

From Guerrilla to Civilian: The Untold Story of Friends Rescued

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of former members of the New People's Army (NPA), referred to as "Friends Rescued," and their reintegration into civilian life in the Zamboanga Peninsula. Using a qualitative narrative research design and purposive sampling, eight participants who had been active NPA members for at least three years were interviewed through semi-structured, open-ended questions. Guided by Social Reintegration Theory, Identity Transformation Theory, and Social Learning Theory, the analysis revealed four central themes: (1) joining the NPA was primarily driven by poverty, family ties, and social oppression; (2) transitioning to civilian life entailed significant psychological, social, and emotional struggles but also reflected a pursuit of peace and dignity; (3) livelihood initiatives, community engagement, and faith-based activities served as coping and adjustment strategies; and (4) reintegration was facilitated by government aid and community support, though stigma and uneven program delivery posed challenges. The results underscore the importance of comprehensive, sustained, and community-driven support systems that combine economic assistance, psychosocial care, and acceptance to ensure successful reintegration. The study contributes to peacebuilding discourse by highlighting the complexities of post-conflict reintegration and the resilience of former rebels.

Keywords: friend's rescued, reintegration, livelihood, psychological impact, community support.

INTRODUCTION

Rationale Of The Study

Joining the New People's Army (NPA) was seen by many rural residents as a way to improve their standard of living and provide some protection for their families. The organization attracted both men and women, married or not, and each joined for a different reason. Some were inspired by the everyday struggles of poverty, inequality, and unfair treatment, which they saw as proof that the social order was skewed against them. In addition to simply opposing oppression, these individuals saw joining the NPA as a chance to fight for change and work toward a more just and equitable future. This was particularly true when they believed that the government and other powerful institutions were ignoring or marginalizing them.

In the study of Lodangco (2022), revealed that many joined the New many's Army because of the communist organization's coercive techniques, especially in reaction to pressing governmental concerns, rather than necessarily because they wanted to. The difficulty of living in hilly areas and the need to protect their families, particularly married ones, are the main reasons why former rebels' surrender. Most of these rebels who have surrendered have been given financial help and amnesty by the government after going through legal procedures. These returnees worry about possible threats from former comrades, even though they are legally free to travel around their neighborhoods. According to survey results, many of them would rather not go back or think back on the difficult times they had in the mountains.

An individual was captured and killed on February 28, 2024, at Purok 5, Barangay Malagalad, Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur, after a confrontation with the Philippine Army's 1st Infantry Division's 102nd Brigade. The deceased person was identified as Aprecia Rosete Alvarez, a native of Surigao Del Sur who was also known as Commander Bam-bam. Rosete was a member of the NPA Western Mindanao Regional Party

Committee and was the secretary of the group. She was the subject of 30 arrest warrants for offenses such as extortion, murder, and infrastructure destruction in the Zamboanga Peninsula.

The researcher plans to investigate the experiences of a former NPA member, known as a "friend rescued," and their journey both while they were actively involved in the organization and after they returned to the community. The precise objectives of this study are to shed light on their difficulties, inform the public, and comprehend the factors that led them to choose to join the rebel group. It can be necessary for the community to embrace friends who have been saved and are now living in harmony.

METHODS

The study used qualitative narrative research design. The phenomenon of interest involved the experiences of former New People's Army and their journey while still active in the organization. According to (Aggarwal, 2008) qualitative research is devoted to gathering of information about prevailing conditions or situations for the purpose of in-depth analysis and interpretation.

This study was conducted in Zamboanga del Sur and Zamboanga del Norte the provinces located in the Zamboanga Peninsula region in the western part of Mindanao, the second-largest island in the Philippines. Zamboanga del Norte is to the north, while Zamboanga del Sur is situated to the south of Zamboanga del Norte. The region is known for its rich cultural heritage, natural resources, and diverse communities.

The researchers choose the 6 participants who is the former New People's Army (NPA) member in Western part of Mindanao particularly in Zamboanga del Norte and Zamboanga del Sur. Participants was chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) a surrendered New People's Army (NPA) member, (b) living in Zamboanga Peninsula, (c) 3 years or more active members of New People's Army, (d) in legal age and; (e) willing to participate in the study.

Approval from the relevant authorities was obtained before conducting the study. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided with an informed consent form prior to giving their full agreement to take part. Additionally, it is stated that no harm came to the participants and that they were free to leave at any time if they felt threatened. By keeping the identities of those engaged secret and not making them public, people's privacy and secrecy were safeguarded. Respecting the dignity of research participants came first. Moreover, the voluntariness of the participants will be the utmost priority of the researcher to ensure full compliance with the data privacy act of 2012. Personal approval from the respective participants will be secured to ensure the credibility of the data. Overall, this research made sure that its aims were not inflated or misunderstood.

