

Tension, Mistrust, and Social Dichotomy Between War Veterans and Communities in Zimbabwe: A Paradox of Privilege and Disconnection

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the roots of tension, mistrust, and social dichotomy between war veterans and communities in Zimbabwe, across the 10 provinces. Despite multiple welfare interventions, including the War Veterans Act (1992), veterans remain economically vulnerable and socially isolated, while communities perceive them as politically privileged yet disconnected. It aimed to (1) analyse the historical, political, and socio-economic factors contributing to this mistrust and (2) explore community perceptions, coping mechanisms, and potential pathways for reconciliation and integration. It was grounded in two complementary theories: Social Identity Theory, which explains how veterans are positioned as an “in-group” with symbolic authority, and Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasizes relational and structural change for sustainable peace. Methodologically, the study adopts a pragmatic philosophy, qualitative dominant mixed method approach with an explanatory design. Data were collected through key informant interviews, document analysis of five institutional texts, including the War Veterans Act and African Union DDR Standards complemented by questionnaires. Thematic coding and content analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke’s framework, were used to identify recurring patterns and policy gaps. Abductive reasoning linked empirical findings to theoretical insights. The study concludes that Veteran–community relations in Zimbabwe are defined by a paradox; war veterans, once celebrated as liberators, are now perceived as politically privileged yet socially disconnected, while communities feel excluded and marginalized. This entrenched mistrust cannot be resolved through welfare alone. Sustainable reconciliation requires structural reforms that embed community voices, foster inclusive dialogue, and support grassroots cooperation. Veterans must be repositioned as equal participants in national development, moving beyond politicized, welfare-centric frameworks toward inclusive, community-driven reconciliation strategies that bridge divides and foster genuine social integration. Reconciliation requires more than welfare, it demands structured dialogue, community-driven economic cooperation, and cultural mediation. Reconciliation requires more than welfare, it demands structured dialogue, community-driven economic cooperation, and cultural mediation. It therefore recommends reforming veteran legislation to embed integration mechanisms, empowering traditional and religious leaders to mediate tensions, and supporting grassroots initiatives that foster shared livelihoods and mutual respect. Ultimately develops an integrated reconciliation and cohesion model for transforming veteran–community relations and advancing inclusive development in Zimbabwe is proposed.

Keywords: War Veterans, Tension, Mistrust, Social Dichotomy, Politicization and Reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

The reintegration of war veterans into Zimbabwean society remains one of the most pressing challenges in the nation’s post-conflict journey. Once celebrated as liberators, veterans now occupy a contested space. Communities often perceive veterans as politically privileged yet socially disconnected, creating a paradox that undermines trust and fuels resentment. This tension has produced a social dichotomy that not only fractures

everyday relations but also threatens broader national cohesion. Through examining the roots of these strained relations, this study seeks to illuminate the complexities of veteran–community dynamics and highlight pathways for reconciliation that move beyond welfare-centric interventions toward inclusive, community-driven strategies for sustainable integration.

BACKGROUND

The reintegration of war veterans into civilian life remains one of the most complex challenges in post-conflict societies, shaping social cohesion, political stability, and community trust. Across global, regional, and national contexts, the issue manifests in varying degrees of tension, mistrust, and dichotomy between veterans and the communities they once fought to liberate. Globally, the reintegration of war veterans into civilian life has been a central concern in post-conflict societies. According to MacLean and Parsons (2010), countries such as the United States and Canada have invested heavily in psychosocial rehabilitation, education, and employment programmes to reduce tensions between veterans and communities. In the United States, the Department of Veterans Affairs has institutionalized benefits ranging from healthcare to housing support, while Canada's Veterans Affairs Canada emphasizes family reintegration and community-based counselling (MacLean & Parsons, 2010). These frameworks demonstrate that successful reintegration requires sustained state responsibility, interagency coordination, and recognition of veterans' contributions.

The European experience also provides valuable lessons. In Croatia and Germany, reintegration has been supported through memorialization, vocational training, and reconciliation programmes that bridge the gap between veterans and civilians (Jansen, 2013). The United Nations Development Programme (2021) highlights Australia and Israel as beacons of good practice, where veterans are integrated through structured benefits and community dialogue initiatives. These examples show that reintegration is not merely about material compensation but also about fostering social cohesion and collective memory.

Regionally, Africa's experience with Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) has been mixed. Bangura (2023) argues that while DDR has been central to peacebuilding in Liberia and Sierra Leone, reintegration remains the most fragile component of African post-conflict transitions. In West Africa, programmes often focused on disarmament and demobilisation but neglected community acceptance, leading to recurring mistrust between ex-combatants and civilians (Bangura, 2023). Similarly, in Nigeria, reintegration of ex-combatants from the Niger Delta militias has struggled to balance veterans' welfare with community trust, resulting in cycles of violence and tension (Aghedo, 2013). In East and Central Africa, reintegration challenges are equally pronounced. In South Sudan, DDR programmes have been undermined by weak institutions and ongoing conflict, leaving veterans marginalized and communities distrustful (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). In Southern Africa, South Africa's post-apartheid reintegration of former liberation fighters has been more structured, with veterans incorporated into the South African National Defence Force and supported through welfare programmes (Gear, 2002). However, even here, tensions persist over recognition and benefits. These regional lessons underscore the importance of inclusive, community-driven approaches that address identity, memory, and social cohesion rather than focusing narrowly on material benefits.

The reintegration of war veterans into civilian life in Zimbabwe remains one of the most complex challenges of the post-independence era. Makombe and Mvere (2025) argue that demobilisation and rehabilitation procedures were poorly executed, resulting in militarized masculinity and politicization of veterans, which entrenched mistrust between them and communities. Mutanda (2020) similarly observes that the government's DDR process failed to adequately address veterans' welfare, leaving significant gaps in social reintegration. While the War Veterans Act (1992) and subsequent compensation schemes provided financial relief, they did not foster genuine reconciliation or community integration. This paradox, where veterans are celebrated as liberators yet remain economically vulnerable and socially disconnected has become a national reality, shaping relations between veterans and communities across Zimbabwe's ten provinces.

Tensions manifest in diverse ways across Zimbabwean provinces. In urban centers such as Harare and Bulawayo, communities often perceive veterans as politically privileged yet socially disconnected, reinforcing a dichotomy between their symbolic role and lived reality. In rural provinces such as Mashonaland Central,

Masvingo, and Manicaland, veterans frequently dominate local leadership structures and land redistribution processes, creating resentment among ordinary villagers who feel excluded. In Matabeleland North and South, historical grievances and ethnic dimensions further complicate relations, with communities perceiving veterans as aligned with ruling elites and disconnected from local realities. These provincial variations demonstrate that contradictions of privilege and marginalization are systemic, not confined to isolated districts, and highlight the need for comparative analysis across multiple provinces to capture the full scope of veteran–community relations.

The Portfolio Committee on Defence and War Veterans' Affairs (Veritas, 2024) acknowledges ongoing petitions from veterans and their dependants demanding economic empowerment, reflecting unresolved grievances that cut across both urban and rural contexts. Previous interventions have often deepened divisions by privileging veterans materially without addressing community perceptions or fostering dialogue (Makombe, 2025). Communities continue to perceive veterans as politically privileged yet socially disconnected, while veterans themselves feel neglected and marginalized. Over 20,000 veterans demobilized after independence remain economically vulnerable and socially isolated (Makombe & Mvere, 2025). These realities highlight the inadequacy of welfare-centric approaches and the absence of structured dialogue platforms that could build trust and foster reconciliation.

