STATUS, AND CHALLENGES IN COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN PATIKUL, SULU: TOWARDS PEACEFUL RESOLUTION MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the status and challenges of initiatives against violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu, focusing on the efforts of the sectoral group Tulung Tupah Sug Inc. Utilizing a descriptive-qualitative research design, the study aims to delineate the scope of violent extremism countermeasures and to identify encountered challenges. Specifically, it evaluates the extent to which the sectoral group's actions in community participation, youth development programs, and the promotion of peace and development align with expectations. Through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and document analysis, the research highlights the sectoral group's success in enhancing community participation and livelihood programs, conducting youth-oriented symposiums and sports activities, and fostering communication among adults and religious leaders for peace and development. The findings underscore the importance of community engagement, resilience, economic development, and law enforcement in formulating a peaceful resolution model to counter violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu. The study proposes a model based on these pillars and recommends its adoption for mitigating violent extremism in the region.

Keywords: Peaceful Resolution Model, community engagement; community resilience; economic development, and law enforcement

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism is a threat to peace and tolerance. It is not enough to counter it; it must be prevented. No one is born a violent extremist, but they are instead made and nurtured. Combating terrorism through addressing radicalization and violent extremism has become a ubiquitous feature of national strategies, resulting in the emergence of many policies and practices directed toward countering and preventing violent extremism. (Stephens 2018).

While there is an increased awareness among the policymakers in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area of the importance of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism (P/CVERLT), there is still not enough dialogue, engagement, and co-operation with civil society and other non-governmental actors in conceptualizing, developing and implementing impactful P/CVERLT activities and policies. Successful P/CVERLT initiatives are rooted in a whole-of-society approach that harnesses the influence and efforts of civil society, in particular, families, women, youth, educators, and religious and community leaders. (A Whole-of-Society Approach 2020)

The rapid rise of Violent Extremism has been a top concern both for governments and vulnerable communities around the world. In recent years, there have been increasing reports of young Muslims joining Violent extremist groups in the conflict-affected regions of Mindanao in the

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southern Philippines. Until now, there has been little data available that policymakers can use as a basis for interventions to respond effectively to this threat. (IAG 2017).

Within the Philippines, populations most vulnerable to Violent Extremism are located in poor, underdeveloped, and rural communities. These populations have higher income inequality, higher poverty rates, lower development rates, lower education, and lower literacy rates. The most vulnerable populations also tend to have high rates of gender inequality and low rates of female empowerment, as measured by female education metrics, female participation in decision-making at home, access to family planning, and spousal violence rates. (Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines 2022)

In Western Mindanao, particularly in Sulu and Basilan provinces, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been the main potent threat since its inception in 1991. The group has carried out atrocities in the region, such as bombings, kidnappings, assassinations of unwary government troopers, and extortion of business establishments and prominent individuals. This group has also been involved in criminal activities, including shootings, drug trafficking, and the liquidation of military informants. The ASG is expected to continue hatching hostile plans and conduct terror attacks against government troops, such as Improvised Explosive Device (IED) bombing and limited guerilla operations, as long as the group can still conduct successful kidnapping and extortion activities in the region as it is their main source of revenue to finance its atrocities against the government.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives of this study.

1. To determine the status of countering violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu in terms of Community participation, Youth Development Programs, Promotion of peace and development, and Sectoral engagement

2. To identify the challenges in countering violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu.

3. To propose a peaceful resolution model in countering violent extremism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed descriptive-qualitative research design because it aims to describe the extent of addressing violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu by Sectoral Group in terms of community participation, youth development programs, and promotion of peace and development. By utilizing this design, the researcher can obtain information that would relatively describe a certain phenomenon, situation, or population. According to Helen L. Dulock, (1993) this design helps answer the what, when, where, and how questions regarding the research problem rather than the why. It helps achieve good results of the study because it provides a detailed and accurate picture of the characteristics and behaviors of a particular population or subject.

On the other hand, qualitative design was utilized to identify the challenges encountered by Tulung Tupah Sug Inc., a Sectoral Group engaged in countering violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. It involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research. Because it gives a unique depth of understanding where the respondents can freely disclose their experiences, thoughts, and feelings without constraint. (Creswell, 1994)

Population, Samples, and Sampling Techniques. The target samples in this study will be the Heads of the Sectoral Groups and religious leaders, Local Government Units, other

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government agencies, and former extremism members who were surrendered or captured by the government.

