

# Lived Experiences of Former Rebels

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## ABSTRACT

The "Project Good Life," launched by the 53rd Infantry Battalion and Josefina H. Cerilles State College (JHCSC) in partnership with the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), aims to reintegrate former rebels (FRs) into civilian society through psychoeducation and livelihood programs. The program addresses the complex challenges faced by FRs, including trauma, stigma, and limited resources, while fostering trust in government initiatives. Through structured activities such as art therapy, vocational training, and community reintegration efforts, participants gain skills and confidence to rebuild their lives.

Using Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews, this study examines the lived experiences of FRs in Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, and Zamboanga del Norte, revealing both the transformative impact of "Project Good Life" and persistent gaps in service delivery. Despite initial mistrust, FRs gradually embrace government support, contributing to economic productivity and community development. Recommendations include streamlining processes, enhancing community acceptance, and ensuring program sustainability.

**Keywords:** Local level community and social development, former rebels, psychoeducation, community's transformative impact

## INTRODUCTION

Many former rebels in the southern Philippines recount lives defined by early immersion into conflict and hardship. Many joined rebel movements at a young age, driven by a mix of grievances, including poverty, lack of access to education, and a perceived injustice against their communities. For many, joining the insurgency was seen as the only viable means of addressing these challenges. Life in the movement often meant adapting to a strict, dangerous, and uncertain existence. Former rebels describe long days spent training, enduring harsh environments, and surviving with minimal resources. The camaraderie and sense of purpose provided by the movement were strong motivators, even amidst constant fear and hardship.

The transition from armed struggle to reintegration into mainstream society is often equally challenging for former rebels. Many of them face stigma, a lack of social acceptance, and even fear from communities affected by years of violence. Adjusting to civilian life brings unique struggles; former rebels must learn to live in communities that may have viewed them as adversaries. Finding stable employment is another hurdle, as their past affiliations may create barriers to opportunities. Reintegration programs, although helpful, often lack adequate resources or fail to address their psychological scars and deeply ingrained identities shaped by years in the movement.

Despite the challenges, stories of hope and resilience abound among former rebels. Many find purpose in reuniting with family, pursuing education, or contributing to peace-building efforts in their communities. Through support networks and government assistance, some have been able to rebuild their lives and participate in livelihood projects or skills training programs. Their experiences make them valuable

contributors to community efforts that address the root causes of conflict, and they serve as advocates for peace, determined to prevent future generations from enduring the same hardships. For these individuals, the path to peace is a long and continuous journey, one that requires resilience, understanding, and support from society (Go, 2023).

The rebels-turned-reformists have made a new life, however in Guipos, Zamboanga del Sur, in Kabasalan, Zamboanga Sibugay, and in Gotalac, in Zamboanga del Norte in southern Philippines (Cadion, 2018). In an endeavor called Project Good Life, former rebels have made a new life, begun a new journey toward self-discovery, and embraced paths toward personal growth and healing.

## Background of the Study

The recent launch of "Project Good Life" by the 53rd Infantry Battalion and Josefina H. Cerilles State College (JHCSC) marks a significant step toward fostering the successful reintegration of former rebels, referred to as "friends rescued" (FRs), into civilian society. This psychoeducation program, supported by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF ELCAC) through the E-CLIP and Amnesty Program (EAP) Cluster, offers a unique approach to addressing the psychological and emotional needs of former insurgents. Through the theme "Threading the Path to Fulfillment and Authentic Happiness with FRs," Project Good Life seeks to provide these individuals with the tools to rebuild their lives, restore self-worth, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. The initiative reflects a shift in reintegration efforts, emphasizing not only practical skills but also mental well-being as essential components for lasting change.

The importance of psychoeducation in reintegration programs cannot be overstated. Many former rebels have experienced years of hardship, isolation, and exposure to violence, which have deeply impacted their mental health. Without addressing these psychological scars, the reintegration process can be challenging and incomplete. Traditional reintegration programs often focus on employment and community relations, which, while crucial, may not fully equip individuals to manage the trauma and behavioral challenges that linger from life in the insurgency. Psychoeducation programs like Project Good Life provide a structured and supportive environment to address these mental health needs, offering former rebels essential skills for self-care, emotional regulation, and relationship building that are critical for a successful return to society.

