

## Unveiling the lived experiences of rebel returnees: A phenomenological inquiry

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of rebel returnees in the Philippines, focusing on their journeys before, during, and after involvement in armed movements. Guided by Hirschi's Social Control Theory, the research examined how social bonds, values, and identities were reshaped throughout the reintegration process.

**Methodology:** A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. Ten rebel returnees who had reintegrated into civilian life were purposively selected as participants. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to capture shared meanings and patterns in participants' narratives.

**Results:** The analysis revealed two overarching themes: Life Journey of a Rebel and Reintegration into Society. Findings showed that poverty, perceived injustice, and the search for belonging influenced entry into armed groups, while experiences during rebellion were marked by hardship, camaraderie, and psychological strain. Reintegration was characterized by both hope and difficulty, particularly due to stigma, emotional burden, and limited access to support services.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the need for holistic and sustained reintegration strategies that address economic stability, psychosocial healing, family reunification, and community acceptance. By foregrounding the voices of rebel returnees, the research contributes to peacebuilding discourse and offers evidence-based insights for designing inclusive reintegration and deradicalization programs that support long-term social reintegration and national development.

**Keywords:** *rebel returnees; lived experiences; reintegration; psychological burden; peacebuilding; deradicalization; E-CLIP*

### INTRODUCTION

The situation of rebel returnees, also referred to as former combatants, remained a complex global challenge shaped by armed conflict, post-war transitions, and peacebuilding processes. Across conflict-affected societies, reintegration programs had become central to sustaining peace; however, empirical evidence indicated that many former combatants continued to experience persistent difficulties in transitioning to civilian life. These challenges commonly included economic insecurity, limited formal education or civilian work experience, social exclusion, and psychological burdens such as trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and moral injury. Despite the global expansion of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives, reintegration outcomes remained uneven, often emphasizing material assistance while underaddressing psychosocial recovery, social acceptance, and long-term community reintegration.

In response to these limitations, peacebuilding discourse increasingly shifted toward more human-centered and inclusive frameworks. This shift was reflected in the evolving language used to describe former combatants, moving from stigmatizing labels such as "former rebels" or "rebel returnees" to rehabilitative terms such as "friends rescued," a locally used phrase referring to individuals who voluntarily disengaged from armed groups and were reintegrated into society. This linguistic transformation signaled a broader effort to reframe former combatants not merely as security threats but as stakeholders in peacebuilding and community reconstruction. However, despite these discursive changes, stigma and social mistrust remained deeply embedded in many post-conflict settings, creating a gap between policy intentions and lived realities.



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In the Philippine context, national and local governance frameworks institutionalized reintegration as a key component of peace and development. The 1987 Philippine Constitution emphasized peace, public order, and social justice as foundations of democratic governance, while Republic Act No. 7160, also known as the Local Government Code of 1991, mandated local government units to deliver basic social services, including reintegration support. Executive Order No. 70 (Series of 2018) operationalized the Whole-of-Nation Approach to end local communist armed conflict, while Administrative Order No. 10 (Series of 2018) strengthened inter-agency coordination mechanisms to assist former rebels and violent extremists. These policy frameworks led to the implementation of programs such as the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), a national reintegration initiative that provided financial assistance, livelihood support, temporary shelter, and access to social services for individuals who voluntarily disengaged from armed struggle.

Despite the existence of these institutional mechanisms, significant gaps persisted in the reintegration process. Former combatants continued to encounter social stigma, limited economic opportunities, unequal access to support services, and tensions between justice, accountability, and reconciliation. Women returnees, in particular, experienced compounded vulnerabilities, including gender-based discrimination and social marginalization. Moreover, many reintegration programs remained program-driven and outcome-oriented, with limited attention given to subjective experiences, emotional struggles, identity reconstruction, and the everyday realities of returnees. This disconnect raised critical concerns regarding whether existing reintegration efforts adequately addressed the holistic and human dimensions of post-conflict recovery.

Against this backdrop, the present phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of rebel returnees in the province of Camarines Norte, a region significantly affected by the Communist Party of the Philippines–New People’s Army (CPP–NPA) insurgency and actively implementing government reintegration programs. By centering the voices and narratives of former combatants, the study aimed to address the gap between policy frameworks and lived realities. Anchored in the phenomenological tradition, the research moved beyond statistical indicators and security-centered perspectives to illuminate processes of disengagement, identity transformation, and social reintegration. Ultimately, the study contributed to peacebuilding discourse by emphasizing the importance of empathy-driven, context-sensitive, and inclusive reintegration strategies that promoted not only economic recovery but also psychological healing, social acceptance, and sustainable peace.

