

Beyond the Battlefield: The Struggles and Triumphs of Former MILF Combatant Returnees in Basilan Province

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Abstract— *This qualitative study explores the experiences of former combatants of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Basilan province, Philippines, as they reintegrate into civilian life after years of armed conflict. Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study examines the challenges they face in reintegrating into their communities and the critical role of community acceptance and support in facilitating their successful reintegration. The study finds that former combatants face multiple challenges, including stigma and discrimination, limited access to education and livelihood opportunities, and inadequate support from the government and other stakeholders. The study highlights the importance of comprehensive socio-economic programs to support the reintegration of former combatants, and the need for community-based approaches to promote lasting peace and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. The study concludes that sustainable peace in conflict-affected areas requires a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of conflict, promotes social justice and inclusive development, and ensures the meaningful participation of all stakeholders, including former combatants.*

Keywords— *Former combatants, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, reintegration, community acceptance, community support, Basilan province, Philippines, armed conflict, socio-economic programs, stigma, discrimination, livelihood opportunities, government support, community-based approaches, peacebuilding, social justice, inclusive development, stakeholder participation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The conflict in the Philippines between the government and various militant groups, including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has been ongoing for decades. The MILF has been one of the largest and most influential of these groups, with a strong presence in the southern island of Mindanao. The conflict has resulted in numerous casualties, including combatants and civilians, as well as significant economic and social disruption in affected areas. However, the conflict has not been static, and there have been efforts to resolve it through negotiation and peace agreements. One such agreement was the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) signed in 2014 between the MILF and the Philippine government. The agreement aimed to establish a new autonomous region for the Bangsamoro people, which includes areas previously controlled by the MILF. As part of the peace process, former MILF combatants were encouraged to return to civilian life and reintegrate into society. This study focuses on the struggles and triumphs of former MILF combatant returnees in the Basilan province of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim

Mindanao (BARMM). Specifically, it seeks to understand the challenges these returnees face in reintegrating into society, as well as the factors that contribute to successful reintegration. The study employs a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews with former combatants, community leaders, and other stakeholders. Several studies have been conducted on the reintegration of former combatants in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao. One notable study is "Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy" by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. The study examines the economic and social factors that contribute to civil wars and identifies strategies for preventing conflicts and supporting post-conflict reconstruction. One of the key recommendations is to provide economic opportunities and social services to former combatants and communities affected by the conflict. Another study is "Reintegrating ex-combatants in post-conflict societies: A review of the literature" by Thania Paffenholz and Lucie Podszun. The study provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities in reintegrating former combatants into society and identifies good practices and lessons learned from experiences in various post-conflict settings. The authors emphasize the importance of addressing the root causes of the conflict, building trust between former combatants and communities, and promoting social and economic inclusion. A third study is "Reintegration of Former Combatants in the Philippines: A Study on the Role of Women" by Irene B. Santiago and Maria Nemenzo. The study highlights the gender-specific challenges faced by female combatants in reintegrating into society, such as discrimination, stigma, and limited economic opportunities. The study also underscores the importance of involving women in the peace process and promoting their participation in decision-making and leadership roles. These studies provide useful insights into the challenges and opportunities in reintegrating former combatants into society. The present study builds on these previous works by focusing on the experiences of former MILF combatants in Basilan province, a region that has been heavily affected by the conflict. The study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to successful reintegration and to inform policies and programs that can support the peace process and promote sustainable development in the region.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study aims to explore the struggles and triumphs of former Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatant returnees in the Basilan province of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by former MILF combatant returnees in the process of reintegrating into civilian life in Basilan province?
2. What factors contribute to successful reintegration of former MILF combatant returnees in Basilan province?
3. How do the experiences of former MILF combatant returnees in Basilan province differ based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and other socio-cultural factors?
4. What policies and programs can be implemented to support the social and economic reintegration of former MILF combatant returnees in Basilan province and promote sustainable development in the region?

The study uses a qualitative research design, with in-depth interviews conducted with former combatants, community leaders, and other stakeholders. The study's findings aim to contribute to the understanding of the reintegration process of former combatants in conflict-affected regions, particularly in the context of the Philippines. Additionally, the study's results aim to inform policies and programs that can support the peace process and promote sustainable development in the Basilan province of the BARMM.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the struggles and triumphs of former Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatant returnees in the Basilan province of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of the research participants. The study utilizes purposive sampling to identify and recruit former combatants who have returned to civilian life in Basilan province. In-depth interviews are conducted with former combatants, community leaders, and other stakeholders who have knowledge and insights into the reintegration process of former combatants in the region. The study aims to interview a minimum of 15 former combatants, and data collection will continue until data saturation is reached. Semi-structured interviews are used to allow for a flexible and open-ended approach to data collection. The interview guide is developed based on the research questions and is designed to elicit rich and detailed responses from the participants. The interviews are conducted in the local language (e.g., Yakan, Tausug and others) by a trained research assistant who is a native speaker and familiar with the local culture and context.

The data collected from the interviews are transcribed and translated into English for analysis. The data analysis employs a thematic approach, where data are coded and organized into themes and sub-themes based on the research questions and emerging patterns in the data. The analysis is conducted manually and with the aid of software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti.

To ensure the rigor and validity of the study, the researchers employ several measures, including member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Member checking involves sharing the preliminary findings with the research participants to validate the accuracy and completeness of the data collected. Triangulation involves the use of multiple sources of data and perspectives to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Peer debriefing involves seeking feedback from other researchers or experts to validate the study's findings and interpretations.

