



Religious Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Case Study of Interfaith Communities

Nur Fadillah¹, Amitya Amir Nazarullah¹

¹Department of Law, State Islamic University (IAIN) Bone, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Nur Fadillah

E-mail: nurfadillah@gmail.com

Article Info

Article History:

Received: 10 April 2025

Revised: 8 May 2025

Accepted: 10 June 2025

Keywords:

Community Resilience,
Interfaith Dialogue,
Peacebuilding, Religious
Pluralism, Social
Cohesion

Abstract

This study examines how interfaith communities in Central Sulawesi transform religious pluralism into social cohesion in a post-conflict environment. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document analysis involving 30 participants from diverse religious and community backgrounds. The findings reveal that everyday interfaith interaction, collaborative peacebuilding initiatives, and shared community activities significantly contribute to trust-building, prejudice reduction, and social solidarity. The study also identifies persistent challenges, including historical trauma, economic inequality, political manipulation of religion, and digital radicalization. These findings indicate that sustainable social cohesion requires more than passive tolerance; it depends on inclusive institutions, equitable development, and continuous interfaith cooperation. The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated understanding of pluralism, peacebuilding, and cohesion in post-conflict societies, while providing practical insights for policymakers and community leaders seeking to strengthen long-term interreligious harmony.

INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism has become an increasingly significant issue in contemporary societies characterized by cultural and religious diversity. In multi-religious countries such as Indonesia, the coexistence of various faith communities presents both opportunities for social enrichment and risks of intergroup tension. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority country, accommodates substantial Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and indigenous religious communities within a shared national framework. This diversity has contributed to a complex socio-religious landscape in which pluralism functions not only as a demographic reality but also as a critical social and political challenge. Recent studies emphasize that religious pluralism extends beyond passive tolerance, requiring active recognition of equal dignity, mutual respect, and constructive engagement across religious boundaries (Ramstedt, 2024; Rosadi et al., 2024). In this sense, pluralism becomes an essential foundation for building sustainable social cohesion in heterogeneous societies (Rizwan, 2024; Myles, 2023).

Social cohesion refers to the degree of trust, solidarity, inclusion, and cooperation that enables members of society to function collectively despite differences. In plural societies, cohesion becomes particularly vulnerable when historical grievances, identity politics, and socio-economic inequalities intersect with religious differences (Ng'eno, 2023; Okorie, 2026). Existing scholarship suggests that religious diversity can strengthen social resilience when managed through inclusive institutions and collaborative social practices. However, when pluralism is poorly managed, it may contribute to polarization, discrimination, and conflict escalation. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which diverse communities transform religious differences into cooperative social relationships remains a critical scholarly concern (Kumar et al., 2023; Ahmed & Adnan, 2024; Saiban & Rozikin, 2025; Fatima & Iqbal, 2025).

Central Sulawesi has a special significance for the study of these dynamics. Religious diversity has been the hallmark of the province since long ago with Muslim and Christian communities the major religious groups among which are the smaller indigenous belief groups. Despite the diversity, there was heavy communal violence in Central Sulawesi in the late 1990s and early 2000s during the Poso conflict. The war fostered profound division and social fractures, along with trauma and enduring mistrust between communities. Trust in intergroup relations is also often a challenge to restore in post-conflict societies as memories of violence tend to linger in social institutions and within everyday interactions (Hutabarat, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2023). The Central Sulawesi case is therefore an important case study to illuminate the potential fragility and resilience of interfaith relations in post-conflict contexts.

Post-conflict, many peacebuilding efforts arose to rebuild interreligious trust and promote reconciliation. Some of these are interfaith dialogue forums, community service, youth engagement, peace education, and cultural exchange activities. These efforts have been significantly supported through the efforts of grassroots actors, religious leaders, civil society organizations and local governments. This research suggests that community-based programmes, which achieve repeated positive interactions between previously divided groups, can effectively overcome prejudice, enhance empathy, and restore trust (Tarpeh & Hustedde, 2021; Ma'ruf, 2024). The results are compatible with intergroup contact theory suggesting that good intergroup contact under cooperative conditions will decrease stereotyping and enhance social relations.

