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Micro and Small Enterprises of Former Combatants: Behind Economic Contributions and Problems to Transforming Peace in the Affected Conflict Community of Aceh

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A B S T R A C T

This study analyzed the positive effects behind micro and small enterprises (MSEs) empowerment programs of the former combatants - the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) despite its problem, on transforming Aceh conflict to a positive peace. MSEs play a critical role in contributing not only to economic empowerment but also conflict transformation and sustaining peace especially during the post peace agreement, that granted Aceh a form of decentralization of power from central government, with a significant degree of political and economic autonomy. Indonesia. Although the MSEs in rural Aceh Province most of them failed, they have positively contributed to the sustainable peace in the region. Based on this assumption, this study explores the ex-combatant's experience with the MSEs program within the framework of decentralized power, and how the program gradually brought them back into the community. In-depth interviews, and field work observation, were the main techniques of the data collection. The data analysis was done using thematic analysis. The study found that autonomy and decentralization has created new political marketplace. MSEs that were set up in small groups of former combatants, civilian victims and other interested community members, was used to build patronage network and that led to their failure. However, the interactions occurring in operating these MSEs have re-established the relationships among the former combatants, victims, and ordinary people that were broken during the conflict. Thus, MSEs gradually reintegrated those ex-combatants into the community.

INTRODUCTION

Elsebaie argued that micro and small enterprises (MSEs)drive for economic growth and development(Elsebaie et al., 2023).They have a strong effect on community economic empowerment and in promoting a peaceful society during the post-conflict era. They transform negative peace to positive peace, for entrepreneurial programs gradually reintegrate demobilized combatants into civil society (Maedl et al., 2010).

In former conflict countries, entrepreneurship is seen as a mechanism to facilitate economic welfare and peace (Joseph et al., 2023). It could prevent conflicts from recurring and the absence of both, could also cause or fuel another conflict to occur. Hacisalihoglu states that a peace agreement must incorporate positive economic elements that encourage the creation of long-lasting peace(Hacisalihoglu, 2012).The private sector/business community: Micro and small enterprises (MSEs), plays a crucial role in promoting peace, both in peace negotiations and peacebuilding(Joseph et al., 2021). MSEs is a tangible one of the four strategies for peacebuilding: business strategy, political strategy, philanthropy strategy, and public relations strategy(Ayalu et al., 2023).

The former combatants of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) experience with MSEs could be an excellent case to be studied(Bachri et al., 2023). Despites of disappointment due to resource limitation, it is estimated that MSEs grew 3.1 percent each year(Srinvasan et al., 2015). Some of them economically became entrepreneurs and began their political careers.

The Government of Aceh - the Regional Planning Agency had drawn up a Roadmap of the Regional Innovation System (SIDa); and MSEs is a program that has been given a priority to boost economic growth and reducing the unemployment of the former combatant and civilian that fallen victim during the conflict with help of international community(Garg & Agarwal, 2017). Some received assistance from the regional Government to develop MSEs, meanwhile those that are politically well connected to political GAM elites prefer to be contractors to gain economic benefits.

The peace agreement–Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005 that grant Aceh a significant of political and economic autonomy which was a form of decentralization of power from Jakarta. The Law on Governing of Aceh, (LoGA) gave Aceh a control over local budget and resources that was intended to empower the region and address the grievances that fuel conflict. Consequently, the former GAM combatants secured the political power and rose to be new political elite and seized the new economic opportunities(Renner, 2006). Among the most lucrative sectors were in the field of construction, trade, mineral exploration and mining, electricity production and agriculture. Former supreme commanders obtained contracts from big government projects, such as road and governmental building construction. It reflects

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the group's pyramidal leadership, whereby the lower rank combatants obtained smaller-scale construction of village road, drainage, and School classroom in their respectively controlled areas; and both worked either with government agencies or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)(Kimemia, 2014). Given their economic-related activities, the former GAM had outstanding financial support to back up its strong rhetoric on rural development.