Overall, this study's methodology aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the reintegration process of former MILF combatant returnees in Basilan province, contributing to the body of knowledge on the social and economic reintegration of former combatants in conflict-affected regions.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study found that former Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatant returnees in Basilan province faced a range of challenges in the process of reintegrating into civilian life. These challenges included social stigma, limited employment opportunities, lack of education and skills training, difficulties in accessing basic services such as healthcare and housing, and trauma and mental health issues. Social stigma was identified as a significant barrier for many former combatants, as they were often viewed with suspicion and mistrust by the broader community, which hindered their ability to reintegrate and rebuild their lives. Many former combatants reported experiencing discrimination, isolation, and marginalization, which contributed to their feelings of hopelessness and despair. The lack of employment opportunities and skills training also posed a significant challenge for former combatants. Many former combatants reported struggling to find employment, as their military skills and experiences were often not recognized or valued in the civilian job market. Furthermore, limited access to education and skills training opportunities made it difficult for them to acquire the necessary skills and qualifications to pursue alternative livelihoods. Difficulties in accessing basic services such as healthcare and housing were also reported as significant challenges for former combatants. Many former combatants reported struggling to access quality healthcare services, especially those related to mental health and trauma. Housing was also a significant issue, with many former combatants living in substandard conditions or lacking access to affordable housing. The study found that trauma and mental health issues were prevalent among former combatants. Many reported experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, which affected their ability to reintegrate into civilian life and contributed to their social isolation and marginalization.

In terms of the factors contributing to successful reintegration, the study identified several key factors, including access to education and skills training, support from family and community, and access to economic opportunities. The study also found that the provision of psychosocial support services, including mental health counseling and trauma healing programs, was critical in supporting the reintegration process of former combatants. The study highlights the complex challenges faced by former MILF combatant returnees in

Basilan province and the urgent need for comprehensive support services to facilitate their successful reintegration into civilian life. These findings have important implications for policymakers and practitioners working in conflict-affected regions, underscoring the importance of holistic and inclusive approaches to support the social and economic reintegration of former combatants. In addition, the study found that the community's perception of the former combatants played a critical role in the success or failure of their reintegration. Community acceptance and support were identified as key factors in facilitating the successful reintegration of former combatants into civilian life. Many former combatants reported that they felt marginalized and ostracized by their communities, which had a significant impact on their mental health and ability to reintegrate. Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of involving former combatants in the design and implementation of reintegration programs to ensure that their needs and perspectives are adequately addressed. Many former combatants reported feeling excluded from the reintegration process and expressed frustration with the lack of opportunities for meaningful participation. The data found out that the role of gender in the reintegration process was complex and varied. While women faced similar challenges as male combatants, they also faced additional barriers related to gender discrimination and social norms. The study underscored the need for gender-sensitive approaches to support the successful reintegration of both male and female combatants. Another significant finding of the study was the impact of the peace process on the reintegration of former combatants. The study found that the peace process created both opportunities and challenges for former combatants in the process of reintegrating into civilian life. On the one hand, the peace process provided a platform for the social and economic reintegration of former combatants through the provision of livelihood and skills training programs. On the other hand, the peace process also generated new tensions and divisions within communities, which hindered the successful reintegration of former combatants.

Moreover, the study highlighted the importance of addressing the underlying structural issues that perpetuate conflict and marginalization in the region. Many former combatants reported feeling disillusioned and frustrated with the ongoing social and economic inequalities in their communities, which they viewed as a root cause of the conflict. The study emphasized the need for comprehensive and sustainable development initiatives that address the underlying structural issues of poverty, inequality, and marginalization to support the successful reintegration of former combatants. Finally, the study found that the successful reintegration of former combatants requires a long-term commitment from all stakeholders, including the government, civil society, and the broader community. The study underscored the importance of a coordinated and sustained effort to support the social and economic reintegration of former combatants, which includes the provision of comprehensive and inclusive support services, the promotion of community acceptance and support, and the addressing of underlying structural issues of poverty, inequality, and marginalization.

In summary, the study provides important insights into the challenges and opportunities for the successful reintegration of former MILF combatant returnees in Basilan province. The findings have important implications for policymakers and practitioners working in conflict-affected regions, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive, participatory, and sustainable approach to support the social and economic reintegration of former combatants.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the struggles and triumphs of former MILF combatant returnees in Basilan province, highlighting the challenges they face in reintegrating into civilian life and the critical role of community acceptance, participation, and support in facilitating their successful reintegration. The findings emphasize the need for a comprehensive, participatory, and sustainable approach to support the social and economic reintegration of former combatants, which includes the provision of inclusive support services, the addressing of underlying structural issues of poverty and marginalization, and the promotion of community acceptance and support. The study also underscores the importance of involving former combatants in the design and implementation of reintegration programs to ensure that their needs and perspectives are adequately addressed. Moreover, the findings highlight the complex and varied role of gender in the reintegration process, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive approaches to support the successful reintegration of both male and female combatants.

Overall, the study provides important insights into the challenges and opportunities for the successful reintegration of former combatants in conflict-affected regions, emphasizing the need for a coordinated and sustained effort from all stakeholders to address the underlying causes of conflict and support the social and economic reintegration of former combatants. The findings have significant implications for policymakers and practitioners working in conflict-affected regions, highlighting the need for a holistic and participatory approach to support the successful reintegration of former combatants into civilian life.

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