



Humanitarian rebels? Rebel governance and international humanitarian engagement

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Abstract

What motivates rebel groups to engage with international humanitarian actors? We argue that international humanitarian engagement with rebels will likely emerge when rebels seek domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis civilians as well as the government. Two indicators of domestic legitimacy-seeking rebels are particularly relevant. One is socially based rebel governance with civilian-connecting experiences. The other is modulated political incentives vis-à-vis the government. The case of United Nations Action Plans aimed at reducing child soldiering is the empirical domain, the lens through which we illustrate the phenomenon and process of humanitarian engagement with rebels. By tracing the engagement trajectory of three rebel groups in the Philippines, we show that rebels seeking domestic legitimacy with specific governance experiences are more likely to accept engagement with international actors than other types. Our study has implications for rebel governance, humanitarian politics, and violence-restraint in civil conflicts worldwide.

Keywords Rebel governance · Civil conflicts · Humanitarian engagement · Child soldiers · United Nations Action Plans

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Introduction

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines has been fighting against the government since 1986. The group has used child soldiers throughout most of its years of rebellion. In 2009, however, the group signed a Joint Action Plan with the United Nations to reduce the number of child soldiers. Subsequently, the group successfully released 1869 children in 2017 (UNICEF 2017). This about-face change is surprising chiefly because the group relied on child soldiers. The MILF group had 8000–11,000 active members (Özerdem and Podder 2011: 126). According to the study by the International Labor Organization (Cagoco-Guiam 2002: 25), the MILF had 1000–1500 children in their ranks, with 100–450 involved in combat operations (Özerdem and Podder 2011: 129). Why did the MILF decide to give up child soldiers that previously made up 10% of its manpower? How did the process of international humanitarian engagement occur?

Beyond the issue of child soldiering, rebels broadly engage in humanitarian affairs with external actors in the contemporary security scene. The engagement usually starts with dialog and contact, involves the signing of informal/formal agreements, and then implementation occurs for better humanitarian outcomes. Some rebels have agreed to reduce the use of anti-personnel mines (Gleditsch et al. 2018; Fazal and Konaev 2019), provided access/assistance for detainees (Jo and Thomson 2013), or more recently, signed onto preventing sexual violence (Geneva Call 2012). The range of phenomena of international humanitarian engagement prompts us to study why at-times-violent rebels would engage in humanitarian affairs and open themselves up to international actors.

In this paper, we argue that domestic legitimacy-seeking rebel behavior is the key to understanding humanitarian engagement. Legitimacy is generally defined as the acceptance by the political audience that an entity is a viable political entity with the right to rule (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). In the context of humanitarian politics, we argue that rebels yearning for domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis civilian populace and the government can pave the road for international humanitarian actions. Domestic legitimacy-building can start with civilian-connecting experiences by developing governance structures that build “civilians into the governing process” (Breslawski 2021: 454–5). Social and inclusive governance practices can prime the rebels to be attuned to the humanitarian needs of the civilian constituents. Paired with the rebel relations with the government that is amenable to political negotiation, humanitarian rebels have a potential to arise, upon international engagement.

Our work on humanitarian engagement thus contributes to the literature on rebel governance by providing *internal* governance roots of *external* engagement. Previous works focused on international-level legitimacy in motivating rebels’ engagement with international humanitarians, such as those with secessionist aims, human rights constituency among foreign backers, and rebel political wings to conduct external diplomacy (Fazal 2017; Huang 2016; Jo 2015). We argue in this paper that domestic legitimacy via civilian-connecting governance



experiences is crucial in explaining what motivates rebels to seek better humanitarian outcomes. Our analysis on domestic legitimacy-seeking behavior complements previous research addressing international legitimacy-seeking behavior of rebels. We argue and show that international legitimacy is often not enough for rebels to engage in costly humanitarian engagements. Our emphasis on domestic legitimacy is consistent with the recent rebel governance literature demonstrating the importance of rebel–civilian–government interactions (Stewart 2018; Bre-slowski 2021).

As for the empirical terrain, we examine the cases of United Nations Action Plans. Since 2000, the UN Special Office for Children and Armed Conflict (UN/CAAC) has engaged in the issue of child soldiers. The critical method involved is to enter into Action Plans with dozens of non-state armed groups worldwide. The Action Plans include “actions” to disseminate within rebel ranks orders about no child soldier use, to release child soldiers, to criminalize child soldiering, and to facilitate the re-integration of child soldiers by laying out concrete “plans” and timelines to implement those actions (UN/CAAC 2022). Using the comparative case of three rebel groups in the Philippines, we detail the degree that rebel govern-ance activities and rebel–government relations can have on a group’s willingness to engage with international humanitarian actors.

One practical implication of our work is related to improving the humanitarian situation in conflict zones worldwide. In the case of UN Action Plans, we are talking about the youth. They are the dominant future workforce in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (USAID 2022). The Action Plans aim to facilitate the transition from children with guns to children with school books while reducing child soldiering by armed groups. The second implication has to do with violence reduction in general. The first step of peace-building requires the willingness and ownership of violent actors themselves. With limited resources, it is essential to understand which violent rebel groups would most likely be open to international humanitarian engagement to ensure that positive outcomes can be achieved in the shortest possible time. Reforming rebels will be a difficult process, often fraught with government opposition and the rebel groups’ resistance to change their practices. Nonetheless, the return value of engaging rebels for humanitarian purposes will be high. We will return to this policy question at the end of this paper.