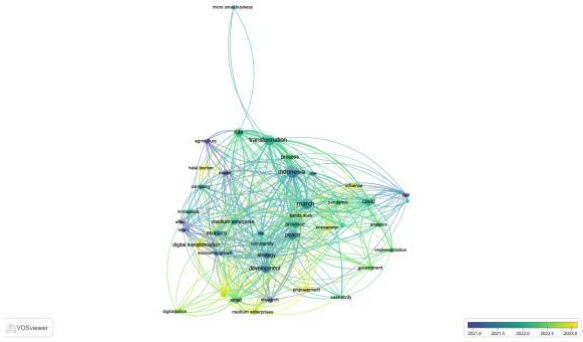
There are studies that argued that small and medium enterprises (MSEs) were highly vulnerable to crises and shocks due to armed conflict, natural disasters, and outbreaks of infectious disease(Eggers, 2020). However, there are more studies that argued, entrepreneurship has led to economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental sustainability(Efthimiou, 2025). More specifically, MSEs play an essential role in social and economic development, especially in rural areas(Woźniak et al., 2019). Their corporate social responsibility programs are one of the assets available for peace-building in society - the private business sector. Once the business sector run according to good corporate citizenship and ethical business behavior, it contributes to prosperity and stability in conflict-prone and conflict-affected areas, that certainly will create peace, especially, the local businesses and small and medium enterprises.

Further, demonstrates the role of the private sector in society; MSEs and local businesses, including grassroots businesses, have a strong influence in ending conflicts(Melin, 2016). Local businesses and MSEs leverage the business relationships of employees and business partners to influence local political influence through various relationships with different actors. In return, MSEs and peace are in an equal relationship. MSEs need peace to develop on the one hand, while, On the other, peace also requires small and medium-sized enterprises to move forward and consolidate(Wang & Wang, 2011). In societies that severely affected by conflict, MSEs can create economic opportunities, create hope and prospects for society, and bring stability.

However, the success of post-conflict economic empowerment is heavily contingent on the governance structures established by the peace agreement. While decentralization and regional autonomy are often seen as solutions to center-periphery conflicts, they can also create new power dynamics at the local level. The devolution of power and resources, if not accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms, can create opportunities for corruption and elite capture, potentially undermining the very goals of economic empowerment and reintegration.

The United Nations Global Compact published Business for Peace in 2013 to advocate for a greater role for the private sector in peacebuilding(Klein & Joras, 2016). The private sector is seen as a peacebuilding player with the resources, local knowledge, and motivation to make a big difference. The Peruvian business world is encouraged to stimulate peaceful development through poverty reduction and socio-economic benefits. In this case, corporate assistance is economically beneficial and necessary to build peace(Klein & Joras, 2016). However, little research explains how MSEs relate to peacebuilding beyond employment opportunities and economic development, particularly social integration or social cohesion. After a civil war, the most significant long-term challenge is the reconciliation and reintegration of individuals who may have fled violence or joined the military with those who remain in conflict zones. In this challenge, small businesses have a role to play, whether in facilitating reintegration or providing employment, so that peace can last. Furthermore, micro and small businesses within free borders between countries should not be excluded from contributing to the economy and national development alone. Beyond that, micro and small businesses must be maintained, systematized, and aligned to integrate communities in border areas (Venkatesh & Sridhar, 2014).Figure 1 describes the progress of research on the MSEs and Peace in global context.

Figure 1. Previous Study on MSEs and Peace



Source: VOS viewer (2025)

Based on the above explanation, a case study on the linkage between MSEs and transforming peace that affect the conflict community is very important to be conducted. The case study could be best example for the global community particularly those who shared similar conflict experience, in a way to find solution to end the conflict and developed a sustainable peace. This study aims to explain the development of former combatants of GAM's MSEs in rural areas. The results showed that MSEs involving former combatants of GAM were conducted in groups with conflict victims and ordinary people based on the capital assistance of the government. Economically, most MSEs failed to improve their economy in sustainability. However, running such a business in a group of various identities can improve the former conflict actors' relationship with the community that was broken during the conflict. This study bases its investigation on the assumption that MSEs has improved the interaction between the former GAM and the society; and it has eventually integrated the former into the latter and therefore, positive peace is possible to take it form.