Although there has been an increasing volume of literature on religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, there are some gaps. First, normative discussions of tolerance and macro-level policy frameworks are given more attention in many existing studies than is the analysis of how pluralism is lived in everyday life in post-conflict communities. Second, previous studies tend to focus on formal peace processes and institutional measures while neglecting grassroots processes that reinforce enduring social cohesion. Third, interfaith initiatives and the lack of narratives and explanations of their relationship to other structural issues like economic inequality, political use of religious identity and radical narratives are under-researched (Nafisah et al., 2024; Okoroafor, 2025). These spaces indicate the need to analyze pluralism more contextually, taking into account both interpersonal relations and structural obstacles to pluralism.

This study attempts to fill these gaps by exploring the interpretations, negotiations and practices of interfaith communities in Central Sulawesi to enhance social cohesion. Unlike previous studies, which have mainly been at a conceptual or institutional level, this research is based on lived experience and community-based practices in a post conflict context. The study examines the role of daily practices in trust-building, interfaith cooperation and collective social action for reconciliation and what continues to impede sustainable cohesion.

What makes this research original is the combination of religious pluralism theory, social cohesion theory, and grassroots peacebuilding perspectives as one analytical lens. This study, which concentrates on Central Sulawesi, offers empirical understanding of pluralism not only as a principle of coexistence, but as a dynamic social process that is ongoing and demands constant negotiating, an inclusive process, and institutional intervention. This is one of the ways to further the scholarship on how post-conflict communities have negotiated a conflict's legacies into a shared understanding of social relations.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how interfaith communities in Central Sulawesi transform religious diversity into sustainable social cohesion. Specifically, the research examines patterns of interfaith interaction, community perceptions of pluralism, contributions of interfaith initiatives, and the structural challenges that continue to affect peacebuilding efforts. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by offering evidence-based insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen interreligious harmony and community resilience in plural societies.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of religious pluralism and social cohesion within the unique socio-cultural setting of Central Sulawesi. A case study approach enables an in-depth examination of interfaith dynamics by focusing on real-life experiences, everyday interactions, and community practices that shape interreligious relations. Through this design, the research explores how pluralism is negotiated, experienced, and sustained within a post-conflict environment. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable as it prioritizes subjective meaning, interpretation, and context, allowing the researcher to capture nuanced insights that quantitative measures may overlook. It also supports the exploration of lived experiences and social processes that influence patterns of cooperation, trust building, and community resilience across religious groups.

Population and Sample

The population of this research encompasses interfaith communities and stakeholders actively involved in fostering peace and religious harmony in Central Sulawesi. These include religious leaders, community elders, youth groups, women's organizations, and civil society actors engaged in interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives. The sample was determined using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants directly relevant to the research focus. Approximately 30 respondents were selected, consisting of religious leaders representing Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, youth representatives, women activists, and members of interfaith forums at the district and village levels. This sampling strategy ensures that diverse perspectives are captured, enabling a holistic understanding of interfaith experiences, challenges, and strategies for maintaining cohesion.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative data collection techniques were employed to enhance the depth, credibility, and triangulation of findings. In-depth interviews were conducted with religious leaders, interfaith activists, educators, and local authorities to explore their views on pluralism, cooperation, and the sustainability of peace. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with youth groups, women's associations, and community members to examine shared experiences of living in a multi-faith environment and to encourage open dialogue among participants. Participant

