

Journey of Reintegration: Stories of Bangsamoro Decommissioned Combatants

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ABSTRACT :Along with the journey of the Bangsamoro to long-lasting peace, this study aimed to explore the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights learned by the decommissioned MILF combatants in their journey to community reintegration. This study utilized the qualitative method using phenomenology, particularly hermeneutic phenomenology, as a research design to describe the journey of the participants in their community reintegration. There were nine participants chosen using a purposive sampling technique from three of the major camps of MILF that participated in the study. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the answers of the participants. *Importance of safety and livelihood, had various duties as part of the MILF, a semblance of normalcy, rampant fighting and peace agreement violations, a potpourri of positive and negative emotions, life has changed much for the better, community and family support is important and none or minimal stigma and discriminations* are the experiences of the participants in community reintegration. The coping mechanisms of the participants in reintegration are *financial assistance from the government, provisions of training and livelihood stocks, strength emanated from belief in Islam, assistance from the MILF top officials, community support was not lacking and the family provided moral support*. Further, the insights shared by the participants are *no more fear, being decommissioned helps our livelihood, there are still unfulfilled promises, respect, acceptance, and willingness of the community, cooperate with the government, do not give up one's ideals, and do join the next batch of decommissioning*. Thus, reintegration is never easy. Social, financial, emotional, and psychological support is crucial to the success of reintegration.

KEYWORDS: *social development, community reintegration, hermeneuticphenomenology, decommissioned combatants, Philippines*

I. INTRODUCTION

When an armed conflict ends, one of the most pressing issues in the peace process is how to separate combatants from their armed mobilizers and reintegrate them into their communities. Actors in armed conflicts frequently use political violence narratives to rationalize the destructive functions of a conflict as a tool for bringing about social and political transformation. As a result, ex-combatants reintegration after an armed conflict becomes a complex process aimed at transforming violent narratives into peaceful narratives and transforming the war's destructive function into constructive social and political change (Subedi, 2018).

Reintegration is an integral aspect of the normalization process, which requires deactivated MILF warriors to begin a civilian life and reintegrate into society. The reintegration process is fraught with difficulties, such as deactivated combatants being assaulted by their victims or harassed by the authorities. The method may cause issues in terms of financial stability, as they will be required to pay taxes and find work to live a stable life (Privey, 2019).

There are two types of barriers to reintegration: those that are personal and those that are social. For starters, some people cannot be rehabilitated and, as a result, are not excellent candidates for reintegration due to their high risk of re-engaging in violence. Individuals who are stubborn and cannot be reformed should be distinguished from those who can still be improved and are likely to cooperate after

According to Moro leaders, the problem in the Bangsamoro region is political, not economic. On the other hand, politics and economics are inextricably linked—one is peel, and the other is a seed. In a nutshell, the political system emerges from the womb of the economic system. The world's dilemma began with the concept of production and consumption. It all started with the allocation of production, which resulted in the emergence of

justice and injustice. Because of differing perspectives on how wealth is produced and distributed, capitalism and socialism arose. Capitalism believes that the government should not own wealth, so private ownership exists. Indeed, healthy competition would be beneficial to the economy. Socialism, on the other hand, is the polar opposite. The government should own wealth, and private ownership should be avoided (Damao, 2021).

The threat of ex-combatants is frequently emphasized in DDR: 'Demobilization attempts worldwide have proven that sustainable job schemes must be developed or ex-combatants may turn to armed banditry' (Oxfam, 2005, p.14). Policies to fight the reality or possibility of increased crime have occasionally jeopardized DDR's goals. As a result, in Guatemala, the anticipated end to conscription in the peace deal did not materialize due to the choice to maintain a substantial military force ostensibly to battle crime (Oliver, 2000).

However, the problem in the reintegration process is that most people would think it is only because of the benefit and cash assistance that the former combatants have reintegrated. But looking at the much bigger picture, reintegration encompasses not only financial but more of the social, political, and economic factors that disrupted and complicated their lives in a post-conflict situation (McMullin, 2013). Despite being perpetrators of frequently heinous acts of violence, ex-combatants can also be seen as victims. Many have been recruited into regular armies, compelled to join irregular groups, or inspired to take up arms by the repression they have witnessed in their families and communities. Child soldiers are undeniably victims, having been kidnapped and forced to fight. Demobilization and reintegration are critical elements of post-conflict policies in Liberia (Berdal, 1996) and Colombia (Koth, 2005).

