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Moro Voices from Mindanao: Addressing extremism in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region

Leanne M. Kelly[abc1], Greg Barton[ab], Anthony Ware[abc], Primitivo III Ragandang[c], Yasmira Moner[c]
[a]Alfred Deakin Institute, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia, [b]School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia, [c]Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology, Mindanao, Philippines

Abstract
This article investigates community perceptions of violent and hateful extremism (VHE) in three municipalities near Marawi City in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), and their proposed solutions for peace. Data from 41 focus group discussions highlight local understandings of and concerns about extremism, and grassroots peacebuilding strategies in a region with a complex conflict history. The discussions reveal insights into how socio-economic disparities, historical grievances, and cultural dynamics including *rido* (clan feuds), shape local experiences and perceptions of VHE. Participant remarks regarding inclusion and tolerance show an interest in increasing gender awareness and integration of marginalised groups. At the same time, however, programs expressly described in terms of preventing violent extremism tend to trigger anxious responses. Findings emphasise the importance of culturally sensitive, inclusive, and community-driven approaches to effectively address the underlying causes of extremism and promote sustainable peace, with a focus on livelihoods and incomes, and educational programs. Legitimate concerns about the risks involved in explicitly seeking to counter VHE reinforce the importance of extremely careful approaches, to avoid exacerbating very real threats. The study enriches understanding of community resilience in a conflict setting and provides important insights into how best to support peace efforts in BARMM's ongoing reconstruction and reconciliation processes.

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Introduction

This article examines community perceptions, concerns, and proposed solutions regarding violent and hateful extremism (VHE) in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Utilising data from 41 focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in March 2024, this analysis unpacks the nuances of community-level perceptions of extremism.

[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Leanne M. Kelly, Email: kelea@deakin.edu.au; Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, Victoria, Australia

The FGDs were conducted across 12 *barangays* (urban neighbourhoods or villages) in three municipalities near Lake Lanao, 10–20 kilometres from Marawi City, the capital of Lanao del Sur province. The villages' proximity to the 2017 Marawi siege epicentre is significant, as collective memory of the event continues to shape security concerns, community relations, and the perceived threat of VHE. The participants belong to the Maranao ethnolinguistic group (the people of Lake Lanao), situated within the broader collective identity of the Moro peoples, which encompasses the diverse Muslim ethnolinguistic communities of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan islands.

This research adopts the conceptual framing of VHE, rather than the established focus on violent extremism alone. This is not to deny violent extremism is a significant threat. The risk of major terrorist attacks remains high, globally as well as in Mindanao. Nonetheless, for most people, sectarian sentiment, hate speech, the incitement of hatred, and the threat of violence by extremists presents a more immediate day-to-day threat than actual physical violence. This hateful extremism often presents as misogyny, racism, sectarianism, and toxic hyper-nationalism. When perpetrated in an organised fashion, hateful extremism is deeply interrelated with violent extremism, yet it represents a more insidious and pervasive problem than violent extremism alone. Although not all hateful extremism leads to actual physical violence, it invariably promotes discrimination and structural violence, and relies on threats of harm. Virtually all violent extremism generates related expressions of hateful extremism. VHE is thus a broad term describing the harmful actions of social movements seeking political and societal change in the name of ideology, sometimes framed in terms of religion and/or identity, by means that dehumanise and threaten to harm to others, coercing or subordinating other groups and occasionally perpetrating physical violence to reinforce that fear (Barton et al., 2022; Sonrexa et al., 2023; Ware et al., 2023a).

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) encompasses a spectrum of policies and programs aimed at addressing the drivers, enablers, and manifestations of extremist violence. Prevention efforts seek to reduce the appeal and recruitment capacity of extremist movements by strengthening individual and community resilience, addressing grievances, and promoting inclusive, transparent, good governance, while supporting efforts to counter and disrupt extremist networks, narratives, and activities before they escalate into violence. In this study, we adopt an expanded P/CVE lens that situates our analysis of

community perspectives within the broader frame of VHE. We are particularly concerned with primary-level P/CVE, which focuses on building resilience and addressing underlying conditions before radicalisation occurs. This emphasis highlights the role of non-government organisations (NGOs) in designing community-based responses to VHE, rather than focusing narrowly on secondary or tertiary interventions targeting individuals already radicalised or involved in violence.

This framing is particularly relevant in BARMM, where communities face the lingering impacts of protracted conflict, insurgency, and extremist violence, yet also possess strong local capacities for peacebuilding and prevention. BARMM, established by the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2019, marks a major step in resolving longstanding conflicts in the area. It was formed as part of a peace deal between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), granting significant concessions for MILF's demobilisation. The Moro Muslim majority region in the west of Mindanao has a complex history of insurgency shaped by colonial legacies, resistance against state control, and movements for Muslim self-determination since the early 20th century. Historically, it has been a hub for various armed groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and later the MILF, both advocating for autonomy.

This conflict has been exacerbated by extremist movements since the 1980s, when the MNLF established ties with extremist Islamist groups in Libya and Afghanistan. Together with providing technical, financial, and training support to these non-state groups, the MNLF sent 'mujahidin' fighters to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, most of whom returned home to Mindanao in the early 1990s after the Soviets withdrew in 1989. MILF and Abu Sayyaf, splinter groups from the MNLF that were formed in 1977 and 1991 respectively, adopted Salafi jihadi ideologies similar to those promoted by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

The 2017 Marawi siege, a critical event in the rise of jihadist violent extremism, was a five-month conflict that rapidly escalated in the wake of security efforts to apprehend ISIS-linked extremists. Led by Abu Sayyaf and Maute group extremists, militants seized key parts of Marawi City, using hostages as human shields and engaging in intense urban combat. The conflict resulted in significant destruction, displacing over 350,000 residents and causing over 1,000 deaths, including militants, security forces, and civilians. It ended on 23 October 2017 after five months of military operations that included artillery and arial bombardments, with

the Philippine government declaring victory, but the city left uninhabitable. This event marked a turning point, highlighting the destructive impact of extremism on local communities in Mindanao, and the complex relationship between global extremist ideologies and local grievances. Given Marawi's proximity—just 10–20 kilometres from the research field sites—it is unsurprising that participants in the research reported in this article frequently discussed the trauma stemming from the siege, with many directly affected as displaced individuals or hosts to displaced family members.

Participants in the FGDs shared their perspectives on violent extremism and extremist groups, discussing its direct and indirect impacts on their local communities. They explored how VHE is perceived and defined, noting variations in understanding traditional violence such as retributive *rido* (clan violence), political violence, insurgency, and VHE. They detailed common methods of spreading extremist narratives and recruitment, and the socio-economic and cultural factors that drive radicalisation. Additionally, they addressed challenges in preventing VHE, emphasising fear of retribution against those who resist extremist activities, contrasting with other settings where discussions often focus on addressing root causes and improving governance and law enforcement (Kelly et al., 2023).

