

## **Unveiling the Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees: A Phenomenological Study**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The government offers aftercare programs for rebel returnees by providing numerous works, livelihood, and education as part of the reintegration process. The government spearheaded attempts to reach this group to halt armed conflict or convince them to surrender (Martinez, 2018). This study anchored on the social control theory of Travis Hirschi, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, and the theory of Motivation by Abraham Maslow. This study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach to describe lived experience of rebel returnees. This study conducted at New Bataan, Davao de Oro, uses a snowball sampling technique to identify the eight (8) rebel returnees. The study has drawn themes of Life Struggle, Effective Government Peace Agreement, Recruitment Process, Taste of Freedom, Value for Education, and Long- Lived Family. The rebel returnees never failed to make a wiser decision for good. They have realized essential lessons based on their experiences that could be a treasure for the rest of their lives. The government has never deprived them of the right to life and be free, yet, they are all provided with different offers from the government to start a new life. Furthermore, it is recommended to research further about the experiences of rebel returnees to get extensive answers and experiences. It is also recommended to bring their comprehensive learning insights after those experiences.

**Keywords:** Lived experiences, Rebel returnees, Phenomenological design, Philippines

### **Introduction**

Our government, under the administration of President Duterte, offers a thorough aftercare program for rebel returns by providing them with numerous work, livelihood, and educational possibilities as a method of reintegrating them back into society. The government has spearheaded attempts to reach out to this group and reach out to them to halt the armed war and eventually convince them to surrender (Martinez, 2018).

Students in Northern Uganda were asked to describe their everyday lives and how they felt upon returning home. The results revealed some issues that impede smooth reintegration between people, their families, and communities. Worries among young people about a jobless future, learning new norms, and how to cope with disputes mixed with the community's fears of repeating violence, overstretched resources, and concern for children still held captive (Annan et al., 2009).

In the Philippines context, one study reveals that some people join rebel organizations, not for the beliefs and philosophies held by the groups but because they want to handle firearms and keep themselves occupied as out-of-school youngsters. Rebel returnees were forced to surrender due to the hardship of surviving in the highlands. In this case, it was the primary cause of their capitulation. (Martinez, 2018)

In Davao de Oro province, based on the news report of Che Palicted (August 18), NPA medic surrendered to government soldiers in Davao de Oro's Mawab, the 71st Infantry Battalion (71IB). The former medic was tired of the extreme hardship and experienced much more there now that many of his former comrades successively surrendered to the government. Moreover, twenty-six members of the communist New People's Army in Davao de Oro province received immediate financial aid from the provincial government. Each former rebel received PHP10,000 cash while they waited for other benefits under the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (ECLIP), the government's primary initiative that helps ex-guerillas start a new life as they return to mainstream society.

The beneficiaries had gone through the government's requirements to be entitled to the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), which helps rebel returnees reintegrate into the community and establish a new, regular life with their families. Based on the statements of Maj. Cenon Pancito III, spokesman for the 3rd Infantry Division – the Philippine Army's mother unit in the Central and Western Visayas regions – told the Philippine News Agency that the division's vision of ending the insurgency through various approaches, including the E-CLIP, will remain unchanged. He pointed out that armed conflict isn't the only way to end the communist insurgency, as the government has several initiatives and projects to help rebels reintegrate into society (Partlow,2021). They may have been influenced to give up because of government initiatives. It's a mystery to know their experiences as rebel returnees, why they joined and left, what their lives were like, and how they can function normally now. In this case, it is a great privilege for the Davao de Oro State College to help them uplift their daily living, especially now we are in a pandemic.

In addition, the provincial government of Davao de Oro brought a caravan of services to the former New People's Army (NPA) infested community of Sitio Cagan, Barangay Andap, New Bataan, to put an end to insurgency in the countryside. The provincial government also distributed medicine, vitamins, school supplies, and agricultural inputs. Conversely, the military is confident that the communist rebel will never return to the community, claiming that the government has already won the people's hearts. (Uy,2022). The study about rebel returnees is mainly conducted in a foreign setting. No study had been conducted in our local place, especially in Davao de Oro. Hence, on this premise, the researcher wishes to explore the experiences of rebel returnees in New Bataan, Davao de Oro.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of rebel returnees before joining the NPA, life while a member, and life after surrendering?
2. What rebel returnees apply coping mechanisms to cope with the difficulties encountered?
3. What insights were gained by rebel returnees in living the new life as ordinary citizens?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored on the social control theory of Travis Hirschi, which states that

individuals break the law due to a breakdown within the societal bond. It holds that humans do not have a conscience at birth but that it develops over time due to our interactions with key people and places. Our parents, churches, and schools teach us morality and values. Our parents, schools, courts, and police teach us laws and social standards. Our religious views are instilled in us by our churches and families, and they tremendously impact our behavior and decisions. As well as teaching discipline and social skills, parents enroll their children in extracurricular activities so they don't waste their spare time getting into mischief or causing trouble with their classmates (Crawford, 2014).

Second is Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality. The theory has three components, the id, ego, and superego, that interact to determine human behavior. The conflicts among these three structures determine a person's behavior and worldview and our efforts to strike a balance between what each "desires." We resolve the tension between two main behavioral inclinations based on the balance we strike in each situation: our biological aggressive and pleasure-seeking drives vs. our learned internal control over those urges.

