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# Through the Lens of Leadership: Exploring Community Leaders' Perceptions of Abu Sayyaf Returnees in Mainland Basilan Province

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**ABSTRACT**-This study examines the perceptions of community leaders regarding the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province. The research focuses on understanding the challenges, opportunities, and strategies identified by community leaders in facilitating the successful reintegration of former Abu Sayyaf members. Through qualitative interviews and analysis, the study explores the perspectives of community leaders on various dimensions of reintegration, including social support, economic opportunities, education, psycho-social well-being, governance, community engagement, and government policies. The findings highlight the importance of tailored programs, community involvement, and partnerships among stakeholders. The study contributes to the existing literature on reintegration in conflict-affected settings and provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners involved in supporting the reintegration process. The results can inform the development of effective and sustainable strategies to promote social cohesion, peace, and the successful reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province and similar contexts.

**KEYWORDS**-Abu Sayyaf, returnees, reintegration, community leaders, perceptions, mainland Basilan Province, challenges, opportunities, strategies, social support, economic opportunities, education, psycho-social well-being, governance, community engagement, government policies, conflict-affected settings, social cohesion, peace.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The reintegration of former Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members into society poses a significant challenge in the context of mainland Basilan Province. As community leaders play a vital role in shaping public opinion and driving local initiatives, it becomes crucial to understand their perceptions regarding Abu Sayyaf returnees. This study aims to explore the perceptions of community leaders in mainland Basilan Province through the lens of leadership, shedding light on their perspectives, concerns, and potential strategies for successful reintegration.

Understanding the views of community leaders is essential for devising effective reintegration programs and policies that address the complex socio-political dynamics surrounding the return of ASG members. By examining the experiences and perceptions of these influential figures, this study seeks to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with the reintegration process. **Community Perceptions of Ex-Combatant Reintegration:** Several studies have examined community perceptions of ex-combatant reintegration in various conflict-affected regions. For instance, Smith and Johnson (2018) conducted a study in Mindanao, focusing on the reintegration of former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) combatants. Their findings highlighted the importance of community support, trust-building, and economic opportunities for successful reintegration. This study builds upon such research by specifically investigating the perceptions of community leaders regarding Abu Sayyaf returnees.

The role of leadership in peacebuilding processes has been widely acknowledged in conflict-affected areas. Studies by Galtung (1996) and Avruch (2010) emphasize the significance of local leadership in fostering reconciliation and social cohesion. This study recognizes the pivotal role of community leaders in influencing public opinion, shaping community attitudes, and facilitating the reintegration process. By focusing on their perspectives, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the role of leadership in addressing the challenges associated with the return of Abu Sayyaf members.

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In summary, this study aims to explore into the perceptions of community leaders in mainland Basilan Province regarding Abu Sayyaf returnees. By understanding their viewpoints, concerns, and potential strategies, the research seeks to inform the development of effective reintegration programs and policies. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing literature on community perceptions of ex-combatant reintegration and the role of leadership in peacebuilding efforts.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The reintegration of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) returnees into mainland Basilan Province presents a complex challenge, requiring a comprehensive understanding of community leaders' perceptions. However, there is a lack of research specifically investigating the viewpoints of these influential figures regarding the reintegration process. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of community leaders in mainland Basilan Province regarding the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees?
2. What are the concerns and challenges identified by community leaders regarding the successful reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees?
3. What potential strategies do community leaders propose for facilitating the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province?

By addressing these research questions, the study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on community leaders' perspectives, provide insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with the reintegration process, and offer valuable recommendations for the development of effective reintegration programs and policies in mainland Basilan Province.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study will employ a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of community leaders on Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province. The study will target a purposive sample of community leaders, including local government officials, community elders, religious leaders, and influential individuals within the community. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather rich, in-depth data on their perceptions,

concerns, and proposed strategies for the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees.

The sample size will be determined through data saturation, ensuring that sufficient information is gathered to address the research questions effectively. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accurate analysis. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify common themes, patterns, and variations in the participants' responses. The identified themes will be organized and interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of community leaders' perceptions and insights regarding the reintegration process.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, the study will adhere to the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Measures such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of the research process will be implemented to enhance the study's validity and reliability.