observation was carried out during interfaith events, religious celebrations, community service programs, and peace dialogues to capture interactions, behaviors, and symbolic expressions of unity in their natural context. Document analysis included reviewing local policies, peace agreements, minutes of interfaith meetings, and organizational reports to understand institutional frameworks and historical developments influencing interfaith relations.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved systematically coding, categorizing, and interpreting qualitative information to identify key themes and patterns. Transcribed interviews, FGD recordings, observation notes, and documents were examined to uncover recurring elements such as tolerance, interreligious dialogue, cooperation mechanisms, conflict triggers, and sustaining factors of social cohesion. The analysis followed a structured process of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation to ensure rigor and traceability. Cross-source comparison was conducted to validate consistency across interviews, observations, and documents. Emerging themes were then interpreted through the lens of established theories of religious pluralism, intergroup relations, and social cohesion, providing both descriptive accounts and analytical insights.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthiness, several measures were implemented to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and ethical integrity of the research. Triangulation was applied by integrating multiple data sources and methods interviews, FGDs, observation, and documents to confirm the reliability of findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify accuracy, clarify ambiguities, and prevent misrepresentation of their views.

Reliability was reinforced through systematic documentation, including detailed field notes, audio recordings of interviews, reflective memos, and a transparent coding process. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process, including securing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality of participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity when discussing religious practices and historical conflict experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings on religious pluralism and social cohesion among interfaith communities in Central Sulawesi. The findings were derived from four qualitative data sources, namely in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and document analysis. A total of 30 participants were involved in this study, representing religious leaders, youth groups, women's organizations, interfaith activists, and local government or civil society actors. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis involving coding, categorization, and cross-source triangulation.

The results are organized into four major themes that emerged consistently across the data. These themes include the levels of interfaith interaction in daily life, perceptions of religious pluralism, contributions of interfaith initiatives to social cohesion, and the challenges faced in sustaining long-term social harmony. Overall, the findings indicate that religious pluralism in Central Sulawesi has gradually shifted from a source of tension into a foundation for rebuilding trust and cooperation, although several structural and ideological challenges remain.

Participant Characteristics

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from various groups actively engaged in interfaith peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives.

Table 1. Participant Profile (N = 30)

Participant Category	Number
Religious Leaders	8
Youth Representatives	7
Women Activists	5
Interfaith Community Members	6
Government/Civil Society	4
Total	30

Source: Primary qualitative data processed by authors, 2026

The diversity of participants enabled the study to capture both macro and micro perspectives regarding interfaith dynamics in Central Sulawesi.

Levels of Interfaith Interaction in Daily Life

The first theme concerns the frequency and quality of interfaith interactions in daily life. Most participants described interfaith engagement as increasingly common in everyday social spaces, including markets, schools, workplaces, and community gatherings. These routine encounters were identified as important mechanisms for reducing prejudice and rebuilding trust after conflict.

A senior Muslim religious leader from Poso described how interfaith relations evolved after communal conflict.

“After the conflict, social interaction between communities became extremely limited. People were cautious, suspicious, and emotionally guarded. Even basic communication felt uncomfortable because memories of violence were still very strong. But over the years, things slowly changed. Markets became the first place where interaction returned because daily needs forced people to meet. Then schools, village meetings, and social events gradually became spaces where trust began to grow again. Today, interaction feels much more natural, although complete trust still requires time.”

This testimony shows that interfaith interaction did not recover immediately after conflict. Instead, social cohesion was rebuilt gradually through repeated everyday contact. Informal interactions became the foundation for restoring social trust.

A youth participant highlighted generational differences in interfaith relations.

“Young people are generally more open to interaction. We study together, participate in sports, and communicate through digital platforms. Religion remains part of identity, but it does not automatically create distance. In many cases, the older generation still carries trauma from the conflict, while younger people focus more on collaboration and shared interests.”

This finding suggests that generational change contributes significantly to strengthening pluralism. Younger generations appear more adaptable to diverse social environments and less burdened by historical trauma.

Participant observation further confirmed this pattern. During a joint community service activity, Muslim and Christian residents collaborated without visible social separation. A women’s activist explained:

“Trust grows when people solve problems together. Formal dialogue is important, but practical cooperation creates stronger bonds. When communities clean public spaces, help during disasters, or organize village programs, shared responsibility becomes more important than religious identity.”

This indicates that collective action creates practical solidarity and strengthens interfaith trust more effectively than symbolic dialogue alone.