The FGDs provided a platform for locals to discuss challenging topics and craft practical solutions, enhancing their ownership and agency in peacebuilding. This paper leverages insights from those directly affected by VHE to enrich the dialogue on effective interventions that support peace, stability, and resilience in BARMM. This study aids in developing nuanced strategies for the long-term stability and prosperity of the Bangsamoro people by analysing the dynamics of extremism and its impact on residents.

Contextual setting

The FGDs were conducted in Saguiaran, Piagapo, and Marantao, municipalities near Marawi City in the BARMM province of Lanao del Sur, a region marked by conflict, socio-economic challenges, and a persistent threat of extremism. This area is strategically significant in Mindanao's conflict, having served as a base for insurgent groups aiming to establish an autonomous Islamic state and as the site of the 2017 Marawi siege. This study thus offers a local critical lens through which the complexities of VHE can be understood, highlighting the

vulnerabilities and complex dynamics of extremism, and the interconnections between local grievances and transnational jihadist ideologies.

In the years following the devastation of the Marawi siege, villages nearby have experienced a precarious peace, punctuated by ongoing security challenges and deep fears and suspicion, amid reconstruction efforts (Gallardo, 2024). The Philippine government and international aid agencies have been involved in rebuilding efforts, yet the shadow of conflict and VHE still heavily influences daily life and local governance (Fernandez, 2021). Reconstruction is hindered by socio-economic disparities worsened by displacement. For example, the regions of Saguiaran and Piagapo are strained by the influx of displaced persons, while Marantao grapples with reintegrating former combatants. Furthermore, the presence of armed groups leveraging family and tribal affiliations complicates the security landscape.

The ongoing tension and extremist risk in Mindanao were starkly evident in the terrorist attack at Mindanao State University (MSU)-Main Campus in Marawi on December 3, 2023, which killed eleven people and injured dozens during a Catholic mass. This incident, occurring six years after the 2017 siege, highlighted the local population's recurring trauma and fear of what they call 'black' groups, that is to say violent extremist groups, most of which align themselves with the global Islamic State/ISIS movement. The MSU-Marawi campus, previously seen as a safe haven and a symbol of cultural diversity and religious tolerance, experienced a profound shock, with many viewing the attack as a direct assault on these values and the fragile peace process. It highlights the fact that local fears of violent retribution are well founded, and that the activity of 'black' groups pose a serious threat to social cohesion, reconciliation, and reconstruction. The fieldwork for this article, conducted in nearby villages just months after this attack, revealed that participants were deeply influenced by this recent destabilisation, with pervasive fear of 'black' groups planning new activities locally.

Although the government is focused on rebuilding Marawi, exemplified by the passage of the Marawi Siege Victims Compensation Act in 2022, the implementation of such efforts received substantial criticism in the FGDs. Locals expressed concerns about the fair distribution of compensation—issues that extremist groups could exploit—and noted a failure to address the root causes of conflict in the region (Gallardo, 2024). This sentiment is supported by other research, such as Fernandez (2021), who argues that simply implementing

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the Bangsamoro Organic Law and establishing BARMM post-Marawi is not enough to prevent the recurrence of violent extremism without addressing underlying cultural, gender, and conflict dynamics more effectively.

A key cultural factor impacting both conflict continuation and resolution in these municipalities is *rido*, or clan feuding, prevalent across BARMM. Rido often arises from personal disputes, political rivalries, or land issues, and can evolve into extended, violent feuds involving multiple generations. Extremist groups exploit these feuds for recruitment by tapping into existing familial and tribal loyalties. NGO personnel, academics, and government officials interviewed for other aspects of a broader research project, of which the FGD data reported here is a part, have noted the negative impact of *rido* on community cohesion and peacebuilding (Barton et al., 2019; Ware et al., 2023b). Findings suggest that engaging community leaders and local government units to mediate *rido* disputes could mitigate this radicalisation driver. However, a detailed exploration of *rido's* connections to violent extremism, including local perspectives and understandings, remains underexplored.

The lived experiences of residents in BARMM, as expressed in the FGDs, demonstrate an understanding of how cultural, economic, and political factors collectively influence VHE. The multiple layers of fear and concern expressed by participants speak to the necessity for culturally sensitive, community-driven peacebuilding strategies that strengthen local dispute mechanisms and governance frameworks.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger, four-country research project led by Australian researchers from Deakin University in partnership with Plan International, aimed at exploring effective community-level strategies against VHE through development and humanitarian interventions. The project examines the dynamics of VHE within local contexts and gathers insights on community perceptions of impacts and solutions across Indonesia, the Philippines, Kenya, and Mozambique. Under the oversight of Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2022-069), the research strictly adheres to ethical guidelines.

Elsewhere, the Australian research team personally facilitated FGDs in local villages (Kelly et al., 2023). By contrast, the fieldwork in BARMM was conducted by academics from

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Mindanao State University (MSU)-Iligan, with the Deakin University and MSU researchers jointly analysing results. This partnership ensured cultural sensitivity and safety given the complex and volatile issues in BARMM.

For this Mindanao research, the MSU team—comprised of two leads and 24 young researchers—selected 12 *barangays* across three municipalities in Lanao del Sur. Village selection criteria included proximity to Marawi City, connections with community leaders through MSU, and logistical considerations. Each *barangay* hosted three FGDs: youth, women, and heads of households (typically male). This approach ensured that women and young people had safe spaces for discussion, countering the tendency for older men to dominate in mixed settings (Kelly et al., 2023).

The field research was conducted at the start of March 2024, and involved 353 participants (329 unique individuals) across 41 FGDs. In total, 305 individuals took part in 36 village-level FGDs (102 heads of household, 100 women, and 103 youth). As local residents, the 24 young FGD facilitators participated in additional FGDs themselves, conducted by the Deakin team: two during training and another three for debriefing, coded in this article as InitaoTraining and InitaoDebrief respectively. FGD data is coded by *barangay*, using the municipality name and a number to ensure anonymity (e.g., Saguiaran1, Saguiaran2). Each of the three municipalities (Saguiaran, Piagapo, and Marantao) had four *barangays* hosting three FGDs each. Findings are generally aggregated by *barangay* but are differentiated by group using codes when a comment was made by a specific group within a *barangay*: H for heads of household (predominantly men), W for women, and Y for youth (e.g., Saguiaran1Y).

This approach leverages the authors' experience with remote fieldwork and introduces a novel method for data collection (Ware & Laoutides, 2021; Kelly & Htwe, 2024). Key advantages include using local FGD facilitators familiar with the context and language. However, this required reliance on others for notetaking and observation. There was a concern that participants might withhold information from locals due to fear of disclosure, but assurances of confidentiality under the Chatham House Rule were provided. Nevertheless, participants were more likely to be reserved due to a prevalent fear of outsiders and mistrust of their intentions, as frequently expressed in the FGDs.

The Australian team met Plan International Philippines staff and the MSU team on the northern coast two-hours east of Marawi City for a one-day refresher training on FGD

facilitation and note-taking, ensuring consistency across sessions. Key topics included ethics, consent, and confidentiality. Training was consolidated through gamification and role play. Part of the role play, which doubled as research data, involved splitting the group in two, with one group of young researchers being asked the questions by the Deakin and MSU academics while the other half practiced notetaking, later switching roles. This process not only generated valuable data from individuals near Marawi City but also gave participants experience in conducting and documenting FGDs. The purpose of these FGDs was clearly explained to participants, who were given the option to redact their comments from the transcripts.

