

Policy Builds the Houses, People Build the Community: The Structured Reintegration Model (SRM) for Former Rebels in Government Housing Sites

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ABSTRACT

Reintegration policy can provide housing, but community cohesion develops through longer-term social, economic, and relational processes. This study examined the factors that strengthen or hinder community cohesion among former rebels in government housing communities and synthesized these findings into a theoretical framework for housing-based reintegration. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected former rebels from the Pineville Housing Project in Malaybalay City and the CDO Midland Valley Homes in Cagayan de Oro City, Northern Mindanao. Participants were intentionally selected to reflect diversity in age, gender, duration of reintegration, and former organizational affiliation. Data were complemented by focus group discussions, immersion observation, and documentary analysis and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings showed that community cohesion is strengthened by institutional support, effective local leadership, and active participation in collective activities, which foster trust, shared responsibility, and social inclusion. In contrast, livelihood insecurity, behavioral problems, and persistent social stigma undermine trust, participation, and long-term community stability. The findings also revealed continued dependence on government assistance, raising concerns regarding the sustainability of reintegration outcomes. Integrating these findings with evidence from the broader research program led to the development of the Structured-Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM), which conceptualizes community cohesion as a dynamic interaction among structural foundations, relational processes, and identity transformation, with sustainable livelihood serving as the central mediating factor. The study concludes that successful reintegration requires housing to be complemented by inclusive governance, livelihood opportunities, and sustained community engagement. The SR-CCRM provides an evidence-based framework to guide government agencies and community stakeholders in strengthening post-conflict reintegration policies and practices.

Keywords: Reintegration, Community Cohesion, Former Rebels, Government Housing, SR-CCRM, Livelihood, Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Every reintegration program embodies a theory of change, though few state it aloud. The Philippine housing-based model, operating through the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), the Task Force Balik-Loob, and the National Housing Authority, wagers that structural provision, houses, security, assistance, will mature into social cohesion and durable civilian life. International experience counsels caution about that wager: disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs that privilege material delivery while under-attending the social environments into which former combatants are placed have repeatedly produced settlements that succeed as construction and struggle as community (McMullin, 2019; Özerdem, 2022), and reintegration reframed from the community's perspective demands participation, acceptance, and shared ownership that no turnover ceremony can confer (Annan et al., 2017). What post-conflict programming lacks, particularly in the Philippine context where research concentrates on policy and economic outcomes (Tadem,

2021), is a grounded account of the factors that actually strengthen or weaken community life inside these purpose-built settlements, and a framework that organizes those factors into usable theory.

This study supplies both. Its first task is empirical: to identify, from the lived experience of former rebels themselves, what helps and what hinders the development of supportive and strong community life in government housing sites. Its second task is theoretical: to synthesize these factors, together with the resettlement, belonging, trust, participation, and identity findings reported in the companion papers of this research program, into an integrative framework, the Structured–Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM). The need for such a model is practical as much as scholarly. Agencies implementing housing-based reintegration currently navigate by fragmented guidance, housing standards from one office, livelihood menus from another, security protocols from a third, with no shared account of how structural support, social relationships, and identity change interact to produce, or fail to produce, cohesion. A model grounded in beneficiaries’ lived experience and framed by reintegration theory (McMullin, 2019) and the social cohesion perspective (Özerdem, 2022; Meernik et al., 2020) offers that shared account.

The study draws on the same research program as its companion papers: a phenomenological inquiry among former rebels in two government housing sites in Region 10, Northern Mindanao. This third and final paper reports the factors of community life (the program’s sixth research question), articulates the SR-CCRM, and translates the model into recommendations for local government units, E-CLIP implementers, the Task Force Balik-Loob, and non-governmental organizations, in support of Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies.

