Leaving the Jungle: The Lived Experiences of Rebel-Returnees in the Province of Isabela

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of former New People's Army (NPA) rebels are worth investigating as they provide insights that may support community intervention programs. The objectives of this study were to unfold rebel returnees' experiences before joining the NPA, their experiences as members, and their motivations for surrendering. The research identified the experiences of 12 rebel returnees before, during, and after surrendering to the government. Using snowball sampling and a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study revealed that their lives were difficult due to poverty before joining the NPA. Motivations for joining included the desire to help the community, positive assumptions about the group, the power of words, the attractiveness of the NPA, safety concerns, wanting to be with a spouse, promises of a better future, and an introduction to ideologies that promised to protect their rights. Family objections did not influence their decision. Active rebels recruited them, and a division of labor was evident inside the camp. Life as a member was challenging, marked by deprivation of basic needs and uncertainty about the future. Surrendering was either voluntary or through capture, requiring a pledge of allegiance to the government. Informants warn others to avoid militant groups and to learn from their experiences. The former NPA rebels' journey confirms that recruitment is primarily driven by socio-economic vulnerability, as individuals join due to poverty and gaps in government service, seeking promises the group ultimately fails to deliver. While returnees are grateful for current government livelihood programs, their experiences emphasize a critical need for sustained, holistic, and comprehensive long-term assistance.

Keywords: A Rebel's Life, New People's Army, New People's Army Recruitment, Rebel Returnee, Surrendering to the Government.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rebellion and armed organizations represent a global reality, often driven by grievances like economic hardship, ethnic tensions, and religious factors, where unemployment heightens vulnerability to recruitment (Rubin, 2018). For instance, disengagement from these groups proves challenging due to fears of violence and reprisals, compounded by stigma and social exclusion that obstruct reintegration (Grip

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& Kotajoki, 2019; Lukunka, 2018). In response, the United Nations has evolved from individual-focused Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) to community-centered approaches, addressing the deep ties between armed groups and local economies (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2022).

Building on this, the study of rebel returnees is necessary because of these complex, multifaceted challenges faced by individuals leaving armed groups for societal reintegration. Moreover, such research uncovers motivations, experiences, and barriers, informing targeted peacebuilding strategies. As a result, it bridges global insights with localized needs, enhancing programs like those in the Philippines. A prime example is the protracted insurgency of the New People's Army (NPA), sustained by socio-political inequalities and a longstanding People's War strategy (Vision of Humanity, 2021; Yuson, 2021). In this context, the Philippines ranks among the top ten nations most impacted by terrorism according to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, as the only Southeast Asian country in this category, despite an 18% decline in terror-related incidents from 424 in 2018 to 348 in 2019, with deaths dropping to 284. Furthermore, the NPA, the most active terrorist group, accounted for about 35-38% of incidents in 2019, though its attacks fell by 26% in events and 8% in fatalities since 2018, operating across 37 provinces, including Negros Oriental and Occidental, where it caused 31 deaths—and recording 13 deaths in Isabela and Cagayan between 2019-2020. However, civilian-targeted NPA attacks rose by 17%, with 53% of Negros incidents affecting civilians and leading to 15 fatalities (Vision of Humanity, 2021).

To counter these threats, the Philippine government pursues a Whole-of-Nation approach, designating CPP-NPA members persona non grata in 1,546 of 1,715 local government units across 64 provinces, 110 cities, and 1,372 municipalities to curb recruitment (Hallare, 2020). As evidence, from July 2016 to May 2021, 17,958 returnees surrendered nationwide, including 3,684 NPA regulars and 7,074 mass supporters, with validations by PNP and AFP (Nepomuceno, 2021). On the local level, Isabela Province recorded 117 E-CLIP beneficiaries from 2018-2021, alongside specific surrenders like five NPA insurgents in San Mariano in July 2021 and three in San Guillermo in January 2022, citing mountain hardships, psychological torture, and armed struggles (Martinez, 2018; Kahulugan, 2022). Consequently, research gaps remain in understanding the lived experiences of rebel returnees, specifically regarding their motivations before joining the NPA, their realities during membership, and the socio-psychological and economic hurdles after surrendering. In particular, studies highlight the need for insights into rebel returnees' personal narratives to enhance reintegration efforts, resource allocation, and peace-building programs tailored to their unique challenges. Therefore, this contextual knowledge is crucial for improving government and community responses to prevent relapse into rebellion and to foster social cohesion. Addressing these gaps, the contribution of this study lies in focusing on rebel returnees from the perspective of their pre-rebellion backgrounds, lived experiences within armed groups, and post-surrender lives. Through this lens, capturing their insights, motivations, and lessons learned informs more effective reintegration strategies and peacebuilding policies within the specific socio-political context of the Isabela region, which has a notable population of

returnees (Nepomuceno, 2021). Ultimately, this localized focus helps tailor interventions to the needs of returnees in communities affected by the insurgency.

