

Hybridizing Justice: Cultural Legitimacy and the Limits of Traditional Dispute Resolution in Lanao del Sur, the Philippines

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This article examines how communities in Lanao del Sur, the Philippines, perceive the role of traditional dispute resolution (TDR) actors in resolving *rido* (clan-based conflict). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study assesses the frequency of engagement, perceived effectiveness, and level of community trust in various actors, including executive heads of local government units, traditional leaders, religious leaders, Moro Islamic Liberation Front combatants, and members of the security sector. Findings reveal that while TDR is widely trusted and accessible, it risks both being captured by and excluding the elite. The article proposes a hybrid dispute resolution framework that combines cultural legitimacy with institutional safeguards, advancing debates on post-conflict justice in legally plural societies. In doing so, it highlights the potential for hybrid mechanisms to foster more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable peacebuilding.

Keywords Bangsamoro, Mranaw, local peacebuilding, *rido*, traditional dispute resolution

Introduction

This study examines how communities in Lanao del Sur, a province within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), evaluate the frequency, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of various actors involved in traditional dispute resolution (TDR), with a particular focus on *rido* (clan-based conflicts). These conflicts, often rooted in disputes over land, political rivalry, and inter-familial grievances, have long undermined local governance and development in the Bangsamoro (Torres 2014, 12; Matuan 2024; Trajano 2020; Orozco 2022, 5). In this context, formal judicial institutions are frequently perceived as inaccessible or misaligned with local values, prompting communities to turn instead to dispute resolution actors, including traditional leaders (i.e.,

sultans and *datus* [hereditary community leaders]), religious leaders (i.e., ulama), *barangay* (local administrative unit) officials, municipal and provincial heads, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and members of the security sector. These actors are not only perceived as more culturally resonant but are also often more effective in resolving disputes and restoring social harmony (Towner 2010, 45).

Central to this study is the concept of cultural legitimacy, defined here as the degree to which a dispute resolution actor is perceived as socially embedded and aligned with local norms and traditional practices. Unlike legal legitimacy, which derives from state authority, cultural legitimacy is rooted in kinship ties, religious affiliation, and adherence to *adat* (customary law) (Abdullah 1981; Disoma 1990). It often explains why communities defer to elders and local leaders over bureaucratic institutions.

TDR in Lanao del Sur encompasses a diverse set of practices—such as mediation, arbitration, and reconciliation—guided by *adat*, *Sharī'ah* (Islamic law), and indigenous traditions. These mechanisms emphasize customary norms, *taritib* (order), and *igma* (social harmony) and frequently operate parallel to or independently from the formal court system (Adam 2018, 45). Far from being peripheral, these systems constitute the normative foundation of justice in many Moro communities and long predate the imposition of Western legal models during the colonial period (Langco 2014; Adam and Boer 2015).

Although the Philippine state institutionalized alternative dispute resolution (ADR) through Republic Act 9285 in 2004 (Department of Justice 2004), its design reflects liberal legal orientations that often fail to accommodate Bangsamoro's sociocultural context (Disini et al. 2002, 14; Agarwal 2005). While ADR mechanisms are conceived as complements to formal courts, this study contends that in Lanao del Sur, TDR remains the primary justice modality—more accessible, legitimate, and effective in promoting reconciliation (Adam 2018; Deinla and Taylor 2015).

Existing scholarship has illuminated the role of customary law in managing rido and mitigating its effects on displacement, violence, and community cohesion (Macabuac-Ferolin and Constantino 2014, 62; Canuday 2014, 138; Mendoza and Mangulamas 2015, 111). However, few empirical studies have systematically examined how local populations evaluate the performance of dispute resolution actors themselves. Most accounts focus on institutional arrangements or broader regional dynamics, leaving a critical gap in understanding community-level experiences and perceptions.

This study addresses that gap by empirically analyzing how the Mranaw people of Lanao del Sur perceive the frequency, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of key dispute resolution actors. It argues that their authority is shaped not only by individual standing but also by institutional backing, social embeddedness, and their capacity to bridge formal and informal justice systems. Crucially, the findings suggest that a hybrid approach—integrating TDR into formal

governance frameworks—may offer a sustainable and context-sensitive pathway to peace and justice in the Bangsamoro region.

Research Method

This study used a mixed-methods research design to examine perceptions of TDR actors in Lanao del Sur in terms of the frequency, effectiveness, and community trust of their TDR efforts. The quantitative component involved a structured survey of six hundred randomly selected respondents across four municipalities identified for their high incidence of rido: Butig, Piagapo, Pagayawan, and Marantao. The survey was conducted by the Peace Education Office of the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, at the Mindanao State University Marawi campus, from March 10 to 16, 2021. Participants were selected from barangay voters and household lists using systematic sampling to ensure broad representation across socio-demographic and geographic lines. The participants were 52% male and 48% female, reflecting a gender-balanced sample.

The survey focused on three central themes: (1) the frequency of reconciliation efforts initiated by TDR actors; (2) their perceived effectiveness and efficiency in resolving disputes; and (3) the level of trust and confidence in each actor's role in local peacebuilding. Survey items were perception-based, asking respondents to rate each actor's engagement using a five-point Likert scale. The response options ranged from "never" to "always" for frequency, and from "very poor" to "excellent" for effectiveness and trust.

To triangulate these findings, the study employed purposive sampling and conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with traditional leaders, ulama, barangay officials, and community members from the selected four municipalities. The author facilitated a self-crafted semi-structured questionnaire guide for the FGDs and KIIs, which were conducted from April 4 to 15, 2022. Data collected from the qualitative phase were subjected to thematic analysis, and the emerging patterns were triangulated with quantitative results to reinforce the validity of the findings.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao (IPDM) at Mindanao State University (MSU), Marawi Campus. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and gave their voluntary consent to participate. The research process adhered to protocols ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity. Fieldwork was conducted in close coordination with local government units (LGUs) to facilitate secure access to communities and ensure the smooth conduct of the study.

