

# Religious Institutions as a Community Development Resource: A Case Study of the Role of Religious Institutions in Tri-People Community Peacebuilding in Upi, Maguindanao del Norte

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## ABSTRACT

*Religion, especially indigenous faith systems, remains understudied and often sidelined in community development due to its perceived divisiveness. Yet in Upi, Maguindanao del Norte, religious institutions have become key actors in sustaining peace. This study examines how Upi's tri-people religious institutions (Teduray, Christian, and Muslim) shape community-based peacebuilding and contribute to a shared vision of development. Using qualitative methods, including key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the research documents 40 faith-led initiatives across eight peacebuilding categories. Findings show that religious institutions build both bonding and bridging social capital, and are capable of enhancing the effectiveness of community development strategies and methodologies. The study also identifies prerequisite key elements that would make religious institutions effective peacebuilding resources in a tri-people context. The research also yielded the UPI (Upi's Peacebuilding Initiative) framework—a context-sensitive model for leveraging religious institutions in peacebuilding. Finally, it shows that religious institutions can be a resource in community development, especially in community peacebuilding.*

*Keywords: Community development, community peacebuilding, religion and development, religion and peacebuilding, tri-people, religious institutions, indigenous faith, inclusive development*

## **Introduction**

For many years, the connection between religion and development received little attention in academia and development journals (Jones & Petersen, 2011; Lunn, 2009; Rakodi, 2012; Ver Beek, 2000). As a case in point, out of the 415 theses and dissertations of the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD) from its establishment as an institute in 1967 up until June 2021, there are only three (0.7%) that discuss faith, five (1%) on spirituality, and none on religion.

While interest grew in the late 20th century, studies remain limited, especially regarding indigenous faith systems. Indigenous peoples' beliefs are viewed as non-scientific. "Development experts," whom Denis Goulet (1980) described as "one-eyed giants," perceive non-scientific ways of rationality to be retrograde.

Another factor behind this scholarly underrepresentation is the prevailing notion that religion fuels violent conflict and should therefore be avoided in development discourse. However, religion is interwoven in the lives of people. Therefore, not talking about religion in the field of community development would waste the potential resource that community development practitioners, scholars, and policymakers can utilize to understand, organize, and mobilize communities to act towards positive change.

These expose the existing gap, which is the limited literature on the connection between religion and development, and the minimal exploration of how religion can be maximized as a resource in community development.

Acknowledging this gap becomes more important when viewed in the context of the Philippines. Maguindanao, located in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, was recently divided into Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte—both under the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). From 2011 to 2022, it recorded the highest violent conflict incidents and fatalities among BARMM's five provinces (Lara, Jr. & de la Rosa, 2022). Among these was the Maguindanao Massacre, or Ampatuan Massacre, where 58 victims were

found in mass graves.

Yet, within this conflict-ridden province, the municipality of Upi stands as a peaceful oasis. A tri-people community composed of Teduray indigenous faith believers, Christians, and Muslims, Upi has flourished despite religious diversity. It has achieved first-class municipality status and garnered national and international recognition for good governance and innovation.

This study, which the researcher conducted from 2018 to 2024, seeks to address these gaps by examining how religious institutions have shaped Upi's community peacebuilding efforts and the outcomes that followed. It identifies lessons, insights, and implications relevant to the theory and practice of community-based peacebuilding as an area of concern in community development, and contributes to the still limited body of work in the emerging field of religion and peacebuilding.

### **Multi-Causal Violent Conflict**

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of human interactions, but it is not inherently negative. According to the book published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), "conflicts can be waged violently, as in a war, or nonviolently, as in an election or an adversarial legal process. When channeled constructively into processes of resolution, conflict can be beneficial" (Snodderly, 2011, p. 14). Conflict turns into violent conflict when opposing parties use violence to achieve their goal (Deutsch, 1973; Gurr, 1970).

Violent conflicts are classified into horizontal and vertical types. Horizontal conflicts occur between groups of similar standing, such as rival families, ethnic groups, and political factions. Vertical conflicts involve power struggles between hierarchical groups, such as armed insurgencies or terrorist actions against the state. Understanding these distinctions is essential in addressing conflicts effectively.

The causes of violent conflict are multi-dimensional and interconnected. International Alert (2018) categorizes them into seven themes:

- **Shadow economy issues:** illegal trade and crimes (e.g., illegal drug and illicit firearm trades, and kidnap-for-ransom).
- **Common crimes:** criminal offenses that are typically considered frequent or usual (e.g., robbery and damage to properties).
- **Identity issues:** arises from differences in social, cultural, religious or political identity between individuals or groups (e.g., ethnic and religious disputes).
- **Political issues:** conflicts that arise from differences in political beliefs, ideologies, or interests between individuals or groups (e.g., rebellions and election-related violence).
- **Governance issues:** violent struggles for government resources and rents, including conflicts due to bidding processes, violent responses to lawful actions and processes, and other government-related transactions and/or development projects.
- **Resource issues:** disputes over land, water, and natural resources
- **Undetermined causes:** most common manifestations of these violent conflicts of which the causes are left unknown are shooting, murder, and clash/encounter.

These factors often overlap, intensifying conflicts. When multiple causes contribute to a single conflict, it is classified as **multi-causal violence** (International Alert, 2018). For example, ethnic and religious differences may intensify disputes over land and water, leading to violent clashes. In the Philippines, nearly half of all conflict-related deaths in 2016 and more than half from 2017 to 2020 were attributed to multi-causal violence (Lara, Jr. & de la Rosa, 2022).

Given its complexity, addressing multi-causal violence requires a holistic and context-sensitive approach. Peacebuilding efforts must consider the interplay of various conflict drivers and tailor strategies accordingly. Properly identifying the type and root causes of violent conflict is crucial in designing effective and sustainable peacebuilding interventions.

### **Addressing Multi-Causal Violent Conflict Through Peacebuilding**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 aims for significant progress in global peace by 2030, yet data show increasing violence worldwide (Peace Direct & Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019;

United Nations, 2022). In 2016 alone, violent conflicts reached a 30-year high, with over 560,000 deaths due to violence and terrorism (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). The economic impact of violence totaled USD 14.96 trillion in 2020, with most costs linked to military and security spending (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021). Beyond economic costs, conflicts disrupt social cohesion and community trust, leading to long-term psychological trauma and social instability (Adams, 2017).

While military power can repel a military danger, it cannot solve or maintain peace if there are deep underlying political, social, economic, or governance issues (Dumasy, 2015). Peace can only be achieved by changing people's relationships, which entails understanding the root causes of the conflict and addressing them (Lederach, 1997).