The third is the theory of Motivation by Abraham Maslow. According to Maslow's theory, people's attempts to satisfy five fundamental wants — physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization — are the source of motivation. According to Maslow, these needs can influence a person's conduct. However, when these "deficiency requirements" aren't satisfied, the individual feels nervous and tight without any physical symptoms. Before an individual can focus on higher-level wants, Maslow's theory indicates that the individual's most fundamental needs must be fulfilled.

Lastly, the theories of Conversion imply "a spiritual and moral change attending a change of belief with conviction; a change of heart; a change from worldliness to godliness; a modification of the ruling disposition of the soul, involving a transformation of the outward life. In this case, rebel returnees have changes that incorporate the sacred into the core of individuals' identities, worldviews, and orientation to their existence and the outside world. It varies widely based on pastoral psychology, personal qualities, family environment, social, societal, religious, cultural, and historical contexts, and the interactions among these factors (Snook et al., 2019).

According to Long and Hadden (1983), as cited by Snook et al. (2019), the social drift theory of Conversion focuses on how individuals gradually drift into new beliefs based on their recurring choices in social settings and situational contexts. In this theory, individuals respond to life pressures and stress by constructing a social identity rooted in their role as potential converts.

## **Review of Related Literature**

The rebel is both a warrior and an artist. As a warrior, he fights for man's freedom by upholding the dignity of human life and the law of moderation within the limits of his human capacity. As an artist, his desire for unity and meaning seeks to bring the beauty of human dignity to life), painting the reality of the rebel's acceptance of and desire for his struggle on a canvas of action. Von Hassel (2021)

As members of these groups lay down their arms and return to a peaceful existence, the effectiveness of their transition to 'normal' lives can be critical in preventing conflict and violence from resurfacing. Former combatants face various challenges and hardships, including criminal violence, political violence, and economic hardship. If not addressed, it may increase

the likelihood that the number of international returnees in emerging economies will grow. If not managed properly, some may become involved in criminal activity, political violence, or other activities that undermine peace. (Macdonald et al., 2020)

Lodangco (2018) mentioned that rebel returnees joined the New People's Army not because they wanted to but because of the communist group's tough mechanisms, particularly the current anti-government issues. The main reasons for the rebel returnees' surrender are the difficulties of life in the mountains and the sake of their families, particularly those already married. The government has legally surrendered most of the rebel returnees, and those publicly offered have been granted amnesty and financial aid. Furthermore, the rebel returnees are considered free because they can freely walk around the neighborhood. However, they are still concerned about their safety from former comrades who may do something unsavory to them. A survey of their lives revealed how many difficult experiences they had in the mountains, and they didn't want to return or remember the problems they encountered. Although they are experiencing difficulties in the transition period following the surrender, they believe their lives have already changed compared to before.

Edrolin (2021) asserted that insurgency movements have existed in the Philippines for a long time. In their attempt to overthrow the Philippine government, organized activities such as the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the New People's Army (NPA), and the National Democratic Front have engaged in armed conflict with it. These movements, once political offenders, underwent rehabilitation under the government's E-CLIP program to facilitate their reintegration into society and incorporation into the government's peace and development program. Returnees and those directly involved in the program can determine how successful the government's agenda is in fully reintegrating returnees into society (Best, 2016)

The goal of the counter-violent extremism (CVE) policy is to deradicalize terrorists through rehabilitation. Working in the pre-insurgency and pre-terrorism domain is complex, but it pays off. Although the Southeast Asian area recognizes the importance of rehabilitation, not all terrorism-affected countries have been able to create rehabilitation capacities. Indonesia and the Philippines established ad hoc and unstructured programs, while Malaysia and Singapore developed thorough and structured programs. Even though capacities range from country to country, the region uses ten different types of rehabilitation. Religious; (2) social and familial; (3) educational; (4) vocational; (5) entrepreneurial; (6) cultural; (7) financial; (8) creative arts; 9) recreational; and (10) psychological are the categories (Gunaratna,2021).

According to Agoot (2018), few NPAs have surrendered in Cagayan, despite continuing to thrive. This is based on recent news reports that two Milisyang Bayan soldiers surrendered to military forces in Rizal, Cagayan, on Tuesday (Lazaro & Inigo 2018). It was announced in February 2018 that 17 CPP-NPA members and supporters had willingly surrendered to the combined forces.

One research determined that SIP had improved the standard of living of rebel returnees in all elements of the program's components - including money, food, and other material goods and housing conditions, as well as education and health care. Therefore, there is a statistically significant change in the level of life of the rebel returnees before and after two years of participating in the program (Piquero III et al., 2014)

Vindevogel et al. (2013) asserted that there were 237 challenges identified and clustered into 15 categories, showing that formerly recruited participants mainly identified "emotional"

and "training and skills"-related challenges. Except for stigmatization, they reported significantly more "emotional" and fewer "social and relational" challenges than non-recruited counterparts. Overall, there was a similarity between the challenges written by both groups.