MSU academics closely supervised the young researchers during data collection. Deakin and MSU academics reconvened with them for a debriefing day immediately after they completed the FGD data collection, in early March 2024. During the debrief, after reporting on their findings the young researchers were divided into three groups for a final round of FGDs, conducted by the Australian team. This session allowed them to discuss and analyse their findings based on their notes and reflections, adding depth and highlighting moments of surprise or disagreement with the villagers' responses.

Detailed transcriptions from the FGDs were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, using an inductive approach to extract themes directly from the data, highlighting the community's authentic voices. This methodology reflects the study's dedication to grounding its findings in the actual experiences and perceptions of participants. Although broad FGD questions guided the discussions, facilitators introduced specific topics, such as attitudes to people identifying as LGBTQIA+ and the impact of social media, to ensure thorough exploration of pertinent issues.

Results

To contextualise FGD participants' responses about definitions, drivers, and prevention strategies for extremism, this section first explores local concerns regarding extremism to ground the cultural and traumatic foundations influencing these discussions. It then presents participants' views on the challenges in addressing VHE in BARMM followed by their overview of local divisions and discrimination occurring in the region. These results are

followed by participants' definitions of both violent extremism and hateful extremism, and their ideas about the conditions that cultivate VHE. This section ends with community-led solutions, whereby participants suggest contextualised and practical prevention measures to promote peace and tolerance in their villages.

Local concerns regarding extremism

Fear or *takot* of recurring violence, particularly linked to the Marawi siege, was a dominant theme across FGDs. Participants expressed ongoing trauma and anxiety about future conflicts, noting how the siege continues to impact their daily lives and decisions: "We're scared" (Marantao3; Saguiaran3); "I saw a lot of people die" (Marantao4); "We're afraid our hometown will be destroyed again" (Piagapo3; Saguiaran4); "It might ruin our future" (Piagapo3). Participants in household head FGDs raised fears around being able to "secure and prioritise the safety of women and our family" (Saguiaran1H), while young people feared separation from their parents (Saguiaran4Y). Participants noticed the compounding impact of complex trauma saying, "Now, even if you feel a bit threatened you get scared: unlike before" (Saguiaran3). They emphasised a collective exhaustion with conflict and a longing for peace: "We've had enough" (Marantao2). These perspectives indicate how ongoing threats and intermittent violent incidents are complicating the recovery process and continuously testing the resilience of villagers around Marawi.

Despite prevailing fears, a strong sense of community pride, cohesion, and resilience was evident. Participants highlighted a commitment to local norms and reliance on community leadership to mitigate conflicts and prevent extremism. For example, proactive community efforts to resist extremism were noted, with one participant declaring, "We will do our best to prevent any extremism in our place" (Marantao3), and another affirming the difficulty of extremist recruitment due to the community's shared values and mutual support (Saguiaran1). However, concerns remain, especially among the youth, about distinguishing between extreme and non-extreme ideologies and the risk of coercion into extremist groups. In contrast, older participants and leaders felt more confident in their capacity to safeguard their community through established norms and leadership.

Participants voiced a strong fear of outsiders, expressing distrust of unknown people loitering in their villages and noting this raised great apprehension (Marantao1; Marantao2;

Piagapo1; Piagapo2; Piagapo3; Saguiaran2). For instance, one participant stated, "I am not afraid of the influence that online platforms may have…but rather, I am afraid of the outsider that might come to our area" (Marantao2). Others noted that "We are afraid of outsiders because we don't know what they're thinking" (Saguiaran3), "we don't know their purpose" (Saguiaran3). Participants connected the escalation of extremism in their region, culminating in the siege, to the infiltration of ISIS members who "came from another country" (Marantao4). While there was a strong thread of fear regarding outsiders across FGDs, many participants commented that some of their neighbours and family members joined extremist groups: "All the people in the *barangay* can be suspected members of extremist groups" (Piagapo4). They noted that this was a reason to avoid discussing these issues: "We're afraid because we don't know if the person we're talking to is with them [the extremists]. Just like now, we don't know if there is someone with us, so we shouldn't discuss it" (Saguiaran3).

While they were more worried about strangers in real life, participants expressed concerns about the role of social media in spreading misinformation and facilitating recruitment. They noted that social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and even text messages were often used by outsiders to manipulate and destabilise communities (Piagapo1; Saguiaran2; InitaoDebrief). The perceived ease with which misinformation can spread and influence people, especially the young, was a common source of worry (Marantao4; Saguiaran2; Piagapo1).

The prevalence of rumours and unverified information was noted as inciting fear and complicating appropriate responses to real threats (Marantao1). For example, a participant emphasised the need for information integrity, stating, "Number one that we must do is stop spreading fake information by those that we call *Marites* [gossips], that's one source of trouble/conflict" (Marantao3). Several of the women's FGDs, in particular, raised the issue of gossiping and the direct link between misinformation and community discord. Utilising the term *Marites* suggests a gender dimension to this critique; *Marites* is something akin to a Filipina version of America's 'Karen', invoking the notion that misinformation is spread by middle-aged busybody women. However, it is not just village gossip that is disseminating unhelpful and unsettling information. The distress caused by rumours of impending attacks was evident in other remarks: "Circulation of text messages that say ISIS or another terrorist group will attack again causes us confusion and trauma" (Saguiaran1; also Marantao1). These

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expressions of concern demonstrate the tangible effects of misinformation on community stability and mental health, particularly in this deeply distressed region.

Another concern raised was the misuse of religious authority in the spread of misinformation, with some religious leaders (*ulama*) allegedly spreading extremist ideologies, via social media and in person (Marantao3; Marantao4; Piagapo2; Saguiaran3). This is not without basis; messaging by religious leaders before and during the Marawi siege said it was a moral obligation for every Muslim to join against the *khafirs* (infidels), in a *jihad fi sabilillah* (war in the cause of Islam) (Newton et al., 2021). Further complicating this issue is the perception that deviations from traditional religious practices are leading to a societal shift towards more individualistic and potentially harmful behaviours. Some participants voiced concern that certain *ulama* were fragmenting unified religious doctrine that may encourage or coerce individuals to adopt extremist views under the guise of religious authority. Additionally, participants worried about religious leaders distorting the concept of *jihad*—a spiritual struggle—using it instead to justify violence (Marantao4Y; Saguiaran4). Participants spoke passionately about how *ulama* like these exacerbate community conflicts and societal misunderstandings of Islam, leading to stigmatisation of Muslims (Piagapo1; Piagapo4; Saguiaran3). They highlighted fears of being wrongfully associated with extremist groups whereby, "if you are identified as a Muslim, then you belong to the Maute or ISIS" (Saguiaran4).