In essence, studying rebel returnees provides a critical understanding of the personal and collective dimensions of rebellion and reintegration, supporting government peace frameworks and community reconciliation efforts. By clarifying how socio-economic factors and individual experiences interact to influence decisions to join and leave armed groups, it informs policies that promote lasting peace and social stability.

II. METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design, which is appropriate for exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of individuals' lived experiences and perspectives on a social problem, in this case, the experiences of former rebels who voluntarily share their stories. Phenomenology helps capture the essence of the participants' subjective experiences before, during, and after joining the NPA, enabling rich, descriptive insight into their motivations and challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Twelve respondents were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. This number aligns with qualitative research standards that prioritize depth of data over sample size to achieve data saturation and rich thematic development (Guest et al., 2006). Participants were former NPA rebels from Isabela province under the E-CLIP program between 2018 and 2021, with both male and female respondents ensuring representativeness, and those who manifested the intention to voluntarily participate in the study. Additional participants were referred by Barangay officials and the former rebels who wanted to take part in the study and who were convened by the AFP. The use of snowball sampling allowed access to a hard-to-reach population, as initial participants referred others with relevant experiences, ensuring trust and willingness to share (Cubero et al., 2024).

Data analysis followed several steps, beginning with transcription of interview recordings, then coding the data through open, axial, and selective coding to identify meaningful units and patterns (Saldaña, 2016). Themes were developed inductively by grouping similar codes around core ideas related to motivations, experiences, barriers, and lessons learned. To validate the findings, member checking was conducted where participants reviewed interpretations for accuracy. Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying data with field notes and expert review of the coding process. The research employed peer debriefing and audit trails to ensure transparency and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section summarizes the rebel returnee's experiences before, during, and after surrendering from the New People's Army.

A. Before joining the NPA

1. Farming failed to improve their means of living.

Key informants described farming as their primary livelihood, yet insufficient to escape poverty, echoing conflict theory's view that economic scarcity and unequal resource access drive class antagonism and vulnerability to radical mobilization (Marx, 1978; Weber, 1978). KI2 stated, "*Maysa ak nga farmers idi sir. Narigat met*" (I was a farmer before, Sir. It was difficult), while KI1 noted, "*Agmulmula met lang kami ti mais sir"* (We were only planting corn, sir). These accounts reveal structural barriers like poor land quality and low yields, aligning with Ogundipe et al.'s (2017) findings on hunger and degraded soils in impoverished rural areas, which raise the opportunity costs of rebellion over subsistence labor. Moreover, Women's dual roles as farmers and caregivers intensified these struggles. KI6 recalled, "*Ay ket kuwa Aggatgatangak ti saba idi met lang. Kuwa met agrigrigat metla idi"* (I was only a banana vendor before. Life was difficult before), and KI12 added, "*Nakiaani lang po ako ng mais noon at ako ang naiiwan sa bahay para may kasama ang anak ko*" (I was a corn harvester before, but I also stayed home taking care of my child).

These patterns match Pogoy et al.'s (2016) observations on rising female agricultural involvement in Philippine single-parent households displaced from traditional roles. Through a conflict lens, patriarchal structures compound class poverty, pushing marginalized women toward insurgent promises of equity. KI1 and KI2's reflections on community-wide farming struggles, "It was still difficult because people were only farmers," underscore horizontal inequalities that fragment rural solidarity and prime recruitment (Østby, 2008). Ultimately, these narratives validate conflict theory's poverty-conflict nexus: subsistence failures create conflict debt through depleted human capital and eroded trust, rendering rural underclasses susceptible to NPA ideology as a counter-hegemonic response (Goodhand, 2001).

2. Life made difficult by poverty.

Key informants consistently described pre-NPA life as marked by chronic poverty and insufficient income, viewing hardship as normalized amid Filipino resilience (Dela Cruz et al., 2014). They echoed this sentiment: KI4 stated, "*Ket narigat latta met ti biyag mi idi*" (Well, life has always been difficult for us). Similarly, KI7 noted, "*Marigrigat kami latta met*" (We were all experiencing difficult life before). KI9 added, "*Dati met ah nga kuwa narigat latta ti biyag*" (Even before, life was difficult), while KI10 remarked, "*Kasjay latta met ti biyag idi narigat latta met*" (Life has always been like that, difficult).

These statements collectively highlight a shared experience of enduring hardship over time. Key informants normalized poverty as expected, reflecting Filipino resilience—the capacity to recover, adapt, and rebuild (Dela Cruz et al., 2014). Overall, findings show NPA returnees struggled primarily due to insufficient income and persistent life challenges.