Research Instrumentation. In this study, the researcher developed a self-structured questionnaire to enable relevance in content and structure and to ensure that all questions can answer the research problem.

The questionnaire was guided by an open-ended question relative to the statement of the problem in terms of community participation, youth development programs, and promotion of peace and development. It also entails questions that would help the researcher gather responses to the proposed or suggested peaceful resolution.

Prior to the conduct of data gathering, the questionnaire was submitted to the panel of experts for critiquing and validation. Then, the interventions were critiqued by the panel of experts to ensure that the objectives of the study were captured in the questions. Afterward, the researcher incorporated the comments and suggestions.

In the course of data gathering, the researcher conducted a focus group discussion to gather the data from the participants focusing on the measures in countering violent extremism and the challenges they encountered in the implementation of those measures. To facilitate a comprehensive discussion among the respondents, the researcher made use of the Filipino language and allowed the participants to do the same. In the same manner, those who are more comfortable with speaking in their mother tongue were also welcomed to express their thoughts freely. The researcher made use of documentary analysis based on the records available in the office on the reported issues and challenges to support any claims from the respondents.

Data Gathering Procedures. The researcher requested permission from the office concerned regarding the conduct of the study. Then, the researcher prepared a Letter of Consent that was given to each of the identified participants before the conduct of the Focus Group Discussion.

The respondents were informed in advance of the purpose of the study and the schedule of the FGD was set based on the availability of all the participants. During the FGD, the researcher personally moderated the discussion using the guide questions. The researcher utilized Audio and Video recordings done with the permission of the participants and kept with utmost confidentiality for data analysis reference purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the discussion conducted among the respondents, the researcher used the variables as themes in answering questions regarding violent extremism. The researcher also grouped the challenges into themes according to their most common responses to foster understanding and used pseudonyms to characterize the discussion.

1. Sectoral Group Engagement

A Sectoral Group is a group of people who exert effort to bring peace to the community by way of addressing issues on violent extremism. The organization envisions "A peaceful, prosperous, and healthy community where children can play and women are empowered, people are in constant dialogue among one another, have quittable access to quality education in pursuits of sustainable development." By realizing this vision, the mission of the organization is to become the leading service and advocacy institution that will help empower communities and collaborate efforts in accelerating development and peacebuilding in Sulu. This organization is based at Duhul Tanjung, Indanan, Sulu, and is currently headed by Mr Karlmarx L. Marrack as President. The existence of this organization was confirmed by Mark who states that:

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The people in Patikul, Sulu understand that the Sectoral Group only pursues peace in the community, and for this, they recognize the existence of this organization.

Martin expressed his support for this organization and described it as:

Many sectoral groups are working on these things; they aim to stop the actions of the terrorists who pose a threat to the community. They try to counter their activities because these can cause harm to the community. They are actively seeking ways to prevent the terrorists from gaining control of the region. They are committed to safeguarding the well-being of the community and are determined to maintain peace so that the people can live peacefully in their areas.

Tanya has a similar understanding of what this organization can do and how they can help the community. She agreed to the statement made by Mark and Martin.

Rey reaffirmed the statement of Tanya and said that through this Group, the people now understand the importance of unity against violent extremism.

This implies that recognizing the existence of this group and getting support from the community means that the Sectoral Group successfully carried out its mission and that people are far more concerned about how they can create a peaceful community by participating in the advocacy of this organization.

Jake emphasized how the Sectoral Group engaged in supporting the people of Patikul, Sulu.

"These are some of the activities that their people value the most since they enlighten and raise awareness in the community."

This further implies that activities such as conducting Islamic Symposium and communicating with the people are crucial to fill the gap of misconception and allow understanding to take place because these are just some of the activities that their people value the most since they raise awareness in the community. People might not be able to understand overnight. Still, with constant encouragement, communication, and proper dissemination, there is hope to eventually unite people, share a common goal, and work together to promote peace.

The extent of Sectoral Group engagement in addressing issues against countering violent extremism was to (1) conduct dialogue with the community regarding the effect of violent extremism; (2) gather the people for an Islamic Symposium; (3) capacitate livelihood programs and community participation with the Sectoral Group fighting against violent extremism.

