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Empowering Penghulu and Religious Counsellors for Community-Based Family Conflict Mediation in Tanah Laut Regency

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ABSTRACT

Household conflict may undermine marital relations, child well-being, family resilience, and community welfare when it is not addressed early. In Tanah Laut Regency, penghulu (marriage registrars) and Islamic religious counsellors are socially trusted and frequently consulted by families; however, their structured competencies in providing early conflict assistance remain uneven. This community service program aimed to strengthen their capacity by integrating contemporary Islamic family jurisprudence, iṣlāḥ, mediation skills, risk awareness, and referral mechanisms. The partner institutions were the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Tanah Laut Regency and local Religious Affairs Offices (KUA). The program employed Participatory Action Research combined with Asset-Based Community Development (PAR-ABCD) and comprised field observation, stakeholder discussions, capacity building, case-based training, reflection, and a 25-item Likert-scale post-training evaluation. Forty participants completed the evaluation: 17 penghulu and 23 religious counsellors. The overall mean was 4.36/5, with 93.5% of responses in the agree/strongly agree categories. Conceptual understanding was strongest, while emotion management, root-cause identification, constructive dialogue, and referral recognition required further practice. The program produced a provisional Community-Based Family Iṣlāḥ Assistance Model linking early assistance with formal or professional referral when necessary.

Keywords: *Community Mediation, Family Conflict, Islamic Family Law, PAR-ABCD, Religious Counsellors*

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INTRODUCTION

Household conflict is part of family life, but unresolved conflict can develop into communication breakdown, prolonged tension, separation, or formal legal disputes. Its consequences extend beyond spouses because children, extended families, and social networks may also experience emotional and social effects. Recent Indonesian studies indicate that communication is a major component of family resilience and that couples experiencing marital problems often seek help from people they trust before approaching professional services (Bustan et al., 2024; Latifa et al., 2024). Accordingly, early, accessible, and culturally legitimate assistance constitutes an essential component of efforts to strengthen families.

Within Islamic family law, conflict resolution is not limited to litigation. The concepts of iṣlāḥ and ṣulḥ emphasize reconciliation, deliberation, justice, and benefit, while contemporary family mediation provides procedural tools for listening, identifying interests, managing emotions, and building voluntary agreements. Maula (2023) shows that ṣulḥ can be connected productively with contemporary mediation, while Safithri et al. (2026) demonstrate that Islamic values can support community-oriented mediation and family resilience. A maqāṣid al-sharīʿah perspective further requires that reconciliation be interpreted together with safety, dignity, and the protection of family members rather than as a demand that every marriage must continue at any cost (Auda, 2008; Nurhikmah et al., 2024).

The local diagnosis for this program was based on field observation at the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Tanah Laut Regency and discussions with KUA personnel rather than on unverified secondary divorce statistics. The initial diagnostic process revealed that penghulu and religious counsellors already serve as trusted first points of contact for marriage- and family-related concerns. This is consistent with studies that place religious counsellors within family-resilience and family-conflict prevention services at KUA level (Maiseptian et al., 2021). However, proximity to the community does not automatically produce structured mediation competence. Participants still needed stronger skills in empathic communication, emotion management, root-cause identification, confidentiality, neutrality, protection of vulnerable parties, and referral decision-making.

The program therefore addressed a practice gap. Community family programs often emphasize advice or normative socialization, whereas difficult family conversations require practical facilitation skills and clear ethical boundaries. This gap is particularly salient because community-based assistance operates alongside formal court-annexed mediation. In Indonesia, mediation in court is governed by Supreme Court Regulation No. 1 of 2016, and community actors should not be portrayed as substitutes for court mediators (Supreme Court of the Republic of Indonesia, 2016). The distinction is also ethically significant in cases involving domestic or family violence. Jones and Aftab (2023) argue that screening for violence is essential because mediation may become unsafe where power imbalances and coercion exist (Nurhikmah & Ibrahim, 2025).

To address this gap, the community service initiative integrated four components: contemporary Islamic family jurisprudence, practical mediation skills, participatory action, and asset-based community development. The local assets included the legitimacy and experience of penghulu and religious counsellors, the KUA and Ministry of Religious Affairs networks, religious values of iṣlāḥ and deliberation, institutional meeting facilities, and academic support from the Faculty of Sharia at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin. Rather than establishing a new institution, the program sought to strengthen the capacity and connectivity of actors who were already present in the community.

Accordingly, the program had three objectives: (1) to strengthen knowledge of iṣlāḥ, contemporary Islamic family jurisprudence, family mediation, protection, ethics, and role boundaries; (2) to strengthen practical skills in active listening, empathic communication, emotion management, problem identification, dialogue facilitation, and referral; and (3) to develop a provisional community-based family conflict assistance model that connects early religious-community support with professional and formal services when required.

