# BETWEEN IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE: UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE IN MUSLIM MINDANAO

CHRISTOPHER RYAN MABOLOC

## ABSTRACT

*Difference politics looks into institutional rules, norms and practices that reinforce the positional inequalities in society. This imbalance in the socio-economic structure gives undue favor to those who are at the top of the hierarchy. To rectify this injustice, unjust structures should be dismantled, and replaced with inclusive mechanisms and policies. Identity politics focuses on recognizing the unfair and unequal treatment of minorities. Group-differentiated rights empower people. But there exists a gap because political representation is not enough to alter the deeply embedded societal inequalities. Using the Bangsamoro as a case in point, it is argued that to address the problem, the roots of the historical injustice against Muslim Filipinos and Lumads must be traced. To create a just society in the Bangsamoro, inclusive institutions must be built based on the framework of holistic peacebuilding.*

*Keywords: Politics of difference; identity politics; Muslim Mindanao; peace-building*

## INTRODUCTION

Difference politics looks into norms and practices that reinforce the positional inequalities in society (Young 2000). This imbalance in the social structure gives undue favor to those who are at the top of the political hierarchy. Oppression is replicated in institutions (Gallen 2023). To correct social injustice, structures should be dismantled and replaced with inclusive mechanisms and policies. Identity politics focuses on ending the unjust and unequal treatment of minorities beyond representation rights. Group-differentiated rights empower marginalized individuals. But there exists a practical gap because political representation is not enough to correct inequalities that cause structural violence. Using the Bangsamoro as the case in point for this investigation, it is argued that to address the Mindanao problem, the roots and causes of the structural injustice against Muslims and Lumads should be identified and analyzed.

Structural injustice is the root cause of the violence in human society. In the case of Muslim Mindanao, the bias against Muslims would try to portray the decades-old conflict as something that is based on religious differences. In point of fact, the deeper reason has something to do with a type of exclusion that minorities suffer from, and it has something to do with the question of identity, not just resource inequality or the lack of political power. When a people are judged based on the prejudice against them that prevail to this day, they are unable to actualize their true potential

due to the lack of respect for their identity and in this regard, of their right to realize themselves in societal culture.

Peace, this study will argue, is not just the absence of conflict. It is a process that is rooted in relational justice. Stakeholders often look at the latent political motives and economic outcomes. But peace involves the dynamic relationship of people in a pluralist society. Such cannot be achieved by merely redistributing economic wealth. It can only be realized if the approach to governance is inclusive, which means giving a voice to underrepresented groups. Integral peace in Mindanao is meant for the total wellbeing of its inhabitants. It is not intended to satisfy the ambitions of any dominant political clan or family. But the situation in the Bangsamoro now caters to the desire of power players, who are the actual reason for the poverty of the whole region. If the Bangsamoro is to make any meaningful progress, then governance must be rooted in social justice.

This study explains the sharp distinction between the "politics of difference" and "identity politics". Difference politics looks into the Young's "social connection model", which says that the problem of injustice cannot be solely blamed on individual responsibility (See Young 1990). For Young (2011), people have a collective "responsibility for justice" that requires institutional or collective action. The liberal approach to the problem of justice focuses on individual rights and obligations. The politics of difference looks into structural processes that affect the options people have or the lack thereof in the design of public institutions and the crafting of laws and policies that are supposed to serve the interests of the general public. The establishment of the autonomous government in the area is not enough to sustain peace. State-centric approaches to peace-building are wanting (Tanabe 2019). The process must involve the democratic empowerment of the people who should be able to determine their own destiny. This will require fighting the reality of systemic and structural violence that has since undermined the lives of Muslims and Lumads.

## Significance of the Study

The concept of social justice, holistic peace, and human development are interconnected and interdependent (Tanabe 2019). After the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, state-building programs have been implemented in the region. This includes the integration of former MILF combatants and the training of hundreds of civil servants and bureaucrats. But the problem of peace in Mindanao goes beyond the formal establishment of government bureaucracies or the surrender of rebel groups. A latent form of injustice must be addressed. This type of oppression is structural and is concerned with the lack of power on the part of minorities to pursue their true aspirations in life. The problem of peace, indeed, also involves providing food on the table, good education, and access to health care (Rasul 2007). Yet, this socio-economic framework is lacking in terms of its true moral power when it comes to the problem of cultural violence. Cultural bias cannot be solved by creating new laws or new rules. It can only be achieved by instituting good democratic practices through an inclusive framework. This new study can help provide an ethical strategy for policy-making to guide government officials and peace advocates in the region. Civil society groups and the academe, in particular, play a vital role in socio-political transformation.