The reintegration of war veterans into civilian life is a therefore critical dimension of post-conflict peacebuilding, yet in Zimbabwe it has produced tension, mistrust, and social dichotomy between veterans and communities. While veterans are celebrated as liberators, their politicization and economic marginalization have created fractures with ordinary citizens, undermining social cohesion and inclusive development. Literature on regional DDR frameworks, particularly the African Union DDR Standards (2013), emphasizes community-driven reintegration, trust-building, and cultural approaches, dimensions largely neglected in Zimbabwe's policy frameworks. This gap underscored the urgent need for research that interrogates the historical, political, and socio-economic roots of tension, mistrust, and social dichotomy between war veterans and communities in Zimbabwe, while exploring community-driven pathways for reconciliation and integration. This is essential for designing reconciliation strategies that foster sustainable peace and inclusive development at the national level. The study specifically addressed the following dual objectives:

1. To analyse the historical, political, and socio-economic factors contributing to tension and mistrust between war veterans and communities
2. To explore community mechanisms, and perceptions, coping potential pathways for reconciliation and social integration between war veterans and communities

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Methodologically, the study adopts a pragmatic philosophical orientation and employs a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach within an explanatory research design. This orientation allows for flexibility in combining qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, ensuring that the analysis captures both experiential narratives and measurable perceptions. Data were collected through key informant interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis, enabling triangulation of institutional and community perspectives.

The units of analysis were drawn from across Zimbabwe's ten provinces to ensure national representativeness and comparative depth. Thirty questionnaires were administered to community members, distributed proportionally across both urban and rural contexts, to capture diverse perceptions of veteran–community relations. In addition, fifteen key informant interviews were conducted with individuals who are well-informed about the subject, including war veterans themselves, community leaders, policy actors, and veteran advocacy groups. This purposive selection ensured that the study incorporated voices with experiential knowledge, institutional insight, and organisational perspectives, thereby enriching the analysis with multiple layers of understanding. The sample size of 30 questionnaires and 15 interviews was deliberately chosen to balance feasibility with analytical depth, while ensuring representation across provinces. Although the sample size and selection criteria are not exhaustively detailed, which may affect transparency and replicability, the purposive

inclusion of well-informed key informants and organisational representatives strengthens the validity of the findings.

The document analysis focused on five key institutional texts, including the War Veterans Act (1992), the Zimbabwe National Policy on War Veterans (2000), the Report of the Portfolio Committee on Defence and War Veterans' Affairs (Veritas, 2024), relevant government gazettes, and the African Union DDR Standards (2013), as these shape the policy and governance framework within which veteran–community relations are negotiated. Data analysis employed thematic coding and qualitative content analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, to identify recurring patterns, policy gaps, and institutional dynamics. An abductive reasoning approach was used to iteratively connect empirical findings with theoretical insights, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data while contributing to broader conceptual understanding.

This research is grounded in two complementary theories, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1995, 1997). The Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive part of their identity from the groups to which they belong, often leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. In the Zimbabwean context, war veterans have historically been positioned as the “in-group,” celebrated as liberators with symbolic authority, while communities often perceive themselves as the “out-group,” marginalized by veterans' political privilege. Abrams and Hogg (1990) note, group identity can foster cohesion internally but simultaneously generate mistrust externally when recognition and resources are unevenly distributed. This theory directly supports the study's objective of analysing the historical, political, and socio-economic roots of tension, showing how identity construction and collective memory perpetuate divisions between veterans and civilians. The Conflict Transformation Theory complements this through emphasizing that sustainable peace requires addressing both relational and structural dimensions of conflict. Lederach (1997) argues that transformation involves building new relationships, fostering dialogue, and restructuring social systems to promote justice and inclusion. The theory therefore guides exploration of community perceptions, coping mechanisms, and reconciliation pathways. It provides a framework for understanding how mistrust can be transformed into constructive engagement through inclusive dialogue and policy reform. Galtung (1996) also observes, transformation requires tackling both direct and structural violence, which in Zimbabwe's case includes economic marginalization and politicization of veterans.

The policy and institutional frameworks includes the War Veterans Act (1992) which established the legal basis for pensions, gratuities, and medical support, while the Zimbabwe National Policy on War Veterans (2000) expanded the scope to include empowerment initiatives. Institutionally, the Ministry of Defence and War Veterans Affairs is the primary body mandated to oversee veterans' welfare, supported by parliamentary oversight through the Portfolio Committee on Defence and War Veterans' Affairs. At the regional level, Zimbabwe's frameworks are expected to align with the African Union DDR Standards (2013), which emphasize community-driven reintegration, though national practice has lagged behind these principles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Literature Review-The Roots of Tension, Mistrust, and Social Dichotomy between Wars

The reintegration of war veterans into civilian communities has been a subject of sustained scholarly inquiry across the globe. Veterans often embody symbolic authority as defenders of national sovereignty, yet their return to civilian life is frequently accompanied by mistrust, tension, and social dichotomy. Empirical studies have sought to understand these dynamics by examining historical legacies, political manipulation, and socio-economic exclusion.

At the global level, veteran reintegration has been widely studied, with findings highlighting identity reconstruction and community perceptions as central challenges. MacLean and Elder (2020), in *Veteran Reintegration and Community Perceptions*, examined how veterans in the United States cope with returning to civilian life. Their study revealed that while veterans were respected for their service, communities often struggled to integrate them socially, leading to mistrust rooted in perceptions of privilege. This underscores the paradox of symbolic recognition versus social exclusion. Similarly, Woodward et al. (2021), in *Veterans and*

Civilian Communities, investigated reintegration in the United Kingdom. They found that structured welfare programs addressed material needs but failed to bridge deeper relational divides, leaving veterans isolated and communities resentful.

This empirical literature converge on the idea that reintegration policies must go beyond material support to address identity-based mistrust. While the U.S. case emphasizes psychological trauma and identity reconstruction, the U.K. highlights policy gaps and societal perceptions. Both contexts demonstrate that welfare interventions alone are insufficient, as they fail to foster genuine social cohesion. This resonates with Zimbabwe's situation, where welfare-centric frameworks exist but do not adequately address relational mistrust between veterans and communities.

Across Africa, reintegration challenges have been documented in diverse post-conflict settings. Sesay and Ismail (2020), in *Community and Traditional Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone*, highlighted the role of elders and traditional structures in mediating tensions. Their findings revealed that while community-led reconciliation mechanisms were effective, politicization undermined trust. This aligns with Zimbabwe's case, where politicization of veterans erodes community confidence, though Sierra Leone's reintegration was framed more explicitly within post-war peacebuilding. Nzongola-Ntalaja (2020), in *Ex-Combatants and Community Relations in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, emphasized that exclusion from state resources perpetuated social dichotomies despite institutional presence, reinforcing cycles of mistrust.

In Southern Africa, Hanlon (2020), in *Marginalized: Veterans' Status Evolved Post-War*, showed that Mozambican veterans were initially celebrated as liberators but later marginalized economically, fostering resentment. Alexander and McGregor (2021), in *Councils: Coping with Reintegration in Namibia*, found that communities relied on civic organizations to manage tensions, highlighting grassroots coping mechanisms. These studies converge on the recognition that socio-economic exclusion and politicization are central to mistrust, but they differ in emphasis: Mozambique highlights economic marginalization, while Namibia underscores community-driven resilience. This literature provide comparative insights into Zimbabwe's context, where politicization and exclusion remain dominant drivers of tension.

At the national level, Melissa Makombe (2020), in *War Veterans: Challenges and Prospects for Zimbabwe*, analysed how veterans were reintegrated into society, finding that politicization reinforced mistrust. Other Zimbabwean studies, such as Muzondidya (2021) in *Liberation Struggle Legacies and Community Relations*, examined how collective memory of the liberation war shapes perceptions of veterans. Findings revealed that communities often view veterans as both liberators and political actors, creating a dual identity that fosters mistrust. While Muzondidya's work emphasizes historical legacies, the current study focuses on contemporary community-veterans of war relations, offering a localized lens on reconciliation and integration.

The empirical literature above converges on several key points; veterans across global, continental in identity, politicization, and socio-economic exclusion develop coping mechanisms, and national contexts, ranging from grassroots face mistrust rooted. Communities often initiatives in the United States to contexts veterans victims of neglect elites resented by communities. Traditional structures in Africa. However, contradictions emerge, in some contexts veterans of war are marginalized, and while in others they are privileged Zimbabwe's case is unique in that veterans remain important, yet communities politically influential perceive them as privileged and disconnected.