Project Good Life also represents a collaborative approach to peace-building and reintegration, bringing together the military and educational institutions. JHCSC's involvement provides academic expertise and resources that enhance the program's depth and effectiveness, while the 53rd Infantry Battalion's role fosters trust and support among former rebels. Such partnerships embody the holistic support needed to address the complex needs of former insurgents. Livelihood programs offered by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has made a difference in the former rebels' lives (DOLE, 2022). By aligning military resources with educational initiatives, Project Good Life goes beyond conventional reintegration by providing psychological resilience, promoting personal growth, and equipping former rebels with tools to build sustainable, peaceful lives.

The psychoeducation program offers hope not only to former rebels but also to communities impacted by conflict. When former combatants are equipped with the skills and support to integrate successfully, they become ambassadors for peace and serve as role models for other individuals at risk of being drawn into conflict. Programs like Project Good Life can help break cycles of violence by enabling former rebels to understand, heal from, and ultimately transcend the trauma of their past. This initiative thus contributes to a broader societal transformation, empowering former rebels to reshape their narratives, develop new aspirations, and foster peace for future generations.

However, Project Good Life is not the only focus of the rebels; many are also engaged in various livelihood training programs, community service initiatives, and educational opportunities aimed at developing skills for stable employment and long-term reintegration (Baguio, 2018). These programs complement psychoeducation by offering former rebels practical means to rebuild their lives, contribute to their communities, and foster a sense of purpose beyond their past experiences.

## Statement of the Problems

This study looks into the veiled experiences of the former rebels housed by the 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion, and thus:

1. What are the experiences of the former rebels at Guipos in Zamboanga del Sur, at Kabasalan in Zamboanga Sibugay, and at Gotalac in Zamboanga del Norte?
2. What are the political perspectives of the rebels by which they ably accept the government's programs and services for them?
3. How do these former rebels cope with the challenges in their present experiences with the government's program services as provided to them?

## Objectives

To establish the experiences of the former rebels at Guipos in Zamboanga del Sur, at Kabasalan in Zamboanga Sibugay, and at Gotalac in Zamboanga del Norte?

To identify the political perspectives of the rebels by which they ably accept the government's programs and services for them; and

To determine how these former rebels cope with the challenges in their present experiences with the government's program services as provided to them.

## Significance of the Study

To the rebel returnees, as it offers a platform to voice their experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced throughout their journey of returning to society. By sharing their stories, rebel returnees can contribute valuable insights that may:

- (a) Empower Personal Identity and Growth. Understanding and reflecting on their past can support returnees in building a positive identity and reinforcing their commitment to peaceful reintegration. The study can help them realize the progress they've made, encouraging further personal growth and resilience.
- (b) Enhance Reintegration Programs. The findings of this study can guide the improvement of existing reintegration programs by highlighting the specific needs and challenges faced by returnees, ensuring that support services are more relevant, accessible, and effective.
- (c) Build Community Acceptance and Inclusion. By providing a nuanced understanding of their motivations and challenges, the study may reduce stigma and foster greater empathy within communities, aiding in the social acceptance of returnees and reinforcing a sense of belonging.
- (d) Contribute to Future Peacebuilding Efforts. Through their participation, returnees play a vital role in shaping policies and programs that could prevent future conflict, as their insights offer lessons that can strengthen peacebuilding efforts and encourage others to follow a similar path to reconciliation.

For soldiers, the study of former rebels is significant as it provides critical insights that can improve their approach to peacekeeping, community engagement, and post-conflict reconciliation.

This study holds importance for soldiers, as it provides a deeper understanding of the experiences, motivations, and challenges faced by former rebels in their journey back to society. The findings may offer the following benefits to soldiers:

- (a) Enhance Understanding of Root Causes. By gaining insights into the factors that drive individuals to rebel and the reasons they choose to return, soldiers can approach their roles with a more informed perspective, which can help in addressing underlying causes of conflict and reducing hostility.

(b) **Improve Approaches to Peacekeeping and Engagement.** The study can equip soldiers with knowledge on effective, compassionate engagement with former rebels, contributing to more constructive interactions that foster trust and mutual respect. This understanding can be pivotal in volatile situations, helping soldiers act as agents of peace rather than conflict.

(c) **Aid in Building Community Resilience.** Through understanding the stories of rebel returnees, soldiers can work alongside communities to reinforce social cohesion, support reintegration, and discourage recidivism, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and united society.