It is notable that the facilitators of the FGDs, who are also Muslims and residents of these *barangays*, expressed certain concerns during pre-fieldwork FGDs that were not mentioned by villagers in the subsequent FGDs. Perhaps some of their observations and other concerns stem from their greater levels of education and awareness of national politics. While many of the concerns align across all 41 FGDs, the facilitators worried that conflicts in the provinces might have adverse effects on the wider BARMM peace process and that "it might break down due to spoilers" (InitaoTraining). They particularly linked this possibility to electoral results explaining the potential for unsuccessful politicians to "promote chaos" and "stir up discontent" as "all they want is power, money, and powerful connections. They only care about themselves" (InitaoTraining). Highlighting the lack of good access to education, internet, and accurate news, the facilitators explained their grave concerns about how vulnerable people in BARMM are to manipulation and that anger around election results

might "push people to form more violent extremist groups or join existing ones" (InitaoTraining). Additionally, they are fearful of regular rumours about violent extremists operating locally and the impact further conflict will have on "the lives of people who are trying to live peacefully" (InitaoTraining).

Challenges in addressing VHE in BARMM

Building on the deep-seated concerns about VHE detailed in the previous section, participants shared the challenges they face in addressing these threats. By far the most consistently expressed challenge was fear about the repercussions of opposing or reporting VHE, fear of potential retaliation and worsening insecurity in their communities. This fear is compounded by firsthand experiences of violence, such as the Marawi siege, and a pervasive climate of threat. Particular concern was expressed about the dangers of addressing extremist actions or actors, which could lead to severe consequences, including death (Marantao2; Piagapo1; Piagapo3): "Each of us is afraid of reporting someone to the authorities for the bad things he is doing or engaged in. He may soon know who reported him" (Marantao2). Even discussions about VHE were seen as dangerous and needing to be conducted with care to ensure extremist actors do not "get back at you or do things that are not appropriate to people who talk about them" (Piagapo3; also Piagapo1; Saguiaran3). Youth participants worried that children and young people might speak about confidential matters without realising who they are talking to, and the magnitude of possible consequences (Saguiaran1). It was explained that municipal mayors are sometimes victims of racketeering, and that some government actors may be colluding with extremist groups, which could affect the implementation of programs to prevent extremism (Saguiaran3). Participants also noted the difficulties surrounding deradicalisation, as people wanting to leave extremist groups know that desertion can mean their death (Marantao3; Saguiaran4). These comments emphasise the complex balance community members must navigate between maintaining safety and addressing threats to promote peace and harmony.

Cultural norms and social dynamics complicate the discourse around VHE in BARMM. The influence of *rido* (clan feuds), *maratabat* (family honour that can engender shame in admitting communal problems), and perceived lack of respect from young people toward those with authoritative roles like community leaders and parents are pivotal

(Marantao3). These factors can both perpetuate violence and hinder conflict resolution, and are strongly interlinked. An example of these interlinkages was recounted in an FGD in the third Marantao *barangay*. A local girl and boy were in a relationship that the girl's family thought bought shame on their clan. As a result, the boy was murdered. The community leaders (*datus*) are trying to convince the clans involved to turn in the murderer and resolve the issue. The community is fearful that people no longer respect those in authoritative roles and this clan feud may escalate into a "*rido* war" (Marantao3). This is consistent with research documenting *maratabat* over inter-ethnic romantic relationships leading to wider *rido* conflict (Dwyer & Cagoco-Guiam, 2010).

Participants emphasised that risk levels are escalating: "a fist fight has now become a gun fight" (InitaoDebrief). In the past, "after a while they're all okay, [now] a small fight can reach the whole town and other places through text and call…and it's not even the right information…and now even our own children don't obey us" (Marantao3). This makes combatting extremist narratives difficult because now people "want to stand and fight for the ideology of other people and don't want to accept the advice of the leaders in the community and don't even respect them" (Marantao2). Strong clan ties and notions of honour and shame impact journeys into extremism as expectations and clan coercion are powerful influencers. "You cannot get the *maratabat* out of the Maranao's hearts" commented a conservative young woman dressed in a black niqab (InitaoTraining).

Adult FGDs emphasised young people's disregard for community customs and hierarchies, while youth participants felt sidelined in discussions about extremism, pointing out generational gaps in addressing such threats (Marantao3Y; Saguiaran1; Saguiaran3). Young participants expressed a disconnect between traditional approaches and modern challenges like limited job prospects, the influence of drugs, and evolving social dynamics (Marantao3Y). Participants criticised politicians for neglecting civilian needs (Saguiaran2Y), emphasising the vulnerability of youth aged 15-30—who comprise 27.4% of the Bangsamoro population—to extremist recruitment due to limited economic and social opportunities and exclusion from political processes (IRI, 2019). They advocated for inclusive program and policy design and suggested that sports and arts activities could foster better engagement (InitaoTraining).

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Another challenge in addressing extremism was that participants expressed a lack of understanding about the nature of VHE and confusion and anxiety about what "Islam really means" (Piagapo1). They highlighted the need for enhanced education and outreach to better understand and address these threats (Saguiaran2). Their concerns included the risk of unknowingly spreading or accepting misinformation due to limited knowledge and the convincing nature of extremist rhetoric: "We can't determine if a person's beliefs are right or wrong anymore" (Saguiaran3). Additionally, they criticised the inadequate promotion of P/CVE events in BARMM, attributing this to broader dissatisfaction with local authorities and the perception that programs mainly benefit a select few. Participants emphasised the importance of such seminars and the need for better communication to ensure community awareness of programmatic interventions (Saguiaran2).

Additionally, participants reminded the research team that P/CVE events must be trauma-informed to minimise re-traumatisation, and conducted with incentives to enable day labourers to attend (Saguiaran3). They also suggested that a gentle and strengths-based approach could help engage people and prevent feelings of defensiveness at their demographic, community, or clan being targeted (Piagapo1; Piagapo3). This should include using different terminology, offered an FGD in Piagapo4, as the words "violent extremism…may cause misunderstandings…so we have to be really careful". The advertising and program design challenges present an easy fix compared to the other challenges raised regarding the very real threat of retaliation for preventative programming and the potential for causing more harm than good. A young participant captured the sentiment across the focus groups when they said, "I'm scared to open up what is in my mind because what if I say something that might not be liked by others, which might cause more problems?" (Saguiaran1).

Local divisions and discrimination

After deliberating on programming challenges, participants were asked about inclusion and marginalisation in their area. These internal divisions often manifest through both subtle social nuances and overt conflicts. While these questions may seem tangential to the topic of VHE, our extensive research with other actors in the P/CVE space—including government officials, NGO personnel, and academics—has highlighted the significant impact of hateful

extremism, intolerance, and discrimination on violent extremism (Barton et al., 2019; Ware et al., 2023b; Kelly et al., 2023). Thus, our starting position is that identifying and addressing these types of local divisions and discrimination is a vital component of preventing VHE, through strengthened community harmony and cohesion.

