

From Mountains to Neighborhoods: Housing, Belonging, and the Peace–Poverty Paradox among Former Rebels in Philippine Government Housing Sites

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ABSTRACT

Government housing has become the physical centerpiece of the Philippines' reintegration strategy for former rebels, yet almost nothing is known about how its intended beneficiaries actually experience life inside these communities. This study explored the lived experiences of former rebels resettled in government housing sites in Region 10, Northern Mindanao, focusing on how they describe daily life in the resettlement communities and how they view their sense of belonging and inclusion. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty purposively selected former rebels across two housing sites, the Pineville Housing Project in Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, and the CDO Midland Valley Homes in Cagayan de Oro City, complemented by observation and documentary analysis, and were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the resettlement experience is defined by a striking duality. Participants expressed deep gratitude for the housing assistance and consistently described their present lives as peaceful, secure, and family-centered, in sharp contrast to the fear and displacement of their years in the armed movement; the house itself emerged as a powerful symbol of recognition, dignity, and a second chance at civilian life, and home ownership, safety, and participation in community affairs nurtured a growing sense of belonging. At the same time, nearly all participants struggled with persistent livelihood and economic difficulties as they transitioned from self-sufficient mountain-based subsistence to a cash-dependent settlement economy, and some continued to feel uncertain and incompletely accepted owing to stigma and the absence of formal ownership documents. The study concludes that former rebels live a peace–poverty paradox: physically safer and symbolically restored, yet economically insecure, and that housing functions as a necessary but insufficient foundation of reintegration whose promise is completed only by sustainable livelihood support and genuine social acceptance. The relational, identity, and structural dimensions of community cohesion arising from these experiences are examined in separate companion papers.

Keywords: Former Rebels, Reintegration, Government Housing, Community Cohesion, Belonging, Lived Experiences, Phenomenology, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

When a former rebel signs away an armed past, the state's most visible answer is a house. Under the Philippine government's Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) and the Task Force Balik-Loob framework, government housing sites have become the physical centerpiece of reintegration policy: former combatants are relocated with their families into purpose-built settlements intended to anchor their transition to civilian life. The policy logic is intuitive, since shelter provides security, permanence, and a stake in the peace. Yet an intuitive policy is not the same as an understood one. Post-conflict research worldwide has repeatedly cautioned that disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs tend to privilege physical and security outcomes while leaving the social and economic substance of reintegration under-attended (McMullin, 2019; Özerdem, 2022), and that resettlement can succeed as construction while failing as community (Tadem, 2021).

What is missing, in the Philippines especially, is the view from inside the housing site. Existing local studies document reintegration challenges in general terms, including life struggles, emotional strain, and social adjustment among former rebels in government-supported communities (Cubero et al., 2024) and difficult identity transitions among decommissioned Bangsamoro combatants (Alongan & Omblero, 2023), but the everyday experience of the housing-based reintegration model itself, how former rebels describe life in these purpose-built settlements, and whether they come to feel that they belong there, has not been examined phenomenologically. This is a consequential gap: billions of pesos in housing investment, and the durability of local peace, rest on assumptions about what these settlements mean to the people living in them. If the sites are experienced as places of dignity, safety, and membership, they are engines of reintegration; if they are experienced as warehouses of the unemployed and the stigmatized, they are holding areas for relapse.

This study addresses that gap by giving direct voice to former rebels resettled in two government housing sites in Region 10, Northern Mindanao. It is guided by reintegration theory, which conceives reintegration as multidimensional, requiring psychosocial, economic, and relational reconstruction and not merely material support (McMullin, 2019), and by the social cohesion perspective, which treats belonging, trust, participation, and shared norms as the connective tissue of functioning communities (Özdemir, 2022; Johnson-Singh et al., 2024). Within the larger research program from which this article is drawn, these lenses frame six questions about life in the housing sites; this first paper takes up the two most foundational: the resettlement experience itself and the sense of belonging it produces. Understanding these experiences serves Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies and offers the National Housing Authority, E-CLIP implementers, and local governments evidence from the ground on which the success of housing-based reintegration ultimately depends. The relational mechanics of trust and participation, the reconstruction of identity, and the structural model integrating these processes are reported in companion papers.

