

From Combatant to Neighbor: Trust, Participation, and Identity Reconstruction Among Former Rebels in Philippine Resettlement Communities

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ABSTRACT

Housing provides former rebels with a place to live, but sustainable reintegration depends on whether they are accepted as members of their new communities. This study explored how former rebels resettled in government housing sites develop trust with their neighbors, participate in community life, reconstruct their identities, and contribute to community cohesion. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved twenty purposively selected former rebels residing in two government resettlement communities in Region X, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Sample adequacy was established through information power, while thematic saturation was reached when no new codes or themes emerged during the final interviews across both sites. Findings indicate that trust develops gradually through repeated positive interactions characterized by respect, humility, and behavioral consistency but remains vulnerable to alcohol-related conflict, low community participation, and persistent stigma. Community participation emerged as the principal mechanism connecting interpersonal trust with collective identity and social cohesion, while leadership opportunities facilitated identity reconstruction from former combatant to active community member. Nevertheless, social stigma continued to hinder complete acceptance despite participants' commitment to civilian life. The study concludes that successful reintegration extends beyond housing provision and requires sustained investments in participatory governance, psychosocial support, livelihood development, and anti-stigma interventions. The findings contribute to reintegration scholarship by demonstrating the interconnected roles of trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion within government-assisted post-conflict resettlement.

Keywords: former rebels, community cohesion, trust-building, identity reconstruction, community participation, reintegration, phenomenology, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The most difficult phase of reintegration begins after former combatants receive housing assistance. While governments can facilitate disarmament, demobilization, and relocation through formal programs, they cannot legislate trust, belonging, or social acceptance. Sustainable reintegration depends not only on material assistance but also on the gradual reconstruction of relationships between former combatants and the communities into which they resettle. Consequently, reintegration is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional process encompassing structural, psychosocial, relational, and identity dimensions rather than merely an administrative transition from armed conflict to civilian life (McMullin, 2019; Özerdem, 2022).

International reintegration research consistently demonstrates that community acceptance represents one of the strongest predictors of successful post-conflict recovery. Studies from Colombia, Sierra Leone, Nepal, Northern Ireland, and Rwanda have shown that former combatants frequently encounter distrust, social exclusion, and persistent stigma despite receiving economic assistance or housing support (Derksen, 2021; Johnson-Singh et al., 2024; Meernik et al., 2020). Communities often evaluate former combatants based on

their observable behaviors rather than official reintegration status, making trust-building a gradual social process requiring repeated interaction, accountability, and meaningful participation.

Within the Philippine context, the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) and other national reintegration initiatives have focused primarily on providing housing assistance, livelihood support, financial incentives, and psychosocial services for former rebels who voluntarily surrender to the government. While these interventions have significantly improved physical security and economic opportunities, relatively little empirical attention has been devoted to understanding how former rebels establish social relationships, negotiate their identities, and develop community cohesion within government resettlement communities. Existing Philippine studies largely emphasize policy implementation, peace agreements, and socioeconomic outcomes, leaving the relational and psychosocial dimensions of reintegration comparatively underexplored (Tadem, 2021; Alongan & Omblero, 2023).

This research addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of former rebels residing in two government housing communities in Northern Mindanao. Specifically, it investigates how interpersonal trust develops, how participation in community activities strengthens social relationships, how shared norms regulate community interactions, and how former rebels reconstruct their identities following armed conflict. Rather than treating housing as the endpoint of reintegration, the study conceptualizes resettlement communities as dynamic social environments where belonging must be continuously negotiated through everyday interactions.

The study is informed by contemporary reintegration theory, which conceptualizes reintegration as a long-term process involving structural support, social acceptance, identity transformation, and community participation (McMullin, 2019). It likewise draws from social cohesion theory, which emphasizes interpersonal trust, participation, shared norms, reciprocity, and collective identity as fundamental elements of cohesive communities (Johnson-Singh et al., 2024; Meernik et al., 2020). These perspectives collectively suggest that successful reintegration cannot be measured solely by housing occupancy or economic assistance but must also consider whether former combatants become accepted members of their communities.

Building upon these theoretical perspectives, this study proposes that trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion operate as mutually reinforcing processes rather than independent outcomes. Trust encourages participation, participation strengthens identity transformation, reconstructed identities facilitate social acceptance, and community cohesion further reinforces trust, creating a cyclical process that supports long-term reintegration. By examining these relationships through participants' lived experiences, the study contributes empirical evidence to the growing literature on community-based reintegration while providing practical insights for strengthening Philippine reintegration programs.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do former rebels build social relationships and trust within government resettlement communities?
2. What roles do participation in community activities, adherence to shared norms, and everyday interactions play in strengthening community cohesion?
3. How do former rebels reconstruct their identities while transitioning from combatant to civilian life?