Research Question

This study answered the question: What factors help or hinder the development of supportive and strong community life among former rebels in government housing? It further pursued the integrative objective of the research program: to synthesize the study’s findings into a framework of community cohesion and reintegration in government housing sites.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019), extended in this final component toward theory-building: beyond describing lived experience, the analysis synthesized cross-cutting patterns from the triangulated data into an integrative model, following the reflexive thematic analysis tradition in which themes are iteratively coded, categorized, and integrated until higher-order structure emerges (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Setting, Participants, and Data Gathering

Participants consisted of twenty former rebels, with ten participants each from the Pineville Housing Project in Barangay San Jose, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, and the CDO Midland Valley Homes in Barangay Dansolihon, Cagayan de Oro City. Purposive criterion sampling was employed to recruit information-rich participants capable of providing detailed accounts of their reintegration experiences and community life. To capture diverse perspectives, participants were intentionally selected across three age groups (20–29, 30–44, and 45–65 years), included an equal representation of males and females (10 males and 10 females), varied in the duration of their reintegration, and represented different former organizational affiliations. Inclusion criteria required participants to be formally enrolled under government reintegration programs, at least eighteen years of age, residents of the housing community for a minimum of two years, and willing to provide informed consent. Individuals with ongoing criminal proceedings or those experiencing acute psychological distress that could compromise participation were excluded.

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the local dialect, allowing participants to describe their reintegration experiences in their own words. Focus group discussions were

conducted to facilitate collective reflection and to validate emerging issues shared during individual interviews. Immersion observation enabled the researcher to document naturally occurring community interactions, participation in communal activities, and everyday social relationships within the housing sites. Documentary analysis of National Housing Authority policies, Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) guidelines, Task Force Balik-Loob issuances, and relevant local government documents provided institutional context and methodological triangulation. The combination of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing convergence of evidence across individual narratives, group discussions, observations, and policy documents.

Data Analysis, Model Development, and Ethics

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2019). Initial coding focused on participants' descriptions of factors that strengthened or weakened community life. Codes were iteratively refined into categories and themes through repeated comparison of interview transcripts, focus group discussions, field observations, and documentary evidence. Data saturation was considered achieved when no new conceptual categories emerged, and similar structural and relational patterns were consistently identified across both housing communities.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation involving interviews, focus group discussions, immersion observation, and documentary analysis. Member checking was undertaken by presenting preliminary interpretations to selected participants to verify that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Peer debriefing with qualitative research colleagues challenged coding decisions and emerging interpretations, thereby reducing researcher bias. An audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, analytic memos, and revisions was maintained throughout the study to strengthen dependability and confirmability. Rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, and context were provided to support the transferability of findings to similar post-conflict housing communities.

The second stage of analysis synthesized the themes generated from this study with those identified across the companion papers on resettlement experiences, social trust, belonging, participation, and identity transformation. Through iterative abstraction and constant comparison, these interconnected findings were integrated into the Structured-Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM), representing the research program's higher-order theoretical contribution.

Ethical safeguards included community orientation conducted in the local dialect, written informed consent, participants' right to withdraw at any stage, anonymization through participant codes, and strict confidentiality of all data. Emotional risks were minimized through voluntary participation and the exclusion of individuals experiencing acute psychological distress. All data collection, storage, and reporting complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What Strengthens and What Weakens Community Life

Four themes captured the factors shaping community life, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors Helping and Hindering Supportive Community Life

Direction	Emerging Themes
Strengthening factors	1. Government support strengthens community stability; 2. Unity and participation build strong communities
Weakening factors	3. Livelihood problems weaken community stability; 4. Behavioral issues and social stigma create division

On the strengthening side, participants consistently identified government institutions as the foundation of community stability. One participant remarked, *"The DSWD, CSWD, PNP, and Philippine Army are the ones who strengthen us,"* highlighting the continuing importance of institutional assistance. Another participant added, *"Without the government's help, we would not have been able to begin a new life here,"* emphasizing that housing, livelihood assistance, and continuing government presence fostered both security and optimism.