When asked about social divisions in their villages, participants tended to respond by initially painting rosy pictures of peaceful existence, which facilitators said was due to *maratabat* (honour) and a disinclination to malign their community (InitaoDebrief). As such, participants were asked more specific questions around acceptance of ethnic, religious, sexual, and gender diversity. Additionally, noting the links between misogyny and violent extremism (Diaz & Valji, 2019), we asked about the incidence of gender-based violence and expectations on women and girls. After further careful discussion, participants generally moved beyond uncritical portrayals and opened up about deeper issues of discrimination and marginalisation.

Ethnic and religious acceptance

While participants initially described their communities as inclusive and peaceful ("There are no existing conflicts between various groups in our community, we are peaceful here" (Saguiaran1)), their later responses revealed underlying tensions and exclusions along religious and ethnic lines. They claimed acceptance of diversity, with remarks like "We are open and accepting of such people" (Marantao2) and "Tolerance…is one of the teachings of Islam" (Piagapo1). However, this acceptance is conditional, often requiring conversion to Islam ("We are trying to enlighten those who have different beliefs" (Saguiaran1)) or imposing restrictions on the public expressions of other faiths: "We cannot tolerate if there is a program about promoting religion that is too much like holding a cross sign and saint" (Marantao3).

Participants noted efforts by non-Muslims to respect Muslim traditions, such as avoiding pork at events and wearing hijabs in Marawi (Saguiaran3), but did not cite examples of similar reciprocation by Muslims toward non-Muslim customs, which are generally less overtly restrictive. This suggests a conditional tolerance that leans more towards assimilation rather than genuine multicultural coexistence. Moreover, while interfaith marriages between Muslim men and non-Muslim women were mentioned, marriages of Muslim women to non-

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Muslim men without conversion were prohibited, reflecting traditional understandings of Islamic law. Additionally, participants often highlighted the ethnic and religious homogeneity of their communities as a source of harmony (Piagapo1; Piagapo4), indicating a preference for a uniform community makeup.

While participants generally described themselves as tolerant and accepting, they also shared experiences of discrimination against the Maranao by non-Maranao, often portraying themselves as victims of negative stereotyping. This discrimination strengthens their internal bonds and unites them against a perceived common adversary. For example, a participant from Marantao recounted personal exclusion in Manila, saying, "my classmates don't want me to join in their group because they said I was a terrorist since I am a Muslim" (Marantao4). This sentiment was echoed with concerns that non-Muslims view all Muslims as terrorists (Marantao1; Piagapo4) and avoid interactions, such as making eye contact (Marantao1). Additionally, participants expressed more fear of the military than of extremist groups like ISIS, due to incidents where military personnel mistook them for terrorists, posing risks of harm or death (Saguiaran4).

Gender dynamics

Cultural norms heavily influence gender relations, with specific expectations placed on women and girls. For instance, while men are permitted more religious and marital freedoms, such as marrying non-Muslim women (Marantao2; Saguiaran2), women face stricter controls: "The boys are allowed to marry Christians, but the girls are not allowed to marry other religions" (Marantao3). This gender disparity is closely linked with the cultural concept of *maratabat*, which imposes severe consequences for deviations from these norms.

Discussions about gender highlighted limitations on women's autonomy, with many participants initially asserting that there is no gender-based violence in their communities and that women face no coercion regarding their conduct or attire—rather they are expected to instinctively act 'morally' and dress conservatively (Marantao2; Marantao3; Marantao4; Piagapo1; Saguiaran4). For example, one participant stated, "There is no pressure on women with regards to their clothing or behaviour because they know the teachings of Islam and the sort of dress that should be worn by the Muslims" (Marantao2). Similarly, another remarked, "We do not put pressure on our women here. They may do their thing as they wish, so long as

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it is not bad" (Marantao2H). These statements show a controlled view of 'autonomy' within the framework of cultural and religious norms.

However, when women's behaviour is deemed "bad", they are pressured to "dress and behave properly, in accordance with the teachings of Islam" (Marantao2Y). Brothers often enforce this, with one stating: "I wouldn't let them go out if they are not wearing their hijab and wearing the appropriate dress... I will push them to wear their hijab and dress appropriately because as their brother, it is my responsibility to protect them and teach them the right thing" (Marantao4). Some men admitted they would beat and scold their sisters for not wearing their hijab (Saguiaran4), while young women rationalised this pressure as being "for our own good…it is only to guide and protect" (Marantao2Y).

Blame for incidents of disrespect or abuse towards women typically falls on the women themselves, with assertions that "they should be the one who is blamed and not anyone but themselves" (Marantao3). This victim-blaming extends to rape, with a young woman acknowledging that inevitably "the victim is blamed" (InitaoTraining). Moreover, women who experienced abuse felt pressured to keep it "a secret because it brings shame to the family" (Saguiaran4). The overarching belief that "women here must submit herself to her husband" (male - InitaoTraining) reinforces a rigid gender hierarchy, where "no matter what, women will not be equal to men" (female - InitaoTraining). Despite claims of no gender-based violence in the village (Marantao2), these accounts suggest widespread denialism and disconnect from the reality of gender dynamics.

The discussions highlighted the normalisation of gender-based discrimination and violence, despite participants' assertions that women are treated well and not subjected to violence in their society. These assertions were often contradicted by strict, conservative expectations around women's dress and behaviour, along with descriptions of the consequences and pressures when norms are not met. These societal expectations, alongside the justification of violence against women under cultural and religious pretexts like honour killings, contribute to an environment where misogyny can exacerbate broader patterns of extremism. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as research by Diaz and Valji (2019) indicates that misogyny not only reflects but also perpetuates wider social and ideological conflicts, underscoring its significance in the roots of VHE.

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Acceptance of gender and sexual diversity

To investigate claims of tolerance, particularly because Islamist extremism often targets LGBTQIA+ individuals harshly, a couple of questions on gender and sexual diversity were included in the FGDs (see also Kelly et al., 2024). Responses depict conditional acceptance shaded by religious beliefs. For instance, a participant in FGD Saguiaran3 stated, "We must promote respect and tolerance among all people, regardless of their status and background", but immediately added, "In Islam, LGBTQIA+ is not accepted". Similarly, FGD Piagapo1 a participant emphasised that, "fostering an environment of inclusivity and advocating for a culture of acceptance remains a constant priority" and then said, "Islam prohibits LGBTQIA+ [but] we can tolerate them as long as they do not cross the line." Disconnects like these were common, where notions of 'tolerance' and 'acceptance' did not extend to certain groups. Tolerance for people of different ethnic groups was one thing; accepting a transgender or gay person was quite another, especially if they 'crossed the line' with overt displays by doing things like wearing make-up or cross-dressing (and/or being known to be in a same sex relationship) (Piagapo1; Saguiaran2).

Participants consistently reiterated, "homosexuality is *haram* [prohibited] in Islam" (Saguiaran2) and expressed that while LGBTQIA+ individuals "deserve to be happy and have their right and freedom of choice" (Saguiaran1), "God's blessings can be withheld from a household because of the presence of homosexual and transgender individuals" (Saguiaran3). They encouraged LGBTQIA+ individuals to "avoid being gay" and warned against expressing their identities, or they "will be reprimanded" (Saguiaran1). One older participant even mentioned, "the solution for that is that we as the traditional leaders and the *barangay* chairman will warn the person to stop being a gay" (Marantao2H). These responses highlight a deep tension between modern inclusivity ideals and traditional religious and cultural beliefs, reflecting a community grappling with internal contradictions regarding inclusion and exclusion.