The findings contribute to reintegration scholarship by illustrating that community cohesion is neither automatic nor guaranteed by housing provision. Instead, cohesion emerges gradually through sustained participation, reciprocal trust, behavioral consistency, and community acceptance, offering important implications for national reintegration policies and post-conflict community development.

Research Questions

This study explored the relational and identity dimensions of community cohesion among former rebels relocated to government housing sites in Region 10, Northern Mindanao. Specifically, it answered three questions: (1) What challenges and opportunities do former rebels face in building social relationships and trust within their community? (2) What roles do participation in community activities, adherence to shared norms, and personal interactions play in shaping community cohesion? and (3) How do former rebels balance their past identities with their current social roles within the housing site?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of former rebels as they rebuilt trust, participated in community life, and reconstructed their identities within government resettlement communities. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for investigating complex human experiences because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to shared phenomena from their own perspectives (Neubauer et al., 2019). Since trust, belonging, identity transformation, and community cohesion are socially constructed experiences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures, phenomenology allowed participants to narrate these processes in their own words while revealing the meanings attached to everyday interactions.

Setting, Participants, and Data Gathering

The study was conducted in two government housing communities established under the Philippine government's reintegration program for former rebels: the Pineville Housing Project in Barangay San Jose, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, and the CDO Midland Valley Homes in Barangay Mambuaya, Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental. These communities were selected because they represent government-assisted resettlement sites where former rebels have transitioned from armed conflict to civilian life, providing an appropriate context for examining trust-building, community participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion. Twenty former rebels participated in the study, with ten participants purposively selected from each housing site. Purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referral, was employed to identify information-rich participants who could provide comprehensive insights into the reintegration process. Eligible participants were at least 18 years old, had voluntarily surrendered through the government's reintegration program, had resided in the housing community for a minimum of two years, and voluntarily agreed to participate by providing informed consent. Individuals who were undergoing active criminal prosecution or exhibited signs of severe psychological distress during the period of data collection were excluded to minimize potential risks and ensure that participants could comfortably and safely share their lived experiences.

Individuals undergoing active criminal prosecution or experiencing severe psychological distress at the time of data collection were excluded to minimize potential harm.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage
Housing Site		
Pineville Housing Project	10	50%
CDO Midland Valley Homes	10	50%
Age Group		
20–29 years	2	10%
30–44 years	8	40%
45–65 years	10	50%
Sex		
Male	10	50%
Female	10	50%
Average Length of Residence	More than 2 years	100%

The sample size was considered adequate based on the principle of **information power** (Malterud et al., 2016), wherein studies with a focused aim, relatively homogeneous participants, and high-quality interviews require fewer participants to generate rich and meaningful findings. Information power was further strengthened through methodological triangulation involving interviews, observations, and documentary analysis.

Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in the participants' local dialect. Interviews began with rapport-building questions before exploring experiences of trust-building, participation in community activities, social relationships, identity transformation, and community life.

Field observations documented community interactions, participation during assemblies, neighborhood activities, and informal social exchanges. Documentary analysis of E-CLIP guidelines, National Housing Authority policies, and local government reintegration documents provided contextual understanding and methodological triangulation.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary before undergoing reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2019). Coding combined deductive codes derived from the research questions with inductively generated codes emerging directly from participants' narratives. Themes were refined through iterative analysis, constant comparison between participants and study sites, and collaborative discussions between the researchers to improve credibility and interpretive rigor. Entry into each housing community began with orientation meetings conducted in the local dialect, during which the study's objectives, procedures, voluntary nature, confidentiality safeguards, and participants' rights were clearly explained. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews commenced, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained through participant codes, secure storage of digital recordings, and removal of personally identifying information from transcripts.

To minimize emotional distress, participants were free to decline any question they considered uncomfortable, while individuals exhibiting signs of acute psychological trauma were excluded from participation. Data collection and management complied with the **Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173)**. **Ethical approval** for the study was obtained from the **Liceo de Cagayan University Institutional Research Ethics Committee Approval No. 2026-02-2288-SBMA-GS**

Sample Adequacy and Thematic Saturation

Sample adequacy was justified using the principle of information power together with thematic saturation. Saturation was considered achieved when successive interviews across both housing communities yielded no substantially new codes, categories, or conceptual insights regarding trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion. The recurrence of similar experiences across participants indicated that the data sufficiently represented the phenomenon under investigation while supporting the credibility and dependability of the thematic findings.