3. Healthy Relationship with family members.

The majority of the informants reported good family relationships before joining the New People's Army. KI9 explained, "*Ay kuwa uray nu agkumkuman kami lang idi ket mayat met ah ti lilinnangen mi nga sanga pamilyaan*" (Even though we only farmed, our family relationship was fine). Similarly, KI11 confirmed, "*Nasayaat latta met sir*" (It was

fine, Sir). However, KI2 noted, "*Okay lang naman sir pero nagsimula ang problema noong dumating ang mga NPA"* (It was okay, sir, but problems began when the NPA arrived). Although most informants described stable family ties, one highlighted disruptions after NPA involvement. This aligns with Suarez and Baines (2021) that familial relations are relatively intact before rebel group affiliation and are profoundly reshaped by wartime separation and post-war stigma.

4. Recruited during their adulthood.

Among the informants, only two joined during childhood. KI1 reported joining at age 16: "*Labing anim na taong gulang, Sir*" (When I was 16 years old, Sir). KI9 joined even earlier, at 13: "*Trese sir*" (When I was 13 years old). All other informants joined as adults, aged 18 to 36. KI11 joined at 18: "*Ti tawen ko ide sumrek nak kit 18 years old*" (I was 18 years old when I joined). KI12 joined at 34: "*34 years old nak met nga sumrik idi ti NPA*" (I was 34 years old when I joined NPA). KI8 joined the latest, at 36: "*36 nak lang idi simrek nak*" (I was 36 years old when I joined). These accounts reveal a wide age range for recruitment. This aligns with Child Soldiers International (2021), which notes that the NPA recruits not only adults but also minors.

B. On their motivations to join the NPA

1. Opportunity to help the community.

Two informants joined the organization to help the poor and their community, driven by promises of supporting fellow Filipinos and improving lives. This motivation aligns with conflict theory, which posits that social groups compete over scarce resources and power, prompting marginalized individuals to mobilize for better conditions (Collins, 2019). KI1 expressed optimism about aiding others: "*Kunada da nga adu matulungan da sir iti masa*" (They said they will help many people). Similarly, KI11 described recruiters' influence: "*Idi kin dagidyay recruiter gamin ibagbaga da nga nu sumrek nak ti NPA kit lumag an ti biagko kin makatulong nak ti padak a tao…*" (Because of what the recruiters said when we joined the NPA, that my life would be easier and even if I was poor, I would be able to help the poor as well).

These accounts reflect a collective hope for community upliftment, embodying conflict theory's view of disadvantaged groups challenging inequality (Collins, 2019). Notably, KI1 sought simple community aid, whereas KI2 aimed to assist fellow impoverished men.

2. Positive Assumptions.

While some participants aimed to help others, KI2 initially viewed the organization's goals positively for the people, but later recognized its cost: family separation. KI2 stated, "*Kuwa sir ta batay ngamin didiay palpalawag da idi ti ammok nasayaat. Ti maysa idi nga kasla kuwa inyad adayu dak iti sidong ti pamilyak sir*" (Based on their explanation, I thought it was good. One thing they did then was they took me away from my family). Similarly, Widodo et al. (2022) noted that women terrorists joined hoping for improved lives. Overall, participants perceiving themselves as poor farmers sought better futures but faced unintended family disruptions instead.

3. The power of words.

KI9 noted that the recruiters' convincing speech prompted her to join the organization. Flowery language, substituting elaborate words for simple ones, and using longer sentences to convey multiple ideas played a key role. She recalled, "*Ke babain met ah adding ti nasayaat nga sasao da idi ta syempre kanyak ubingak pay ket nabiitak lang nga naal allukoy idi met*" (It is quite embarrassing, but the way they talked was really convincing. I was young back then, and they easily persuaded me to join).

These findings align with Walker (2017), who argued that powerful rhetoric from terrorist leaders effectively controls and recruits members, recommending that governments adopt similar counter-campaigns. Howard (2021) reinforced this view, highlighting counter-speech strategies as essential for preventing terrorism by countering influences that draw individuals in.

4. Attractive NPA Rebels.

KI11 cited the physical appeal of NPA members as a partial reason for joining, stating, "*Ti rason ko ide nu apay napasali ak ti NPA kit adda gamin ide babae nga makitkitak kasla naakit nak*" (My reason why I joined is because of the attractive members of the NPA; I was attracted to them). This highlights personal attractiveness as a recruitment factor. Garza (2022) similarly links facial attractiveness and body type to perceived leadership, with respondents favoring leaders who appear smart, articulate, and appealing. Thus, KI11's attraction to members' looks made enlistment more compelling.