## METHODS

Throughout this study, the investigator will employ textual and interpretive analysis based on the available literature from books, archived documents, newspaper clippings, and scholarly journals. This work is interdisciplinary. By employing philosophical analysis on the materials above, the

researcher hopes to define the important questions on the Mindanao problem and offer a hypothesis that is firmly rooted in the belief that sustainable peace can only be achieved by means of holistic efforts and not just by way of state-centric means. On this note, the researcher will rely on the works of Iris Marion Young on difference politics. With respect to the idea of peacebuilding, the researcher will also depend on the scholarship pertaining to sustainable peace building as proposed by peace scholars Juichiro Tanabe and Johann Galtung. To understand the Mindanao problem, the study will examine a number of critical works.

This study combines political philosophy with peace studies and local history. It will try to fuse the idea of holistic peacebuilding with the arguments and framework of Young's politics of difference within the historical background of Mindanao in order to come up with a paper that highlights the significance and value of recognizing the contribution of Lumads, Muslim leaders and their communities, and the Christian faith to peacebuilding efforts in the Bangsamoro and Mindanao. It also examines the role of the Great Migration and the leadership that characterized the Philippine Commonwealth period. The study will identify the threats to sustaining peace in Mindanao while attempting to come up with the proposal for integral peacebuilding that is rooted in the concept of democratic inclusivity and solidarity within the Bangsamoro among Muslims, Lumads, and Christians.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSION

### Identity Politics and the Politics of Difference

According to Iris Marion Young (1990, 38), "institutions and processes often restrict people's ability to explain their perspectives in life and society in the hope that others would listen." To locate her place in the critique of the liberal theory of justice, Young makes a distinction between the "politics of difference" and the "politics of identity". Multiculturalism, as a body of thought that embodies the response to ethnic and religious pluralism, has questioned the thick concept of the good posited by Rawlsian liberalism. As a philosophy, identity politics has paid close attention to contentious cultural differences. The concept explores the shared experiences and questioned the systematic oppression of minority groups. As a paradigm, identity politics has redirected the theoretical attention from resource redistribution to recognition, meant to unshackle minorities from bondage through "group-differentiated rights," such as "language rights," the "right to religious practice," and the "right to self-determination" (Kymlicka 2003, 330).

The politics of positional difference, in contrast, is concerned with the reality of structural injustices. According to Young (2000, 93), the "unequal positioning naturally develops within the positional hierarchy." Unjust norms and practices are a manifestation of societal exclusion. Domination is brought about by the unequal positioning of people in the political hierarchy. Some people in high culture possess prejudices against their fellow human beings. They use their position in society to undermine the liberty of others. Positional injustice is about "institutional conditions that prevent people from any form of meaningful participation in their society" (Young 1990, 38). Undemocratic structures have become impediments in the pursuit of the human good. The same has made the lives of millions difficult. Various forms of inequalities are a result of decades-long oppression that has subjected a people to unfair practices and unjust policies. Such simply undermines their well-being and their ability to realize the common good.

Rawlsian liberalism is founded in man as rational and free (Rawls 1999). To ensure social and political cooperation, people must come into an agreement grounded in reason. The original

position guarantees that no one is above anyone in the distribution of resources and the division of duties in the state. But the problem is not the concept of justice. The problem is the reality of injustice (Gallen 2023). Young, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, criticizes the Rawlsian starting point for being ahistorical. The nature of an injustice maybe historical. The invented veil of ignorance seems to hide the actual historical conditions of people and for this reason, political and socio-economic structures are not really fair to begin with because the design of the same is decided by the homogeneity of rational human beings. It ignores the presence of prejudices and historical injustices which are integrated in norms, rules and institutions. The same prevents people from actualizing their potentials as human beings and the pursuit of the good life in their communities.