Rebels seeking domestic legitimacy and international humanitarian engagement

Some rebel groups engage in international humanitarian affairs, while others do not. We argue that the division crucially lies in rebel’s legitimacy-seeking in rebel–civilian relations as well as rebel–government relations. We examine these two factors (rebel–civilian relations and rebel–government relations) in turn.



Rebel–civilian relations

Rebels govern for various military, social, or economic reasons. To win a long-haul political and military fight against the government, rebels need various support from the domestic populace. For instance, rebels rely on civilians for intelligence to fight against government forces (Kalyvas 2006; Berman et al. 2011). At times, the interactions between armed groups and civilians naturally evolve as social relations (Arjona 2016), where some rebels remain extractive while others become community-builders (Keister and Slantchev 2014). Rebel–civilian relations have economic bases as well. In many conflict-ridden societies, where state capacity stops functioning, rebels also engage in economic activities to collect taxes and provide infrastructure. Civilians also become part of the rebels' economic resources because they are the key source of recruits (Weinstein 2006).

In this broad map of rebel–civilian relations, rebels that seek domestic legitimacy vis-a-vis the civilian population are likely to find international humanitarian engagements largely beneficial. This is especially the case when the policies and clauses rebels should agree to fit with the interest of civilians, regardless of being defined in terms of normative or material benefits. For instance, UN Action Plans aim to provide protection and re-integration measures for children, which reduces the chance of forced recruitment and crimes against children and offers better educational and occupational opportunities for them (UN/CAAC 2022). For legitimacy-seeking rebels, international humanitarian engagements offer an opportunity to win “hearts and minds” from their support base, maybe even worth costing significant loss in their ranks.

Domestic legitimacy-seeking rebel motivations are manifested as civilian-connecting rebel governance behaviors, which privileges participation of civilians and rebels' responsiveness to civilian demands. Among the set of possible governance activities that include “rebel encouragement of civilian participation, provision of civilian administration, or organization of civilians for significant material gain” (Kasfir 2015: 24), some will be more related than others in understanding the process of international humanitarian engagement.

In the context of child soldiering and humanitarian issues, two aspects of rebel governance activities will be particularly relevant: (1) the way rebels demand recruits from the civilian population (voluntary or coercive) in their security provision and (2) the degree to which rebel organizations are attuned to civilian demands in their civilian administration. When the child soldier recruitment is done based on kinship, on a voluntary basis, rebels' civilian-connecting experiences will differ from those groups that forcibly recruit children and keep them in the jungle, far away from their family members (Özerdem and Podder 2011). The manner of voluntary recruitment will also relate to the collective security protection by rebels and civilians from the government forces. As well, when the civilian population changes its preferences toward supporting moderated war aims, away from armed struggle with the use of child soldiers, rebels with civilian-connecting governance experience would reflect those civilian preferences in their directions of rebel movement.

In sum, the community-based governance and long-term rule over civilians can increase the willingness to engage in external relations with international humanitarian



actors. Rebels putting an emphasis on gathering civilian support are likely to view international humanitarian engagement as an option that boosts their domestic legitimacy, often due to their governance style and strategy of rebellion.

Rebel–government relations

Rebels' domestic legitimacy-building also occurs at the level of rebel–government relations. At the most fundamental level, the occurrence of international rebel engagement will depend on the role and response of the host government. Suppose the government does not allow international actors to interact with their non-state armed actors in their political jurisdictions. In that case, rebels might be blocked from engaging with external actors up-front. Unless the government is favorable or at least neutral to international actors' attempts to engage with its internal enemies, rebels might have no chance to agree on humanitarian engagements.

Many governments may consider international involvement in their internal affairs an infringement on state sovereignty. Some governments maintain hardline positions vis-à-vis rebel groups. Others do not even acknowledge the state of civil wars in their own country. Reputational concerns vis-à-vis other internal enemies (Walter 2002) abound. Also, states with the upper hand are often unwilling to make concessions to rebel groups (Tamm and Duursma 2023). These concerns can manifest as the “keep-out” attitudes by some governments. India's non-interference policy is one example of this hesitancy in accepting external interventions in internal civil conflicts (Bass 2015: 264).

The host government thus plays an important gatekeeping role in making or breaking international engagement with rebel forces. States with an overwhelming military advantage over rebel groups may be less willing to allow external actors to engage with such groups. For example, in the case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Rajapaksa government crushed the group militarily, ending the civil war outright. Another example when there is significant power asymmetry was the violent crackdown on the Rohingya in Myanmar. There, the government used repression tactics to end internal dissent before the emergence of a viable rebel challenge to the government could occur. In contrast, when the governments do not have strong military means or tools of repression, they might allow international actors to interact with their internal enemies. In other words, a permissive environment for humanitarian engagement can occur when the governments in civil wars do not have apparent alternatives or policies to deal with their internal rebellion. This line of reasoning leads us to expect that governments that are more lenient to internal rebellion are more likely to engender an environment where international humanitarian engagement with rebels can arise. This also means that international humanitarian engagement hinges on rebels having moderate political goals that the government could accept.

Process of engagement

Child soldiering rebels giving up child soldiering: how does it actually work? We argue that norm change can occur with a change in the standard of behavior. If



rebels are attuned to civilian opinions and demands, rebels can slowly change their practices upon the introduction of a new international norm.