Equally important was the role of unity and active participation in sustaining community cohesion. As one participant explained, *"The main thing that helps here is unity,"* while another observed, *"When everyone joins community activities, misunderstandings decrease, and we become closer."* These statements demonstrate that institutional support alone does not create cohesive communities; rather, cohesion develops through everyday interaction, shared responsibility, and collective participation.

Participants also consistently described livelihood insecurity as the greatest obstacle to successful reintegration. One participant stated, *"Housing is important, but without work it is difficult to support our family,"* while another noted, *"If there is no income, people become discouraged and stop joining community activities."* These accounts illustrate how economic insecurity limits participation, weakens trust, and reduces long-term community engagement.

Behavioral concerns and persistent social stigma further undermined cohesion. Drinking-related conflicts, theft, and low participation in community activities were repeatedly cited as sources of tension within the housing communities. One participant explained, *"Discrimination follows immediately once they know you are a former rebel,"* while another reflected, *"Even though we have already changed, some people still fear us."* These narratives demonstrate that reintegration extends beyond physical resettlement and requires sustained efforts toward social acceptance and identity transformation.

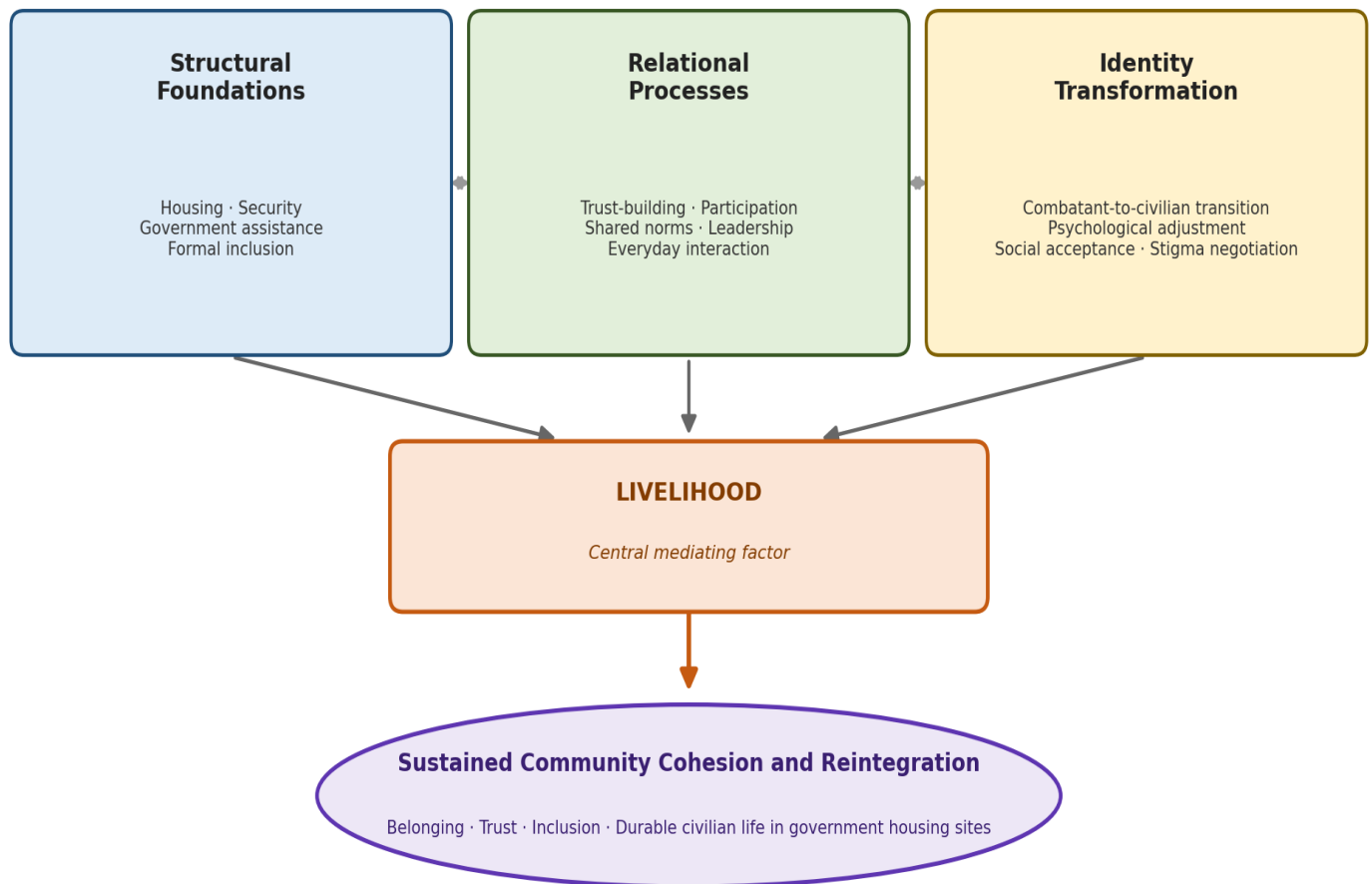
The Structured–Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM)