## Review of Related Literature and Studies

### Global Literature on the Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees

Global studies indicated that rebel returnees experienced complex emotional, social, and economic challenges after disengaging from armed groups. Many former combatants faced fear, stigma, and insecurity from both state security forces and former comrades, which made the reintegration process risky and psychologically stressful (Meernik et al., 2021). Despite these difficulties, former rebels often relied on peer support networks for emotional assistance, livelihood opportunities, and protection against social discrimination (Suarez & Baines, 2021).

Research further demonstrated that reintegration programs, particularly disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives, facilitated the transition of former fighters to civilian life by providing skills training, financial assistance, and psychosocial support. However, significant implementation gaps persisted across many post-conflict contexts, limiting the overall effectiveness of these programs (Millen & Seligsohn, 2021).

### Local Studies in the Philippine Context

Local studies indicated that many Filipino rebel returnees were recruited at a young age due to poverty, family influence, peer pressure, and limited access to formal education (Lopez, 2020; Tolentino-Gumban, 2024). After disengaging from armed groups, former combatants often faced threats from former comrades, social stigma, and persistent concerns for personal safety, which made the reintegration process emotionally and socially challenging (Fanao & Cawi, 2023).

Research further highlighted that economic assistance and livelihood programs, such as the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), a Philippine government reintegration initiative, and livelihood support provided by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), supported former rebels in rebuilding their lives by offering income-generating opportunities and economic stability (Lodangco, 2022). However, gaps in program implementation and inconsistent support from local government units adversely affected long-term reintegration outcomes.

Community acceptance, access to employment opportunities, and the availability of psychosocial support were identified as critical factors in helping rebel returnees restore dignity, enhance personal security, and regain a



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sense of belonging within their communities (Tangging & Yeo, 2023; Yuson, 2021). Overall, the lived experiences of rebel returnees in the Philippines reflected persistent struggles related to reintegration, safety concerns, and economic survival, alongside ongoing efforts to reconstruct peaceful civilian lives.

## Synthesis

Despite the growing body of research on rebel returnees, most existing studies remained heavily centered on reintegration programs, policy frameworks, and structural indicators such as livelihood assistance, access to social services, and institutional support. Although these approaches provided valuable assessments of the effectiveness of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, they often framed former combatants primarily as program beneficiaries or security subjects rather than as individuals undergoing complex emotional, psychological, and identity transformations. As a result, the human dimensions of reintegration, particularly the ways in which returnees interpreted their past involvement in armed conflict and reconstructed their identities in civilian life, remained insufficiently documented and inadequately understood.

Although some studies acknowledged issues related to trauma, stigma, ideological struggle, and social exclusion, these concerns were frequently treated as secondary variables rather than as central analytical lenses. Furthermore, there was a limited body of phenomenological research that captured the subjective meanings and lived realities of rebel returnees from their own perspectives. Longitudinal analyses of reintegration processes, as well as youth-centered and context-specific narratives, also remained scarce, creating additional gaps in understanding how reintegration unfolded over time and across diverse social environments.

In the Philippine context, particularly at the provincial level, empirical studies that systematically documented the lived experiences of rebel returnees were limited. Existing research largely relied on macro-level policy analyses and program evaluations, leaving a critical gap in localized, experience-based evidence that could inform context-sensitive reintegration policies and psychosocial interventions.

The present study addressed these gaps by adopting a phenomenological approach that centered on the personal narratives of rebel returnees. Unlike previous research that emphasized institutional outcomes, this study foregrounded subjective experiences of disengagement, trauma recovery, identity reconstruction, and social reintegration. In doing so, the research contributed to peacebuilding and social work scholarship by providing in-depth, context-specific insights into the human processes that shaped successful and sustainable reintegration.

## Theoretical Framework

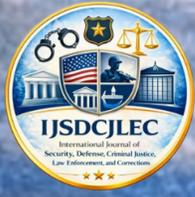
This study was guided by Hirschi's Social Control Theory (2001), which provided a conceptual lens for interpreting how rebel returnees rebuilt social bonds and internalized prosocial values throughout the reintegration process. The theory was particularly relevant to the present study because involvement in armed movements was associated with the erosion of conventional social ties, weakened attachment to family and community institutions, and the normalization of nonconforming behaviors. Reintegration therefore required not only material assistance but also the restoration of social relationships, moral commitments, and normative beliefs, which were central mechanisms emphasized by Social Control Theory.