All LRA returnees may be stigmatized due to their time spent with the rebel organization. However, they may also be stigmatized in several ways that may serve numerous purposes, from rejection to resocialization. As a result of these findings, it is being questioned if this all-encompassing word obscures more than it reveals. As a result, there are significant policy implications. If stigmatization is understood as a multifaceted expression and manifestation of social suffering and repair, efforts to reduce it can't be limited to one-dimensional "awareness" and "education" campaigning. This scenario has also failed to make a noticeable impact in other contexts (Pescosolido et al., 2010; Pescosolido and Martin, 2015).

Based on Macdonald & Kerali's (2020) study, the moral experience' of post-war Acholi "local worlds" is heavily stigmatized. To restore 'normality' in a society that has endured a great deal of pain, it regulates the presence and behavior of LRA returnees. For example, it might be part of a "moral experience" of pleasing the cen, defending community members from physical attacks, securing access to land, or controlling village government. Or it could be a mix of these things. For this reason and because it has many diverse roles, stigmatization can be exclusionary or re-integrative. Depending on the situation, a thick or thin description might be used for this umbrella word.

Most foreign fighters who return to the United States become or seek to become domestic terrorists within a year of their return. Only three persons were involved in domestic terror plans more than three years after they returned. In the case of these outliers, the extended lag durations are not related to the fact that they spent time in prison before they were arrested or attacked (Malet & Hayes, 2020).

The research reveals that the Social Integration Program (SIP) effectively improved rebel returnees' standard of living in all aspects of the program's components, including income, food, material goods, housing condition, employment, education, health care, and security and safety. As a result, there is a statistical difference in the standard of living of rebel returnees before and after two years of participation in the program. (Piquero, 2014). This study, supported by (J.V., 2018) that the government sustains its efforts in assisting rebel returnees and ensuring wider dissemination of the surrendering to convince them to go through the formal process. The government should conduct sustainable programs and activities to help out-of-school youth finish their education or engage in productive activities. These are local youth-oriented groups, sports, and livelihood projects to prevent them from being allured to the temporary benefits of the rebel groups.

The government's constant role is to assist former rebels in overcoming the problems they have now encountered due to their surrender, particularly in finding jobs and ensuring their safety. (Lodangco, 2022) Despite their difficult circumstances, the couple's rebel returnee is more motivated to prioritize their children's education so they can finish college and find better jobs. According to the couple, education is the only wealth they can give their children to ensure a better future. The family is grateful to have been a part of the program because they have become empowered individuals, ready to face an empowered society open to change. Pantawid Pamilya, as well as the various government programs, services, and assistance they received, assisted them in raising their level of well-being. (Castillo, 2018)

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This research utilized a phenomenological study design that helped us understand the meaning of people's lived experiences explores what people experienced, and focuses on their experience of a phenomenon. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method used to describe how human beings experience a particular phenomenon. A phenomenological study attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a situation. It allows the researcher to delve into the perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of those who have experienced or lived the phenomenon or problem of interest. However, the phenomenological method used in this study is to describe the participants' perceptions and experiences through the in-depth interview. Researchers use this method to discuss the participants' lived experiences, particularly on specific phenomena. Therefore, phenomenology can be defined as the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced by people living those experiences (Giorgi, 2012). participants, a researcher can begin to make generalizations regarding what it is like to experience a particular phenomenon from the perspective of those that have lived the experience (Arnett, 2017).

According to (Creswell, 2003), as cited by (Alase,2017), qualitative research describes as an effective model that occurs in a natural setting that enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from being highly involved in the actual experiences. In this case, we used the phenomenological qualitative research method, which helped me to explore the complex world of lived experiences of the selected participants. It does not only help us to understand a phenomenon or an event at a deeper level of consciousness, but at the same time, it helps us to explore our nature, bringing a transformation at a personal level. In this way, a researcher can reflect critically and become more thoughtful and attentive in understanding social practices (Qutoshi,2018).

### *Research Locale*

The study will be conducted at New Bataan, Davao de Oro. New Bataan is a landlocked municipality in the province of Davao de Oro. The municipality has a land area of 553.15 square kilometers or 213.57, and New Bataan has 16 barangays. Its population, as determined by the 2015 Census, was 47,726. This represented 6.48% of the people of Davao de Oro or 0.98% of the overall population of the Davao Region.

### *Role of the Researcher*

It is the task and responsibility of phenomenological researchers to explore and recognize the implications of the research subject matter on the 'life experiences of the research participants. It is to help the researcher to think through all facets of the research Creswell (2012). The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. (Sutton, 2015)

In addition, the interviewer, recorder, transcriber, translator, and encoder were among the roles played by the researcher during the study (Stuckey, 2013). To reach more profound levels of understanding, an intelligent interviewer asks probing questions, listens, thinks, and then asks more questions. As the transcriber and encoder, all recorded interviews were transcribed and appropriately translated in English all the interview words and correctly encoded all the participants' responses.

### ***Research Participants***

In a phenomenological study in which the sample includes individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, it is also essential to obtain participants' written permission to be studied. This study was limited to eight (8) rebel returnees from New Bataan, Davao de Oro. Eight (5) men and three (3) women participants above 18 years old fit our inclusion criteria: the rebel returnees. The study established that gender research and analysis enables us to examine and challenge social norms around what it means to be a woman or man in society and to pursue justice and equality for all, which should be fundamental facets of development. Accordingly, (Njoku, 2020) recommends 5-25 participants for the phenomenological studies. I used snowball sampling to ascertain the participants. Based on the data gathered on the local unit of New Bataan, there are 35 rebel returnees surrendered in the municipality. Thus, the researchers coordinated with the local New Bataan, Davao de Oro unit to access the participants.