Research Questions

This study explored the lived experiences of former rebels relocated to government housing sites in Region 10, Northern Mindanao, and how these experiences shape their views of community life. Specifically, it answered two questions: (1) How do former rebels describe their experiences living in government housing sites? and (2) How do former rebels view their sense of belonging and inclusion in the resettlement community?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design, the approach best suited to capturing the subjective meanings and conscious reflections that participants attach to a shared phenomenon (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019), here, the experience of resettlement in government housing after life in an armed movement. Phenomenology privileges depth and richness of individual accounts over numerical representation, allowing the essence of the resettlement experience to emerge from the participants' own narratives.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in two government housing sites for former rebels in Region 10: the Pineville Housing Project in Barangay San Jose, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, and the CDO Midland Valley Homes in Barangay Mambuaya (Dansolihon area), Cagayan de Oro City. Participants were recruited purposively, with snowball referral used to identify additional information-rich residents who met the eligibility criteria. Recruitment sought variation by site, age, and sex rather than statistical representativeness. Inclusion required participants to have formally surrendered and been resettled through government programs, to be at least eighteen years old, and to have lived in the housing site for at least two years so that they could reflect on sustained community experience. Individuals undergoing active legal prosecution or showing signs of acute psychological trauma were excluded as a safety measure. Twenty former rebels participated, ten from each site. The sample included men and women across three age brackets (20–29, 30–44, and 45–65 years), as summarized in Table 1. The sample size was appropriate to the phenomenological aim of obtaining rich, contextualized accounts; however, it was not intended to represent all former rebels or all reintegration settings in the Philippines.

Table 1. Profile of Participants by Site, Age Bracket, and Sex (N = 20)

Age Bracket	Pineville Project	Housing CDO	Midland Valley	Total
45–65 years old (2 male, 2 female per site)	4	4		8
30–44 years old (2 male, 2 female per site)	4	4		8
20–29 years old (1 male, 1 female per site)	2	2		4
Total	10	10		20

Data Gathering and Analysis

Data were gathered primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted individually in the local dialect. Interviews began with rapport-building questions about participants' backgrounds and everyday routines before moving to resettlement experiences, economic adjustment, access to services, social relationships, participation, legal or documentary concerns, and feelings of community membership. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to use follow-up probes, request concrete examples, and clarify meanings while preserving participants' own framing of their experiences. Interviews were complemented by field observations of community life and documentary analysis of National Housing Authority guidelines, E-CLIP materials, and relevant local government directives. These sources were used to contextualize, rather than replace, participants' accounts and to support methodological triangulation.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher first became familiar with the interview material through repeated reading, then generated initial codes across the dataset. Coding combined deductive attention to the research questions with inductive coding of unanticipated meanings and experiences. Related codes were clustered into candidate themes, which were reviewed against coded extracts and the full dataset, refined through comparison within and across the two housing sites, and then clearly defined and named. Analytic attention was given to both convergent accounts and experiences that complicated dominant patterns. A working record of codes, theme development, and cross-site comparisons was maintained to make analytic decisions traceable. Rather than treating frequency alone as evidence of importance, themes were retained when they captured meaningful patterns relevant to the lived experience of resettlement and belonging. Recruitment and interviewing continued until additional accounts were no longer materially changing the developing interpretation of the two research questions. Qualitative rigor was strengthened through data-source triangulation, cross-site comparison, attention to divergent cases, and reflexive review of the relationship between the research questions, coded data, and final themes. Because reflexive thematic analysis treats researcher interpretation as an analytic resource rather than something that can be eliminated, the analysis did not rely on inter-coder agreement as a test of validity.

Ethical Considerations

Entry protocols began with community orientation sessions in the local dialect explaining the study's objectives, eligibility requirements, voluntary nature, interview procedures, and confidentiality safeguards. Written informed consent was secured before participation. Participants were informed that they could decline any question or withdraw without penalty. Identities were protected through participant codes, and potentially identifying details were minimized in reporting. The principal foreseeable risk was emotional discomfort when recalling conflict-related experiences; this was addressed through the exclusion criteria, a non-coercive interview approach, and participants' continuing right to pause or discontinue the interview. Interview materials and research records were handled confidentially and in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized around the two research questions, with five themes describing the resettlement experience and four themes describing belonging and inclusion, summarized in Table 2 and elaborated with the participants' own words.

