

# Mindanao

## A Community-based Approach to Counterinsurgency

BY WILLIAM A. STUEBNER AND RICHARD HIRSCH

Over the past several years, U.S. Government agencies have been revising their thinking on counterinsurgency and stability operations. Despite recent doctrine and guidance about better ways to end conflict and promote lasting peace, however, something has been missing from the dialogue: a successful model of reintegration and economic growth in an Islamic insurgency that has taken combatants off the battlefield permanently. One of the best places to look for such a case study of fighting and winning “smart” is in Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Since the U.S. incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, scholars, strategists, and policymakers seem interested in discovering how to fight smarter or, preferably, how to win without fighting. Americans have been rediscovering writers such as David Galula, author of *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, whose experiences in the Algerian civil war helped guide counterinsurgency thinking during the Vietnam War. They have also unearthed long-forgotten publications such as the U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual* and issued a plethora of new doctrines, manuals, joint publications, and directives. More recently, David Kilcullen’s *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* offered an indirect approach to counterinsurgency that emphasizes local relationships and capacity-building in light of efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This approach, he asserts, is most effective in complex environments that include *accidental guerrillas*—individuals who enter into conflict not as an existential threat to another nation-state but as defenders of their own space.

As if designed with Kilcullen’s policy prescriptions in mind, the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program began in 1995 and will run through 2012 in its current phase (GEM 3), helping to accelerate broad-based economic growth and supporting the peace process in Mindanao.<sup>1</sup> This article responds to a call by James Kunder, USAID’s former acting Deputy Administrator, to tell the stories of successful responses

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to complex situations. It explains the success of the peace process undertaken by the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP), particularly the key role played by the USAID/GEM program. These USAID/GEM lessons might be applied to other conflicts, such as those in Colombia, Afghanistan, and the

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Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan that now affect national security and have proven so costly to the United States in blood and treasure.

### **Background**

Mindanao is the second largest of the 7,000 islands that make up the Republic of the Philippines. It contains one-fourth of the national population and one-third of the land area. It is home to the country's Muslim minority—about 4.5 million of Mindanao's 22 million people are Muslim. Islamic communities are primarily in central Mindanao and in the chain of islands stretching south and southwest, the Sulu Archipelago. Although Mindanao as a whole has lagged behind much of the rest of the Philippines in development, the Muslim population has long felt especially neglected, believing they have been discriminated against politically and economically, which has led to calls for secession and autonomy over the past century. This sentiment was as pronounced when American Soldiers and Marines fought there at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as it is today; but, thanks to the success of an economic growth strategy, this view is changing.

The counterinsurgency remains a complex operation in every sense. Mindanao is awash in noninsurgent armed groups comprising the private militias of local politicians, criminal gangs, and village (or *barangay*) self-defense organizations. Furthermore, the social environment includes a longstanding gun culture as pervasive as that in the United States, which requires an unusual approach to disarmament.

After decades of violent conflict and almost 20 years of on-and-off peace negotiations, enlightened leaders in the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) came together in the mid-1990s to forge a peace agreement. Before this agreement was signed with the MNLF, the government was also facing combat in Mindanao against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); New People's Army (NPA), a communist group; and Abu Sayyaf, an affiliate of al Qaeda. By taking more than 40,000 active combatants of the MNLF out of the fight, the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the GRP and MNLF was the Philippine equivalent of the Camp David Accords that took Egyptian forces out of the military confrontation with Israel.

### **Case Study**

The MNLF fighters who confronted the Philippine government for decades before the 1996 Final Peace Agreement almost exactly meet Kilcullen's definition of the accidental guerrilla. They did not represent an existential threat to the GRP; rather, they saw the encroachment of the largely Roman Catholic Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) into their ancestral territory as an existential threat to *their* religion and way of life. This situation is analogous to the current situation in the FATA of Pakistan, where a Punjabi-led Pakistani army is fighting Pashtun tribes and clans. Although there the adversaries

are all Muslim, in the eyes of many Pashtuns, the Punjabis are as foreign to their culture and more conservative sect of Islam as the American, Russian, or British soldiers they have confronted over the past century or more. In the case of the MNLF, although they were surrounded and outnumbered by non-Muslims, their fight was based on cultural identity and survival. Thus, the keys to defusing their violent resistance were to include them, increase their autonomy, and ensure their security from government forces and other armed actors, including additional Muslims who were set on more radical paths.

