

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Rebellion to Integration: The Phenomenological Experiences of Former Rebels now Serving as CAA in Talaingod, Davao del Norte

Bismark D. Gumela

56th Infantry (Tatag) Battalion, Philippine Army, Talaingod, Davao del Norte, Philippines, Bismark D. Gumela: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0000-430X>

*Corresponding author: bgumela@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the lived experiences of the CAA force in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, who were previously members of the CPP-NPA. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used, involving interviews with five purposively selected former rebels to elicit their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies during their transition from guerrilla fighters to community peacekeepers. The results show that the participants' path to joining CAA was driven by rectifying their mistakes, protecting vulnerable IP communities, and seeking financial stability. Being a current member of the CAA has allowed them to maintain a steady income, receive livelihood assistance, and maintain access to their loved ones, which helps them rebuild their lives and regain their self-worth. Notably, they faced challenges during the transition, such as trauma, stigma, and fear of retribution from their former comrades in the armed group. The troops of the 56th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army, along with the acceptance of the IP community of Talaingod led by datos, have helped them adjust and return to everyday lives. Hence, the study shows that reintegration is not merely about finding a profession or sustaining oneself with financial assistance; it also requires emotional support from loved ones and community acceptance. The study proposes that the government implement programs to maintain education, job opportunities, and livelihoods for former rebels, to curb stigma and discrimination, while allowing them to revitalize their lives as they take on responsibilities as active partners of the government in promoting peace in the conflict-affected areas.

Keywords: *CPP-NPA, Citizen Armed Auxiliary (CAA), former rebels (FR), reintegration, peacebuilding.*

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INTRODUCTION

It is a prevalent occurrence that those individuals who took up arms and waged war against the government have suffered a life of difficulty and complexity. The complexity arises not only from what they felt physically due to the dangers of warfare but also from the emotional and moral scars they carry. These scars penetrate through the individuals' well-being and affect their whole lives. According to the research of Mananga (2024), many former rebels are suffering psychological trauma and the guilt for their atrocities or inhumane acts committed due to false ideology. These circumstances were further compounded by the harsh environmental conditions that they endured to survive and emotional longing due to separation from their families. Likewise, the years or even decades they spent in the armed struggle have isolated them from mainstream society to avoid the pursuing government forces. Their guerrilla bases were often located in dense jungles, which cut them off from education, awareness, and livelihood opportunities (Decker, 2020; Lamichane, 2015). These prolonged

exposure to violence and false narratives of communism have weakened their connection to society, which makes their return to everyday life more challenging. As a result, the guerrilla fighters upon surrender have faced serious barriers to reintegration into mainstream society and career opportunities, compounded by stigma, mistrust, and perceived risk in the community (Veiglová, 2023).

At the international level, countries around the world have acknowledged the complexity and the challenges faced by former rebels during the reintegration process. Thus, they created programs under the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) framework and realized that successfully reintegrating individuals is not only about providing immediate support through monetary and livelihood assistance but also about addressing emotional and psychological needs. For example, in Colombia, the former members of Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), even though they have received monetary support, have faced difficulties in rebuilding their own identity and seeking their purpose due to factors such as their immersion in the

conflict at a young age, the rejection of their communities since they were associated with violence, and their trust issues due to the non-compliance of the government with their promises (Gluecker et al., 2021). Similarly, the study conducted by Robins and Bhandari (2016) underscores that the 2006 peace agreement between the Communist-Maoist rebels and the government of Nepal left the beneficiaries of the treaty struggling to adapt to mainstream society since they missed out on basic education and were often labelled as “disqualified,” which excluded them from the majority. Another, the former members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka experienced distrust and hate from their community, especially the women, despite the government programs’ training (sewing, cooking) that led to an unsustainable source of income, which made their lives harder (Miriyaigalla, 2014). Taken together, these examples suggest that reintegration must be a holistic approach: recipients of the DDR program must be supported not only through material or economic means. However, they must also be involved in emotional healing, community acceptance, and better opportunities to rebuild their lost years and regain a sense of purpose in their lives.

In the Philippine setting, the CPP-NPA, created by Jose Maria Sison, still exists after 56 years. However, its presence is minimal due to the combined internal security operations (ISO) of the AFP and PNP, supported by the Whole-of-Nation Approach concept of NTF-ELCAC. These holistic approaches of the government agencies by addressing the common issues exploited by the communists have successfully dismantled multiple guerrilla fronts and encouraged the surrender of thousands of red fighters along with firearms, war materiel, and subversive documents (Yuson, 2021; Moaje, 2021). Despite these significant achievements, the former rebels’ battle to redeem their old selves posed a difficult challenge. Many of these former rebels have suffered discrimination, little to no progress in employment opportunities, and a lack of access to sustainable livelihood programs catered by the government. These factors can be a cause or a risk of changing these individuals’ ideals, leading to recidivism, or a return to armed struggle (Cubero et al., 2024; Francisco, 2025). These situations highlight the critical gap between national government policies and the lived realities of former rebels, especially those living in IP communities. Notably, some of the former rebels have found an alternative path by joining the Citizen Armed Auxiliary (CAA), an irregular force of the AFP. The CAA are civilian volunteers who were trained, organized, and armed by adjacent local Philippine Army units to support the AFP’s thrust to defend the country against perceived threats, such as conventional belligerent warfare and counterinsurgency operations against Communists and Southern Philippines Secessionist Groups. They were strategically assigned in a patrol base proximate to their residence (Alcudia, 2022; Zech and Eastin, 2020).