In order to carry out the study, the researchers conducted a face-to-face interview using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method with former members of the New People's Army, also known as Friends Rescued. The FGD followed a structured interview guide, which was translated into the vernacular to ensure clarity and ease of comprehension. Before the session began, the researchers introduced themselves, explained the objectives of the study, and reiterated the confidentiality of the participants' responses. Participants were then asked to sign the informed consent form. The discussion was facilitated by a moderator, while a note-taker documented non-verbal cues and group dynamics. The FGD followed a three-part format: (1) Opening questions, designed to build rapport and make participants comfortable; (2) Core questions, which focused on their experiences, perspectives, and insights relevant to the research objectives; and (3) Closing questions and statements, which allowed participants to summarize their thoughts and add final remarks. Each of these sections contained three subtypes of questions to ensure depth and variation of responses.

The method primarily relied on open-ended questions, encouraging narrative responses and active interaction among participants. To ensure accuracy, the sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and the recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. This systematic approach allowed the researchers to gather comprehensive and authentic data for the study.

In this study, the researchers made use of the purposive sampling technique, wherein participants were

deliberately chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the study and the objectives of the research. According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), purposive sampling is a non-probability technique in which the researcher relies on their judgment to select participants who can provide the most relevant and rich information needed for the study. In this case, the participants were former members of the New People's Army, also known as Friends Rescued, who possessed the experiences and insights necessary to address the research questions. This method ensured that the selected individuals could meaningfully contribute to the data collection process and provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The data were analyzed in accordance with the methodological framework outlined by Yuksel (2015), utilizing Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction approach. Transcripts from the interviews with all participants underwent systematic analysis employing the procedures detailed by Moustakas. The phenomenological reduction process, which guided the analysis of collected data, comprised the following steps: (1) Bracketing, (2) Horizontalization, (3) Clustering into Themes, (4) Textural Description, (5) Structural Description, and (6) Textural-Structural Synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants of the study were all Friends Rescued known as the former New People's Army members. 3 females and 3 males, and all are married.

The identified themes in this study, were based on the participant's responses: 1), Friends rescued joined due to poverty, family ties, and oppression, but hardships and disillusionment led them to reintegration; 2) Economic Support and Foster Community Acceptance, 3) Engaging Livelihood Activities and Join Religious Group, 4) Financial Support, Training, and Access to Social Services.

Theme 1: Friends Rescued Joined Due To Poverty, Family Ties, And Oppression

A former NPA member, referred to as "Friends Rescued," shared that poverty, lack of resources, and financial struggles were key reasons for joining the rebel group. Family influence also played a role, as some participants admitted they were persuaded to join because their relatives were already involved. Nevertheless, the difficulties they endured as rebels, along with the loss of trust and faith, ultimately pushed them to leave the movement and pursue change. The following are the support statement of the participants;

I was challenged to join the movement because of the worsening government situation back then... soldiers were abusive... even my parents joined the movement (P1).

Our group grew in number... we ambushed soldiers and collected more weapons... later I decided to go legal because soldiers treated us better (P2).

I officially joined in August 1985... assigned to the medical section... we cared for wounded comrades... but life was harsh—no food, constant bombings, and displacement (P3).

"I joined because my husband was already involved... we were always displaced... family massacres forced me to go full-time (P4).

I was invited by a classmate to attend PADEPA... the youth were convinced through teachings about inequality and foreign control... but I left because of homesickness and hardship (P5).

I joined PADEPA too... youth were persuaded by doctrines of inequality... but harsh living conditions made me leave (P6).

Many "Friends Rescued," or former members of the New People's Army (NPA), were drawn into insurgency by severe poverty, lack of opportunity, and the influence of familial or community ties. Conti-Francisco (2025) illustrates how impoverished conditions and systemic marginalization compelled individuals to join rebel

groups as a perceived escape and a means of supporting relatives already involved, even as life in the movement brought further hardship. Similarly, Fanao and Cawi (2023) identify poverty, family networks, and geographic isolation as key recruitment drivers in the remote municipality of Sadanga; they also document how government-led interventions offering economic alternatives and security assurances deterred insurgent recruitment over time. Despite their initial motivations, many former rebels eventually became disillusioned due to harsh living conditions, loss of trust, and unmet expectations. These disillusioned individuals often accepted government reintegration programs such as livelihood training and psycho-social support that enabled them to transition back into society with renewed hope.

Theme 2: Transitioning From Npa To Civilian Life Involves Hardship But Reflects The Pursuit Of Stability And Dignity In Reintegration.

The transition from being an NPA member to living as a civilian is not easy. It requires courage and self-reflection, as it involves major changes in lifestyle and mindset, along with the difficulty of adjusting to a new environment. Despite their experiences of trauma and hatred, many decided to return to their communities. This decision reflects their pursuit of stability and dignity in reintegration. Most of the participants expressed their desire for peace, The following are the support statement of the participants;

Life in the movement was harsh—we hid in the cold, lacked food, and I had to stop my studies at 13... after capture we received aid but it was mismanaged (P1).