Although it did not begin with Kilcullen's doctrine as a script, the USAID/GEM program invoked strategies to help the MNLF preserve Moro cultural identity and promoted long-term peace through sustainable economic growth. Kilcullen prescribes five facilitating strategies to create an environment that wins over a disaffected population:

- ❖ a political strategy that builds government effectiveness and legitimacy
- ❖ a comprehensive approach that closely integrates civilian and military efforts
- ❖ continuity of key personnel and policies
- ❖ population-centric security founded on presence, local community partnerships, and self-defending populations
- ❖ close and genuine partnerships that put the host-nation government in the lead.

Using this framework, we detail the successes of the USAID/GEM program, which further validate his points.

### **Political Strategy**

The peace agreement mandated that in its first or transitional phase of implementation,

a Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) be established. In the second phase, following a plebiscite, areas within the SZOPAD that elected to join the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a region with its own government composed of all the Philippines' predominantly Muslim provinces, would do so.<sup>2</sup>

Although the agreement included many political and diplomatic provisions, the U.S. Government through USAID/GEM focused its initial investments following peace with the MNLF on facilitating sustainable economic growth primarily through agriculture-related activities; reintegrating former combatants; and investing in community infrastructure, business development, workforce preparation, computer literacy, and local governance improvement. The United States also plays a military role in Mindanao through a highly regarded and effective Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) that is training the AFP as it fights insurgents who have not joined the peace process and who are located in the conflict-affected areas in Mindanao, which overlap the ARMM. Also, all USAID mission programming increasingly focused on the conflict-affected areas over time.

Explicit in the document was a promise of economic and sociopolitical development for MNLF fighters who agreed to abide by the peace process. Security provisions included that 5,750 MNLF fighters be integrated into the AFP and the Philippine National Police, and this provision has expanded to include the integration of up to 7,500 former insurgents.

All development activities have local participation leveraged by substantial government investment in infrastructure, education, and workforce preparation targeted to meet community needs. Operating under the oversight of the GRP Mindanao Economic Development Council, USAID/GEM has collaborated with

national government line agencies, provincial and local governments, business support organizations (chambers of commerce and producer associations), educational institutions, and district engineers. This local investment and cost sharing by the community help ensure long-term sustainability of investments in community infrastructure, programs for schools, and computer literacy expansion. These counterpart contributions range from 25 to 50 percent of the cost and are ensured by intensive on-site monitoring. Where communities do not fulfill their agreements to operate and maintain facilities correctly, additional assistance is withheld until problems are corrected. The result is observable progress for stakeholders on the ground and increased credibility and legitimacy of the government and its leadership.

Public diplomacy surrounding the USAID/GEM projects demonstrates the resolve of both the Philippine and U.S. governments to bring the benefits of peace to stakeholders and provides reasons for residents not to pursue insurgency. American Ambassadors and their deputies travel often from Manila to Mindanao or to Jolo and the outer islands for USAID/GEM ribbon-cutting ceremonies, sometimes attending multiple ceremonies on the same day. Additionally, local leaders proudly proclaim these USAID projects as their own, due in large part to local counterpart investments and ongoing operations and maintenance responsibilities. In turn, former MNLF combatants see their leaders and former commanders making decisions that affect their lives and interacting with foreign dignitaries.

In his case study on Afghanistan, Kilcullen makes a strong case that a road, done right, is more than a road. With local input, local labor, and genuine cooperation between the recipients and their leaders, roads connect not only places

but also people and their governments. All USAID/GEM infrastructure projects, including roads, have been carried out in exactly this manner, and the results in government legitimization have been palpable.