The municipality of Talaingod, located in the province of Davao del Norte, was one of the formidable strongholds of the Southern Mindanao Regional Committee (SMRC) of the CPP-NPA. It is noteworthy that upon the arrival of the 56th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army in February 2018, CPP-NPA members began the snowballing of surrender, unearthed the mass organizations, and formal withdrawal of support to communism in the identified sitios of the guerrilla bases through triad operations (focused military operations, civil-military operations, and intelligence operations). As a result, the general perception of the municipality has changed from a fearsome NPA-infested guerrilla base to a peace-inclined municipality conducive to growth and development (PIO Eastern Mindanao Command AFP, 2022;

Palicte, 2022a).

Despite these significant changes and improvements, the municipality is still seeking solutions to address the prevailing socio-economic issues, including poverty, limited access to education for Talaingod Manobo youths, a lack of healthcare facilities, no power supply to inert sitios, limited livelihood opportunities, and poor infrastructure. These prevailing issues posed a potential propaganda that CPP-NPA political cadres could exploit during their Ideological-Political-Organizational (IPO) work, the primary way of recruiting NPA members and creating mass bases for logistics and operational support (Law-ay et al., 2022; Nepomuceno, 2025). Consequently, many former rebels are seeking alternative means to survive despite the government’s efforts to address this issue. Although some of the former rebels have already received their financial assistance from the government through the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) of DILG and livelihood programs under DSWD, and the Provincial Government of Davao del Norte assists, not all former rebels can find stable jobs or sources of income since most of them have not finished elementary studies, rendering them as farmers (OPAPRU, 2019). Hence, some of them decided to join the CAA force to protect the vulnerable communities against a possible resurgence of the CPP-NPA. According to the articles of the 10th Infantry Battalion (2025) and Daguno-Bersamina (2025), former rebels joining CAA serve as a gateway to correct their past mistakes within the armed group while earning a decent salary.

Given the situation, the researcher aimed, through this study, to explore the lived experiences of former rebels now serving as CAA in the municipality of Talaingod, Davao del Norte. The focus is on understanding their reasons for joining the armed group, the cause of their escape or departure, the challenges they faced during the transition from former rebel to CAA, and the ways they adapt to it. Also, it provides a clearer picture of the reintegration process in an indigenous area previously affected by conflict. Finally, it hopes to fill the research gap, as there are no existing studies on former rebels who joined community-based military groups in the Philippines. The study’s results can benefit scholars and policymakers at the local and national levels by helping develop more specific, culturally sensitive reintegration programs to sustain peace in cleared areas, such as Talaingod.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The study used a qualitative approach within a phenomenological research design to thoroughly examine participants’ experiences during their transition from former rebels to CAA in Talaingod, Davao del Norte. The municipality of Talaingod, Davao del Norte, is categorized as a second-class municipality and is situated in a geographically isolated and disadvantaged area (GIDA) of the Pantaron Mountain Range in the Davao Region of Southern Mindanao (Camilo, 2024). Its geographic isolation and challenging terrain limit access to government services, affecting residents’ daily lives and shaping participants’ experiences. On the north and east, it is bounded by the municipality of Kapalong, Davao del Norte; on the west, by the municipality of San Fernando, Bukidnon; and on the south, by the Paquibato District, Davao City. It is composed of three barangays, namely Sto Niño, Palma Gil, and Dagohoy, with 99 remote sitios or villages that are only accessible by navigating unpaved roads and dangerous trails.