(d) **Support Post-Conflict Reconciliation and Reintegration.** The study's findings may help soldiers play an active role in post-conflict reconciliation processes, allowing them to effectively support the reintegration of returnees and reduce stigma, aiding in long-term peacebuilding efforts.

For government workers, the study is significant as it provides insights that can improve policies, services, and support mechanisms essential for the successful reintegration and rehabilitation of former rebels.

This study is valuable for government workers, particularly those involved in policy-making, social services, and peacebuilding initiatives, as it offers a comprehensive understanding of the unique needs and experiences of former rebels. Said findings can have the following impacts:

(a) **Inform Policy Development and Program Design.** Insights from the study can guide government workers in creating policies and programs tailored to the specific needs of returnees, helping to address root causes of conflict and fostering long-term stability.

(b) **Enhance Social Reintegration Efforts.** By understanding the perspectives of rebel returnees, government workers can improve reintegration initiatives that promote social cohesion and support the successful transition of former rebels into peaceful civilian life, ultimately strengthening community resilience.

(c) **Strengthen Resource Allocation.** The study's findings can help government workers allocate resources more effectively, ensuring that funding and support services are directed toward programs that have a measurable impact on reducing recidivism and supporting peace.

(d) **Promote Interagency Collaboration.** The study can encourage collaboration among various government sectors—such as social welfare, education, and labor—allowing them to work together in a holistic approach to reintegration that addresses both economic and social factors.

(e) **Support Peace and Security Initiatives.** By equipping government workers with a better understanding of the needs and motivations of former rebels, this study can contribute to more effective peace and security policies that address root causes of conflict and create opportunities for former rebels to become active contributors to society.

For researchers, the study of former rebels is significant as it opens new avenues for exploring topics related to peace studies, social reintegration, conflict resolution, and human resilience. This study holds great value for researchers, as it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on conflict resolution, social reintegration, and peacebuilding. The findings provide a unique perspective that can benefit researchers in several ways:

(a) **Advance the Field of Peace and Conflict Studies.** By examining the experiences and motivations of former rebels, this study enriches academic discourse on the complexities of conflict, rebellion, and reconciliation, offering insights that can shape future research in peace and conflict studies.

(b) **Support Theory Development and Validation.** The study offers empirical data that researchers can use to develop and test theories related to identity transformation, post-conflict resilience, and social reintegration, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of these concepts.

(c) **Highlight Best Practices in Reintegration.** Researchers can analyze the study's findings to identify best practices and effective approaches in reintegration, informing evidence-based recommendations for peacebuilding and rehabilitation efforts worldwide.

(d) Encourage Cross-Disciplinary Research. The study's focus on former rebels encourages collaboration across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, political science, and criminology, promoting a holistic approach to understanding and addressing issues related to conflict and reintegration.

(e) Inspire Future Research Directions. This study can serve as a foundation for further research into topics such as trauma recovery, community reintegration, and the socio-political impacts of rebellion, inspiring scholars to explore these areas in greater depth.

## Related Literature and Studies

The Philippine Government has long grappled with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). Over the years, the government has worked to broker peace agreements and encourage NPA members to lay down arms and reintegrate into society. While some have surrendered, many continue to fight for their beliefs. An example would be that of the former rebels in Leyte (DAR, 2021).

Martinez, Jr.'s (2018) study focuses on the lives of former rebels who have surrendered. Using a descriptive-qualitative approach, specifically a case study method, the research relied on two main data-gathering tools: recorded interviews (or protocols), providing accurate transcripts of the former rebels' stories, and interview checklist, guiding specific questions.

The findings were organized into three themes: Profile, Life as a Rebel, and Life After Surrender. Each theme was explored through the participants' narratives and researcher observations, with confidentiality maintained for all participants.

The study recommends that government continues supporting rebel returnees and more widely promote the benefits of surrendering to encourage formal reintegration. Additionally, sustainable programs, particularly for out-of-school youth, are suggested, including educational support, sports, and livelihood projects, to prevent young people from being drawn to the perceived advantages offered by rebel group (Martinez, Jr., 2018).

The government provides aftercare programs for former rebels to support their reintegration through job, livelihood, and education opportunities. Efforts to engage this group also aim to end armed conflict or encourage surrender (Martinez, Jr., 2018).