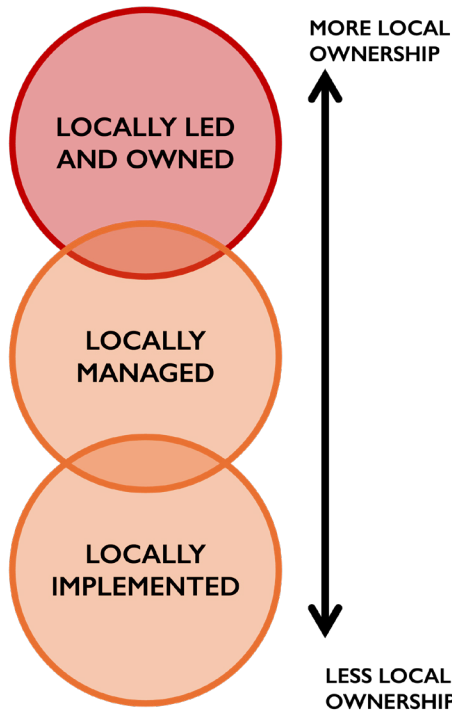
Peacebuilding addresses the root causes of conflict by transforming relationships and structures that perpetuate violence. According to Lederach (1997), peacebuilding is defined as one that "encompasses, generates and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships." The ultimate goal of peacebuilding is to confront and transform the relational, structural, cultural/ideological, and perpetual conditions that create or perpetuate violence and to create sustainable peace (Coronel-Ferrer, 2005). It includes measures to prevent conflicts from recurring by strengthening national capacities for conflict management (United Nations, 2010). Recognizing its importance, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2282 in 2016, urging member states to support peacebuilding efforts (UN Security Council, 2016).

### **Local Peacebuilding**

Local peacebuilding refers to "peacebuilding initiatives owned and led by people in their own context" (Peace Direct & Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019, p. 3). This local peacebuilding is also called by other scholars as community-based peacebuilding or community-based approaches for peacebuilding (Akande et al., 2021). It encompasses both small-scale grassroots initiatives and larger-scale operations.

Peace Direct and Alliance for Peacebuilding (2019) further

differentiates peacebuilding efforts as **locally implemented** (externally designed and executed by locals), **locally managed** (external strategies transferred to local control), and **locally led and owned** (local individuals and groups develop the strategy and determine priorities while outsiders provide or assist with resources). These approaches aim to improve international interventions while ensuring legitimacy and local participation in peace efforts.



**Figure 1.** *Types of Peacebuilding Efforts*

*Note.* Adapted from Peace Direct & Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019.

The emphasis of local actors in peacebuilding is essential, as they offer valuable insights into conflict resolution beyond state-level interventions. Their involvement fosters trust between international organizations and local communities, enhancing rehabilitation efforts.

A successful example of local peacebuilding is the Citizens Theatre movement in South Sudan, initiated by the South Sudan Theatre Organization (SSTO) (Christian Aid, 2018). This community-led forum

promotes dialogue and problem-solving on social, cultural, and political issues. It has trained hundreds of young facilitators, strengthened inter-ethnic networks, improved mental health, and even influenced the national education curriculum by integrating drama as a tool for peace.

## **Religion as a Resource in Peacebuilding**

### *Avoidance of Religion*

Religion is often avoided in academic studies due to its association with conflict, perceived irrelevance in secular societies, and the belief that it should remain a private matter (Jones & Petersen, 2011; Peace Building Initiative, 2008). Historical events like the Crusades and modern extremist attacks reinforce its controversial nature. Additionally, religion is often viewed as outdated or separate from tangible development efforts, making it difficult to integrate into mainstream academic and policy discussions (Tamas, 1999).

### *From Avoidance to an Increase in Interest*

Interest in religion and development grew in the late 20th century, gaining traction among policymakers, professionals, and academics (Ager & Ager, 2016; Jones & Petersen, 2011). The role of religion in peacebuilding gained prominence after the 9/11 attack in the United States, prompting research on religious extremism and faith-based peace initiatives (Alger, 2002; Omer et al., 2019). Appleby (2000) explored religion's dual role in fostering both violence and peace, while Johnston (n.d.) identified conditions where faith-based interventions mediate conflicts effectively. Appleby (University of California Television [UCTV], 2014) later argued that religion and peacebuilding could be considered a distinct academic field, a view further supported by the Oxford University Press's 2015 publication of the first handbook on *Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*.

### *Religion as Social Capital*

Putnam's Social Capital Theory (1995) asserts that social networks hold value with religious social capital, fostering connections, trust, and reciprocity (Maselko et al., 2011; Putnam, 1995). It includes **bonding** (within religious communities), **bridging** (between different

religious groups), and **linking** (connections with higher authorities or organizations) social capital (Maselko et al., 2011; Woolcock, 2001). Smidt (2003) highlights the durability of religious social capital, emphasizing how faith-driven commitment fosters volunteerism, charitable giving, and civic engagement, particularly among resource-poor citizens. Religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples serve as social hubs, strengthening community trust and cooperation (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

### *Religious Institutions Engaging in Faith-Based Peacebuilding*

Bouta et al. (2005) examined the role of 27 Christians, Muslims, and multi-faith organizations in peacebuilding, identifying six key activities:

- **Advocacy:** promoting social justice, empowers marginalized groups, and challenges unjust structures;
- **Mediation:** facilitating communication between conflicting parties to foster peaceful resolutions;
- **Observation:** monitoring conflicts to prevent violence and human rights violation;
- **Education:** raising awareness of systemic inequalities and equipping communities with peacebuilding skills;
- **Transitional Justice:** holding perpetrators accountable for war crimes and human rights abuses to support post-conflict recovery;
- **Intrafaith and Interfaith Dialogue:** fostering understanding within and between religious groups to mitigate tensions and contribute to peace processes.

They found that faith-based organizations play a critical role in transforming attitudes, challenging stereotypes, and promoting reconciliation (Bouta et al., 2005). Their influence extends to shaping policies, advocating interfaith dialogue, and mobilizing communities towards democracy, human rights, and social justice. Raj (2017) further highlights the impact of spirituality in strengthening community resilience, citing how faith-driven initiatives in Bato, Camarines Sur, enabled fisherfolk to organize disaster preparedness and recovery efforts.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for this research can be summarized by the diagram in Figure 2.

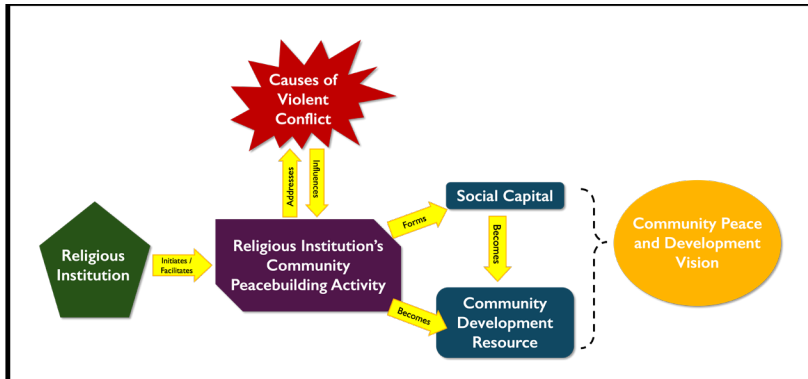


Figure 2. *Religious Institutions as a Community Development Resource in Peacebuilding Diagram*

This research posits that religious institutions can initiate, facilitate, and/or influence community peacebuilding that yields results such as social capital, which becomes a community development resource. The community peacebuilding activities themselves become community development resources. The community peacebuilding and social capital of religious institutions contribute to the formation or attainment of a community peace and development vision.