To accurately contextualize the survey findings, the study identifies the key actors involved in dispute resolution in Lanao del Sur, selecting them based on

their visibility, authority, and established roles in local peacebuilding. At the provincial and municipal levels, these LGUs comprise elected officials, including governors and mayors, as well as their respective peace and order council members. Notably, in the municipalities examined, these officials do not concurrently hold traditional titles such as sultan or datu. This institutional separation eliminates overlap between formal political authority and traditional leadership, allowing respondents to evaluate LGU actors strictly within their government-mandated roles.

At the barangay level, the barangay LGU refers to officials operating under the barangay justice system (BJS), including the *punong barangay* (chairman) and members of the *Lupon Tagapamayapa* (a dispute resolution committee). While some Lupon members may simultaneously hold traditional titles, their participation is defined by the formal BJS framework; thus, the barangay LGU category captures dispute resolution within institutionalized state mechanisms.

In contrast, the traditional leader's mediation occurs outside the BJS framework, grounded in traditional systems and often operating autonomously, particularly where government presence is weak or distrusted. Although individual overlap between formal and traditional roles exists, the survey explicitly instructed respondents to distinguish actors by the institutional setting and process of mediation, rather than personal identity or titles, ensuring conceptual clarity and preventing analytical conflation. The MILF, including Shari'ah court officials and local commanders, constitutes another distinct category. Their growing role in dispute resolution draws on religious legitimacy and organizational authority, a dynamic that predates and continues beyond the peace agreement and establishment of the BARMM.

Finally, actors from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) represent the security sector's involvement in dispute resolution. The military and police forces frequently participate in multistakeholder dialogues and mediate *rido*, particularly in areas where armed enforcement or ceasefire oversight is required. In the specific context of Lanao del Sur, the AFP's 103rd Infantry Brigade operates through its Civil-Military Operations, which is mandated to support local reconciliation efforts by coordinating with LGUs, traditional leaders, and other peace actors. Similarly, the PNP's Community Affairs Section, operating under the broader Police Community Affairs and Development Group, facilitates the police force's engagement in conflict-affected communities by supporting peace forums, monitoring *rido*, and participating in the work of local peace and order councils. Although the security sector is sometimes perceived as less neutral compared to traditional or religious mediators, its engagement is often considered indispensable in security-sensitive contexts where the potential for escalation is high. This rigorous categorization—anchored in institutional mandates and procedural roles rather than individual affiliations—enables a more precise

and nuanced understanding of community perceptions regarding each actor's involvement, effectiveness, and trustworthiness in managing localized conflicts.

Results

TDR among the Mranaw

The Mranaw of Lanao del Sur have historically practiced a plural legal tradition, using multiple, coexisting pathways for dispute resolution. This study focuses on three core mechanisms: *kokoman a kambhatabata'a* (informal mediation through intermediaries), *taritib* and *igma* (i.e., customary practices and consensus and social order), and *kitab* (Islamic jurisprudence derived from sacred texts). The mechanism selection typically depends on the nature of the conflict, the social relationship between parties, and the perceived legitimacy of the mediating authority. These mechanisms are neither used in isolation nor in a fixed sequence; rather, disputants often navigate fluidly among them, reflecting the negotiated and adaptive nature of justice within Mranaw society (Abdullah 1981, 40).

This fluidity is central to what this study refers to as TDR. TDR is not defined by a single legal code or institutional framework but is grounded in a convergence of cultural, religious, and social norms that have developed over generations. Among the Mranaw, *kokoman* (a traditional mode of conflict resolution) is facilitated by respected elders or community intermediaries; *taritib* and *igma* embody normative customs that promote social cohesion and prescribe sanctions for misconduct; and *kitab* invokes Islamic principles, particularly in matters related to family and morality (Saber 1963; Disoma 1990). For the Mranaw, these localized mechanisms remain preferable to formal state courts due to their accessibility, cultural resonance, and legitimacy.

Framing these practices under the term TDR emphasizes their embeddedness in the Mranaw social life. Unlike the formal justice system, TDR is a relational, consensus-oriented, and restorative approach that aims to repair the social condition rather than impose punitive outcomes. It reflects a worldview anchored in *adat*, *taritib*, *igma*, and Islamic ethical values. Far from being a mere "alternative" to state-led adjudication, TDR constitutes a living, foundational system of justice deeply interwoven with Mranaw identity and historical continuity.

Types of Dispute Resolution Practiced in Lanao del Sur

For centuries, human societies have employed informal mechanisms to resolve disputes, predating the emergence of formal legal systems. Archaeological findings from early civilizations, including those of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Assyria, indicate the existence of such practices in antiquity (Agarwal 2005). Despite being labeled "alternative dispute resolution" (ADR), many of these

approaches are not recent innovations but rather continuations or revivals of customary processes that predate state-imposed legal frameworks. One notable comparative example is India's *Lok Adalat* (People's Court) system, which institutionalizes local mediation through a legally recognized, yet non-adversarial, platform for dispute settlement. These courts emphasize reconciliation over litigation, reflecting a growing global recognition of the value of culturally embedded, community-oriented justice systems (ibid.). In the Philippines, for example, the introduction of Western-style adjudication displaced earlier indigenous practices such as trial by ordeal and battle (Knack 2013). Although the legal system has since evolved into an adversarial model, the communal values and customary norms that once governed dispute resolution have endured (Disini et al. 2002).

Recognizing the relevance of these traditional methods, the Philippine state has made efforts to institutionalize ADR within its legal architecture. The 1953 Arbitration Law marked an early attempt to reintroduce non-judicial forums, followed by Presidential Decree 1508 in 1978 (Philippines 1978), which established the *Katarungang Pambarangay*, also known as the BJS. Later codified under the Local Government Code, this system promoted a community-based approach to resolving local disputes. Although further initiatives, such as the Supreme Court's 1997 procedural reforms, sought to promote ADR, its adoption by legal practitioners has remained limited. Nevertheless, ADR's foundational principles, dialogue, consent, and consensus, remain consistent with the country's precolonial legal heritage.