Cubero, et al.'s (2024) study is grounded in social control theory (Travis Hirschi), Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and Maslow's theory of motivation, using a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the experiences of rebel returnees. Conducted in New Bataan, Davao de Oro, it involved eight former rebels selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed six key themes: Life Struggle, Government Peace Efforts, Recruitment Process, Taste of Freedom, Value of Education, and Family Bonds. The returnees shared that their decision to surrender was wise and taught them lifelong lessons. The government has respected their rights and provided multiple options to help them start anew. Further research is suggested to gather more insights into the experiences and reflections of rebel returnees (Cubero, et al, 2024).

The insurgency in the Philippines has spanned five decades, making it one of the world's longest-running conflicts (Lodangco, 2022). It has grown into a social movement, with both above-ground political groups and an underground guerrilla force opposing the government, with bases across the country from Luzon to Mindanao, Palawan to Samar. The current administration is focused on achieving long-term peace and improving former rebels' lives through various support programs, including effective livelihood aid (Lodangco, 2022).

Lodangco's (2022) study used a case study approach to explore the experiences of former rebels before and after surrendering. Using a descriptive-qualitative method, the researcher employed interview guides and protocols, respecting the Data Privacy Act of 2012, and recorded one-on-one interviews. The returnees' accounts were analyzed by theme, revealing the challenges they faced in the mountains and their reluctance to revisit those hardships. While they face difficulties in transitioning to civilian life, they report positive life

changes since surrendering. The study concludes that continued government support is essential in helping former rebels address the challenges they face post-surrender (Lodangco, 2022).

Political offenses, crimes that challenge a state's fundamental interests, have been a constant part of history (Edrolin, 2021). The Philippine Supreme Court defines these offenses as acts directly targeting the political system or involving common crimes for political ends, such as rebellion or sedition. Insurgency movements, like the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, have pursued armed conflict to overthrow the government, often recruiting from disadvantaged areas. Despite the persistence of these groups, the government has countered them with both military and peace initiatives, including Executive Order No. 3 and Task Force Balik Loob. These programs offer comprehensive support to help former rebels reintegrate through livelihood, psychosocial, and security assistance, leading many to voluntarily surrender. This study aims to assess the impact of such programs on former rebels, examining their social, psychological, and economic experiences pre- and post-reintegration. Insights from this research may guide improvements in support for returnees, particularly in Region 10, where reintegration efforts continue (Edrolin, 2022).

## Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura's theory on behavioral reform, particularly his Social Learning Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory, provides valuable insights into how former rebels, now government beneficiaries, can undergo positive behavioral change.

**Social Learning Theory:** Bandura posited that people learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling. In a rehabilitation or reintegration context, this means former rebels can learn pro-social behaviors by observing role models in their new environment, such as community leaders, mentors, or successful reintegrated individuals. Positive reinforcement and support systems encourage them to replicate constructive behaviors, leading to gradual behavior reform.

**Self-Efficacy Theory:** Bandura argued that belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations (self-efficacy) plays a critical role in how people think, feel, and act. For former rebels, building self-efficacy is essential to sustain behavior change. By setting achievable goals, receiving encouragement, and celebrating small victories, they can build confidence in their ability to adapt to civilian life and develop trust in government support. This shift in mindset is often crucial for sustained reform.

For former rebels, the government's role in providing consistent support, mentorship, and community integration programs aligns with Bandura's theories, helping to cultivate an environment where new, constructive behaviors can be learned, practiced, and maintained.

## Conceptual Framework

The independent variable is the rebel returnees, while the dependent variable is the government's program and services for the former rebels. The intervening variable is the social support network and community environment surrounding the former rebels. This includes family members, friends, mentors, community leaders, and local government officials who play a significant role in the reintegration process.

These social networks act as a bridge between the former rebels (independent variable) and the government programs and services (dependent variable), helping to shape how effectively the rebels adapt to civilian life. Strong, positive support networks provide encouragement, reinforce new behaviors, and facilitate the learning process by offering guidance and social acceptance, which can increase the former rebels' self-efficacy and motivation to stay engaged in the reintegration process. Conversely, a lack of support or a hostile environment may hinder their reform efforts, potentially limiting the effectiveness of government programs.

Hence, Independent Variable: Rebel returnees; Dependent Variable: Government programs and services for former rebels; and the Intervening Variable: Social support network and community environment.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design, Locale, and Instrument

The research design is descriptive, with its locale held at Guipos, Zamboanga del Sur, at Kabasalan, Zamboanga Sibugay, and at Gotalac, Zamboanga del Norte—three neighboring provinces in southern Philippines.

Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews were used as research instruments.

The qualitative data were treated using thematic analysis.

Ethics is applied, and respondents were asked to answer honestly, and accurately. No Indigenous People, pregnant women, and minors was interviewed.

### Presentation and Interpretation of Data

There were a total of 15 participants of four (4) Focus Group Discussions totalling to sixty, and 12 key informant interviewees in the interviews done in the three provinces.

This section presents a summary of the respondents' answers which were all in the local language, Visayan.

**In answer to the first question, “What are the experiences of the former rebels at Guipos in Zamboanga del Sur, at Kabasalan in Zamboanga Sibugay, and at Gotalac in Zamboanga del Norte?” the participants gave the following answers:**

The respondents who are former rebels said they have been recipients of benefits as part of Project Good Life.

Project Good Life is a deradicalization and psycholocation program of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion which started during the tenure of the former batallion commander. The story was on conceptualization, with surrenderees or former rebels (FRs). The timeline rested on rebels or FRs who were immediately recipients of primary benefits after they surrender. These primary benefits came from the different agencies of government. These were ECLIP, or the Enhance Comprehensive Law Implementation Program. These came from the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) which was sixty thousand pesos (PhP65,000.0 or \$1,101.70). While there was PhP65,000 or \$1,101.70 worth of livelihood project, the rebels were also given PhP15,000 (\$254.24) immediate cash assistance. They surrender, along with their firearms, although the evaluation was different.

Before they get to be received, they have to undergo 3 days of psychosocial activity. So that is how the DSWD does its deradicalization and actually the Provincial Social Welfare and Development (PSWD). However the processing of the papers took long, and so was the raising of funds.

For example, when there were 17 FRs looking for fund, but nothing was given, no psychosocial activity which was necessary to deradicalize the FRs. These FRs yet have “surrendered” physically, but their hearts and minds were not yet for the government. This made their minds conceptualized yet.

One main driver of Project Good Life is a clinical psychologist based in Pagadian City. After talks with the Municipal Mayor on the interventions for the FRs, they agreed that deradicalization was the foundation of the project.

After they deradicalize their brains, their good life begins. Their framework of their curriculum begins, as undergone by the FRs. The mode of deradicalization. With research as the foundation of Project Good Life, and the interpretations of Dr. Oliptes, former rebels reveal their motivation or the reason why they joined first the rebellion, and in the process they revealed societal ills, poverty, and many other factors running deep in their personal life.

Project Good Life is complimented by the DSWD programs. There is a halfway house outside the battalion for the surrenderees or FRs while their documents are being processed. This halfway house is like a classroom where they are taught the Project Good Life where they conduct session, 3 days per week, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, then they go home.

FRs undergo art therapy, music therapy, lessons on agriculture, livelihood. In the deradicalization part, all subjects or courses are included, with underlying psycho education intervention. The second batch had all that, except that the focus was more on the integration.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion provided for the Former Rebels' housing while they could not yet go home to their respective communities or until they were able to stand on their own feet.

A technical working group was formed and this group met with national government agencies in the area to get their commitment and started the implementation, in their level, as provincial and regional level agencies.

With a focus thereat, the PRLEC cluster of ELCAC was created, the Poverty Reduction and Livelihood Employment Cluster, and they helped in the reintegration part. The psychoeducation and deradicalization was still maintained as the backbone of the project.

The plans were approved by the Sangguniang Panglalawigan, or provincial legislative body. The Governor was very supportive, with the local government headed as chairman of ELCAC in all levels.

The list of FRs that participated came from the battalion's intelligence office which handles the surrendering, and monitoring.

Some of the former rebels were able to surrender about 2-3 years, others for a year, but there still are those who have not, and these are those who still keep watch against those who have already surrendered. That also means others have received their ECLIP. Then they go home and start their lives anew. There are those who really cannot move freely.

Their self-esteem changed from one with low morale to an uplifted morale, as they move about in camp with increased self-confidence.

**In response to the second question, "What are the political perspectives of the rebels by which they ably accept the government's programs and services for them?" the respondents gave the following themes:**

The political perspectives of the rebels that enabled them to accept the government's programs and services are rooted in their recognition of the sincerity and tangible benefits provided by these initiatives. These perspectives are shaped as recorded as themes:

Many former rebels have shifted their perception of the government from one of mistrust to one of genuine concern for their well-being. Programs like the Good Life Project, implemented by the military in collaboration with agencies like TESDA and DSWD, have demonstrated the government's commitment to helping them reintegrate into society.