The thematic findings were interpreted through the four core components of the theory: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. The theme on family motivation and surrogate kinship directly reflected the concept of attachment, as participants described rebuilding emotional connections with family members, mentors, and supportive peers. These renewed relationships provided emotional stability, strengthened accountability, and reduced social isolation, thereby reinforcing conformity to socially accepted roles and behaviors.

Findings related to livelihood aspirations, education, and future-oriented goals aligned with commitment, as returnees invested in socially valued pursuits that increased their stake in conventional life. By engaging in employment and skills training, participants developed tangible incentives to avoid re-engagement in armed activity, as personal progress and long-term stability became increasingly tied to lawful and productive behavior.

Themes on participation in reintegration programs, livelihood projects, and community activities corresponded to involvement, which emphasized how structured engagement in positive social roles reduced exposure to high-risk environments. Active participation in community-based initiatives occupied time and energy that might otherwise be directed toward deviant networks, while simultaneously strengthening social integration and community acceptance.

Finally, findings related to moral reflection, emotional coping, and value transformation reflected the element of belief, as participants demonstrated shifting attitudes toward peace, responsibility, and lawful behavior.



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The internalization of prosocial norms allowed returnees to reinterpret their identities away from armed struggle and toward constructive citizenship, reinforcing behavioral change beyond external supervision or incentives.

Overall, Social Control Theory helped explain how strengthened social bonds and the internalization of shared values supported identity reconstruction and sustainable reintegration among rebel returnees. At the same time, the findings demonstrated that individual transformation occurred within broader economic, social, and institutional conditions. This highlighted the importance of creating supportive environments—through family engagement, livelihood programs, psychosocial services, and community reconciliation efforts—that enabled former combatants to rebuild meaningful social attachments, strengthen commitments to civilian life, sustain positive involvement, and internalize beliefs aligned with peacebuilding and social cohesion.

## Statement of the Problem

Despite the implementation of national and local reintegration programs for former rebels in the Philippines, many rebel returnees continued to experience significant social, economic, and psychological challenges during their transition to civilian life. Existing studies and policy evaluations primarily focused on program outcomes, security dimensions, and institutional effectiveness, often overlooking the personal meanings, emotional struggles, and identity transformations experienced by rebel returnees. As a result, the lived realities of disengagement, reintegration, and psychosocial recovery remained insufficiently understood, particularly at the community level.

In the province of Camarines Norte, a region affected by prolonged armed conflict, empirical research documenting how rebel returnees interpreted their experiences before joining armed groups, during their involvement, and after their return to civilian society remained limited. Understanding these experiences was essential for the development of reintegration programs that extended beyond material assistance and addressed psychosocial recovery, family reintegration, and community acceptance.

The present study, therefore, examined the lived experiences of rebel returnees in Camarines Norte who had transitioned to civilian life within the previous five to ten years. The study aimed to generate context-sensitive insights and propose an intervention program that could strengthen reintegration outcomes and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

## Research Objectives

### General Objective:

To explore the lived experiences of rebel returnees in the province of Camarines Norte who transitioned into civilian life within the past 5–10 years.

### Specific Objectives:

1. To describe the experiences of rebel returnees before joining the armed group.
2. To describe the experiences of rebel returnees during their involvement as rebels.
3. To identify the challenges and coping mechanisms encountered by the participants while in the group.
4. To describe the reintegration process of rebel returnees into civilian life.
5. To propose a program based on the results of the study.

## Research Questions

1. How do rebel returnees describe their experiences: (a) Before joining the group? (b) As rebels?
2. What challenges and coping mechanisms are encountered by the participants during their time with the group?
3. How do rebel returnees describe the reintegration process?
4. What program may be proposed based on the results of the study?



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## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to examine the lived experiences of rebel returnees, particularly their transition from armed involvement to reintegration into civilian life. Phenomenology was selected because it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and give meaning to their personal experiences rather than measuring variables or testing causal relationships. This design was appropriate for the present study because reintegration is not only a structural or programmatic process but also a deeply personal, emotional, and identity-related journey.

The phenomenological approach enabled the systematic collection and interpretation of first-hand narratives that reflected participants' perceptions, emotions, coping strategies, and reflections on disengagement and reintegration. Through this approach, the study was able to generate a nuanced, human-centered understanding of the reintegration process that could not be adequately captured through quantitative or policy-focused methods.

### Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of rebel returnees in the province of Camarines Norte, Philippines, who had reintegrated into civilian life and had participated in government-led reintegration programs. A total of ten (10) participants were selected to provide in-depth qualitative data relevant to the objectives of the study.

**Sampling Technique.** Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who met specific inclusion criteria. These criteria included: (1) prior involvement in armed groups, (2) formal disengagement and reintegration into civilian life, (3) participation in reintegration programs, and (4) willingness to share personal experiences related to disengagement and reintegration. This sampling technique was appropriate because it ensured that participants possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

**Participants.** Participants were referred through local military battalions and municipal police stations. In this context, military battalions referred to regional units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines responsible for security coordination and reintegration facilitation at the provincial level, while municipal police stations referred to local law enforcement offices that assisted with community-based reintegration referrals. The participants represented diverse socio-economic backgrounds and varied in age and length of reintegration experience. All participants took part in individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

### Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers as the primary data collection instrument. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' demographic backgrounds, reasons for joining and leaving armed groups, experiences during armed involvement, challenges encountered during disengagement, factors influencing surrender decisions, and reintegration experiences.

To ensure content validity and cultural appropriateness, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by an expert in Filipino language, who holds a PhD in Filipino Studies and extensive experience in qualitative research within Filipino cultural contexts. The validation process focused on evaluating the clarity of questions, relevance to the research objectives, logical sequencing, and sensitivity to cultural and social nuances. Feedback from the expert led to several revisions, including refining question wording to reduce ambiguity, reordering items for a more natural conversational flow, and adjusting prompts to encourage participants to provide richer, more detailed narratives. These revisions enhanced the guide's ability to elicit accurate, meaningful, and culturally relevant responses from participants.

### Data Collection

Participants were recruited through coordination with the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office (PSWDO), the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and the Philippine National Police. Data collection was conducted through face-to-face, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions held in locations that were accessible, private, and comfortable for participants.

A conversational "coffee interview" approach was utilized, in which interviews were conducted in a relaxed and informal setting to promote openness and reduce participant anxiety. This approach facilitated natural dialogue and encouraged participants to share personal experiences more freely. Each interview was audio-recorded with participant permission and supplemented with field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.



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The sample size was determined through data saturation. Data collection was concluded when no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Health and safety protocols were observed throughout the data collection process to ensure participant well-being.

## Treatment of Data

Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis framework of Miles and Huberman, which provided a systematic process for organizing, interpreting, and deriving meaning from participants' narratives. All interview transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings were first transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and completeness.

- 1. Familiarization** – The researchers repeatedly read and listened to the transcripts to immerse themselves in participants' lived experiences, paying attention not only to the content of their narratives but also to emotional cues, pauses, and emphasis that highlighted key aspects of recruitment, coping strategies, social relationships, and reintegration challenges.
- 2. Initial Coding** – Coding was conducted inductively, allowing patterns to emerge naturally from the data rather than being pre-imposed. Significant statements, recurring ideas, and emotionally charged expressions were assigned descriptive codes, which captured concepts such as economic motivations, family obligations, moral struggles, camaraderie, stigma, and psychosocial adjustment.
- 3. Generating Initial Themes** – Related codes were clustered into preliminary themes that reflected shared patterns across participants' narratives. For example, codes related to family support, emotional attachment, and surrogate kinship were grouped under a preliminary theme reflecting the role of social bonds in reintegration.
- 4. Reviewing and Refining Themes** - Themes were systematically reviewed across all participants to ensure coherence, consistency, and relevance to the research questions. Overlapping themes were merged, minor or weak themes were revised or discarded, and themes were iteratively compared to participants' narratives to maintain authenticity and credibility.
- 5. Theoretical Alignment** – Throughout the coding and theme refinement process, the emerging themes were examined in relation to Hirschi's Social Control Theory (2001). This step ensured that the final thematic structure reflected key theoretical constructs—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—while remaining grounded in participants' lived experiences. For instance, narratives on family motivation and surrogate kinship were interpreted through the lens of attachment, whereas themes on livelihood engagement and community participation reflected commitment and involvement.
- 6. Defining and Naming Themes** – Final themes were clearly defined and labeled to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme while preserving the richness, authenticity, and emotional depth of the narratives.
- 7. Writing Up** – The findings were presented through thematic narratives, integrating interpretative discussion that connected participants' experiences with the study's theoretical framework and relevant literature. This approach ensured that the analysis was both data-driven and theoretically informed, allowing the study to elucidate how former combatants reconstructed identities, re-established social bonds, and reintegrated into civilian life.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate academic review body prior to data collection. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was secured before participation.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of coded identifiers and secure data storage. Only the researchers had access to audio recordings and transcripts. Interviews were conducted in safe and private environments to protect participant comfort and privacy. Participants were informed of their right to decline to answer specific questions, pause the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

Coordination with partner institutions ensured safety protocols for both participants and researchers. A respectful, non-coercive, and non-judgmental approach was maintained throughout the research process to uphold ethical standards and ensure the credibility and integrity of the study.



## RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The results and discussion are presented based on four research questions about the lived experiences of rebel returnees. Using thematic analysis of interviews with ten participants, the study examined their experiences before and during rebellion, the challenges and coping strategies they faced, their reintegration experiences, and suggested programs to support sustainable reintegration.

### 1. Lived Experiences Before Joining the Group

#### Themes

##### *Poverty as the Core Motive*

#### 1.1 Poverty as the Core Motive

Participant 8's account illustrated how economic deprivation functioned not merely as a background condition but as a structural driver of mobilization into armed movements. The following is a sample transcription:

*Participant 8: "Dahil sa kahirapan at kakulangan sa oportunidad na makapagtrabaho, nahikayat akong sumali sa kilusang rebelde, sa paniniwalang magbibigay ito ng tulong pinansyal."*  
(“Because of poverty and the lack of job opportunities, I was encouraged to join the rebel movement, believing that it would provide financial assistance.”)

Rather than viewing the decision to join as an isolated personal choice, the finding suggested that persistent poverty and the absence of viable employment opportunities created a context in which armed groups were perceived as alternative sources of economic security. In Camarines Norte, where socioeconomic marginalization coexisted with the presence of CPP-NPA networks, material scarcity appeared to have lowered the threshold for recruitment by increasing individuals' susceptibility to promises of financial support and livelihood stability (Meernik et al., 2021; Nussio & Ugarriza, 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern aligned with opportunity structure and grievance-based frameworks, which posited that structural inequalities and unmet basic needs heightened participation in collective violence. Economic hardship, in this sense, operated as both a push factor—forcing individuals away from conventional livelihood pathways—and a pull factor—making armed groups appear as viable survival strategies. This dual dynamic underscored how economic vulnerability intersected with conflict dynamics, transforming poverty into a catalyst for armed engagement rather than a passive condition.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were significant. The findings suggested that livelihood-oriented reintegration programs were not simply welfare interventions but strategic components of conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. By providing skills training, income-generating opportunities, and economic stability, such programs helped former combatants reconstruct civilian identities and reduced the likelihood of re-mobilization. Moreover, addressing economic deprivation alongside psychosocial support and community reintegration strengthened social cohesion, mitigated structural drivers of conflict, and contributed to more sustainable peace outcomes in conflict-affected communities.

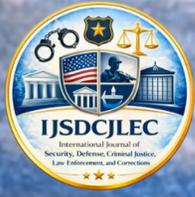
#### 1.2. Perceived Injustice and Lack of State Support

Participants demonstrated how perceived state neglect and unfulfilled government commitments operated as powerful motivational forces for participation in the armed movement. The following is a sample transcription:

*Participant 3: "Pangako ng pantay na karapatan at tulong, pero nanatili kaming nasa laylayan."*  
(“They promised equal rights and support, but we remained marginalized.”)

Rather than reflecting a simple emotional response, this perception of injustice indicated a deeper rupture in the relationship between marginalized communities and state institutions. In Camarines Norte, where uneven development and limited access to public services persisted, such governance gaps appeared to have reinforced feelings of exclusion and political alienation, thereby increasing susceptibility to insurgent mobilization (Senires, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligned with relative deprivation and political grievance frameworks, which suggested that individuals were more likely to engage in collective resistance when there was a



perceived discrepancy between promised rights and actual lived conditions. The experience of being “left behind” did not merely generate dissatisfaction but transformed unmet expectations into a sense of moral justification for rebellion. This process illustrated how perceived injustice functioned as a mobilizing narrative that legitimized armed struggle as a form of social and political redress.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were substantial. The findings indicated that effective reintegration programs needed to go beyond economic assistance by incorporating social support, community participation, and improved access to government services. Such interventions helped former combatants rebuild civilian identities and gradually restore trust in state institutions. Moreover, addressing structural inequalities and promoting inclusive governance strengthened social cohesion, reduced grievances that fueled conflict, and supported the long-term stability of conflict-affected communities.