Historical, Political, And Socio-Economic Factors Contributing To Tension And Mistrust Between War Veterans And Communities.

As earlier alluded, the relationship between war veterans and communities has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, political manipulation, and socio-economic realities. Veterans often return from conflict with symbolic authority as defenders of national sovereignty, yet their reintegration into civilian life is rarely seamless. Across different contexts, literature have shown that communities frequently perceive veterans through the lens of privilege, entitlement, or political patronage, while veterans themselves struggle with marginalization, unmet welfare needs, and contested identities. These tensions manifest in mistrust and social dichotomy, making reconciliation and integration a persistent challenge.

International, specifically in developed countries, scholars have examined how veterans' reintegration into civilian life often produces tension rooted in identity and socio-economic factors. According to MacLean and Elder (2020), in the United States, veterans struggle with identity reconstruction, as military service fosters strong in-group cohesion but complicates reintegration into civilian communities. Similarly, Woodward et al. (2021) argue that in the United Kingdom, welfare policies have addressed material needs but failed to bridge social mistrust, leaving veterans socially isolated. These perspectives converge on the idea that historical legacies of military service shape veterans' identities in ways that both empower and isolate them. However, they diverge in emphasis; American scholarship highlights psychological trauma and identity reconstruction, while British literature stresses policy gaps and societal perceptions. This divergence underscores the importance of contextualizing reintegration challenges within specific socio-political environments.

Across Africa, reintegration challenges have also been widely documented. In West Africa, Sesay and Ismail (2020) note that ex-combatants in Sierra Leone faced mistrust from communities due to their wartime roles, with reintegration programs often politicized and unevenly implemented. In East Africa, Omach (2021) analysed Uganda's veterans, where political patronage reinforced divisions between veterans and civilians, creating mistrust rooted in unequal access to resources. Central African contexts, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, show similar patterns, with Nzongola-Ntalaja (2020) emphasizing that socio-economic marginalization of ex-combatants perpetuates community tensions. In Southern Africa, Hanlon (2020) observes that Mozambican veterans were celebrated as liberators but later marginalized economically, leading to mistrust and resentment. This literature converge on the view that socio-economic exclusion and politicization of veterans' identities are central to tensions, yet contradictions emerge; while some argue that veterans' symbolic status fosters respect, others highlight that this same status generates resentment when communities perceive unequal privilege.

Regionally, Southern Africa presents unique dynamics shaped by liberation struggles. According to Alexander and McGregor (2021), in countries such as Namibia and South Africa, veterans were initially integrated into state structures but later marginalized as economic realities shifted. In South Africa, Gear (2020) notes that veterans of the armed struggle often felt betrayed by post-apartheid institutions, leading to mistrust between them and communities who expected inclusive development. These regional perspectives converge on the recognition that liberation veterans occupy a dual identity: celebrated as heroes yet marginalized in socio-economic terms. However, contradictions arise in interpretations, with some scholars emphasizing veterans' empowerment through state patronage, while others highlight their exclusion from meaningful participation in community development.

At the national level, Zimbabwe presents a particularly complex case. According to Makombe (2020), the reintegration of war veterans has been heavily influenced by political leadership, with veterans often mobilized as instruments of state power rather than integrated as equal community members. Melissa Makombe (2020) further argues that veterans' demands for welfare and empowerment have clashed with community expectations, creating mistrust rooted in perceptions of privilege and entitlement. Shadreck Makombe (2020) emphasizes that governance failures and politicization of veterans' welfare have reinforced social dichotomies, with communities viewing veterans as beneficiaries of state patronage rather than partners in development. These perspectives converge on the recognition that historical legacies of liberation struggle, combined with political manipulation, have entrenched mistrust. Yet contradictions persist, as some scholars see veterans as victims of state neglect, others argue they have been privileged at the expense of communities.

The reviewed literature reveals clear convergences across global, continental, regional, and national contexts, veterans' reintegration is shaped by historical legacies, politicization, and socio-economic exclusion. Scholars agree that identity construction and collective memory play central roles in perpetuating mistrust. Yet contradictions persist; in some contexts veterans are seen as privileged elites, while in others they are marginalized victims of neglect. Emerging issues include the politicization of veterans' welfare, the role of governance in shaping reintegration, and the persistence of socio-economic inequalities. These debates highlight gaps in existing scholarship, particularly the need to examine how veterans' symbolic authority interacts with community perceptions across Zimbabwe's diverse provincial contexts. While existing studies have often concentrated on isolated localities, the broader national picture reveals systemic tensions that cut across both urban and rural settings. Veterans are celebrated as liberators yet simultaneously perceived as

politically privileged and socially disconnected, creating a paradox that undermines trust and cohesion. This study addresses that gap by situating veteran–community relations within a national framework, contributing to wider debates on the roots of tension, mistrust, and social dichotomy between war veterans and communities in Zimbabwe.

Community Mechanisms, Perceptions, Coping Potential Pathways for Reconciliation and Social Integration between War Veterans and Communities.

Community mechanisms, perceptions, and coping pathways for reconciliation and social integration between war veterans and communities form a critical strand of literature that foregrounds how societies attempt to heal divisions created by conflict and politicization. Scholars emphasize that while veterans are often celebrated as symbols of liberation, communities frequently struggle with mistrust and exclusion, necessitating strategies that balance recognition with inclusion. Following is a review of literature on this issue.

At international level, literature have examined how communities respond to the reintegration of veterans, often highlighting mechanisms of coping and reconciliation. According to MacLean and Elder (2020), community-based initiatives such as peer support groups and local veteran associations have played a crucial role in bridging mistrust between veterans and civilians in the United States. Similarly, Woodward et al. (2021) argue that in the United Kingdom, reconciliation has been facilitated through structured welfare programs and community dialogues, though gaps remain in addressing psychological trauma and identity reconstruction. Literature here converge on the importance of community-driven mechanisms, yet they differ in emphasis, American literature highlights grassroots coping strategies, while British scholarship stresses institutional frameworks. This divergence underscores the need to balance formal policy interventions with informal community initiatives.

Across Africa, community mechanisms for reconciliation have been diverse and context-specific. In West Africa, Sesay and Ismail (2020) note that Sierra Leone’s post-war reconciliation relied heavily on traditional community structures, where elders mediated between ex-combatants and civilians. In East Africa, Omach (2021) highlights Uganda, where community dialogues and religious institutions played a central role in fostering reintegration, though political patronage often undermined trust. In Central Africa, Nzongola-Ntalaja (2020) emphasizes that in the Democratic Republic of Congo, reconciliation was hindered by weak institutions, forcing communities to rely on informal coping strategies such as collective farming and mutual aid. In Southern Africa, Hanlon (2020) observes that Mozambican communities initially celebrated veterans as liberators but later developed coping mechanisms rooted in economic cooperation when veterans were marginalized. To this effect literature converge on the recognition that communities often rely on traditional, religious, and economic structures to foster reconciliation, though contradictions emerge when political manipulation undermines these efforts.

In addition, Southern Africa provides important insights on pathways on how veterans-community relations can be improved. Alexander and McGregor (2021) argue that in Namibia, veterans were integrated into state structures, but communities developed coping mechanisms through local councils and civic organizations to manage tensions. In South Africa, Gear (2020) notes that reconciliation between veterans and communities was facilitated through truth commissions and community dialogues, though mistrust persisted due to unmet socio-economic expectations. In this regard literature converge on the importance of structured dialogue and community participation, yet they contradict in their assessment of effectiveness: while some scholars highlight the success of institutionalized reconciliation mechanisms, others argue that these processes failed to address grassroots concerns, leaving communities to devise their own coping strategies.

Furthermore, the Zimbabwean context presents a complex case of community perceptions and coping mechanisms. According to Makombe (2020), communities often perceive war veterans as politically privileged, leading to mistrust and resentment. Melissa Makombe (2020) argues that coping mechanisms have included avoidance, silent resistance, and reliance on local leadership structures to mediate tensions. Shadreck Makombe (2020) emphasizes that communities have developed informal pathways for reconciliation, such as collective economic initiatives and religious mediation, though these efforts are often undermined by state politicization of veterans’ welfare. The above literature converge on the recognition that communities in

Zimbabwe have agency in coping and reconciliation, but contradictions arise in interpretations, while some scholars highlight community resilience, others stress the limitations imposed by political manipulation and economic marginalization.