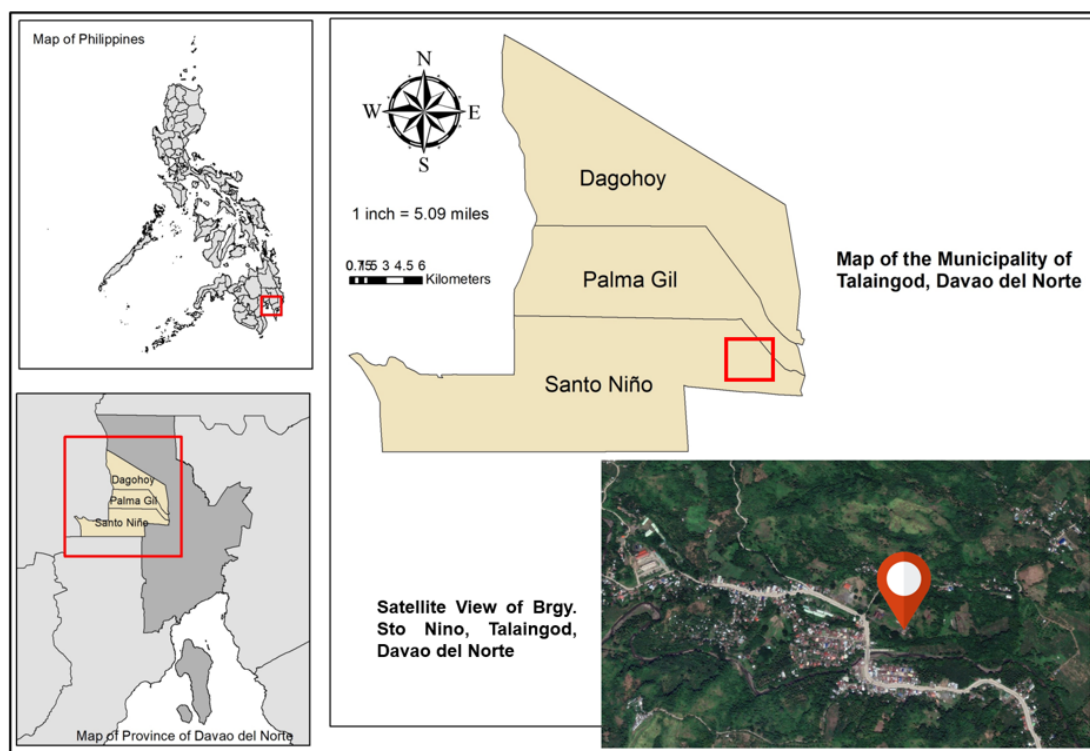


Figure 1. The Map of Municipality of Talaingod, Davao del Norte, and the study area site

According to Williams (2021), the phenomenological approach examines participants’ deep, personal experiences. Hence, it is an appropriate design study because it captures the participants’ interpretations of their transition and reintegration. Qualitative research was used in this study to provide the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing participants’ perspectives on a complex phenomenon within a specific setting (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Through the use of this method, the study will fully understand the motivations, challenges, and coping strategies the participants used from their previous role as perpetrators of terror actions because of communist ideology to peacekeepers who support the mandate of the AFP.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study has used purposive sampling, which is appropriate because it deliberately selects individuals who possess specific, relevant information aligned with the study’s objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). Therefore, the researcher selected five former rebels who formally surrendered between 2019 and 2023 and are currently serving as CAA, operationally controlled by the 56th Infantry (TATAG) Battalion of the Philippine Army in Davao del Norte. This enabled the researcher to gather accurate data from the participants who had undergone the whole transition process.

Table 1. Profile of research participants.

Code	Sex	Former guerilla front	Length of stay in the NPA	Years in the CAA service
P1	Female	SRGU, SRC5, SMRC	4 years	2 years
P2	Female	GF Malayag, SRC2, NCMRC	6 years	3 years
P3	Male	GF6, SRC2, NCMRC	7 years	5 years
P4	Male	SRGU, SRC5, SMRC	4 years	3 years
P5	Male	GF55, SRC5, SMRC	8 years	2 years

As shown in Table 1 above, the research participants include two females and three males to achieve consensus across all genders. Likewise, the Guerrilla Fronts where the participants served during their stint in the armed struggle operated from the hinterlands of the municipalities of Loreto and Lapaz in Agusan del Sur; Talaingod, Santo Tomas, and Kapalong in Davao del Norte; Cabanglasan, Malaybalay City, Quezon, and Kitaotao in Bukidnon; and Paquibato District in Davao City. Also, they participated in the armed struggle for more than three years, which clearly demonstrates that they acquired sufficient experience about the life of an NPA armed fighter. Similarly, during their years in the CAA service, they provided community security services for over 2 years, indicating that they have fully understood the transition from a rebel to a CAA and can

narrate their past and present experiences with depth and clarity.

According to Budiu (2021) and Subedi (2021), the number of participants, which is five, is often considered suitable for qualitative phenomenological research because a smaller number allows the researcher to achieve maximum depth and richness in data collection and analysis, which is the core goal of exploring lived experiences. Additionally, Radu (2025) emphasized in his article that this size is often sufficient to achieve data saturation, meaning that the key themes and the essential structure of the phenomenon are adequately uncovered without collecting redundant information.

The five participants were handpicked to meet the specific criteria set by the researchers to ensure the data’s credibility and reliability. The criteria that they met are that they must be

verified former rebels of the CPP-NPA through the Joint AFP-PNP Intelligence Committee (JAPIC) validation board of the 1003rd Infantry Brigade and the Davao del Norte Provincial Police Office. Importantly, they must have undergone the Deradicalization Program, facilitated by the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office of Davao del Norte, to undo the radical indoctrination in communism while equipping them with skills and knowledge before their return to mainstream society. Moreover, participants are required to serve a minimum of 1 year under the operational control of the 56th Infantry Battalion to ensure adequate exposure to the reintegration process and community service. Additionally, the researcher requested a copy of the certificate of residency from their respective barangays and an ID from the municipal tribal office of Talaingod as proof that they are legitimate Talaingod Manobos living in the ancestral domains. Also, those former rebels who surrendered to the unit between 2019 and 2023 are picked to maintain the relevance and recency. This strict protocol ensured that the selected participants could provide rich insights aligned with the study's objectives.

Research instrument

Through individual, face-to-face, and structured interviews, the researchers have gained the necessary data to create scientific results. The use of semi-structured interviews is well established in qualitative research because, according to Horton et al. (2004) and Karatsareas (2022), it captures participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and insights. Moreover, the application of open-ended questions followed by probing questions significantly clarifies and expands responses, further enriching and gathering the participant's thoughts and feelings while guiding the conversation toward the study's objectives. It also enables the researcher to gather rich, in-depth data while maintaining flexibility and a degree of alignment or structure to investigate key themes and subthemes through participant quotes that emerged throughout the interview process (Blandford, 2013; Eppich et al., 2019; Kallio et al., 2016).