### *Religious Institutions*

Religion refers to (a) a religious or spiritual belief of preference, regardless of whether or not this belief is represented by an organized group or (b) affiliation with an organized group having specific religious or spiritual tenets. For this research, the Teduray faith shall be referred to as a religion.

Taking off from this, religious institutions refer to organizations created to serve as a formal structure for the practice of religious beliefs, rituals, and traditions within a community. The religious institutions in Upi can be clustered into three: the Lumad, Christians, and Muslims.

## ***Religious Institutions' Community Peacebuilding Activities***

This research assumed that there are religious institutions in Upi that initiate, facilitate, and/or influence community peacebuilding. These peacebuilding activities were categorized into the **nine types of peacebuilding activities** according to the merged concepts of Anasarias (2008), Bouta et al. (2005), and Manalo (2013):

1. Community Organizing
2. Community-Based Resource Management
3. Education
4. Advocacy
5. Intermediary/Mediation
6. Observing
7. Transitional Justice
8. Intrafaith and Interfaith Dialogue
9. Reconciliation and Healing

## ***Causes of Violent Conflict***

The framework has an arrow pointing to the causes of violent conflict. This means that community peacebuilding is assumed to address causes of violent conflicts. The classification of these causes that are aimed to be addressed will be based on the ones identified by International Alert (2018). The seventh category, "undetermined," will not be used, as it is unclear how undetermined causes can be addressed.

- Shadow Economy Issues
- Common Crimes
- Identity Issues
- Political
- Governance Issues
- Resource Issues

Community peacebuilding activities were analyzed if they have formed social capital, and if so, whether it is bonding or bridging social capital.

## Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing document analysis, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) to examine the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding (Figure 3).

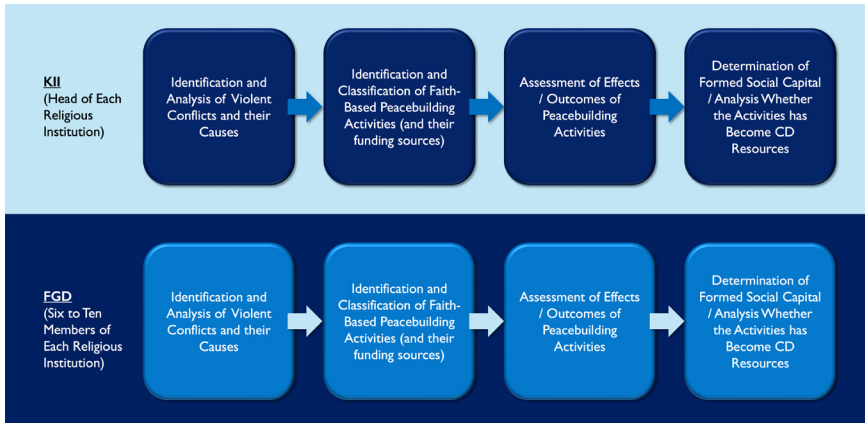


Figure 3. Research Diagram

The researcher first made an initial inventory of religious institutions present in Upi by conducting local consultations and reviewing data from the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Upi and the Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA).

To select the participants for the KIIs and FGDs, the institutions were first screened based on the level of involvement in peacebuilding activities within the community and their population size. Religious institutions with significant peacebuilding roles were prioritized, including Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Tedurays, Muslims, Nuro Alliance Evangelical Church, and Seventh-day Adventists. The Iglesia ni Cristo was included due to its population size. Details on the population size are found in Figure 8.

From the aforementioned institutions, key informants were identified, particularly leaders or administrators knowledgeable about their institution’s peacebuilding initiatives. At least one leader per institution was interviewed, with some institutions providing multiple

respondents based on availability. Two leaders from the Iglesia ni Cristo were interviewed during the 2018 KII, but no representative was available for the 2024 KII (where the research tool for this study was applied) despite several attempts to secure one. There was no representative as well from the Seventh-day Adventist.

Similarly, participants for the FGDs were purposively selected. FGDs covered the central team (leaders) engaged in the peacebuilding activities (with the exception of the respondents to the KII). Due to limitations in time and resources, the researcher conducted an FGD only with the Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and Tedurays while not compromising the quality of the research. Gender dynamics in the Muslim faith were considered, hence, a separate FGD was conducted with males and females. The sixth FGD was done with a mixed group from a barangay—Barangay Rempes—that has almost a balanced number of tri-people. The said barangay was identified through multiple recommendations, including that of the municipal mayor. All groups were encouraged to maintain a balance of sexes (except for the Muslim FGDs) and to include at least one person with a disability (PWD), an LGBTQIA+ member (also except for the Muslims), and a senior citizen. However, no LGBTQIA+ individuals or PWDs participated.

A total of 55 participants contributed, representing diverse backgrounds, including religious leaders, elected officials, government employees, teachers, media personnel, farmers, and housewives. The age range varied, and 58% were male, while 42% were female. This broad representation enriched the study by providing a nuanced understanding of peacebuilding across different faith communities in Upi. Table 1 summarizes the study sample:

**Table 1.**  
*Summary of Respondents*

Religious Affiliations	Number	Sex Distribution		Age Distribution		
		Male	Female	≤ 30	31-59	≥ 60
<b>Key Informant Interviews (7)</b>						
Episcopalians	1	1			1	
R. Catholics	3	2	1		3	
Muslims	1	1				1
Tedurays	2	2			1	1

Religious Affiliations	Number	Sex Distribution		Age Distribution		
		Male	Female	≤ 30	31-59	≥ 60
Evangelicals	1	1			1	
<b>Focus Group Discussions (47)</b>						
Episcopalians	6	3	3	1	2	3
R. Catholics	7	2	5		3	4
Muslims (Male Only)	6	6		2	4	
Muslims (Female Only)	6		6	2	3	1
Tedurays	11	5	6		8	3
Mixed Group	11	9	2		7	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>17</b>

Qualitative analysis identified patterns and themes while descriptive statistics summarized their character.

The researcher did regular reflection and review for necessary adaptations, ensuring that the research remains focused, relevant, and rigorous. Detailed documentation captured the richness of the adaptive process, supporting the credibility and ethical integrity of the study.

### Data Presentation

This section provides an overview of Upi, examining its history, demographics, and peace and security landscape. A comparative analysis of crime rates with adjacent areas offers insight into Upi’s security situation and potential external threats. The discussion then shifts to Upi’s tri-people composition serving as a foundation for analyzing the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding. Lastly, key community peacebuilding initiatives are presented to highlight local efforts in fostering peace and development and to contribute to the limited literature documenting the peacebuilding efforts of Upians.