## **2. Lived Experiences During their time as a Rebel**

### **Themes**

#### *Camaraderie and Surrogate Family Structures*

##### **2.1. Camaraderie and Surrogate Family Structures**

Participants illustrated how emotional bonding within the armed group functioned as a critical psychosocial mechanism that sustained continued participation in rebel life. The following is a sample transcription:

*Participant 8: “Pakiramdam ko ay wala akong mapuntahang lugar. Pero noong sumali ako, naramdaman kong tinanggap ako. Tinuring nila akong parang pamilya.” (“I felt like I had nowhere to go. But when I joined, I felt accepted. They treated me like family.”)*

Rather than serving merely as companionship, these surrogate family relationships provided members with emotional security, validation, and a reconstructed sense of belonging that compensated for disrupted ties with biological families. In the context of Camarines Norte, where social fragmentation and limited community support structures persisted, such internal group cohesion appeared to have strengthened attachment to the movement by fulfilling unmet emotional and relational needs.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligned with social identity theory and psychological kinship frameworks, which emphasized how shared hardship and collective struggle fostered strong in-group identification and emotional fusion. The formation of surrogate families within armed groups not only reinforces loyalty but also reshapes individual identities around collective belonging. This dynamic suggested that emotional attachment functioned as both a coping mechanism and a mobilizing force, making disengagement more difficult despite exposure to risk and hardship.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were significant. The findings indicated that successful reintegration required more than economic support, as returnees also needed structured opportunities to rebuild healthy social connections. Psychosocial interventions, mentorship programs, and peer support networks were essential in facilitating identity reconstruction and emotional adjustment to civilian life. Moreover, fostering inclusive community relationships and positive social bonds contributed to restoring trust, reducing social isolation, and strengthening community resilience, thereby supporting the long-term stabilization of conflict-affected areas (Cubero et al., 2024; Aldoughli, 2024).

##### **2.2. Harsh Living Conditions and Psychological Trauma**

Participant 5's account illustrated how prolonged exposure to violence, deprivation, and constant threat produced enduring psychological strain that extended beyond active participation in the armed movement. The following is a sample transcription:

*Participant #5: “May mga gabi pa rin na hindi ako makatulog. Paulit-ulit kong iniisip ang mga bagay na ginawa ko, ang mga utos na sinunod ko. At tinatanong ko ang sarili ko kung tama ang naging desisyon ko?” (“There are still nights when I can't sleep. I keep replaying the things I did, the orders I followed. And I keep asking myself if I made the right decision.”)*



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Rather than representing isolated symptoms of distress, the reported experiences of intrusive memories, sleep disturbance, and moral questioning suggested deeper processes of trauma and moral injury. In the context of Camarines Norte, where access to formal mental health services remained limited, such unresolved psychological burdens appeared to have complicated the transition to civilian life by undermining emotional regulation, self-confidence, and social functioning.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns aligned with trauma-informed and stress accumulation frameworks, which posited that repeated exposure to life-threatening situations and coercive environments generated long-term cognitive and emotional disruptions. The internal conflict expressed by former combatants reflected not only fear-based trauma but also ethical dissonance arising from participation in acts that conflicted with personal values. This dual burden indicated that reintegration challenges were shaped by both psychological injury and identity disorientation, reinforcing the need to view disengagement as a multidimensional recovery process rather than a single behavioral shift.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were substantial. The findings suggested that effective reintegration programs needed to prioritize trauma-informed psychosocial interventions, including counseling, peer support groups, and community-based mental health services. Such support facilitated emotional healing, strengthened self-efficacy, and supported identity reconstruction, enabling returnees to engage more responsibly in civilian roles. Moreover, addressing psychological distress reduced the risk of social withdrawal and re-mobilization, strengthened community reintegration, and contributed to long-term stability in conflict-affected areas (Orejuela & Restrepo-Plaza, 2021; Tokdemir et al., 2020).