Researcher Reflexivity

Recognizing that qualitative inquiry requires continuous awareness of the researcher's influence on knowledge production, the principal researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document methodological decisions, emerging assumptions, and personal reflections. Although the researcher possessed professional familiarity with government housing and reintegration programs, deliberate efforts were undertaken to minimize bias through reflexive practice, prolonged engagement, triangulation of interviews with observations and documentary evidence, and collaborative review of coding decisions with the research adviser. These procedures enhanced confirmability while ensuring that the themes reflected participants' lived experiences rather than researcher assumptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interview data generated twelve themes across the three research questions, revealing that trust, participation, and identity reconstruction are closely interconnected processes shaping community cohesion among former rebels in government resettlement communities.

Building Trust Through Everyday Social Relationships

Participants consistently described trust as a gradual process developed through repeated positive interactions rather than an immediate consequence of resettlement. Respect, humility, patience, and consistent good behavior emerged as the primary foundations of trust. Community activities, including neighborhood meetings,

worship gatherings, and celebrations, provided opportunities for residents to interact regularly, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and establish mutual confidence. Conversely, alcohol-related conflicts, undisciplined behavior, interpersonal disputes, and low participation in community activities weakened trust and hindered social integration. Although participants generally perceived improved relationships within their communities, many acknowledged that complete trust had not yet been achieved, reflecting the lingering effects of their former identities.

These findings demonstrate that trust functions as a dynamic social process requiring continuous reinforcement through positive behavior and repeated interaction. Rather than being created through housing provision alone, trust develops through sustained interpersonal engagement, supporting McMullin's (2019) argument that reintegration extends beyond structural assistance toward long-term relational reconstruction. Similar observations have been reported in Colombia and Sierra Leone, where former combatants gradually earned community acceptance through consistent prosocial behavior rather than formal reintegration status (Derksen, 2021; Annan et al., 2017). The findings likewise reinforce social cohesion theory, which identifies interpersonal trust as a fundamental condition for collective action and community stability.

Community Participation as the Mechanism of Cohesion

Participants identified community participation as the principal mechanism through which trust was translated into collective cohesion. Regular assemblies, peace and order meetings, religious activities, neighborhood celebrations, and informal daily interactions enabled residents to exchange experiences, resolve conflicts, and strengthen social relationships. Communities characterized by higher participation demonstrated stronger cooperation, greater adherence to shared norms, and more effective conflict resolution than communities with lower participation.

Beyond facilitating social interaction, participation served as an important mechanism for reinforcing collective responsibility and shared community identity. Through regular engagement, former rebels gradually shifted from passive beneficiaries of government assistance to active contributors to community governance and development. This finding extends previous reintegration research by demonstrating that participation not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also facilitates identity transformation through meaningful civic engagement. Comparable findings have been documented in post-conflict communities in Rwanda, Northern Ireland, and Nepal, where participatory governance and community-based activities significantly enhanced social cohesion and long-term reintegration outcomes (Johnson-Singh et al., 2024; Meernik et al., 2020). The findings therefore suggest that participation serves as the operational bridge linking individual trust with broader community cohesion.

Identity Reconstruction: From Former Rebel to Community Member

Participants described identity reconstruction as a gradual and ongoing transition rather than an immediate outcome of surrender and relocation. Many acknowledged that adjusting from armed struggle to civilian life required substantial psychological adaptation, with meaningful community roles and leadership responsibilities facilitating this transition. Serving as community officers, peace advocates, or neighborhood leaders enabled participants to redirect their previous organizational experiences toward constructive community development.

Despite these positive developments, participants consistently reported that social stigma remained one of the greatest barriers to complete reintegration. The label "former rebel" continued to influence how some community members perceived them, resulting in persistent discrimination and conditional acceptance. Consequently, identity reconstruction depended not only on participants' willingness to embrace civilian life but also on the surrounding community's willingness to recognize their transformation.

These findings support contemporary reintegration theory, which conceptualizes identity reconstruction as a reciprocal process involving both individual behavioral change and community acceptance (Özerdem, 2022). Similar experiences have been documented among former combatants in Colombia and Northern Ireland, where long-term reintegration remained constrained by persistent public stigma despite successful economic and residential integration (Derksen, 2021). The present findings therefore highlight that sustainable reintegration requires interventions addressing both individual transformation and societal attitudes toward former combatants.