METHOD

The program used Participatory Action Research integrated with Asset-Based Community Development (PAR-ABCD). Operationally, PAR was applied through a cycle of diagnosis, action, evaluation, and reflection, while ABCD was used to identify and mobilize existing human, social, institutional, religious, and physical assets. This approach was selected because participants were positioned not merely as training recipients; rather, their experience in KUA and community services informed problem definition, competency selection, and the design of follow-up activities.

The service was conducted in Tanah Laut Regency, South Kalimantan, in partnership with the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Tanah Laut Regency and local KUA. The main face-to-face capacity-building session was held on 8 July 2026 at the Takisung District Hall and involved KUA heads, penghulu, religious counsellors, and lecturers from the Faculty of Sharia. The evaluation dataset contained 40 complete responses, consisting of 17 penghulu (42.5%) and 23 religious counsellors (57.5%). Variables such as sex, years of service, and previous caseload were not available in the evaluation dataset and were therefore not analyzed.

The intervention comprised six linked stages: (1) field observation and stakeholder discussion to map problems and assets; (2) capacity building on iṣlāḥ, contemporary Islamic family jurisprudence, role boundaries, and family protection; (3) practical discussion and case-based learning on communication and facilitation; (4) post-training evaluation and reflection; (5) design of technical follow-up training; and (6) development of a provisional assistance and referral model. At the time this manuscript was prepared, the technical online session scheduled for 19 August 2026 had not yet been completed, so it is reported as a planned follow-up rather than as a finished intervention.

A 25-item Likert questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used to assess five dimensions: understanding of iṣlāḥ and mediation (items 1–5), mediation skills (items 6–12), gender and child protection (items 13–16), self-confidence (items 17–20), and perceptions of PAR-ABCD (items 21–25). Quantitative data were summarized using means, score indices, and the proportion of responses rated 4 or 5. Internal consistency was examined with Cronbach's alpha. Qualitative notes from observation, KUA discussions, case discussions, and program reflection were organized thematically around community assets, competency needs, role boundaries, protection, referral, and sustainability.

Although a 15-item knowledge pre-test/post-test instrument had been designed for the program, a matched pre-test dataset was not available when the manuscript was drafted. Consequently, the manuscript does not report gain scores, effect sizes, paired-sample t tests, or Wilcoxon tests. The quantitative results should therefore be interpreted as a post-training capacity profile rather than as causal evidence of change.

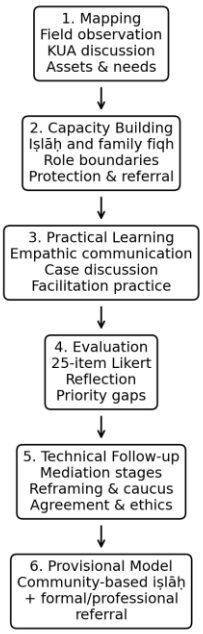


Figure 1. PAR-ABCD empowerment pathway used in the program

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Community Diagnosis and Asset Mobilization

The initial field process identified four closely connected needs. First, participants required an applied understanding of iṣlāḥ and contemporary Islamic family jurisprudence rather than purely normative advice. Second, practical communication and facilitation skills needed reinforcement. Third, family assistance had to be responsive to the needs of women, children, and other

vulnerable parties and to incorporate the ability to identify high-risk situations. Fourth, participants needed a clear distinction between community assistance and formal court mediation.

The asset-mapping process also identified strong local resources. Penghulu and religious counsellors already possessed religious knowledge, institutional access, community trust, and practical experience in family consultation. KUA and the Ministry of Religious Affairs provided organizational networks, while the Faculty of Sharia contributed legal and academic perspectives. The Takisung District Hall supported the face-to-face activity, and digital communication was selected for follow-up training. This combination reflects the ABCD principle of mobilizing existing capacities rather than departing from a deficit-based narrative. Similar ABCD-based community services have shown that religious, institutional, and social assets can be mobilized as foundations for sustainable community development (Abdurrahman et al., 2022).

Participant Profile and Capacity Outcomes

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant group	n	%
Penghulu	17	42.5
Religious counsellors	23	57.5
Total	40	100.0

Forty participants completed the post-training evaluation. The participant profile confirms that the two intended frontline groups were directly represented. The overall mean across 25 items was 4.36 out of 5 (87.1/100), and 93.5% of all item responses were in the agree or strongly agree categories. The total participant score ranged from 85 to 125, with a standard deviation of 11.62. Internal consistency was very high (Cronbach's α = 0.971), although this value should not be interpreted as a substitute for full construct validation.

The strongest dimension was understanding of iṣlāḥ and mediation (M = 4.47), whereas practical mediation skills were relatively lower (M = 4.28). Gender and child protection, self-confidence, and perceptions of PAR-ABCD also produced high scores. This pattern is noteworthy because it suggests that conceptual acceptance alone is insufficient; practical skills remain the principal focus for continued training.