ADR refers to a spectrum of mechanisms that resolve disputes outside of formal litigation, including mediation, arbitration, negotiation, and conciliation. These methods offer flexible, cost-effective, and timely alternatives to court proceedings, emphasizing collaborative rather than adversarial engagement (Stipanowich 2004). In the Bangsamoro, due to limited access to courts and constraints on formal legal recourse, ADR has emerged as a practical and culturally grounded approach. It empowers local actors to resolve conflicts in ways that align with community norms and socio-religious values.

Beyond its pragmatic appeal, ADR makes a meaningful contribution to local peacebuilding (Khan, Nazir, and Awan 2024). Its use fosters social stability by providing predictable and trusted avenues for justice, thus strengthening economic confidence, facilitating local governance, and easing the burden on formal courts. In conflict-affected or underserved regions, integrating ADR into governance structures not only enhances institutional legitimacy but also reinforces community cohesion and participatory justice (Singh 2017).

Barangay Justice System (BJS): The Local Government Code of 1991 reinforces the autonomy of barangays by formally recognizing their role in both legal assistance and informal dispute resolution through the BJS, institutionalized

earlier by Presidential Decree 1508 in 1978 (Philippines 1978). Known as the *Katarungang Pambarangay*, this system mandates that community disputes undergo initial mediation or conciliation at the barangay level before being eligible for court proceedings (Sam, Usop, and Abubakar-Sam 2013). Courts are required to refer applicable cases back to the barangay, affirming the decentralized character of grassroots justice.

Central to this framework is the Lupon Tagapamayapa, chaired by the Barangay Captain and composed of ten to twenty appointed community members. As Rojo (2022) notes, the BJS represents the country's first legally institutionalized decentralized justice mechanism, embodying the broader vision of local governance and devolution. Section 6 of Presidential Decree 1508 (Philippines 1978) restricts courts from accepting cases within the Lupon's jurisdiction unless mediation or conciliation has first been pursued.

The Lupon's effectiveness hinges on the selection of respected and impartial community members who uphold the principles of procedural justice—neutrality, fairness, and inclusivity. The Barangay Secretary is responsible for documentation and coordination with the municipal courts. If initial mediation fails, a conciliation body known as the *Pangkat ng Tagapagkasundo* is convened (Noveloso et al. 2024). Ideally, both parties jointly select their members; however, in the absence of an agreement, members are drawn by lot under Section 405 of the Local Government Code. While this process ensures procedural structure, it may inadvertently limit parties' agency in choosing trusted conciliators, potentially affecting perceptions of fairness (ibid.).

Sulh as Practiced through MILF Shari'ah Courts: In Islamic jurisprudence, the Shari'ah, or divine law, governs all facets of life, including mechanisms for conflict resolution (Keshavjee 2013). One of its foundational methods is *Sulh*, a conciliatory process rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith that emphasizes reconciliation, compromise, and social harmony (Levi-Tawil 2010, 609). Derived from the triliteral root *ṣ-l-h* (meaning "to make peace"), *Sulh* is widely practiced in Muslim societies and often functions alongside formal judicial mechanisms, including *qada* (legal adjudication) and *tahkim* (arbitration), provided it does not contravene Islamic prohibitions (Oseni 2015). While *qada* remains the formal foundation of Islamic legal judgment, contemporary scholars recognize *Sulh* as a complementary process that fosters social cohesion and equitable resolution (Iqbal 2000; Black, Esmailli, and Hosen 2013, 154; Adnan 2024). Qur'anic injunctions such as Surah Al-Hujurat (49:10) and Hadith traditions extol the moral virtue of mediation, positioning *Sulh* as both a spiritual and practical method of dispute resolution.

In the Bangsamoro, particularly in Lanao del Sur, *Sulh* continues to serve as a central mechanism for resolving disputes, notably within the Shari'ah courts administered by the MILF. These courts adjudicate both civil and criminal cases,

and despite ongoing challenges related to legal recognition and procedural standardization, they provide a culturally resonant and structured avenue for Islamic reconciliation (Saifuddin, Daud, and Hilmi 2024; Hamid et al. 2019). The MILF itself occupies a transitional position in the region's evolving governance architecture: historically grounded in revolutionary struggle and imbued with Islamic and customary legitimacy, it now increasingly participates in formal governance structures under the BARMM (Franco 2016). This dual role enables the MILF to function simultaneously as a community-embedded actor and a quasi-state authority, particularly through its local command structures and religious institutions, thereby exemplifying a hybrid actor whose legitimacy stems from both grassroots trust and emergent institutional authority.

Modern adaptations have led to hybrid frameworks, such as Med-Arb (mediation-arbitration), although key distinctions remain: Sulh is voluntary and conciliatory, whereas tahkim involves binding arbitration (Muhammad 2008; Keshavjee 2013). Grounded in Islamic principles of *al-'adl* (justice), *salam* (peace), and *musalaha* (reconciliation), effective Sulh requires impartial mediators, informed consent from disputing parties, and mutually acceptable outcomes (Manaf and Shah 2020). However, doctrinal constraints, particularly those from the Shafi'i school, which is dominant among Filipino Muslims, influence the extent to which Sulh agreements are considered valid. Formal integration of Sulh within the national legal framework remains an ongoing challenge.

Shari'ah Trial Court, Agama Arbitrary Council: The Agama Arbitration Council, established under Title II of the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, serves as a key adjudicatory body for civil matters among Moros, particularly in cases involving *Talaq* (traditional divorce) and *Tafwid* (delegated divorce), remarriage, and violations of adat (Code of Muslim Personal Laws, Articles 160-3). However, the Code of Muslim Personal Laws lacks clear guidelines regarding the qualifications and selection of council members, including the clerk of the court, who chairs the council. This absence of procedural safeguards raises concerns about legal competence and the consistent application of Islamic arbitration. Additionally, the lack of gender-inclusive provisions contributes to interpretative ambiguities, particularly in reconciling adat with Qur'anic and Hadith-based jurisprudence (Bagolong 2023).

In Lanao del Sur, formal institutions such as the Shari'ah trial courts and the Agama Arbitration Council operate alongside community-based mechanisms led by ulama, elders, and barangay officials. While TDR remains widely preferred for its accessibility and cultural legitimacy, formal courts reinforce state authority and seek to standardize Islamic legal processes. Yet, both systems face challenges, including procedural inconsistencies, limited accessibility, and ongoing tensions between customary norms and codified Islamic law.