Snowball sampling is a method in which one interviewee gives the researcher the name of at least one or more potential interviewees. That interviewee, in turn, provides the name of at least one more potential interviewee, and so on, with the sampling growing like a rolling snowball if more than one referral per interviewee is provided. Finding the right people at the right time is crucial in collecting data that is usable, viable, and valuable (The Academic Triangle, 2017).

Creswell (2013) stated that "It is essential that all participants have [similar lived] experience of the phenomenon being studied." Participation in the study will be voluntary, and the participants may end their involvement without risk or harm. There will not be any compensation for participating in the study. Demographics will not be identified nor recorded to protect the anonymity of the participants.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Alase (2016) stated that in a qualitative research study, it is imperative and ethically critical that the phenomenological study is mindful of the right and privacy of the individuals participating in the research. This study was strictly voluntary, and the risks to the participants should be minimal. It is, however, important that no harm should come to the participants in the study. This study provided adequate measures of protection for the rights and dignities of its participants. The researcher gathered the data through the following procedures.

As researchers, we took careful steps in the data collection procedures. We also engaged in a series of activities to collect data before arriving after the research.

First, the researchers asked permission from the Local Government of New Bataan with the coordination of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to conduct the study.

Second, participants are identified with the use of the snowball sampling method. The researchers ensured that those who were purposively selected had an experience of the phenomenon being studied. Hence, the researchers humbly requested the head or members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to help me identify the participants suited for the study. He gave me a list of prospective participants for the in-depth interview.

Third, the individual in-depth interview occurred at the specified time and venue only after the participants signed the consent and were informed of the study's objective. We used open-ended questions in the conduct of the individual in-depth interview. The researcher will

conduct the interview face-to-face. However, health protocol is still strictly followed (social distancing should be observed, wearing of face mask and face shield, and hand sanitizer). A video recorder was used to ensure validity and reliability, which are very significant in the conduct of the study.

Fourth, participants' responses were stored and encoded in the computer for translation since most participants used vernacular. Answers were transcribed verbatim to ensure greater accuracy during the data analysis. In line with that, we made transcription references to ensure accuracy and avoid missing important details.

Fifth, a thematic analysis was done. Our adviser/mentor assisted us in ensuring that our participants' responses were analyzed carefully based on the core ideas.

## **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is the process of making sense of research participants' views and opinions of situations, corresponding patterns, themes, categories, and regular similarities (Cohen et al., 2007). Qualitative methods are generally interactive. The structure of an experience is interpreted during phenomenological analysis (Sitko, 2013).

The researchers transcribed the participants' answers from the audio recording stored in the computer, from specific to follow-up questions. The researchers transcribed the data gathered and thus made transcription references to ensure accuracy and avoid missing important details. Then, followed by coding, it analyzed the content of the participants' answers and assigned keywords to the idea. Next, thematic analysis was done wherein the researchers extracted the main themes and core ideas of the responses related to each other for me to capsule it. Analysis and interpretation were made afterward. The gathered data results were the bases for the conclusions, the implication, and recommendations for further research.

### ***The Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees***

Three main themes emerged from the data collected on the participants' experiences, as presented in this table. Table 1) Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees, the themes are 1) *Life Struggle*; 2. *Recruitment Process* 3) *Effective Government Peace Agreement*

#### ***Life Struggle***

The participants' lived experiences during and after they became rebel returnees have finally been narrated and explained in the sincerest expression during the interviews. It was a nerve-wracking experience to tell, but they took the guts to share their stories. Some experienced physical and mental struggles due to negative uncertainties while still tied up with NPA.

#### ***As shared by IDI-P1***

*I have faced numerous challenges. We were ambushed as I initially entered. I had severe trauma at the time. As I think of it profoundly, it resembles committing to something uncertainly.*

#### ***He added***

*The influence that brought me to turn my back was my feet. I was supposed to come under for a medical treatment check-up, but they were still untreated. I felt like suffering from a crisis, which is why I went out. I surrendered because I couldn't understand their rules, which is why I surrendered.*