Social structures may become coercive. Positional difference, in this respect, explains the hegemonic nature of social relations. In principle, it reflects the "inadequate design of our basic institutions" (Costa 2009, 397). The Rawlsian social contract theory appears somewhat naïve to structural inequalities. The principle of neutrality in the original position is something that is difficult to employ given the reality of weak institutions in our society. The efficient functioning of the government depends enormously in the maturity of a nation's political culture. In this regard, enshrining the basic principle of impartiality in the constitution is never enough. The true power of the basic human liberties can only be rooted in the honest way citizens use their entitlements. Indeed, a weak democracy may result in the disrespect for proper procedures or rules and the rise into power of tyrannical leaders, which are undeniably harmful to the well-being of the public.

To illustrate the above point, there is a huge polarity between the abstract world of Rawls and politics in the developing world. In the ideal world envisioned in the social contract, people are to respect each other as equals. But in the real world, bad leaders use their cunning ways to usurp good people. The power that autocratic rulers wield enable them to control and exploit the vulnerable. In some instances, Indigenous People or *Lumads* have no real access to any form of legal protection. The Lumads is the collective name for the natives of Mindanao (Gaspar 2021). They are from different tribes and have long been in the island even before Muslims established their sultanates in Sulu and Maguindanao. Being in the margins, the natives have little means if anything to defend themselves against the onslaught of the Christian majority who have since grabbed their lands and displaced them. In fact, institutional procedures and policies manifest the influence and supremacy of vested interests in society, thereby putting the Lumads into the margins and as a result, silencing them when it comes to issues that affect their future.

The politics of difference is not oblivious to the positional hierarchies in society. This type of imbalance contributes to a group possessing an undue advantage when it comes to the pursuit of the good in society. The rule of the majority, for instance, hides the fact that latent structures and mechanisms control the composition of organizations or political bodies. Young maintains that the question of justice is structural. This means that "institutions and practices conspire to restrict people" (Young 2007, 63). Young explains that injustice has something to do with positional difference. In her *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, she argues that hierarchies undermine the freedom of people and marginalizes the minority. Systems serve the interest of the powerful because they are the ones who create them. Ordinary folks have no say because the formalities in Congress and other legal forum limit the participation of people. In this regard, the state being an apparatus of power can only perpetuate the elitist strategies of technocrats who work for the benefit of the ruling class.

Rawlsian liberalism, however, is oblivious to historical oppression by choosing an ahistorical approach. In this regard, the purported solution only exacerbates the problem as the

system put in place actually favors a particular sector and disadvantages the powerless minority. Young teaches us that to realize justice in society, we must look into ways that would reform unjust systems by means of inclusion. Deliberative democracy employs a procedural order that introduces opportunities for people to participate in state building. However, the same may be confined to formalities that also hinder any meaningful participation on the part of those who have been marginalized. In fact, the patronage system in the Philippines exploits the apparatus of the state to perpetuate those who are in position of authority. There is no authentic democratic participation as people are reduced into mere observers when their representatives, who belong to political families, initiate projects in their respective districts to serve their vested interests instead of debate important issues that matter to the welfare of their constituents.

Difference politics puts into question the prevailing systems. As a case in point, the unjust structures in the Philippines are a by-product of colonial rule. In this particular case, Mindanao has been subjected to exclusion due to elite democracy perpetuated by the Americans after Spain left. The logic of Philippine politics is based on a patronage system that allows the powerful to divide among themselves the spoils of domination and corruption. Young believes that social injustice is bred in corrupt systems hidden in the bureaucracy and state policies decided by the powerful elite. The centralized system of government exemplifies what Young calls structural oppression in so far as those in the margins of society, especially indigenously peoples and Muslim Filipinos have no means to express themselves on public matters that affect their well-being. In fact, some institutional practices are the obstacles to the development of a people. Instead of being a vehicle for justice and fairness, these institutions reinforce historical injustices that undermine the growth and development of society.

## Young's Difference Politics and the Case of the Bangsamoro

To explain the concept of "difference politics", this study will look into the case of the Bangsamoro in Mindanao. The culture of violence in some places in the Bangsamoro Region in the Philippines is a consequence of the historical exclusion of Muslim Filipinos. During the Philippine Revolution, the region is not considered as a vital part of the effort to establish an independent Philippine State. It was not considered worthy of being a part of the new republic. Mindanao was seen as no more than a land resource, the land of promise, in which poor and landless peasants in Luzon were to occupy from 1920s up to the 1940s. This resulted to the displacement of Lumads and Muslims who now suddenly saw themselves landless and strip of their dignity as a people. This had severe repercussions to the lives of millions who continue to wallow in misery due to the abuses of the powerful elite. The same also encouraged the rise of political clans who now control most of the politics and the economic life of the region.