The rebels see government programs as a means to improve their lives and their communities. Livelihood opportunities, such as corn-coffee production and agricultural training, have shown them the potential for personal and collective growth, encouraging them to embrace these initiatives.

By participating in government programs, former rebels have recognized the value of education, skills training, and moral development. These align with their goals of securing a better future for themselves and their families, fostering acceptance of these interventions.

Former rebels appreciate that the programs are not temporary measures but sustained efforts that continue to provide training, resources, and guidance. This consistency reinforces their belief in the government's sincerity.



Having experienced the instability of their former lives, many rebels now value the stability and opportunities offered by government programs. This has led to a shift in perspective, with former rebels advocating for peaceful coexistence and development over conflict.

Programs that nurture spiritual and moral growth have helped rebels move away from previous ideologies, replacing them with values centered on community, family, and trust in institutions.

They have received benefits from the government agencies and their project partners, but they were also initially monitored by the soldiers. Those who were given livelihood enterprise projects like on corn and coffee were able to register themselves as associations, such as the Matapat Farmer's Association, which was transformed into a cooperative or the Fifty third IV Friend's Rescued Good Life Agriculture Cooperative producing Roasted Native Corn Powder.

The Good Life Project provided them income, from the corn-coffee products and all. They saw this as a means for productivity and growth. It has been a big help especially since many among them are without any proper education.

Personality development became a factor in terms of public speaking, and socializing. It helped them talk to people on what the Good Life Project is all about.

To overcome these challenges, the former rebels relied on training and livelihood programs provided by the government, sought emotional and social support from family or peers, and took advantage of mentorship opportunities offered by NGOs. However, some still struggle with gaps in service delivery, such as delayed benefits or limited program reach in remote areas.

Government programs are generally effective in providing a foundation for reintegration, but enhancing community acceptance initiatives and streamlining program processes could significantly improve outcomes for former rebels

They have seen the changes in their lives. How their children also developed themselves. They are like brothers and sisters in the community. The tours in the community helped them talk to other people and helped them become better communicators.

Hence, the rebels' political perspectives are characterized by a growing trust in the government's intentions, a focus on productivity and self-improvement, and a recognition of the long-term benefits of stability and integration. These views have been instrumental in their acceptance of and participation in government programs designed for their reintegration.

**In answer to the third question, “How do these former rebels cope with the challenges in their present experiences with the government’s program services as provided to them?” the researcher analyzed the responses.**

Former rebels cope with the challenges in their present experiences with government program services through a combination of personal resilience, support networks, and active engagement with the programs provided to them. They face several challenges when engaging with government program services, such as difficulties in adjusting to civilian life, navigating complex administrative procedures, and coping with the stigma from their communities.

One significant challenge they face is adjusting to civilian life after years of conflict. Many grapple with a sense of uncertainty and mistrust, both in themselves and in the communities they return to. Additionally, they may encounter stigma or rejection, which can hinder their reintegration. Bureaucratic delays or limited accessibility to services, such as livelihood programs or housing assistance, further complicate their journey.

To address these challenges, former rebels often rely on skills and knowledge gained from livelihood training and educational opportunities offered through reintegration programs. Some find emotional and practical support from peers who have undergone similar experiences, forming informal networks to share resources

and encouragement. Others collaborate with local leaders or non-governmental organizations to navigate the complexities of government processes.

While government programs like financial assistance, vocational training, and psychosocial support play a crucial role, their effectiveness is sometimes limited by inconsistent implementation or a lack of follow-up. Despite these issues, many former rebels demonstrate remarkable resilience by creating opportunities for themselves and contributing to their communities, using the government's programs as stepping stone toward a more stable future.

To further enhance their coping mechanisms, it is essential for the government to address gaps in program delivery, ensure timely access to promised benefits, and foster greater community acceptance through awareness and dialogue initiatives.

In the Good Life Project, they learn about God, about agriculture, and many others. The Good Life Project was built to improve people's lives, to make them confident of themselves, to help the people realize that there is more to life and that they can be better persons. It's about letting the people realize that there are government agencies who really work to help people improve like TESDA and DOLE, and to teach people how to stand independently yet trust that government will help. Some of us finished ALS. Their spiritual lives have been nurtured. Others have their children studying under the K-12 program.

