

Original Article

Peacemakers in the Community a Qualitative Study of Barangay Conciliators' Experiences

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Abstract: Barangay conciliation has emerged as a cornerstone of community-based conflict resolution in the Philippines, serving as an alternative to formal judicial proceedings through the Katarungang Pambarangay system. The mechanism empowers local leaders, particularly members of the Lupon Tagapamayapa, to mediate interpersonal and intergroup disputes at the barangay level, facilitating peacebuilding rooted in cultural norms such as pakikipagkapwa (shared identity) and bayanihan (communal unity). The study explored the lived experiences of barangay conciliators—members of the Lupon Tagapamayapa—in different Barangay in Iloilo City, Philippines, who mediate local disputes under the Katarungang Pambarangay system. Grounded in the frameworks of restorative justice, social capital theory, and symbolic interactionism, the study aimed to uncover the emotional, procedural, and institutional dynamics that shape grassroots conflict resolution. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced conciliators purposively selected from rural barangays. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Four key themes emerged: (1) neutral mediation and proactive engagement, (2) challenges related to cooperation and resource limitations, (3) resilient coping strategies, and (4) aspirations for institutional support and integrity. The findings reveal that while barangay justice is deeply rooted in cultural values such as pakikipagkapwa and bayanihan, its effectiveness is hindered by inadequate support, lack of training, and inconsistent public cooperation. Despite these challenges, conciliators demonstrate remarkable adaptability, moral commitment, and community-centered values. The study contributes to global discussions on informal justice systems and highlights the need for policy reforms to strengthen community-based mediation in the Philippines and similar contexts.

Keywords: Barangay conciliation, katarungang pambarangay, community-based justice, lived experiences

1. INTRODUCTION

The Barangay, being the smallest administrative sector in the Philippines, is considered the most immediate level of government to the people [1]. Historically, Barangays have been the primary social organization in Filipino communities, dating back to pre-colonial times [2]. The grassroots level of governance plays a critical role in local administration and community management [3]. Each Barangay operates under the mandate of the Local Government Code of 1991, which emphasizes local autonomy and community-based governance [4]. Barangays are headed by the barangay officials. Barangay officials are pivotal in administering local governance and ensuring the welfare of their constituents [5]. The Barangay Captain, or Punong Barangay (also known as the barangay chairperson), leads that team, supported by seven councilors or Barangay Kagawads, and a secretary