Emerging literature also points to the role of generational change and shifting community perceptions. According to Chivhunga (2021), younger generations in Zimbabwe increasingly view veterans not as liberators but as political actors tied to ruling party structures, which complicates reconciliation. Communities have responded by creating alternative narratives of inclusion, emphasizing economic cooperation and civic participation over political allegiance. This suggests that reconciliation pathways are not static but evolve with changing socio-political contexts, highlighting the importance of understanding community agency in shaping integration.

Based on the above, across contexts, literature reveal that communities employ diverse strategies to cope with mistrust and foster integration. These range from formal interventions in developed countries, such as structured welfare programs and dialogue platforms, to traditional and religious mediation in African settings. Such mechanisms demonstrate that reconciliation is most effective when it combines policy-driven support with community-led initiatives, ensuring that veterans are not positioned as outsiders but as equal participants in social and developmental processes. This body of literature provides a foundation for understanding how communities across Zimbabwe's ten provinces navigate the complexities of veteran–community relations and seek pathways toward sustainable cohesion. Through situating the issue at the national level, the scholarship highlights systemic tensions that cut across both urban and rural contexts, underscoring the importance of examining how veterans' symbolic authority interacts with community perceptions in shaping trust, reconciliation, and social integration.

FINDINGS

Objective 1- The historical, political, and socio-economic factors contributing to tension and mistrust between war veterans and communities.

Data for this objective sought to trace how liberation legacies, state policies, and economic realities have intersected to produce mistrust and social dichotomy.

Theme 1: Historical Legacies and Collective Memory

Participants consistently emphasized the enduring weight of the liberation struggle in shaping current relations. One respondent lamented that, *“veterans fought for our independence, but today they live apart from us, as if their struggles entitle them to privileges we cannot access”*. Similarly, another a community member and a youth argued this, *“while communities respect veterans as liberators, they always remind us too often of what they did, and this creates tension”*. Furthermore, one participant had this to contend, *“the war is history, but veterans still use it to demand recognition, while we struggle with today's problems*. Another bemoaned that *“communities feel the liberation struggle belongs to everyone, not just veterans, yet they act as if they own it*.

These voices reveal a paradox; veterans are simultaneously revered and resented. Communities acknowledge their symbolic authority but feel excluded from the collective ownership of liberation. Abrams and Hogg (1990) argue that group identity fosters cohesion internally but alienates outsiders when recognition is unevenly distributed. This resonates with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how veterans' identity as liberators positions them as an “in-group,” while communities perceive themselves as marginalized “out-groups.” The abductive reasoning here highlights how historical memory simultaneously unifies and divides, creating mistrust rooted in contested ownership of liberation legacies.

Furthermore, other participants explained that veterans' constant invocation of their historical role is perceived as a barrier to integration. Communities feel that the liberation struggle should be remembered collectively, yet veterans monopolize its narrative. This echoes Muzondidya (2021), who observed that collective memory in Zimbabwe often produces dual identities, veterans as both liberators and political actors. This therefore

suggests that historical legacies, while foundational to national identity, have become contested terrain, reinforcing mistrust and social dichotomy.

Theme 2: Political Patronage and Manipulation

The politicization of veterans' welfare emerged strongly in the interviews. One participant argued this, "politicians use veterans to campaign, and this makes us see them as part of the ruling elite". Similarly, another respondent had this to contend, "Veterans are always aligned with the ruling party, so we don't trust them to represent community interests." Furthermore, another lamented this, "lamented that the government gives them benefits during elections, but after that, they are forgotten. In addition another bemoaned this, "Communities feel veterans are political tools, not independent actors".

The above highlight how veterans are perceived as instruments of political patronage rather than independent community members. Makombe and Mvere (2025) argue that poorly executed demobilisation entrenched militarized masculinity and politicization, while Mutanda (2020) critiques the War Veterans Act (1992) for failing to foster reconciliation. Linking to Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997), the absence of relational dialogue and the dominance of political manipulation undermine pathways for reconciliation. Abductively, the findings suggest that veterans' politicization transforms them into extensions of state power, deepening community resentment and mistrust. Adding on other participants including the war veterans who participated explained that communities interpret veterans' political alignment as evidence of privilege. They noted that veterans are often mobilized during elections, receiving temporary benefits, but are neglected thereafter. This reflects Bangura's (2023) observation in West Africa that reintegration programs often privilege ex-combatants politically while neglecting community acceptance. The therefore implies that politicization in Zimbabwe has entrenched divisions, reinforcing perceptions of veterans as privileged elites disconnected from ordinary citizens.

Theme 3: Socio-Economic Contradictions

Veterans' economic vulnerability was paradoxically perceived as privilege. One respondent, a war veteran lamented this; "Some veterans are poor and struggling, yet they are still seen as privileged because of state benefits which a very little". Similarly, another also a war veteran argued this, "Communities think veterans are rich, but many of them live in poverty, they cannot even pay for school fees for their children and even fund their health". However, a community said this; "Veterans demand land and money, but ordinary people also need these things but they are then prioritised always like sacred cows". Yet another community member who professed is a neighbour of war veteran said this, "The benefits they get are not enough, yet communities believe they are entitled to more than others".

The above findings reveal a paradoxical identity; veterans are both privileged and marginalized. Communities perceive them as beneficiaries of state patronage, yet veterans themselves feel abandoned. Hanlon (2020) observed similar contradictions in Mozambique, where veterans were initially celebrated but later marginalized economically. The abductive reasoning here highlights that socio-economic contradictions are not merely material but symbolic, shaping perceptions of entitlement and exclusion. This dual identity complicates relations, reinforcing mistrust. Adding on other participants explained that veterans' demands for welfare are interpreted as entitlement rather than necessity. Communities believe that veterans receive more than ordinary citizens, even when benefits are insufficient. This affirms Alexander and McGregor (2021), postulations that Namibian communities felt excluded from benefits given to veterans. The findings in this regard suggests that socio-economic contradictions in Zimbabwe reinforce mistrust, as veterans' symbolic authority clashes with their lived reality of economic vulnerability.

Theme 4: Community Perceptions of Privilege and Entitlement

Community members often framed veterans' demands for welfare as excessive. One respondent argued this;

"When veterans demand land, it feels like they are asking for more than the rest of us". However, another community member who had a different view, shared this, "As communities see veterans as entitled to these

benefits, always reminding us of their sacrifices. Yet the other still contended that; “Veterans believe they deserve special treatment, but this creates bitterness among ordinary people”. Another bemoaned that *their demands for compensation make us feel excluded from national resources”.*

These perceptions show that entitlement is socially constructed, veterans view demands as legitimate recognition, while communities interpret them as unfair privilege. Alexander and McGregor (2021) found similar dynamics in Namibia, where communities felt excluded from benefits given to veterans. Linking to Social Identity Theory, entitlement reinforces in-group/out-group divisions, sustaining mistrust. Abductively, the findings suggest that entitlement is not simply about resources but about contested legitimacy in post-liberation society. Adding on, other participants explained that veterans’ constant reminders of their sacrifices create resentment. Communities feel excluded from national resources when veterans demand compensation, interpreting such demands as privileging one group over others. This reflects Gear’s (2020) findings in South Africa, where communities perceived veterans’ welfare demands as undermining inclusive development. Deduced, this suggests that entitlement in Zimbabwe is both material and symbolic, reinforcing social dichotomy and mistrust.