Synthesis of Findings

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion operate as mutually reinforcing processes rather than independent dimensions of reintegration. Trust encourages participation, participation strengthens social relationships and identity transformation, reconstructed identities facilitate community acceptance, and increased cohesion further reinforces trust. This cyclical relationship suggests that successful reintegration extends beyond the provision of housing and livelihood assistance toward the continuous cultivation of supportive social environments.

The study contributes to reintegration scholarship by illustrating that community cohesion represents both a social process and a measurable reintegration outcome. Consistent with international evidence from post-conflict societies, the findings indicate that long-term reintegration depends on sustained investments in participatory governance, psychosocial support, leadership development, and anti-stigma initiatives that enable former rebels to become fully accepted members of their communities rather than merely recipients of government assistance.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that successful reintegration extends beyond the provision of housing and material assistance toward the gradual development of trust, active community participation, and identity reconstruction within resettlement communities. Trust emerged as a progressive social process founded on respect, humility, consistent behavior, and repeated interpersonal interaction rather than an automatic consequence of relocation. Community participation served as the principal mechanism through which trust evolved into community cohesion by strengthening social relationships, reinforcing shared norms, and promoting collective responsibility. Meanwhile, identity reconstruction from former combatant to civilian was found to be gradual and uneven. Although participants demonstrated strong commitment to peaceful civilian life and many assumed meaningful leadership roles within their communities, persistent social stigma continued to limit complete acceptance. Collectively, the findings indicate that trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion operate as mutually reinforcing dimensions of sustainable reintegration. The study therefore concludes that housing-based reintegration programs achieve their greatest long-term effectiveness when structural assistance is complemented by interventions that promote inclusive participation, psychosocial recovery, leadership development, and social acceptance.

LIMITATIONS

The findings should be interpreted within the context of several limitations. First, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological design involving twenty former rebels from two government housing communities in Northern Mindanao; consequently, the findings are intended to provide in-depth contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study captured participants' experiences at a single point in time and therefore could not examine how trust, participation, and identity reconstruction evolve throughout the reintegration process. Third, the study relied primarily on the perspectives of former rebels and did not include the views of neighboring civilians, local government officials, or reintegration implementers whose experiences could further enrich understanding of community cohesion. Future studies employing longitudinal, mixed-method, and multi-stakeholder approaches across different post-conflict communities are recommended to validate and extend these findings.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide important implications for strengthening the Philippine government's national reintegration initiatives, particularly the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) and related community-based peacebuilding programs. Reintegration policies should recognize community cohesion as a core program outcome alongside housing provision, financial assistance, and livelihood support. Community participation mechanisms—including regular assemblies, participatory governance, community service, leadership development, and peacebuilding activities—should be institutionalized as integral components of reintegration rather than optional community initiatives. National agencies may also strengthen psychosocial interventions that address trauma, stigma, and social exclusion while expanding livelihood

opportunities that reduce economic vulnerability and encourage active community participation. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate indicators of interpersonal trust, civic participation, leadership engagement, identity transformation, and community acceptance to assess the long-term sustainability of reintegration beyond conventional measures of housing occupancy and financial assistance. Such policy reforms would promote a more holistic and socially sustainable approach to post-conflict reintegration in the Philippines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are offered for reintegration policy and practice. The National Housing Authority, local government units, and E-CLIP implementers may institutionalize regular community assemblies, participatory governance mechanisms, and inclusive community activities that strengthen interpersonal trust and encourage active civic engagement among former rebels and host communities. Reintegration programs should complement housing assistance with sustained livelihood support, leadership development, financial literacy, cooperative formation, and community-based enterprise initiatives that promote long-term economic self-reliance. Psychosocial support services and community reconciliation programs should likewise be strengthened to address stigma, discrimination, and the psychological challenges associated with identity reconstruction following armed conflict. Community leaders should be encouraged to provide meaningful leadership opportunities for former rebels, recognizing that active participation in community governance facilitates identity transformation and strengthens collective responsibility. Finally, future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches involving former rebels, host communities, government agencies, and civil society organizations to examine how trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion evolve over time across diverse reintegration settings.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Community Cohesion in Post-Conflict Reintegration.