5. Wanting to experience the life of her husband.

One informant joined the NPA out of curiosity and a desire to stay with her husband. Initially driven by curiosity, her decision soon shifted due to fears of separation. As a devoted family member, this ultimately propelled her involvement. She explained: KI12 stated, "*Kayat ko lang idi Makita ken maexperiece iti ana nga kunkunana da nga NPA ta kasjay sumursurok nak met saka NPA gamin din idi ni lakay ko ta kayat ko lang met maging NPA tapnu makadwak isuna*" (I just wanted to see and try what their so-called NPA was like, so I went along; and because my husband was already an NPA, I wanted to be one too, so I could be with him).

Attachment theory elucidates this shift as anxious attachment, where the drive for proximity to a spouse amid separation threats heightens radicalization vulnerability (Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). In Philippine NPA contexts, women's strong family ties serve dual roles, protective yet risky, particularly when spousal loyalty draws them into insurgency.

6. Objections of family members did not change anything.

Eleven informants reported that their families knew of their participation, while two said they did not. Regardless, family awareness did not influence their decisions. KI6 revealed, "*Amman ah ammo ti kuwah ah pamilyak idi t saanak nagawid idin eh*" (Yes, my family already knew then because I never came home). Likewise, KI5 confirmed this acceptance: "*Ay wen ah ta talaga ngarud nga syempre tanggap da metten ah*" (Yes, because

they really accepted it). In contrast, KI10 shared a different perspective: "*Ammo da pagaw awiden da kami ana ngarud ket nalpasen"* (They know; they wanted us to go home before, but it was too late).

These statements illustrate the evolving family awareness and reactions over time. Colyvan, Cox, and Steele (2010) frame decision theory as the primary driver of choices, which individuals deem final despite external disagreement.

7. The involvement of family in decision-making is important.

Policymakers, practitioners, and the public often blame families for negative decisions, yet some occur without family awareness or influence. Regarding promises of a better future, KI1 shared that recruiters offered free education, unlike typical high tuition fees, stating, "*Kunada sir tapnu maka eskwela ittoy uneg awan ti mabayadan*" (They told us, sir, that we can study inside without having to pay). Similarly, KI5 noted, "*Syempre ikkan daka ti adal pagadalen da ka ikkan daka kanu ti trabaho*" (Of course, they will educate us, let us study, and provide jobs), while KI10 added, "*Pinagtigtignay da kami nga immuna"* (They gave us a job from the beginning).

These accounts reveal how the group attracts recruits through promises of livelihood and education, bolstered by active recruitment efforts. Merton's strain theory explains this dynamic: When societal goals and legitimate means conflict, individuals may join rebellious groups as alternatives (Nickerson, 2021).

C. As a member of the NPA

The second part of the interview focused on the informants' lives as active NPA members. Their experiences were shared in a discreet setting.

1. Division of Labor.

Questions on participants' ranks in the New People's Army revealed that positions were assigned based on specialized responsibilities, with roles defining their status. KI1 stated, "*Medical nak lang sir*" (I served as medical staff.). KI2 explained, "*Unang una po tagabili ng pagkain tapos hanggang nagtagal nag-edit book ako, gumagawa ng babasahin; ako yung nagtuturo sa mga kabataan na sumali sa grupo*" (First, I bought food; later, I edited books, created reading materials, and recruited youth.). KI8 noted membership in armed units: "*Kami yung mga nakikipaglaban at nag-aambush*" (We fought and conducted ambushes.). KI12 added, "*Taga-luto da ken taga-budget iti makan iti tropa*" (I cooked and budgeted food for the troops.).

Division of labor extends beyond the NPA. Sheptycki (2017) shows its long-standing effectiveness in organizations. Durkheim's (1893) The Division of Labor in Society argues it fosters societal progress, social cohesion, and moral order—principles evident in NPA structure.

2. Deprivation of basic needs.

Participants openly shared the challenges they faced in the New People's Army (NPA). Life proved difficult, exacerbated by food shortages, homesickness, and frequent clashes with government forces. KI1 recalled walking until evening amid hunger:

"*Napadasak pay ti saan nga nangan*" (I have experienced not eating). KI4 added, "*Ti ilutom ti rabii ah ket pammigat pangaldaw mo adiayen*" (What you cooked at night will be your breakfast and lunch). KI7 similarly noted, "*Napadasan mi ah ti nagbisin ah*" (We experienced starvation). Beyond scarcity, participants expressed profound family longing; KI5 stated, "*Mailiw kamet ti pamilyam eh"* (You miss your family). Sickness compounded isolation, as KI7 shared: "*Aggurigorak ke mariknak pamilyak eh malagip ko ti awan mangalaga kanyak*" (When I have a fever and feel something bad, it always reminds me of my family because no one is taking care of me). KI9 lamented, "*Mailiw nak iti nagannak ko natay ngarud ti nagannak ko nga haan ko nga nakita*" (I miss my family; my parents died before I even saw them). These hardships underscore participants' profound struggles and regrets for joining the NPA.