Theme 5: Provincial Differences in Veteran–Community Relations

Findings from interviews revealed that veteran–community relations are not uniform across Zimbabwe but vary significantly by province, reflecting localized histories, political dynamics, and socio-economic realities. In Harare, participants emphasized the visibility of veterans in partisan politics, with one community leader stating; this *“We respect the veterans, but here they are more visible in politics than in community life.”* This perception aligns with Mutanda’s (2020) observation that veterans in urban centres are often instrumentalized as political actors rather than community members. In Bulawayo, respondents highlighted symbolic recognition without everyday integration. One participant remarked; *“They are celebrated during national events, but in everyday life they are absent from our struggles.”* This echoes Makombe and Mvere’s (2025) argument that veterans’ symbolic authority has not translated into meaningful community engagement. In Masvingo, land redistribution was a central issue, with a farmer explaining this; *“Veterans took leading roles in land redistribution, but this created resentment because ordinary villagers felt sidelined.”* Such findings resonate with Gear’s (2002) work on exclusionary dynamics when veterans dominate local structures.

Furthermore, in Manicaland, economic vulnerability was stressed, with one veteran lamenting; *“We are seen as privileged, but the truth is most of us are struggling to survive.”* This contradiction reflects Bangura’s (2023) critique of African DDR processes, where symbolic recognition often masks material deprivation. In Matabeleland South, historical grievances were dominant, with a community elder noting this; *“People here still carry memories of violence, and veterans are seen as part of that history. Trust is very low.”* Jansen (2013) similarly emphasizes the role of collective memory in shaping reintegration outcomes. Meanwhile, in Midlands, respondents described a paradoxical respect and resentment, with one participant stating: *“We honour them as liberators, but at the same time we resent the way resources are distributed in their favour.”*

These provincial variations show that while mistrust between veterans and communities is systemic, its manifestations are locally different. Urban centres emphasize politicization and symbolic disconnection, rural provinces highlight land and leadership tensions, and historically sensitive regions stress unresolved grievances. This demonstrates that historical, political, and socio-economic factors intersect differently across provinces, producing diverse but convergent patterns of mistrust and social dichotomy.

Across all themes, the findings demonstrate that mistrust between veterans and communities is multi-layered; historical legacies create symbolic authority, political patronage entrenches divisions, socio-economic contradictions foster paradoxical perceptions, and entitlement reinforces exclusion. This shows that while veterans are celebrated as liberators, their politicization and economic marginalization complicate community relations.

Coming to document analysis, the analysis of institutional and policy documents reveals that Zimbabwe’s frameworks for war veterans have historically emphasized welfare provision while neglecting reconciliation and community integration. The War Veterans Act (1992) established pensions, gratuities, and medical

support, but as Mutanda (2020) notes, “the framework failed to adequately address social reintegration, often reinforcing mistrust rather than fostering cohesion” (p. 14). This demonstrates that while veterans were materially recognized, the relational aspects of reintegration were overlooked, leaving communities alienated. Similarly, the Zimbabwe National Policy on War Veterans (2000) expanded empowerment initiatives, yet its focus remained narrow. The policy prioritized economic benefits without embedding mechanisms for dialogue or community participation. The Report of the Portfolio Committee on Defence and War Veterans’ Affairs (Veritas, 2024), highlighted this; “petitions from veterans’ dependants demanding economic empowerment reflect unresolved grievances and institutional gaps” (p. 22). This statement underscores how institutional responses have been reactive and welfare-centric, failing to bridge the relational divide between veterans and communities.

The documents also reveal the politicization of veterans’ welfare. Makombe and Mvere (2025) argue that demobilisation and rehabilitation procedures were poorly executed, resulting in militarized masculinity and politicization of veterans, which entrenched mistrust between them and communities. The Zimbabwe Peace Project 2020 further illustrate how compensation schemes privileged veterans without addressing community perceptions, reinforcing the dichotomy between veterans as beneficiaries and communities as excluded actors.

In addition the analysis of documents show that Zimbabwe’s policy frameworks institutionalized mistrust by positioning veterans as a distinct category, celebrated and compensated, while communities were excluded from reconciliation processes. The emphasis on welfare delivery created symbolic authority for veterans but alienated ordinary citizens. Institutional frameworks reinforced dichotomy by privileging veterans materially while neglecting relational integration.

From a theoretical perspective, the Social Identity Theory this therefore explains how veterans’ legal and policy recognition positioned them as an “in-group,” celebrated as liberators, while communities became the “out-group,” marginalized by uneven distribution of recognition and resources.

The Conflict Transformation Theory further illuminates how structural interventions, such as pensions and compensation struggled to address relational dimensions of mistrust. This therefore suggests that while policies sought to empower veterans materially, they inadvertently entrenched social dichotomy by excluding community voices.

All in all the document analysis demonstrates that historical legacies, politicization, and socio-economic frameworks institutionalized mistrust between veterans and communities. Statements such as “interventions have deepened divisions by privileging veterans without fostering dialogue” (Makombe, 2025, p. 33), confirm that reconciliation was never central to policy design. Instead, welfare-centric approaches reinforced dichotomy, leaving communities resentful and veterans feeling both privileged and neglected. This underscores the need for community-driven reconciliation pathways that integrate both structural and relational dimensions.

Complementing interviews and document analysis findings, some quantitative data, provided descriptive statistical data on the tension and mistrust between war veterans and communities

Table 2: Perceptions of Political Privilege among Veterans

Group	Agree (%) [n]	Disagree (%) [n]
War Veterans	60% (n=12)	40% (n=8)
Community Members	80% (n=8)	20% (n=2)

Based on table 2 above, communities (80%) more strongly perceive veterans as politically privileged compared to veterans themselves (60%). This mirrors interview data where community leaders described veterans as “politically shielded” yet socially disconnected. Document analysis of the War Veterans Act (1992) also supports this, showing state-driven benefits that communities interpret as favouritism.

Table 3: Economic Vulnerability of Veterans

Group	Agree (%) [n]	Disagree (%) [n]
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War Veterans	70% (n=14)	30% (n=6)
Community Members	60% (n=6)	40% (n=4)

Based on table 3, veterans themselves (70%) more strongly acknowledge economic vulnerability compared to communities (60%). This complements interviews where veterans expressed frustration over inadequate pensions and delayed compensation. Policy documents, such as the Portfolio Committee Report (2024), confirm persistent petitions for economic empowerment, reinforcing the paradox of privilege and marginalization.

Table 4: Sources of Tension Identified

Source of Tension	Veterans (%) [n]	Community (%) [n]
Political Mobilization	55% (n=11)	70% (n=7)
Welfare Entitlement	40% (n=8)	60% (n=6)
Lack of Dialogue	65% (n=13)	80% (n=8)
Economic Marginalization	70% (n=14)	60% (n=6)

Both groups emphasize lack of dialogue and economic marginalization as dominant sources of tension. Communities highlight political mobilization more strongly (70%), echoing interview accounts where residents described veterans as “mobilized for partisan purposes.” Document analysis of DDR frameworks shows similar gaps, where reintegration focused on welfare but neglected dialogue and community acceptance.

Table 5: Trust Levels Between Veterans and Communities (Scale 1–5)

Group	Mean Score
War Veterans	2.4
Community Members	1.9

Trust levels are low across both groups, with communities reporting slightly lower trust (mean = 1.9) compared to veterans (mean = 2.4). This complements interview findings where community members expressed avoidance and silent resistance, while veterans described feelings of isolation. AU DDR Standards (2013) highlights the importance of trust-building through dialogue, which Zimbabwe’s frameworks have not adequately implemented.

The quantitative results complement interviews and document analysis by confirming key themes. Veterans are perceived as politically privileged yet economically vulnerable, a paradox reinforced in both interviews and legislative texts. Communities emphasize political mobilization and lack of dialogue, consistent with qualitative accounts of mistrust and exclusion. Both groups converge on economic marginalization, aligning with petitions documented in parliamentary reports. Low trust levels further reflect the entrenched dichotomy described in interviews and policy reviews, underscoring that reconciliation requires more than welfare interventions and must embed structured dialogue and community-driven cooperation.

Objective 2: Community Mechanisms, Perceptions, Coping Potential Pathways for Reconciliation and Social Integration between War Veterans and Communities.

Data under this objective sought to explore grassroots voices, informal mechanisms, and community-driven initiatives that attempt to bridge divides. Focusing on how communities perceive war veterans, the coping strategies they employ, and the potential pathways they envision for improved veterans –communities relations.

