

Collaborative Trust: Leadership Practices in Post-Conflict Community Reintegration

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative trust is fundamental to successful post-conflict reintegration, yet little is known about how leadership practices facilitate trust, participation, and social cohesion among former rebels in resettlement communities. This study explored the lived experiences of former rebels to examine how leadership influences collaborative trust in government housing communities. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, and documentary analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across participants' experiences.

The findings revealed that collaborative trust develops through strategic and inclusive leadership that promotes safety, shared norms, participation, and mutual accountability. Effective leadership fostered interpersonal trust, strengthened residents' sense of belonging, encouraged collective decision-making, and supported identity transformation from former combatants to active community members. However, livelihood insecurity and continued dependence on government assistance constrained the sustainability of collaborative relationships. The study proposes that collaborative trust is not an automatic outcome of resettlement but a leadership-driven process shaped by institutional support, community participation, and social capital. These findings informed the development of the Structured Reintegration Model, which positions collaborative trust as a central mechanism linking strategic leadership with sustainable community reintegration. The study contributes to leadership and public management literature by demonstrating that effective post-conflict reintegration requires adaptive, collaborative, and community-centered leadership beyond the provision of housing alone.

Keywords: collaborative trust, strategic leadership, post-conflict reintegration, community cohesion, social capital, former rebels, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Post-conflict reintegration is increasingly recognized as a leadership and governance challenge rather than solely a security or humanitarian concern. While governments worldwide have invested substantial resources in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, the long-term success of these initiatives depends not only on the provision of housing, livelihood assistance, and financial support but also on the ability of public leaders to foster collaborative trust, strengthen community relationships, and facilitate inclusive governance. Reintegration therefore extends beyond restoring former combatants' socioeconomic conditions; it requires leadership practices that rebuild fractured social systems, encourage collective participation, and cultivate resilient communities capable of sustaining peace.

Contemporary leadership scholarship emphasizes that complex societal challenges require collaborative, adaptive, and participatory approaches rather than traditional hierarchical leadership. Public leaders operating in post-conflict environments must coordinate diverse stakeholders, reconcile competing interests, and establish institutional arrangements that promote cooperation among former combatants, local governments, civil society organizations, and host communities. Collaborative leadership enables multiple actors to share responsibility for addressing complex social problems, while strategic leadership provides the vision and institutional direction necessary for sustainable community transformation. Together, these leadership approaches create conditions

that enable trust, cooperation, and shared ownership of development initiatives, which are widely recognized as essential foundations of effective governance and long-term peace.

Among the most significant yet least understood leadership outcomes in post-conflict settings is **collaborative trust**. Unlike interpersonal trust, which develops between individuals, collaborative trust refers to the collective confidence that community members place in one another, their leaders, and public institutions to work cooperatively toward shared goals. Within management and leadership literature, collaborative trust is increasingly regarded as a strategic organizational resource that enhances coordination, strengthens stakeholder engagement, improves collective decision-making, and increases organizational resilience. In post-conflict communities, collaborative trust enables former combatants and civilian residents to move beyond historical divisions by participating in shared governance, community development, and collective problem-solving.

International evidence demonstrates that leadership significantly influences the quality of post-conflict reintegration. Studies conducted in Colombia, Rwanda, Liberia, Northern Ireland, and Nepal consistently report that reintegration programs achieve more sustainable outcomes when public leaders facilitate inclusive participation, encourage community dialogue, strengthen local institutions, and promote collaborative governance rather than relying exclusively on material assistance. These studies further demonstrate that leadership helps reduce social fragmentation by fostering trust, empowering local stakeholders, and creating opportunities for former combatants to assume constructive civic roles. Consequently, contemporary reintegration frameworks increasingly recognize that leadership capacity represents a critical determinant of sustainable peace and community resilience.

Within the Philippine context, government efforts to promote peace and development have expanded significantly through the implementation of Executive Order No. 70 and the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), both of which embody the government's Whole-of-Nation Approach to Ending Local Communist Armed Conflict. These initiatives provide comprehensive assistance packages that include housing, livelihood support, financial incentives, education, skills development, psychosocial services, and access to government programs designed to facilitate the transition of former rebels into peaceful civilian life. The National Housing Authority, in partnership with the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU), Local Government Units, and other government agencies, plays a central role in implementing housing-based reintegration initiatives intended to provide beneficiaries with safe, stable, and dignified living environments.

