

Participatory Community Empowerment for Conflict Management and Peacebuilding in Multicultural Island Settings

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ABSTRACT

Maluku Province, Indonesia, is an archipelago characterized by its vibrant cultural, ethnic, and social diversity, but also by recurrent conflicts linked to land, identity, and historical grievances. This study reports on a community service initiative in Negeri Laha, Ambon, designed to enhance local capacities for conflict management and resolution. Employing participatory action research, the program delivered a series of workshops and interactive dialogues focused on the causes, dynamics, and solutions for conflict, with special attention to land disputes involving the Indonesian Air Force and local residents. Thirty participants, including youth, women, traditional, and religious leaders, engaged in case simulations, collaborative reflection, and practical training in negotiation and mediation. The results indicate a significant increase in participants' understanding of conflict sources, practical confidence in resolution strategies, and motivation to continue peacebuilding efforts. Key barriers identified include deep-seated mistrust, external influences, and limited institutional support for ongoing reconciliation. The initiative's emphasis on inclusive engagement, local leadership, and culturally relevant dialogue aligns with best practices in global peacebuilding literature and demonstrates the value of university-community collaboration. This model offers promising implications for other multicultural and conflict-prone areas, supporting both immediate dispute resolution and the development of sustainable local peace infrastructures. Future efforts should prioritize sustained capacity-building, regular dialogue forums, and integrated support from government and civil society to maintain long-term social harmony and resilience.

Keywords: *community, conflict management, Maluku, participatory action, peacebuilding*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's Maluku province, distinguished by its archipelagic geography and composed of around 2,896 islands, presents a unique tapestry of cultures, ethnicities, and social systems (Rahail et al., 2020). This region, nestled within the nation's "spice islands," has for centuries been a crossroads of trade, migration, and cultural interchange. The capital city, Ambon, serves as a vivid microcosm of Maluku's diversity, with a mosaic of indigenous and migrant communities, each bringing distinct languages, traditions, and worldviews (Ririhena et al., 2021). While such diversity can be an invaluable resource for cultural creativity and social dynamism, it also introduces the risk of friction and competition, especially in contexts marked by historical grievances and scarce resources (Barron et al., 2009). The city of Ambon and its surroundings, including Negeri Laha, have not been immune to such challenges. Since the late 1990s, Ambon has become emblematic of Indonesia's struggles with communal violence, particularly between different religious and ethnic groups (Bertrand, 2004). These episodes have often been triggered or aggravated by longstanding disputes over land, the ambiguous boundaries of customary (adat) and state authority, and competition over economic opportunities (Kingsbury, 2015). In Negeri Laha, one particularly persistent and agonistic conflict has unfolded between local communities and the Indonesian Air Force, centering on contested land boundaries—an issue rooted in colonial-era claims and complicated by post-independence land reforms (Novrianto et al., 2022). Such conflicts are rarely reducible to single causes; rather, they reflect complex historical, legal, and socio-political entanglements that require nuanced and culturally appropriate approaches for resolution (Arifin & Hanafi, 2021).

Maluku's archipelagic geography is both a blessing and a challenge. The region's thousands of islands foster distinctive local identities and tight-knit communities but also breed a degree of insularity that can complicate inter-group relations (Tomagola, 2000). In practice, this means that communities are often segregated—socially, economically, and even physically—limiting opportunities for positive intergroup interaction and mutual understanding (Davidson, 2003). The resulting “island mentality” can, under certain circumstances, amplify stereotypes, foster suspicion, and enable minor disputes to escalate rapidly into larger-scale conflicts (van Klinken, 2012). Urbanization in Ambon has introduced an additional layer of complexity. Rapid population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and the inflow of diverse ethnic and religious groups have increased competition for land, employment, and public services (Joseph, 2015). These demographic shifts, while contributing to Ambon's dynamism, have also heightened the salience of group identities and intensified struggles over access to resources (Sulaiman et al., 2019). In such settings, unresolved historical grievances—especially over land ownership, legal recognition, and political representation—can readily re-emerge as flashpoints for communal violence (Adam, 2021).