Table 2. Post-training capacity by dimension

Dimension	Mean (1–5)	Responses rated 4–5
Understanding of iṣlāḥ and mediation	4.47	97.5%
Mediation skills	4.28	92.5%
Gender and child protection	4.36	91.9%
Self-confidence	4.33	92.5%
PAR-ABCD perception	4.36	93.0%
Overall	4.36	93.5%

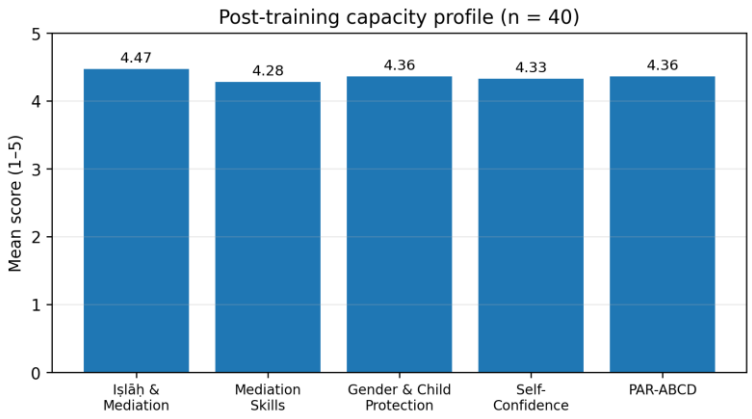


Figure 2. Mean post-training scores across five capacity dimensions (n = 40)

From Conceptual Strength to Practical Skills Gaps

At the item level, the highest-rated items concerned understanding of the concept of iṣlāḥ (4.60), understanding of ethical boundaries and confidentiality (4.55), and the belief that the program could contribute to family resilience and divorce prevention (4.50). The lowest-rated items concerned the management of disputing parties' emotions (4.17), the identification of root causes (4.20), the facilitation of constructive dialogue (4.22), and the recognition of cases requiring professional referral (4.22). These results were interpreted diagnostically rather than as a simple indicator of program success.

This gap between conceptual knowledge and practical facilitation is consistent with the broader literature. Religious counselling has an important role in family resilience, yet approaches that rely mainly on advice and lectures may remain limited without structured skills and continuous evaluation (Maiseptian et al., 2021; Miftahussurur et al., 2026). Bustan et al. (2024) also found that couples with marital problems frequently turn to trusted religious figures, underscoring the need for those figures to possess appropriate counselling and referral competencies. Training therefore needs to move beyond prescribing outcomes to families and toward enabling parties to communicate, identify their interests, regulate escalation, and access appropriate services.

Consequently, the program's next technical session was designed around four applied themes: the stages of dispute resolution through mediation, reframing and caucus, the drafting of settlement agreements, and mediator ethics. This follow-up design illustrates the PAR cycle, in which evaluation findings are not merely reported but translated into subsequent action.

Table 3. Highest strengths and priority areas for further training

Area	Mean	Interpretation
Understanding the concept of iṣlāḥ	4.60	Strong conceptual foundation
Ethical boundaries and confidentiality	4.55	Strong ethical awareness
Perceived contribution to family resilience	4.50	High program relevance
Managing parties' emotions	4.17	Priority for practical training

Area	Mean	Interpretation
Identifying root causes	4.20	Priority for practical training
Facilitating constructive dialogue	4.22	Needs repeated practice
Recognizing referral cases	4.22	Needs stronger risk/referral protocols

From Community Facilitation to Formal Referral

One of the most important outcomes was role clarification. Although the program title refers to 'mediation,' the operational model does not position penghulu or religious counsellors as substitutes for court-annexed mediators in the Religious Courts. Court mediation is regulated by Supreme Court Regulation No. 1 of 2016, whereas community actors in this program are positioned as educators, early assistants, facilitators of iṣlāḥ, and referral connectors. This distinction safeguards both legal accuracy and the rights of the parties.

The referral principle is especially important in cases involving violence, severe coercion, threats, or other high-risk conditions. A reconciliation-oriented approach should not pressure a vulnerable party to remain in an unsafe relationship. Jones and Aftab (2023) emphasize the need for domestic and family violence screening in Indonesian mediation contexts, while Tirtawening and Maryam (2018) similarly highlight risk identification and referral services. The community model therefore defines successful assistance broadly: success may entail improved communication, a fair and voluntary agreement, or timely referral to a competent authority or protection service.

Provisional Community-Based Family Iṣlāḥ Assistance Model

The participatory process generated a provisional Community-Based Family Iṣlāḥ Assistance Model. The model begins with early identification and risk screening. Low-risk cases may proceed to facilitated iṣlāḥ dialogue focused on communication, interests, and options, followed by an appropriate agreement or follow-up plan. High-risk cases, legal disputes, or unresolved cases move to professional or formal referral. In this design, community assistance does not constitute a parallel justice system; rather, it functions as an upstream layer of prevention, support, and service navigation.