and treasurer [6]. The effectiveness of Barangay governance significantly depends on these officials' leadership, integrity, and community engagement [7]. These officials are responsible for various tasks, including dispute resolution, maintaining peace and order, and implementing local policies and development programs [8]. Conflicts at the Barangay level are often rooted in interpersonal or interfamily disputes, land issues, and minor criminal offenses. The Barangay Justice System, known as the *Lupong Tagapamayapa*, is integral to resolving these conflicts at the local level as the system emphasizes alternative dispute resolution methods, aiming to resolve conflicts amicably without resorting to the formal court system [9]. However, challenges arise due to factors such as "unequal power distribution, moral or cultural differences, personality conflicts, conflicting values and expectations, and miscommunication" [10-12]. Despite the existence of the Barangay Justice System as a localized dispute resolution mechanism, the Philippine justice system is not immune to systemic inequities, particularly for economically disadvantaged individuals. As highlighted by [13], despite the poor litigants' determination to assert their innocence, they were subjected to physical abuse by community police (*barangay tanod*) and the police aimed at coercing confessions to crimes they did not commit. These experiences of mistreatment, alongside a lack of resources to challenge abuse, emphasize the power imbalances within the justice system—where people experiencing poverty are disproportionately targeted and subjected to abuse by those positions of authority. Within the context, the Barangay Justice System's potential to address conflicts and promote justice is significantly constrained, reinforcing the need for innovative approaches that address these socioeconomic inequalities while enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of local governance. Barangay conciliation has emerged as a cornerstone of community-based conflict resolution in the Philippines, serving as an alternative to formal judicial proceedings through the *Katarungang Pambarangay* system. The mechanism empowers local leaders, particularly members of the *Lupon Tagapamayapa*, to mediate interpersonal and intergroup disputes at the barangay level, facilitating peacebuilding rooted in cultural norms such as *pakikipagkapwa* (shared identity) and *bayanihan* (communal unity) [14]. As an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism, the *Katarungang Pambarangay* operates under the Local Government Code of 1991 and is widely recognized for effectively addressing local conflicts without recourse to the formal court system [15]. According to [16], ADR approaches have evolved to suit the social dynamics of rural communities by emphasizing neutral facilitation and voluntary agreement. Barangay officials generally perceive the system as highly functional, especially when implemented with committed leadership and operational understanding [17]. An author [18] noted that members of the *Lupon Tagapamayapa* often demonstrate exceptional dedication, ensuring that disputes are managed with respect for both legal standards and cultural expectations. Supporting that, [19] found consistent satisfaction ratings among officials and community members, indicating a shared belief in the system's effectiveness. Despite these strengths, implementation challenges persist. An author [20] identified significant variations in the size and composition of *Lupon* memberships, which affect the process and outcome of mediation. Moreover, in cases involving Muslim or indigenous groups, disputes are sometimes deferred to customary authorities rather than barangay officials, complicating the universality of KP system application. Trust and social capital are essential to effective barangay conciliation. An author [21] reported that conflict resolution is significantly more successful in areas where barangay leaders and residents share strong bonds of trust and mutual respect. Conversely, a lack of trust may lead to withdrawal from the process or refusal to comply with settlements. An author [22] emphasized that community involvement is equally critical, as active participation from residents promotes acceptance and implementation of mediated outcomes. Cultural values play a vital role in barangay conciliation. An author [23] observed that Filipino conflict resolution is deeply influenced by relational values such as compassion, collectivity, and social harmony—principles that align well with the restorative justice framework. However, material constraints often hinder implementation. An author [24] highlighted

how limited resources and a lack of training among barangay officials reduce the system's consistency and effectiveness. The role of women has also gained recognition in the process. An author [25] noted that female mediators are particularly effective in resolving interpersonal disputes due to their empathy and communication skills. Recent advancements have pushed for digital innovation in barangay justice. An author [26] advocated for the use of online platforms to facilitate complaints and virtual conciliation sessions, although gaps in infrastructure and digital literacy remain significant. An author [27] recommended targeted investments in technology and capacity-building to address these barriers. The broader relevance of barangay conciliation is echoed in international contexts. An author [28] documented how the Jaarsummaa system in Ethiopia leverages the wisdom of community elders to resolve disputes, while [29] found that Western mediators often employ relational dialogue and storytelling to foster empathy and understanding. These global practices reinforce the importance of culturally sensitive, community-owned solutions to conflict. The study, conducted in the Western Visayas seeks to explore the lived experiences of Lupon Tagapamayapa members as they facilitate barangay conciliation. Grounded in the theoretical lenses of restorative justice [18], social capital theory [21], and symbolic interactionism [15], the Study investigates how grassroots mediators perceive their roles, navigate challenges, and envision improvements in barangay-level justice.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological study design to capture the rich, lived experiences of barangay conciliators involved in grassroots conflict resolution. The methodological approach is particularly suited for exploring deeply personal and contextually embedded phenomena, as it allows study to interpret meaning from the participants' point of view [30]. The study was conducted in selected barangays within Iloilo City, Philippines, where the Katarungang Pambarangay system is actively implemented. Participants were purposively selected based on specific criteria: active membership in the Lupon Tagapamayapa, a minimum of three years' experience in barangay conciliation, and willingness to engage in in-depth interviews. A total of three participants were recruited, each offering a wealth of insight due to their sustained involvement in community-based dispute resolution. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed and validated by experts in qualitative study and local governance. The guide consisted of open-ended questions that allowed for both structure and narrative freedom, enabling participants to share their reflections in their own terms. Interviews were conducted in Hiligaynon, the local dialect, and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. Data were analyzed using [31] thematic analysis, involving multiple phases of coding, theme generation, and refinement. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study process. Informed consent was obtained, participants were guaranteed anonymity, and all data were securely stored and treated with confidentiality. Ethical clearance procedures aligned with established qualitative study guidelines [32].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed four major themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of barangay conciliators: (1) neutral mediation and proactive engagement, (2) challenges related to cooperation and resources, (3) coping mechanisms through resilience and adaptability, and (4) aspirations for institutional support and integrity in barangay justice. Each theme reflects the multilayered and often emotionally taxing nature of community-based conciliation work. Participants described their primary role as mediators who must maintain neutrality while actively facilitating dialogue between disputing parties. They emphasized that impartiality builds trust and credibility, while proactive engagement—such as meeting parties in advance or tailoring language to their social backgrounds—encourages voluntary resolution. These roles required emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal dexterity. One participant, for instance, noted the need to “balance