In academic and policy discourses, two interrelated but distinct concepts frequently recur: conflict management and conflict resolution (Jeong, 2009). Conflict management encompasses strategies designed to contain, regulate, or minimize the destructive consequences of conflict without necessarily resolving the underlying issues (Rahim, 2017). Such strategies may include the establishment of dialogue forums, the use of traditional authorities as mediators, or the imposition of legal sanctions to deter violence (Deutsch et al., 2011). Conflict resolution, by contrast, involves processes—formal or informal—whereby disputing parties engage in negotiations, mediation, or other mechanisms to reach mutually acceptable and sustainable solutions (Fisher et al., 2000). The aim is not simply to suppress overt conflict but to address its root causes and to transform adversarial relationships into cooperative ones (Lederach, 1997). In the context of Maluku, effective conflict resolution must be attentive to local norms and institutions, as well as to the region's legacy of adat (customary) law, which often intersects in complex ways with state legal frameworks (Panggabean & Smith, 2011).

Negeri Laha, situated at a strategic intersection near the city of Ambon and the Indonesian Air Force's Pattimura base, is emblematic of the tensions that can arise when state interests and local claims collide (Mouffe, 2013). For years, disputes over land ownership between the Air Force and local residents have generated antagonism, fueled by a combination of historical uncertainty, perceived injustice, and the absence of effective dispute-resolution mechanisms (Novrianto et al., 2022). Such conflicts are often characterized by an “agonistic” dynamic: while violence may not always be present, the relationship between the parties is adversarial, marked by a persistent struggle over recognition, legitimacy, and rights (Richmond, 2018). Research has shown that unresolved land conflicts can perpetuate cycles of mistrust and impede social and economic development (Hussein et al., 2021). They can also spill over into broader communal tensions, especially in settings where ethnic and religious divisions intersect with disputes over territory (Kingsbury, 2015). In such contexts, efforts to impose “top-down” solutions—such as legal rulings or forceful state intervention—often exacerbate the conflict or produce only temporary calm, without addressing the underlying sources of grievance (Ramsbotham et al., 2016).

Contemporary research in peace and conflict studies has increasingly highlighted the importance of community-based approaches to conflict transformation (Boege et al., 2009). Rather than treating local communities as passive victims or mere recipients of policy, these approaches recognize the critical agency of local actors—elders, religious leaders, women's groups, and youth—in both igniting and resolving disputes (Azca, 2011). Education, dialogue, and participatory problem-solving have been identified as effective strategies for transforming adversarial relationships and fostering the development of “peace infrastructures” that can endure beyond the immediate resolution of a given dispute (Galtung, 2011). Peace education is particularly salient in pluralistic and post-conflict societies. It aims to provide individuals and communities with a deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflict, the value of empathy, and the practical skills required to manage and resolve disputes constructively (Salomon & Cairns, 2010). Several studies have demonstrated that peace education initiatives can enhance social cohesion, increase mutual trust, and reduce the likelihood of future violence (Othman et al., 2020). Moreover, community service programs that engage universities, government, and civil society in collaborative problem-solving

have shown considerable promise in Indonesia and elsewhere (Kusuma & Daryono, 2023). Such programs not only disseminate academic knowledge but also empower local stakeholders to take ownership of both problems and solutions, fostering a sense of agency and resilience (Nan, 2010).

Given the persistent and multifaceted nature of land disputes in Negeri Laha, there is a pressing need for innovative, context-sensitive interventions that bridge the gap between academic research and grassroots practice (Arifin & Hanafi, 2021). This community service initiative is designed in direct response to the specific agonistic conflict between local residents and the Indonesian Air Force, while also seeking to address broader patterns of social tension and inter-group misunderstanding in the region. The program is grounded in the principles of participatory action research, emphasizing collaboration, reflection, and capacity-building among all stakeholders (Ririhena et al., 2021). Key activities include educational workshops for community leaders and youth, facilitated dialogues between disputing parties, and the development of culturally appropriate conflict management resources (Rahail et al., 2020). By fostering greater awareness of both the sources and dynamics of conflict, the program aims to reduce the risk of escalation, promote mutual understanding, and support the creation of sustainable mechanisms for peace (Lederach, 1997). Importantly, the initiative also aligns with the Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi, the threefold mission of Indonesian higher education, by combining teaching, research, and community service in a manner that is responsive to local needs and realities (Sulaiman et al., 2019). Through partnerships with local government, traditional leaders, and the Air Force, the program seeks to model best practices for university-community engagement and to contribute to the growing body of evidence on effective peacebuilding in Indonesia's eastern islands (Boege et al., 2009).