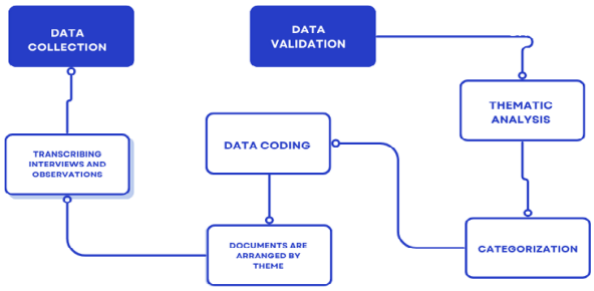
METHODS

This is a case study of qualitative research that took place in North Aceh District. The research subjects were determined by Snowball sampling. The research was carried out by visiting the MSEs that belong to the GAM ex-combatants based on the information obtained from the villages' leaders in North Aceh. It aimed to explore ex-combatants' business-venturing activities, specifically their MSEs, to improve their economy and relationships with civil society after the peace agreement

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(Memorandum of Understanding). Figure 2 describes the flow of the research, from the data collection to the data analysis.

Figure 2. Flow of Data collection and data analysis



Source: Yin (1992) in Ikhsanet.al (2024)

To access the MSEs of the ex-combatants, firstly, the authors had to obtain permission from village leaders and discuss the economic activities of the ex-combatants as initial information. Based on the information, several MSEs of the ex-combatants were purposely listed and taken to be the sample of the research.

Next, the authors contacted the director of the listed MSEs, and informed the latter about the study's purpose, and arranged the appointment, when and where to meet then began the observation and interview. There were only ten people who agreed to participate in the study. Some were interviewed in coffee shops, and others were interviewed in their business location. The authors have prepared an open-ended list of questions, as guide during the interviews.

Each interview was conducted by mixing two languages, Acehnese and Indonesian, but to make the situation comfortable and friendly, Acehnese was mostly used as the tool. All interviews began with a polite request for permission from the participants. Each of them took approximately 50 - 60 minutes naturally. Participants were asked to describe their experiences during conflict and peace periods following the researchers' introductions. Then, while listening to their explanations, the authors slowly directed them to tell their business experiences after the peace agreement. All these interviews were noted and recorded.

The data then were thematically analyzed, for its flexibility in analyzing qualitative data, that is to understand experiences, thoughts, and behaviors across a data set(Cernasev & Axon, 2023). Similarly, it is suitable for analyzing experiences, perceptions, and understandings with small, medium-sized, and even large data sets(Shinebourne, 2009). Thematic analysis suggests a researcher coding the collected data to identify themes or patterns related to the research question(Herzog et al., 2019).

The data were analyzed continuously, during data collection and after going out of the village day by day; the authors transcribed, translated, and evaluated all interviews. Then, the transcripts were reviewed and analyzed to have themes relating to research problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Micro and Small Entrepreneurships: Horticultural Farming, Feedlots and Local Based Creativity Production

The former GAM members: civilian and ex-combatants- in rural areas are divided into two groups some are actively involved in the local government, supporting the former GAM's elite who took part in local legislative and local executive elections. While there is group on former combatant stay low and refuses to get involve in local and national politics. The former's closed relation with the elite, gave them opportunities to established micro and small enterprises. They received financial aids, as capital for entrepreneurship, under the economic empowerment program from the local government which has been controlled by the elites of former GAM, who won the Regencies and Regional Head election and the Regional and Regency Legislative elections. While, the other groups refused to associate themselves with those elites; and prefer to make their own economic way of life. In addition to these two groups, they were also middlemen that played as "agent" which indicated there has been preferential treatment of those connected to GAM elite as the result of decentralized power of Aceh from Jakarta. With regards to the MSEs that were established by ex-combatants of GAM in rural areas, see Figure 3.

Figure3: Economic empowerment (MSEs)



Sources: based on interview with informant

Based on field observation in rural North Aceh, *RisehTunong Village*,*Sawang*, the study discovered a group of ex-combatants, led by Muhazir and Abdurrahman, have begun a horticultural farming, in the land that were distributed to them through marshal plan as compensation and rehabilitations program collaborative organized between the central government and *Badan Rekonsiliasi Aceh*/ BRA (Aceh Reconciliation Body) and *KomisiPeralihan Aceh/ KPA* (Aceh Transition Committee). They have been planting shallots and red papers as their source of income since 2020. Hoping that it would improve their economic wellbeing after the peace agreement. This group was gradually joined by other villagers who were conflict victims and civilians and formed a farming corporation. This corporation has been receiving financial aid from the ex-combatants, members of the Aceh People's Representative Council (DPRA). One informant said: "There was a former member of the Free Aceh Movement who served in the Aceh People's Representative Council (DPRA) from our sub district, *Sawang* and promised to plot financial aids, in the form of capital for entrepreneurship in the provincial government of Aceh's annual budget. Thence, we formed a farming enterprise group in order to receive financial assistance from the Aceh Government.