Rido and maratabat

Clan conflicts, often based in land and political disputes, are prominent sources of division. Although local leaders frequently intervene, unresolved issues can escalate into *rido* or blood feuds, fuelling ongoing cycles of violence. Participants described stark choices in

resolving these disputes: "they resolve the issue within their family, or they just kill each other" (Marantao3). This normalisation of violence is illustrated through multiple accounts of extreme actions, such as frequent killings and beheadings. Notably, adultery can lead to fatal consequences (Marantao3). Moreover, the ingrained social mores dictate a cycle of revenge, as one participant noted, "if you kill someone, the relative of the deceased will always take revenge" (Saguiaran2). This highlights the entrenched nature of retaliatory violence within the community.

Some of this violence is *rido*, while intra-family disputes often arise from *maratabat*. Participants highlighted the power of *maratabat* and commented that it is a key driver of violence in BARMM: "They [Maranao] have a lot of ego. It's not visible, but people in our society have extreme pride like you would not believe. It is men who take the action in this, but women feel the same but are less likely to act" (InitaoTraining). *Maratabat* and adherence to local expectations weighs heavily and shapes participants' actions and perceptions. A female participant outlined: "I abide to the rules of my culture and religion. If there is something that would make my clan or family angry, I will not do it or believe it. If something is not ok for our family, like involving myself with a Christian man, I will not tolerate it" (InitaoTraining). Other women in this FGD agreed that they would endorse punishment if deemed necessary by their cultural standards.

This analysis shows that while there is a surface-level portrayal of peace and acceptance, deeper probing shows differentiation in how other groups are integrated and accepted. Understanding these subtleties is essential for developing effective P/CVE strategies that address the underlying causes of VHE, including entrenched discrimination and social inequalities.

Understandings of violent extremism

Having established a clearer understanding of the FGD context, participants' understandings of violent extremism can now be presented and interpreted within their situational frame. The discussions about violent extremism elicited a variety of responses from participants about what they understand violent extremism to be, reflecting their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and local conflicts. These definitions ranged from general descriptions of violence to specific references to terrorist groups and broader

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geopolitical conflicts. Conversations centred on the Marawi siege and the dynamics and narratives surrounding that catastrophe, including minimal reference to transnational links with the Islamic State/ISIS movement.

Many discussions, especially in youth FGDs, showed confusion about what violent extremism actually entails. This was evident in a notetaker's comments about the difficulty participants had in understanding the term 'extremism': "The interviewer repeatedly discussed this question to the participants. She even used different terms to describe extremism but they seem not get it" (Notetaker, Marantao2). Participants associated violent extremist actions with the term *maitum* or 'black': "When we hear 'extremism' we think of them as the Black" (Piagapo3). This label stems from the black Islamic State flag used during the Marawi siege, with participants describing these extremists as "dark forces" who "carry guns, wear masks with long hair, and wear black, and you can see from their physical features that they are bad" (Saguiaran3). "They are a scary group of people," remarked a participant in Piagapo3. Now, "black" has become a local synonym for anything associated with Islamic State, and thus violent extremism.

Participants described black groups as violators of the Prophet's teachings, engaging in acts that cause death and destruction, and being synonymous with criminals and terrorists (Marantao4; Saguiaran1; Saguiaran4). In Saguiaran2, these extremists were called "evil-minded people" who coerce others into harmful actions against civilians. Across the FGDs, terms like cruelty, trouble, harm, chaos, menace, power, aggression, force, and danger were commonly used to describe extremism. One participant noted, "Extremism is characterised by an overwhelming belief" (Piagapo2). Participants also mentioned how fear of extremist elements has become normalised and internalised in their society: "The only thing we hear and can think about is the black group. It's normal for us to blame them for what happened in Marawi City" (Marantao3).

Many responses reflected an intertwining of violent extremism with local cultural practices, such as *rido*. Participants noted that violent extremism could perpetuate or arise from these clan disputes, and that these conflicts can pass through generations, blurring the lines between clan conflict and extremist violence (Marantao3). This indicates a cyclical view of violence based in familial and cultural honour.

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Participants frequently linked violent extremism to direct actions like bombings, shootings, and recruitment by armed groups. They noted that extremists attempting to leave black groups face lethal consequences from remaining members, highlighting the groups' coercive nature. These observations connect extremism more with tangible acts of violence than with ideological beliefs. As one participant put it, "Extremism and trouble are the same. War using guns is also extremism" (Marantao3). Even discussions about ideology underlined its coercive dissemination, with recruits having little choice in their involvement. One participant described this dynamic: "Extremism becomes violent extremism when it harms not just individuals but the entire village. One example is the black group who roam around the village trying to promote their beliefs and aspirations about *jihad* in Islam. It became violent extremism because they force young men to believe what they believe in and encourage these young men to join their group and if not, something bad will happen to one of their family members" (Piagapo1). This perspective closely associates violent extremism with coercion, physical aggression, and disruption of community peace.

Discussions about extremism highlighted gender and social dynamics within the community, especially regarding the roles and expectations of women and men in conflict scenarios. Comments that referred to extremists invariably used male pronouns, associating black group members primarily with men, except when specifically recalling instances of female recruitment. For example, "they wear a bandana, they're men, and you can see from their faces that they are violent" (InitaoDebrief). Another participant commented that extremist groups are "full of men with guns" (InitaoTraining). It was also mentioned that black groups aim to dominate women and even "put an end…to those girls who do not wear hijab" (InitaoTraining).

Participants' definitions of violent extremism showed a broad, yet vague understanding that emphasises physical violence, differing notably from findings in other regions of Asia and Africa where elements of hateful extremism were often raised as a significant focus (Barton et al., 2019; Sonrexa et al., 2023; Ware et al., 2023a). Additionally, the inclusion of clan feuding as a form of—or a key contributor interlinked with—violent extremism highlights a unique local expression of conflict. Recognising these nuances is vital for developing targeted, culturally sensitive interventions in P/CVE that effectively address the specific dynamics of violence within communities.

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Conditions that cultivate violent and hateful extremism

Much has been written around the dynamics of radicalisation and the evidentiary basis for what drives and enables radicalisation and recruitment (Orsini, 2023; Vergani et al., 2020). This study of Maranao FGD participants in Lanao Del Sur focuses on *perceptions* of the factors that contribute to radicalisation into extremism. These perceptions do not, of course, completely and comprehensively align with all of the factors that other studies have identified as being involved in radicalisation and recruitment. Nevertheless, they do provide valuable insights into how members of the local community understand vulnerabilities and drivers and, therefore, what issues that they feel need to be addressed in preventing and countering violent extremism.