**Table 1: Themes and Core Ideas of the Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees**

Major Themes	Core Ideas
<i>Life Struggle</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have faced numerous challenges. We were ambushed as I initially entered. I had severe trauma at the time. As I think of it profoundly, it resembles committing to something uncertainly.</li> <li>• The influence that brought me to turn my back was my feet. I was supposed to come under for a medical treatment check-up, but they were still untreated. I felt like suffering from a crisis, which is why I went out. I surrendered because I couldn't understand their rules, which is why I surrendered.</li> <li>• Our food is scarce, and we often walk regularly. We seldom eat due to insufficient consumption. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I just voluntarily surrendered out of my exhaustion from the peak.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• I was in a raid and got frightened. That's when I realized being an NPA was not all beneficial.</li> <li>• Of course, I have undergone struggles because I am just a farmer, and it wasn't easy because we lived in the mountain and seldom ate rice grain because we're only consuming maize yet, sometimes nothing. Still, being grateful because we are living together with our family.</li> <li>• I've had too many obstacles since I joined the NPA group. We were frequently ambushed while on the move, without food or rest. They were good negotiators, and you'll be taken seriously, but I persisted. The regret, though, comes too late</li> <li>• There, I experienced suffering; during the raid, many of us were murdered. Our commander abandoned us in the air; we didn't know where to go, so we kept on running, and that was when I decided to surrender due to suffering. We kept on going without food, only water, and we only ate any grass.</li> <li>• Usually, we get raided, move to new locations to rest, and only occasionally eat because of the shortage. Other times, we eat grass and drink polluted water.</li> <li>• There was, but he passed away. Armed personnel was under surveillance, and our area was predominately populated with NPA. I only managed to escape when we were subjected to a raid and abandoned by someone who had brought us; otherwise, I decided to surrender.</li> <li>• I don't use any of that; instead, I was filled with anxiety as I left away from them, wondering whether they would kill me. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before, my eldest brother was NPA, so he influenced me to join them.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Since I never joined the NPA, my life has been poor, as I am only a farmer. I wanted to finish my studies and help my family survive poverty.</li> </ul>
<i>Recruitment Process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was simply a worker before, and when I got back, someone recruited me to join NPA, so that's how I got in, and it's hard for me to get out.</li> <li>• They said it was acceptable to visit the family, which is why I went there by riding a vehicle, but they fetched me and forced me to join NPA, which is why I failed to decline.</li> <li>• It contradicted my decision when I was compelled to join and forced to join even. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That was when I arrived at the 66<sup>th</sup> I.B. thru Lt. Malidum; everything was enlightened because we were individually fetched from our homes.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The community treated me well even though we were rebel returnees since I have been living in our hometown since I became an NPA. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was nothing new or changed in how the community views us. We were afraid to go out because we were restricted from doing so.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• I've had a lot of experiences as a former rebel. Having fear was inevitable the moment that I surrendered. Nevertheless, they treated me well.</li> </ul>
<i>Effective Government Peace Agreement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Now, I decided to change. I will no longer commit anything that will harm myself and entirely determined to finish my studies because it has always been my desire.</li> <li>• I have many experiences as a rebel returnee, and I am comfortable enough to stay in the camp. We were nurtured and provided with clothes and other useable stuff.</li> <li>• They treated me well. We are well provided with stuff and clothes that we can use daily.</li> <li>• What I have encountered as a rebel returnee has several commitments, such as life reformation and job security if everything is realized. However, we are still put on hold for our safety. They treated us well; we were comfortable acting, unlike our situation in the mountain, where we were always vigilant. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To help in the government whenever there are community meetings or engagements where I can help.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**IDI-P2 felt this**

*I surrendered because I couldn't understand their rules, which is why I surrendered.*

Few confessed *that* having no food to eat daily for NPA rebels is one of the most

challenging parts of their journey. It affects their physical and mental health. However, they still managed to survive because there were no options to choose from but to keep going despite the inadequacy of *food* to consume.

***IDI-P3 pointed out that***

*Our food is scarce, and we often walk regularly. We seldom eat due to insufficient consumption. I voluntarily surrendered out of my exhaustion from the peak. I was in a raid and got frightened. That's when I realized being an NPA was not all beneficial.*

***IDI-P4 shared his testaments***

*Of course, I have undergone struggles because I am just a farmer, and it wasn't easy because we lived in the mountain and seldom ate rice grain because we're only consuming maize yet, sometimes nothing. Still, being grateful because we are living together with our family.*

***IDI-P4 also expressed***

*I've had too many obstacles since I joined the NPA group. We were frequently ambushed while on the move, without food or rest. They were good negotiators, and you'll be taken seriously, but I persisted. The regret, though, comes too late*

***Another participant had the same experience***

*There, I experienced suffering; during the raid, many of us were murdered. Our commander abandoned us in the air; we didn't know where to go, so we kept on running, and that was when I decided to surrender due to suffering. We kept on going without food, only water, and we only ate any grass.*

***Same experience also with IDI-P6***

*Usually, we get raided, move to new locations to rest, and only occasionally eat because of the shortage. Other times, we eat grass and drink polluted water.*

Regarding experience that is difficult to deal with as a rebel returnee, IDI-P8 confirmed.

*I don't use any of that; instead, I was filled with anxiety as I left away from them, wondering whether they would kill me.*

***Recruitment Process***

The participants realized that the organization focused on gaining support in rural areas to inspire a people's *democratic* revolution among the lower classes. They asserted that the organization's goal is to gain power in the Philippines through revolutionary insurgency or try to educate them about the problems with the government and eventually persuade them to work full-time as NPA members. This was evident when these participants shared,

*Before, my eldest brother was NPA, so he influenced me to join them. (IDI-P2)*

*Since I never joined the NPA, my life has been poor, as I am only a farmer. I wanted to finish my studies and help my family survive poverty. Then, some people came and promised to help our family. But my mother disagreed because she wanted me to finish my studies. But, due to the incitements from the people, I came along. (IDI-P2)*

*I was simply a worker before, and when I got back, someone recruited me to join NPA, so that's how I got in, and it's hard for me to get out. (IDI-P3)*

*They said it was acceptable to visit the family, which is why I went there by riding a*

vehicle, but they fetched me and forced me to join NPA, which is why I failed to decline. (IDI-P5)

***In addition, IDI-P8 expressed that***

*It contradicted my decision when I was compelled to join and forced to join even.*

***She added***

*They still treated me in the same manner and were unaware that I was being held captive by the NPA. It was still normal.*

***Effectivity of Government Peace Agreement***

After they surrendered to the authority for some valid reasons, one of their support systems to cope with bad *experiences* gained was the community and government. They were not left out like a trash bin, but their homecoming was valued for making their everyday life restart.