The expected outcomes of the community engagement program are manifold. In the short term, it is anticipated that participants—especially community leaders and youth—will acquire new knowledge and skills for analyzing conflict, managing disputes, and facilitating dialogue (Salomon & Cairns, 2010). Enhanced capacity for self-restraint, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving is expected to reduce the frequency and intensity of confrontations, while promoting a culture of peace that is both locally grounded and adaptable to changing circumstances (Galtung, 2011). In the longer term, the program aspires to support the development of local peace infrastructures: networks of actors, institutions, and practices capable of preventing, managing, and resolving conflict in a sustainable manner (Boege et al., 2009). By demonstrating the effectiveness of community-based conflict management and resolution, the initiative may also provide a model for similar interventions in other parts of Maluku and Indonesia, contributing to national efforts toward social harmony, equitable development, and the consolidation of democratic governance (Ramsbotham et al., 2016).

METHOD

This community service program employed a participatory approach centered on education and dialogue to ensure the effective transfer of knowledge and skills related to conflict management and resolution within the community. The methods implemented in this service activity included:

Lecture Method

The lecture method was utilized to deliver foundational material on social conflict, its causes, and conflict resolution strategies relevant to the context of Negeri Laha. Material was presented systematically and communicatively, supported by presentation media (projectors) and real-life case examples that were easily understood by participants. These examples included child-to-child conflict, domestic disputes, and land ownership conflicts common in the local environment. The lecture method in community service has been shown to be effective in increasing conceptual understanding and building critical awareness among community members (López-López et al., 2022).

Question-and-Answer and Discussion Method

Following the lecture, an interactive question-and-answer and discussion session was held for approximately 1.5 hours. During this session, participants were encouraged to ask questions, share experiences, and discuss solutions to conflicts occurring within their community. Facilitators fostered active participation by creating a dialogic atmosphere, helping community members to better

understand the material and apply it in daily life. This method has been found effective in enhancing practical understanding and participatory problem-solving skills (Weinstein et al., 2021).

Mentoring and Case Simulations

The service team also provided mentoring for community leaders and selected participants by conducting conflict resolution simulations based on real case studies in Negeri Laha. Participants were guided to analyze root causes, identify stakeholders, and develop consensus-based solutions. This mentoring reinforced conflict resolution skills and facilitated experiential learning processes (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Evaluation and Feedback

At the end of the program, an evaluation was conducted through a short questionnaire and a group reflection session to assess participants' understanding and the overall effectiveness of the community service implementation. This evaluation aimed to improve future programs and promote the sustainability of community-based conflict management (Bhattacharyya et al., 2018).

Stakeholder Collaboration

The entire process was carried out in close collaboration with village authorities, traditional institutions, and other strategic partners. Cross-sectoral collaboration has proven to be a key factor in the success of community service programs in achieving sustainable social change (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Community Service Implementation

The community service activity on conflict management and resolution in Negeri Laha, Ambon, was successfully conducted on July 21, 2024. Thirty participants attended, representing a cross-section of community leaders—youth leaders, traditional leaders, women leaders, teachers, religious figures, and general community members. The activity was held at the Negeri Laha government office, from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM. The event comprised a series of presentations, interactive discussions, and practical simulations centered around conflict analysis and peacebuilding strategies. This section presents the main results of the activity, the responses and reflections of participants, the key challenges encountered, and a critical discussion of these findings in the context of existing international research on community-based conflict management, peace education, and participatory action.

Participants' Understanding and Initial Perceptions of Conflict

Before the activity commenced, facilitators conducted an informal needs assessment by engaging in dialogue with community representatives. Initial observations revealed that most participants viewed conflict primarily as a negative and destructive phenomenon to be avoided at all costs. This perception is common in many cultural contexts, where conflict is frequently associated with social disharmony, violence, or failure of community norms (Tidwell, 1998; Fisher, 2000). However, research demonstrates that conflict is an inevitable aspect of social life and, when managed constructively, can even promote social change and innovation (Deutsch et al., 2011). This view was introduced during the opening lecture, encouraging participants to reflect on their own experiences and reframe conflict as a potential driver of positive transformation (Cosser, 1956). The majority of participants identified land ownership disputes, inter-family tensions, and misunderstandings between youth and elders as the most frequent sources of conflict in Negeri Laha. This is consistent with findings in other rural and multicultural settings, where contested land tenure and generational divides are major sources of tension (Panggabean & Smith, 2011; Sjaastad & Cousins, 2008). These conflicts are often exacerbated by ambiguous legal boundaries, overlapping customary (adat) and state regulations, and the limited availability of impartial conflict resolution mechanisms (Unruh, 2001).