Upi, a landlocked municipality, spans 74,295 hectares and consists of 23 barangays, with Barangay Nuro as its administrative center (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2016). Its political history dates back to 1901 when American forces arrived in Cotabato (Municipality of Upi, 2017). Captain Irving Bryant Edwards, a colonial administrator,

established the Upi Agricultural School in 1919 to promote formal education.

Christian settlers from Cebu and Ilocos, as well as Moro settlers arrived following the construction of roads and the introduction of land titling by the Americans, which was unfamiliar to the indigenous Tedurays. This led to land ownership shifts and changes in farming practices, dividing the Tedurays into those who assimilated and those who moved deeper into the forest or ancestral lands (Schlegel, 1999).



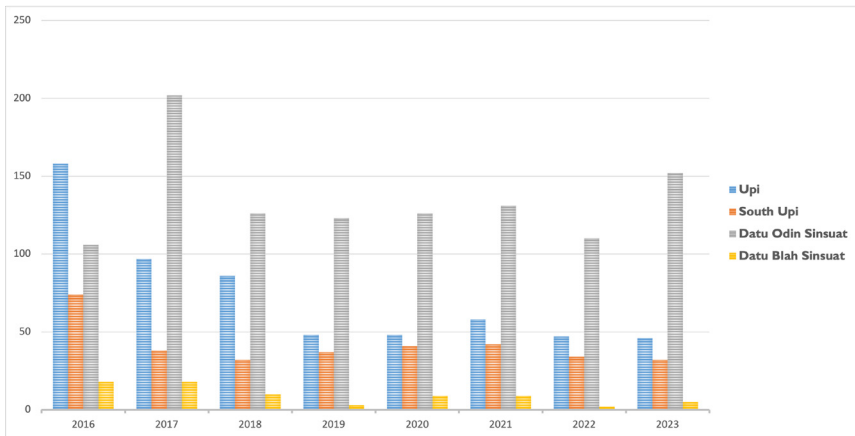
**Figure 4.** *Map of Upi* (Google Maps, n.d.).

Upi officially became a municipality on June 10, 1955 through Republic Act No. 1248, with its first elected mayor, Teduray leader Ignacio Tenorio Labina, assuming office in 1956. Leadership later transitioned to the Sinsuat and Piang families, who played significant roles in local governance (Municipality of Upi, 2017). In 2006, a portion of Upi was carved out to create the Municipality of Datu Blah T. Sinsuat (Muslim Mindanao Autonomy Act No. 198, 2006). Subsequently, in 2019, Upi became part of BARMM following the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law through a plebiscite (Republic Act No. 11054, 2018).

As of 2015, Upi had a population of 59,004, with a 2.64% growth rate and a density of 72 persons per square kilometer. Its economy remains primarily agricultural, dominated by corn, rice, coconut, rubber, and coffee, alongside small-scale livestock and poultry farming, with a 39.11% poverty incidence in 2021, economic development and poverty alleviation remain critical priorities.

**Crime Rates of Upi and Adjacent Municipalities**

Upi is adjacent to three municipalities: Datu Blah Sinsuat, South Upi, and Datu Odin Sinsuat. Examining its crime statistics alongside these municipalities helps contextualize Upi’s security trends and external influences. Figure 5 shows the crime data analysis from 2016 (the earliest available in the Philippine National Police database) to 2023 based on PNP records.



**Figure 5.** Crime Volume of Upi and Adjacent Municipalities, 2016–2023.

Crime volume, or total reported crimes, has generally declined in Upi since 2016, with a slight increase in 2021 (Figure 5). Upi consistently records lower crime volumes than Datu Odin Sinsuat, which has twice its population, but higher than South Upi and Datu Blah Sinsuat due to its larger population.

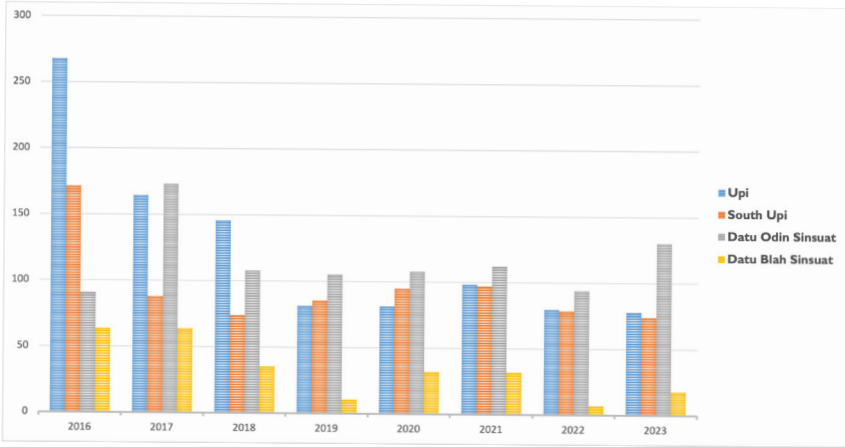


Figure 6. Crime Rate of Upi and Adjacent Municipalities, 2016–2023

Crime rate, measured per 100,000 residents, offers a clearer view of crime prevalence. Upi’s crime rate has fluctuated, peaking in 2016 before declining, whereas Datu Odin Sinsuat maintains a higher rate, indicating more frequent crimes per capita (Figure 6).

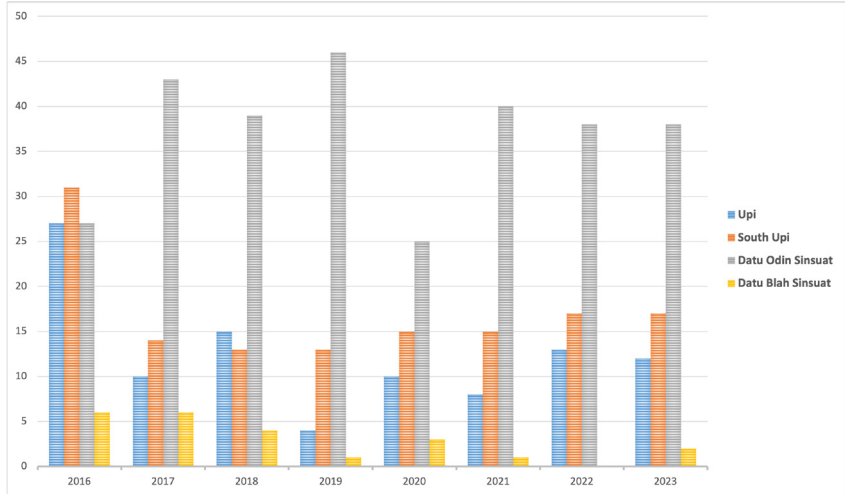


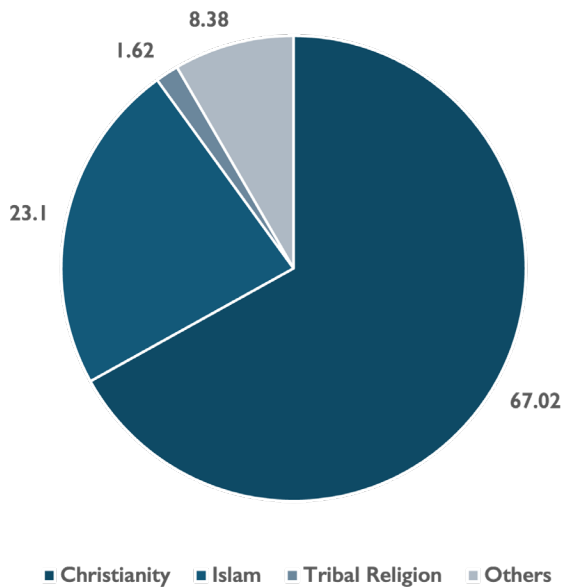
Figure 7. Incidents of Crime Against Persons in Upi and Adjacent Municipalities, 2016–2023