Also, a researcher-developed interview was developed, consisting of six open-ended questions to guide the research throughout the interview process. During the formulation of the research questions, the researcher focuses on the participants' motivation in joining the armed group, their reasons why they escape and surrender, the challenges they experienced during the transition from former rebel to CAA, the coping techniques

they used to overcome it, and their positive experiences as they take the new role as community peacekeepers in their respective areas. Moreover, to validate the research instrument, three experts: one with a Doctor of Philosophy and two with a Doctor of Education, were sought formally through letter requests and coordination.

Upon finalization of the questionnaire per the guidance and approval of the three experts, the study area was set in an undisclosed military installation in Brgy Sto Niño, Talaingod, Davao del Norte, to ensure the participants are secure and convenient and to promote a comfortable and confidential area conducive for both researchers and the participants.

Data gathering procedure

The researcher sent a formal letter requesting the Operations Officer of 56IB and the Patrol Base commanders, who are in charge of the participants, after the validation of the research instrument by the experts and preparation of the study area. Imperatively, each of the five participants was briefed individually through a CAA, using a translator proficient in Cebuano and Manobo, to ensure they fully understood the objectives of the study and could accurately narrate. Moreover, the researcher explained that the interview is voluntary, and they may withdraw if they feel offended, violated, or if their privacy is invaded, without any repercussions if they decline. All information regarding this matter is considered confidential and stored in a secure facility accessible only to personnel involved in this research, in accordance with Executive Order Number 608 dated 30 March 2007. After the participants agreed to the terms and conditions, the interview was conducted from 10 August to 18 August at Alsons Compound, Brgy. Sto. Niño, Talaingod, Davao del Norte, as shown in the study area in Figure 2.

The initial pilot interview was conducted with two participants to ensure the research instruments aligned with the study and to assess the clarity, flow, and depth of the responses. The pilot interview results showed that a minor refinement was necessary, which the researcher implemented immediately. After refinements and finalization of the instrument, a full round of interviews was conducted with the remaining three participants. Likewise, the researcher utilized his Android cellphone as an audio recording device to transcribe the verbatim while jotting down important details.



Figure 2. The participant being interviewed by the researcher.

Data analysis procedure

The researcher used thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), to interpret the gathered data. According to Naeem et al. (2023), thematic analysis is suitable for this research because it comprehensively explores participants' insights, beliefs, and experiences.

The following methodologies have guided the research in analyzing the interview-derived data. First, the researcher used his Android phone as an audio recorder to capture the interview. Likewise, the researcher records important details in writing to add depth that recordings alone cannot capture and to facilitate the identification of patterns, contradictions, and unique insights (Hecker & Kalpolas, 2025). Next, the recorded

audios were transcribed into text in Microsoft Word and reread repeatedly to be familiar with the insights and narratives. Third, the researcher used QDA Miner Lite, a free qualitative software, to identify themes and organize them into groupings to observe patterns and linkages, thereby making the process more efficient (Elfarem et al., 2025). Fourth, the identified theme names were refined to reflect the gathered data accurately. Fifth, the finalized themes were later renamed in accordance with the sub-theme definitions and their relevance to the study's objectives. Lastly, the findings for each identified theme in QDA Miner Lite were converted into a report through a Microsoft Word file. Evidently, the researcher maintained objectivity throughout the analysis to ensure the study was meaningful based on the participants' narratives.

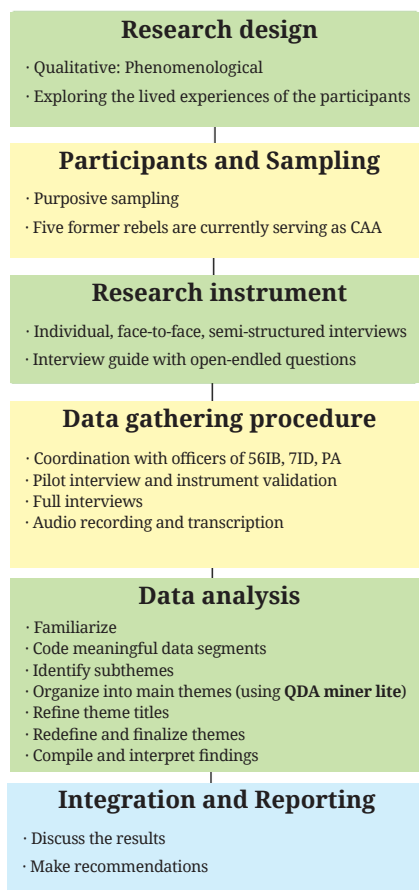


Figure 3. Research flow layout.

RESULTS

Motivations for Joining the CPP-NPA

Table 2. Factors influencing recruitment into CPP-NPA.

Subthemes	Significant quotes
Influence of Family and Social Networks	P1: "My nephew encouraged me to visit the nearby NPA encampment." P2: "I joined the NPA because my sitio was a traditional mobility corridor for their activities, making their presence familiar to me. Additionally, my father was already a member, and his involvement was the primary reason I decided to join the group."
Deceptive Promises of Education, Income, and Support	P5: "They told me that since DepEd could not provide free notebooks, clothing, or allowances, I should consider joining the NPA. They promised that if I joined them, I would receive a real education—learning how to read and write—along with an allowance, school supplies and uniforms." P1: "They promised to pay me Php1,000.00 per month for five years and SUPAMIL (Suporta sa Pamilya) monthly worth Php2,000.00" P3: "They promised a daily wage of Php60.00 and encouraged me to fight against capitalists for lower prices on daily goods and higher prices for bananas (from Php5.00 per kilo to double). Since I experienced the hardship of a banana farmer, this propaganda attracted me."