One of group member stated that "Muhajir, one of the group's leaders, was very good in building a relationship with the

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former combatants who are in Aceh's government." However, this group was formed for a temporary period of time, for instance in 2020. Once shallots and red peppers were harvested and the financial aid transferred by the government the group dissolved.

Furthermore, the study also found that there have been feedlots program that were carried out by ex-combatants after the peace agreement, namely fattening cow and goats. A group of former GAM soldiers located in *LhokBayu* in*Sawang* sub district, North Aceh, they took part in feedlots program. However, the group maintains the business with their own capital and reluctantly asks for financial aid from the elite of the former members of GAM. One of the former GAM commanders said that:

> "I had been included in the list of those entitled for capital assistance, which was specifically provided for former GAM as part of the peace agreement. At that time, I hoped that I would start a new life with my family after the Peace agreement with that financial assistance. However, it turned out to be a false hope, the aid has never reached us, the agent who had ties to the leadership elite in Aceh deceived us. Upon such a bad experience, I stop proposing for financial aid from the Aceh government and start my business with my own capital."

Soon, they were relieved when there was a village program for fattening cattle for the community, which was managed by the Village Owned Enterprise (BUMG). He stated:

> "I found peace when I saw my name in the list of those who received such assistance from the BUMG program. Since I started to work in the cattle fattening business in my village, it has been running for about two years. The feedlot would be sold during the celebration of Islamic seasons in Aceh, known as the day of slaughter *(Uro Mak Meugang)*, whence the price of cows is higher than the normal days. As a result, the profit from selling the cattle is halved; 50% for cattle keepers and another 50% for BUMG."

They further said that "although this business is a group business, we run this business individually, we distribute the three bulls for each member to care for the bull in their own barn."

Similar business is also found in *Gajah* Village. The group consists of three members, mostly former GAM combatants. As explained above, they raised the bulls also not in groups but individually; but each person raised three bulls in their barns. According to the group member, this business was relatively more prosperous than the businesses that were assisted by the Aceh Government. The so-called government's economic welfare program for the former GAM combatant mostly failed. He further argued:

> "The government's financial aids had not increased the income of former GAM in rural areas, partly because of the playing agent (middle man) by the former GAM combatants who had close connections with the elites in government, and took financial benefit or commission from the financial aids. Consequently, the group members did not fully receive the aid; it was not sufficient to run a business, therefore it was used for daily consumption rather than for business."

In addition to fattening cows or bulls, goat fattening programs also were found in *Lhok Nibong*- East Aceh and *Matang Sijuek, Seunedon*, North Aceh. The latter is the hometown of the former High Commander of the Free Aceh Movement, Muzakir Manaf or more popularly known as *Mualem*. This village had been provided with a variety of financial aid programs from the Investment, Transmigration, and Labor Office of North Aceh, which was supported by the Ministry of Human Resources Development of the Republic of Indonesia.

The program began in 2018. In order to be eligible for financial aid programs, people have to organize themselves in several working groups that consist of 20 men of former GAM Combatants, conflict victims, and ordinary people. Then the group leader establishes a contact with the person who would play as Agent middling between the group and related government offices. He was also a former GAM combatant, and politically connected to the new elected and appointed members of legislative and head of regencies from the GAM elites. The Agent manages all administrative matters, and the working groups just wait for the time when the aids would be distributed.

The group joined a three-day workshop "caring and fattening goats" organized jointly by the Ministry, Provincial and District Offices in Lhokseumawe City. In August 2018, they were given a number of medium-sized goats. They were very disappointed because the goats did not meet their expectations. They argued it was impossible for the Ministry to give them such small goats. The size as such would take two years to raise them and make them fatter for a profitable price. Besides, each group member only got two goats without any other aid such as medicine and money to build barns. They further said:

> "Each business group consisted of former members of GAM and conflict victims. During the group formation, they were very enthusiastic and pleased with the goat aid program. However, three days after receiving the goats, we received information by telephone that the first group complained that the goat got a cold, and the next day, the group reported that the very goat was dead. Then, what happened when we checked the field? We did not find any goat dead bodies, whether they were dead or sold. Two months later, we did not find any single goat raised by the beneficiary community. Worse yet, we also lost contact with the group, the number is no longer active. It turned out that they had sold the goats to the market on Sunday's market. We believed that such a business group was formed only to fulfil the requirements stipulated by the government agencies and ministries."