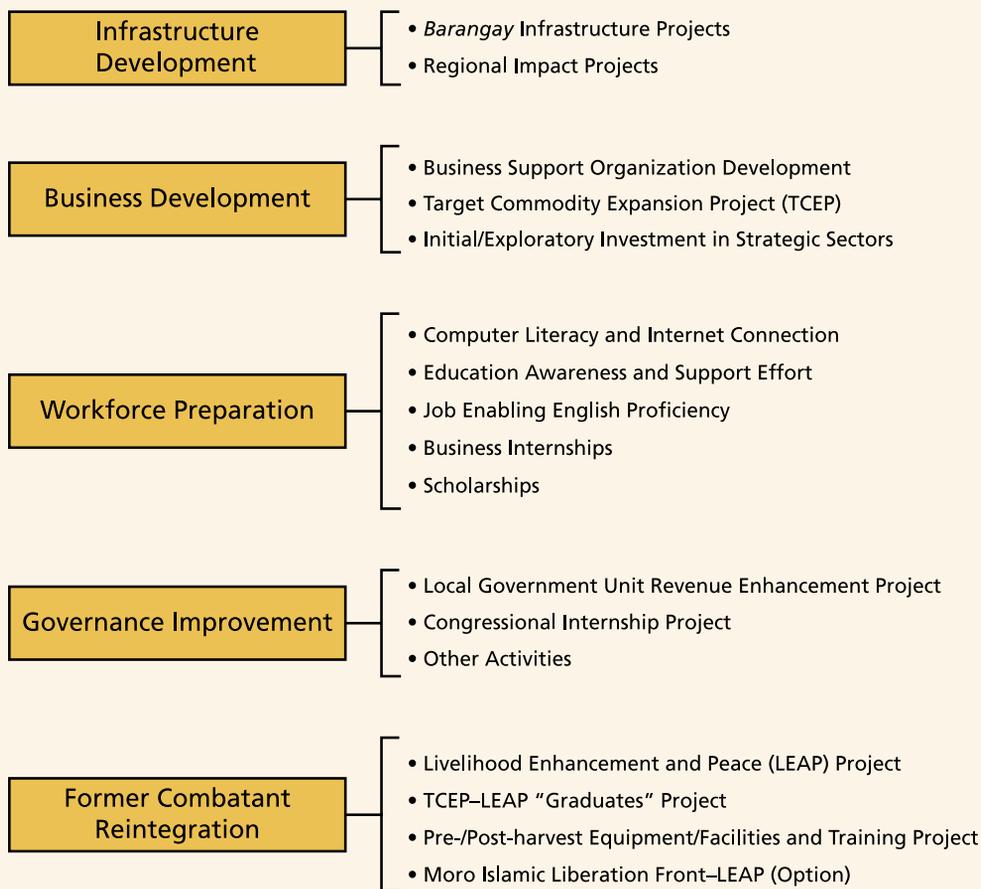
### **Comprehensive Approach**

USAID/GEM is accepted into conflict-affected communities by wary residents because it is a civilian development program carried out by noncombatant civilians. It has developed into a comprehensive, multidisciplinary program that addresses a wide range of livelihood, infrastructure, education, and governance needs, complementing strategic objectives by helping stabilize communities and focusing stakeholder attention on economic growth and not insurgency. Taken holistically, USAID/GEM contributes to the creation of an enabling environment required for sustainable economic growth. All the components of USAID/GEM contribute to the development of business opportunities and trade.

USAID/GEM personnel interact regularly with local government units, cooperatives and firms, and civil society organizations, and periodically work with the AFP civil-military officers at the battalion, brigade, and division levels. They discuss security concerns and identify the need for village-level infrastructure projects such as boat landings, farm-to-market roads, irrigation systems, matching grants, and computer Internet centers in schools, which are sometimes constructed by the AFP. Field commanders also take every opportunity to encourage USAID/GEM personnel to initiate needed projects in their areas of operations.

Although the AFP is a capable fighting force that constantly keeps the pressure on non-MNLF insurgents and other perpetrators of violence in Mindanao, its senior officers and

Figure. Growth with Equity in Mindanao Components



field commanders have become experts in winning without fighting. Civil-military cooperation began in 1997 with a general exchange of security-related information between the USAID/GEM staff and AFP and the provision of site, convoy, and route security during visits of U.S. officials. Its role, however, has deepened and diversified greatly over the years.

As an example, an infantry battalion commander took the USAID/GEM team to a village where an important farm-to-market road had been severed by a flash flood and asked team members to make its repair a priority. In a briefing at his battalion headquarters, he also revealed that every USAID/GEM project in his area of operation was plotted prominently on his tactical briefing maps. He referred to these sites as “key terrain,” signaling the strategic importance of these civilian projects to his military operations.