Coercion and Fear-Based Recruitment	<p>P1: <i>“The NPA commander instructed my nephew to leave me in the encampment to join the ranks of the NPA. He also promised that after one month of being a member, I would be allowed to go home. After a month, I asked the commander if I could go home, but he insisted that the group was busy with consolidation efforts in the mass bases. He repeatedly emphasized this until I was given the position of medic of the platoon, which made it increasingly difficult to leave, as I had more responsibilities.”</i></p> <p>P3: <i>“I joined out of fear. The NPA commander threatened me, saying that government troops were hunting me as a suspect in the ambush of a military vehicle that resulted in several troop deaths. Joining the NPA would ensure my safety from the hands of military captors.”</i></p> <p>P4: <i>“While I was a student at Community Technical College of Southern Mindanao in Maco, Davao de Oro, I participated in a group organized by my teacher, which held rallies and demonstrations against the government in Davao City. Later, my cousin, who was an NPA commander, informed me that I had become a wanted and faced the threat of torture from soldiers. Consequently, I decided to join the NPA, believing that it would provide me with protection against these threats.”</i></p>
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Table 2 highlights that recruitment in rural and marginalized areas, such as Talaingod, Davao del Norte, is affected by numerous socio-economic factors, particularly poverty, limited educational attainment, and weak government services. As shown in the table above, family, relatives, and social ties, such as friends, have significantly influenced participants' decisions to join the armed group. Additionally, the promises of free

education and financial assistance through salaries in the form of SUPAMIL attracted them, as the municipality of Talaingod was facing shortages of basic services from the government. Moreover, some were coerced into joining the armed group due to fear and threats resulting from the fabricated or manipulative tactics of the commanders.

Motivations to Surrender and Reintegration Decision

Table 3. Factors influencing exit from the CPP-NPA.

Subthemes	Significant quotes
Disillusionment with NPA Ideology and Broken Promises	<p>P3: <i>“Even after six years in the movement, I achieved nothing. I almost lost my life, but I was unable to earn even a single centavo. They broke their promise to provide financial support to my family. For those long years, I was misled by NPA commanders who claimed that my family received a monthly compensation called SUPAMIL (Suporta Sa Pamilya), but this was not true.”</i></p> <p>P3: <i>“As a squad leader, I witnessed the cruelty of the system firsthand. The comrades were not informed of the fate of their deceased relatives, including parents and children. The leaders were aware that these NPA members would never return after being allowed to visit the wakes of their loved ones.”</i></p> <p>P3: <i>“My uncle and cousins escaped from the NPA with their firearms. They claimed I was involved in the escape plan. Because of this, I was wrongly accused, disarmed, and brought before a hukumang bayan or Kangaroo Court presided over by senior NPA leaders. Without any evidence or chance to defend myself, the court sentenced me to death. Members of the Special Partisan Unit (SPARU) were ordered to take me and three others to the place of execution. Fortunately, before this could happen, Philippine Army troops intercepted and rescued us.”</i></p> <p>P5: <i>“I also realized that their beliefs and goals were misguided. They opposed the construction of roads in remote areas because they feared it would allow government forces to reach them more easily. As a result, we burned the heavy equipments, extorted money, and terrorized the construction firms. However, I came to understand that these activities are wrong since these roads could actually help people by improving access to towns where essential goods and basic services are available.”</i></p>
Hardships and Survival Struggles	<p>P5: <i>“We were not provided with enough food or supplies, which made it increasingly difficult for me and my comrades to keep track on long marches. I witnessed many of my comrades collapse due to hunger and fatigue.”</i></p> <p>P3: <i>“I realized that life in the NPA had become increasingly difficult; there was often a lack of food, and we were forced to march long distances without eating or sleeping to evade government forces.”</i></p> <p>P3: <i>“We marched relentlessly, day and night, and at times we were forced to go without food for three days just to cover enough distance to escape the pursuing military troops.”</i></p>
Desire for Family Reconnection and Normal Life	<p>P1: <i>“I escaped and surrendered because I wish to live with my only daughter and support my ailing, widowed mother.”</i></p> <p>P5: <i>“I can regularly see and support my family. We are complete and happy, free from the fear of dying in an armed encounter.”</i></p>

Table 3 presents participants' reasons for surrendering and returning to mainstream society. Disillusionment, hardships, and family connections were key motivators. The participants eventually realized they had been deceived and misled after discovering that many of the promises made to them by the NPA commanders during recruitment had remained unfulfilled. Moreover, their fear of life due to constant dangers posed by the

pursuing government forces and the harsh living conditions in the jungles, compounded by food shortages and long marches, made their life miserable. Additionally, the participants have longed for their everyday lives, living in the mainstream society with their families. Therefore, the combined physical and emotional exhaustion has contributed to their decision to escape the armed group and surrender to the government forces.

Decision to Join as CAA

Table 4. Factors influencing the decision to Join the CAA.