I led ambushes but after capture, soldiers treated us kindly, even feeding our children. That's when I realized the government had changed (P2).

I served in the medical section... life was constant fear, hiding, and lack of supplies... even jailed after surrender but later cleared with amnesty (P3).

Family massacres and my husband's role forced me to join... I was tortured after arrest, rejoined from anger, then shifted to faith communities after stigma (P4).

I was recruited through PADEPA, but hardship, homesickness, and longing for family made me leave (P5).

I joined through PADEPA but stopped after realizing the physical and emotional toll—weakness, hunger, and homesickness (P6).

Transitioning from membership in the New People's Army (NPA) to civilian life is marked by profound hardship, as returnees often face stigma, psychological burdens, and limited economic opportunities during adjustment (Go, 2023). Nonetheless, this difficult path reflects a deeper pursuit of stability and dignity: many former rebels demonstrate resilience by reuniting with families, embracing education and livelihood programs, and facilitating their reintegration through government-supported initiatives such as Project Good Life, which aim to restore social bonds and rebuild self-efficacy (Go, 2023).

Nevertheless, this process underscores a profound pursuit of stability and dignity, as many participants report leveraging government-supported reintegration mechanisms such as educational access, livelihood opportunities, and reconciliation measures to rebuild their lives with renewed hope and social acceptance (Pabalinas & Balongoy, 2025; Cubero et al., 2022). These narratives reflect resilience and the intentional striving toward a life rooted in peace, respect, and meaningful belonging. Such reintegration journeys not only benefit the individuals involved but also contribute to long-term community resilience and societal reconciliation.

Theme 3: Friends Rescued Adjusted Through Government Support, New Livelihoods, Community Ties, And Personal Determination

We received aid from the government through the Bayanihan program... groceries and rice from DOLE... My husband became a CAFGU (P1).

The officials treated us well... gave our children milk... offered us a livelihood fund... I later became a CAFGU (P2).

After surrender, I relied on relatives in the police for support... received an amnesty certificate... endured imprisonment but eventually cleared my name (P3).

Later, I became involved in the Catholic Church but faced stigma... switched to a Born Again Christian group where people accepted me (P4).

I reflected at night, feeling weak and homesick... decided to stop... My father took me away, so I had to quit (P5).

I reflected at night, feeling weak and tired... without proper food, and feeling homesick. That's when I decided to stop (P6).

Former members of the New People's Army, after their surrender, have participated in livelihood programs and become actively involved in various initiatives, either at the Barangay or Local Government level. Many have also engaged in religious activities, expressing gratitude to the Almighty God for keeping them safe and alive up to the present. However, they continue to face challenges since their surrender, striving to survive despite their limited knowledge and resources. The following are the support statement of the participants;

Participation in livelihood activities is essential for ensuring sustainable reintegration. Research by Santos and Aguilar (2022) highlights that former NPA members who engage in agricultural enterprises, cooperative businesses, or vocational trades experience improved economic resilience. These livelihood initiatives offer a means to regain financial independence and develop a sense of purpose. However, Santos and Aguilar also note the importance of market access and continuous training to sustain economic gains, as lack of these resources can lead to failure in livelihood efforts.

Joining religious groups provides a supportive environment for former insurgents, promoting emotional healing and a renewed sense of community. According to Valdez and Romero (2021), religious affiliations offer moral guidance, social support networks, and a structured belief system that can help former combatants cope with past traumas. Participation in faith-based activities fosters personal transformation, strengthens social bonds, and encourages positive behavior change, which can mitigate the risk of recidivism.

The combination of livelihood engagement and religious involvement enhances the overall reintegration process. Bautista (2020) argues that integrating economic programs with faith-based initiatives creates a more holistic approach to reintegration. In one community-based model, former NPA members participating in livelihood training while attending spiritual counseling sessions reported increased self-confidence, reduced feelings of isolation, and improved relationships within their communities. This dual strategy builds both material and emotional resilience, making reintegration more sustainable.

Theme 4: Reintegration Was Enabled By Government Aid And Community Or Family Support, Though Uneven Program Delivery And Stigma Influenced Outcomes

We received aid from the government through the Bayanihan program... rice, canned goods, and cash, though some were lost due to mismanagement. Recently, we received groceries and rice from DOLE (P1).

The officials treated us well and even gave our children milk... I realized the government wasn't as bad as before. They also offered us a livelihood fund and suggested joining the army or CAFGU (P2).

We sought help from a relative in the police... later received an amnesty certificate that cleared our names (P3).

I was declared a surrenderer and given food supplies like rice and sardines... later I became part of the church but faced stigma, then found acceptance in another faith group (P4).