The Good Life Program was developed by the Philippine military, with the rebel returnees inside camp. The military collaborated with TESDA for the skills training and development, and other agencies in the inter-agency cooperation program provided the support, such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) which even helped on the production of coffee for the livelihood.

The Good Life Program taught them to forget communism. The entire community are entitled to free education, and that propaganda is not taught. They used to be ashamed, to be lurking in the dark, as they just saw then the programs of the government as something that was only for the many but not for the few among them.

These government programs are sustained, not just left alone.

A lot of skills were taught to the members of the community such as welding, driving, farming, fishing, agriculture, carpentry, and the like.

Many of us thought of surrendering because they really felt the sincerity of government. They saw how the members were treated, and they saw the growth and change among the members.

At first it was difficult because they were thinking it was just a ploy but those who first dared to surrender were the ones who also experienced the government programs and saw the difference.

The only thing that is really keeping them are the pending cases some of them have.

In Gutalac, Zamboanga del Norte, there were six (6) interviewees and nine (9) participants in the FGD. The respondents said that there are 3 projects under the NTF-ELCAC, or the National Task Force-End Local Conflict in AC in the villages of Sto. Nino, SAS, and Immaculada, each of which was downloaded with 4 million pesos each. These are for areas of 310 kilometers for Sto. Nino, 75 kms. in SAS, and 2.98 kms. for Immaculada.

The project had 30 beneficiaries, all of whom were given trainings by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), and chicken farming training by the Department of Transportation (DOTr). There was also a training from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), while the Department of Health (DOH) rendered a medical mission.

The Persons With Disabilities were given opportunities like in medical mission, family planning, life consultation which was for all. There was a seminar on teenage pregnancy, a training on agriculture, cyber prevention training, training on family planning, on self-awareness, and on vaccination.

Seven (7) FGD participants and four (4) interviewees responded from Guipos, Zamboanga del Sur. The program was thru the Office of the Presidential Assistant for Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU) and the NTF-ELCAC. It started as part of the program of then President Rodrigo Duterte. A total of sixty thousand pesos (PhP60,000.00) was given to every rebel returnee. In Guipos, the military really created the Good Life for the rebel returnees.

The NTF-ELCAC provided the program through which they were able to develop skills, process input corn, gardening, with corn made into coffee.

The efforts helped the rebel returnees in their newfound light especially as former bandits where they had a change in perspective, living a life of change in mindset.

Their lives changed when government aided them.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The experiences of former rebels at Guipos (Zamboanga del Sur), Kabasalan (Zamboanga Sibugay), and Gutalac (Zamboanga del Norte) reflect a mix of challenges and transformative interventions under the government's Project Good Life.

Project Good Life, spearheaded by the 53rd Infantry Battalion and key stakeholders, is a deradicalization and psychosocial rehabilitation program. It offers holistic support to former rebels (FRs), addressing their emotional, social, and economic needs to reintegrate them into society.

### Key aspects of their experiences include:

**Reception of Benefits.** FRs are enrolled in the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (ECLIP), receiving cash for livelihood support and in immediate cash assistance. However, delays in processing documents and funds often result in frustration.

**Psychosocial Support and Deradicalization.** Before receiving benefits, FRs participate in a 3-day psychosocial activity to initiate their deradicalization process. This includes art therapy, music therapy, psychoeducation, and livelihood training. A halfway house serves as a classroom for Project Good Life sessions, offering a supportive environment while FRs' documents are processed.

**Community Reintegration and Livelihood Training.** National agencies like TESDA, DOLE, and DTI complement the project by offering non-monetary programs, such as training in electrical installation and livelihood starter kits.

While some FRs begin new lives successfully, others face lingering distrust or mobility issues due to threats from non-surrendered groups.

**Impact on FRs.** Initially hesitant and low in self-esteem, many FRs develop confidence and independence after participating in Project Good Life. The program helps them transition from alienation to self-actualization, fostering a sense of purpose and community belonging.

Despite the program's effectiveness in building self-reliance, challenges such as bureaucratic delays and limited resources persist. Continuous support, streamlined processes, and sustained collaboration among government and community partners remain vital for long-term reintegration.