Upi records fewer violent crimes such as homicide, assault, and robbery than its neighbors, particularly Datu Odin Sinsuat (Figure 7).

Since violent crimes significantly shape public perception of safety (McGarrell et al., 1997), Upi’s lower rate reinforces its reputation as a peaceful area. Locals even joke that it serves as a “rest and recreation” area for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) due to its perceived safety.

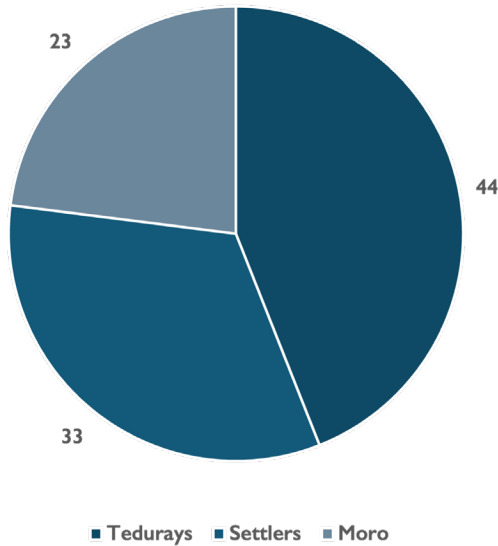
*Tri-People*

The tri-people nature of Upi can be understood through two lenses. As shown in Figure 8, the first lens highlights the composition of religious groups (i.e., Tedurays with their traditional faith, Muslims, and Christians). The second perspective focuses on affiliations based on ethnicity or origin, such as Indigenous Peoples/Lumad, Moro, and Settlers (Figure 9). The tri-people lens used in this research is religion.



**Figure 8.** Population Distribution by Religion in Upi, 2010

*Note.* Christians can further be disaggregated to Episcopal Church (37.9%), Roman Catholic (27.5%), and Evangelical Church (1.62%).



**Figure 9.** Population Distribution by Ethnicity in Upi, 2015

*Note.* Sub-groups of settlers are Ilonggos (17%), Tagalogs (7%), Cebuanos (3%), Ilocanos (2%), and Others (4%) (PSA, 2015, as cited in Piang 2018).

On tribal affiliation, the Teduray tribe emerges as the predominant group (44%). This indicates a significant presence and influence of the Teduray culture in the area.

### *Story of Unrest: Upi's Violent Conflicts*

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, Upi experienced various conflicts, including violent clashes between the Ilaga, an extremist paramilitary group, and the Black Shirts, a Moro guerilla faction, along with underdevelopment, kidnappings, and land disputes. The Ilaga, led by Kumander Toothpick, engaged in violent confrontations with Moro guerillas, resulting in civilian casualties, school bombings, and the destruction of public institutions (Schlegel, 1999).

Despite a decline in violence in the 1980s, Upi remained underdeveloped pre-2000s, with poor infrastructure and limited economic growth, leading to frustration among residents (Municipality of Upi, 2017). In the early 2000s, kidnappings, including that of

entrepreneur Arthur Yap, heightened insecurity, though the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) later assisted in recovering victims, demonstrating their commitment to peace talks (Fernandez, 2011). In 2018, bombings by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) targeted Upi, causing casualties and instilling fear among residents (Fernandez, 2011).

Land disputes, particularly between Muslims, Christians, and Tedurays, further contributed to local tensions, fueled by unresolved ancestral claims and overlapping land titles (Republic Act [RA] No. 8371, 1997). Other challenges, including cattle rustling and isolated *rido* (clan feuds), also persisted, though at lower levels compared to neighboring areas, highlighting the ongoing complexities of peace and security in Upi.

### *Causes of Violent Conflicts in Upi*

The violent conflicts in Upi stem from a complex interplay of social, economic, political, and cultural factors. These causes can be broadly categorized into shadow economy issues, common crimes, identity issues, political issues, governance issues, and resource issues.

KII and FGD data reveal that most of the violent conflicts in Upi are multi-causal, which means they are driven by more than one cause. An example of this is the combination of political and resource made manifest in the illegal mining exploration that reportedly happened in Upi from 2013 to 2015. A male FGD participant shared, “*Kahit walang Free, Prior, and Informed Consent o FPIC, tinuloy pa rin nila ang mining exploration* [Even without our Free, Prior, and Informed Consent or FPIC, they still pursued the mining exploration].” A similar threat emerged in 2023 when portions of Upi and South Upi within the Teduray and Lambangian Ancestral Domain Claim, were proposed as mineral reservation areas. Additionally, many common crimes, such as rape, robbery, and domestic violence, are linked to illegal drug use. The shadow economy, including cigarette smuggling, also intersects with broader political and governance issues. Meanwhile, youth suicide cases have been reported, with factors like bullying and parental absence contributing to depression. These findings highlight the need for a holistic approach to conflict resolution, as violence in Upi is driven by

overlapping and interrelated causes.

### ***Key Community-Based Peacebuilding Initiatives of Upians and Religious Institutions***

Upians have undertaken numerous community-based peacebuilding initiatives, largely led by religious institutions. These efforts align with eight of the nine recognized peacebuilding categories, with no reported activities under transitional justice.

A total of 47 peacebuilding initiatives were documented, 40 of which were initiated by religious institutions (those without asterisks). The remaining seven, while not initiated by religious institutions, became platforms for their peacebuilding efforts. For example, Teduray Youth and Students Association (TYSA) and Teduray-Lambangian Youth and Student Association (TLYSA) served as channels for Teduray leaders to pass on indigenous faith and peace teachings to younger generations and to those from other religions. The Upi Agricultural School also became a platform by accommodating different faiths, practicing a tri-people prayer system, and serving as the home of various religious youth groups. In the next section, three programs are highlighted to give a glimpse on the role of religious institutions in shaping and strengthening these initiatives.