In addition, from the standpoint of lay actors, participation struggles are an important aspect of citizenship processes. Ex-combatants from various non-state groups, general victims of the conflict, members of the larger civilian population, and official authorities, among others, are all implicated in the politics of participation in the case of ex-combatant reintegration. Ex-combatants may face discrimination, distrust, stigma, and rejection due to stigmatizing social representations. However, this can also lead to resistance and efforts to create new positive representations and identities for ex-combatants (Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Many ex-combatants common experience of discrimination may lead them to see discrimination as a constraint inherent in their social realities, encouraging resistance behaviors such as distancing themselves or concealing their stigmatized identities. Indeed, by discriminating between two antagonistic social categories in Colombian society – victims and perpetrators – the DDR rhetoric plays a role in shaping how the community bestows or hampers recognition towards ex-combatants', which implies that it is a sort of ultimate othering (McMullin, 2013).

Further, the Bangsamoro has been fighting a long and drawn-out war to taste and relish sweet-smelling justice, believing they have been victims of injustice since colonization began. To recapture and restore pre-colonial independence, the Bangsamoro revolution was started. The Jabidah Massacre fueled the movement even more. The terrible predicament created by the 1935 Colonization Act was genuinely heartbreaking. The war of attrition that consumed Mindanao began with what government administrators saw as a solution to the HUK problem: peasants' thirst for land in central Luzon. The government's answer to the Luzon crisis exacerbated the problem in Mindanao. That issue persisted for decades (Gloria, 2014).

However, signing an agreement does not mark the conclusion of the peace process. It will take years of continual implementation, legislative tinkering, social service and transitional justice delivery, and expectation management (Abuza&Lischin, 2020). With the present Bangsamoro Organic Law in place, the decommissioned fighters now expect the current Bangsamoro Government administration to maintain a long-term peace that benefits them and the communities in which they live. The lack of narrative evidence from the decommissioned combatants on the success or failure of the reintegration has also contributed to the gap in this study.

Indeed, while a large portion of the peace negotiation and conflict resolution literature focuses on the content and process of negotiations between two or more parties, less attention is generally given to the narratives of the rebel returnees. Thus, this study will explore the healing journey of the Bangsamoro Decommissioned Combatants as former members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) towards achieving long-lasting peace through community reintegration.

This qualitative research aimed to produce a concise, brief document exploring and describing the journey of healing of the selected former Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatants to achieve the answered prayer of long-lasting peace in the Bangsamoro Region.

In this study, I wanted to explore the firsthand experiences of decommissioned combatants on the triumph of achieving peace by magnifying the lens of thought, points of view, insights, and feelings. This study also explored their struggles and challenges before, during, and after signing the Bangsamoro Organic Law as a mechanism for the peace process.

Furthermore, this study will also describe the ex-combatants' coping mechanisms in their community reintegration as civilians and their lessons learned. This will create awareness among Muslims and non-Muslims to better understand the longest fight of these decommissioned combatants. More importantly, this will ignite the interest of the Bangsamoro Government of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) to include in the findings of the study in the participatory process and moral governance as the main goal of the government.

This study looks at Durkheim's (1892) social integration theory, which proposes a scenario in which minority groups come together or are assimilated into mainstream society. In this situation, the decommissioned Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatants reintegrate into society as responsible citizens. Social integration is a gradual process of agreeing on a shared system of meaning, language, culture, and other factors (Levitas, 2017). This theory applies the concept of cooperation to a group in which members must depend more on one another. Further, if the group's members share strong links of attraction, social integration will prevail. People who want to integrate into a group are under pressure to convince the other members that they would make desirable associates, but the rivalry for popularity that results breeds defensive strategies that prevent social integration. Social distinction results from the process by which a member who can deliver valuable services to others drives them to give up their protective tendencies and express their attraction to him. Instead, someone who comes out as approachable removes the need for others to be defensive, allowing people to express their interest in them (Blau, 1960).