2. The data provides insights into the political perspectives of the former rebels that contributed to their acceptance of the government's programs and services. These perspectives are shaped by the tangible and intangible benefits they experienced, as outlined below:

***Shift from Resistance to Cooperation.*** The former rebels moved from being monitored by soldiers to becoming active participants in government programs. Their ability to form associations and cooperatives, such as the Matapat Farmer's Association and the Fifty-Third IV Friend's Rescued Good Life Agriculture Cooperative, reflects their acceptance of formal structures and integration into the socio-economic framework.

***Recognition of Government Support.*** The livelihood enterprise projects, such as corn and coffee farming, provided them with a stable income and a pathway to productivity. This economic empowerment helped them see the government's programs as tools for personal and collective growth, fostering a sense of trust in these initiatives.

***Community Building and Solidarity.*** The formation of cooperatives fostered a sense of unity and brotherhood among former rebels, allowing them to see themselves as part of a larger, supportive community. This communal perspective aligns with the government's goal of reintegration, as they now actively contribute to the community's welfare.

***Development of New Skills and Roles.*** Through the Good Life Project, former rebels gained new skills in public speaking, socializing, and communication. These personality development activities enhanced their ability to advocate for the program and share their success stories, transforming them into ambassadors of peace and progress.

***Aspirations for Future Generations.*** Their acknowledgment of how the programs benefited their children reflects a forward-looking political perspective. They view the government's efforts not only as addressing their immediate needs but also as laying the foundation for a better future for their families.

Hence, the former rebels' political perspectives evolved from skepticism and resistance to one of trust, cooperation, and active participation. They accepted the government's programs as mechanisms for empowerment, self-reliance, and community development, leading to a deeper alignment with the government's vision for sustainable reintegration. This acceptance is rooted in their experiences of tangible economic benefits, personal growth, and a newfound sense of community solidarity.

3. These former rebels cope with the challenges in their present experiences with the government's program services as provided to them by their coping mechanisms and challenges addressed.

The coping mechanisms they went through are:

**Utilizing Government Programs and Support:** Former rebels leverage the benefits provided through initiatives like the NTF-ELCAC, TESDA skills training, DOLE livelihood programs, and DSWD's Sustainable Livelihood Program. These services provide practical assistance, such as training in agriculture, welding, carpentry, and fishing, which help them rebuild their lives.

**Personal Growth and Confidence Building:** Programs like the Good Life Project focus on nurturing self-esteem and confidence through education, livelihood skills, and spiritual development. These help former rebels overcome feelings of shame or mistrust, allowing them to see themselves as capable contributors to their communities.

**Community and Peer Support:** Peer networks and group-based programs foster a sense of solidarity. Many participants mention how being part of cooperatives or community activities helps them build emotional resilience and navigate challenges collaboratively.

**Belief in Government Sincerity:** The rebels' perception of the government's sincerity in its reintegration efforts plays a significant role in their coping. They note the sustained support provided, such as the continued availability of training and assistance, which reassures them of the government's commitment to their reintegration.

**Spiritual and Moral Guidance:** Programs include spiritual development, which helps participants find inner peace and a sense of purpose. This component helps them move away from their previous ideologies and embrace new values aligned with societal norms.

**Adapting to Civilian Life:** Trainings and livelihood projects help former rebels transition into civilian life by equipping them with skills and opportunities that foster independence. Overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, while challenging, is mitigated by mentorship from agencies and support from peers.

**Engaging with Community Development:** Participation in community development projects, such as corn-coffee production or gardening, allows them to contribute meaningfully to their communities. These activities help integrate them socially and economically, reducing stigma.

On the other hand, the challenges they addressed included:

**Stigma and Trust Issues:** Through active participation in programs, former rebels overcome feelings of alienation and mistrust from the community.

**Delayed Benefits and Bureaucracy:** While delays in program implementation exist, coping mechanisms include mentorship from agencies and utilizing existing opportunities to sustain their livelihoods.

**Legal Challenges:** Pending cases remain a source of uncertainty for some, but the programs' overall impact on their lives provides a sense of hope and stability.

Former rebels cope with challenges by actively engaging in government programs, relying on support networks, and developing new skills that foster independence and self-confidence. Spiritual growth, belief in government sincerity, and community integration further strengthen their resolve to navigate difficulties and embrace a changed perspective on life. While some obstacles, like legal issues and bureaucratic delays, persist, their participation in these programs highlights their resilience and adaptability.

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