Table 2. Summary of Emerging Themes by Research Question

Research Question	Emerging Themes
RQ1: Experiences living in government housing sites	1. Gratitude for government housing assistance; 2. Persistent livelihood and economic difficulties; 3. Peace and security as positive transformations; 4. Family reunification and social stability; 5. Difficult adjustment from mountain life to community living
RQ2 (of this paper): Sense of belonging and inclusion	1. Housing ownership creates a sense of belonging; 2. Participation strengthens inclusion; 3. Peace and safety reinforce belongingness; 4. Uncertainty and social selectiveness remain

The Resettlement Experience: Gratitude, Peace, and Family Amid Hardship

Across both sites, participants opened their accounts with gratitude. The house, given without cost, was described as a meaningful achievement they could never have secured alone and as evidence of the government's good faith. One participant from the CDO Midland Valley Homes captured the sentiment:

"The NHA gave us a house, and the government treated us well... We were happy because the government gave us joy. This house is very valuable to us because the government gave it to us without us spending anything."

Gratitude was inseparable from the experience of peace and security, consistently narrated in contrast to the fear of life in the movement. A participant explained that "our life here is good; we are at peace; it's not like when we were in the forest where we were constantly afraid," while another rendered the transformation in a single image:

"Here, when we hear a helicopter, we just look up. Before, we would run away."

A third dimension of the positive experience was family reunification. Years in the armed movement had separated participants from spouses and children, and the housing site was, for some, the first place the family had ever lived together:

"During my years in the NPA, we were never together as a family. The first time we really lived together was when we moved here."

Yet woven through every narrative of gratitude ran the study's hardest thread: persistent livelihood and economic difficulty. The move from mountain subsistence, where land, water, and firewood were free, into a cash-dependent settlement economy transformed daily survival. "Back in the mountains, we could plant things; we didn't have to buy water or firewood; here, you have to buy everything," one participant explained, while another put employment at the center of the experience: "The most important thing here is livelihood; we have students, and our income here can't keep up." Unfulfilled expectations sharpened the strain, with one participant stating plainly that "the government's promise to provide jobs and assistance has not been fulfilled until now," and a Pineville participant tracing the difficulty to the skills gap of agricultural life: "Livelihood is very tight... most of us came from the mountains and don't know much about work in the city." The adjustment was thus not merely economic but cultural and psychological, a reorientation of an entire way of living, felt in one participant's summary of the emotional texture of resettlement: "sometimes happy, sometimes sad because of the hardships."

Belonging and Inclusion: Ownership, Participation, and the Limits of Acceptance

Against this backdrop of grateful hardship, a genuine sense of belonging is nonetheless taking root, and its first anchor is the house itself. Ownership converted residence into membership and closed the road back to the mountains:

"I really feel like I am a part of this now... because of my house. Why would we go back to the mountains when we have this?"

Participation supplied the second anchor. Belonging was repeatedly described not as a status conferred but as a practice performed, through attendance, involvement, and shared obligations: “I can say I belong to this community because I am active here on the ground,” one participant asserted, and another located her inclusion simply “because I participate in the discussions.” Peace and safety supplied the third anchor, with participants associating belongingness with living “in safety” and with the desire never to return to their former lives. Yet belonging remains unfinished for some. One participant voiced a hesitation that joins the legal to the social:

“I’m not sure yet because I don’t hold a title yet... people are still selective in choosing whom to trust.”

The absence of formal ownership documents, residual stigma, and the selectiveness of trust mark the boundary of inclusion, a reminder that belonging in resettlement communities is tied not only to physical relocation but to social acceptance and legal recognition within the broader society.

The Peace–Poverty Paradox

Read together, the themes disclose the study’s central finding: former rebels in government housing live a peace–poverty paradox. They are safer, calmer, reunited with their families, and symbolically restored, yet they remain economically vulnerable in a settlement environment where basic needs increasingly require cash. Physical safety therefore does not automatically translate into economic stability or completed reintegration. The participants’ accounts point to structural conditions that shape this paradox: limited employment opportunities compatible with their prior agricultural experience, the cost of water and other everyday services, weak livelihood continuity, incomplete ownership or award documentation, and dependence on government and local institutions for access to assistance. These factors show that reintegration is produced not only through individual adjustment or interpersonal acceptance but also through the availability, accessibility, and continuity of institutions and services. Local governance support is especially consequential because housing administration, livelihood linkage, documentation, community activities, and referrals to public services are implemented or coordinated at the local level. This interpretation is consistent with international evidence that post-conflict programs privileging security, demobilization, and physical resettlement while under-providing economic reintegration leave former combatants materially vulnerable even as their safety improves (McMullin, 2019; Özerdem, 2022). Philippine scholarship similarly documents continuing financial hardship and adjustment challenges among former combatants (Alongan & Omblero, 2023; Cubero et al., 2024), while policy analysis warns that fragmented or short-term assistance can prolong vulnerability (Tadem, 2021; Lamb, 2020). Evidence from Nigeria likewise underscores the role of livelihood support, skills training, and enterprise opportunities in converting resettlement into participation and cooperation (Momodu et al., 2025).