The change can ensue, especially when rebels do not have overriding strategic incentives to break humanitarian norms (Fazal and Konaev 2019). As recent civilian agency literature shows (Idler et al. 2015; Kaplan 2017), some rebels change their behavior upon hearing the civilian demands about humanitarian issues. This is likely to occur particularly when the civilians overcome their own collective actions or if they get support from local or religious leaders (van Baalen 2021). The class of rebels susceptible to these norm changes would be long-running rebels with firmly established civilian interactions via social and inclusive governance experiences.

Once norms start to shift, norm internalization can occur with the help of external actors. Rebels can change the internal code of conduct, changing how they conduct rebellion. Positive inducements such as demobilization and re-integration can occur by involving international humanitarian actors.

The turnaround behavior by rebels—from child soldiering to no child soldiering at the international initiative—likely occurs not because of the rebels' change of hearts, but because their strategic incentives change over time. Rebels with social bases have strategic incentives to appeal to civilians under their control to achieve support for the rebel groups' goals, especially when they have no foreign backing or alternative resources to fund their movement and operations (Weinstein 2006; Blair forthcoming).

Social rebels might have strategic reasons to interact with civilians and international humanitarian actors to seek and gain material benefits. The strategic motives can include getting more external material resources in the form of aid (Terry 2002), enhancing its external image to increase its external legitimacy (Jo 2015; Huang 2016; Huddleston 2021), or increasing political support to widen the recruitment pool from the civilian population. In this sense, both domestic and international legitimacy can be key motivators for rebels to enter into international humanitarian engagement. The change can also be assisted by the altered strategic goals of rebels that reach negotiated solutions with the government. The increased acceptance by the government, rather than rejection, assisted by listening to civilian demands, can nudge compassionate rebels to humanitarian engagement.

Role of other factors

What about other rebel characteristics, such as strength or territory-holding? Do they also simultaneously serve as explanatory factors for international humanitarian engagement? It is important to recognize the role of those other factors in the context of our theoretical framework.

The role of rebel strength depends on how we define strength. If the strength of a rebel is its capacity to govern the population, the concept can overlap with legitimacy-seeking behaviors. If the strength is defined in resources rebels muster, rebels that rely on external sponsors that do not care might not have sway over their humanitarian behavior (Salehyan et al. 2014; Jo 2015). Suppose the rebel's strength lies in its military capacity to fight the government. Militarily strong rebels are no more likely to govern



than weak groups (Stewart 2020). The rebel military strength, then, may not predict governance that prioritizes civilian support. On the other hand, though, the wax and wane of rebel strength can contribute to humanitarian engagement. According to our theory, humanitarian engagement is likely to occur when rebels seek legitimacy vis-à-vis the government, so engagement is likely to occur during the phase where rebels get weaker over time to reach the negotiation point.

Territory-holding often coincides with civilian-regarding governance, but not in all cases. Governing territory and governing people sometimes occur with no apparent overlap. Some territory-holding rebels that took territory from the government might not choose to prioritize gathering civilian support. As well, governing rebels do not necessarily need territory to exercise influence over civilians and maintain a governing presence. In the case of the MILF, for example, the group had “camps”—pockets of areas sanctioned by the government (Özerdem and Podder 2011)—where close civilian-connecting experiences occurred, but they did not officially hold those territories as their own. The non-state actor dataset reflects this and codes the MILF as non-territory-holding rebels (Cunningham et al. 2013). Also, the MILF is absent in Breslawski’s Local Order of Rebel Territory (LORT) dataset (Breslawski 2021), but its governance aspects are well noted in the literature (Rubin 2020; Breslawski 2023).

All in all, other rebel characteristics are potentially related to rebel governing activities that can also produce international humanitarian engagement. But the analysis in this section indicates that other aspects of rebel movements, such as rebel strength or the territory-holding dimension, cannot easily capture domestic legitimacy-building characteristics or processes.

Theoretical expectations

In summary, rebels seeking domestic legitimacy—both from their civilian populations and the government—are more likely to engage in external humanitarian engagement. The above theoretical discussion leads us to lay out several conditions for international humanitarian engagement to occur. For one, socially based rebel groups with civilian-connecting governance experiences are amenable to humanitarian engagement, compared to rebels with no such governing experiences. Second, rebels with some level of non-acrimonious relationship with the government are likely to take the path of international humanitarian engagement. These two conditions will provide a favorable environment for international actors to conduct humanitarian engagement with rebels. This theory is diagrammed in Fig. 1. The diagram shows links the independent variable of domestic legitimacy to the mechanisms and processes it works to influence the dependent variable of humanitarian engagement. Up next, we conduct an empirical investigation of these conditions in actual cases.