This aligns with the temporal theory of regret, positing that regret intensity evolves over a lifespan, shaped by the decision's nature (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995).

3. Uncertainty about what the future brings.

NPA rebels' lives involved unpredictable changes tied to their environment and location, fostering anxiety about the future. KI5 stated, "*Haan mo ammo nu anya mapasamak kanyam haan nga ammo pamilyam nu anya mapasamak kanyam*" (You don't know what will happen to you; your family doesn't know what will happen to you). KI2 supported this: "*Syempre haan mu nga talaga nu anya mangmangyari iti biyag mo ngay*" (Of course, you'll never know what will happen in your life now). Uncertainty and affect represent fundamental, interrelated aspects of the human condition (Anderson et al., 2019). Collectively, respondents' experiences—from recruitment to frontline hardships drove their eventual surrenders.

D. Surrendering Process

To provide a clearer understanding of how they surrendered, the researcher also asked about the process or what made them finally surrender, aside from the reasons or challenges they previously stated in the previous questions.

Some informants admitted voluntary surrender. KI2 stated simply, "*Kusak latta met*" (I volunteered). KI3 shared, "*Nag-usap kaming mag-asawa sa PNP kami mag-surrender"* (My wife and I agreed to surrender to the PNP). KI7 noted, "*Nagsurenderak*" (I surrendered), while KI8 added, "*Sika mi nga mismo nagsurender*" (We voluntarily surrendered). KI11 explained, "*Ide awan dagdyay kakadwak a NPA kit adyay ti gundaway ko tapnu tumakas*" (I escaped when alone without other NPA members). Though difficult, facing dangers on both sides, they chose the legal path over remaining with the NPA.

Specific deterrence aims to prevent reoffending through imposed consequences (Ariel et al., 2019). These returnees faced no legal punishment, yet hardships, family separation, and broken promises prompted surrender. Bhayana (2019) similarly identifies failed promises and persistent struggles as key surrender drivers, alongside attractive government financial support.

While some informants voluntarily surrendered, others were captured by soldiers. KI4 and KI5 reported that they were brought to the army camp for an interview. KI4 stated, "*Idiay innala dak idiayen kinuyog dak napan dak impa interview idiay army*" (When

they captured me, they brought me to the army camp for an interview). Similarly, KI5 said, "*Captured nak ngamin idi*" (I was captured). According to Huey et al. (2021), suspects arrested by police officers often have varied experiences. Although the law prescribes standard procedures, the specific steps may differ depending on the circumstances, but all actions should remain lawful.

In addition, one participant detailed the post-surrender process: initial 10-day detention followed by transfer to Villa Concepcion, an army facility in Isabela Province. There, they swore an oath of allegiance to the Philippine government. KI8 affirmed, "*Nagsapata kami ah nga talaga*" (We took an oath of allegiance). Capitulo (2019) underscores oaths' significance for former militants in Mindanao, advocating nonviolent agreements over escalating violence for conflict resolution.

E. After Surrendering

Rebels surrendering to the government occur worldwide. These individuals were received, processed, and referred to relevant government agencies for assessment. Surrender has political, military, and legal aspects: politically, it signifies defeat and victory; militarily, it means the person is no longer fighting and is hors de combat (Buchan, 2018).

1. Prioritization of parental responsibilities.

Families played a key role in many rebels' decisions to surrender. KI1 stated, "*Napanunot ko nagsurender tapno ma maalagaak atoy anak*" (I decided to surrender to take care of my child). KI2 added, "*Adiyay ngarud haan ko ida matultulunganen… isu nga daydiyay iti maysa nga mapanpanunot ko*" (That's it, and that I can no longer help them—that's what I keep thinking about). KI4 and KI7 echoed these sentiments, citing camp hardships and constant thoughts of family, a pattern reinforced by KI8–KI12. KI8 highlighted family-specific struggles inside the group. KI9 worried, "*Pinanunot ko dagidiay annak ko awan ti masakbayan da nu adda kami lang idiay uneg*" (I worried my children would have no future if we stayed in the jungle). KI10 focused on his children, KI11 could no longer endure jungle life with family, and KI12 sought to leave due to pregnancy and reunite with children left behind.

Parental involvement significantly shapes children's development, particularly academically (Lara & Saracostti, 2019). Theories such as identity, paternal investment, ecological, and role theory elucidate how parental roles influence child growth (Perry & Langley, 2013).