Subthemes	Significant quotes
Search for Redemption and Purpose	<p>P5: "I joined the CAA because I wanted to correct my past mistakes. I witnessed many former rebels who are CAA have found their path and are now happy. I realized that fighting against the government was wrong. Now, I can join them to serve the people in the right way."</p> <p>P4: "I want to prove that I have already changed. I want to protect our young generation of Lumad against the malign ideologies of CPP-NPA."</p> <p>P5: "Being part of the CAA gave me direction. Before, I had no plans after surrendering, as I would lay my life for the communist ideology. Now, I wake up each day with a mission to serve the Talaingod Manobos by enlightening them about the malicious propaganda of CPP-NPA."</p> <p>P1: "I joined the CAA because I need a job. My family depends on me. At least here, I receive regular pay and benefits, unlike in the NPA, where we are relentlessly marching without a single peso."</p>
Economic Stability and Livelihood Opportunities	<p>P2: "The 56IB told us that by joining the CAA, we would have allowances worth Php12,000.00 for a duty of 15 days per month, training, and financial assistance for our families, especially if they were to become sick or die. That was one of the reasons I joined."</p> <p>P4: "When I was in the NPA, we suffered from hunger and sleepless nights in the mountains. Now, I can earn for my family, attend my abaca farm and manage my small business."</p>

Table 4 presents participants' reasons for joining the CAA. Personal redemption, livelihood, and community protection were key factors. By joining the CAA, participants reflected on their transformation from perpetrators of terrorist acts under the CPP-NPA to a peace-oriented force under the AFP, driven by their desire to atone for past mistakes and become better individuals in society. Also, they were satisfied in their new profession since they were able to receive a steady and adequate salary that provided them with economic stability and livelihood

opportunities, the primary source that provided support to their families. Notably, the participants after joining the CAA were enlightened to their purpose in life, as they were given a sense of direction for their life that replaced their old self living in the armed group that was full of uncertainty and the possibility of being killed. Also, they expressed their desire to take up arms by joining legitimate government and organization to protect their respective communities, preserve their cultural identities, and prevent their fellow IPs from falling victim to the CPP-NPA.

Challenges in Transition to CAA

Table 5. Problems faced by former rebels during reintegration.

Subthemes	Significant quotes
Psychological Trauma and Isolation	<p>P4: "I still remember the faces of those who died during ambushes and liquidation. Sometimes, I wake up at night thinking about what I have done. I also think about the families they left behind—their parents, children, and loved ones."</p> <p>P1: "We lived in the jungles of the Pantaron Mountain Range for so long that I forgot how to live like a normal person. We are like criminals, always endlessly evading. Moreover, I did not even see my family for four years. Their promise of free education is not true; it is just constant movement and fear."</p>
Stigma and Discrimination	<p>P5: "Many people in my community often mock me and call me 'buang,' which means crazy. They also know that I once led ambushes against the military, so they call me a murderer."</p> <p>P3: "I have often encountered accusations from individuals saying that my heart and mind still belong to the rebellion. Some claim that the NPA sent me to spy or infiltrate the soldiers."</p>
Fear of Retaliation	<p>P4: "Some people are avoiding me, mocking me as 'traitor', 'NPA, 'kumunista', and 'bandido.'"</p> <p>P4: "I am afraid of being a CAA at first because I know that those who take on this role are automatically listed as targets for liquidation or so-called S.O. (Standing Order) by the NPA. This threat extends to my family as well, since my cooperation could reveal my operational knowledge and experience, which the government could use to dismantle or negotiate the surrender of active NPAs. I have witnessed many former rebels who became CAA members end up being killed. These experiences have made me hesitant to join the CAA, as I fear for my life and the lives of my loved ones. I am aware that becoming a CAA places me in the crosshairs of my former comrades, which could lead to dangerous consequences."</p>

Table 5 highlights the main challenges faced by former rebels during reintegration, including trauma, stigma, and fear. The transition of reintegration of participants from former rebels to CAA suffered challenges and problems due to the psychological trauma they bore from the violent experiences, atrocities, and prolonged isolation in the mountains from mainstream society due to relentless hiding from government

forces. Likewise, the emotional stress they experienced was further compounded by stigma or labelling and discrimination, realizing that they are rejected and mistrusted within their own communities. Moreover, the fear of their life due to retaliation from former active comrades intensified their anxiety, which limits their sense of freedom.

Motivations and institutional support in reintegration

Table 6. Support systems that assisted the participant's transition to CAA.

Subthemes	Significant quotes
Military Guidance and Support	P2: <i>"Our commanders and NCOs treat us fairly, just like the other CAAs. They provide us with guidance and training so we can perform our duties properly. They do not look down on us for being former rebels. They are also understanding whenever we ask for permission or financial assistance."</i> P3: <i>"I used to be afraid of soldiers, but when I joined the CAA, I realized they were actually good people. This was very different from the propaganda spread by NPA leaders, who said soldiers were brutal, barbaric and murderous. They supported me during my transition by giving advice that built my confidence and encouraged me to serve the community."</i>
Community Acceptance and Social Reintegration	P1: <i>"At first, I was worried that my neighbors and relatives would not accept me. However, when I came back as a CAA, they treated me kindly. They said they were happy that I chose peace and the right side."</i> P5: <i>"Our barangay officials, purok leaders and tribal leaders helped me regain trust in the community by a traditional peace offering called 'Usay'. They told the people that we are no longer enemies but partners for peace."</i>

Table 6 presents the support systems that facilitated participants' reintegration. Military guidance and community acceptance were key to rebuilding their lives. The continuous support and guidance of the NCOs of the 56IB greatly helped participants during their reintegration by boosting their confidence, instilling military discipline, and equipping them with skills they used in their new roles as CAA. Additionally, the support of local community leaders and tribal datu through traditional reconciliation rituals helps them be accepted in their respective sitios through their cultural ways, restoring their sense of dignity and belonging and reducing negative perceptions of them by the general public.