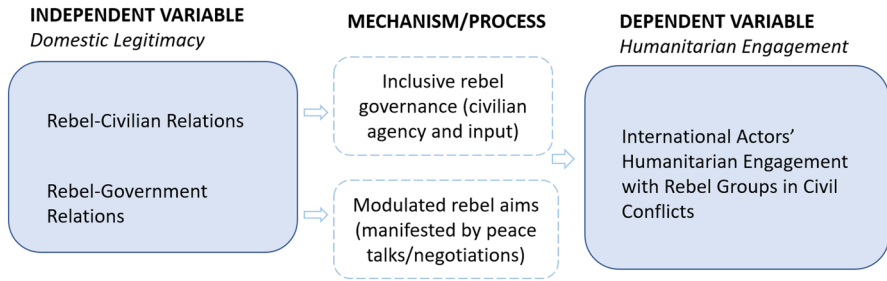


Fig. 1 Theory diagram: politics of international humanitarian engagement with rebels

Case of United Nations action plans

We present a qualitative investigation of humanitarian engagement by examining the case of the United Nations Action Plans. The effort was launched in 2003 with the UN Security Council Resolution 1460. The UN/CAAC started interacting with armed actors around the globe, including the national army, paramilitaries, and rebel groups. The UN, unlike other NGOs, is more likely to be conscious of state responses since the UN is based on state-membership. It implies that the UN's movement is likely more restrictive than other NGOs due to host governments' responses. This higher threshold of humanitarian engagement with rebels, in turn, means that the case provides a hard test for the emergence of humanitarian rebels.

We utilize the case of the United Nations Action Plans for two main reasons. One is the costliness and formal nature of the UN agreements, where rebels make time-bound agreements with the United Nations, an international body, to reduce the number of child soldiers, with actual implementation of changing internal code of conduct and the re-integration programs. These Action Plans impose more implementation burden than other types of humanitarian engagements with non-governmental organizations, such as detention visits or anti-personnel mines issues. Detention visits are done without formal agreements (Jo and Thomson 2013), and the Deed of Commitment banning anti-personnel mines is looser in terms of the commitment and monitoring mechanisms (Gleditsch et al. 2018). From the research design perspective, then, the UN Action Plans pose a rather hard case for humanitarian engagement to arise, considering the costly commitment. This hardness is partially observed when we consider that the Deed is signed with 54 non-state groups (Geneva Call 2023), while the Action Plan was signed with a dozen. In addition, child soldiering essentially involves the recruitment issue, which gets at the civilian-connecting experiences directly, compared to other humanitarian issues, such as the anti-personnel mines issue. With the thematic issue of child soldiering in the context of the United Nations Action Plans, we aim to present qualitative evidence that domestic legitimacy spurs internal changes, which in turn can bring about international humanitarian engagement.

Specifically, we conduct a case study of the Philippines. The most defining feature of our case study is that it allows *cross-rebel comparisons*. UN Action Plans were completed with about a dozen rebel groups in six conflicts (Central African Republic, Ivory



Coast, Nepal, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Philippines) between 2000 and 2015 (UN/CAAC 2022). The Philippines case features multiple rebel groups within one country. Other countries feature multiple non-state armed groups but are not amenable to cross-rebel comparison. Ivory Coast features the central Force Nouvelles as a governing rebel group, but other groups that signed the UN Action Plans are all pro-government militias. In the Central African Republic, the Anti-Balaka and the Seleka did not engage in meaningful governance, so comparing governing and non-governing rebels is not feasible. In Sudan, the development of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army into the South Sudan government prevents an adequate comparison with other Darfuri groups.

The cross-rebel comparison design in the Philippines allows us to meaningfully compare different groups within one conflict region, especially those that engage in rebel governance and others that do not. This research design allows us to look at the cases focusing on comparisons across rebels, with the conflict-context (or state-specific factors) relatively fixed. In this sense, the Philippines case has an advantage in comparing rebel groups in a similar conflict and examining the varying characteristics related to rebels' legitimacy-seeking behaviors. Comparing three rebels with divergent UN Action Plan outcomes also allows us to consider alternative explanations for humanitarian engagement.

Three rebels, one Action Plan in the Philippines

Various rebel groups have been active for decades in the Philippines. Three main rebel groups stand out in the conflict history of the Philippines: (1) Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA), (2) Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and (3) Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). MILF is the only one that signed a UN Action Plan in 2009, eventually delisted in 2017 from the list of shame. ASG and CPP still recruit and use children in their ranks (UN/SC 2017: 7).

In what follows, we trace the history of rebel governance of each group and its effect on international humanitarian engagement. We start with the case of ASG, where a UN Action Plan did not occur since the ASG hardly earned any domestic legitimacy. We then delve into the case of CPP, where the group failed, in the end, to achieve support both from civilian populations and the government and did not get to the eventual signing of a UN Action Plan. The last case concerns MILF, where the governing group successfully signed a UN Action Plan and eventually implemented the release of child soldiers according to the Action Plan. This progression from the failure case to the success case will highlight the mechanisms of how rebels seeking domestic legitimacy had an advantage on the road to international humanitarian engagement.



Abu Sayyaf group: lack of domestic legitimacy, no Action Plan outcome

Abu Sayyaf means “bearer of the sword” in Arabic. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is a small but radical and violent militant group in the southern Philippines, based in Basilan Island (Sullivan 2023; The Mapping Militants Project 2017a). ASG originally departed as a splinter group from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), opposing the group’s moderated policy of acceding autonomy. The US Department of State designated the group as a foreign terrorist organization on 8 October 1997 (U.S. Department of State 2022). The group operated as “more of a criminal gang rather than an ideologically driven organization” (The Mapping Militants Project 2017a).