Housing as Symbol: Physical Stability as Psychological Security

The second integrative insight concerns what the house means. For these participants, the housing unit is not merely shelter but an emblem of recognition: safety, dignity, permanence, and the state’s acknowledgment that they may peacefully rebuild their lives. It is on this symbolic foundation that belonging grows, through ownership, participation, and peaceful living, which is why the participant without a title feels his membership incomplete. The finding aligns with scholarship showing that stable living environments diminish anxiety and restore a sense of security and belonging after protracted conflict (Alongan & Omblero, 2023) and that housing functions as a psychosocial support system, not only infrastructure, in the transition from fear and displacement (Johnson-Singh et al., 2024). Yet the same scholarship, and this study’s own fourth belonging theme, caution that housing does not by itself guarantee social integration: without community-building, livelihood, and psychosocial support, resettled former rebels can remain stigmatized and incompletely accepted despite their roofs (Lamb, 2020; Tadem, 2021). Housing, in short, is the necessary beginning of reintegration and never its completion.

CONCLUSIONS

Three conclusions are drawn from the lived experiences of the participants. First, government housing resettlement delivers genuine and deeply valued goods: peace, security, family reunification, and a dignifying symbol of second chances. These experiences form an important emotional and material foundation on which

former rebels begin to identify as legitimate community members. Second, the resettlement experience is structured by a peace–poverty paradox in which improved safety coexists with livelihood insecurity, limited employment options, cash-dependent daily needs, and continuing reliance on institutional support. Economic reintegration and access to services are therefore not secondary benefits but conditions that shape whether housing can become a sustainable platform for civilian life. Third, belonging is real but conditional: it is strengthened by housing, participation, and safety, yet constrained by residual stigma, selective trust, and incomplete legal or ownership documentation. Reintegration in these communities is thus simultaneously material, relational, legal, and institutional. These conclusions are specific to the twenty participants and two Region 10 housing sites studied and should be transferred to other settings through careful consideration of contextual similarities rather than assumed statistical generalization.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that delimit the interpretation of its findings. It draws on twenty former rebels from two government housing sites in Region 10 and was designed for phenomenological depth rather than population-level representativeness; accordingly, the findings may not transfer directly to reintegration settings with different conflict histories, housing arrangements, livelihood environments, or governance capacities. The study also privileges former rebels' perspectives. Although observation and documentary analysis provided contextual triangulation, host-community residents, local government officials, housing administrators, and program implementers were not interviewed, limiting the study's ability to compare beneficiary accounts with institutional and community perspectives. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures experiences at a particular stage of resettlement and cannot determine how belonging, livelihood security, documentation status, or institutional dependence change over time. These boundaries do not negate the findings but define the context within which they should be interpreted and applied.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Housing Authority and housing site administrators may expedite the issuance and clarification of ownership or award documents, since legal recognition emerged as a direct condition of felt belonging, and may pair housing delivery with sustained community-building and post-occupancy support rather than treating turnover as the endpoint of assistance. E-CLIP implementers and the Task Force Balik-Loob may strengthen durable livelihood development through skills upgrading, employment and market linkage, enterprise support, and livelihood options suited to participants' prior agricultural experience. Local government units may institutionalize inclusive community activities and anti-stigma or reconciliation initiatives while improving residents' practical access to employment facilitation, basic services, civil and housing documentation, and locally coordinated reintegration assistance.

Future research should test the transferability of these findings across other reintegration communities and regions through multi-site, longitudinal, and mixed-method designs. Studies should deliberately include the perspectives of host-community residents, local government officials, National Housing Authority personnel, E-CLIP and Task Force Balik-Loob implementers, and reintegration practitioners to examine how institutional decisions and community perceptions interact with former rebels' lived experiences. Comparative work should also investigate structural determinants of reintegration—including employment opportunities, livelihood continuity, access to health, education and other basic services, legal and housing documentation, transportation and market access, and the consistency of local governance support—and examine how these conditions shape belonging, stigma, participation, and long-term economic self-reliance.

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