Figure 1. Presentation of the Book on Agonistic Conflict in Negeri Laha

Educational Sessions

The primary material was delivered by two keynote speakers with extensive experience in sociology and peace studies. Their presentations addressed the causes, stages, and dynamics of conflict; the distinction between constructive and destructive conflict; and practical frameworks for conflict resolution. Feedback collected through oral questions and post-session evaluation indicated a significant increase in participants' understanding of conflict dynamics. Many participants reported for the first time an appreciation for concepts such as “interest-based negotiation” (Fisher & Ury, 1981), the difference between positions and interests, and the role of communication in de-escalating disputes (Lewicki et al., 2016). Several community leaders shared that recognizing underlying interests—rather than only surface-level demands—could potentially open new pathways for reconciliation. These findings align with international studies which highlight the importance of conceptual clarity in promoting effective grassroots conflict resolution (Bush & Folger, 2005; Lederach, 1997). The use of relatable, locally grounded case studies—such as child-to-child disputes, family disagreements, and ongoing land conflicts—made the session especially resonant. Participants expressed that seeing their own realities reflected in the material helped break down barriers to engagement and demystified the process of conflict analysis (Kriesberg, 2007). Participatory dialogue enabled community members to openly share their personal experiences and reflect on previous conflict episodes in their community. Such approaches are recognized as key in adult education and community learning, particularly in multicultural and post-conflict settings (Freire, 1970; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006). The dialogical process contributed not only to increased knowledge, but also fostered a sense of collective responsibility for managing future disputes (Hara, 2015). Notably, women leaders and youth representatives voiced a strong interest in learning techniques for de-escalation, mediation, and constructive communication. This corroborates the argument that inclusive conflict management must address the particular vulnerabilities and capacities of different social groups (Pankhurst, 2003; Mazurana et al., 2002). The participation of diverse community segments enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of peacebuilding interventions (Schirch, 2004).

Question-and-Answer and Discussion Sessions

The 1.5-hour question-and-answer session was characterized by lively interaction and deep engagement. Participants posed a range of practical questions, including how community leaders should respond when two parties refuse to talk to each other, the best ways to involve traditional and religious authorities in dispute resolution, and how misunderstandings arising from social media and rumors can be contained. These questions reflected both the complexity of real-world conflict in Negeri Laha and the participants' desire for practical, actionable strategies. According to the facilitators, such deep engagement is a hallmark of successful community empowerment efforts (López-López et al., 2022). Facilitators introduced a range of conflict resolution theories, including the “interest-based approach” (Fisher & Ury, 1981), “transformative mediation” (Bush & Folger, 2005), and the “circle process” method of restorative justice (Zehr, 2002). Participants were encouraged to apply these frameworks to their own cases, discussing possible outcomes if alternative

approaches had been used. This direct application of theory to lived experience is supported by experiential learning models, which emphasize the importance of reflection and action in consolidating new knowledge and skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Schön, 1983). One key insight was the recognition that sustainable conflict resolution often requires sustained dialogue and the sharing of personal narratives (Lederach, 2005). Several participants acknowledged that previous attempts at settlement had failed because parties never sat down together to listen to each other's stories, needs, and fears. This finding echoes research showing that narrative approaches can break cycles of mistrust and foster empathy, even in highly polarized contexts (Cobb, 2013; Ross, 2010).