USAID/GEM personnel also closely interact with members of the GRP–MILF Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities, which includes the AFP co-chairman. USAID has wisely included an

option in the current GEM 3 contract to implement a Livelihood Enhancement and Peace (LEAP) combatant reintegration program for the MILF following a peace agreement. Such an agreement would provide the second largest group of insurgents (estimated at 12,000 armed fighters) with improved economic opportunity and benefit their communities with the same kind of programs that assisted their cousins in the MNLF.<sup>3</sup>

### Continuity

Continuity is perhaps the area in which USAID/GEM best validates the Kilcullen argument. Since its inception in 1997, USAID/GEM has been consistently applied and improved to help make the promises of the peace agreement become reality. For more than 12 years, through various U.S. and Philippine administrations as well as several American Ambassadors, support for the program has never

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wavered. Now in its third iteration, USAID/GEM continues to help integrate MNLF members and their communities into the mainstream Philippine economy. By the time USAID/GEM 3 ends in 2012, the program will have recorded a remarkable 15 years of continuity, consistency, and dedication to the peace process (from pre-planning to implementation to closeout).

The Economic Growth Advisor of the USAID Mission, Robert Barnes, who is the USAID/GEM Cognizant Technical Officer, was the original conceptualizer and designer of

the GEM program and has remained as its chief architect and long-term champion. Formerly a career USAID officer, Barnes stayed on after his retirement as a personal services contractor to USAID to provide institutional memory. Consequently, adjustments and improvements have been guided by someone who thoroughly understands the complexity of the holistic approach and Mindanao's difficult political, cultural, and economic environment.

At the same time, the general contractor, The Louis Berger Group, Inc., has won three separate full and open competitions to manage the program. The result is that the key managers involved in carrying out USAID plans have been in position since the beginning. They have decades of experience in the Philippines and more than 14 years with USAID/GEM. Key Philippine staff members, who represent the backbone of the effort, also have long tenures with the program and extensive field experience in the impact area.

Continuity among AFP officers has also played an important role. Before the culmination of the peace process with the MNLF, many of the older officers who had fought in the long, bitter conflict were replaced. Since 1997, however, many younger officers who understand and support the community-based economic growth strategy have served repeated assignments in Mindanao both as combatants and agents of negotiated settlement.

### Population-centric Security

Although the AFP certainly conducts offensive operations against violent groups such as Abu Sayyaf, and at times elements of the MILF or the NPA, much of its operational mission involves protection and support. As mentioned, Mindanao is awash in weapons and seeded with every imaginable kind of armed

group from terrorists to private political militias to outright criminal gangs. Often the distinction between them is blurred, and because local police are controlled by local leaders, the rule of law is at times not applied appropriately.

Some recent incidents are examples. In November 2009, an individual planning to run for governor of Maguindanao Province sent his wife and several other women supporters to file the papers for his candidacy. He believed he would be killed or kidnapped if he went himself but that the women would not be harmed because that would be “against Islam,” and even his Muslim enemies would not do that. He was wrong. A group of 100 armed men murdered the women and more than 30 journalists accompanying them—57 individuals. Local paramilitary units allegedly served as lookouts or conspired with the perpetrators. The army had to move in to arrest the perpetrators because local police could not, and for a time martial law was declared. Also, in December, a criminal gang that had formally been a government-armed militia that was ostensibly organized to defend the communities against threats by the communist-influenced New People’s Army took dozens of civilian hostages and agreed to release them only after they were promised there would be no attempt to arrest gang members.

Because of such incidents, the AFP must often assume roles normally reserved for police units. Consequently, its population-centric defensive efforts go far beyond defending the people from intimidation by insurgents. AFP officers recognize that their protection efforts will never be successful until the Philippine government has a monopoly on firearms and the use of deadly force, but disarming Mindanao would be problematic.