Manaf and Shah (2020) identify three models of Islamic mediation—

settlement, problem-solving, and transformative approaches—which resonate with the Bangsamoro context, where legal pluralism shapes local justice practices. A useful comparative case is Malaysia’s Sulh system, formalized under the Shari’ah Court Civil Procedure Act of 2004. While effective in promoting marital reconciliation, its lack of standardized procedures has led to jurisdictional disparities (Hak, Mansor, and Soh 2019; Saifuddin, Daud, and Hilmi 2024)—a challenge also mirrored in the Bangsamoro. These parallels highlight the pressing need to enhance institutional capacities and align Islamic law with local customs, thereby ensuring both legitimacy and procedural coherence within formal judicial frameworks (Syaikhu 2019).

Local Perspectives on Dispute Resolution: A Survey of Frequency, Effectiveness and Efficiency, and Trust and Confidence

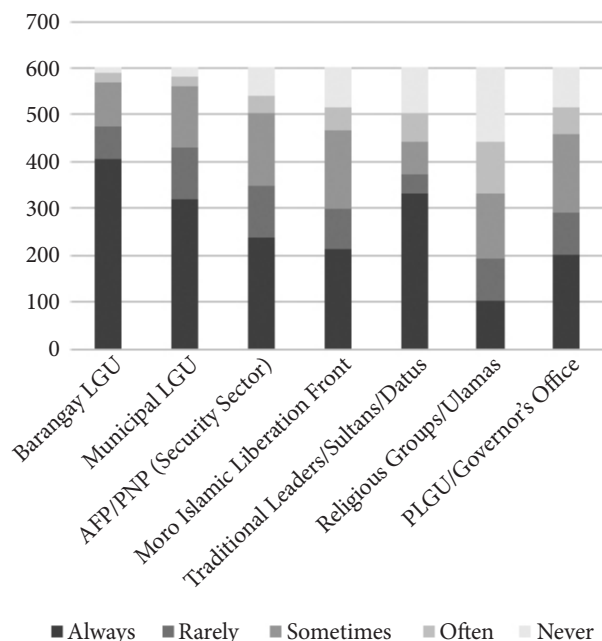
To examine community perceptions of dispute resolution in rido conflict-affected areas in Lanao del Sur, this study analyzed three key indicators: (1) the frequency with which dispute resolution actors initiate reconciliation; (2) the perceived effectiveness and efficiency of these interventions; and (3) the level of trust and confidence communities place in the various actors engaged in resolving rido-related conflicts.

Survey findings (Figure 1) reveal that barangay-level LGUs are the most active in initiating reconciliation, with 67.5% of respondents affirming that they “always” intervene. Across multiple FGDs, participants emphasized that barangay officials often respond swiftly during outbreaks of violence, coordinate with religious and traditional leaders, and facilitate peace rituals such as the *kanduri* (reconciliation feast). One participant recounted that a barangay chairman’s prompt coordination of ceasefire and mediation efforts helped prevent further bloodshed following a shooting incident at a wedding (author’s interview with FGD participant in Piagapo, April 11, 2022).

Municipal LGUs also play a key role, with 53.17% of respondents noting that they frequently initiate reconciliation. Their involvement is often activated in escalated cases or when barangay-level mediation stalls. Municipal LGUs typically convene peace and order councils and provide logistical or political support; however, participants in FGDs in Pagayawan, Marantao, and Butig noted bureaucratic delays and a limited reach in remote areas.

Traditional leaders, including sultans and datos, were similarly recognized, with over half of respondents reporting that they “always” initiate reconciliation. Their authority—anchored in *taritib* and *igma*—is reinforced by kinship networks and symbolic leadership. A key informant interview described how one sultan resolved a politically charged rido through the use of *taritib* and *igma* and the involvement of ulama and military observers (author’s interview with KII participant in Marantao, April 8, 2022).

Religious leaders also play a vital role in reconciliation. One-third (33.3%)

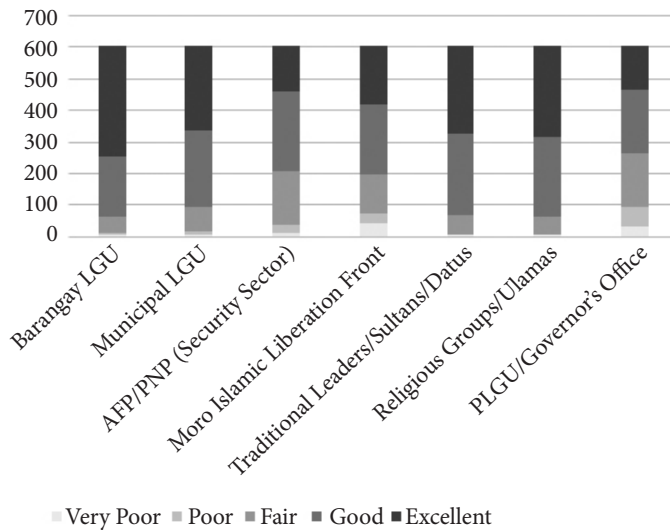
Figure 1. Frequency in Initiating Reconciliation (TDR Survey, MSU-IPDM, 2021)

Source: Author.

of survey respondents indicated that ulama “always” take part in initiating reconciliation, while another 28.17% marked “sometimes.” Their legitimacy derives not only from their knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence but also from their moral standing and spiritual influence within the community. Participants of an FGD in Butig highlighted instances where mosque-based sermons were used to de-escalate tensions and where ulama convened Sulh-inspired dialogues rooted in both Islamic and customary traditions. This dual legitimacy often positions them as effective mediators, especially in disputes involving moral transgressions or intergenerational conflict (author’s interview with KII participant in Butig, April 6, 2022).

In contrast, provincial-level LGUs received the lowest ratings in terms of frequency of engagement. Only 17% of respondents stated that provincial LGU actors actively initiate reconciliation, while 26.3% indicated that they “never” do so. This perception reflects a broader disconnect between provincial governance and community-based conflict resolution, especially in upland or rural municipalities.