Young makes an important distinction between collective from individual responsibility. Young (2011, 97) says that the "social connection model finds all those who contribute by their actions to structural processes with unjust outcomes share a responsibility for the injustice." The latent prejudices people have, which influence the manner by which they deal with others, make them accountable for the wrong committed. The bias of people undermines those who are in the margins of society who in return are rendered powerless. This unjust system is beyond what any individual can change. Societal reform needs a collective sense of responsibility that entails changes in the mechanisms and rules. To achieve this, people must adhere to a common ground founded in their solidarity as a community or nation. It appears, however, that co-existence is sometimes difficult for Muslims and Christians. For the most part, the dominant majority in any

region is in control of the political and economic affairs of the place, which puts at a disadvantage the minority.

Another problem is that rule-making in the Philippines is a one-sided affair. The Philippine Congress, for instance, does not represent the people. It is composed of members from wealthy and powerful families (Coronel et al. 2004, viii). In this regard, laws sometimes favor the rich and influence-peddlers in society. This double standard means that Philippine society is hardly democratic. In the same vein, peace building is meant to advance the interests of the state whose benefactors are the rich and landed few in Philippine society. Mindanao has since become the face of oppression by means of violence, marginalization, exploitation, and cultural imperialism, categories that Young enunciates in her essay, "The Five Faces of Oppression". Cultural imperialism is the imposition of the standards by the dominant culture on the minority. Muslim Filipinos were labeled as violent and lazy by the Christian majority. Meanwhile, Lumads or indigenous peoples were branded as uncivilized and uncultured by a form of "imperialism from within" (Maboloc 2022, 63). Indigenous religious practices were also demeaned by a "chauvinistic religion" (Gaspar 2021, 358). They were seen as unworthy of the modern ways of life. They have been forcibly confined to the hinterlands without any manifestation of modern progress. The reason for this is the elitist system that imposes the will of influential and powerful families on the poor and helpless.

To sustain peace in the region, inclusion is a non-negotiable principle. For instance, the indigenous peoples in the region are viewed as possessing an inferior culture. The standard in the Philippines when it comes to high culture is the West. This is how the Christian majority may characterize themselves, especially in the Christian dominated areas. In places where there is a Muslim majority, like in the Bangsamoro, Muslim culture also prevails above the Christian. The problem, however, is that the indigenous communities seem to be demeaned along the way since they have remained voiceless. What this implies is that Muslim leaders are in control in Muslim areas while Christian leaders also undermine the indigenous tribesman whenever the same goes to the city, a situation that is present in highly urbanized cities where Lumads or Indigenous Filipinos beg for food and money in the streets. This situation is what Johann Galtung (1969, 167) calls "cultural violence".

Within the Bangsamoro Region, the Lumad feels excluded. The City of Cotabato is the seat of power of the Bangsamoro. This means that the people in the locality see the importance of the economic as well as the political impact of the peace agreement. However, questions linger when it comes to the Bangsamoro Transition Authority. There is fear that powerful clans will take over the BARMM after the BTA shall be out of office in 2025. This is important, most especially since the Lumad are also seeking automatic representation in the Parliament. The reality, however, is that only political clans have the resources and manpower to launch a successful campaign. If political overlords gain control in the BARMM, former rebels might feel harassed and disadvantaged, which can result to another type of rebellion. In all this, the Lumad remains powerless and without a voice in their destiny as a people.

## Roots of Structural Injustice in Muslim Mindanao

Liberal approaches to the politics of recognition based on the work of Will Kymlicka look into three aspects of identity politics - representation rights, respect for religious practice, and the practice of cultural rights and language. These rights can be legislated to protect the interest of the minority. In the case of Mindanao, the Bangsamoro Organic Law is meant to provide a bigger slice

from the national income for the region and greater autonomy in terms of decision making, which includes the rights mentioned above, including legal rights from certain aspects of the Sharia law, specifically on civil rights. The Muslim rebels after years of negotiation with the Republic of the Philippines agreed and signed the Peace Agreement with the GRP. This was significant because the previous government in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao failed to improve the socio-economic situation of the people. Peace is important. It must not be forgotten that 150,000 lives have been wasted in the Muslim rebellion of the Philippine South (Jubair 2007).