Because of the extremely confused and dangerous security situation, negotiators of the

peace treaty recognized that demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of the MNLF would have to occur *without* demobilization or disarmament. The GRP could not expect the MNLF leadership to give up its ability to defend itself and its people, so it instead took the path of helping most become farmers while integrating thousands into the army and police and organizing some of the others into village defense militias. Whereas these kinds of militias have been problematic in many areas, as in the preceding examples, overall the MNLF record has been good. From 1998 through 2000, when armed groups under the MILF planned to move into communities in North Cotabato Province in Central Mindanao, forces belonging to the MNLF, which had signed a peace agreement with the Philippine government but had neither demobilized nor surrendered their weapons, confronted the MILF, forcing the latter to withdraw. An overstretched AFP is largely relieved of the responsibility for protecting the population in MNLF-controlled areas because anyone who attempts to attack or intimidate its members will likely not survive the resulting confrontation or might need rescuing themselves. The current MNLF chairman, Datu Muslimin Sema, likes to remind visitors that his organization retains the capability to return to war if necessary, but no one expects that to happen without extreme provocation, which now seems largely unthinkable.

As the MILF (the second-largest insurgent group) moves toward peace, it will insist on the same kind of self-protection and integration into the AFP enjoyed by the MNLF. If anything, it will be even more insistent on continuing to bear arms because its members tend to be more “Islamic” and more influenced by the events of the post-9/11 world than MNLF followers. They believe it is a religious requirement that they

maintain their weapons in case circumstances ever require them to engage in jihad in defense of their religion. If, however, the reintegration of the MILF turns out to be as successful as that of the MNLF, widespread insurgency and instability in Mindanao will be much closer to becoming a thing of the past.

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As Kilcullen argues, self-protecting populations supported by organized government forces is a model than can work for accidental guerrillas. This phenomenon has certainly been the case with the MNLF, and its experience can be taken as a validation of his argument and an example for less incorrigible insurgent elements in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

### **Partnerships**

USAID/GEM is the result of interagency cooperation and coordination among Filipinos and Americans. USAID/GEM's Steering and Management Committees are chaired by the Philippine government. The U.S. Government has consistently and sincerely accepted this model as necessary for success.

Perhaps this cooperation is easier in Mindanao, and especially in the case of the MNLF, since the United States was not a direct combatant. It may be more difficult if the MILF stands down because of the perceived role of the JSOTF in support of AFP combat operations, although in fact JSOTF is limited to training and civil action projects. The JSOTF has always been mindful and respectful of the preeminence of the Philippine government and its armed

forces and has not been directly involved in combat operations.

USAID has adopted GEM-like strategies in other conflict and postconflict environments, and this is especially noteworthy in the case of Colombia. There, new regional USAID-funded projects will have a Colombian face from the beginning, and the entire approach will be comprehensive, holistic, and interagency. The Colombian authorities have recognized the similarities between their situation and that of the Philippine government and have already hosted senior AFP officers to meet with their Colombian counterparts in Bogota to discuss best practices and strategy. The next step in this South-South dialogue should be discussions between tactical combat commanders to create greater understanding of winning without fighting. Perhaps the Colombian and Philippine armed forces could even exchange liaison officers, which could be facilitated by the responsible U.S. combatant commands.

Finally, USAID/GEM has always had a Filipino face, even at the contractor level, reinforcing the perception that Filipinos are providing leadership in their own communities. Currently, the USAID/GEM staff is made up of only 5 expatriates and 250 Filipinos. When projects such as road or bridge construction are initiated, Filipino companies compete for the contracts, and the USAID/GEM engineers and contracting officers they deal with are generally Filipinos.

### **Communications and the Information Battle**

In *The Accidental Guerrilla*, Kilcullen argues unequivocally that the United States has lost the information war in Iraq and Afghanistan because the public information effort was always seen as subsidiary—almost an afterthought.

Public information officers in the military have long complained that their contributions to the fight have never been taken seriously. When combat commanders talk “move, shoot, and communicate,” the “c word” is all about operational communications between units and headquarters, not about using public relations and communications to help win the war.

Helping the public understand what is going on (that is, public diplomacy) is in many ways as important as the physical accomplishments. Much of Mindanao is mountainous, and people in remote rural areas often do not know what is happening in the next valley, let alone on the rest of the island and beyond. To change attitudes about the future and relevance of the government, stakeholders must be knowledgeable about progress they can see and feel on the ground as having an impact on their lives.

