sincerity, honesty, and goodwill, and striving for righteousness and unity in conformity with the teachings of Islam.

SAB is also informed by the Islamic concept of arbitration, known as *tahkim*. SAB's conflict resolution mechanism involves a third party taking responsibility for evaluating a dispute and deciding upon the correct outcome. This ensures an impartial decision-making process coherent with the principles of good governance, fairness, and justice (Jamal 2018). Consistent with *tahkim*, SAB aims for both efficiency and effectiveness, resolving conflicts in a timely manner and thus contributing to society's cohesiveness. Moreover, the process of *tahkim* in SAB helps build trust and confidence among the public. The credibility of the administration is enhanced when disputes are resolved fairly and transparently. By adopting the concepts of *sulh* and *tahkim* in the SAB program, this increases the social legitimacy of GenSan's justice system for Muslim communities, where these Islamic principles and jurisprudence are highly regarded.

7. Conclusion

The rationale and performance of the SAB program in General Santos City exemplify how indigenous Islamic practices can be effectively integrated into public value creation through conflict resolution (Drechsler 2013, 2025; Juego 2023). Rooted in the rich cultural and spiritual traditions of the Bangsamoro people, SAB has demonstrated remarkable success in promoting social cohesion and enhancing the well-being of the community. The SAB case exhibits an actuality – and a further potentiality – of a non-Western paradigm of local governance, specifically an Islamic public administration in practice, with its distinct ways of effective service delivery and legitimate goals in addressing social needs (Drechsler and Chafik 2022; Drechsler et al. 2024).

Through its emphasis on consultation (*shura*), conciliation (*sulh*), and arbitration (*tahkim*), SAB has established a conflict resolution mechanism that is not only operationally efficient and pragmatically effective but also culturally relevant and widely accepted. The program's focus on restorative justice, healing, and reconciliation over punitive measures underscores its commitment to attaining social peace and community harmony.

SAB's notable accomplishments in conflict resolution, cultural relevance, inclusivity, sustainability, and societal impact highlight the administrative capacity and transformative power of a religion-based innovative institution of local governance. By targeting the underlying causes of conflicts and forging dialogue, SAB has been able to prevent the escalation of

disputes and promote a sense of justice and mutual respect among the city's multicultural communities. The integration of modern elements, such as human rights considerations, gender sensitivity, and the use of technology, has further enhanced SAB's effectiveness and relevance. These innovations demonstrate SAB's adaptability and its potential to serve as a model for other local government units seeking to implement similar initiatives. The adaptiveness and resiliency of SAB also signify that it possesses "agile stability," a dynamic yet stable program, whose robust management capability and future sustainability draw from its competent organizational configuration that enjoys broad socio-cultural legitimacy (Kattel et al. 2019).

Indeed, the SAB program stands as a testament to the enduring value of indigenous conflict resolution practices in contemporary governance. Its success story offers valuable lessons for public administrators and policymakers on the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to conflict management. Founded on the Islamic concepts of *shura*, *sulh*, and *tahkim*, and integrating traditional practices with modern elements, SAB has not only resolved conflicts but also strengthened communal bonds, promoted social justice, and contributed to the condition of peace in GenSan. As such, it serves as an inspiring example of how indigenous Islamic principles can be harnessed within an institutional governance framework to create public value and enhance the quality of life for all community members.

The SAB template may launch a positive ripple effect on identical contexts. Like other effective service delivery programs of Muslim Filipino communities based on indigenous Islamic cooperative institutions, SAB remains to be a small bright patch in the conflict-ridden landscape and underdeveloped region of Mindanao, let alone in the periphery of the Philippines' historical structure of maldevelopment. Still, the SAB experience of the City Government of General Santos offers a compelling lesson for the responsive local governance of a multi-ethnic constituency: There cannot be meaningful peaceful coexistence, cultural flourishing, economic development, and social change without good public administration.

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Bonn Juego (bonn.juego@jyu.fi) is a Senior Lecturer in International Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He is the current Chair of the Finnish Society for Development Research. Before joining academia, he worked for civil society organizations; he also served the Philippine government as a researcher and later as Director II – Chief of the Legislative Staff – of the Office of the Deputy Speaker for Mindanao in the House of Representatives, addressing peace and development issues for Muslim Filipinos.

Muss Lidasan (mslidasan@addu.edu.ph) is the Executive Director of the Al Qalam Institute at the Ateneo de Davao University in Mindanao, Philippines. A former Member of Parliament of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (2019–2022), he also served as Commissioner of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (2017–2019). He is a columnist and contributor to several media outlets, notably SunStar Davao and MindaNews.