#### **1. Community Organizing (13)**

- 1.1. Upi Muslim Consultative Assembly (UMCA)
- 1.2. The Upi Ministerial Fellowship (UMF)
- 1.3. Muslim Youth Fellowship (MYF)
- 1.4. Organization of Teduray Lambangian Conference
- 1.5. Family Life Ministry
- 1.6. OMI Indigenous Peoples Ministry in Sitio Blala, Brgy. Renede, Upi, Maguindanao del Norte
- 1.7. Kuyog Rayray Band and i-Watch Media
- 1.8. Teduray Youth and Students Association (TYSA)\*
- 1.9. Teduray-Lambangian Youth and Student Association (TLYSA)\*
- 1.10. Fëliwawat Ide Libun Teduray [Rise Teduray Women]\*
- 1.11. Sënfagayunon
- 1.12. Sakat Youth

- 1.13. Mindanao Women Advocacy for Good Governance
2. **Community-Based Resource Management (4)**
  - 2.1. R. Catholic and Episcopal Churches' Livelihood Assistance
  - 2.2. Care for Creation Program
  - 2.3. Food distribution during calamities
  - 2.4. Talab
3. **Education (10)**
  - 3.1. Pulpit / preachings / khutbah / kanduli
  - 3.2. Notre Dame of Upi
  - 3.3. St. Francis Episcopal School of Upi, Inc.
  - 3.4. Madaris
  - 3.5. Upi Agricultural School\*
  - 3.6. Catechism
  - 3.7. JOY Alliance Elementary School
  - 3.8. Muslims' educational outreach in Islamic educational institutions and weekly religious teachings
  - 3.9. Roman Catholics and Episcopalians conducting weekly Bible study
  - 3.10. Teduray education during Kanduli and knowledge sharing about their culture and traditions
4. **Advocacy (4)**
  - 4.1. Kapehan
  - 4.2. Pre-Ramadan symposium
  - 4.3. Quran reading contests
  - 4.4. Muslims and Episcopalians participating in peace and order councils
5. **Intermediary/Mediation (2)**
  - 5.1. Setiawan
  - 5.2. Muslim intermediaries
6. **Observing (4)**
  - 6.1. Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV)
  - 6.2. Muslims ensuring that no extremist groups and teachings will enter Upi
  - 6.3. Philippine Episcopalians advocating clean and peaceful

elections

6.4. Kabalikat sa Malinis na Halalan

**7. Interfaith Dialogues (3)**

- 7.1. Tri-people prayer in the LGU and schools
- 7.2. Inclusive jobs, assistance, and religious celebrations
- 7.3. Inter marriages

**8. Reconciliation and Healing (2)**

- 8.1. Tedurays' efforts in reconciliation and healing through traditional practices like Këfiyo Fëdëw, Toyo Dara, and Sëinëm Dara/Sëinëm Kënugëw
- 8.2. Family visitations, Sacrament of Reconciliation, and counseling

**9. LGU-Institutionalized Peacebuilding Initiatives (5)**

- 9.1. Upi Mayor's Council\*
- 9.2. Meguyaya Festival
- 9.3. DXUP Radio Station\*
- 9.4. Municipal Peace and Order Council\*
- 9.5. Kasalan ng Bayan [Mass Wedding] done in the respective places of worship

Out of these 47, five initiatives of religious institutions are highlighted below. Two of these have been institutionalized by their respective local government units.

First is the *Kapehan*. The *Kapehan* is a community initiative of discussing problems in and out of Upi while having coffee (*kape*). It was formed by members and leaders of different faiths, including Fr. Elinio "Ely" Balboa, OMI, former Parish Priest of the Roman Catholic's San Isidro Parish; Rev. Fr. June A. Imperial, former Administrative Officer of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Philippines and Rector of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Cotabato City; imams; and Tedurays. The *Kapehan* sessions took place every Saturday from around 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. at the San Isidro Parish premises. Each session featured different topics for discussion, aiming to create a platform where everyone, regardless of faith, age, or background, could voice their concerns and contribute to community development.



Figure 10. One of the Performers of the Meguyaya Festival Street Dancing Competition (My Mindanao, 2019).

Second is the Meguyaya Festival. One of the products of the Kapehan is the Meguyaya Festival. *Meguyaya* is derived from the Teduray term for “thanksgiving” or “celebration,” reflecting the spirit of gratitude and communal joy that defines the event. The festival aims to promote peace, unity, and cultural diversity. It serves as a convergence point for the tri-people—showcasing their unique faith and cultural traditions and fostering a sense of communal harmony. Miss Lily-Ong Muslim, one of the key members of the kapehan recounted that “*Every program na nilagay namin, talagang may connection sa culture, may connection sa community* [Every program that we put in place, there was a connection to culture and to the community].” It begins with *Kanduli*, an ecumenical prayer integrating Qur’anic, Biblical, and Teduray teachings, reinforcing mutual respect. A central feature is communal food-sharing, symbolizing unity and goodwill. The festival culminates in a vibrant street dancing competition where participants in traditional attire perform to agong and kulintang rhythms, showcasing Upi’s rich cultural and spiritual heritage and peacebuilding.

Third is the Sënfagayunon. *Sënfagayunon*, a Teduray term for “unity,” is an organization of the Teduray tribal religious leaders founded in 2013 by Deonato P. Mokudef. Currently, the organization is chaired by Timuay Johnny Mokudef. The organization’s main purpose is to provide or come up with a uniform Teduray religious teaching and the preservation and

transmission of Teduray indigenous knowledge. It is in this platform that teachings on peaceful coexistence or respect for people of other faiths are taught. As Timuay Mokudef said, “*Huwag siraan ang ibang denominations kundi tulungan sila, dahil yan ang gusto ni Tulus* [Do not discredit other denominations, instead, let us help them for that is the will of God].”

Figure 11. Seal of the Upi Muslim Consultative Assembly (UMCA)



Fourth is the UMCA. Formed in 2004 by Muslim leaders of Upi, UMCA serves as the unified voice of Upi’s Muslim community, ensuring Islamic teachings remain free from extremist influences, particularly in its 17 Madrasahs. It regulates external religious influences, granting or denying access based on alignment with Islam’s peaceful teachings. Ustadz Haron shared,

*May pumasok na nagtuturo ang sabi nila, [ang] gamit nila ay Qur’an ngunit mali ang tinuturo. Pinigilan namin kasi mali ang tinuturo, hindi kapayapaan. Ginagawa namin ang tungkulin namin na ang Upi talaga ay mapanatili ang kapayapaan ‘di gaya ng ibang munisipyo na wala silang control* [There were those who came to Upi claiming that they were using the Qur’an in their teachings. We stopped them because their teachings were wrong and not about peace. We are doing our part to keep Upi peaceful, unlike in other municipalities that do not have control].