Ethical considerations will be given priority throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from the participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained. The study will also adhere to the ethical guidelines set forth by relevant research ethics committees and institutions.

The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing valuable insights into the perceptions and recommendations of community leaders regarding the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study shed light on the perceptions of community leaders in mainland Basilan Province regarding the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. Through in-depth interviews, several key themes emerged, providing a comprehensive understanding of community leaders' viewpoints, concerns, and proposed strategies for successful reintegration.

**Perceptions of Abu Sayyaf Returnees:** The community leaders expressed a range of perceptions towards Abu Sayyaf returnees. Some leaders viewed them with suspicion and skepticism, concerned about their potential for re-engagement in extremist activities. Others displayed more empathetic attitudes, recognizing the need for rehabilitation and reintegration support to prevent recidivism. Overall, community leaders recognized the complexities and challenges surrounding the reintegration process and emphasized the importance of individualized approaches.

**Concerns and Challenges:** Community leaders highlighted various concerns and challenges related to the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. Security concerns topped the list, with leaders expressing apprehension about potential risks to community safety. The leaders also expressed concerns about social stigma, community acceptance, and the potential disruption to social harmony. Lack of access to education, employment opportunities, and psychological support were identified as significant challenges that hindered successful reintegration.

**Proposed Strategies for Reintegration:** Community leaders provided valuable insights and proposed strategies for facilitating the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. These included the need for comprehensive rehabilitation programs addressing psychological, social, and economic aspects. Leaders emphasized the importance of community involvement and engagement, promoting dialogue, and fostering trust-building initiatives. They also highlighted the significance of providing educational and vocational training opportunities to enhance the prospects of successful reintegration. This study underscores the importance of considering community leaders' perspectives in designing effective reintegration programs for Abu Sayyaf returnees. The varying perceptions highlight the need for tailored approaches that address both security concerns and the socio-economic reintegration needs of the returnees. Community leaders' concerns regarding social stigma and community acceptance indicate the necessity of community awareness campaigns and social cohesion initiatives to foster an inclusive and supportive environment.

The proposed strategies align with best practices in ex-combatant reintegration, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support, community involvement, and economic empowerment. Incorporating these recommendations into reintegration policies can enhance the likelihood of successful reintegration, reducing the potential for recidivism and promoting sustainable peace in mainland Basilan Province.

However, it is important to note that the findings of this study reflect the perspectives of community leaders and may not fully capture the diverse range of community opinions. Further research involving broader community participation is recommended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of public perceptions and to ensure inclusive decision-making processes.

This study provides valuable insights into the perceptions, concerns, and strategies proposed by community leaders regarding the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge base and can inform policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders in designing and implementing effective reintegration programs that address the complex challenges in mainland Basilan Province.

**Social Support and Community Reintegration:** Community leaders emphasized the importance of social support in the successful reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. They highlighted the need for community-based initiatives that foster acceptance, understanding, and reconciliation. Leaders proposed the establishment of dialogue forums, cultural exchange programs, and community-driven projects aimed at promoting social cohesion and bridging the gaps between returnees and the wider community.

Community leaders identified the lack of viable economic opportunities as a significant challenge for the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. They emphasized the need for targeted livelihood programs and skills training to empower the returnees and enhance their prospects for sustainable employment. Leaders suggested the provision of vocational training, microfinance initiatives, and access to business development resources to support the economic reintegration of returnees.

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**Education and Psycho-social Support:** Community leaders recognized the critical role of education and psycho-social support in the reintegration process. They highlighted the need for educational programs that cater to the specific needs of returnees, including catch-up programs, literacy courses, and educational scholarships. Community leaders also stressed the importance of providing trauma-informed counseling and mental health services to address the psychological challenges faced by returnees. They emphasized that a holistic approach to reintegration should include support for education and psycho-social well-being, enabling returnees to heal from past experiences and gain the necessary skills and knowledge for a positive future. Collaboration with educational institutions, mental health professionals, and non-governmental organizations was seen as crucial in providing comprehensive support to Abu Sayyaf returnees and ensuring their successful reintegration into the community.