The MILF, alongside the AFP and the PNP, received moderate ratings (35%-40%). Community members acknowledged the MILF’s role in facilitating Sulh sessions and its growing integration into formal governance under BARMM.

Figure 2. Level of Effectiveness and Efficiency (TDR Survey, MSU-IPDM, 2021)

Source: Author.

One MILF commander described intervening after a string of retaliatory killings by invoking Islamic teachings during mosque-based mediation (author's interview with KII participant in Butig, April 6, 2022). While the AFP and PNP were recognized for maintaining security and preventing escalation, several respondents viewed their role as reactive and lacking in cultural resonance compared to local actors.

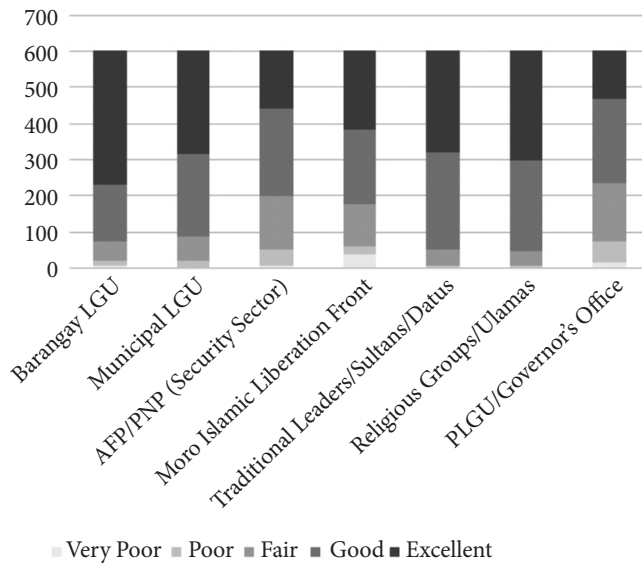
On the other hand, in terms of perceived effectiveness and efficiency of these dispute resolution actors, findings from the survey (Figure 2) indicate that barangay-level LGUs are perceived as the most effective mediators in addressing localized conflicts, particularly rido. A striking 89.83% of respondents rated their performance as either "excellent" (57.83%) or "good" (32%), underscoring the central role that barangay officials play as first responders in moments of community tension. Their effectiveness lies not only in their official mandate but in their physical proximity, accessibility, and deep familiarity with the social dynamics of their constituencies. During FGDs, participants repeatedly emphasized how barangay leaders act swiftly during outbreaks of violence—mobilizing local stakeholders, invoking customary mechanisms, and coordinating reconciliation rituals. The previously-mentioned account from Piagapo illustrates this effectiveness, describing how the barangay chairman successfully intervened after a shooting at a wedding by facilitating a temporary ceasefire and initiating dialogue between disputing families through mosque-based mediation (author's interview with FGD participant in Piagapo, April 11, 2022).

Traditional leaders, including *datus* and *sultans*, were similarly held in high regard, with 88.5% of respondents evaluating their performance positively —45.83% “excellent” and 42.67 percent “good.” Their authority, rooted in *adat*, kinship networks, and symbolic leadership, is widely recognized for resolving protracted and intergenerational clan conflict. A participant in Marantao shared how one *sultan* resolved a longstanding conflict by invoking ancestral ties and convening a negotiation process that involved both religious leaders and military observers (author’s interview with FGD participant in Marantao, April 4, 2022). This ability to combine cultural legitimacy with inclusive mediation reflects their unique position in local governance and dispute resolution.

Municipal LGUs were also viewed favorably, with 84.34% of respondents rating their performance as either “excellent” (44.67%) or “good” (39.67%). Though not as embedded in the daily life of communities as *barangay* or traditional leaders, municipal LGUs contribute significantly through formal mechanisms such as peace and order councils. However, participants in FGDs conducted in Pagayawan and Butig noted that bureaucratic delays and limited presence in remote *barangays* occasionally undermine the timeliness and accessibility of municipal interventions (author’s interview with FGD participant in Pagayawan, April 12, 2022; author’s interview with FGD participant in Butig, April 6, 2022).

Religious leaders and the MILF likewise received commendable ratings, though with greater variability across locations. *Ulama* were rated “excellent” by 47.67% and “good” by 42.17% of respondents, with many participants affirming their pivotal role in restoring moral order and guiding reconciliation through Islamic teachings. FGDs highlighted instances where *ulama* mediated disputes during Ramadan or Eid, invoking principles of justice, patience, and forgiveness. The MILF, meanwhile, garnered 30.67% “excellent” and 37.17% “good” ratings. Their involvement was especially valued in areas where they have a historical presence, such as Camp Busra in Butig. In such contexts, they were seen as effective mediators, particularly among ex-combatants and in matters governed by Islamic law. Still, several participants expressed concerns over perceived partiality and the uneven presence of MILF actors across municipalities.

By contrast, the AFP and PNP received more moderate evaluations. While 41.67% rated their performance as “good,” only 24% considered it “excellent,” with nearly 30% offering a “fair” or lower rating. While their role in ensuring physical security and enforcing ceasefires was acknowledged, they were generally viewed as reactive rather than proactive and as lacking the cultural embeddedness required for meaningful reconciliation. Similarly, provincial LGUs were perceived as the least effective, with only 23.17% rating them “excellent” and over 15% assessing them as “poor” or “very poor.” Narratives from FGD participants consistently portrayed provincial officials as distant and intermittently engaged, often only becoming involved in disputes that escalated to media attention or

Figure 3. Level of Trust and Confidence (TDR Survey, MSU-IPDM, 2021)

Source: Author.

required formal documentation. This suggests a persistent disconnect between provincial governance structures and the relational, community-based strategies that are more effective in managing rido in Lanao del Sur.