In addition, this study is anchored on the social representation theory (Moscovici, 1894), which posits that representations are not "individually produced replicas of perceptual data" but are viewed as social creations and are, therefore, seen as part of social reality (Billig, 1993, p. 43). In this concept, these MILF ex-combatants are not represented by themselves but by their leaders or commanders. In addition, social representation theory examines how people collaborate to create representations of various objects in various social contexts. These social representations influence the attitudes and behaviors of both individuals and communities (Andersén, 2014).

Another theory to help us better this study, social system theory, emphasizes the system which functions as a whole under the interdependence of its part (Buckley, 1968). It also defines a system as the dynamic interrelatedness of the components. In this context, the system of the interrelatedness of the decommissioned combatants and the community where they are living now.

To further understand social integration, the United Nations for Social Summit's general assembly explores alternative approaches to social integration. The result of the summit postulates that social integration can be seen in three different ways. First, it is an inclusionary goal that aspires to give equal opportunities and rights to all individuals. Second, it gives a negative connotation which forces people to the unwanted imposition of uniformity. Last, it implies an established pattern of human relations within a society (Alcantara, 1994).

In addition, empirical studies have variously identified social reintegration with acceptance of ex-combatants by their families and neighbors (Porto et al., 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2007) as an outcome of successful transitional justice measures and reconciliation (Annan & Cutter, 2009), or related to economic and political reintegration (Ozerdem, 2012).

After the peace accord was signed, the decommissioning process commenced involving many stakeholders to make this process successful and fruitful. This process is one of the most complex and hardest parts of normalization and poses many challenges for the decommissioned MILF combatants. Thus, the researchers presume that the social integration theory supports this study as it elaborates and elucidates the reintegration of a group into society.

This study was limited to the narratives on the journey towards reintegration of the selected Bangsamoro decommissioned combatants from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front camps in Maguindanao and North Cotabato regardless of their ethnic background, place of origin, and age. The participants must, however, have served as commanders of the MILF Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF).

In addition to the criteria mentioned above, only those who took part in the decommissioned process of the MILF combatants, regardless of the phase of the International Decommissioning Body (IDB), were included in this study. Those who are not yet decommissioned were not part of this study.

Finally, this research explores the Bangsamoro decommissioned combatants' journey toward personal reintegration into the community. Specifically, this answers the following research questions:

1. What were the experiences of Bangsamoro Decommissioned Combatants in their journey toward personal reintegration into the community?
2. How did Bangsamoro decommissioned combatants cope with the challenges of reintegration into the community at large?
3. What insights can the participants share with fellow decommissioned combatants on community reintegration?

II. METHOD

This study used hermeneutic phenomenology to describe the experiences of the participants in their journey to community reintegration. The participants of this study were the nine MILF decommissioned combatants who have undergone decommissioning process under the Normalization and Decommissioning Section of the Office of the Presidential Adviser for Peace Process (OPAPP) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). This research used a self-constructed interview guide questionnaire which was validated by internal and external experts to gather information and data from the target participants.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants of this research represented the three major camps of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (M.I.L.F.), Camp Abubakar, Camp Darapanan, and Camp Rajamuda, Maguindanao, Philippines.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Name	Age	Year joined the MILF	Year decommissioned	Address	Camp assignment
Hamzah	53	1989	2021	Parang, Maguindanao	Abubakar
Mohammad	56	1989	2015	Parang, Maguindanao	Abubakar
Kamid	53	1985	2015	Parang, Maguindanao	Abubakar
Zacaria	67	1971	2015	Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao	Darapanan
Alhasan	42	1993	2019	Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao	Darapanan
Hafiq	59	1978	2019	Sultan Mastura, Maguindanao	Darapanan
Abdullah	41	1997	2019	Pigcawayan, North Cotabato	Rajamuda
Guiapar	47	1991	2021	Pagalungan, Maguindanao	Rajamuda
Zainab	70	1972	2019	Pikit, North Cotabato	Rajamuda

Hamzah started his journey as MILF combatant in 1989 and was assigned at Camp Abubakar. He lives in Parang, Maguindanao. During his time as a combatant of MILF, he was part of the political committee. He joined the decommissioning in 2021 and received a hundred thousand pesos from the government. He was very participative in the interview. Currently, he is a *payong-payong* driver.