The point is to support the argument that the issue is not just a question of identity politics but a problem of structural injustice. Firstly, in can be argued that in the past, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was an example of the politics of recognition which is rooted in representation rights. However, it should be noted that the same mechanism failed because it did not address the root cause of the problem – structural injustice. The situation in the Bangsamoro is typical of the reality of elitism and positional inequalities. Political clans hold power and control the territory. This means that the people on the ground have no say in the affairs of the government. The failure of the ARMM, in this regard, was due to the fact that people have not been empowered in terms of governance and effective democratic participation. If one is keen in observing the system in the Bangsamoro, one or two big political clans act as patrons. The poor constituents in the localities depend on political patrons for their economic survival and a sense of security or protection from violence.

When one looks into Philippine history, it is no secret that Mindanao has been left behind in terms of growth and development (Gaspar 2021). The colonial rulers of the Philippines exploited the natural resources of Mindanao (Gaspar 2020). The centralized form of government, a by-product of colonial rule, means that Mindanao is powerless in terms of determining the fate of its people (Maboloc 2019). This lack of significance in the power structure implies that the island region was reduced into a source of natural resources. From the vantage point of someone in the capital, Mindanao is a land of conflict because that is the way its image has been projected. The centralized system of state and government instituted by Spain and perpetuated by the Americans also meant that politically, Mindanao must serve the interests of overlords in Manila. It was President Duterte who committed funding for Mindanao and convinced Muslim Filipinos through his radical politics to finally take up the cudgels of governing (Maboloc 2019).

Still, there are fears that the Bangsamoro will not succeed because of the unequal position of the stakeholders in the region. The fear that the Bangsamoro might fail is rooted in the idea that powerful political clans and families will employ a patronage type of governance that has been in the region, supported by its shadow economy, the moment power is handed from the Bangsamoro Transition Authority to the elected members of the Parliament after 2025, although there are efforts to establish democratic political parties in the Bangsamoro (Agoho and Teehankee 2023). Still, there are serious doubts. The return to the patronage type of politics will only serve the interests of the dominant clans. This is a complex issue given that the peace agreement was arranged to end the Moro rebellion. The MILF leadership is also afraid that the Bangsamoro government will be controlled by the politicians beholden to the interests Manila. Indigenous peoples in the region also think that they have been left out of the agreement and that they do not have any meaningful role in governance. As such, they fear that the Bangsamoro would simply perpetuate their marginalization and as a result, lead to their exclusion when it comes to growth and progress.

Democratic participation is crucial in the Bangsamoro. The people on the ground must be involved in peace building. Civil society groups must have a say in the planning, not just a select few who are beholden to politicians. The way forward, in order to allow a broader sense of

democratic participation in building a truly just society, is to involve non-state actors in the issues dominating the public sphere. This is what the burden of a shared responsibility for justice requires. Beyond the state, Young (2000, 98) suggests that churches, schools and other members of civil society "have a stake in the design of equitable institutions and the re-design of structurally oppressive ones". The success of the Bangsamoro will not depend on the formalities of its parliamentary system. It will depend on the way people value their lives and nurture the newly found vigor in the pursuit of justice and equality in the region. This means the people making the right choices and not on the basis of a patronage system that has made progress difficult.

To realize a sustainable peace building framework, institutions must be built from the bottom up. This is the essence of a collective responsibility. Allowing the powers that be to make decisions will not rectify historical injustices. It is not just about putting money on the table so that rebels will negotiate and surrender. They must be made to understand that they are part of the process not only in the cessation of hostilities but more importantly, in establishing a just and democratic social order. The meaning of inclusiveness is not limited to being an observer in the crafting of laws. It involves the meaningful involvement of ordinary citizens, or in the case of Mindanao, ordinary Muslim Filipinos and Lumads or IPs, and not be dictated by the whims and caprices of powerful political clans and their self-serving interests. The political exclusion in the Bangsamoro tells us that minority groups fall into the trap of meaningless concessions and unfair schemes that only accommodate the welfare of a favored group. For instance, the 'rule of law' for the Bangsamoro people is problematic because according to Francisco Lara Jr. (2015, 110), "political agents of constitutional laws are often the same clan leaders who made it a point to capture elective positions and who collude with the national government in selectively imposing a rule of law that benefits them."