The group adopted an approach of terrorist tactics rather than a service-orientated one in building relations with local communities. Most people in the Philippines find it difficult to support ASG due to its illegal and extremist activities. Even though the group has received some support from the Muslim population in Southern Mindanao, this support has waned because of fear caused by the group’s brutal tactics (Mears 2016: 14). The group sustained communal acceptance rather than support via intermarriages and recruited from slain militants’ relatives (International Crisis Group 2022). Rather than building governance institutions, ASG provided economic incentives to communities, exploiting the poverty and the lack of governance by the government (The Diplomat 2021).

ASG targeted impoverished and marginalized orphans for recruitment, often the children of former MILF and ASG members. As early as 2000, the group had youth serving in its military force of 1,000 (Child Soldiers International 2001). Around 2009, 80% of its 400 forces were adolescent males under 25 (Daniels 2009). The group sought to establish loyalty by telling children that “they [the government] killed your father. So join us. I’m your family” (Del Villar 2013: 48), exploiting the extremist’s advantage in recruitment (Walter 2017: 21–24). Another strategy for recruiting children has been offering material incentives. The UN/SC reports illustrate that ASG recruited child soldiers by luring them and their families with material compensation (UN/SC 2008: 7; UN/SC 2013: 6). According to The Diplomat (2021), “recruits from coastal villages have joined ASG in return for payments of roughly \$200, as well as monthly deliveries of rice for their families.” This coercive recruitment is an antithesis to Action Plans if it occurs, resulting in high costs by shifting the manner of recruitment as well as by losing important sources of manpower and military capability.

The group’s nominal goal of secession from the Philippines and its continued criminal activities provides no room for the government to recognize the group by any means. The hardened stance of ASG further limited the channels available for UN actors to develop an opportunity for engagement (UN/SC 2010: 13). The UN has sought a partnership with the Filipino government, especially the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, to open a negotiation channel with ASG, with no significant progress since 2010 (UN/SC 2010: 13).



Overall, the ASG did not rely on civilian support, preferring illegal and criminal activities. The group practiced coercive recruitment with no apparent governing activities that should have incentivized rebels to look to international humanitarian engagements. Its government relations were also fraught with terrorist designations and animosity. The combination of these factors—resource base, nature of recruitment, and government relations—tells us that the ASG did not enjoy favorable conditions that could lead to international humanitarian engagement.

Communist party of the Philippines: limited domestic legitimacy, no Action Plan outcome

The Communist Party of the Philippines emerged in the Philippines' largest island of Luzon, and it later spread out to the Visayas and Southern Tagalog (The Mapping Militant Project 2017b). In the early years, CPP and its military wing, New People's Army, formed their key bases in areas "which are deeply entrenched in several *barangays* (Philippine villages), covering more than two towns or provinces around the country" (Domingo 2013). In this zone, the group sustained a reliable recruitment pool from the rural peasantry. It also possessed a substantial number of soldiers, about 20,000 (Cunningham et al. 2013). CPP could expand "its influence and operations to at least 1000 *barangays* and ... access to some 5694 firearms" (Domingo 2013).

CPP promoted local governance with economic activities such as taxation and social activities such as farmer cooperatives (Kessler 1989). Taxation was based on the "revolutionary taxes" gathered from local businesses in the name of promoting equality (Domingo 2013). Social activities were paired with discipline activities via "Revolutionary Courts" (Chalk et al. 2009: 60–61). CPP-NPA officially even conducted the "Social Integration and Class Analysis"—a community assessment (Rubin 2020: 468). Benefiting from the lack of government social services, especially in the Surigao Valley and Zamboanga del Norte areas, CPP provided public services such as security protection, livelihood development, and land reforms (Domingo 2013). A CIA report in 1985 stated that the group was "effectively controlling villages inhabited by at least 5 million people, and contesting control of villages inhabited by another 5.5 million" (CIA 1985: 3). Gathering existing evidence, CPP's governance activities indicate that there has been a close relationship between CPP and the local civilian population, characterizing both cooperative and strategic nature of its rebel governance.

However, CPP's commitment to improving civilian relations in its rural base has been quite limited, even in its early years. Due to its ideological focus on the labor class, "the party never encouraged the development of an autonomous peasant movement and, in fact, actively inhibited the rise of such a movement" (Putzel 2012: 646). The Party's peasant organization, *the Peasant Movement of the Philippines* (PKM), did not achieve a national organizational network nor independent local existence in most cases (Putzel 2012: 652).

In the early 2010s, many NPA units fell into "criminal bands," losing central command and control even in their area of influence (Rubin 2020: 470). This is



a striking change for CPP from its early days when the group focused on “not so much by terror and killing” but “addressing a number of key issues that the government has either been unwilling or unable to resolve” (Jones 2019: 35). Walch similarly describes that CPP’s “social contract” with the local population has gradually eroded over the years, losing their trust and support (Walch 2014: 45). Also, many recent reports suggest that CPP’s area of influence has been remarkably reduced and only able to construct territorial presence in some remote areas (Domingo 2013: 10).

CPP’s inability to construct a reliable and symbiotic civilian base also shifted its recruitment strategy. Gradually, CPP looked to exploiting recruits’ hatred against the government rather than sustaining a regular recruitment pool in their governing area, which shows a striking similarity to that of ASG (Domingo 2013: 5). On its official account, CPP adhered to the prohibition of using child soldiers. In 1999, the group issued a memorandum announcing they were willing to conform to international humanitarian law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN/SC 2008: 6). However, CPP’s practice contradicted its promise. According to the government estimate, the NPA had 9463 fighters in June 1999, and between 13 and 18% were children under 18 according to one estimate, and the UNICEF estimate was 3% (Child Soldiers International 2001).