Mohammad joined the MILF in 1989 as part of the political committee, where he is a Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Force (BIAF) and was assigned at Camp Abubakar. He was decommissioned in 2015 as part of the ceremonial decommissioning batch which he received cash assistance, health assistance, and training on driving from TESDA and received an NCII. He was also very participative in the interview.

Kamid was a combatant of MILF for 30 years and was assigned at Camp Abubakar. He was decommissioned in 2015 and received cash assistance, health assistance, and training on baking from TESDA where he received an NCII. Currently, he enjoys being a civilian.

Zacaria has been with MILF as a combatant since 1971. For 44 years, he fought against the government. He was part of the military committee of the MILF. In 2015, he was decommissioned and received a hundred thousand pesos and carpentry training from TESDA with tools and allowances. He now lives peacefully with his grandsons and granddaughters.

Alhasan was assigned at Camp Darapanan for more than 20 years when he was a combatant of the MILF. He was also part of the political committee of the group. In 2019, he joined the decommissioning and received a hundred thousand pesos and carpentry training from TESDA.

Hafiq was also assigned at Camp Darapanan for more than 30 years during his time as a combatant of MILF. He joined the decommissioning in 2019, where he received a hundred thousand pesos. Presently, he is a farmer and a *habal-habal* driver.

Abdullah became an MILF combatant in 1997, particularly as one of the front brigade national guard. He was assigned to Camp Rajamudah. In 2019, he decided to be part of the decommissioning, where he received 100 thousand pesos. At present, he is enjoying himself as a farmer.

Guiapar joined the MILF at the age of 16 years old. For 30 years, he dedicated his life to what the MILF fights for. In 2021, he joined the decommissioning and received a hundred thousand pesos. Currently, he is a farmer.

Lastly, Zainab was part of the MILF combatants from 1972 to 2019 as part of the front brigade national guard. In 2019, he joined the decommissioning, receiving a hundred thousand pesos. Presently, he is a farmer also.

Table 2

Experiences of the MILF Decommissioned Combatants in their Journey into Community Reintegration

Major Themes	Thematic Statements
Importance of safety and livelihood	We had to use different names.
	We disguised under different names.
	My real name was hidden when I joined M.I.L.F.
	Upon being decommissioned, I could use my real name.
	The government asked us what we needed, and they would provide it if we no longer used any guns.
	Unfortunately, all of those are still proposals.
	Until now, they have not given any other than 100 thousand pesos.
Had various duties as part of the M.I.L.F.	We trained in the camps.
	I became the provincial treasurer.
	I became a member for 25 years.
	I was an inner guard of the chair of the M.I.L.F.
	I was part of the national front guard (NGF) for three years.
Semblance of Normalcy	I was a farmer.
	I was still single when I joined the M.I.L.F.
	I was earning a little of something before for our needs.
	I was a <i>payong-payong</i> driver and a farmer.
	I was a farmer. I was also an Imam.
	I do my job as M.I.L.F., but I always think of my family
Rampant Fighting and Peace Agreement Violations	Before the all-out war of Pres. Erap, the previous agreements were not followed.
	We fought hard to defend our place since Pres. Erap said to kill all Muslims.
	Before there were FAB, CAB, the BBL, and the BOL, however, the government still breaks peace agreements.
	During the time of Marcos in martial law, many of us died.
	We were at war always because the government did not follow the previous peace agreements.
	During Pres. Gloria Macapagal's time, we were praying when the marines fired an airstrike and bombed the mosque.
A Potpourri of Positive and Negative	Having the Bangsamoro Organic Law is better.