A dominant FGD theme reinforced the impact of socio-economic conditions as contributing to the vulnerabilities of individuals towards radicalising into extremism. Participants frequently identified poverty being commonly exploited by extremist groups offering financial incentives for recruitment. For instance, one participant pointed out vulnerabilities due to "poverty and innocence, especially in youth" (Marantao4) that extremists exploit. Another noted that financially desperate individuals are often targeted with offers of money (Marantao2), identifying economic struggles as a gateway to radicalisation. Although poverty is widely recognised as representing a major risk factor in itself because of vulnerability to inducements, poverty needs also to be understood as a symptom of inequality, exclusion, and exploitation (Kessels & Nemr, 2016). Despite recent improvements, the poverty rate in BARMM (defined by the the Philippine Statistics Authority as the minimum income needed to meet basic food and non-food requirements) remains high at 34.8%, about double the national average (PSA, 2023).

Cultural norms and family dynamics also influence susceptibility to violent extremism. *Rido* and *maratabat* can escalate conflicts and create environments conducive to extremism. Further, family influences, particularly domestic instability, can make youth more vulnerable to recruitment (Ragandang 2024). Participants mentioned that family disputes could lead youth to involvement in extremist activities (Marantao3), indicating that domestic turmoil can push individuals towards extremism. This perception accords with the findings of

recent scholarship on the importance of social factors in driving and enabling radicalisation (Altier, 2021; Milla et al., 2024; Orsini, 2023).

Poor education and pervasive misinformation were raised as other factors contributing to recruitment. Participants expressed concerns about the spread of extremist ideologies through misinformation and the lack of robust educational frameworks to counteract these narratives—both religious and secular. This is evident in discussions about the misunderstanding of religious texts and the role of local religious leaders in potentially fostering radical views. Issues with "misinformation among individuals in our community" (Saguiaran1) highlights the need for more informed and context-specific educational interventions. Extremists often exploit religious beliefs, distorting religious tenets to justify violence and attract members, particularly targeting youth and those with limited religious knowledge. The comment that extremists "preach to convince people to join the group" (Piagapo3), illustrates how religious rhetoric is weaponised to recruit and radicalise.

The role of community and peer networks in facilitating recruitment was noted, with particular attention to how social bonds and community status can sway individual decisions. Vulnerability to recruitment is perceived as being higher among those lacking strong community ties or feeling marginalised, with one participant observing, "It's easy to recruit idle or out-of-school youth who have nothing to do" (Saguiaran3). This insight accords with research that has shown that psychological factors such as stress, trauma, and the need for belonging create conditions conducive to radicalisation (De Coensel 2018; Vergani et al., 2020). Participants highlighted how personal crises and mental health issues could predispose individuals to extremist ideologies, offering a sense of purpose or escape, noting that "they can be recruited if they feel disregarded" (Saguiaran3). Recognising recruiters' exploitation of emotional vulnerabilities, a participant said, "If a person is feeling depressed or anxious…it is easy to persuade them because they're feeling bad" (InitaoTraining).

The FGDs offer a grassroots analysis by locals on perceptions of what drives or facilitates VHE, including economic deprivation, cultural factors, clan violence, misinformation, ideological manipulation, community dynamics, and psychological vulnerabilities. Addressing these multifaceted issues demands holistic approaches that consider the realities of individuals' lives and their broader socio-economic and cultural

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contexts. Who better to inform these solutions than community members with firsthand experience of these complexities?

Community-led solutions

When discussing how to address extremism and its drivers, participants in the FGDs proposed community-centred solutions emphasising economic stability, education, cultural understanding, and robust community engagement. Participants noted the importance of creating job opportunities and supporting local businesses to alleviate economic hardships that may lead to extremist recruitment. “To prevent any violent extremism from happening, we just need work, [we need] business” (Marantao3), one participant stated.

Participants strongly advocated for enhanced educational efforts, recommending the integration of peaceful ideologies into school/madrasah curriculums and community forums to counter extremist views and clarify religious teachings (Marantao2). They stressed the importance of religious leaders actively correcting misconceptions and promoting peace. The role of family in education was emphasised, with suggestions for parents to oversee their children’s activities, cultivate personal responsibility, and instil critical thinking skills. Strengthening community bonds through sports and cultural events was suggested to enhance unity and resilience against extremism, while cultural and interfaith engagements were seen as vital for building mutual respect and understanding among diverse community groups.

Despite enthusiasm for these initiatives, participants noted a lack of venues and expertise in event management. They recognised the potential of local leaders, including *barangay* leaders and religious figures, to facilitate these community-driven solutions. Overall, participants expressed eagerness to implement comprehensive strategies against VHE, aiming to address immediate threats and promote long-term community resilience through education, economic support, and enhanced social cohesion.

Discussion

A distinctive outcome of the FGDs was the local conceptualisation of extremist forces as *maitum* or ‘black’ groups. Participants identified these extremists as distinct entities with specific violent behaviours and appearances, such as wearing black and carrying weapons.

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This local terminology reflects a deep understanding of the impact of extremism on community life, emphasising physical traits and direct actions rather than the more abstract definitions common in global counter-extremism dialogues. This framing challenges definitions of extremism that emphasise ideological motivations over the more visceral, tangible forms of identification observed here. However, the merging of local conflicts and cultural narratives with extremism, noted throughout the FGDs, aligns with findings from other conflict-affected areas (Borum, 2011; Orsini, 2023). The overlaps between culture, conflict, and extremism supports P/CVE strategies that adapt to local perceptions and terminologies to ensure cultural consonance and effectiveness.

Research has emphasised the role of personal and social factors in extremist recruitment (De Coensel, 2018; Milla et al., 2024; Vergani et al., 2020). Where it was previously popular to assert that poverty was a key driver of radicalisation into extremism, current thinking is much more nuanced. In global terms there is not a strong correlation between levels of poverty and levels of extremism. But this does not mean that economic hardship cannot contribute to vulnerability to recruitment. This was very much the perception members of the FGD in Lanao del Sur. And whilst poverty *per se* might not be a ‘root cause’ of extremism, many studies have identified socio-economic challenges, such as poverty and unemployment, in combination with other factors, as being significant contributors to vulnerability (Abuza, 2019; Krueger, 2008; Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2021; Weisburd et al., 2022). This does not mean, however, that it is only the poor who are vulnerable to being recruited into violent extremism. Notable cases such as the Maute brothers—who were well-educated and from a relatively affluent family yet played a leading role in the Islamic State-inspired Marawi siege—suggest that economic status alone does not predict extremist affiliation. Poverty is frequently a symptom of broader issues like inequality, exclusion, and exploitation (De Coensel, 2018; Kessels & Nemr, 2016), indicating these might be the more important factors being exploited by extremists in their recruitment strategies. Because of this, there are good reasons for supporting economic interventions in reducing vulnerability to extremism by improving livelihoods and providing stable economic opportunities (Altier, 2021; Weisburd et al., 2022).