The following participants have the same experience. Here are some of their stories:

*That was when I arrived at the 66<sup>th</sup> I.B. thru Lt. Malidum; everything was enlightened because we were individually fetched from our homes. (IDI-P1)*

*The community treated me well even though we were rebel returnees since I have been living in our hometown since I became an NPA. (IDI - P2)*

*There was nothing new or changed in how the community views us. We were afraid to go out because we were restricted from doing so. (IDI -P3)*

***IGI-P3 added that***

*I've had a lot of experiences as a former rebel. Having fear was inevitable the moment that I surrendered. Nevertheless, they treated me well.*

***IDI-P4 asserted that***

*Now, I decided to change. I will no longer commit anything that will harm myself and entirely determined to finish my studies because it has always been my desire.*

***IDI- P5 declared***

*I have many experiences as a rebel returnee, and I am comfortable enough to stay in the camp. We were nurtured and provided with clothes and other useable stuff.*

***Same experience with IDI-P7***

*They treated me well. We are well provided with stuff and clothes that we can use daily.*

***Another participant shared his sentiments***

*What I have encountered as a rebel returnee has several commitments, such as life reformation and job security if everything is realized. However, we are still put on hold for our safety. They treated us well; we were comfortable acting, unlike our situation in the mountain, where we were always vigilant.*

***IDI-8 also expressed his experience***

*To help in the government whenever there are community meetings or engagements where I can help.*

### *Coping Mechanisms Applied by Rebel Returnees in Difficulties Encountered*

As presented in this *table*, two main themes emerged from the data collected on the participants' experiences. Table 2) Coping mechanisms applied by rebel returnees in difficulties encountered, the themes are 1) *Taste of Freedom* and 2) *Value for Education*.

**Table 2:** *Themes and Core Ideas of Coping Mechanisms applied by Rebel Returnees in Difficulties Encountered*

Major Themes	Core Ideas
<i>Taste of Freedom</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• However, I am free and have nothing to fear. It was initially all right when I entered the NPA group, but something was different. I was also encouraged to join because they have reasonable goals. In my personal experience, being fortunate or unlucky makes a substantial difference in the law.</li> <li>• Back then, when I decided to put my guns off, I was worried about the possible trouble that may happen to my family, who was supposed to have a peaceful life. But, by God's grace, everything was fine.</li> <li>• We helped them in their camp whether they asked for assistance or not. We also never experienced struggles since they assisted us, so we never had to struggle either.</li> <li>• I am now in my comfort zone. I can make noise now that no one will yell at me or order me around. In contrast, you are not permitted to make a minimal noise because someone will warn you.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing a family is such a pleasure.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The misery I experienced in the mountain was different here. I can sleep properly and am provided with garments to wear.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fear in here. But we are safe now.</li> <li>• They promised us to pursue education. There are a lot.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• They have something told us, but I don't know what the programs are. But, I have heard about the involvement of livelihood and education. I ought to be kind and be changed because they will send me to school.</li> <li>• Of course, they have told us about several opportunities, such as livelihood and education</li> </ul>
<i>Value for Education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We were asked whether we wanted to pursue our studies or our other ambitions in life. We were armed with two, and four of us decided to continue schooling.</li> <li>• There is. Of course, one thing that keeps us motivated is allowing our family to enter here and the programs they offer to ensure we will finish in education.</li> <li>• We should be kind, and they will provide us with a career and education if we want to pursue our studies.</li> <li>• To contribute to their endeavors, I want to pursue my studies. But we're still waiting for what they might provide us because it's still being processed.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have a variety of experiences. They taught me how to medicate and perform operations on wounded members. They provided us with training for us to be educated. I also knew how to support and care for women during birthing.</li> <li>• I should be considered a woman who can adjust to any situation and has gained maturity and significant medical knowledge in medication and childbirth.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### *Taste of Freedom*

After months, years, or even a decade of being entangled with the NPA, a new and changed life has begun. The *participants* said that taste of freedom is the value that needs to be kept. They can live their lives doing what they want, living where they want, eating what they want, and learning what their heart desires. Even during the rebellion, they confessed that they were not the wrong person. They just had convinced to join and follow the principles of NPA. However, returning is their only option to see the light from the darkness. IDI-P1 said:

*However, I am free and have nothing to fear. It was initially all right when I entered the NPA group, but something was different. I was also encouraged to join because they have reasonable goals. In my personal experience, being fortunate or unlucky makes a substantial*

*difference in the law.*

***He also revealed that***

*Back then, when I decided to put my guns off, I was worried about the possible trouble that may happen to my family, who was supposed to have a peaceful life. But, by God's grace, everything was fine.*

***IDI-P2 affirmed that***

*We helped them in their camp whether they asked for assistance or not. We also never experienced struggles since they assisted us, so we never had to struggle either.*