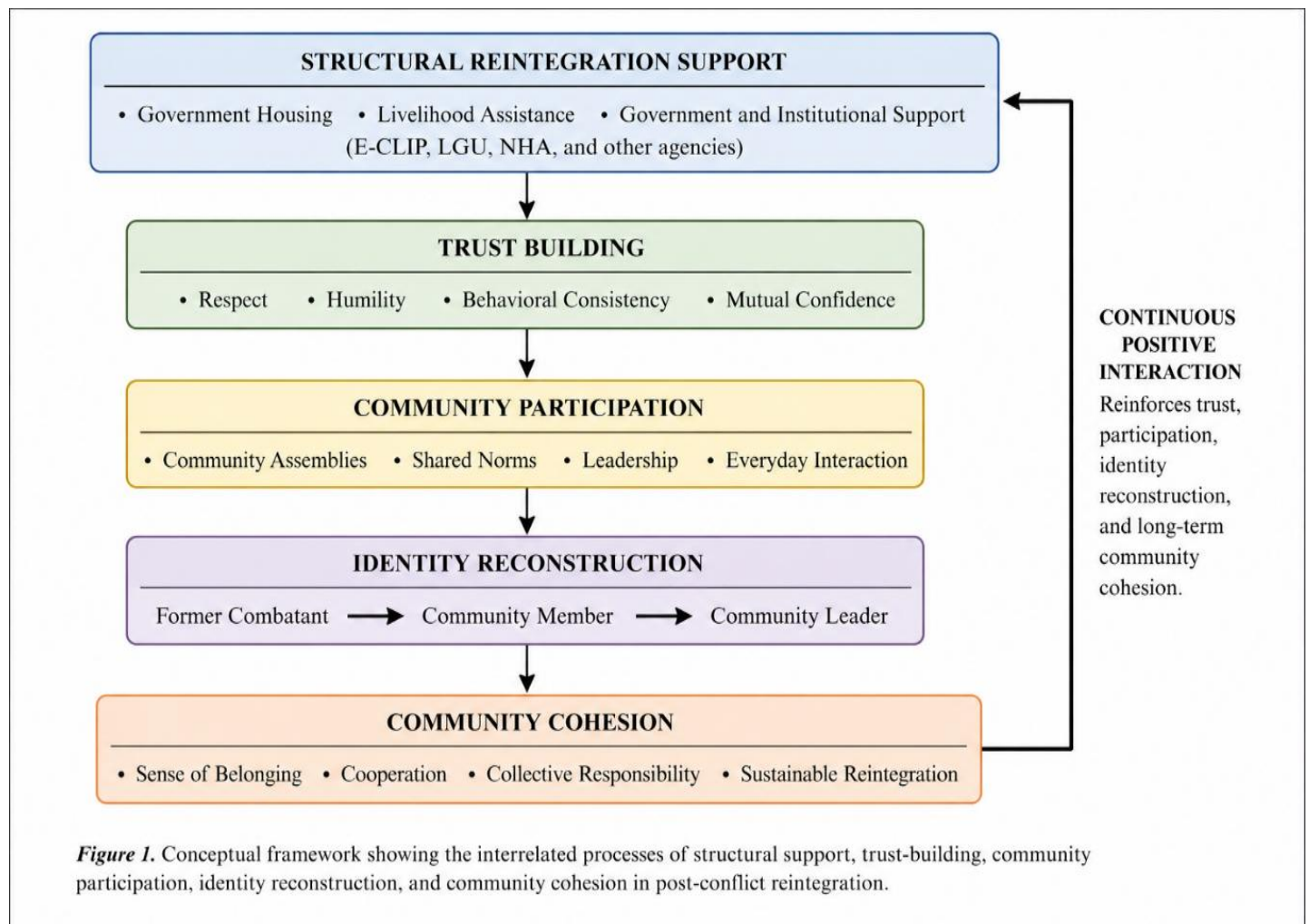


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing the interrelated processes of structural support, trust-building, community participation, identity reconstruction, and community cohesion in post-conflict reintegration.

The framework illustrates that structural reintegration support, including housing, livelihood assistance, and institutional support, creates the enabling conditions for trust-building among former rebels. Trust promotes active participation in community governance and social interaction, which facilitates identity reconstruction from former combatant to community member and, ultimately, community leader. These processes collectively strengthen community cohesion through enhanced belonging, cooperation, collective responsibility, and sustainable reintegration. The feedback loop indicates that continued positive interaction reinforces trust, participation, identity reconstruction, and long-term community cohesion.

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