The government relations of the CPP have been fraught, as seen from the series of deadlocks in their negotiation for a truce. Occasional peace talks were short-lived with soon continued with localized clashes. In May 2013, peace talks collapsed since the government didn’t meet the rebel side’s precondition of releasing political prisoners affiliated with CPP before any negotiations for peace could start (UN/SC 2013: 4). Most recently, the peace talks took place in April 2017, but the conflict resumed after President Duterte denounced CPP and NPA for their recent “terrorist attacks” and declared them “a terrorist organization” (CNN Philippines 2017).

Due to the CPP’s acrimonious government relations, the UN struggled to establish direct channels with the group. When, albeit temporarily, the rebel–government relations became friendly, the UN was able to grant some chances to talk with the CPP. In February 2011, when the government and CPP resumed formal talks, the Joint Monitoring Committee for the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Law was assembled to gather and examine various human rights issues with the CPP and the government of the Philippines. During this time in April 2011, with the Filipino government’s support, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General visited CPP members to negotiate their peace terms. The Special Representative announced the possibility of signing an Action Plan, and successive meetings followed in Utrecht, Netherlands (UN/SC 2013: 14). However, no formal discussions have ensued since then as the peace deals between the government and the rebels broke down.

On June 29, 2012, the group unilaterally declared its “programme of action on the rights, protection and welfare of children” (UN/SC 2013: 14). The programme officially provides “the minimum age for recruitment for combat by the New People’s Army at 18 years of age,” but still allows the recruitment for non-combat roles and self-defense purposes (UN/SC 2017: 16). In 2017, the UN country task force in the Philippines started a technical-level discussion on the agenda of protection of children with the NPA (UN/SC 2017: 12). In addition, UNICEF held several technical



meetings with the NDFP officials, and it “reiterated its willingness to cooperate with UNICEF,” which was also appreciated by the country task force (UN/SC 2017: 16). However, the group has not signed a UN Action Plan yet.

The sequence of events and the group’s governance and government relations indicate that the CPP had some favorable conditions for international humanitarian engagement. Still, several unfavorable conditions blocked the process. CPP pursued international legitimacy with its political wing and continuous messages and efforts to convey information about its child soldiering policy. The group crucially missed the establishment of domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis the domestic populace or the government. It failed to establish that it is a viable, legitimate rebel movement. The group did not engage in inclusive governance activities with increasing reliance, not on civilians but rather depended on “revolutionary taxes” from illegal mining activities over time (Walch 2014: 44). This absence of long-term civilian-connecting experiences, as well as fraught government relations of the CPP explains the non-occurrence of the UN Action Plans.

Moro Islamic liberation front: seeking domestic legitimacy, UN Action Plan signed

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, MILF sought to be recognized as a representative force in the Bangsamoro region, representing the popular will of the Moro people. In the early 1990s, MILF had a military force of about 6000, which increased to approximately 15,000 by 1999 (Vitug and Gloria 2000: 111). MILF was not a purely military organization; rather a “multi-dimensional” organization with “schools, mosques, sharia courts,” practicing Islam as an overall principle ruling whole aspects of life (Vitug and Gloria 2000: 109). The group primarily attempted to build and secure social bases in the Mindanao area, gaining wide support from the Moros through its Islamic orientation and provision of administrative functions. It benefited from its “effective community engagement, government services, and dedication to Islam” (The Mapping Militants Project 2017c).

Most military camps in MILF are located in nearby communities, and soldiers, when they are not training or fighting, return to their homes and work at their farms. This proximity helps the group to build a daily relationship with the population in their area of influence and provides tangible governance (Walch 2014: 47). The sorts of governance offered by MILF include security, justice, and infrastructure building. MILF maintained the Islamic tax system, *Zakat*, and reportedly the group used the revenue to develop the villages and communities in an Islamic way (Walch 2014: 47).

Even before its official emergence as MILF, the group recruited and trained children as early as 1982. Child soldiers were used as “lookouts, couriers and procurers, and in the worst instances, as reserve troops” (Kerkvliet 2006: 9). According to a report from the International Labor Affairs Service, children were trained in MILF camps, with some of the “soldiers” being as young as 10 years old (Makinano 2001: 5). The Human Rights Watch reported that in May 2003, child soldiers were killed in a battle against government forces and that half of the 98 MILF members that



surrendered to the government forces were teenagers (Human Rights Watch 2004). In September 2003, a research team from the University of Philippines investigated the use of child soldiers in Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) and reported that at least two child soldiers had encountered enemy forces when they served in MILF (Camacho et al. 2005: 38).

It is important to note that MILF's child soldiering had roots in its social base, which is clearly different from that of CPP and ASG. Researchers report that MILF recruited children since their parents usually sought to enter their children into the resistance, influenced by Islamic education. Children's recruitment and military training could be easily justified in the Islamic tradition, as the age of 12 to 14 is considered mature (Santos et al. 2010: 357). During the conflict, the grassroots social and religious ties between the Bangsamoro communities and MILF military camps helped recruit children (Podder et al. 2010). Many child soldiers were often "active agents" drawn from family ties rather than being forcibly recruited (Podder et al. 2010: 317–318). Two in-depth interview-based studies are consistent with children's "voluntary" joining in MILF, which was not the case for ASG and the CPP's child soldiers whose motives were reported to be based on taking "revenge" against the government (ILO 2002: 42–43; Özerdem and Podder 2011).