Another participant exclaimed that the government gave them the freedom to express what they wanted:

*I am now in my comfort zone. I can make noise now that no one will yell at me or order me around. In contrast, you are not permitted to make a minimal noise because someone will warn you. (IDI-P3)*

This participant also coped with the challenges by seeing their family

Seeing a family is such a pleasure. (IDI- P5)

***IDI- P7 shared her experience***

*The misery I experienced in the mountain was different here. I can sleep properly and am provided with garments to wear.*

***She added that;***

***The fear in here. But we are safe now.***

***Value for Education***

Certain government provisions are being offered, and these rebel returnees have become so grateful for all those *things* offered. This was evident when this participant shared,

*They promised us to pursue education. There are a lot. (IDI-P1)*

The three participants also felt this as they share their experiences,

*They have something told us, but I don't know what the programs are. But I have heard about the involvement of livelihood and education. I ought to be kind and be changed because they will send me to school. (IDI-P2)*

*Of course, they have told us about several opportunities, such as livelihood and education*

*(IDI-P3)*

*We were asked whether we wanted to pursue our studies or our other ambitions in life. We were armed with two, and four of us decided to continue schooling. (IDI-P5)*

***Another participant shared the same sentiments,***

*There is. Of course, one thing that keeps us motivated is allowing our family to enter here and the programs they offer to ensure we will finish in education. (IDI-P6)*

***Furthermore, IDI-P6 added that***

*We should be kind, and they will provide us with a career and education if we want to*

*pursue our studies.*

**IDI- P7 expressed his scenario**

*To contribute to their endeavors, I want to pursue my studies. But we're still waiting for what they might provide us because it's still being processed.*

These participants also had the same experience.

*I have a variety of experiences. They taught me how to medicate and perform operations on wounded members. They provided us with training for us to be educated. I also knew how to support and care for women during birthing. (IDI-8*

**She also admitted that**

*I should be considered a woman who can adjust to any situation and has gained maturity and significant medical knowledge in medication and childbirth.*

**Learning Insights Gained by Rebel Returnees**

Three main themes emerged from the data collected on the participants' experiences, as presented in this table. Table 3) Learning insights gained by rebel returnees; the theme is Long-Lived Family.

**Table 3: Themes and Core Learning Insights Gained by Rebel Returnees**

Major Themes	Core Ideas
<b>Long-Lived Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were many, but the one that stuck out the most was leaving the camp and returning home; we must be changed.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The challenge I faced was meeting with my family for a long time. I sobbed over it, but they were grateful to see me still alive</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I learned several things at the mountain, but when I returned home, nothing changed my way of living.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were many challenges at first when I surrendered but seeing my family made me very happy.</li> </ul>

**Long lived family**

The participants have realized that having a long-lived family is essential. It can provide support, *security*, and unconditional love; they will always look for and bring out the best in their life, even if they cannot see it for themselves. They treasure their memories, value themselves for everything, and are grateful for what they have with their family.

IDI –P4 shared his insight; she said,

*There were many, but the one that stuck out the most was leaving the camp and returning home; we must be changed.*

**IDI-P5 expressed his insights**

*The challenge I faced was meeting with my family for a long time. I sobbed, but they were grateful to see me still alive.*

**As IDI-P8 shared**

*I learned several things at the mountain, but when I returned home, nothing changed my way of living.*

**IDI-P8 added that**

There were *many* challenges at first when I surrendered but seeing my family made me very happy.

## Discussions

### *Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees*

From the data collected on the experiences of the participants, there are three main themes in the *Lived Experiences* of Rebel Returnees; the themes are: 1) *Life Struggle*; 2. *Recruitment Process* 2) *Effective Government Peace Agreement*

### *Life Struggles*

During the interviews of the participants, they were sincerely responsive as they narrated their experiences *when* they were still former rebels and becoming rebel returnees. The participants showed intense emotions during the interviews. The participants shared various responses about their experiences of hardships and struggles. Some participants conveyed how traumatic becoming an NPA is after they have departed from that legion of rebels. They indeed lived with many uncertainties. It was considered the darkest journey of their lives, suffering physically and mentally. Starvation is one of their primary concerns and struggles. They were wandering and hiking in the mountains without enough support or food from their companions. Thus, many rebels have found surrendered due to this type of crisis. It is a remark that rebellion against the government would be a survival test.

### *Recruitment Process*

Regarding recruitment methods and targeting for "fighters," the CPP-NPA is similar to other insurgent *groups*. They prey on the low-income families of the countryside. Because of their isolation from mainstream communities, they quickly turn against the government, particularly their younger family members, including indigenous people. They also use their more educated members as activists on college and university campuses to attract and retain idealistic individuals as their brains (Casuncad, 2017). The participants realized that the organization focused on gaining support in rural areas to inspire a people's democratic revolution *among* the lower classes. They asserted that the organization's goal is to gain power in the Philippines through revolutionary insurgency or try to educate them about the problems with the government and eventually persuade them to work full-time as NPA members.

### *Effective Government Peace Agreement*

Despite all the negative impacts of rebellion in our country, rebel returnees have become one of the government's priorities. Most participants are grateful for how the community and the authority *treated* them. They neither never felt judged nor abandoned but took care of instead.