Figure 3 shows that barangay LGUs remain the most trusted actors in terms of legitimacy, with an overwhelming 88% of respondents rating their performance as either “excellent” (62%) or “good” (26%). This high level of trust stems from their direct presence in daily affairs and their immediate accessibility during conflict incidents. FGD participants in Piagapo and Pagayawan consistently described barangay officials as “the first to arrive” during disputes, often mediating between families, convening elders, and mobilizing community resources to prevent escalation. In one instance, a barangay captain was praised for organizing a kanduri to reconcile two rival clans shortly after a land-related shooting (author’s interview with FGD participant in Piagapo, April 11, 2022).

Traditional leaders also rank highly in perceived legitimacy, with 91.67% of respondents giving positive ratings—47% “excellent” and 44.67% “good.” Their cultural authority, rooted in adat, kinship networks, and symbolic power, continues to anchor their role in peace and justice. A key informant in Marantao shared how a local sultan resolved a ten-year rido through taritib and igma, ancestral invocation, and the involvement of both ulama and respected family elders (author’s interview with KII participant in Marantao, April 8, 2022). Many participants expressed that traditional leaders embody a “moral memory” of

justice that is deeply internalized in the community psyche.

Religious leaders, received the highest level of legitimacy overall, with 92.5% of respondents rating them positively—51.17% “excellent” and 41.3% “good.” Their role is widely viewed as essential in restoring social and moral order, especially in the aftermath of violence. Several FGD participants noted that during the holy months of Ramadan and Muharram, ulama often preach against vengeance and lead mosque-based mediation sessions grounded in Islamic teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation. One participant in Butig shared how the moral weight of a Friday khutbah by a local *alim* (religious scholar) was enough to convince a grieving father not to pursue retaliatory violence (author’s interview with FGD participant in Butig, April 6, 2022).

Municipal LGUs were also viewed positively, with 85.67% of respondents rating them either “excellent” (47.67%) or “good” (38%). However, unlike their barangay counterparts, municipal LGUs were perceived as more procedural and sometimes distant from grassroots realities. In FGDs conducted in Piagapo, some participants mentioned delays in response time and limited follow-through once a case was elevated beyond the barangay level, especially when political interests were involved. Nonetheless, their logistical capacity and formal authority to convene peace and order councils remain crucial in escalated cases.

The MILF received a more mixed evaluation, with 71% of respondents giving positive ratings—36.17% “excellent” and 35% “good.” While appreciated for facilitating Sulh-based mediation and promoting Islamic values of justice, the group’s effectiveness appears to vary across municipalities. In areas like Butig, where MILF commanders maintain strong local ties, they were praised for quickly de-escalating clan violence and coordinating with religious figures. However, in areas with factional tensions or weak coordination with the interim Bangsamoro government, some respondents voiced concerns about perceived bias or limited presence (author’s interview with FGD participant in Butig, April 6, 2022).

The AFP and PNP were viewed more moderately. While 40.5% of respondents rated them as “good” and 26.67% as “excellent,” nearly a third (32%) rated their legitimacy as only “fair” or below. FGD narratives reflect this ambivalence. While many acknowledged their role in enforcing ceasefires and preventing large-scale violence, some community members described them as “outsiders” who lack the cultural literacy and interpersonal trust needed for deeper reconciliation. Others expressed concern that their presence, especially when heavily armed, sometimes exacerbates fear or tension in already fragile situations (author’s interview with FGD participant in Butig, April 6, 2022).

Finally, the provincial LGUs received the lowest legitimacy ratings, with only 22.67% of respondents ranking their performance as “excellent” and 38.33% as “good,” totaling 61%. Moreover, 12.17% of respondents rated them “poor” or “very poor.” FGDs repeatedly highlighted the perceived absence of provincial

authorities in times of crisis, particularly in rural or upland areas. One participant from Pagayawan remarked that “the governor is only heard from during elections or after the damage is done,” pointing to a clear gap in relational governance and community responsiveness (author’s interview with FGD participant in Pagayawan, April 13, 2022).

Discussion

This section synthesizes the empirical data into three interrelated dimensions: actors involved in initiating reconciliation, the perceived effectiveness of interventions, and levels of community trust. These elements collectively illuminate the conditions under which TDR actors retain legitimacy and the limitations they face in sustaining equitable peace.

Who Initiates Peace and Why?

Figure 1 illustrates that reconciliation efforts in Lanao del Sur are primarily initiated by local actors embedded within the community. These findings underscore the importance of proximity and cultural legitimacy in dispute resolution. Barangay officials often serve as first responders due to their accessibility and community accountability (Torres 2014). Likewise, traditional leaders derive their authority from lineage, adat, and spiritual symbolism, mediating disputes based on *taritib* and *igma*, which are deeply rooted in Mranaw identity.

Municipal LGUs frequently act as intermediaries, supporting grassroots reconciliation through logistical or political means, though their effectiveness hinges on alignment with customary norms and traditional authority structures. In contrast, the provincial LGUs’ minimal engagement reflects institutional detachment, reinforcing critiques of top-down peacebuilding approaches that often lack local relevance. Security actors, meanwhile, such as the AFP and PNP, typically intervene during post-escalation phases to provide security guarantees. While their involvement is limited, the MILF’s evolving role under BARMM governance adds a layer of revolutionary legitimacy to local peace efforts.

Although the data confirm the central role of local actors in initiating reconciliation, concerns remain about inclusivity. TDR, while trusted, often operates within exclusive, male-dominated power structures, sidelining women (Adam and Boer 2015; Torres 2014). As Macabuac-Ferolin and Constantino (2014) observe, mediation spaces in rido-prone communities are predominantly occupied by male elders, thereby marginalizing alternative perspectives and reducing the potential for broader social transformation. To address these gendered exclusions, there is a growing need to institutionalize mechanisms that support women’s meaningful participation in local peace processes. Women-led

mediation models, rooted in both religious ethics and cultural familiarity, hold untapped potential for widening the moral authority of TDR actors. Training programs that build the capacity of female leaders, and community members in mediation and restorative justice—especially when grounded in gender-sensitive and culturally attuned frameworks—can enhance the inclusivity and legitimacy of TDR mechanisms. In the context of BARMM’s evolving governance, embedding gender-responsive approaches within local peace and order councils, barangay justice systems, and traditional leadership structures is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic step toward more equitable and sustainable peacebuilding outcomes.