2. Sectoral Group Engagement in terms of Community Participation

Community participation is the key to success in countering violent extremism, thereby community engagement or working with communities such as local leaders; religious sectors, youth sectors; community social organizations, and law enforcement units must be developed and strengthened that create an enabling environment for peace and security; business, and prosperity in the municipality. Interview with Mark, one of the members of the Sectoral Group, the success of the program lies in the extent of community participation.

By way of encouraging and engaging various sectors, agencies, and community local leaders, the goal of this program will be to succeed as they reinforce peace and harmonization of values that can help prevent extremism from taking root in communities.

This implies that engaging and working hand-in-hand with community leaders to establish community-driven initiatives is a useful activity to slowly eradicate violent extremism in the place. If all were educated about violent extremism, there

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would be less to protect in the community since they would know what to do and how to protect themselves and family from this violence. If there's high awareness of violent extremism, the recruitment of youth to extremist groups will no longer exist. If programs such as education, livelihood, social services, capacity building, and all others continue to support the people in the community along with the elders and religious organizations, there will be peace and harmony in place. When people are aware of the damages and uncertainties brought by extremist groups, they can protect their homes, community, and future to live in a better place.

2.1. Livelihood Programs

The lack of education and poverty, compounded by the lack of economic opportunities and unemployment are the significant factors in driving people towards extremist ideologies/violent extremism.

Tanya revealed that poverty navigates people to join extremist groups for survival. She emphasized the need to improve livelihood programs in the community.

Mark also added that orienting/educating people is not sufficient to prevent them from joining an extremist group. He also emphasized the need for livelihood in the program for the community to prosper.

The skills training and capacity-building programs that empower people to start local businesses and become self-reliant can also be significant factors in blocking extremist ideologies. Working with key industries in the municipality, such as agriculture, fishing, and tourism, to create sustainable employment opportunities is also a significant effort to prevent communities from joining extremist activities. Capacity building and training programs for law enforcement agencies and community security groups such as Barangay Tanod and Civilian Volunteers can improve their effectiveness in preventing and responding to violent extremism. Developing business industries, education programs, sustainable livelihood programs, and strengthening law enforcement activities an essential components of the peaceful resolution model in countering violent extremism in Patikul.

3. Sectoral Group Engagement in terms of Youth Development Programs

3.1. Sports Activities

The Sectoral Group considers the Youth as an important contributor to the success of their advocacy because if they can save the youth from violence, they can build a better future for the community. Thus, the Sectoral Group also provides activities for the youth via sports. Tanya and Mark testified that in terms of youth development programs, the sectoral group was very active.

This indicates that the Sectoral Group also extends its effort to look into the welfare of the youth and is not limited to solely eradicating violent extremism. As a result of their effort, sports were initiated in the community. This kind of activity is vital for them to keep a healthy lifestyle and be occupied during their free academic hours.

3.2. Islamic Symposium

The Islamic Symposium is seen as an integral part of the youth development program to raise awareness among youth. It is used to navigate successful communication to help the youth understand the importance of using knowledge as a weapon against violent extremism. This platform is also utilized to continuously encourage the youth to positively contribute to creating a beautiful place to live.

This further implies that the conduct of orientation among youth to participate in countering violent extremism in the community consistently resulted in positive responses as evident in the sports participation of the youth. It can also be implied that because of the symposium conducted, students are now

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becoming more vigilant of extremist ideologies. They were not easily deceived by false promises anymore because the organization helps the youth by educating them. Roman and Martin said:

"In my observation, the youth nowadays are proving that they are not easily swayed by false promises and deceptive enticements that lead to harmful activities. Instead, they are actively participating in various youth programs within the community and are genuinely interested in making positive contributions to society." Roman

"The youth nowadays are attending school and engaging in various youth programs in the community. This way, they are not easily swayed by groups that promote violence in the community and those who try to mislead them." – Martin

4. The extent of Sectoral Group Engagement in terms of Promotion of Peace and Development

The Sectoral Group engaged in Alternative Peaceful Resolution where the traditional leaders settled the family feud in the community and conducted Islamic symposiums in the community. They also organized volunteers in the community to settle disputes as well as conduct Islamic symposiums in the community for peace partnerships among religious and adult leaders in countering violent extremism because it is only through their commitment and collaborative efforts, they can protect the community and promote peace. If there is an understanding between tribal groups, there will be unity. Thus, this will make a strong barrier to counter violent extremism in the community. Tanya said:

"The sectoral group engaged in dialogue with elders and religious leaders regarding the promotion of peace in the community."