The importance ascribed by participants to culturally embedded factors that facilitate or promote violence, such as *rido* and *maratabat*, is notable. These factors are frequently cited

as shaping local social dynamics and perceptions of justice, potentially exacerbating conflicts or being exploited by extremists. Their role in perpetuating violence stresses the need for culturally sensitive approaches that respect local traditions while promoting non-violent norms when developing comprehensive community-level development programming. For example, *maratabat* can constructively support peace when locals use it to reinforce that any harm done to the community must be settled in the spirit of collective honour.

The focus on education and awareness to counter extremist narratives aligns with broader academic calls for educational reforms to build resilience against extremism (Horgan, 2009). Emphasising the correction of misinformation, especially distorted Islamic teachings, highlights the importance of targeted educational programs and curriculum development in schools, *madrasahs*/*madaris*, and the wider community. Addressing disillusionment among the youth, particularly in the transitional phase of BARMM where unmet expectations can lead to frustration, is crucial. Idealistic youth have the energy and enthusiasm to become active agents of either violence or peace (Ware et al., 2022).

Reflecting on community-driven solutions proposed by participants, there is a compelling case for integrating education, economic development, and cultural engagement in P/CVE strategies. The FGDs demonstrated the complexity of addressing VHE in BARMM and identified the need for multifaceted, culturally informed strategies that incorporate local definitions, socio-economic interventions, educational reforms, and community engagement (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022).

Notably, participants seldom mentioned the role of local governments in P/CVE efforts. This lack of visibility is concerning, given that *barangay*-level governments are supposed to gather local knowledge on extremist threats, provide early warnings, and develop context-specific solutions. Their absence in the FGDs raises questions about their effectiveness or the community's awareness of their efforts.

Conclusion and implications

The findings from 41 FGDs held across 12 *barangays* in three BARMM municipalities presented in this article offer useful insights and implications for policy and practice, particularly for NGOs involved in community resilience and programming for P/CVE. The

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use of local terms like *maitum* or 'black' to describe violent extremists shows the importance of carefully incorporating local language and perceptions in P/CVE initiatives. Local insights facilitate the development of targeted communications that resonate with communities lived experiences and fears, making prevention messaging more credible and counter-narratives more effective. The research also identified that cultural dynamics such as *maratabat* and *rido* can perpetuate violence (Custodio, 2019), highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in peacebuilding (Paffenholz, 2014). For P/CVE actors, this means integrating conflict resolution and cultural competency into program design so that extremist actors cannot readily exploit these dynamics for recruitment or mobilisation. It is crucial to develop and support peacebuilding initiatives that address antisocial practices and other forms of violence based on *rido* and misogyny, including training for local mediators and leaders in conflict resolution techniques that respect local traditions while empowering women, young people, and other marginalised groups.

Respondents repeatedly pointed to persistent socio-economic challenges as providing openings for extremism, giving opportunity spaces for extremist groups to recruit (Abuza, 2019). From a P/CVE standpoint, livelihood programs can serve as both resilience-building and disruption tools that can reduce vulnerability to recruitment while creating constructive pathways for social belonging and purpose. The findings imply that running economic programs offering vocational training and entrepreneurship opportunities, particularly targeting youth and marginalised groups, have the potential to reduce the economic vulnerability factors that can facilitate extremist recruitment.

Additionally, the spread of misinformation and the lack of robust educational frameworks contribute to the persistence of extremist ideologies, highlighting the need for educational programs that encourage critical thinking and information literacy and promote peaceful cultural and religious narratives. These should include concrete and practical peace education curricula that counteract extremist narratives and promote tolerance and understanding across diverse community segments. Over time, inclusion of 'diversity' can extend beyond ethnic and religious diversity to incorporate showing greater acceptance and compassion for members of other marginalised groups including disabled, indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ people. Integrating these messages into school curricula, madrasah teaching, and

local media is a clear primary-level P/CVE measure to pre-emptively undercut extremist propaganda.

Despite prevalent fears, a robust sense of community pride, cohesion and resilience is evident across the three municipalities. Participants emphasised the importance of empowering local communities through leadership training and community-driven initiatives, which enhance their capacities to resist and counter extremism. As well as economic, educational, and other programs that can be run with communities, there can be benefit in establishing community watch groups that can act as early warning systems for extremist activities. These groups should be trained in non-violent communication and mediation to ensure they contribute positively to community safety without exacerbating conflicts. When linked into local governance and NGO networks, such groups can form a preventative frontline of P/CVE, identifying and addressing risks before they escalate (Kelly et al., 2023). Additionally, the findings suggest a disconnect between the expected and perceived effectiveness of local government units, highlighting the need to strengthen local governance to effectively support community-driven P/CVE efforts (Paffenholz, 2014; Ragandang, 2021; Weisburd et al., 2022).

NGOs have the potential to facilitate and support many of the suggestions mentioned throughout this article, as the work and mandate of development and humanitarian organisations aligns well with efforts to prevent VHE (Altier, 2021; Barton et al., 2019; Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022). For organisations acting in this space, it is vital that they analyse the conflict and violent and hateful dynamics occurring in local programming spheres to ensure P/CVE initiatives do not unintentionally exacerbate antisocial dynamics and to ensure that P/CVE initiatives capitalise on opportunities to maximise peace and tolerance. Monitoring and evaluation should be prioritised to ensure programs remain relevant and effective, again, using this as an opportunity to assess extremist dynamics and their impact. Monitoring and evaluation should include regular feedback from community members to continuously improve and adapt programs to changing local dynamics, as well as ensuring that data collection and analysis pays attention to the experience of marginalised groups (Kelly & Rogers, 2022). Programs strengthening peace education, both in schools and *madrasahs/madaris*, supporting livelihoods, enhancing local alternative conflict resolution mechanism for *rido* and other conflicts, and developing spaces and expertise for community-

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building sports and cultural events, are all strongly indicated. Framing these as deliberate primary-level P/CVE interventions ensures they are not only promoting peace, but actively reducing the conditions conducive to extremist mobilisation.

NGOs can also offer a useful platform to link community members vertically with governance structures, which they can use for policy advocacy. Policy advocacy can help ensure that causes of extremism, such as historical and current grievances (which often translate into poverty and educational disparities) are addressed systematically. Finally, strengthening collaboration with traditional leaders, religious authorities, local governments, international agencies, and NGOs enables pooled resources and shared knowledge, ensuring a coordinated approach to the multifaceted challenges of extremism.

Practical and policy implications drawn from this research advocate for a holistic approach to preventing VHE—one that integrates economic development, educational reform, and cultural respect. Such strategies should aim to reduce the opportunity spaces and enabling conditions for extremism through sustainable policies that address the causes of poverty and disenfranchisement, while also enhancing the educational infrastructure to equip individuals with the knowledge to resist extremist overtures. This would require a concerted effort from all stakeholders—government bodies, local communities, and NGOs—to forge effective, culturally consonant strategies that address the symptoms and causes of extremism. The responses from the FGDs indicated that the will to work for peace is strong. Using inclusive community-driven approaches that mobilise local people to collaborate for a peaceful future can transform fear and vulnerability into strength and cohesion. This research contributes to better understanding of these dynamics in BARMM, offering guidance for P/CVE interventions informed by the lived experiences and insights of those most affected by extremism.

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