2. Grateful for the second chance given by the government.

Informants expressed gratitude toward the government and soldiers for their positive treatment. KI1 conveyed deep appreciation for the life-changing support, stating, "*Iti mariknak sir idi ke dakkel nga pagyamanak ta talaga nga dakkel iti nagbaliwan na ken haan nak met binaybay an ti gobyerno sir"* (I felt deep gratitude because it brought a big change to my life and the government did not let me down). KI3 initially feared torture but noted, "*Talagang kinakabahan ako...pero wala namang ipinakitang ganung motibo yung tropa ok naman yung pagtrato nila sa amin bilang captured*" (I was nervous thinking they might torture me,

but their treatment was okay). One informant described taking an oath of cooperation and receiving release papers: KI3 said, "*Sikami nga nagsurender nagsapata kami ah nga talaga tatta inikkan da kamin ti release paper*" (As surrenderees, we took an oath and were given release papers). KI5 added, "*Maayatan nak metten ah ta balik gobyerno ngaruden*" (I am grateful to be back with the government). KI8, KI11, and KI12 similarly confirmed respectful treatment by soldiers, which alleviated initial fears.

This supportive approach aligns with reintegration theory, positing that positive interactions enhance offenders' willingness to rejoin society (Braithwaite, 1989). Respectful police treatment also promotes guilt admission and rehabilitation (Basinska & Daderman, 2019). Reintegration underscores punishment paired with treatment and training to foster law-abiding citizens (Whyte, 2014).

3. Warned others to live a different life.

All respondents agreed on warning others against joining the New People's Army (NPA), using their hardships as cautionary examples. KI1 stated, "*Wen sir, tapno haan da met mapadasan sir isu nga ibagak kanya da sir*" (Yes, sir, I warned them so they won't experience it). KI2 aimed to raise civilian awareness: "*Dagiti padak nga civilian sir mabalin tapnu iti kasjay mariing agidiyay kapanunutan na tapno maamwan na diyay nagpaspasarak nga rigat sir*" (To my fellow civilians, so they understand the hardships I went through). KI5 cautioned against rash decisions: "*Narigat kunak narigat ti padalos dalos dita kunak baka agsangit kanto met laeng"* (Rushing decisions is difficult; you might just end up crying).

KI17 employed an idiom to alert youth to hardships, while KI7 advised, "*Wen dagiti kabataan...nu dakayo met nga kuwa ke kayat yo padasen yo...imbes nga makaraman kayo arak haanen*" (Yes, young people, it's difficult, but if you want to try, it's up to you; instead of tasting wine, you won't). KI8 urged learning from his story before opposing the government: "*Isu nga kunak...nu plano yo iti kasla sumrek nga NPA...adda kanya yo atta ta siak ngamin ti pagbasehan yo*" (I tell them if they plan to join the NPA or fight the government, use my experience as a reference). KI9 affirmed the risks: "*Wen nu adda agdamag ta narigat nga talaga...ta ipuspustam ti biyag mo*" (Yes, it's really difficult to join the NPA because you risk your life).

These counter-narratives align with reintegration theory, emphasizing credible personal testimonies to deter recruitment, foster social cohesion, and highlight the consequences of past hardships (Gómez et al., 2021).

4. Flowery words and promises.

KI11 warned others against recruiters' flowery words and false promises: "*Ti maibag aklang ti tattao lalo ti kabataan nga haan da agpalinlang ti ibagbaga ti recruiter kin haan da pad padasin ta nagrigat talaga ti maysa a NPA*" (All I can say, especially to the youth, is don't be fooled by recruiters and never try because being an NPA is really difficult). KI12 echoed this caution: "*Huwag niyo nalang subukan o huwag agad magpapadala sa matatamis o mabulaklak na salita…sa una lang pero hindi papanindigan*" (Don't try or be swayed by sweet words; promises are good at first but never fulfilled).

González (2022) describes how violent groups emotionally manipulate vulnerable youth, fostering belonging without overt coercion. Reintegration theory underscores the

role of support systems and positive role models in disengaging individuals from such groups and rebuilding lives (Bowling & Sherman, 2008). Here, informants leverage their experiences as negative exemplars—not to inspire ambition (Morgenroth et al., 2015), but to deter NPA recruitment and encourage societal reintegration.

F. Social Aspect

After surrendering, the following experiences were shared by the respondents as to their social relationships with the community.