### 3. Challenges and Coping Mechanisms During their time with the Group.

#### Themes

##### *Camaraderie and Surrogate Family Bonds*

#### 3.1. Camaraderie and Surrogate Family Bonds

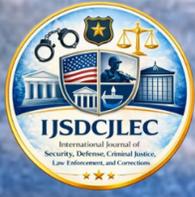
The participants illustrated how surrogate family relationships within the armed group functioned as a central mechanism of emotional attachment and collective identity formation. The following is a sample transcription:

*Participant #3: "Iniwana ko ang tunay kong pamilya, pero nakatagpo ako ng panibago sa mga kasama kong kailanma'y hindi ako iniwano." ("I left my real family behind, but I found another one in the comrades who never left my side.")*

Rather than serving merely as interpersonal support, these bonds operated as social anchors that compensated for disrupted familial ties and reinforced sustained engagement in the movement. In the context of Camarines Norte, where formal and informal social support systems were often limited, such surrogate kinship networks appeared to have intensified loyalty and group cohesion by fulfilling unmet needs for belonging, protection, and mutual trust.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligned with social identity theory and group cohesion frameworks, which emphasized how shared adversity and collective struggle strengthened in-group identification and emotional solidarity. The construction of a "family-like" identity within the movement did not only foster emotional resilience but also normalized risk-taking and sacrifice for the group. This dynamic suggested that emotional attachment functioned as both a coping strategy and a retention mechanism, making disengagement psychologically challenging even when individuals experienced disillusionment or hardship.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were significant. The findings indicated that reintegration efforts needed to address the loss of these surrogate social networks by providing alternative sources of belonging through peer support groups, mentorship programs, and community-based engagement. Such interventions supported identity reconstruction and social reintegration by helping returnees form healthy civilian relationships. Moreover, strengthening positive social bonds within communities promoted trust, enhanced social cohesion, and contributed to the long-term stabilization of conflict-affected areas (Turkoglu, 2022).



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## 3.2. Emotional Suppression and Moral Rationalization

The participants illustrated how emotional suppression and moral rationalization functioned as adaptive survival mechanisms within the context of armed conflict. The following is a sample transcription:

**Participant #4:** *“May mga pagkakataong nakaramdam ako ng guilt, lalo na pagkatapos ng mga operasyon... pero kinailangan kong kumbinsihin ang sarili ko, ‘Para ito sa mas nakararami.’”* (“There were times when I felt guilty, especially after operations... but I had to tell myself, ‘This is for the greater good.’”)

Rather than representing mere denial or emotional avoidance, these strategies reflected deliberate cognitive and emotional adjustments that enabled individuals to continue operating under extreme stress and moral ambiguity. In Camarines Norte, where post-conflict psychosocial services remained limited, such coping patterns appeared to have persisted beyond disengagement, leaving former combatants with unresolved emotional tension and moral dissonance that complicated their reintegration into civilian life.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligned with cognitive dissonance theory and moral injury frameworks, which explained how individuals reinterpreted morally troubling actions to preserve a coherent self-concept and maintain group loyalty. The use of collective justification narratives, such as acting “for the greater good,” helped reduce internal conflict during participation in violence but also delayed emotional processing and ethical reconciliation. This dynamic suggested that survival-oriented coping strategies, while functional during conflict, became psychological barriers to healing and identity reconstruction in the post-conflict phase.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were substantial. The findings indicated that effective reintegration programs needed to incorporate trauma-informed counseling and moral repair interventions that allowed returnees to confront past actions in safe, supportive environments. Such approaches facilitated emotional healing, promoted accountability, and supported the development of prosocial civilian identities. Moreover, addressing moral and psychological wounds strengthened social reintegration, encouraged responsible community participation, and contributed to more sustainable peace outcomes in conflict-affected communities (Bociaga, 2025).

## 4. Challenges, adjustments, and support systems encountered by rebel returnees during their transition back into civilian life.

### Themes

#### *Family as a Primary Motivation and Anchor*

### 4.1. Family as a Primary Motivation and Anchor

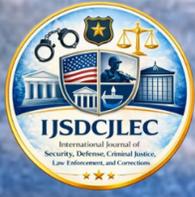
The participant illustrated how family obligations functioned as a central motivational force that shaped both entry into and exit from the armed movement. The following is a sample transcription:

**Participant #3:** *“Ang gusto ko lang talaga ay makasama ulit ang pamilya ko, lalo na ang mga anak ko. Gusto kong bumawi sa mga panahong nawala.”* (“All I really wanted was to be with my family again, especially my children. I want to make up for the time I lost.”)