Perceptions of Religious Pluralism

The second theme focuses on how participants understand religious pluralism. Most participants viewed pluralism positively and associated it with equality, mutual respect, coexistence, and shared responsibility. Importantly, participants did not define pluralism merely as tolerance but as active recognition of equal dignity across religious groups.

A Christian religious leader explained the deeper meaning of pluralism.

“Pluralism is not simply about acknowledging that different religions exist. It means ensuring that each community feels respected, protected, and treated fairly. Tolerance alone is insufficient if one group still feels marginalized. Genuine harmony requires equality and justice in both social interaction and public institutions.”

This quote reveals that participants strongly associate pluralism with justice. Social harmony becomes fragile when communities perceive unequal treatment.

FGD participants similarly emphasized the role of fairness in maintaining cohesion.

“In daily life, most people interact peacefully. Problems usually emerge not because of religion itself, but because of inequality, discrimination, or unfair access to resources. When people feel excluded, religious identity can become politicized and tensions may rise.”

This suggests that pluralism is influenced by structural factors beyond interpersonal relations. Social cohesion depends not only on positive attitudes but also on inclusive governance.

Document analysis of interfaith agreements reinforced this perspective. An interfaith forum organizer stated:

“Interfaith forums help maintain peace, but dialogue alone is not enough. We also advocate equal participation, fair representation, and collective responsibility. Sustainable harmony requires both social and institutional support.”

The findings indicate that pluralism in Central Sulawesi is widely valued, but participants remain aware of its vulnerability to inequality and exclusion.

Contributions of Interfaith Initiatives to Social Cohesion

The third theme examines the contributions of interfaith initiatives to strengthening social cohesion. Participants consistently identified interfaith dialogue forums, peace education, cultural exchange, joint community service, and youth collaboration as essential mechanisms for rebuilding trust.

An interfaith activist described the role of collaborative initiatives.

“Peace does not grow only from formal declarations. It develops when people repeatedly cooperate in solving shared problems. Through education programs, health initiatives, and disaster response activities, communities learn to trust each other. They begin to see one another as partners rather than as separate groups.”

This shows that interfaith initiatives function as practical tools of peacebuilding by fostering cooperation and reducing social boundaries.

A youth leader further explained the impact of direct participation.

“Before joining interfaith activities, some participants had stereotypes about other communities. They inherited fear or suspicion from family narratives. But once they participated in collaborative programs, many realized those stereotypes were inaccurate. Shared experience changes perception more effectively than theoretical discussion.”

This demonstrates the transformative power of experiential learning. Direct contact allows participants to replace prejudice with real understanding.

Participant observation during a cultural event also revealed strong emotional bonding. A female activist noted:

“Cultural celebrations create emotional closeness. People eat together, laugh together, and share stories. These simple moments create belonging. They remind us that despite religious differences, we are still part of the same social community.”

The findings suggest that interfaith initiatives strengthen social cohesion through cognitive, emotional, and practical pathways. They reduce prejudice, foster empathy, and create durable cooperative relationships.

Challenges to Sustaining Social Cohesion

Despite positive progress, participants identified several major challenges that continue to threaten long-term social cohesion. The most frequently mentioned challenges include lingering mistrust from past conflict, economic inequality, political manipulation of religion, exposure to radical ideologies, and limited institutional support.

An older participant who experienced the Poso conflict described the persistence of trauma.

“Peace has improved, but trauma does not disappear quickly. Many families still carry painful memories of violence, loss, and displacement. Sometimes those memories remain silent, but they can re-emerge during sensitive situations. That is why peace must be continuously nurtured.”

This suggests that historical trauma continues to influence interfaith dynamics. Reconciliation remains incomplete when emotional wounds persist across generations.

Economic inequality emerged as another important challenge.

“Social tension often increases when development feels unequal. Poverty creates frustration, and in some cases, religion becomes a channel for expressing dissatisfaction. If economic disparities continue, trust can weaken.”

This finding indicates that socio-economic inequality indirectly threatens social cohesion by intensifying feelings of exclusion.

Political manipulation was also repeatedly mentioned.