The model also integrates Islamic and contemporary mediation perspectives. Iṣlāḥ provides a culturally and religiously meaningful orientation toward reconciliation and benefit, but its implementation is constrained by justice, voluntariness, safety, and role boundaries. This is compatible with recent discussions of Islamic family mediation that combine religious legitimacy with professional mediation standards and community participation (Safithri et al., 2026; Wirdyaningsih et al., 2026). A maqāṣid perspective strengthens this integration by situating family preservation alongside protection of life, dignity, children, and fair relationships.

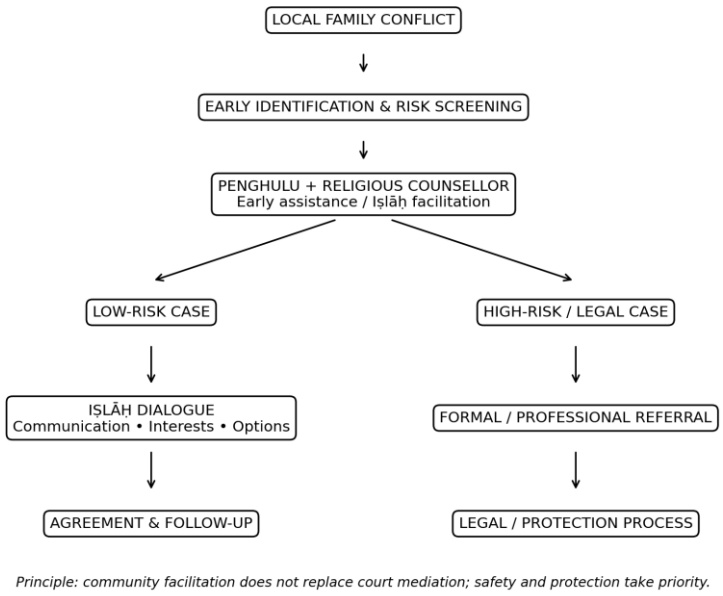


Figure 3. Provisional Community-Based Family Iṣlāḥ Assistance Model and referral pathway

Sustainability, Institutional Implications, and Limitations

Sustainability requires more than a one-off workshop. In the short term, penghulu and religious counsellors can apply active listening, structured questioning, confidentiality, and referral awareness in family consultations. In the medium term, KUA and the Ministry of Religious Affairs can facilitate peer mentoring in which difficult cases are discussed anonymously and ethically. In the longer term, the model can be translated into a minimum protocol containing early identification, consent, confidentiality, risk screening, dialogue stages, role boundaries, documentation, and referral pathways.

The program also has implications for the Faculty of Sharia. Field cases and the provisional model can enrich case-based teaching in Islamic family law, alternative dispute resolution, mediation, and protection of women and children. The partnership with KUA and the Ministry of Religious Affairs also provides a basis for longitudinal community service and future research. Family resilience research indicates that communication and religious resources can both contribute to coping and resilience, supporting the relevance of linking legal-religious literacy with communication skills (Latifa et al., 2024; Prasetyo et al., 2023).

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The evaluation included only 40 participants from one regency. Matched pre-test data were unavailable, so before-after statistical change cannot be claimed. The dataset did not include sex, length of service, previous conflict-handling experience, or family-level outcomes. In addition, no standardized observation rubric was available to quantify mediation behavior before and after training. Finally, the technical online session was still scheduled when the manuscript was prepared. The findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive post-training evidence accompanied by a provisional model-development process, rather than as experimental proof that the intervention reduced divorce or altered long-term family outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This community service program demonstrates the practical value of strengthening local religious actors as an early layer of family-conflict assistance. Field observation and KUA discussions showed that penghulu and religious counsellors already possess community legitimacy and access, but they require structured competencies in iṣlāḥ, empathic communication, emotion management, ethical boundaries, protection, and referral. The post-training evaluation of 40 participants produced an overall mean of 4.36/5, with conceptual understanding stronger than practical mediation skills. These findings guided the design of further technical training and the development of a provisional Community-Based Family Iṣlāḥ Assistance Model. Because matched pre-test data were not available, the results should not be interpreted as a measured pre-post improvement. The principal implication is that community-based assistance should complement, not replace, formal mediation and legal processes. Penghulu and religious counsellors can facilitate safe early dialogue and strengthen family resilience when cases are appropriate for community assistance, while legal disputes, violence, and serious risk require timely referral to competent authorities and protection services. Sustainable implementation will depend on repeated skills practice, peer mentoring, institutional protocols, and continued collaboration between KUA, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and higher education institutions.

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