In addition to the feedlot, based on an interview with a former food assistant supplier of the GAM during the conflict in *Pirak Timu* sub-district; he told us that he took advantage of the opportunities in the Village Owned Enterprises (BUMG) that move in the production of Charcoal of the coconut shell, where he supplied the enterprise with raw material. Since he did not have close connection with the GAM political elites, He sold coconut shells at 1000 rupiah per kilogram. Every two days he collected 50 to 100 kilograms of coconut shells. By selling coconut shall to the BUMG, the man gradually gained self-confidence and felt reintegrated in the local community.

Pijet, local nickname, was logistic supplier to former GAM Guerrillas in the forest during the conflict. Of the same village narrated another interesting story and experience. One day, one his fellow former combatant who has close connection with the Aceh Reintegration Agency contacted him and asked for his full identities. The latter promised him that he would be listed as the recipients of financial aid for conflict victims. His name was in the list, but he did not receive any financial aid as such. He made a complain to the BRA, but no favorable response he received.

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Thence, he sensed of a corrupt aid system and stopped hoping for financial aid from the regional and local government in Aceh. He quoted an Acehnese wise word, *"Jaroe Uneun Tak, Jaroe Wie Tarek"* (the right-hand cuts, the left-hand pulls). The proverb has the meaning of self-reliance, a commitment that he has held on during peacetime. He worked at the Wood Processed plant in *Teupin U Pirak Timu* to support his family. He further narrated that "If I continued waiting for aid program from the government, my children and wife would starve, and for the time being they have to live in the *Meunasah* (Village Multipurpose Hall) because where I worked, I was not given a monthly salary. I was paid based on percentage share of the wood ordered."

Working for a long time at other companies with uncertain salaries, *Pijet* ventured to start his own business to earn more income. He stated that "Because I did not have the capital, the first thing I did was that I approached the house builders and asked them to buy the wood directly from me. His marketing strategy worked, and now many people who wanted to build their houses had contacted him for the wood. He would look for woods and then took them to a wood processing company." That was how *Pijet* started his own wood supplier.

These were several samples of MSEs set up by the former GAM combatant in Aceh, either that received financial support from the government, or that were set individually without the support from the government. The former MSEs mostly ended following the ending of the aid program from the government. While the latter might continue till today. What is interesting with the finding of this study is its ability to see beyond the economic implication of the MSEs, it argues that the social political implication of MSEs as the economic empowerment program on the former GAM combatants is reflected in their social political relation with other members of the community in Aceh. How MSEs have transformed negative peace to positive peace in rural Aceh. A deeper analysis would be presented in the later part of this discussion.

The MSEs as a Forum for Reintegrating Former Combatants

MSEs can be carried out individually and in groups. Most of the MSEs that involved former GAM in villages were established merely to obtain the government's financial aid(Woźniak et al., 2019). It was setup to fulfil the requirement for being eligible for the financial aid from the economic empowerment program initiated by the central government. In the hope that it could transform temporal peace to the sustainable peace. only one business was run without capital assistance from the government, namely a wood processing business for building houses. Most former GAM combatants in rural areas have formed business groups with other villagers to obtain financial assistance from central government programs through ministries, provincial governments through offices, and village governments through Village-Owned Enterprises. In Aceh, presents an interesting picture of MSEs, where the business group consists of former GAM members, conflict victims, and ordinary people. In contrast to several cases of conflict in areas such as in Colombia, the general public, civilian victims of the conflict were reluctant to work with the former combatants. They were cautious that being closer to the latter might put them at risk, so they kept a distance from. The coexistence was mainly determined by local factors, such as poverty and insecurity, and past experiences of conflict victims, former combatants, and other citizens.