DISCUSSION

The existence of prevailing issues in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, such as widespread poverty, illiteracy due to lack of educational institutions, and inadequate government basic services due to lack of access roads to inert sitios, plays a crucial role in enabling the propaganda of NPA cadres and political organizers, who often target those individuals affected by it (Algonos et al., 2024; PSA Region XI - Davao Region, 2024). Based on participants' narratives, the inclination of family members, relatives, and peers in the armed group has influenced them to join the armed struggle. Correspondingly, said claims were consistently aligned with the studies of Bultman (2018), which indicates that the social structure of an individual, which means loyalty, love, and social impact, guides their decision in joining groups, even though it was radicalized or criminal in nature. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the participants mentioned that the CPP-NPA political cadres often exploit the eagerness and determination of IP youths as another essential factor in the recruitment into the armed struggle by offering false promises of education, financial support, and material assistance, especially in areas like the municipality of Talaingod, where DepEd educational schools are lacking (De Asis and Tecson, 2022). In addition, these tactics clearly reveal how the insurgents weaponize poverty and government service gaps, as supported by Nwokike's (2023) study and Lako's (2022) thesis on the insurgency in Nigeria. Lastly, the fear and coercion that create pressure on an individual play a vital role in the recruitment of IPs in Talaingod. Some of the participants narrated that they experienced pressure due to the fabricated and manipulated threats created by the NPA commanders to force an individual to leave his everyday life out of fear and join the group that would protect him. This aligns with Leader Maynard's (2019) findings that survival instincts often outweigh ideological beliefs and personal choices in their decision to join the armed group.

On the good side, the participant's decision to abandon the

communist ideals, surrender to the government forces, and reintegrate into society represents a major ideological shift and a significant act of courage. It is clearly indicated that the participants, like other former rebels who featured their stories in the mainstream media narrating the account of their experiences in the armed group, have clearly recounted that they have lost faith in the ideology and the armed struggle of the CPP-NPA after realizing that they were deceived, abused, manipulated, and coerced (Palicte, 2022b; Paunan, 2023). Notably, one of the highlights of the interview is the story of a participant who described that he was almost executed after a kangaroo court trial implicated him without any probable cause, sufficient or circumstantial evidence, or the chance to defend himself against the fabricated accusations. Therefore, this experience is highlighted as one of the reasons why even a diehard or fanatical member of the armed group leaves due to embarrassment with the organization's leadership, as supported by the studies of Devia (2024) and Bruneau et al. (2022) on the Colombian insurgency. Furthermore, the harsh environmental factors, specifically the hot, dense, and humid jungles of the Pantaron Mountain Range, compounded by starvation, exhaustion, and the dangers of being killed by government forces, have taken a toll by draining their mental and physical strength, which led them to escape and surrender. According to Nussio and Ugarriza (2021), these distressing experiences, specifically the physical and mental torture, further amplify the distrust in an organization, which led to some individuals' abandonment. Beyond the physical hardship, the highest motivator for their surrender is their loneliness for their families. The desire to be cared for and be reunited with their loved ones has clearly outweighed the loyalty to the armed group. These clearly show that family bonds play an essential role in encouraging CPP-NPA members to surrender and return to their everyday lives (Cagod, 2025).

However, the process of transitioning a member of a publicly denounced enemy group, the NPA, to an organized military force under the AFP was not easy. It required guts and significant emotional, psychological, and social adjustments. Participants recounted that they have carried deep and emotional scars from the years of their involvement in the armed struggle. The violent experiences that they perpetrated and endured, such as hostilities with the government troops and even unaware civilians, such as encounters, ambushes, sniping, harassment, IED bombing, and liquidation, have left them with trauma and guilt that continued to haunt them even after years of reintegration into society and transition to the CAA force (Almoshmosh, 2016). Aside from suffering psychological burdens, the years of living in the jungle with total isolation, since guerrilla bases were often located in the deep, thick jungles of the triboundaries of provinces that completely cut

them from society, and led to the dislocation of their everyday lives. These cut them off from awareness and news trends, completely repelling them from education, family, and regular social interaction. Therefore, these feelings of isolation made them more dependent on communism and weakened their ties with society, which completely trapped them from any opportunities, living a life of survival and blindly and strictly following the CPP-NPA directives, even if they were immoral. As a result, participants experienced lag or challenges in transitioning from a disorganized, criminally inclined communist structure to the AFP's modern organizational system (Guillermo, 2022). Also, the choice of being a member of CAA branded them by members of the community as traitors, spies, and enemies, which led them to suffer stigma and discrimination, creating barriers and doubt in themselves about whether they would ever be entirely accepted and trusted by the communities (Unfried et al., 2022). Importantly, the fear of retribution from their former active comrades has created persistent anxiety and fear for their security and safety and restricted their movements and freedom, which creates emotional distress not only for themselves but also for their loved ones (Buchanan, 2011). Overall, these represent that the reintegration of a former rebel into a CAA is not only a physical process but also needs significant support in the form of emotional and social care to deter negative emotions such as trauma, stigma, isolation, and fear that hinder their recovery.