Although these programs have demonstrated considerable progress in expanding access to housing and government services, their long-term effectiveness depends largely on the quality of leadership and governance within resettlement communities. Housing alone cannot ensure successful reintegration if community members remain socially isolated, distrustful of one another, or excluded from meaningful participation in local governance. Similarly, financial assistance and livelihood interventions may improve material well-being but cannot independently restore the interpersonal relationships necessary for sustained community cohesion. These realities suggest that successful reintegration requires leadership practices capable of transforming housing communities into collaborative environments characterized by trust, participation, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

Despite the growing importance of leadership in contemporary reintegration policy, empirical research examining leadership practices within post-conflict housing communities remains limited. Existing studies have predominantly focused on policy implementation, security outcomes, livelihood assistance, and psychosocial adjustment, while comparatively little attention has been given to understanding how leadership facilitates collaborative trust among former rebels and host communities. Within the Philippine literature, qualitative investigations have primarily examined beneficiaries' experiences of housing, economic assistance, and social acceptance, leaving an important theoretical and practical gap regarding the leadership processes that enable trust, strengthen governance, and promote sustainable reintegration. Consequently, leadership remains an underdeveloped dimension within both reintegration scholarship and public management research.

This study addresses this gap by examining collaborative trust through the lens of strategic and collaborative leadership within government housing communities established under the Philippine government's reintegration

program. Rather than viewing trust merely as an interpersonal outcome, the study conceptualizes collaborative trust as a leadership capability that emerges through inclusive governance, participatory decision-making, and sustained community engagement. By exploring the lived experiences of former rebels residing in government housing communities in Northern Mindanao, the study investigates how leadership practices facilitate relationship development, strengthen community participation, and support sustainable reintegration in post-conflict settings.

The study is anchored on Strategic Leadership Theory, Collaborative Leadership Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Collaborative Governance Framework. Collectively, these perspectives explain how leaders mobilize stakeholders, facilitate cooperation, develop institutional trust, and strengthen organizational resilience within complex community environments. These theoretical perspectives further suggest that sustainable reintegration is achieved not solely through government assistance but through leadership processes that create opportunities for collaboration, shared learning, collective responsibility, and community ownership of development initiatives.

Drawing from the empirical findings, this study advances the **Collaborative Trust Leadership Framework (CTLF)**, which positions collaborative trust as the central mechanism linking strategic leadership, collaborative governance, community participation, social capital, and sustainable reintegration. The framework proposes that leadership serves as the catalyst through which structural interventions—including housing and livelihood support—are transformed into enduring social outcomes such as community cohesion, institutional trust, and collective resilience. In doing so, the framework extends existing leadership and governance literature by demonstrating how collaborative trust functions as both a strategic leadership capability and a critical organizational resource within post-conflict communities.

The study contributes to management and leadership scholarship in three significant ways. First, it extends collaborative leadership theory by conceptualizing collaborative trust as a dynamic leadership outcome rather than merely an interpersonal phenomenon. Second, it contributes to public management literature by demonstrating how strategic leadership and collaborative governance facilitate sustainable reintegration within government-led housing programs. Finally, it provides practical insights for policymakers, public administrators, housing agencies, and peacebuilding practitioners by identifying leadership practices that strengthen community resilience, enhance stakeholder collaboration, and support long-term peacebuilding. Ultimately, the study argues that the enduring success of post-conflict reintegration depends not only on rebuilding homes but also on exercising leadership that cultivates trust, empowers communities, and transforms former conflict-affected settlements into resilient, inclusive, and self-sustaining communities.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore how leadership practices shape the development of collaborative trust in post-conflict community reintegration among former rebels residing in government housing communities in the Philippines. Specifically, it examined how former rebels experience collaborative trust within their resettlement communities and how leadership practices influence the formation of trusting relationships, community participation, and social integration. The study further investigated the roles of collaborative governance, community engagement, and institutional support in fostering trust and strengthening community cohesion, as well as the organizational and social factors that facilitate or hinder collaborative relationships during reintegration. Finally, the study explored how collaborative trust contributes to sustainable reintegration, resilient communities, and long-term peacebuilding in post-conflict government housing communities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine how leadership practices shape collaborative trust in post-conflict community reintegration among former rebels residing in Philippine government housing communities. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it seeks to understand the meanings individuals attribute to their lived experiences and provides rich insights into

complex social phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of this study, phenomenology enabled an in-depth exploration of how former rebels experienced leadership, trust, community participation, and institutional support as they transitioned from armed conflict to civilian life.