1. Respect begets respect.

When asked about coping after surrender, KI3 emphasized the importance of respect: "*Mahusay yung pakikitungo sa akin yung rinerespeto ka ba*" (They treated me well with respect). KI12 agreed: "*Para kanyak sir respeto lang basta awan ar-aramidem nga dakes kanya da*" (For me, sir, just respect, as long as you don't do anything bad to them). KI11 also stressed respectful relationships: "*Basta mayat lang ti pakisamam kanya da awan met problema nukwa. Importante ti respeto*" (As long as you get along well, there will be no problem. Respect is important). KI8 initially feared rejection: "*Amman ah napanunot ko adiayen talaga rejekak ti tao... Pero mayat met*" (I thought people would reject me because I was an Intel, but it went fine). These accounts reveal how assumptions can fuel overthinking, yet actual experiences often exceed expectations.

These insights align with reintegration theory, which underscores respect and social acceptance as vital for successful reentry and adaptation (Maruna, 2001). The psychosocial model reinforces this, positioning respect as essential for restoring identity and social bonds (Cheng et al., 2022). Specifically, Cheng et al. explain how respect manifested through voluntary deference bolsters social status and leadership, promoting cooperation over coercion.

2. Family welcomed them home.

All participants reported that their families accepted and welcomed their return, expressing happiness at being together permanently, in contrast to the uncertainty they experienced in the NPA. KI1 said, "*Ket mayat metten*" (It was fine). KI2 shared, "*Idi bimmabaak ittoy sir ket mayat metten ta amin dagiti pamilyak idi naawis ko metla ida ittoy sir naurnos kami met laeng*" (When I came down here, it was okay because I persuaded my family to come here, and we settled down). KI3 noted, "*Mayat latta met, tanggap dak met*" (It's okay, they accepted me), while KI4 recalled, "*Sabi ng asawa ko mabuti at bumaba ka na, sabi niya, kasi may anak na kami noon kaya nahihirapan din siya*" (My wife said it was good that I came down because we already had a child, and she was struggling). KI11, who surrendered with his whole family, also described a positive reception: "*Ket nasayaat latta met ah sir ti pinangawat da kanyak*" (It's okay, they accepted me well).

Family acceptance is vital for reintegration after conflict. Zapata Garcia et al. (2020) concludes that the family is a fundamental system in adaptation to civilian life, often operating as a protection factor and motivation for leaving armed groups and sustaining reintegration. Strong family ties help protect against renewed extremist influence by

fostering trust, care, and social belonging, supporting a transition away from violence toward stability.

G. Economic Aspect

After surrendering, the economic aspect of the former NPA Rebels revolved around farming as their means of livelihood, the same as before. Although livelihood programs were implemented, not all informants benefited from them.

1. Farming as their livelihood before and now.

Farming remains the primary livelihood for participants, unchanged before and after joining the New People's Army. KI6 stated, "*Niluklukatak agidiay kumkuman min ah isu pagbibyagan min ah*" (I tried to farm again so it will be our means of income). KI8 and KI12 similarly confirmed their continued farming, with KI8 noting, "*Kastoy latta met farmers latta*" (Still like this, still a farmer) and KI12 adding, "*Makikumkuman lang*" (Just farming other people's farm). KI5 remarked, "*Nagsubli nak latta metten ittoyen sir agkuman*" (I just went back and farmed).

This persistence in farming suggests that NPA involvement has not improved their economic situation and may have worsened it through stigma and negative records. KI2 observed, "*Awan pay. Awan pay ti masnop nga trabahok*" (Nothing yet. I don't have a permanent job yet). These patterns reflect enduring economic challenges in rural, insurgency-affected communities, including limited land reform, poverty, and scarce formal employment. Farming as the main livelihood underscores former members' post-defection struggles with stigma and employment barriers (International Crisis Group, 2024).

2. Presence of livelihood programs.

Livelihood support is vital for recovery, as financial aid alone provides only temporary relief. KI1 shared, "*Agtaraken ti manok*" (Raising chickens), while KI2 confirmed that they also benefited from a livelihood program involving poultry raising. KI9 mentioned promises of livelihood assistance, including cows and land, which KI10 likewise affirmed. KI5 added that some beneficiaries received cows alongside the grant of amnesty.

Sustainable livelihood programs for rebel returnees have significantly improved family incomes, allowing some to move above the poverty threshold. These initiatives promote sustainable agriculture, land tenure security, crop diversification, and livelihood options such as livestock and organic fertilizer production, thereby strengthening economic resilience, reducing disaster risks, and enhancing market access and social stability (Taruc, 2023). However, persistent socio-economic challenges, including limited land reform, poverty, and a lack of formal employment opportunities, continue to constrain livelihood choices. Many former rebels remain in farming because stigma and adverse records restrict their access to stable jobs after defection (International Crisis Group, 2024).