This statement was agreed by Rey, Allan, and Jake said similar cases in terms of high respect for their religious leaders and value among elders in their community. In most cases, conflicts among family members are resolved by their adult leaders in the community. Respect among religious leaders is also their route to promote peace. They said:

"They work with community elders and religious leaders to settle family feuds and conduct peace dialogue and look for volunteers to settle family disputes in the community." - Rey

"They work with community elders and religious leaders to promote peace and encourage protecting it in their community." – Allan

"They work with community elders and religious leaders in settling family feuds. They also conduct a dialogue with citizens where they encourage them to help promote peace and prosperity in the community to bring about lasting peace in the region." Jake

There is a need to support the Sectoral Group to strengthen partnerships and collaborative efforts in countering violent extremism among key stakeholders in the province. Countering violent extremism through a peaceful resolution model or peaceful approach in Sulu province particularly in the municipality of Patikul to address the root causes of violent extremism by enhancing community engagement; community resilience; helping and improving economic development and stability; establishing and improving peace and order status; establishing a good relationship between the communities and the law enforcers. Strengthening law enforcement activities in the community and ensuring that human rights are protected while countering violent extremism. Martin states:

"They also have programs aimed at promoting community development, where they gather people and sometimes collaborate with leaders and scholars in the community to discuss and address important matters."

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"They are the ones who advocate for peace in the community, promoting not only a harmonious environment but also striving to prevent any form of conflict." - Roman

The efforts in countering violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu were noticing improvement where the community had been participating in countering violent extremism in the province. Youth development programs and the promotion of peace and development are among the important parts of the efforts of counterpropaganda against extremist ideologies. This indicates that the people are open to participating in the advocacy of the organization and that they support its goal of achieving peace in the community.

5. Proposed Peaceful Resolution

According to Roman, violent extremism has caused so much pain to individuals, and damaged so many lives. He has been part of the group before but surrendered because he has witnessed how these groups break the future of each family in the community. When interviewed as to his proposal for raising peace in the community, he said that helping one another and working with other agencies whose aim is to promote peace in our place is one way to eradicate or prevent extremism. He also shared his experiences when he was still part of the group and said:

"I used to be a member of Abu Sayyaf, and I have seen the actions we did that caused harm to the community. That's why I am now helping our community so that people will no longer be influenced by violence in the region. To others who are still involved, I encourage you to surrender and follow the path of truth and peace. I surrendered and came back to the right path." – Roman

In the same manner, Martin also said that he views collaboration as a way to achieve peace and prosperity in their community. He supported Roman's statement and said:

"We should also collaborate in this endeavor because it cannot be accomplished by any one of us alone. Together, we can work towards achieving peace and prosperity in our community."

He also stated that he is helping the people to work towards achieving the kind of life they wanted to have no longer live in fear and the kind of place they wanted to live for their tribe, family, and children. Allan even agreed that their participation needs to be strengthened in carrying out activities and programs to fight against extremism. When he was asked how they can help prevent violent extremism from happening, he said:

"My participation in this program is important because, with a financial reward, I volunteer to help and participate in the fight against violent extremism."

In the same way, Tanya also admitted that she is helping with the programs of the Sectoral Group against violent extremism by way of participating in their activities and programs. She said:

"My participation in the fight against violent extremism is very important because I used to convince the community to oppose the atrocities committed by the extremists to be freed from the danger brought by bad elements in the community so that they can live in peace."

"I collaborated with sectoral groups in the implementation of anti-violent extremism in the community and I became their partner in dialogue with the community to encourage the community to participate in fighting violence."

As evident in the responses of the participants, it can be implied that the Sectoral Group has already established the objective of their organization which means that they get full support from the community including youth, elders, religious organizations, and others to help

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them successfully implement activities that would further enhance their living in the community and promote peace.