Emotions	There is no need for disguise.
	At first, there were still violations because the government is not following the agreements.
	We are no longer afraid of marines.
	It is better now compared to our previous life.
	We were scared because they might shoot us when we crossed paths at checkpoints
	Violations are discussed in the panel then another agreement is made.
	There are no more evacuations.
	We do not have any M.I.L.F. military operations.
	Now that we have the Bangsamoro Organic Law, it has a good effect and result.
	The Bangsamoro Organic Law brought us goodness and peace.
	There were members of the M.I.L.F. who were not interested, scared, or hesitant to be decommissioned.
	We now have the trust and confidence of the people who govern us.
Life Has Changed Much For The Better	The decommissioning is not what turned out to be good, it was the peace agreement between the M.I.L.F. and the Philippine government.
	We no longer touch our guns since it was surrendered to authorities like IDB and BARMM.
	I can do my activities without overthinking anymore.
	Before, we always feared that our farm animals would be taken, but we can freely leave them in a safe space with the current situation.
	I have no longer experienced battles or wars since the Bangsamoro Organic Law was signed and implemented.
	Children are now peacefully studying without fear.
	We no longer have duties in the camp.
Family Support is Important	My family supported me in my decision to be decommissioned
	I did not have any problems because the whole community supported me.
	There is huge support from the family and the community.
	My wife is my first supporter. She was the one who told me to join the decommissioning.
	My whole family was supportive of me being part of the decommissioning.
None or Minimal Stigma and Discrimination	I explained to my family the purpose of decommissioning.
	I carefully studied the decommissioning process.
	Decommissioning is different from surrendering.
	Stigma was not huge.
	I did not hear any negative comments from the community.
My wife supported me if it is jihad.	

Experiences of the MILF Decommissioned Combatants in their Journey into Community Reintegration

Importance of safety and livelihood. This theme emerged from the challenges experienced by the participants as they faced their realities as part of the M.I.L.F. The participants mentioned that they had to use other names to hide and protect their identities. Their reason was also to look for a livelihood to fulfill their everyday needs. Rural livelihoods are typically agriculture and fisheries based, where most households live out of the barangay's natural resources (Uy et al., 2011). Hamzah mentioned that he had to hide his real name because they feared the government. He said: *Nagtatago kami saibangpangalan* (We had to use different names.) Mohammad also shared the same. He mentioned: *Ibayungpangalannagingamit ko para hindimalamanna MILF ako.* (I used a different name to hide my identity as MILF.)

Had various duties as part of the M.I.L.F. This theme was created on the question of the decommissioned combatant's life before the peace agreements. Before being decommissioned, the life of participants before the peace agreements played multiple roles, obligations, and responsibilities as part and members of the Moro

Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). They were trained in camps, guarded the chair of the armed group, and became part of the committees created. Hafiq shared that he became a part of the national front guard and the provincial treasurer. He said: *Saki nanyaumbal ako a national guard front sat'luragon ago sumyakawmasu reshuffling nainumbal ako iran a provincial treasurer.* (I was part of the national guard front for three years, and when reshuffling happened, I became the provincial treasurer.) Abdullah also shared that: *Kanu nona a kinamong ko na single ako pen lubadatu. Inner guard ako na chairman na MILF santuba a timpu.* (I was still single at that time when I became an inner guard of the chairman of the MILF.)

Semblance of normalcy. Even before the war and the peace agreements, the participants' life had a semblance of normalcy. This theme was formed in the life of the participants before the creation of the peace agreements between the MILF and the GPH. Some of them were farmers and *payong-payong* drivers who were earning little for the needs of their families. The participants also shared that some of them became their community's Muslim leaders. Guiapar shared that he drove a motorcycle to earn a little. He said: *Bamantyali ako bun datu. Min-drive drive ako bun sapayong-payong.* (I was a payong-payong driver.) Alhasan also shared that he was a farmer when he joined the MILF. He said: *Farmer ako ko myawna. Saki bun su Imam iran ago parte ako saMorsid.* (I was a farmer, Imam, and a part of the Morsid (Islamic Committee).)