This study further argued that, besides the economic improvement, MSEs also in Aceh serve as a forum for reintegrating former combatants, civilian conflict victims and general people into the society. It is in line with previous literatures on the positive potential of local businesses such as enterprises that could be managed as an important economic reintegration program to build a lasting peace after the peace agreements(Joseph et al., 2021). MSEs should move forward and consolidate, creating economic opportunities and providing hope and prospects for long-term partnerships(Aulia et al., 2024). Business activities can promote peace that gradually reduces intergroup differences within the operating environment of the business on the basis of inclusive and value-creating practices (Joseph & Van Buren, 2022). Business interactions may reduce bias and fear; and that certainly builds a common intergroup identity when entrepreneurs are inclusive and engage in intergroup activities(Bojicic-Dzelilovic et al., 2024). This can be understood by the provision of post-conflict business capital aids in groups that include various group identities, even if they experience economic losses, it still has a positive impact on restructuring relationships among members of the community that were damaged by a prolonged conflict. MSEs which are also called social entrepreneurship for it uses entrepreneurial behavior for social ends rather than economic profit (Mohiuddin et al., 2020). MSEs are perceived to be effective in setting up sustainable peace-building to promote a peaceful society (Grimm et al., 2024)by strengthening social cohesion and community resilience at grassroots level.

The previous explanation indicates that the government's assistance in forming the business groups of former combatants, conflict victims, and ordinary people is valuable for a robust reintegration process. This study confirms that providing capital assistance brings former combatants of GAM into civil society.

This study shows that providing assistance capital to run MSEs in groups has two functions; the MSEs might facilitate prosperity and reintegration as a peacebuilding process. The involvement of former combatants in Small Enterprises (MSEs) facilitated by government assistance gave them business opportunities to enjoy peace dividends and repair relationships damaged by prolonged conflicts. Economically, however, this study found that most MSEs facilitated by the central and provincial governments yet could not improve their economic condition. Some MSEs groups disappeared not long after capital assistance was received, see table 1 and 2. The failure was associated with either the cattle being under graded, insufficient funds, or the exclusion of women from the business group. Gender inequality remains a problem that must be resolved between former men and women combatants, and between conflict-affected communities. If this condition persisted, the Aceh conflict could change from a vertical to a horizontal conflict, both between former combatants and between former combatants and ordinary civil society. Withstanding that, the positive peace has gradually taken place and the chance for sustainable future peace were possible to be realized.

Table 1. Sustainable MSEs in North Aceh

MSEs	Scale	Location

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Palm Plantation	ME	*PyBakong, Nisam, Sp.Keramat*
Hobey Bee Breeder	MES	*Sp.Keramat*
Restaurant	MES	*Lhoksukon*

Sources: multiple media reports formulated by authors, 2005- to present

Table 2. Unsustainable MSEs in North Aceh

MSEs	Scale	Location
Charcoal and Wood Craft	ME	*Pirak Timur*
Feedlots	MES	*Senudun, Bayu*
Horticultural	MES	*Sawang*

Sources: multiple media reports formulate by authors 2014- 2018

CONCLUSION

This article concluded that economic empowerment and the MSEs program are important breakthrough policies introduced by the central government after the peace agreement reached in Helsinki. Aceh with her special autonomous status should have speed up the economic empowerment not only for former combatant but also Acehnese in the general. For the programs have not only provided the local conflict affected civilians but also the former combatant with financial support for starting a small business after long perpetual conflict. Unfortunately, the governance challenges stemming from the post-conflict arrangement, corruption and elite captured, have significant hampered the potential of MSEs for both economic and social transformation.

However, the MSEs emerges as the flatforms for social contact. They have positively and gradually enhanced the social integration process of the former combatants into the community. They have erased all negative perception, prejudice, suspicious and hostility as excesses implication of armed conflict; and get socially integrated within the community.

This study recommended that to ensure the sustainable of peace and strengthen the social integration in the region, the Aceh government must design a stronger downward accountability to the village level rather than being managed by provincial and district capital, to avoid elite capture. The success of economic empowerment program should be supported by technical field assistances, financial accountability and supervision. So that the business groups that locally setup are free of scam; and they are truly setup for economic empowerment of the beneficiaries. The limitation of this article, it does not investigate deeper into the scam and its effects on the economic empower program and the possibility of horizontal conflict that it might triggered in the future.

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