Unlike CPP, which eroded its social base over time, MILF continued to emphasize being a "governing rebel" until recently. According to Walch, the group's emphasis on providing governance to its social base stands out, comparing MILF and CPP's relief efforts after Typhoon Pablo affected both groups simultaneously (Walch 2014). In one interview, a MILF rebel pointed out that the group "needs to show that they are effective at responding to the needs of the communities" and "failure in providing relief after a natural disaster may imply a loss of support for the movement and therefore decreased legitimacy" (Walch 2014: 47).

MILF's consistent emphasis on garnering support from its civilian base indicates that the group has "a lot to gain and little to lose" in signing and implementing the UN Action Plan. This should be especially the case since, in the late 2000s, public opinion in Mindanao signaled that civilians did not support MILF's use of children in the ranks (Podder 2012). One report suggested that many Bangsamoro youths picked education as their top priority (Rajendran et al. 2006: 6), implying children's decreasing interest in serving in MILF, unlike their seniors did in the early years of the conflict. From this perspective, we can see that MILF accommodated the demands from Bangsamoro civil society and activists to stop using child soldiers based on its desire to transform from "rebels to rulers" (South and Joll 2016: 176). These aspects highlight MILF's motivations to sign the UN Action Plan as it attempts to boost its domestic legitimacy, reflecting the opinions of the group's social base.

How the MILF managed its government relations was also critical in paving the way to the signing and completion of the UN Action Plan. In the early years of MILF, their relationship with the government was quite hostile as they splintered from MNLF when refusing to accept the government's offer. They conducted offensives after agreements in 1996 and 1997 (The Mapping Militants Project 2017c). MILF relations with the government did not improve until after 2000 (Kerkvliet 2006).



However, MILF's separatist goal and its relationship with the government have shifted over time. A key factor for the change was the realization process following a series of military setbacks in the early 2000s against the AFP. President Joseph Ejercito Estrada started an all-out war against the separatist movement in 2000. The next President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, followed suit and conducted the "Buliok offensive" targeting multiple MILF camps (Kerkvliet 2006: 10). Under the Arroyo administration, MILF dropped its demand for independence, and the Office of the Presidential Adviser noted that "it is significant that during our stint, the MILF has dropped the option of independence" (GMA News 2010). Yet, these military offensives by the government were not enough to annihilate the group. In the late 2000s, MILF still retained a status where the Filipino government was willing to consider reaching terms (Santos et al. 2010: 77).

The continued peace talks between MILF and the government paved the way for the UN to approach the rebel group and further negotiate the terms for an Action Plan. For instance, the UN was able to use an already established institutional channel, the Bangsamoro Development Agency, established in June 2001 in the aftermath of peace talks, to exchange "meaningful dialogue aimed at establishing mechanisms for the prevention, monitoring of and response to grave child rights violations within their ranks" (UN/SC 2008: 12). MILF and UN then were able to proceed bilateral talks for negotiating the terms for a UN Action Plan. In December 2007, MILF signed a joint communiqué with UNICEF, which defined "cooperation between MILF, national and local government agencies, international ceasefire monitors and UNICEF to implement a programme to provide basic social services for children in 645 villages" (UN/SC 2008: 12). In December 2008, the UN special representative Radhika Coomaraswamy met MILF leaders (The Straits Times 2008). The Action Plan was officially signed on July 31, 2009 (UN/CAAC 2009).

Figure 2 presents the fluctuation of the number of child soldiers over time, compared to the overall manpower of the MILF. Since the number of child soldiers and rebel manpower are notoriously difficult to pinpoint, we relied on multiple sources. The main takeaway is the sequence of events from the rebellion reaching the UN Action Plan and its subsequent decrease in child soldiering.

The MILF case shows the combination of rebel-civilians and rebel-government relations in bringing about the success story of international humanitarian engagement with positive humanitarian outcomes. The secessionist motivation of the group when it started off was not enough. The group did not sign the UN Action Plans when it had a clear secessionist motivation. It was rather the modulated incentives of political autonomy, the period during which nudged the group into the UN Action Plan signing. International legitimacy may matter, but domestic legitimacy matters more, as the MILF's case shows. The inclusive governance model of the MILF over its domestic constituencies and altered political goals vis-à-vis the government were prime factors leading to the signing and execution of the UN Action Plan.