Rampant fighting and peace agreement violations. Part of the responsibilities of the members of the MILF was to guard and protect what they have fought for since the creation of the organization. Based on the participants' answers, they experienced rampant fighting because the government violated the peace agreements. The participants also shared that many brothers and sisters in the organization lost their lives while in the battle. While they acknowledged that they were scared, the participants only fought because they were aggrieved. The struggle between the Moro is a complicated, very complex matter that has its roots in centuries of significant societal fragmentation and splits. The struggle with the Moro people began in 1972, a pivotal year that saw the establishment of martial law by President Ferdinand Marcos and the beginning of the bloodiest period of warfare between different religious groups. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) were initially the parties involved in the conflict. The MNLF was the first Moro rebel organization to fight for independence in the historically Muslim region of Mindanao (Hernandez, 2017). In addition, the Moros, including the members of the MILF and the military, have been engaged in an armed war for more than four decades. This conflict is being resolved as part of the GPH-MILF peace process. It started in 1996 and achieved a significant turning point with the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro signing in 2014. The accord calls for the construction of a genuinely autonomous, democratic, and Islamic Bangsamoro, or the Land of the Moros, by the Philippine Congress. It is supplemented by several annexes that organize the formal peacebuilding phase of the peace process, which includes the decommissioning and rehabilitation of MILF combatants, socio-economic development programs, and a transitional justice process (Loesch, 2017). Abdullah shared that the government and MILF knew about the previous peace agreements, but the government kept violating this. He shared: *Gyera. Kasi yung mga dating peace agreements, hindi naman nasusunod. Hanggang umabotsa point nayung MILF, nagsabina ayawna ng agreement kasi nava-violate lang.* (There was a war because the peace agreements before were being violated. It is not implemented as it is until such time that MILF did not want to have the agreement.)

The Bangsamoro rebellion-related armed conflict never attained its intensity between 1972 and 1975, and by 1975 the sides had come to a military standstill. The Organization of Islamic Conference (now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), which was sympathetic to the Bangsamoro's plight as a Muslim minority in the Philippines, had given the MNLF its support by that point. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) designated Misuari and the MNLF as the only authorized representatives of the Bangsamoro and urged Marcos to end the war peacefully. On the other hand, Marcos was eager to foster positive relations with the OIC as he faced an impending oil crisis. Despite this, from 1976 to 2014, violence between government troops and the MNLF and the MILF repeatedly erupted despite several attempts at a peaceful resolution and, occasionally, precisely because of discontent with the peace process itself. The existence of warlords or strongman control, which has gone unchecked despite the creation of the then-created Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, has also resulted in several instances of local-level violence. The conflict has also continued due to the establishment of other armed groups in Mindanao, including foreign terrorist organizations. The ongoing instability on the ground has fueled prejudice against the Moros in the rest of the country, making it challenging to win over a more prominent public to peace efforts in Mindanao. The Bangsamoro insurrection is viewed as a regional issue, and Mindanao and its issues are come secondary to the country's core interests (Bayot, 2018). Zacaria also shared that the Comprehensive Agreement for the Bangsamoro and Framework Agreement was on the Bangsamoro before the Bangsamoro Organic Law, but the government broke its content. He said: *Dati, merong FAB, CAB bago ang BBL at BOL, peronabebreakrin ng gobyerno kaya nakikipaglaban pa rin*

kami. Nakikipagbakkaban pa rin kami.(Before the BBL and BOL, there were FAB and CAB. However, the government broke these, so we had to fight back.)

A potpourri of positive and negative emotions. The participants have a mixture of positive and negative thoughts, emotions, and feelings about the previous and current peace agreements. The participants strongly believed that the present peace agreement, the Bangsamoro Organic Law, is much better than the prior agreements because it gave autonomy to the Bangsamoro Government to lead the region. Decommissioning is only a part of the current peace agreement to stop the battle between the MILF and GPH. The participants also feel they are no longer scared of the government armed forces when encountering them because they have tremendous confidence in this agreement. They no longer need to disguise themselves when going out in public, and there are no more evacuations because of the battles. Mohammad shared that he is not scared of the government forces now. He said: *Di kami den kal'kansamgasundaroaya. Ku myawna ka bantangnasobra so girekamirekiran ka basipanimbak'n kami iransan. Imantona okay den, pakwkit kami den samapya.* (I (we) am not scared anymore of the government soldiers, unlike before when we passed them, we have that considerable fear of them because I think they might shoot us.) Zainab mentioned that he was happy with the new agreement and is now at peace and ease. He shared: *Pakaginawa ako den samapya ka da den sukadtitimbaka.* (I am now relieved and at peace.)