“During elections, religious identity becomes very sensitive. Certain political actors deliberately use religious narratives to mobilize supporters or create division. This is dangerous because it can destroy trust that communities have spent years rebuilding.”

This demonstrates that political instrumentalization of religion remains a serious threat to sustainable peace.

Finally, youth participants emphasized the rise of digital radicalization.

“Social media has become a new battleground. Young people are exposed to hate speech, misinformation, and radical narratives every day. Without critical literacy, these messages can influence attitudes and recreate divisions.”

This highlights that contemporary challenges to pluralism are increasingly shaped by digital ecosystems. The findings indicate that social cohesion in Central Sulawesi remains vulnerable to structural inequality, political opportunism, historical trauma, and ideological radicalization.

Cross-Source Validation

To strengthen trustworthiness, triangulation was conducted across all qualitative data sources. Findings from interviews, FGDs, participant observation, and document analysis showed strong consistency across all major themes.

Table 2. Triangulation Matrix

Theme	Interview	FGD	Observation	Document
Interfaith Interaction	✓	✓	✓	✓
Perceptions of Pluralism	✓	✓	✓	✓
Contributions of Initiatives	✓	✓	✓	✓
Challenges to Cohesion	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Triangulation analysis by authors, 2025

The triangulation process confirmed strong consistency across all data sources, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings. Overall, the results reveal that religious pluralism in Central Sulawesi has evolved from a source of division into a foundation for rebuilding social cohesion. However, sustaining this cohesion requires continuous interfaith engagement, institutional fairness, inclusive development, and resilience against divisive political and ideological influences.

Reconstructing Social Cohesion through Everyday Interfaith Engagement in Post-Conflict Central Sulawesi

The findings of this study demonstrate that religious pluralism in Central Sulawesi functions not merely as a condition of coexistence but as an active social process through which communities continuously negotiate trust, solidarity, and collective identity in a post-conflict environment. The qualitative evidence suggests that social cohesion is rebuilt through everyday interfaith engagement, institutional support, and grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, while simultaneously remaining vulnerable to structural inequalities, political instrumentalization of religion, and digital radicalization. These findings contribute to the growing literature on interfaith peacebuilding by showing that sustainable pluralism depends not only on ideological acceptance of diversity but also on practical cooperation embedded in daily social life.

One of the most significant findings concerns the central role of everyday interfaith interaction in rebuilding trust. The interview and observational data indicate that routine encounters in markets, schools, workplaces, and neighborhood activities serve as informal but highly effective mechanisms for reconciliation. This finding aligns with recent studies on intergroup contact, which argue that repeated interaction under cooperative conditions reduces prejudice and increases trust (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024; Ma'ruf, 2024). The present study extends this perspective by showing that, in post-conflict settings such as Central Sulawesi, everyday interaction carries deeper significance because it helps repair psychological damage caused by historical violence. Unlike conventional peacebuilding approaches

that prioritize formal dialogue, the findings suggest that trust reconstruction often begins in ordinary social spaces where practical needs encourage repeated contact.

This finding is consistent with recent work by Tarpeh and Hustedde (2021), who found that community-based engagement generates stronger long-term cohesion than top-down institutional intervention alone. Similarly, Hartoyo et al. (2020) emphasized that local participation strengthens resilience in post-conflict communities because it creates ownership over peacebuilding processes. However, this study offers an important extension to previous literature by highlighting the temporal dimension of reconciliation. Trust in Central Sulawesi was not rebuilt immediately after the Poso conflict; rather, it emerged gradually through repeated low-risk interactions over time. This indicates that post-conflict social cohesion should be understood as a cumulative process rather than a single intervention outcome. Theoretically, this reinforces contact-based peacebuilding models by demonstrating that frequency and continuity of interaction matter as much as the interaction itself.

Another important finding concerns how participants conceptualized religious pluralism. The data show that participants do not define pluralism as passive tolerance alone but instead associate it with fairness, equality, mutual recognition, and shared civic responsibility. This finding is particularly important because it challenges narrow interpretations of pluralism that focus solely on coexistence without addressing power relations. Recent studies similarly argue that pluralism requires institutional justice to remain sustainable (Ramstedt, 2024; Rosadi et al., 2024). The findings from Central Sulawesi support this argument by showing that interfaith harmony weakens when communities perceive unequal access to public services, development, or representation.