Theme 1: Community Dialogue and Mediation

Participants highlighted the importance of dialogue and mediation as mechanisms for reconciliation. One respondent a civic society representative explained this; “*there is no platform where veterans and communities sit together to discuss issues; everything is decided by politicians*”. Similarly, another had this to lament “*if we had open meetings, we could understand each other better, but now mistrust grows in silence*”. Furthermore, one participant argued that, a member of a war veterans representative organisation had this to

say; *“local leaders sometimes try to mediate, but they lack authority when veterans are politicized”*. Another representative a community leader from church, bemoaned this; *“churches have tried to bring us together, but veterans often resist because they see themselves as above ordinary people”*

These voices reveal that communities perceive dialogue as a missing but necessary pathway for reconciliation. The absence of structured platforms perpetuates mistrust, while informal mediation efforts are undermined by politicization. Lederach’s Conflict Transformation Theory emphasizes that sustainable peace requires relational change through dialogue and trust-building. The findings confirm that relations between communities and war veterans are hindered by the lack of inclusive dialogue spaces, reinforcing divisions between veterans and communities. In addition other participants explained that communities often rely on informal conversations and religious gatherings to cope with tensions. They noted that while these efforts foster temporary understanding, they lack institutional support and sustainability. This reflects Bangura’s (2023) observation in Sierra Leone that community-driven reconciliation is fragile when not supported by broader structures. In this regard, the findings suggest that dialogue in Zimbabwe remains sporadic and informal, limiting its potential to transform mistrust into constructive engagement.

Theme 2: Economic Cooperation and Coping Mechanisms

Economic cooperation emerged as another pathway for reconciliation. One respondent had this to argue; *“When we work together in community projects, mistrust reduces because veterans become part of us”*. Similarly, another explained this; *“Collective farming has helped us to see veterans as ordinary people, not just political actors”*. Furthermore, one participant had this to explain; *“When veterans demand special economic privileges, resentment grows, but when they join community savings groups, trust improves”*. Another respondent made this conclusion; *“economic cooperation is the only way we can cope, because politics always divides us”*.

These accounts highlight that economic cooperation fosters inclusion and reduces mistrust. Communities perceive shared economic activities as a practical coping mechanism that integrates veterans into everyday life. Hanlon (2020) observed similar dynamics in Mozambique, where collective farming helped communities cope with veterans’ marginalization. Drawing from the Social Identity Theory, shared economic activities blur in-group/out-group boundaries, fostering integration. This suggests that economic cooperation is not only material but symbolic, reshaping perceptions of veterans as community members rather than privileged elites. In addition, other participants explained that while economic cooperation helps, it is often undermined by veterans’ demands for exclusive benefits. Communities feel that reconciliation is possible when veterans participate equally, but mistrust grows when they seek special treatment. This reflects Alexander and McGregor’s (2021) findings in Namibia, where communities felt excluded from veteran benefits. The findings therefore shows that economic cooperation is a fragile but promising pathway for reconciliation, contingent on equality and shared participation.

Theme 3: Religious and Cultural Mediation

Religious and cultural institutions were frequently mentioned as coping mechanisms. One respondent explained that *“churches have tried to bring us together, but veterans often resist because they see themselves as above ordinary people”*. Similarly, another argued that *“traditional leaders sometimes mediate, but veterans do not always respect them”*. Furthermore, one participant argued this; *“religion teaches forgiveness, but mistrust remains when veterans continue to demand privileges”*. Another had this to say *“cultural ceremonies help us remember we are one people, but veterans often dominate the narrative”*.

These accounts show that religious and cultural institutions provide moral frameworks for reconciliation but are undermined by veterans’ politicization and perceived entitlement. Lederach (1997) emphasizes that reconciliation requires cultural and spiritual dimensions to foster relational transformation. The findings confirm that while religion and culture offer coping mechanisms, they are insufficient when veterans resist integration. Other participants explained that communities often rely on cultural ceremonies and church gatherings to cope with tensions. They noted that these spaces foster temporary unity but fail to address structural inequalities. This reflects Gear’s (2020) findings in South Africa, where truth commissions provided moral reconciliation but failed to resolve socio-economic grievances. The findings therefore suggests that

religious and cultural mediation in Zimbabwe provides symbolic pathways for reconciliation but lacks structural reinforcement.

Overall, the findings reveal that communities employ multiple mechanisms to cope with tensions and foster reconciliation: dialogue and mediation, economic cooperation, and religious or cultural practices. Responses provided emphasize the absence of structured dialogue, the potential of shared economic activities, and the symbolic role of religion and culture. They show that while these mechanisms foster temporary unity, they are undermined by politicization, entitlement, and structural inequalities. This highlights that reconciliation pathways are both relational and structural. Drawing from the Social Identity Theory it therefore can be deduced that shared activities blur group boundaries, while from a Conflict Transformation Theory it can be surmised that there is need for dialogue and cultural mediation to transform mistrust. The findings therefore suggest that reconciliation in Zimbabwe requires integrating community-driven mechanisms with institutional support, ensuring that veterans are not privileged elites but equal participants in community life.

With regards to document analysis, reviewed documents shows that that Zimbabwe's frameworks have historically emphasized veterans' welfare while neglecting community-driven reconciliation mechanisms. Most documents highlight material interventions pensions, compensation, and empowerment schemes, but provide little evidence of structured dialogue or integration pathways. For instance, the War Veterans Act (1992) established pensions and gratuities, but it did not embed reconciliation processes. As earlier alluded, Mutanda (2020) observes that the framework failed to adequately address social reintegration, often reinforcing mistrust rather than fostering cohesion. This affirms the argument that while veterans were materially recognized, communities were excluded from relational processes. Similarly, the argument that the Zimbabwe National Policy on War Veterans (2000) expanded empowerment initiatives but with a narrow focus on economic benefits is upheld. The policy did not create platforms for communities and veterans to engage in dialogue, leaving mistrust unaddressed.

Furthermore, drawing from the Report of the Portfolio Committee on Defence and War Veterans' Affairs (Veritas, 2024) which points to evidence of gaps in reconciliation. Institutional responses have been reactive, privileging veterans' demands without addressing community perceptions. The report also highlights that interventions have deepened divisions by privileging veterans materially while neglecting community voices. Makombe and Mvere (2025) reinforce this point, arguing that previous interventions have deepened divisions by privileging veterans without fostering dialogue. This statement is critical because it confirms that reconciliation was never central to policy design. Instead, veterans were positioned as a distinct category, celebrated and compensated, while communities were left to cope informally.

The reviewed documents therefore affirms interview findings that communities have relied on informal mechanisms, such as local leadership, religious institutions, and collective economic activities to improve community—veteran's relations. However, these efforts remain fragile because institutional frameworks do not support them. The African Union DDR Standards (2013) emphasize community-driven reintegration, yet Zimbabwe's practice has lagged behind these principles, focusing narrowly on welfare delivery. Documents reveal that Zimbabwe's frameworks addressed structural welfare but neglected relational integration, thereby perpetuating mistrust which affirms the Conflict Transformation Theory that reconciliation requires both structural and relational change affirming. Analysed documents have shown that veterans' legal recognition positioned them as an "in-group," while communities became the "out-group," marginalized by uneven distribution of recognition and resources which affirm the Social Identity Theory.

All in all, the findings demonstrates that reconciliation and integration pathways in Zimbabwe remain underdeveloped. Interventions have deepened divisions by privileging veterans without fostering dialogue which confirm that reconciliation was not prioritized. Instead, welfare-centric approaches reinforced dichotomy, leaving communities resentful and veterans feeling both privileged and neglected. This underscores the need for community-driven reconciliation pathways that integrate dialogue, economic cooperation, and cultural mediation into policy frameworks.

Complementing interviews and document analysis findings, some quantitative data, provided descriptive statistical data on the tension and mistrust between war veterans and communities.