Synthesizing these factors with the full findings of the research program, the grateful but economically strained resettlement experience, the conditional growth of belonging and trust, the engine role of participation, and the uneven work of identity transformation, yields the Structured–Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (Figure 1). The SR-CCRM organizes housing-based reintegration into three interrelated pillars. Structural foundations comprise the policy-driven support systems, housing, security, and government assistance that provide initial stability and formal inclusion in community life. Relational processes comprise the everyday social construction of cohesion: trust-building, participation, shared experiences, norms, and leadership that regulate and sustain relationships. Identity transformation comprises the gradual transition from combatant to civilian identity, shaped by psychological adjustment, social acceptance, and the negotiation of stigma. Across all three runs, the model's central proposition is that livelihood functions as the central mediating factor, determining whether policy-enabled stability matures into sustained community cohesion or remains fragile.

Although grounded in established reintegration scholarship, the SR-CCRM extends existing theoretical perspectives in several important ways. Reintegration theory conceptualizes reintegration as a multidimensional process involving economic, psychosocial, political, and social adjustment (McMullin, 2019), while social cohesion frameworks emphasize trust, participation, belonging, and shared norms as the foundations of peaceful communities (Özerdem, 2022; Meernik et al., 2020). The SR-CCRM integrates these complementary perspectives within the specific context of government housing-based reintegration and proposes that sustainable livelihood functions as the principal mediating mechanism connecting structural support to relational development and identity transformation. Unlike previous frameworks that treat livelihood as one component among several reintegration interventions, the SR-CCRM identifies livelihood as the enabling condition through which policy support is translated into sustained participation, trust, and community cohesion. This proposition represents the model's principal theoretical contribution.

Figure 1. The Structured–Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM)

Structured-Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM)



Cohesion is continuously constructed through participation, interaction, and adaptation — not automatically achieved through policy.

The model's defining claim is that cohesion is not automatically achieved through policy but continuously constructed through participation, interaction, and adaptation within the community. Structural foundations are necessary, the participants' gratitude and their naming of government agencies as their strength attest to it, but structure only opens the space in which relational processes and identity transformation do the actual work of community-making, and livelihood decides whether that work can proceed. The SR-CCRM thereby integrates the theoretical lenses of the research program: reintegration theory's insistence that reintegration is multidimensional, requiring psychosocial, economic, and relational reconstruction beyond material support (McMullin, 2019), the social cohesion perspective's location of community strength in trust, participation, norms, and belonging built through interaction (Özerdem, 2022; Meernik et al., 2020; Johnson-Singh et al., 2024), and the community-centered account of reintegration in which acceptance and shared ownership complete what programs begin (Annan et al., 2017). Its contribution is the explicit mediating position of livelihood, elevated by the participants' own testimony from one program component among many to the hinge of the entire framework.