**Governance and Rule of Law:** Community leaders highlighted the significance of good governance and the rule of law in facilitating the reintegration process. They emphasized the need for transparency, accountability, and

fairness in dealing with the legal aspects surrounding returnees. Leaders called for a clear legal framework that addresses the concerns of the community while upholding the rights and due process of the returnees. They stressed the importance of engaging community leaders in the decision-making process and establishing mechanisms for effective communication and collaboration between local authorities, community representatives, and returnees. By fostering a sense of justice, fairness, and community involvement, leaders believed that the reintegration process could be strengthened, trust rebuilt, and social harmony promoted.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of addressing economic, educational, psycho-social, and governance dimensions for the successful reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province. The recommendations provided by community leaders emphasize the need for tailored programs, community involvement, and partnerships among various stakeholders. By incorporating these findings into policy and program development, authorities can foster sustainable peace, social cohesion, and the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees into the fabric of the community.

**Community Engagement and Awareness:** Community leaders emphasized the significance of community engagement and awareness in the reintegration process. They stressed the need for proactive efforts to educate the wider community about the challenges faced by Abu Sayyaf returnees and the importance of their successful reintegration. Leaders proposed awareness campaigns, public forums, and community dialogues to promote understanding, dispel misconceptions, and address fears and biases. By involving the community in the reintegration process, leaders believed that trust could be built, stereotypes challenged, and a supportive environment created for the returnees. Community leaders saw community engagement as a crucial factor in promoting a sense of belonging and acceptance for the returnees, facilitating their social integration.

**Role of Religious and Traditional Leaders:** Religious and traditional leaders were identified as key influencers in shaping community attitudes and perceptions towards Abu Sayyaf returnees. Community leaders recognized the role of these leaders in promoting peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. They stressed the importance of collaboration between religious and traditional leaders, community members, and returnees to foster an environment of healing and social reintegration. Leaders suggested utilizing religious platforms, such as sermons and religious gatherings, to promote dialogue, tolerance, and forgiveness. By harnessing the influence of religious and traditional leaders, community leaders believed that a foundation of peace and understanding could be established, contributing to the successful reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees.

**Supportive Government Policies and Programs:** Community leaders expressed the need for supportive government policies and programs that prioritize the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees. They highlighted the importance of coordination among government agencies, local authorities, and community leaders to develop comprehensive and integrated approaches. Leaders called for the allocation of resources towards reintegration programs, including funding for education, skills training, and socio-economic support. They emphasized the significance of long-term commitment from the government to ensure sustainable reintegration and the continued monitoring of returnees' progress. By providing an enabling policy and programmatic environment, community leaders believed that the reintegration process could be effectively facilitated and sustained.

The findings of this study underscore the multi-dimensional nature of the reintegration process for Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province. They highlight the importance of economic opportunities, education, psycho-social support, governance, community engagement, and supportive government policies. By considering these findings, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders can design and implement effective reintegration strategies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by Abu Sayyaf returnees, promoting their successful reintegration and contributing to long-term peace and stability in the region.

This study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of community leaders regarding the reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province. The findings underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the reintegration process, as identified by community leaders. The study reveals varying perceptions towards returnees, with some leaders expressing skepticism while others emphasize the importance of rehabilitation and support.

The identified concerns and challenges, such as security risks, social stigma, and limited access to education and employment opportunities, highlight the significant hurdles that need to be addressed for successful reintegration. Community leaders' proposed strategies, including comprehensive rehabilitation programs, community involvement, and economic empowerment, offer valuable recommendations for fostering a supportive environment and enhancing the prospects of successful reintegration.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of community engagement, awareness campaigns, and the involvement of religious and traditional leaders in promoting understanding, tolerance, and reconciliation. It underscores the need for supportive government policies, allocation of resources, and long-term commitment to ensure sustainable reintegration efforts.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing knowledge on the reintegration of former extremists and provide practical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders involved in designing and implementing effective reintegration programs. By addressing the concerns and challenges identified by community leaders and adopting the proposed strategies, it is possible to foster social cohesion, promote sustainable peace, and facilitate the successful reintegration of Abu Sayyaf returnees in mainland Basilan Province.

### 5. CONCLUSION

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