Notably, the negative feelings experienced by the former rebels during the transition were gradually alleviated and eventually addressed by the guidance and support provided by the military and the community. Specifically, the continuous advice and mentorship from the officers and enlisted personnel of the 56th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army have greatly helped the participants find themselves, rebuild their self-confidence, adjust to military discipline, and trust government institutions. The battalion has initiated various programs and regular refresher trainings to support the reintegration of former rebels into the CAA. Among the initiatives are livelihood and skills training in coordination with the counterpart government agencies, such as TESDA, DSWD, and DOLE. For military training, they have undergone basic training, specialization, and seminars that have helped them adapt to military etiquette, boosting their morale and confidence. For the benefit of the beneficiaries, they have included them in the spearheaded programs of the Provincial Government of Davao del Norte, such as free housing, quality education through scholarship, and financial assistance (CMOTATAG56, 2018; Mejos, 2025; DA-SAAD, 2025). The programs created by the 56IB have not only addressed participants' basic economic needs but also helped them reduce stigma, rebuild their self-worth, and strengthen their roles as peace advocates in their respective communities. At the same time, the help of community leaders, especially barangay officials, purok leaders, and tribal leaders or *datus* who act as mediators between the community and the participants, has repaired relationships and restored the dignity lost after the traditional Manobo peace rituals (Bughaw and Street, 2021). These indicate that to have a smooth and successful transition from a former rebel to a government-inclined organization, it requires the genuine assistance from the institution, which in this case is the military and the community, represented by the tribal leaders, to heal the psychological and emotional wounds they suffered.

The participants, after joining the CAA force, have realized a significant change in their lives. From a communist labelled as a terrorist by the government that inflicted deaths and caused widespread destruction and fear in the municipality of Talaingod and the adjacent areas, he became a protector and peacekeeper. Almost all participants acknowledge that they were motivated to correct past mistakes

and regain their dignity. Also, becoming a CAA saw an opportunity to protect their families and fellow IPs living in still-vulnerable sitios from deceptive CPP-NPA manipulation, while showing the transition in their hearts and minds by being loyal to the government of the Republic of the Philippines (OPAPRU, 2025). In addition, economic stability played an important role, as the AFP provided them with regular pay or allowances, clothing, incentives, and livelihood support that also helped them during the transition, thereby improving their quality of life and that of their families. These align with the study by Salisu (2025), which states that government financial benefits greatly help an individual experiencing a crisis become financially stable and recover from poverty.

CONCLUSION

These lived experiences of former CPP-NPA members who transitioned into CAA members under the AFP tell a strong narrative of change and recovery. Many of them have joined the armed struggle, primarily due to poverty, education, and lack of government support, especially in the municipality of Talaingod. These conditions made them vulnerable to exploitation by CPP-NPA political cadres by offering them promises in exchange for being a member of the armed group. However, they began to realize and be enlightened to the devious and manipulative acts, which revealed the true nature of the criminally inclined organization. Notably, they began to escape and eventually surrendered to the law, primarily because they wanted to reunite with their families, leave peacefully, and escape the hardships they had endured. Therefore, their surrender marks a significant shift in belief and purpose, from a rebellion seeking to overthrow the government by violent means to CAA, rebuilding their lives while serving as community peacekeepers.

Nevertheless, the transition to being a CAA was challenging. The participants struggled with the emotional trauma, guilt, discrimination, and fear of being judged by their fellow IPs or retaliated against by the active former comrades within the armed group. Despite these challenges, the advice and support from the officers and enlisted personnel of the 56th Infantry Battalion, along with the acceptance of the IP communities led by the tribal *datus*, significantly assisted them in their healing and helped them regain their confidence. Moreover, they were able to internalize that by serving as a CAA, they have experienced a new sense of purpose in their lives by protecting and serving the same communities that they formerly disrupted. Ultimately, this shows that the participant's transformation through successful reintegration requires emotional and economic support from the community. With this study, there must be continued guidance from the national to local government through livelihood opportunities to allow these CAAs to become lasting partners in maintaining peace and development.

Based on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, which posits that people define themselves not only by their personal identity but also by their social identity, shaped by their group inclinations or affiliations. This idea aligns with the study's findings that reintegration involves a participant's sense of self and belonging. Their transfer from former rebels into their new roles as CAA clearly demonstrates the formation of a new social identity, strengthened by the support of the troops of 56IB and the IP community of Talaingod through the tribal *datus* and their immediate family members. Their mere showing of acceptance, guidance, and trust to the former rebels helped them to regain purpose in their lives. Thus, the mentioned theory supports the study's results, which show that reintegration is not only about government support through financial support,

livelihood assistance, or material gain, but also about rebuilding one's sense of self and connection to the community to sustain peace.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

B. G: Writing, conceptualization, methodology, data gathering and analysis, validation, review and editing.

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DECLARATION

Informed consent statement

Before the data-gathering procedure, the researcher obtained permission through a courtesy call and coordination with the Indigenous People's Mandatory Representative (IPMR) and the Municipal Tribal Office on 05 August 2025, located at Balimba Hills, Sitio JBL, Brgy. Sto. Niño, Talaingod, Davao del Norte, to properly seek advice and guidance on the taboo acts that will violate the norms and traditions of Talaingod Manobos while adhering to the standard international ethics in research. Moreover, the researcher used alphanumeric codes and anonymized participants to adhere to ethical protocols and protect their privacy

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

AI Disclosure


The authors declare that no Artificial Intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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