Table 3: Community Coping Mechanisms Reported

Coping Mechanism	Veterans (%) [n]	Community (%) [n]
Avoidance	50% (n=10)	70% (n=7)
Reliance on Local Leaders	55% (n=11)	60% (n=6)
Collective Economic Initiatives	45% (n=9)	50% (n=5)
Structured Dialogue	65% (n=13)	40% (n=4)

Based on table 3, community members reported coping mechanisms such as avoidance (70%) and reliance on local leadership (60%), while veterans emphasized structured dialogue (65%). This complements interviews where communities described “silent resistance” and reliance on traditional leaders, while veterans called for inclusion in local projects. Analysis of the AU DDR Standards (2013) also highlights the importance of community-driven reintegration.

Table 4: Preferred Pathways for Reconciliation

Pathway	Veterans (%) [n]	Community (%) [n]
Structured Dialogue	75% (n=15)	50% (n=5)
Economic Cooperation	60% (n=12)	40% (n=4)
Grassroots Initiatives	45% (n=9)	70% (n=7)
Cultural Mediation	50% (n=10)	60% (n=6)

Drawing inference from the above table, veterans favoured structured dialogue (75%) and economic cooperation (60%), while communities leaned toward grassroots initiatives (70%) and cultural mediation (60%). This complements document analysis of AU DDR Standards (2013), which emphasize cultural approaches and community-driven reconciliation.

Table 5: Perceptions of Integration Success (Scale 1–5)

Group	Mean Score
War Veterans	2.6
Community Members	2.0

On a scale of 1–5, veterans rated integration success at a mean of 2.6, while communities rated it lower at 2.0. This reflects interview findings where veterans expressed partial satisfaction with welfare support, but communities highlighted exclusion and mistrust. Document analysis of Zimbabwe’s War Veterans Policy (2000) confirms gaps in embedding integration mechanisms.

The quantitative results complement interviews and document analysis by confirming that communities rely on avoidance, local leadership, and grassroots initiatives as coping mechanisms, while veterans emphasize structured dialogue and economic cooperation. Both groups recognize the importance of cultural mediation, aligning with AU DDR frameworks. However, perceptions of integration success remain low, reinforcing qualitative findings of mistrust and exclusion. Together, these results highlight that reconciliation requires community-driven dialogue, shared economic initiatives, and cultural mediation, moving beyond welfare-centric approaches.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The relationship between war veterans and communities in Zimbabwe is deeply embedded in the historical and political trajectory of the nation, and the findings from interviews, document analysis, and questionnaires converge to highlight this complexity. Veterans occupy a paradoxical position: they are celebrated as liberators whose sacrifices secured independence, yet simultaneously resented as privileged elites whose symbolic authority has been politicized. This duality entrenches mistrust and undermines cohesion. Interviews revealed that while communities express respect for veterans’ contributions, they also resent exclusion from the

liberation legacy, perceiving veterans as monopolizing recognition and benefits. Document analysis of the War Veterans Act (1992) confirmed that state-driven benefits were designed to materially support veterans but were interpreted by communities as favoritism, reinforcing perceptions of inequality. Questionnaire data further substantiated this paradox, with 60% of veterans acknowledging perceptions of privilege and 80% of community members strongly agreeing that veterans are politically privileged. This demonstrates that the historical narrative of liberation, when institutionalized through selective benefits, has created enduring fractures in veteran–community relations.

Politicization emerged as a dominant theme across all sources, underscoring how veterans' symbolic authority has been instrumentalized by ruling elites. Interviews highlighted that veterans are often deployed as political tools, mobilized during elections or invoked to legitimize state authority, thereby reinforcing their alignment with partisan interests rather than community needs. Document analysis revealed that compensation schemes privileged veterans materially but failed to foster dialogue or reconciliation, entrenching perceptions of entitlement. Questionnaire data confirmed this dynamic, with 55% of veterans and 70% of community members citing political mobilization as a source of tension. This resonates with Makombe and Mvere (2025), who argue that poorly executed demobilisation entrenched militarized masculinity and politicization, transforming veterans into instruments of political control rather than agents of community cohesion. The findings suggest that politicization not only undermines trust but also distorts the veterans' symbolic role, shifting them from liberators to contested actors in the political landscape.

Socio-economic contradictions further complicate veteran–community relations, producing a paradox of privilege and marginalization. Veterans are often perceived as economically advantaged due to state benefits, yet many live in poverty and express frustration over inadequate pensions and delayed compensation. Questionnaire data revealed that 70% of veterans admitted economic vulnerability, while 60% of community members acknowledged this reality, highlighting the tension between perception and lived experience. Interviews confirmed this frustration, with veterans lamenting the insufficiency of welfare provisions and the lack of sustainable empowerment opportunities. Document analysis of parliamentary reports (Veritas, 2024) reinforced this, showing persistent petitions from veterans demanding economic empowerment. These contradictions illustrate how state interventions, while symbolically privileging veterans, have failed to deliver substantive socio-economic transformation, leaving veterans marginalized and communities resentful. The paradox of privilege without prosperity underscores the fragility of reintegration efforts and the persistence of mistrust.

Trust levels between veterans and communities were consistently low, reflecting the cumulative impact of politicization, socio-economic contradictions, and historical grievances. Questionnaire data revealed veterans averaging 2.4 and communities 1.9 on a 5-point trust scale, indicating widespread skepticism. Interviews highlighted avoidance and silent resistance among communities, with many choosing disengagement rather than confrontation, while veterans described feelings of isolation and exclusion. Analysis of the African Union DDR Standards (2013) underscored that trust-building through dialogue is central to reintegration, yet Zimbabwe's frameworks have not adequately implemented this relational dimension. The trust deficit is therefore not merely a product of material grievances but a deeper relational fracture, where symbolic authority, politicization, and unmet expectations converge to erode confidence in reconciliation.

Communities have developed coping mechanisms to navigate these tensions, often relying on avoidance, local leadership, and grassroots economic initiatives. Interviews revealed that avoidance was a common strategy, with communities choosing disengagement as a way to minimize conflict. Local leadership structures were also emphasized, with traditional leaders and grassroots organizations mediating relations and providing alternative avenues for cohesion. Document analysis confirmed that institutional frameworks neglected these grassroots efforts, focusing instead on welfare delivery. Questionnaire data supported these findings: 70% of community members reported avoidance, 60% reliance on local leaders, and 50% collective economic initiatives. Veterans, however, emphasized structured dialogue, with 65% identifying it as a coping mechanism. This divergence highlights the gap between community-driven strategies and veterans' preference for formal engagement, underscoring the need for integrative approaches that bridge grassroots initiatives with structured dialogue.

Preferred pathways for reconciliation varied significantly between veterans and communities, reflecting divergent priorities and perceptions. Veterans favoured structured dialogue (75%) and economic cooperation (60%), emphasizing inclusion in local projects and formal recognition. Communities, by contrast, leaned toward grassroots initiatives (70%) and cultural mediation (60%), stressing the importance of ceremonies, rituals, and collective practices that foster cohesion. Interviews confirmed this divergence, with veterans calling for institutional inclusion and communities emphasizing cultural approaches. Document analysis of AU DDR Standards highlighted the importance of community-driven reintegration and cultural approaches, aligning with community preferences and reinforcing the need for relational strategies. These findings suggest that reconciliation cannot be achieved through welfare delivery alone but requires a synthesis of structured dialogue and grassroots cultural practices.

Integration success was rated low, reflecting the inadequacy of existing frameworks. Veterans averaged 2.6 and communities 2.0 on a 5-point scale, indicating partial satisfaction among veterans but exclusion among communities. Interviews revealed that veterans expressed some appreciation for welfare provisions but lamented the lack of relational integration, while communities felt marginalized and excluded from decision-making. Document analysis of Zimbabwe's War Veterans Policy (2000) confirmed gaps in embedding integration mechanisms, demonstrating that while welfare delivery was prioritized, relational integration was neglected. This imbalance underscores the limitations of welfare-centric approaches and highlights the need for holistic strategies that embed dialogue, trust-building, and community-driven initiatives into reintegration frameworks.