5.1. Consistency of the Program

In any organization, planning, and implementation of programs, projects, or activities has always been considered integral to ensure the success of the organizational goal. However, the sustainability of the program somehow becomes an issue due to many factors affecting the program. It is for this reason that most of the responses in this study hope for the sustainability of the programs.

During the focused group discussion, Mark said that there should be more livelihood programs for the people in their community so they can meet the demands of their families' daily needs.

"I hope there will be more livelihoods programs so that they can earn enough to meet their daily needs because what is important to them is that they can feed their families." - Mark

Tanya and Rey along with Jake supported this claim and said:

"I hope there are many livelihood programs so that we can have an income for our family's daily needs." – Tanya

"I hope this program continues, and I hope all stakeholders will participate in this program and do their part to achieve success."- Rey

"I hope the program will continue until we achieve true peace and we can live peacefully without fear of our security." - Jake

This implies that violent extremism can be eradicated and prevented from happening when all are provided with livelihood programs as people in the community are just forced to join such groups because of poverty. Since the extremist groups offer false promises, many who are suffering from poverty will have no choice but to join the group thinking that it will help them economically. Thus, if the livelihood program flourishes, they will have enough to provide for their families and will no longer be tempted by what extremist groups can offer.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concludes the following:

SOP1. To what extent do the Sectoral Group address violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu as expected against as demonstrated in terms of:

1.1. Community participation

It was found that the extent of the Sectoral Group in addressing violent extremism in terms of community participation was made through strengthening community participation and livelihood programs.

1.2. Youth Development Programs

It was found that the extent of the Sectoral Group in addressing violent extremism in terms of Youth Development Programs was conducting symposiums and sports activities.

1.3. Promotion of peace and development

It was found that the extent of the Sectoral Group in addressing violent extremism in terms of Promotion of Peace and Development is that communication among adult/ religious leaders was seen to be the route gearing towards achieving the goal.

2. SOP2. Proposed Peaceful Resolution Model

These are the proposed peaceful resolution model in countering violent extremism in Patikul, Sulu, focusing on community engagement; community resilience; economic development, and law enforcement activities:

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2.1. Community engagement, involving members of the community such as sectoral groups; youth; elders; religious leaders, and barangay officials/local leaders in the community is vital in countering violent extremism through a peaceful resolution model.

2.2. Community participation is critical to identifying and addressing the root causes of violent ideologies.

2.3. The interfaith and intercultural dialogue; cooperation; promoting mutual respect and understanding in the community to prevent violent extremism from taking root cause, and to reinforce peace harmony, and values in the community is desirable.

2.4. Strengthening law enforcement activities, and empowering local security groups including intelligence gathering and sharing, and border control is necessary to ensure the community's peace, order, security, and stability.

2.5. Developing local businesses and promoting economic development can provide an alternative to violence for the unemployed people.

2.6. Establish concrete solutions to address the lack of education; poverty; unemployment and underdevelopment as these are the significant drivers of extremism.

2.7. Establish training facilities to train peace advocacy groups in countering violent extremism.

2.8. Empower the youth to discourage their peers from participating in extremist activities.

2.9. Formulate a program that could shield the youth from engaging in ideological activities.

2.10. Establish community-driven initiatives that promote peace and prosperity, such as livelihood projects, social services, educational programs, educational cultural sensitivity, and Islamic education to build trust and create resilience against extremist propaganda and ideologies.

2.11. Empowering elders; ulama and youth as promoters of peace and development and supporting peace advocates in the community.

2.12. Shield the youth from being physically infiltrated by the threat groups to avoid them from being recruited into extremist activities.

2.13. Develop economic growth that benefits all communities by diversifying the local economy, increasing access to markets, and stimulating job creation.

2.14. Conduct of Symposium on Preventing Countering Violent Extremism is necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These are the recommendations based on the findings derived from this study:

1. Recommend that the abovementioned peaceful resolution models in countering violent extremism as a guide in the implementation of the program in countering violent extremism to achieve the desired outcomes and prevent the spread of violent extremism and ideologies in the region.

2. The collaboration of efforts and the participation among stakeholders, and between the Local Government Units and law enforcement agencies in countering violent extremism through peaceful means are highly recommended.

3. The Local Government Units should craft concrete programs to counter violent extremism through peaceful means.

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