Figure 2. Group photo with the participants of the community service activity in Negeri Laha

Simulation and Mentoring

During the case simulation, community members role-played typical conflicts from their village, with others acting as mediators or observers. The scenarios included a land dispute between neighbors and an intergenerational conflict between a parent and adolescent. Through these simulations, participants practiced active listening, paraphrasing, summarizing interests, and proposing collaborative solutions. Mentoring from facilitators emphasized the importance of impartial facilitation, respect for local customs, and clear ground rules for discussion (Moore, 2014; Bercovitch & Houston, 2000). Participants found this hands-on practice empowering and reported increased confidence in facilitating conflict resolution in their own communities. A major outcome of this session was the identification of potential local mediators. Several community members—particularly those already active in religious and traditional roles—were recognized as having the necessary trust and authority to act as neutral parties in future conflicts. This approach is aligned with international best practices, which advocate for building local peace infrastructures and supporting endogenous leadership (Boege et al., 2009; Mac Ginty, 2010).

Evaluation and Feedback

At the conclusion of the program, participants completed a brief survey and participated in a collective reflection session. Analysis of the feedback revealed several key outcomes. Notably, 90% of participants reported an increased understanding of the causes and dynamics of conflict in their community, while 80% stated that they felt more confident in their ability to apply basic conflict resolution techniques. Furthermore, all participants expressed a strong desire for further training, particularly in advanced mediation, negotiation, and peacebuilding skills. These results align with findings from other community education projects, which have demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory and experiential learning approaches in building conflict resolution capacity (Othman et al., 2020; Salomon & Cairns, 2010). Despite these positive outcomes, participants identified several persistent barriers to effective conflict resolution. Among the most significant were deep-seated mistrust stemming from past injustices, the influence of external actors and interests in local disputes, and the lack of ongoing institutional support for mediation and reconciliation. To address these challenges, participants recommended the establishment of a regular dialogue forum, ongoing support from local government and civil society organizations, and continuous capacity-building

programs. The need for sustained follow-up and long-term sustainability of such interventions is widely recognized in the peacebuilding literature (Richmond, 2018; Ramsbotham et al., 2016).

Implications and Critical Analysis

The results of the community service in Negeri Laha resonate with a growing body of international research highlighting the critical importance of locally led, culturally relevant conflict management (Lederach, 1997; Boege et al., 2009). Such approaches recognize that sustainable peace is rooted in local agency, legitimacy, and the alignment of external support with indigenous practices and leadership (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). While international interventions have often prioritized technical solutions or imported models of dispute resolution, there is increasing recognition of the value of “hybrid peace” frameworks that blend local customs, religious norms, and formal legal mechanisms (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012; Boege et al., 2009). The participatory and dialogical methodology adopted in this project exemplifies these principles. A major strength of the activity was its emphasis on building social capital and empowering diverse community stakeholders (Putnam, 2000). By involving youth, women, traditional, and religious leaders, the program helped to enhance the inclusiveness and legitimacy of conflict resolution efforts. Research indicates that such inclusive processes not only increase the likelihood of reaching agreements but also contribute to long-term social cohesion and resilience (Narayan & Cassidy, 2001; Paffenholz, 2015). However, the project also revealed the challenges of ensuring sustainability beyond the initial intervention. Without continuous institutional support, local initiatives risk being overwhelmed by entrenched interests or re-escalating conflict (Odendaal, 2013). This underlines the need for integrated strategies combining community-based action with policy-level commitment and resource allocation. Educational and participatory action approaches—such as those employed here—have proven effective in various contexts, from urban youth violence prevention to post-conflict rural peacebuilding (Smith et al., 2016; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). The interactive methods used—lectures, discussions, simulations, and mentoring—align with global best practices for adult and community learning.

CONCLUSION

The community service initiative implemented in Negeri Laha, Ambon, demonstrates the effectiveness of participatory, locally grounded approaches in enhancing conflict management and resolution capacities within diverse and complex social settings. Through a combination of educational workshops, participatory dialogue, practical simulations, and collaborative reflection, the program succeeded in increasing participants’ understanding of conflict dynamics, fostering greater confidence in applying resolution techniques, and identifying local leaders capable of sustaining peacebuilding efforts. The active engagement of community stakeholders—from youth and women leaders to traditional and religious authorities—proved vital for building social capital and ensuring the legitimacy and sustainability of outcomes. Despite persistent challenges such as deep-seated mistrust, external influences, and limited institutional support, the initiative highlights the importance of continuous capacity-building, regular dialogue forums, and cross-sectoral collaboration to address both immediate disputes and long-term peace. The experience in Negeri Laha offers a valuable model for community empowerment and sustainable conflict resolution that can be adapted in similar multicultural and conflict-prone regions.

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