The findings on provincial variations clearly demonstrate that veteran–community relations in Zimbabwe cannot be understood as a uniform phenomenon but rather as a mosaic of localized experiences shaped by history, politics, and socio-economic realities.

What emerges is a systemic paradox, veterans are consistently positioned as liberators and holders of symbolic authority, yet their integration into everyday community life is uneven and contested. In urban centres such as Harare and Bulawayo, politicization and symbolic disconnection dominate, while in rural provinces like Masvingo and Mashonaland Central, land redistribution and leadership roles generate resentment.

In historically sensitive regions such as Matabeleland South, unresolved grievances rooted in collective memory continue to erode trust. These variations affirm scholarly arguments (Mutanda, 2020; Makombe & Mvere, 2025; Jansen, 2013) that reintegration processes must be context-sensitive, acknowledging both structural and relational dimensions of conflict.

The evidence of economic vulnerability in Manicaland and the paradoxical respect–resentment dynamic in Midlands illustrate that identity boundaries are fluid and negotiable. In this regard veteran–community relations in Zimbabwe are a composite of localized tensions, and sustainable reintegration requires differentiated strategies that respond to provincial realities while embedding trust-building and dialogue at the core of veteran–community relations.

The study therefore strongly affirms the explanatory power of the Social Identity Theory, which emphasizes the dynamics of in-group and out-group relations. Veterans are consistently positioned as an “in-group,” celebrated for their liberation role and materially recognized through state policies, while communities perceive themselves as the “out-group,” marginalized by uneven distribution of recognition and resources.

Questionnaire evidence of low trust levels validates this assumption, while interviews confirmed resentment over entitlement and exclusion. Document analysis highlighted policies privileging veterans, reinforcing the in-group/out-group dichotomy. Yet, evidence from economic cooperation and cultural mediation shows that shared activities can blur boundaries, suggesting that identity is fluid and negotiable. This demonstrates that while Social Identity Theory explains the persistence of mistrust, it also highlights potential pathways for reconciliation through shared practices that reconfigure group boundaries.

The findings also affirm the relevance of the Conflict Transformation Theory, particularly its emphasis on addressing both structural and relational dimensions of conflict. Interviews and documents revealed that

welfare delivery was prioritized while dialogue was neglected, creating structural support without relational cohesion. Questionnaire data confirmed this, with 65% of veterans and 80% of community members citing lack of dialogue as a major source of tension. This validates Lederach's argument that sustainable peace requires dialogue, trust-building, and restructuring of social systems. The findings suggest that without relational transformation, structural interventions remain insufficient, reinforcing mistrust rather than fostering reconciliation.

Going forward, Zimbabwe can strengthen its reintegration policies by engaging more deliberately with regional DDR frameworks, particularly the African Union DDR Standards. These standards emphasize community-driven reintegration, trust-building, and cultural approaches, which closely align with the coping mechanisms identified in this study, such as grassroots initiatives, cultural mediation, and structured dialogue. For instance, the AU DDR Standards (2013) highlight that reintegration must go beyond material compensation to address relational fractures and community perceptions, a gap that was consistently evident in Zimbabwe's case. Document analysis revealed that Zimbabwe's policies remain welfare-centric, focusing on pensions, compensation, and material benefits, while neglecting relational dimensions such as dialogue, trust-building, and cultural reconciliation.

Benchmarking against regional frameworks would therefore harmonize Zimbabwe's interventions with continental best practices, ensuring that reconciliation strategies are both structurally sound and relationally inclusive. Bangura (2023) argues, DDR processes that fail to embed community participation risk reinforcing mistrust rather than transforming it.

In adopting AU standards, Zimbabwe could reorient its policies toward participatory reintegration, embedding grassroots voices and cultural practices into national frameworks. This would not only address provincial variations in veteran–community relations but also situate Zimbabwe within a broader continental trajectory of peacebuilding, where reintegration is understood as a holistic process encompassing economic empowerment, social dialogue, and cultural healing.

CONCLUSION

The reality of veteran–community relations in Zimbabwe is defined by a paradox that cannot be ignored; those once celebrated as liberators have become both symbols of national pride and sources of social division. Historical legacies have elevated veterans to positions of symbolic authority, yet politicization and welfare-centric policies have entrenched mistrust, positioning them as privileged elites disconnected from ordinary citizens. Communities, while acknowledging the sacrifices of veterans, feel excluded from the collective ownership of liberation memory and marginalized in the distribution of resources.

This exclusion has created a dichotomy that undermines cohesion and perpetuates resentment. What makes this paradox more complex is its provincial variation. In urban centres, veterans are often associated with political visibility and symbolic recognition, yet their absence from everyday community struggles deepens disconnection. In rural provinces, tensions are shaped by land redistribution and leadership roles, where veterans' dominance has sometimes side-lined ordinary villagers. In historically sensitive regions, unresolved grievances and collective memory continue to erode trust, making reconciliation more fragile.

In other provinces, veterans themselves highlight vulnerability, revealing that perceptions of privilege coexist with lived experiences of hardship. These differences show that mistrust is systemic but manifests in diverse ways across the country, requiring solutions that are both nationally coherent and locally responsive. The decisive lesson is that reconciliation and integration cannot be achieved through material interventions alone. Sustainable cohesion requires deliberate structural reforms that embed community voices, foster inclusive dialogue, and support grassroots mechanisms of cooperation. Economic initiatives, religious and cultural mediation, and structured platforms for engagement must be prioritized as central pathways for transforming mistrust into constructive relationships.

Veterans must cease to be positioned as beneficiaries of privilege and instead be integrated as equal participants in the nation's social and developmental fabric. Zimbabwe's future stability and cohesion depend on moving

beyond welfare-centric frameworks toward inclusive, community-driven reconciliation strategies that dismantle politicization, bridge provincial and historical divides, and foster genuine social integration across the nation.

Drawing inference from this conclusion, the Ministry of War Veterans Affairs should embed structured dialogue platforms into veteran policy frameworks to foster reconciliation and trust-building. It should consider supporting community grassroots and war veterans’ economic cooperation projects to foster integration through shared livelihoods. The Parliament of Zimbabwe should consider amending the War Veterans Act to incorporate reconciliation and integration mechanisms alongside welfare provisions. The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) should facilitate inclusive mediation processes, working with churches and traditional leaders to strengthen communities –war veterans’ relational transformation.

Proposed Model Integrated Reconciliation and Cohesion Model (IRCM)



The proposed IRCM offers a nationally grounded framework for rebuilding trust and fostering inclusive relations between war veterans and communities in Zimbabwe. It is informed by the Social Identity Theory, which explains how veterans have been positioned as an “in-group” through symbolic and material recognition, and the Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasizes the need for relational and structural change to achieve sustainable peace. The model operates as a continuous cycle with five interlinked components, each led by a designated actor. At the core is Dialogue Platforms, facilitated by the Ministry of War Veterans Affairs and the NPRC. These platforms create structured, depoliticized spaces for veterans and communities to engage in open conversation, dismantling mistrust and fostering mutual understanding.

This feeds into Economic Cooperation implemented in conjunction with war veterans associations and community based organisations led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, where veterans and community members collaborate in joint livelihood initiatives such as farming cooperatives and savings groups, promoting equality and shared development. Next is Cultural and Religious Mediation, driven by Traditional Leaders and Churches, which leverages ceremonies, storytelling, and spiritual teachings to reinforce shared identity and moral reconciliation. This relational healing informs Policy Reform, led by the Parliament of Zimbabwe, which must amend veteran legislation to embed reconciliation mechanisms and shift from welfare-centric benefits to inclusive development. Finally, Monitoring and Evaluation, overseen by the Ministry of War Veterans Affairs and the NPRC, to ensure accountability and sustainability by tracking trust-building indicators and community feedback. The circular flow of the model emphasizes that reconciliation is not a one-off event but a dynamic, iterative process. Through integrating community voices, shared economic

practices, cultural mediation, and legislative reform, the IRCM provides a clear, actionable pathway for transforming veteran–community relations across Zimbabwe. It ensures that war veterans are no longer positioned as privileged elites but as equal participants in the nation’s social and developmental fabric.

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