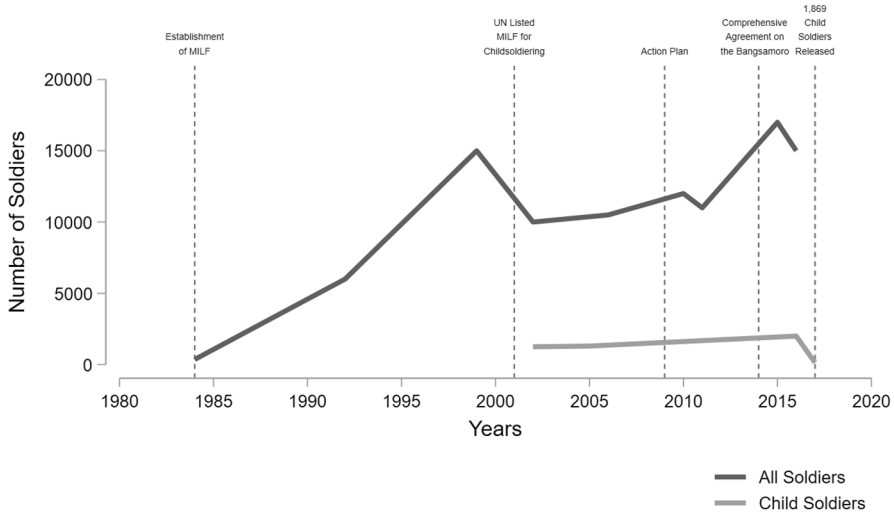


Fig. 2 The timeline of MILF. Sources Bale (2003), Bowman (2007), Franco (2016), Vitug and Gloria (2000), The Mapping Militants Project (2017a), UN/GA-SC (2010), UN/SC (2017), UN/CAAC (2009), GlobalSecurity.org (2015)

Summary comparison of three cases

Table 1 summarizes our investigation of the three rebel groups along domestic and international legitimacy dimensions. The case comparison reveals that the MILF was particularly susceptible to signing the Action Plan, given its strategic incentives to boost domestic legitimacy. For one, MILF held a strong presence proximate to civilians and established governance in their area of influence. In particular, MILF emphasized the importance of earning support from their civilian base, leading the group to pay attention to the problem of child soldiers and civilians’ opinions about it. As well, MILF has sought domestic legitimacy from the government and has been willing to cooperate with the government on child soldiers’ issues.

Table 1 Summary of three rebels in the Philippines

	Factors			Outcome
	Group sought domestic legitimacy		Group sought international legitimacy	UN Action Plan
	Community-based rebel governance	Non-acrimonious government relations	Political wing initiating talks with the UN	
MILF	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CPP	Yes early years; no later years	No	Yes	No
ASG	No	No	No	No



The other two groups fell short of seeking domestic legitimacy. In contrast to the MILF that built a stronghold over Mindanao, the CPP stationed in the mountains used “insurgency” tactics with guerilla warfare (Fearon and Laitin 2003), unlike the MILF’s strong governance presence in its camp areas. Most crucially, CPP failed to gain acceptance from the government. The group did not change its mission of replacing the “capitalist” government, unlike MILF, which gave up its secessionist aims. Despite the CPP trying to interact with the UN to boost its international legitimacy, CPP’s limited efforts to secure domestic legitimacy explains its ultimate failure to sign an Action Plan. This shows the importance of domestic legitimacy as the core of humanitarian engagement over the international legitimacy factor emphasized in the previous literature.

While ASG shares a similar historical lineage with MILF as the breakaway faction from the MNLF, its strategy for rebellion has been strikingly different from MILF and CPP. ASG maintained loose networks without a coherent political platform, resulting in underdeveloped civilian relations. Its recruitment activities were reported to be coercive, which prevented the group from adjusting its recruitment strategy with an Action Plan. Both domestically and internationally, the group has been referred to as a terrorist group, which reduced the likelihood of the government’s recognition as a candidate for international engagement.

Conclusion

International engagement with violent actors in civil conflicts can carry a big potential humanitarian payoff. The benefits include possible outcomes such as reduced child soldiering, reduced sexual violence, reduced anti-personnel mine use, humane detainee treatment, etc. Engaging violent actors can be done at a relatively low cost compared to military interventions and can potentially prevent future atrocities. The activities can be customized to local contexts, as in the timeline adjustment in UN Action Plans. If many parts of the world’s territory are governed by non-state actors (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018), would it not be worth trying?

As we explored in this piece, challenges abound. International engagement with domestic rebels is fraught with political, economic, and social obstacles. Political obstacles often include acrimonious governments’ relations with rebels. The room for international actors shrinks when a government denies the existence of civil war or when it seeks to deal with internal matters with military campaigns or repression. Economic obstacles to securing funds from donors for humanitarian projects are sometimes challenging. Given the declining global economy with authoritarian turns, the lessened political appetite for international humanitarian actions may translate into less funding for humanitarian projects and restricted humanitarian space to do creative maneuvers and policy experiments. Social obstacles to navigating different cultures and norms are also significant, if not insurmountable. More often than not, international actors present in domestic conflict zones provoke a backlash. Going deep into cultural contexts is not easy and may require the art of persuasion and cooperation with local actors, such as established political, local, or religious authorities (Cismas and Heffes 2021).



Our inquiry into humanitarian politics and rebel governance yields some guidance on where to look, whom to engage, and when to take humanitarian actions among the 200-plus rebel groups in about 30 civil conflicts worldwide. Regarding “where to look,” humanitarian engagement can be feasible, particularly where the rebel–government relations are not too acrimonious, lest the government plays a gatekeeper role or security situations hinder access. Regarding “whom to engage,” humanitarian engagement would be feasible vis-à-vis governing, compassionate rebels with finding the value of gathering civilian support highly. Regarding “when to take humanitarian actions,” the progression of peace talks provides the prime time for the engagement when military incentives are toned down. The fruits of humanitarian engagement may be difficult to harvest, but our work shows that humanitarian engagement with violent armed actors can be done, despite the many challenges.

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