USAID/GEM’s public diplomacy program is designed to:

- ❖ counter the impression that Mindanao is a battleground, thus keeping businesspeople interested in doing business there
- ❖ generate public support for the adoption of policies more conducive to Mindanao’s sustained economic progress (for example, increasing infrastructure budget and moving toward more openness in decisionmaking)
- ❖ generate public awareness, understanding, and support of the Philippine government and USAID activities and investments in Mindanao through high-profile visits of the U.S. Ambassador and USAID leadership to project sites.

Both the MNLF chairman and senior AFP officers have repeatedly told official visitors that it is their hope that the widespread

awareness of USAID-created progress will entice other groups, especially the MILF, to demand peace so the same benefits would accrue to them and their children. Whether this has indeed played a role in the MILF decision to declare a ceasefire and return to peace talks remains to be studied.

One can wonder about the effects of constant reporting of USAID/GEM results in the broadcast and print media; the impact of town hall meetings to discuss local project priorities; the experience of walking or driving on new roads and bridges to get one’s produce to market; and the joy of seeing children in schools not only learning basic subjects but also having a whole new world opened to them through 900 Internet centers. But there can be no doubt that through this concerted effort almost everyone in Mindanao, indeed many throughout the Philippines, knows about how USAID has helped to keep the promises of the Philippine

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government to members of the MNLF and how they, in return, are becoming active and productive members of Philippine society. If a focused public information effort in mountainous Mindanao can have such a salutary effect, could not a similar campaign be just as important in countries such as Afghanistan and Colombia?

### **Conclusion**

The total cost to the American taxpayer of the LEAP/GEM programs from 1995 through the projected end date for USAID/GEM 3 in 2012 will be approximately \$250 million. If the MILF fully joins in the peace process and

performs as well as the MNLF, the total number of combatants taken out of the fight since 1996 will be more than 50,000. Because about one-fourth of USAID investment in GEM has been directly focused on MNLF combatants and their communities, this investment amounts to about \$1,250 per fighter. What would it have cost to neutralize and/or eliminate that number of tough, experienced guerrillas through military means, even if that were remotely possible in the mountains and jungles of Mindanao?

Of course, the fighting prowess and sacrifice of AFP soldiers and marines have also been important in convincing Mindanao's accidental guerrillas to stop fighting. On the other hand, one should not forget to tally up the value of 7,000 former MNLF insurgents who have been added to AFP ranks and however many more may be added from the MILF. Other considerations are the benefits of infrastructure added rather than destroyed; youth being educated rather than stagnating and adding to the problem; and men and women becoming productive participants in the economy and dynamic members of a democratic body politic rather than spending their lives in poverty and alienation.

Violence in Mindanao will not end when the MILF joins with the MNLF in the peace process. There will always be incorrigibles, such as members of Abu Sayyaf, who will have to be dealt with by force. But their numbers do not total more than a few hundred, and the expansion of USAID assistance to the communities in which they function will vastly reduce their ability to move and operate. The NPA also continues as a threat, but its numbers are fewer than half the total of current MILF fighters, and many of them may yet be won over through an expansion of USAID/GEM-like programs into their areas. Although a completely nonviolent Mindanao may not be a realistic goal in the near term, reducing the situation to a police rather than a military problem may be in sight.

The experience of the governments of the Republic of the Philippines and the United States working together in Mindanao has been one of steady progress toward sustainable peace. The precepts of David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerrilla* have largely been validated, as have those of his intellectual predecessor of the 1960s, David Galula. Although one size does not fit all and every national situation is different, the lessons of Mindanao and USAID/GEM are worth further study and application in other complex operational environments. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed explanation of the background and progress of USAID/GEM, see the "Growth with Equity in Mindanao 2 Program: Completion Report, October 2002 to December 2007," available at <[www.mindanao.org](http://www.mindanao.org)>.

<sup>2</sup> The complete agreement can be found in the Peace Agreements Digital Collection on the U.S. Institute of Peace Web site at <[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)>.

<sup>3</sup> In September 2009, the Philippine government and MILF announced a breakthrough agreement on a panel of international peace brokers for the resumption of stalled talks. Hopes are high that a final agreement will be reached after the national election in 2010.