Rather than representing a purely emotional attachment, family responsibility operated as a moral and social anchor that influenced decision-making across different phases of participation. In the context of Camarines Norte, where extended kinship networks often served as primary sources of emotional and material support, family ties appeared to have provided a powerful counterweight to continued involvement in armed struggle by reorienting priorities toward protection, caregiving, and long-term stability.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligned with life-course and social bonding frameworks, which suggested that strong relational attachments promoted behavioral change and disengagement from high-risk activities. The desire to restore disrupted family roles and repair strained relationships contributed to identity transformation, shifting self-perception from that of a combatant to that of a parent, provider, and community member. This transition highlighted how family-centered motivations facilitated moral recalibration and offered a pathway for resolving guilt and moral injury associated with past actions.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were substantial. The findings indicated that reintegration programs that actively involved families—through counseling, parenting support, and family reunification initiatives—strengthened emotional resilience and supported sustainable reintegration outcomes. By reinforcing family stability and supportive home environments, such interventions enhanced social reintegration,



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fostered community trust, and contributed to long-term peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected areas (Sen, 2021; Yildiz, 2023; Fanao & Cawi, 2023).

## 4.2. Stigma and Community Rejection

Participants illustrated how community stigma and persistent security threats functioned as structural barriers to successful reintegration. The following is a sample transcription:

*Participant #10: "May mga pagbabanta pa rin sa akin. Hindi ako makauwi. Traydor daw ako. Kaya hanggang ngayon, sa kampo pa rin ako nakatira."* ("There are still threats against me. I cannot go home. They say I'm a traitor. That's why I still live in the military camp.")

Rather than representing isolated acts of discrimination, these experiences reflected broader patterns of social exclusion that restricted physical mobility, limited access to community resources, and undermined feelings of safety and belonging. In Camarines Norte, where historical conflict dynamics and community mistrust remained present, such hostile social environments appeared to have prolonged displacement and delayed the transition from combatant to civilian identity.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligned with labeling theory and social exclusion frameworks, which suggested that stigmatized identities reinforced marginalization and constrained opportunities for social reintegration. Being publicly marked as a "traitor" or former combatant did not only affect social reputation but also reshaped self-perception, often reinforcing feelings of shame, fear, and isolation. This dynamic demonstrated how external stigma became internalized, creating psychological barriers that compounded the practical challenges of reintegration.

The implications for reintegration and peacebuilding were substantial. The findings indicated that effective reintegration programs needed to combine economic assistance, psychosocial counseling, and protective security measures with community-based reconciliation initiatives. Such integrated approaches helped rebuild trust between returnees and host communities, reduced fear-driven exclusion, and supported the restoration of social belonging. Moreover, addressing stigma and promoting inclusive community relationships strengthened social cohesion, facilitated sustainable reintegration, and contributed to long-term peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas (Lodangco, 2022; Suarez & Baines, 2021; Cubero et al., 2024).

## Conclusions

The experiences of rebel returnees in Camarines Norte revealed that poverty, social marginalization, and emotional vulnerability drove their decisions to join armed groups, while their time as rebels was marked by fear, hardship, and moral dilemmas. Participants coped through camaraderie, surrogate family bonds, emotional suppression, and ideological commitment, highlighting the complex psychological and social strategies employed to endure armed life.

Reintegration was described as challenging yet transformative. Family support, particularly responsibilities toward children, motivated returnees to rebuild their lives, while stigma, security threats, trauma, and economic instability posed significant barriers. Programs such as the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) provided some economic and social support, but the findings emphasized that reintegration involved not only material recovery but also identity reconstruction, emotional healing, and the re-establishment of social bonds.

Guided by Social Control Theory, the study showed that strengthened attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief supported positive transformation and successful reintegration. The findings suggest that holistic programs integrating economic support, psychosocial counseling, mentorship, and community engagement are essential for facilitating identity reconstruction, promoting social acceptance, and sustaining long-term peace in conflict-affected communities.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that the Local Social Welfare and Development Office (LSWDO), in coordination with barangay-level local government units, faith-based organizations, non-government organizations, the Philippine National Police, the Philippine Army, and other relevant national government agencies, consider implementing a Holistic Reintegration and Empowerment Program to address the social, economic, psychological, and community needs of rebel returnees. Livelihood opportunities and access to basic services may be enhanced to reduce poverty and social exclusion, while peace education, civic engagement initiatives, and social justice awareness programs could be provided to promote reconciliation and prevent future conflict.



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Trauma-informed psychosocial support, values reorientation sessions, and moral recovery interventions may be provided to facilitate emotional healing and personal transformation. Family reunification initiatives, mentorship programs, and community reconciliation activities could be strengthened to rebuild trust, support identity reconstruction, and reinforce social bonds.

Finally, existing reintegration programs such as the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) may be enhanced through sustained monitoring, protective measures, and coordinated support from government and non-government actors to promote long-term stability, community acceptance, and successful reintegration of former combatants.

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