Social Integration Program (SIP) effectively improved rebel returnees' standard of living in all aspects of the program's components, including income, food, material goods, housing condition, employment, education, health care, and security and safety. As a result, there is a statistical *difference* in the standard of living of rebel returnees before and after two years of participation in the program. (Piquero, 2014). This study, supported by (J.V., 2018) that the government sustains its efforts in assisting rebel returnees and ensuring wider dissemination of the surrendering to convince them to go through the formal process. The government should conduct sustainable programs and activities to help out-of-school youth finish their education or engage in productive activities.

### *Coping Mechanisms Applied by Rebel Returnees*

From the data collected on the participants' experiences, two main themes were found in coping mechanisms applied by rebel returnees in difficulties encountered; the themes are: 1. *Taste of Freedom and the Value of Education*.

### ***Taste of Freedom***

Our participants have realized that the taste of freedom is the value that needs to be kept. They can live their lives doing what they want, living where they want, eating what they want, and learning what their heart desires. Even during the rebellion, they confessed that they were not the wrong person. It is one of the many ways to cope with past experiences and prevent stereotypes and judgments among rebel returnees in the community.

### ***Value for Education***

The government provides funding for their suggested livelihood projects so that former rebels and their *families* can start afresh. Some participants are engaged by the local government, which aids them in bringing about social transformation and raising living standards for themselves, their families, or entire communities.

These are local youth-oriented groups, sports, and livelihood projects to prevent them from being allured to the temporary benefits of the rebel groups. The government's constant role is to assist former *rebels* in overcoming the problems they have now encountered due to their surrender, particularly in finding jobs and ensuring their safety. (Lodangco, 2022).

### ***Learning Insights Gained by Rebel Returnees***

From the data collected on the participants' experiences, three main themes were found in the learning *insights* gained by rebel returnees; the theme is *Long Live Family*.

### ***Live Long Family***

The participants have realized that having a long-life family is essential. It can provide support, security, and unconditional love; they will always look for and bring out the best in their lives, even if they *cannot* see it for themselves. They treasure their memories, value themselves for everything, and are grateful for what they have with their family.

Despite their difficult circumstances, the couple's rebel returnee is more motivated to prioritize their children's education so they can finish college and find better jobs. According to the couple, education is the only wealth they can give their children to ensure a better future. The family is grateful to have been a part of the program because they have become empowered individuals, ready to face an empowered society open to change. Pantawid Pamilya, as well as the various government programs, services, and assistance they received, assisted them in raising their level of well-being. (Castillo, 2018)

## **Concluding Remarks**

This study used in-depth interviews to generate the experiences of selected participants. The primary data *source* is the transcript of the participant's answers to the given questions. Thus, during the interview, it is challenging to get and convince the participants to share their experiences; luckily, they are very much willing to do it.

Along with the conduct of the study, it took all the necessary measures to make this research successful with the support of other researchers. It is demanding because it requires time, patience, and *perseverance* to gather quality and relevant data to support our study.

The rebellion is considered one of the country's most prominent social problems. They are trying to terrorize and steal the government we have today. But then, due to hardships and challenges experienced by the rebels of NPA, they finally decided to return to their home and follow the *government* and its laws. At some point, they might have chosen the wrong path due



to the intense manipulation of the NPA, but they were still able to find hope and live a new life-- a peaceful one with the provision of the government.

Therefore, these *rebel* returnees never failed to make a wiser decision for good. They have realized essential lessons based on their experiences that could be a treasure for the rest of their lives. The government has never deprived them of the right to life and be free, yet, they are all provided with different offers from the government to start a new life. As rebel returnees revealed their experiences, coping mechanisms, and learning insights, we can conclude that they once had life-to-death experiences that will be remembered for the rest of their lives. *However, they finally stepped out into life that never gave them the assurance, security, prosperity, and hope of a better life—a life of rebellion.*

## **Recommendations of the Further Study**

This study was to unveil the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of rebel returnees. Nevertheless, the result of this qualitative study is limited only to the experiences and coping mechanisms of rebel returnees. The government must provide them with stable or temporary employment to help returning rebels adjust to their new circumstances. In the same way, the government requires ongoing initiatives for youth, especially those not in schools, such as sports and work opportunities, to engage in these pursuits. They can start afresh with their new, regular life after being resettled back into the community, where they can be with their families.

It is recommended to conduct research with many participants to obtain more comprehensive *answers* to the *study's* questions. It should cover broader objectives that compare the rebel returnees' life before and after. Furthermore, it is recommended to research further about the experiences of rebel returnees to get extensive answers and experiences. It is also recommended to bring their comprehensive learning insights after those experiences.

## **Acknowledgment**

Writing this paper has been a great challenge to the researchers, but because of their disposition to accomplish this endeavor, and indeed, through prayer, those they thought impossible things became possible. The researchers would like to convey their heartfelt gratitude to the Almighty God, the creator of everything, and the main reasons they could finish this study. With Him, indeed, nothing is impossible if you pray. The researchers are very thankful for their family and friends' untiring support, love, and encouragement. To Dr. Joselito Loquinario and Sir Philip Millan for the motivation and cheering them up, and inspired them to finish this endeavor. To their respondents, this study would not be successful without their help. To the RDE staff headed by Sir Jeson Nalangan Geroche, who was very supportive of this research, thank you so much.

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