**Figure 12.** *Four of the six members of the Upi Mayor's Council, along with their secretary (center), during the FGD in 2018*

Fifth is the Upi Mayor's Council. Established on August 25, 2001, through Upi Municipal Executive Order No. 4, the Upi Mayor's Council mediates disputes among Settlers/Christians, Moro/Muslims, and Tedurays. Each group selects two representatives based on moral standing and religious knowledge. For example, if a settler offends a Teduray, Teduray customs guide the resolution. If initial attempts fail, the case may be escalated to barangay or judicial levels. From 2007 to 2023, the Council handled 640 cases, averaging 38 per year, with a 60% settlement rate. Without this mediation, many disputes could have escalated into violent conflicts.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This chapter analyzes the research findings through the study's conceptual framework, and presents lessons and implications for community-based peacebuilding. It explores the role of religious institutions in shaping Upi's peace and development vision, the formation of social capital, and how these insights enrich and refine existing

community development methods and strategies. It also examines challenges faced by religious institutions in peacebuilding, the factors behind their peacebuilding's effectiveness, and introduces the UPI (Upi's Peacebuilding Initiative)—a flexible framework developed from Upi's unique experience, which serves as a model for leveraging religious institutions in community peacebuilding. Religious institutions play a significant role in forming a community vision of peace and development.

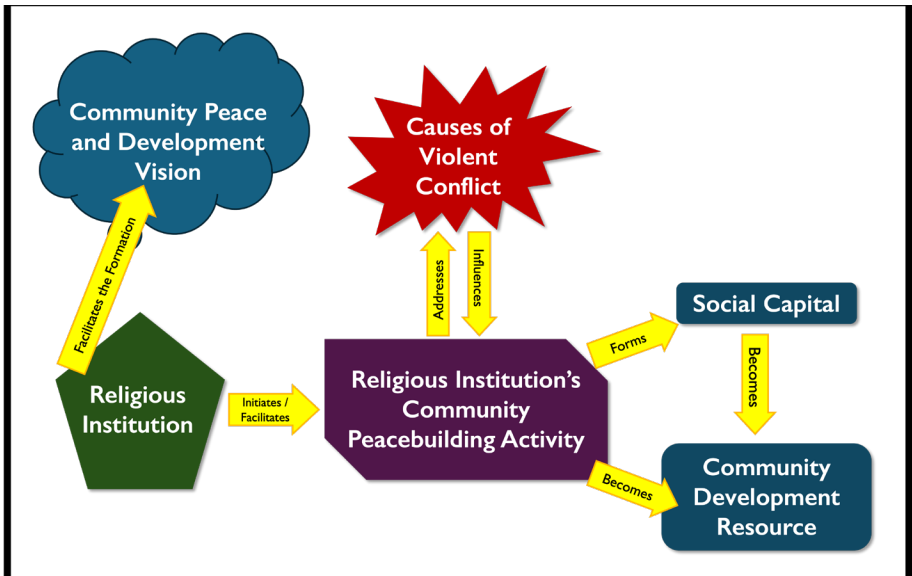


Figure 13. *Enhanced Conceptual Framework on Religious Institutions as a Community Development Resource in Peacebuilding*

The research reveals that religious institutions in Upi play a crucial role in shaping the community's peace and development vision, thus the enhanced conceptual framework in Figure 13. Rather than an outcome of peacebuilding, the collective vision was already present and religion had a profound influence on shaping it. A participant shared, "*Lahat kami ay magkakapatid. Iisa lamang ang aming Diyos pero tinatawag namin siya sa iba't-ibang pangalan. . . . Kami ay iisa* [We are all siblings. We have one God, though we call Him by different names. . . . We are one]."

For years, this vision of unity and peace was embedded in the collective consciousness of the people, shaped by their religious teachings. However,

this vision required a catalyst to fully materialize in the community's social and political landscape. That pivotal moment occurred when the community united to support the candidacy of Mayor Ramon Piang, Sr. Recognizing the need for a leader who embodied their shared values and vision, the people rallied behind Piang, Sr., guarding the election process to ensure its integrity and supporting him throughout his tenure as Mayor.

While Piang, Sr. is often celebrated as a key figure in Upi's history, it is essential to recognize that his leadership was shaped and supported by the religious institutions that nurtured his values and guided his rise to office. These institutions, working closely with the local government, were instrumental in articulating and formalizing the community's long-standing vision into a clear and powerful statement: "Upi: Haven of an Empowered Tri-People" (Municipality of Upi, 2017).

More than a slogan, this vision was ingrained in Upi's collective consciousness through religious teachings long before Piang, Sr.'s term. His administration gave it an official voice, integrating it into the town's development goals and reinforcing its role as a model for inclusive governance.

### *Formation of Social Capital*

The findings reveal that peacebuilding initiatives by religious institutions in Upi have significantly created social capital, helping reduce violent conflict.

The bonding social capital formed is characterized by internal trust and cohesiveness, feelings of belongingness, and acceptance and adherence to shared social norms. Members of different religious institutions approach their respective leaders for guidance and updates on governance and community activities, demonstrating deep trust. There was also a high number of attendees in religious gatherings and a large number of volunteers in ministries and outreach activities. The Episcopalians of Upi, led by Fr. Joerge N. Pinera, all echoed their motto, "Episcopal Church welcomes you." Moreover, the FGD participants of the Teduray group and the mixed group shared that before, they were ashamed of being Tedurays. But slowly, due to peacebuilding initiatives

such as the Meguyaya Festival, they are taking pride in their ethnicity and religion, which includes their practices.

Bridging social capital is evidenced by the expansion of social networks beyond immediate religious communities, as well as toward the LGU. Moreover, trust and respect between different religions were fostered. As Fr. Jericho Veñarta, OMI, said, “The absence of adversarial arguments and unhealthy debates among religious groups is notable.” Interfaith marriages, widely accepted in Upi, contrast with more restrictive areas like Jolo, Sulu. Peacebuilding activities has also helped reduce prejudices, with terms like “land grabbers” diminishing in usage.

Community harmony and safety further reflect the successful formation of bridging capital. Religious groups coexist peacefully—Catholic church bells ring without complaints, Muslims perform Adhan via loudspeakers, and residents walk home safely at night. These factors highlight how religious institutions, through their deep-rooted peacebuilding initiatives, contribute to lasting social cohesion.

### *Insights for Community Development Methods and Strategies*

Observing and analyzing Upi’s peacebuilding initiatives, the researcher identified key community development methods and strategies employed by the religious institutions of Upi. Upi has been notably successful in implementing its peacebuilding initiatives using these community development strategies. This section discusses the key elements of Upi’s peacebuilding initiatives that can enhance the effectiveness of community development methods, whether in peacebuilding activities or in other contexts. It also highlights the added benefits of engaging religious institutions in community development work, beyond their role in building social capital.

1. **Community Organizing:** Religious institutions foster collective action and solidarity by instilling values of faith, responsibility, stewardship, and sustaining engagement in social initiatives. They empower individuals, especially women and youth, to assume leadership roles while upholding religious traditions. A Muslim youth from the MYF said, “*Gumagawa kami ng mga outreach programs at mga Qur’an reading sessions upang hindi mawala sa*

*tamang landas ang mga kabataan* [We do outreach program and Qur'an reading sessions so the youth will not be strayed from the right path].”