This result also resonates with Negură et al. (2021), who found that institutional trust strongly predicts social cohesion in diverse societies. When citizens perceive governance systems as fair and inclusive, intergroup relations become more stable. Conversely, inequality and exclusion can undermine even positive interpersonal relations. The present study contributes theoretically by linking pluralism with distributive justice in post-conflict settings. Rather than viewing pluralism as purely cultural acceptance, this research demonstrates that pluralism also operates as a governance issue. In practical terms, policymakers must recognize that sustainable social cohesion requires equitable development, inclusive representation, and fair policy implementation (Sargiotis, 2024; Roy & Sachdeva, 2025; Pandey et al., 2024). Dialogue programs alone are insufficient if structural inequalities remain unresolved.

The study also found that interfaith initiatives function as crucial infrastructures for peacebuilding and social cohesion. Participants consistently described interfaith forums, youth exchange programs, cultural events, peace education, and joint social action as transformative spaces for reducing prejudice and fostering empathy. This finding is consistent with recent international studies emphasizing that collaborative activities strengthen emotional and cognitive dimensions of peacebuilding (Hosseini, 2023; Frazier, 2022). The present study confirms that interfaith initiatives create environments in which participants move beyond inherited stereotypes and engage with others as collaborators in solving shared problems.

A particularly important contribution of this study is the finding that shared action often produces stronger cohesion than symbolic dialogue alone. This differs from some previous studies that prioritize interfaith dialogue as the primary peacebuilding mechanism (Siddiqui et al., 2023). While dialogue remains important, the findings indicate that collaborative action such as community service, disaster response, and local development initiatives produces more durable trust because it generates shared experience and emotional connection. This expands existing theoretical

discussions by suggesting that practical cooperation may function as a stronger peacebuilding catalyst than discourse-based engagement in certain post-conflict settings.

This insight represents one of the major novelties of the study. Previous literature has extensively examined interfaith dialogue as a mechanism of reconciliation, but fewer studies have demonstrated how everyday collaborative labor becomes a form of peace infrastructure. In Central Sulawesi, peace is sustained not only through formal interreligious discourse but through shared responsibilities embedded in daily community life. This finding contributes to grassroots peacebuilding theory by emphasizing the importance of functional interdependence in sustaining social cohesion. Communities become more resilient when interfaith cooperation becomes routine rather than exceptional.

Positive improvements have been made, but the findings also show structural vulnerabilities that have remained. One of the biggest challenges to lasting togetherness is historical trauma. Those who personally witnessed the Poso conflict reported that they were left with psychological scars like fear, suspicion and emotional wariness. This discovery is in line with recent research on post-conflict memory, which demonstrates that collective trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally and have long-lasting effects on intergroup relations even after the conflict has concluded (Hutabarat, 2023; Mazya et al., 2024). Trauma is thus not just a psychological problem, but also a social one that can shape formation of trust.

This study builds on previous research by showing that trauma is becoming intergenerational in Central Sulawesi. The younger participants are more open to interfaith cooperation, while the older participants continue to be much influenced by conflict memories. This generational divide opens an opportunity for the youth to act as a key force in longer-term peace consolidation. The same was concluded by Loader and Hughes (2017) who suggested that inclusive education might bring about reconciliation in divided societies, as the young people may become such agents when they are given the chance to engage with them. In practice, this means that the interfaith, youth-focused programming should be a priority for peacebuilding institutions.

Another key issue was economic inequity. Over and over again, the participants stressed that social inequalities may exacerbate social tension and contribute to feelings of injustice and exclusion. This is in line with international literature which suggests that inequality is associated with social fragmentation (Dana et al., 2021). When economic development is felt to be uneven, identity differences, such as religion, may serve as a means of articulating discontent. The study thus confirms the argument that peacebuilding is inextricably linked to socio-economic justice. Development policies that promote social cohesion and equity in distribution of resources are essential for sustainable social cohesion.