The study adopted an interpretivist perspective, recognizing that collaborative trust is socially constructed through continuous interaction among community members, local leaders, and public institutions. Rather than treating trust as a measurable outcome, the research conceptualized collaborative trust as a dynamic leadership process emerging from inclusive governance, participatory decision-making, reciprocal relationships, and shared community experiences. This perspective aligns with contemporary leadership scholarship, which views leadership as a relational process that mobilizes stakeholders toward collective action and sustainable organizational outcomes.

Research Setting and Participants

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 CDO Midland Valley Homes in Barangay Mambuaya, Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental. These communities were purposively selected because they represent long-term government-assisted resettlement sites where former rebels, local government institutions, homeowners' associations, and community leaders continuously interact in managing everyday community life. Such settings provided an appropriate environment for examining leadership practices, collaborative trust, and community cohesion within post-conflict communities.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all respondents possessed direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Eligible participants were required to (1) be recognized former rebels enrolled in the government's reintegration program, (2) be legitimate beneficiaries residing in one of the selected housing communities, (3) have resided in the community long enough to meaningfully describe their experiences of leadership, trust, and community participation, and (4) voluntarily provide informed consent. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, wherein no substantially new insights emerged regarding collaborative trust, leadership practices, and community reintegration.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences while providing sufficient flexibility to probe issues relating to leadership, collaborative trust, governance, and community participation. Interview questions focused on participants' interactions with community leaders, experiences of trust-building, participation in community activities, institutional support, collaborative decision-making, and the factors that facilitated or constrained successful reintegration.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, interview data were complemented by field observations and documentary analysis. Field observations documented community interactions, leadership activities, homeowners' association meetings, and everyday collaborative practices within the housing communities. Documentary analysis included relevant government policies, program guidelines, and institutional documents pertaining to the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), National Housing Authority (NHA) housing initiatives, and local government reintegration mechanisms. Integrating multiple data sources enhanced methodological triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of collaborative trust within post-conflict communities.

All interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language and audio-recorded with their consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary while preserving the contextual meanings expressed by participants.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis commenced with repeated familiarization with the transcripts, followed by systematic coding of significant statements relating to leadership practices, collaborative trust, community participation, governance, and institutional support. Initial

codes were grouped into categories based on conceptual similarities before broader themes were developed through iterative comparison across participants' narratives. Themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they accurately represented the participants' lived experiences and addressed the study's research questions.

To enhance analytical rigor, the emerging themes were interpreted through the lenses of Strategic Leadership Theory, Collaborative Leadership Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Collaborative Governance Framework. This theoretically informed interpretation enabled the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and explain how leadership practices contribute to the development of collaborative trust and sustainable community reintegration.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review body before the commencement of data collection. Permission to conduct the study was likewise secured from the relevant government agencies responsible for implementing reintegration and housing programs.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Prior to each interview, participants received a clear explanation of the study's objectives, research procedures, anticipated benefits, potential risks, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Considering the sensitive nature of post-conflict experiences, strict measures were implemented to protect participants' privacy and well-being. Personal identifiers were removed from all transcripts and replaced with participant codes to preserve anonymity. Audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were securely stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the research team. Particular care was taken to avoid questions that could unnecessarily retraumatize participants, and interviews were conducted in private, secure, and participant-preferred locations to ensure confidentiality and emotional comfort.

Throughout the research process, the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity were rigorously observed. Data management and processing complied with the provisions of the **Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173)**. These ethical safeguards ensured that participants' rights, dignity, and welfare were protected while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated five interrelated themes that explain how leadership practices shape collaborative trust in post-conflict community reintegration. Rather than viewing community cohesion solely as an outcome of resettlement, the findings demonstrate that collaborative trust develops through inclusive leadership, participatory governance, institutional support, and reciprocal social relationships. Together, these themes illustrate that leadership functions as the mechanism through which trust is cultivated, participation is encouraged, and resilient post-conflict communities are sustained.

Theme 1. Strategic Leadership Establishes the Foundation for Collaborative Trust

Participants consistently described community leaders, homeowners' association officers, and government representatives as important actors in creating an environment where trust could gradually develop. Leadership was not perceived merely as administrative authority but as the ability to facilitate communication, resolve conflicts, coordinate community activities, and ensure equitable access to government services. Transparent decision-making, fairness, and consistent engagement increased residents' confidence in both leaders and fellow community members, thereby creating the conditions necessary for collaborative trust.