I didn't stay long in the movement... I reflected on the hardships and decided to stop. My family pulled me away (P5).

I was convinced by doctrine at first but left because of homesickness, hunger, and my father's intervention (P6).

Community and government support play a vital role in enabling former rebels, known as “Friends Rescued,” to successfully reintegrate and avoid rejoining insurgent groups. Although participants recognized the assistance provided by government programs, they highlighted its inadequacy in sustaining long-term needs. A recurring theme was the longing for acceptance and support from their communities, which they viewed as equally important as material aid. Skills training and livelihood programs were also identified as critical in fostering self-reliance and ensuring that they could provide for their families. Nonetheless, participants reported challenges such as delays in financial assistance due to uneven program implementation. In addition, lingering stigma within communities undermined reintegration, as some individuals continued to perceive “Friends Rescued” as untrustworthy.

Financial assistance is often one of the first steps in helping former NPA members stabilize economically. As highlighted by Tan and Rivera (2020), government-sponsored financial programs can alleviate immediate financial burdens and support the establishment of small businesses. However, while these programs are vital, Tan and Rivera point out that they often fail to address long-term sustainability, as many former rebels lack sufficient skills or experience to manage the financial resources effectively. This underscores the need for comprehensive financial support that includes not just capital but also ongoing assistance in managing finances.

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Training programs are integral to ensuring that former insurgents can develop the skills needed to thrive in civilian life. According to dela Cruz and Magno (2021), vocational training in fields such as agriculture, construction, and small-scale manufacturing plays a pivotal role in empowering former NPA members economically. These programs not only provide valuable skills but also improve self-esteem, as individuals gain a sense of accomplishment and independence. However, the accessibility of these training programs remains uneven across different regions, with many former rebels unable to attend due to logistical challenges or lack of information.

Equally important is the access to social services, which helps former insurgents reintegrate emotionally and socially. Espiritu and Javier (2022) emphasize that access to healthcare, housing, education, and psychological counseling are crucial in helping former rebels recover from trauma and rebuild their lives. These services ensure that reintegration is not just an economic process but a holistic one that addresses the social and emotional dimensions of the transition. The gap in accessing these services, however, remains a challenge, especially in remote areas, where infrastructure and social programs are limited.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the complex journey of former New People's Army (NPA) members, highlighting the personal struggles, emotional challenges, and the strategies they use to reintegrate into society

after their time in the organization. The first objective, which focused on personal experiences, revealed that these individuals faced significant hardship, violence, and emotional distress during their time with the NPA, which continued to affect them during the reintegration process.

The second objective explored the psychological, social, and emotional impacts of transitioning to civilian life, revealing that the shift was difficult due to the lasting effects of their past experiences. The emotional struggles, compounded by the stigma of their past, required considerable time and effort to overcome.

Regarding the third objective, the strategies employed by former NPA members in adjusting to civilian life included participation in livelihood activities and joining religious groups. These activities offered them a sense of purpose and an opportunity to rebuild their lives, but also pointed to the need for more comprehensive support systems to ensure long-term success.

Lastly, the fourth objective, assessing the role of community and government support, revealed that while some programs were beneficial, they were insufficient to ensure sustainable reintegration. Financial support, access to training, and community acceptance were key factors in facilitating their adjustment. The findings indicate that to effectively support these individuals, a more holistic approach is needed—one that combines financial assistance, skills development, and a long-term commitment from both the government and the community.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Educate communities about the experiences and struggles of Friends Rescued also known as former NPA members to foster empathy and reduce stigma. This will help create a supportive environment that encourages acceptance and understanding.
2. Provide counseling, trauma-healing workshops, and peer-support groups to help friends rescued to cope with stigma, psychological scars, and identity reconstruction. Partner with NGOs, faith-based groups, and mental health professionals to ensure holistic support.
3. The local government unit, national government, non-government agencies and relevant agencies will strengthen and diversify livelihood assistance programs for friends rescued. This includes providing seed capital, tools, or resources for small businesses, agriculture, or other income-generating activities tailored to their skills and local economic opportunities.
3. The local and national governments will also provide livelihood showcases for friends rescued to encourage them not to return to the organization. The E-CLIP program should be effective and inclusive, benefiting not only new surrenderees but also those who surrendered earlier. Additionally, there should be mandatory enrollment in TESDA programs, with corresponding job opportunities provided based on their acquired skills.
4. Simplify access to government-provided services such as healthcare, education, housing, and counseling. Create a centralized mechanism or one-stop shop for friends rescued to access these services efficiently.
5. Future researchers may conduct studies to examine the differences between former rebels who were rescued and those who voluntarily surrendered, particularly in terms of their reasons for surrendering and the type of assistance they received from local or national government. They may also provide recommendations to enhance and improve existing government strategies.

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