Effective Justice or Symbolic Action?

Survey data from Lanao del Sur (Figure 2) indicates that community-level actors—particularly barangay officials and traditional leaders, such as sultans and datus—are widely perceived as the most effective mediators in resolving local disputes. This preference reflects not only their proximity and accessibility, but also the deep cultural legitimacy they command. Operating within established systems of adat and agama, these actors derive authority from lineage, spiritual standing, and their embeddedness within kinship networks (Mendoza and Mangulamas 2015; Orozco 2022). In contrast, formal institutions such as the municipal and provincial LGUs, the MILF, and state security forces are often viewed as distant, politicized, or procedurally cumbersome, contributing to a noticeable trust deficit (International Alert 2014). This observation reflects broader dynamics of legal hybridity in Mindanao, where state and non-state systems interact in ways that complicate public trust, legitimacy, and perceptions of justice (Deinla 2018, 2019).

In moments of conflict, particularly during rido, communities consistently turn to traditional mediators and barangay officials whose responses are immediate, context-specific, and rooted in relational justice. Mechanisms such as kokoman a kambhatabata’a (intermediary-led mediation), taritib and igma (consensus-based and customary order), and kitab-based decisions (Islamic jurisprudence), often accompanied by kanduri (peace feasts) or *diat* (compensatory payments), have proven effective in halting retaliatory violence and restoring social cohesion (Torres 2014). These culturally embedded practices offer legitimacy through reconciliation rather than retribution.

Yet, while TDR mechanisms often achieve short-term peace, critical scholarship highlights their structural limitations. Resolutions may prioritize communal harmony over accountability, especially in serious offenses such as murder. Elite capture remains a concern, as powerful clan leaders—many of whom hold political office—may manipulate outcomes to preserve status hierarchies (Adam 2018; Adam and Boer 2015). Furthermore, women and youth are routinely excluded from mediation processes, reflecting patriarchal norms

that undermine inclusive justice (Hedström and Senarathna 2015). In such closed-access orders, trust may be less a measure of democratic legitimacy than a reflection of constrained alternatives.

Crucially, TDR in Lanao del Sur occupies a continuum between effectiveness and symbolism. It offers a culturally resonant framework for de-escalation but may fall short of delivering rights-based or equitable justice. As Torres (2014) argues, sustainable peacebuilding in the Bangsamoro requires blending TDR's strengths—its accessibility, legitimacy, and local ownership—with institutional safeguards that promote inclusivity, accountability, and human rights. For policymakers, the task is not to replace TDR but to enhance its transformative potential through hybrid and participatory justice frameworks (Adam and Boer 2015).

Trust and the Moral Order

Figure 3 highlights the central role of moral legitimacy in shaping community trust in dispute resolution actors in Lanao del Sur. The data indicate that trust is rooted not in formal institutional authority but in the perceived spiritual, genealogical, and cultural credibility of actors.

In Mranaw society, legal pluralism endures, and authority is derived from agama and adat, which together uphold a normative moral order (Matuan 2024). Ulama and traditional leaders function not only as mediators but as moral authorities whose interventions are viewed as maintaining both communal harmony and divine justice. Their influence is heightened by the perceived ineffectiveness of state institutions, often regarded as externally imposed and culturally detached.

The MILF, now transitioning into formal political leadership within BARMM, occupies a hybrid space. Its moderate trust ratings reflect its dual identity as both a former revolutionary force and an emerging institutional actor. Similarly, barangay and municipal LGUs maintain relatively high trust, underscoring the value of hybrid governance models that blend formal procedures with culturally grounded responsiveness (Adam 2018). By contrast, the security sector garners only moderate trust. While their coercive capacity can be instrumental in de-escalating violence or enforcing agreements, they are often seen as outsiders rather than community-integrated peacekeepers. Historical grievances and past abuses continue to erode their moral authority, thereby limiting their role in both preemptive and restorative mediation.

The provincial LGU, which received the lowest trust ratings, exemplifies the disconnect between administrative authority and cultural legitimacy. Commonly perceived as distant and bureaucratic, provincial institutions have minimal involvement in grassroots dispute resolution and lack resonance with local norms (International Alert 2014).

While religious and traditional leaders hold significant moral capital, sustainable peacebuilding necessitates that their authority be exercised within

inclusive and accountable frameworks. Expanding the moral community entails developing deliberative processes that transcend lineage and charisma, anchoring trust in fairness, transparency, and respect for human rights.

These findings complicate binary distinctions between formal and informal justice systems. Rather than a clear divide, what emerges is a fluid, adaptive ecosystem of conflict resolution shaped by local needs, normative legitimacy, and institutional limitations.

Why TDR Remains Relevant in Resolving Rido in Lanao del Sur

Survey findings affirm that TDR remains the primary mechanism for addressing rido in Lanao del Sur, driven by high levels of community trust in religious and traditional leaders, particularly ulama and sultans/datus. These actors hold moral authority rooted in lineage, religious piety, and cultural embeddedness, enabling them to mediate conflicts in ways that resonate deeply with community norms and expectations.

Local government units, especially at the barangay level, also enjoy considerable trust due to their proximity, rapid response during crises, and collaboration with traditional mediators. Municipal LGUs follow in perceived legitimacy, with their credibility often enhanced when their actions align with customary practices. By contrast, provincial government units and state security forces receive notably lower trust, reflecting a broader skepticism toward formal institutions perceived as detached or unresponsive.

TDR's effectiveness stems from its deep cultural and spiritual grounding. Dispute resolution practices draw on adat, *maratabat* (honor), and Islamic principles, making reconciliation a morally significant act rather than a procedural outcome. Settlements often involve context-specific practices—such as kanduri feasts, diat (blood money), or arranged marriages—that offer flexible, swift, and culturally legitimate alternatives to formal adjudication, particularly in rural or underserved areas.

Traditional leaders derive their influence not from coercive power but from community trust and moral capital. Their authority enables them to enforce agreements through religious and social persuasion, often achieving compliance more effectively than formal mechanisms. A ruling by a respected religious leader may carry greater weight than a court order in many contexts.