These findings support Strategic Leadership Theory, which argues that leaders create organizational conditions that encourage collaboration, shared purpose, and long-term sustainability. Within post-conflict communities, strategic leadership reduced uncertainty and strengthened residents' willingness to participate in collective activities despite their diverse backgrounds and previous experiences of conflict.

Theme 2. Collaborative Governance Strengthens Community Participation and Social Capital

The findings reveal that collaborative governance served as a critical mechanism for strengthening community cohesion. Participants emphasized the importance of regular meetings, community assemblies, collective decision-making, and volunteer activities in promoting cooperation among residents. These collaborative processes allowed former rebels and other community members to jointly address local concerns while developing stronger interpersonal relationships.

Leadership encouraged participation by providing opportunities for residents to contribute to community initiatives, resulting in greater ownership of collective decisions. Through repeated interaction, residents accumulated social capital characterized by reciprocity, mutual assistance, and shared responsibility. The findings demonstrate that collaborative governance transforms community members from passive beneficiaries into active partners in community development.

Theme 3. Inclusive Leadership Facilitates Identity Transformation and Reintegration

Participants described reintegration as a gradual process of reconstructing personal identity from former combatants to responsible community members. Leadership practices that emphasized inclusion, respect, and equal participation enabled former rebels to overcome feelings of isolation and gradually develop a stronger sense of belonging within their communities.

Community leaders who promoted inclusiveness reduced perceived social barriers between former rebels and long-term residents. Through participation in community organizations, neighborhood activities, and collective problem-solving, participants reported increased acceptance and confidence in assuming new civilian roles. These findings suggest that leadership extends beyond organizational management and functions as a catalyst for identity transformation during post-conflict reintegration.

Theme 4. Institutional Support Enhances Collaborative Trust but Livelihood Constraints Limit Sustainable Reintegration

Participants acknowledged that government housing programs, peacebuilding initiatives, and local government interventions significantly contributed to their safety and overall quality of life. Institutional support provided the structural foundation necessary for successful reintegration by ensuring access to housing, basic services, and community development programs.

However, participants consistently identified unstable livelihoods, limited employment opportunities, and financial insecurity as persistent challenges. While leadership successfully promoted collaboration and trust, economic vulnerability reduced residents' ability to participate consistently in community activities and limited the long-term sustainability of reintegration efforts. These findings indicate that collaborative trust alone cannot sustain resilient communities without complementary economic development strategies.

Theme 5. Collaborative Trust Creates Resilient and Sustainable Post-Conflict Communities

Across all interviews, collaborative trust emerged as the central outcome of effective leadership practices. Trust enabled residents to cooperate, resolve conflicts peacefully, support one another during periods of hardship, and collectively pursue community development goals. Participants frequently described mutual assistance, shared responsibility, and active participation as defining characteristics of cohesive communities.

The findings demonstrate that collaborative trust functions as both a social and organizational resource. As trust increased, residents became more willing to engage in collective action, participate in governance processes, and contribute to community resilience. These behaviors reinforced social cohesion and strengthened the long-term sustainability of post-conflict reintegration.

Integrative Discussion

The findings collectively suggest that successful post-conflict reintegration is fundamentally a leadership process rather than solely a housing or welfare intervention. Strategic leadership establishes the institutional environment in which collaborative governance can flourish; collaborative governance encourages participation and builds social capital; social capital strengthens collaborative trust; and collaborative trust ultimately produces resilient, cohesive, and self-sustaining communities.

Based on these findings, this study advances the **Collaborative Trust Leadership Framework (CTLF)**, which conceptualizes collaborative trust as the central mechanism linking leadership practices to sustainable community reintegration. The framework proposes that strategic leadership, collaborative governance, institutional support, and community participation interact to produce collaborative trust, which subsequently enhances social capital, community cohesion, organizational resilience, and long-term reintegration outcomes. This contribution extends existing leadership and public management literature by demonstrating that collaborative trust represents a critical organizational capability for governing post-conflict communities and sustaining peace through participatory leadership.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that collaborative trust is a leadership-driven process that underpins successful post-conflict community reintegration. The findings reveal that community cohesion among former rebels is not achieved solely through the provision of housing or government assistance but emerges from strategic leadership practices that promote inclusive governance, meaningful participation, reciprocal relationships, and shared responsibility. Leadership was found to play a pivotal role in creating an environment where trust could gradually develop, enabling former rebels and other community members to engage in collective action and strengthen social relationships despite the challenges associated with post-conflict transition.