Influence on religion by the political was also recognized as a serious problem. Religious identity is especially salient during electoral cycles, when political actors may weaponize sectarian narratives, participants observed. This discovery matches with the recent studies on the politics of religion where it has been found that politicizing religious aspect leads to polarization and makes democracy less cohesive (Hussain, 2023; Nurdiansyah, 2024). The example of Central Sulawesi demonstrates that, despite extensive community unity, communities are still susceptible to elite polarization. This implies a need to go beyond community engagement in peacebuilding processes and to include governance structures that facilitate political use of religious identity.

The study also underscores the importance of the phenomenon of digital radicalization. Youth participants noted that social media is becoming the platform

of choice for tolerance, misinformation and extremist ideologies to spread. This discovery aligns with recent international worries over algorithmic amplification of polarizing material and online radicalization (Haroon & Rehman, 2023). The present study builds on this literature by providing an illustration of how digital threats relate to local post-conflict dynamics. Digital hate narratives can help to resurface latent conflicts in societies characterized by unresolved trauma. Thus, critical media education and digital literacy should be integrated into interfaith peacebuilding programmatic efforts.

This study's theoretical contribution is the merging of religious pluralism, social cohesion, and Grassroots peace building in a single analytical lens. Such concepts are usually explored individually in existing studies. This study proves that pluralism could only be sustainable if it is backed up by social interaction and structural justice. Social cohesion is not just about ongoing trust-building, fair institutions, and problem solving together, it's about an ideology of diversity. This holistic view provides a more complex insight into pluralism in post-conflict communities.

The study has significant policy implications for civil society organisations, religious institutions and policy makers. First, the peacebuilding process should no longer be restricted to interfaith dialogue and instead focus on programmes and activities at the level of communities working together that encourage repeated collaboration. Second, there is need for local governments to enhance institutional fairness by involving everyone in development and having fair representation. Third, youth-oriented and digital literacy initiatives are needed to fight against radicalism and in order to maintain pluralism for the long-term. These actionable recommendations underscore the need for integrated action in social, institutional and digital spheres.

There are some limitations in this study. First, the study is based on one provincial setting and thus findings are not easily transferable to other multi-religious contexts. Secondly, the study is predominantly qualitative, meaning it offers depth of information but does not facilitate broader comparison in terms of measurement. Third, the research paints a broad picture of the participants' views, but it did not include extended follow-up information to explore how interfaith experiences change over time. The limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

This study could be extended in the future by carrying out comparative analysis by comparing with other post-conflict areas of Indonesia or Southeast Asia. Mixed-method designs can also be used to combine the qualitative depth and quantitative measurement of social cohesion indicators. Longitudinal research would be particularly helpful in elucidating interfaith trust across generations. It is also important to consider the linkage between digital media ecosystems and religious pluralism, especially among the younger generations, in future research. This kind of research will advance the knowledge of scholars in understanding the role of today's technological contexts in peacebuilding and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religious pluralism in Central Sulawesi has gradually evolved from a source of social fragmentation into a foundation for rebuilding social cohesion in a post-conflict setting. The findings reveal that everyday interfaith interaction, grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, and collaborative community engagement play crucial roles in restoring trust, reducing prejudice, and strengthening solidarity across religious groups. The study demonstrates that sustainable pluralism extends beyond tolerance and requires fairness, mutual recognition, and inclusive participation in social and institutional life.

This research contributes to the literature by integrating religious pluralism, social cohesion, and grassroots peacebuilding into a unified analytical framework, emphasizing that trust reconstruction in post-conflict societies emerges through repeated social interaction and practical cooperation. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations should prioritize community-based collaboration, inclusive governance, and digital literacy to sustain long-term peace. This study is limited by its focus on a single regional context and qualitative scope. Future research should conduct comparative and longitudinal studies across multiple post-conflict regions to better understand the evolving dynamics of interfaith cohesion.

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