To say that Mindanao is a land of conflict is rooted in a type of a prejudice that labels the Muslim Filipino as violent. For Patricio Abinales (2010, 2), it is an "orthodoxy" that was brought about in the making of a "patchwork state". Mindanao was never really considered important in the creation of the Philippine Republic. As such, if justice is about inclusivity, there is a need to address firstly, the problem of exclusion. The question, in this way, is not really about justice but the reality injustice (Gallen 2023). Political exclusion is not just the lack of representation in the formal venues of the legislature. Even if people choose or elect their representatives, if the same do not express the sentiments of the people, state policy likewise will not benefit the good of minority groups. It is for this reason that the quest for peace cannot be limited to state-centric approaches. The reality of oppression requires dismantling of unjust structures and rectifying historical injustices. This includes political clans and dynasties that have ruined the dynamics of power in the Bangsamoro (Agoho and Teehankee 2023). Democracy is about the "empowerment of ordinary citizens" (Sen 1999, 100). They must be empowered as real stakeholders in the pursuit of the good life and that sense of solidarity that allows distinct ethnic or religious groups to live side by side. This type of co-existence is something that the people in the whole Bangsamoro must desire, if they want to sustain peace and promote the dignity and protect the lives of everyone.

According to Galtung (1969, 167), no one has "the monopoly of defining peace." For Juichiro Tanabe (2019), peacebuilding must not be limited to the liberal framework. The liberal framework is based on state-centric mechanisms that focus on formalities and schemes that sometimes favor those who have vested interests. By the very nature of these systems and structures, they often exclude a group of people who have no means or ability to take part in a formal forum. Because of the bias against Lumads and Muslims, certain institutional processes prevent them from taking part in meaningful state-building because they can be coerced and as a

result, become submissive to the will of the powerful. Holistic peace involves the whole person and aims to give to all persons the basic respect they deserve, which should translate to the opportunity to participate in building a just and equal society. State-centric approaches are centered on the decisions of those at the top of the hierarchy that sometimes undermine ordinary people who are not given the chance to express the sentiments.

Galtung (1969) has made the important distinction between "negative and positive peace". Negative peace is about the absence of violence whereas positive peace refers to the presence of laws, rules and mechanisms that empower people towards growth and progress. Inclusion and democracy are the sides of the same coin which reveals that the mandate to govern comes from ordinary people whose interests the institutions of human society should be able to serve. In this case, the situation in the Bangsamoro is that of negative peace. Since the Muslim rebels have laid down their arms, social integration has become possible. But there is no guarantee that lasting peace can be achieved because peace must be integrated into the moral fabric of society, which means that it must become a way of life. This will require the active and efficient functioning of government institutions where people get equal and just treatment as responsible members of a society that respects diversity and values the dignity of every human life.

CONCLUSION

This study uses difference politics to highlight the historical nature of the injustice in the Bangsamoro (Muslim Mindanao). To address the problem of violence in the region, unjust systems and structures must be dismantled. This will require recognizing the right to representation. The prejudice against Muslims and Lumads must be removed. Difference politics seeks to dismantle obvious and latent injustices by making societal institutions more inclusive. Rawlsian liberalism, with its emphasis on designing the formal nature of the basic structure, focuses on the concept of justice. The real problem, however, are the injustices that the people in the whole Bangsamoro have been subjected to. The way forward, in this regard, is to build a society that is truly democratic and inclusive by removing the barriers or obstacles to human well-being and make institutions truly just by building them from the bottom up. This bottom up approach not only recognizes the value of democratic participation. It also rectifies the imbalance in state governance by giving back to the people the power to decide the course of their destiny. Peace can only be sustained if it becomes integral, which means that it is interwoven into the moral fabric of society. This will require a government that is inclusive and just institutions working towards the public good and is respectful of the dignity and value of every member of society.

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CHRISTOPHER RYAN MABOLOC
Ateneo de Davao University
Roxas Ave, Davao City,
8000 Davao del Sur, Philippines


*Corresponding author: ryanmaboloc75@yahoo.com