2. Support given by the government.

The Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (ECLIP) is the government's flagship initiative to support the reintegration of surrendered rebels into their communities. Key informants reported receiving various forms of assistance under this program. KI1 shared that he received financial support from the government, which KI2 confirmed, adding that he also obtained payment for surrendering his firearm. KI1 stated, "*Eclip sir tapos adu pay ti intulong da kanya mi*" (ECLIP, sir, they helped us a lot). KI2 added, "*Immuna idi nga na receive ko sir diyay kuwa ti eclip*" (The first assistance I received, sir, was from ECLIP). KI12 reported receiving PHP 30,000 from ECLIP and free marriage services for her and her husband upon surrender: "*Inikkan da kami met nga 30k starting kit galing iti ECLIP… nagpakasal kami met ni lakay ko nga free*." KI11 noted that his financial assistance was still being processed: "*Iproc-process da palang dagdyay papeles ko tapnu makatanggap nak ti benepisyo kasla ata ECLIP"* (They are still processing my papers so I can receive benefits like ECLIP).

According to a letter from the Department of the Interior and Local Government, 117 returnees have received ECLIP financial support since 2018 (Leusen, 2022). ECLIP also grants civilian status through amnesty (Proclamation No. 1377, s. 2007; Administrative Order No. 172). During the Surfacing Phase (Step 5C), former rebels receive counseling, life skills training, values formation, and de-radicalization seminars (Lupao & Cawi, 2021). Lopez (2022) further reported that surrendered rebels receive additional government funds, with each of the 12 former rebels in this unit obtaining PHP 20,000 under the DSWD's Livelihood Settlement Grant (LSG) program.

H. Political Aspect

After surrendering, the political leanings of the informants presented no problems except for one informant who did not pursue his political career since some advised him that it was not allowed.

When asked about their political rights and whether these were affected by their former status, most informants reported no issues, while others were in the process of registering. KI4 stated, "*Oo nagbotos nak idin*" (Yes, I voted before). KI7 added, "*Wen agbotbotosakon awan met ti diskriminasyon ok met*" (Yes, I voted already. There was no discrimination). KI9 confirmed, "*Wen ah dati nga nagkuwa kami idi idiayen nagregister kami dagus idi"* (Definitely yes. We registered immediately). KI10 also noted, "*Wen ta nagpa rehistro kami nga dagus idi*" (Yes, since we registered right away). Some respondents, however, remain unregistered. KI8 shared, "*Awanen botos kon saanak nagbotos kadagitoyen... bareng agrenew ak*" (I am not voting since I am not registered yet; hoping to register soon). KI3 and KI1 similarly reported not having registered.

Eastin and Zech (2022) observed that rebel returnees' voting rights typically remain intact post-surrender, provided registration and identification requirements are met. These accounts demonstrate that, despite past hardships, returnees reject violence and embrace legality upon recognizing rebellion's false promises. Government reintegration programs continue, though full benefits require time. While their social and political rights persist, economic improvement demands sustained effort and community support.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The findings highlight the interplay of structural poverty, social inequities, and psychological factors in both joining and exiting insurgency. Reintegration programs must adopt a holistic approach that addresses economic, social, and political dimensions to sustain peace and prevent cyclical violence. Policymakers should regard returnees not merely as former combatants but as empowered agents in community rebuilding, afforded dignity and opportunity.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL BIASES

This study's qualitative approach yields rich, in-depth data but carries inherent limitations. Snowball sampling risks selection bias, as connected participants often share similar perspectives and limit viewpoint diversity. Voluntary participation excludes those reluctant to share, potentially omitting dissenting or critical experiences. The small sample size (12 former rebels from one province) hinders generalizability. Data from unstructured interviews relies on honest disclosure, which social desirability bias or fear of repercussions may undermine. Referrals from officials and military personnel could further skew selection toward government-favorable respondents.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Reintegration programs should first target persistent poverty and subsistence farming reliance by promoting sustainable livelihoods beyond agriculture, such as skills training, formal employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship. These measures can reduce economic marginalization and re-radicalization risks. Tailored support for women balancing farming and caregiving roles is also essential to address compounded poverty effects. Family counseling, community reconciliation, and stigma reduction efforts foster social acceptance and combat isolation that fuels relapse. Integrating mental health services to treat trauma, regret, and uncertainty, paired with hope-building frameworks, counters despair effectively. Programs like ECLIP require improved accessibility through streamlined registration, transparency, and multi-sector collaboration to deliver sustained, individualized support. Safeguarding political rights via voter registration assistance and civic participation aids legal and social reintegration. Evidence-based counter-recruitment campaigns, leveraging credible personal testimonies and positive role models, are vital to dismantle persuasive rhetoric and prevent youth involvement.

VIII. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declares no competing interests.

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