The findings also demonstrate that housing provision alone does not guarantee successful reintegration. Rather, government housing serves as the structural entry point through which former rebels begin rebuilding civilian lives, while long-term cohesion depends upon continued interaction among institutional support, community participation, identity reconstruction, and economic self-sufficiency. By explicitly positioning livelihood as the central mediating factor, the SR-CCRM offers a more comprehensive explanation of why some housing communities progress toward sustained cohesion whereas others remain dependent on continuing external assistance. In doing so, the model advances existing reintegration literature by linking structural interventions with long-term social sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

Four conclusions are drawn. First, supportive community life in government housing sites is strengthened by two forces working in tandem: institutional support, which residents experience as the backbone of stability, and the community's own unity and participation, which convert assistance into cohesion. Second, community life is most consistently weakened by livelihood insecurity, whose effects are social as much as economic: it suppresses participation, strains trust, and destabilizes identity; and, secondarily, by behavioral issues and social stigma that divide residents from each other and from surrounding communities. Third, the residents' strong dependence on government institutions, while presently stabilizing, poses a sustainability question that short-horizon assistance cannot answer. Fourth, the findings of the research program compose an integrative framework, the Structured-Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM), in which structural foundations, relational processes, and identity transformation interact, with livelihood as the central mediator, to determine whether housing-based reintegration produces sustained community cohesion.

The findings further demonstrate that housing provision alone does not guarantee successful reintegration. Rather, government housing serves as the structural entry point through which former rebels begin rebuilding civilian lives, while long-term community cohesion depends on the continued interaction of institutional support, community participation, identity reconstruction, and sustainable economic opportunities. By explicitly positioning livelihood as the central mediating factor, the SR-CCRM offers a more comprehensive explanation of why some housing communities progress toward sustained cohesion whereas others remain dependent on continuing external assistance. In doing so, the model extends existing reintegration and social cohesion scholarship by linking structural interventions with long-term social sustainability and provides a context-specific framework for strengthening housing-based reintegration policies and programs.

Ultimately, the model's central proposition is that policy builds the houses, but people build the community, and livelihood determines whether that community can endure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local government units may institutionalize community-based participation mechanisms, regular assemblies, participatory governance, and community development programs as core components of reintegration while strengthening livelihood assistance, market linkages, local employment opportunities, and psychosocial, reconciliation, and mental health services that address stigma and behavioral challenges among former rebels and host communities alike. E-CLIP implementers may transition from one-time assistance toward developmental interventions through sustained livelihood support, periodic monitoring, mentoring, community-based enterprise development, financial literacy, and cooperative development to reduce dependency and strengthen the economic self-reliance that the SR-CCRM identifies as the foundation of sustained community cohesion. The Task Force Balik-Loob may further strengthen inter-agency coordination and localization by extending monitoring beyond assistance delivery to include indicators of social integration, community participation, livelihood sustainability, and economic stability, while adopting culturally responsive interventions that support the transition from rural subsistence to urban and formal economies. Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations may complement government initiatives by expanding livelihood assistance, psychosocial support, leadership development, community dialogue between former rebels and host communities, peer-support networks, and anti-stigma campaigns that foster social acceptance and inclusive community development.

Future studies should validate the Structured-Relational Community Cohesion and Reintegration Model (SR-CCRM) using longitudinal and mixed-method research designs across multiple post-conflict regions in the Philippines and comparable international contexts. Longitudinal research would enable scholars to examine how community cohesion, identity transformation, institutional dependence, and livelihood outcomes evolve throughout the reintegration process, while mixed-method approaches could empirically test the relationships among the model's structural, relational, identity, and livelihood dimensions. Future investigations should also evaluate the long-term effectiveness of livelihood interventions as mediating mechanisms for sustainable

community cohesion and compare reintegration outcomes across different demographic groups, housing models, and former organizational affiliations to further establish the model's applicability and generalizability.

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