The study further concludes that collaborative governance serves as an essential mechanism for transforming government housing communities into resilient and self-sustaining communities. Through transparent decision-making, participatory leadership, and active stakeholder engagement, community members develop social capital characterized by mutual trust, cooperation, and collective accountability. These governance processes encourage greater community participation, reinforce a shared sense of belonging, and support the long-term sustainability of reintegration initiatives.

The findings also highlight that institutional support remains indispensable to successful reintegration. While government housing programs provide the structural foundation for rebuilding lives after conflict, sustainable reintegration depends on complementary interventions that strengthen livelihoods, expand economic opportunities, and enhance local leadership capacities. Persistent livelihood insecurity demonstrates that trust and community cohesion, although necessary, are insufficient without broader institutional strategies that address the socioeconomic conditions affecting reintegrated communities.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the **Collaborative Trust Leadership Framework (CTLF)** by positioning collaborative trust as the central mechanism linking strategic leadership, collaborative governance, and community participation to sustainable reintegration outcomes. The framework extends contemporary leadership and public management literature by demonstrating that collaborative trust functions as an organizational capability through which leaders mobilize stakeholders, strengthen social capital, and foster resilient post-conflict communities. This contribution broadens the application of leadership theory beyond traditional organizational settings and illustrates its relevance within complex community-based governance environments.

Overall, the study concludes that sustainable post-conflict reintegration is fundamentally a collaborative leadership endeavor. Effective leadership does not merely coordinate programs or administer services; it cultivates trust, empowers communities, facilitates collective action, and creates the institutional conditions necessary for resilient, inclusive, and peaceful communities. Consequently, leadership should be recognized as

a strategic resource in the design, implementation, and long-term governance of reintegration policies and community development programs aimed at sustaining peace and social stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership practices and collaborative governance in post-conflict community reintegration.

Government agencies responsible for reintegration, including the National Housing Authority (NHA), the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU), and Local Government Units (LGUs), should adopt leadership approaches that prioritize collaborative trust as a strategic component of reintegration programs. Beyond providing housing, leaders should institutionalize participatory governance mechanisms that encourage regular dialogue, transparent decision-making, conflict resolution, and active community participation. These practices can strengthen relationships among former rebels, community leaders, and government institutions while fostering greater ownership of community development initiatives.

Community leaders and homeowners' associations should receive continuous leadership development programs focused on collaborative leadership, conflict management, participatory decision-making, communication, and trust-building. Equipping local leaders with these competencies will enable them to manage diverse post-conflict communities more effectively, encourage inclusive participation, and sustain collaborative relationships that contribute to long-term community cohesion.

Given the persistent livelihood challenges identified by participants, reintegration policies should integrate leadership with local economic development strategies. Government agencies should strengthen interagency collaboration with employment, livelihood, agricultural, cooperative, and private-sector partners to create sustainable income opportunities for reintegrated communities. Leadership interventions are likely to be more effective when accompanied by economic initiatives that reduce financial vulnerability and enhance community self-reliance.

Public institutions should likewise strengthen collaborative governance by establishing formal partnerships among national government agencies, local governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and community organizations. Such multi-stakeholder collaboration can facilitate resource sharing, coordinated program implementation, continuous monitoring, and evidence-informed policy development that supports sustainable reintegration beyond the initial resettlement period.

The findings also suggest the value of incorporating collaborative trust as a measurable outcome in the evaluation of government reintegration programs. Future program assessments should examine indicators such as trust in community leadership, participation in governance processes, social capital, institutional confidence, and collective efficacy alongside conventional socioeconomic measures. Evaluating these relational dimensions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of reintegration success and inform the continuous improvement of leadership and governance strategies.

Finally, future research should further validate and refine the **Collaborative Trust Leadership Framework (CTLF)** developed in this study. Comparative studies across different post-conflict communities, regions, and reintegration contexts are recommended to examine the framework's transferability.

Researchers may also employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to investigate how collaborative trust evolves over time and how leadership practices influence long-term community resilience, organizational effectiveness, and sustainable peacebuilding. Such studies would extend the contribution of this research to the broader fields of leadership, public management, collaborative governance, and organizational resilience.

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