Despite these strengths, TDR is not without limitations. Scholars caution that in weak-state settings, informal justice systems can be manipulated by elites, particularly when traditional leaders also occupy political positions (Bacaron 2010; Knack 2013). In such cases, settlements may reinforce clan dominance rather than deliver equitable outcomes. Moreover, TDR often prioritizes peace over accountability, resolving even serious crimes through compensation rather than legal sanctions, which raises concerns about victim rights and long-term deterrence. Without formal oversight, some agreements may lack transparency

and fail to protect vulnerable parties. Rojo (2022) critically assesses the impact of the barangay justice system, noting that while it improves access to justice for disadvantaged communities, it often lacks the institutional safeguards necessary to ensure fairness and sustainability in complex or high-stakes disputes.

Furthermore, TDR tends to reproduce existing power asymmetries by sidelining women and youth from deliberative processes (Kim 2018). Hedström and Senarathna (2015) emphasizes that excluding these groups from conflict resolution undermines the legitimacy and sustainability of peace outcomes. While TDR mechanisms draw strength from cultural legitimacy, their effectiveness must also be measured by their ability to accommodate diverse social actors. Hybrid models—when designed with intentional inclusivity—offer the opportunity to formalize participatory structures, ensuring that rido settlements are not only locally resonant but also socially equitable.

To address these challenges, scholars and practitioners increasingly advocate for hybrid models that integrate traditional practices within formal governance frameworks. Examples include local ordinances that recognize adat and peace councils that bring together religious leaders and government actors. The Bangsamoro Organic Law reflects this pluralist vision, calling for justice systems that respect cultural traditions while upholding legal safeguards. Such institutionalization can preserve TDR's local legitimacy while enhancing its accountability, inclusivity, and protection of human rights.

In this context, TDR remains not merely relevant but indispensable to sustainable peacebuilding in Lanao del Sur—provided it evolves within inclusive, transparent, and rights-based structures.

The Emergence of Hybrid Conflict Resolution

While this study initially categorized local actors under the umbrella of TDR, closer analysis of their practices reveals a more hybridized system of conflict mediation. Although TDR was first conceptualized as the normative and culturally grounded counterpart to state-imposed legal systems and ADR frameworks, the data suggest that dispute resolution in Lanao del Sur is best understood as a hybrid model that integrates elements of multiple legal and cultural traditions. This reflects the broader trend of legal pluralism in postcolonial and conflict-affected settings, as observed by Deinla and Taylor (2015), where formal and informal institutions often coexist, overlap, and adapt in response to sociopolitical realities. Traditional leaders remain rooted in adat, taritib, and genealogical authority, using time-honored rituals to restore social harmony. However, their methods are increasingly shared by other actors. Ulama, for instance, resolve disputes through Islamic law while adopting procedures akin to kokoman a kambhatabata'a and taritib and igma, reinforcing a religious yet culturally resonant form of mediation.

Similarly, state officials such as barangay chairmen, mayors, and governors often replicate or defer to traditional practices, not only to gain legitimacy but

also due to their deep social embeddedness. These actors exemplify hybrid authority—formally elected, yet culturally grounded. Their contributions extend beyond facilitation to include material support for peace rituals such as *diat* and *kanduri*, especially in cases where traditional actors lack financial resources. The MILF further demonstrates this hybridity through a dual-track system: local commanders often employ customary mechanisms, while unresolved disputes are elevated to the organization's Shari'ah courts for formal arbitration. This layered approach integrates grassroots reconciliation with structured adjudication. The security sector, though less central to mediation, sometimes engages in culturally informed reconciliation, especially when officers are *Mranaw* and familiar with local customs. Their participation, particularly in ceasefire monitoring or pre-negotiation contexts, adds another dimension to the hybrid system.

These overlapping functions challenge rigid dichotomies between “traditional” and “alternative” justice systems. As Deinla (2018) argues, hybrid justice arrangements in Mindanao do not simply coexist—they co-evolve, reflecting both tensions and synergies between state law, religious norms, and customary practices. Instead, what emerges is a complex, adaptive ecosystem where actors—regardless of formal status—draw on *adat*, *taritib*, *igma*, religious principles, and state authority to facilitate peace. Community recognition is not conferred solely by institutional affiliation or lineage, but by an actor's ability to mediate effectively, uphold local norms, and provide necessary resources for reconciliation.

Thus, the most fitting conceptual lens for understanding dispute resolution in Lanao del Sur is a hybrid dispute resolution system—a dynamic synthesis of traditional, religious, and formal governance practices that reflect the sociopolitical complexities of protracted clan conflict.

Conclusion

This study empirically analyzed how the *Mranaw* communities of Lanao del Sur perceive the frequency, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of key dispute resolution actors. It demonstrates that the authority of these actors is shaped not only by individual standing but also by their institutional support, social embeddedness, and their ability to navigate between formal and informal justice systems. The findings confirm that traditional dispute resolution mechanisms remain central due to their cultural legitimacy, accessibility, and deep roots in local norms.

Importantly, the study reveals a growing hybridization of dispute resolution practices, wherein formal institutions—such as local government units and the MILF—integrate traditional procedures to enhance both legitimacy and responsiveness. However, critical limitations persist, including challenges of

accountability, elite capture, and exclusion of women, which may constrain the delivery of equitable and rights-based justice.

To translate these findings into actionable reforms, policymakers in BARMM should prioritize the formal recognition and integration of culturally embedded justice mechanisms within the region's evolving governance frameworks. This includes instituting training programs for barangay and municipal-level mediators that emphasize both conflict sensitivity and cultural competence, as well as the systematic incorporation of adat-based protocols into local peace and order councils. Additionally, local government units could establish multi-sectoral peace councils composed of traditional leaders, religious actors, civil society representatives, and women mediators to ensure plural and participatory mediation processes. By embedding these practices into policy, BARMM can reinforce the legitimacy of its hybrid dispute resolution architecture while advancing equitable access to justice and deeper community trust in state-building efforts.

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