things fairly,” highlighting how flexibility and neutrality were essential in maintaining the legitimacy of the process. However, challenges persist. A recurring issue was the lack of cooperation from disputing parties, many of whom either avoided participation or exhibited resistance due to misunderstandings or mistrust of the process. That aligns with previous findings on limited public awareness and procedural ambiguity [33]. Compounding that issue was the lack of logistical and institutional support. Participants reported the absence of basic mediation tools, inadequate training, and no formal compensation—factors that diminished their ability to fulfill their roles effectively. Despite these obstacles, barangay conciliators demonstrated resilience through adaptive coping mechanisms. They adjusted strategies based on each case’s context, regulated emotional tensions, and leveraged spiritual or community support to sustain morale and ensure fair outcomes. Finally, the participants expressed a unified aspiration for improved resources, training, and ethical leadership. They advocated for institutional reforms that recognize and support the essential role of grassroots mediators. One participant articulated a desire for “just a small token of appreciation,” underscoring the emotional labor and moral commitment involved in barangay justice. Their calls for reform were grounded not only in logistical necessity but also in a vision for a more credible, transparent, and inclusive conciliation system. That study provides a nuanced understanding of barangay conciliation as a deeply relational and culturally embedded justice mechanism. The findings confirm that the success of the Katarungang Pambarangay relies not merely on procedural adherence but on the personal integrity, emotional labour, and social positioning of its mediators. The theme of neutral mediation reflects the principles of restorative justice, which prioritize healing and community dialogue over punitive measures [34]. Moreover, the emphasis on trust, cooperation, and community engagement reinforces the relevance of [35] social capital theory in explaining how social cohesion facilitates effective conflict resolution. The challenges identified in the study—particularly non-cooperation and resource scarcity—highlight systemic limitations that warrant policy intervention. Without adequate support, barangay justice becomes unsustainable, undermining its potential to serve as a credible alternative to formal litigation. Furthermore, the coping strategies employed by participants suggest that resilience is not an innate trait but a cultivated response to institutional neglect. These findings resonate with [36] symbolic interactionism, which posits that meanings, roles, and behaviours are shaped through social interactions and contextual cues. The aspirations voiced by the participants for more training, recognition, and ethical leadership underscore the need to professionalize and humanize community-based justice work. Their desire for institutional reform is not simply a call for better tools but a demand for dignity, legitimacy, and sustainability in their roles as peacemakers. As such, barangay conciliators embody the frontline of justice in rural communities, bridging the gap between cultural tradition and formal law through empathy, wisdom, and perseverance.

4. CONCLUSION

The study provides a nuanced understanding of barangay conciliation as a deeply relational and culturally embedded justice mechanism. The findings confirm that the success of the Katarungang Pambarangay relies not merely on procedural adherence but on the personal integrity, emotional labour, and social positioning of its mediators. The challenges identified in the study—particularly non-cooperation and resource scarcity—highlight systemic limitations that warrant policy intervention. Without adequate support, barangay justice becomes unsustainable, undermining its potential to serve as a credible alternative to formal litigation. Furthermore, the coping strategies employed by participants suggest that resilience is not an innate trait but a cultivated response to institutional neglect. The aspirations voiced by the participants for more training, recognition, and ethical leadership underscore the need to professionalize and humanize community-based justice work. Their desire for institutional reform is not simply a call for better tools but a demand for dignity,

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