Recognizing that peace cannot solely rely on current leaders, Upi's religious institutions and community organizations place a strong emphasis on nurturing the next generation of leaders. For instance, several former leaders of the MYF now serve as officers of UMCA, such as Ms. Bai Zuhiera Kankan, who is currently the Secretary of UMCA and also a guidance counselor at UAS.

Organizing efforts also play a role in governance. Catholic leaders such as Fr. Elinio Balboa, OMI, and Fr. Eduardo Vasquez, OMI, alongside those from the Episcopal Church, have mobilized communities to resist alleged election fraud.

2. **Participatory Planning:** Religious institutions actively shape development plans through internal planning sessions, such as those conducted by Sënfagayunon. Moreover, UMCA and UMF serve as consultative bodies for faith groups, ensuring diverse religious perspectives are represented in policymaking.
3. **Community Resource Mobilization:** Faith-based institutions secure funding through personal contributions, tithes, donation boxes, and cooperative ventures. The Catholic Church's *Halad Mula sa Puso* [Offering from the Heart] tithing system and rental income from multi-purpose halls sustain initiatives. External support includes the Adopt a Parish Program of the Episcopal Church and NGO partnerships with Plan International, Synergia, and Pathways. International donors, such as an Egyptian benefactor funding a mosque, highlight the global reach of religious networks in Upi.
4. **Community-Based Resource Management:** Teduray religious traditions, as an example, guide sustainable resource management as seen in Kanduli Maras, a ritual seeking divine permission before land cultivation. As Timuay Mokudéf shared, observing star patterns informs agricultural decisions, reinforcing the community's spiritual and ecological connection

to the land.

5. **Community Education:** Religious institutions embed integrity, compassion, and accountability into education, fostering ethical leadership and governance. Teachings promote peace, non-violence, and contentment, cautioning against materialism with expressions like “*dumadaan lang tayo sa mundong ito*” [we are only passersby in this world]. They advocate for generosity and fairness, encouraging mutual support over exploitation.
6. **Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction and Management:** Religious institutions mobilize local resources during crises, utilizing places of worship as relief hubs. They disseminate disaster preparedness information through religious gatherings and provide spiritual and emotional support to strengthen resilience. Their extensive networks ensure long-term recovery assistance for affected families.
7. **Community-Based Monitoring and Evaluation:** Religious institutions integrate monitoring and evaluation into peacebuilding. UMCA actively reviews Madrasah curricula to prevent extremist influences. Organizations like the MYF, TYSA, and TLYSA refine strategies based on evaluations, expanding into various schools to better organize Muslim and Teduray youth. Religious leaders also self-monitor through spiritual reflection, ensuring alignment with peacebuilding goals.

### ***Key Elements of Religious Institutions as Effective Peacebuilding Resources in a Tri-People Context***

This study identifies four essential conditions that enable religious institutions to play a transformative role in maintaining peace and fostering unity, namely:

1. A culture of religious tolerance and mutual respect.
2. Committed and consistent religious leadership in peacebuilding efforts.

3. Strong and inclusive interfaith coordination structures composed of both religious leaders, lay leaders, and members/congregations.
4. Religious institutions serving as advocates for the tri-people community vision of peace and development.

***UPI (Upi's Peacebuilding Initiative): Upi's Model of Leveraging Religious Institutions***

Based on Upi's experience, the researcher made a flexible framework for leveraging religious institutions in community peacebuilding. Upi's case illustrates how religious institutions foster cohesion and stability, offering insights for other communities seeking to integrate faith-based initiatives into peace efforts.

Rather than a rigid blueprint, this model adapts to different religious, cultural, and social contexts. While Upi's experience provides valuable lessons, each community faces distinct challenges that may shape its approach. This framework is not a step-by-step process, but a guiding tool that can be tailored to fit local needs.

By prioritizing flexibility and contextual sensitivity, the model encourages communities to learn from Upi's successes while crafting their own paths to peace and development.

1. Make an inventory of religious institutions.
2. Assess religious teachings and practices: Compare similarities and differences in religious teachings and practices. Understand theological and doctrinal bases that might influence community perspectives.
3. Unravel historical relationships: Investigate historical unity and conflicts among these institutions.
4. Identify a common ground: Identify and build on theological commonalities (e.g., concepts of God, angels, heaven, and hell). For example, Christians, Muslims, and Tedurays all believe that there is one God.

5. Facilitate the healing of historical wounds: Use religious teachings as tools to address structural and historical grievances.
6. Create symbols of unity: Develop and erect visible symbols representing the unity of different faiths (e.g., tri-people statues of Upi at their roundabout and their plaza).
7. Formulate a tri-people vision: Incorporate a tri-people perspective in the community's peace and development vision.
8. Institutionalize religious unity: Establish community festivals and events celebrating interfaith unity (e.g., Meguyaya Festival). Also, start events with tri-people prayers to signify unity and mutual respect.
9. Engage and support religious leaders: Actively involve religious leaders in local governance. Ensure equitable representation in local councils and decision-making bodies. Provide financial and logistical support to enhance their community roles.
10. Establish justice mechanisms: Develop or enhance local justice systems or mechanisms that involve members from all religious backgrounds. Use these systems or mechanisms to address local disputes and conflicts fairly (e.g., Upi Mayors Council).
11. Ensure a partnership perspective: Encompassing all of the steps is needed for the leader of the LGU to have a partnership perspective regarding the relationship with religious groups, not merely treating them as tools for development. Leaders should possess a respectful and knowledgeable approach towards different faiths.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings confirm the influence and impact that religious institutions have on the peacebuilding efforts in Upi, offering valuable lessons, insights, and implications for the theory and practice of community development. Research results showed that religious institutions shape community vision of peace and development, form

social capital, and can enhance the efficacy of community development strategies and methodologies. It also uncovered prerequisite key elements to make effective peacebuilding resources in a tri-people context. Finally, it showed that religious institutions can be leveraged in community peacebuilding.

Among the many recommendations from this research are for religious institutions to plan long-term, manage internal issues, and consider structured transitions to avoid leadership-based disruptions. Religious institutions are also suggested to form their respective peace committee or interfaith ministry to reinforce peacebuilding efforts and guard against potential spoilers who may exploit religion to sow division. For the LGU, they are recommended to sustain partnerships with religious institutions and provide additional support for documenting the indigenous beliefs of the Tedurays.

Community development practitioners are encouraged to learn more about religion; scholars and researchers to increase their study of religion's role in community development, particularly in diverse communities like Upi; and the UP CSWCD to consider establishing a seminar course on the role of religion and indigenous faith in community development. For future research directions, researchers can conduct a parallel study in South Upi and/or other tri-people areas; longitudinal study on the sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives in Upi; exploration of youth involvement in religious-based peacebuilding initiatives; and an assessment of the economic impact of religious institutions' community peacebuilding.

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