Life has changed much for the better. Now that the Bangsamoro Organic Law is in place, the participants' lives have changed much better. They no longer hold guns in battles and do personal activities without overthinking. This theme emerged from the question of what the life of the participants was now that there is a sustained peace agreement. Social reintegration has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental factor for sustainable peacebuilding because of its potential contribution to reweaving a conflict-torn fabric (Subedi & Jenkins, 2018). The combatants' reintegration follows demobilization, frequently the most challenging stage. Combatants who switch from combatant to non-combatant positions face difficulties rebuilding their livelihoods, finding employment, regaining trust, and re-establishing their families, networks, and relationships (KC, 2019). Hamzah shared that his children are now studying peacefully. He shared: *Imantonapakapangagisamapyasuwata ko. Di kami den mambutitimbaka.* (My children are now studying peacefully. We are no longer in the battle.) Kamid also shared his sentiments about a much better life now. He shared that it was not because of the decommissioning that turned out to be good but the peace agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government. He said: *K'nabasu decommissioning sumyakagkapy ka gyaba peace agreement aya, gyaya a Bangsamoro Organic Law. Naba kami den mambupegkap'tsamgatimbak ka inisurrenderami den sagyabakya-decommission amiaya.* (The Bangsamoro Organic Law is why we have a good agreement, not the decommissioning. We also no longer hold guns because we have surrendered them since decommissioned.) In addition, with previously known as the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), the Bangsamoro Organic Law (B.O.L.) describes the road to peace in Mindanao. The current desire is to end Muslim Mindanao's protracted strife. It has also been thought of as a means of redressing historical wrongs committed against the Bangsamoro people. BOL is now the newest long-term peace and development tool for Muslims in Mindanao (Tagoranao & Gamon, 2020).

Family support is essential. This theme emerged from the question of who supported them in terms of the decommissioning process. The support of the participants' families is what they need when they reintegrate into the community after decommissioning. Their wives and children had full support for them when they decided to be decommissioned. A study showed that the form of assistance offered by the community and family was voluntary and closely related to the established and closed familial relationships between the returning citizens and the members of their welcoming host community. The host community's direct assistance to the returnees was providing food, shelter, and animal assets such as cattle, sheep, and goats (Barasa & Waswa, 2015). Hamzah shared that he did not have a problem with his family when he joined decommissioning. He said: *Saki na da bun a myabproblema ko ka subantangyannasupamilya ko nasobrasobrasusupportairansa raki.* (I did not have any problems because my family greatly supported me.) In addition, Alhasan also shared that his wife encouraged him to join the decommissioning for the sake of Islam. He mentioned: *Subantangnasumis ko imidtaru raki a mamongsagyaba a decommissioning aya ka sakina di ko katawanaya. Supamilya ko nasupportadoiransugyaba a kyamong ko. Inexplain ko rekirangyayaba a decommissioning aya bun.* (My wife was my first supporter. She was the one who told me to join the decommissioning. My whole family greatly supported me.)

None or minimal stigma and discrimination. Based on the sharing of the participants, the discrimination they experienced in the community ranged from minimal to none. This is because the community they are from knows what the MILF has been fighting for all these years. This is true of a survey of twenty-four Bosa and Kennedy locals who produced interesting findings when asked how safe they felt in their communities; 57% of respondents said they felt very secure and a little safe, while only 40% said they felt a little unsafe and

extremely unsafe, which may suggest that people's levels of fear are slightly more evenly distributed than the figures above and findings revealed that few Bogota locals knew the identities of the demobilized ex-combatants place (Prieto, 2012). Kamid shared that his family and community greatly supported his decision. He shared: *Maslasutiwala ago supportapudsapamilya ago barangay ko.* (I fully received hugesupport from my family and community.) Mohammad also shared that he did not have any problem since the community also knew about the issue of the MILF and supported the new BARMM government. He said: *Da bun. Da bun a myabproblema ko sagyabakya-decomission raki kasi su community na mala susupportairansagyaba ago sabago a BARMM government.* (I had no problem since the community greatly supports the new BARMM government and me.)

Table 3: *Coping Mechanisms of MILF Decommissioned Combatants in Community Reintegration*

Major Themes	Thematic Statements	Problems and Challenges
Financial Assistance from the Government	I got 100 thousand pesos. That is the only thing I have received since I became decommissioned.	Economic and Financially Challenged
	They (the government) told us we would be given 1 million, but only 100 thousand pesos have been given so far.	
	There were cash incentives from the government worth 25,000 pesos.	
	According to Galvez, the 100 thousand that we received shall be used for recreational activities.	
Provisions of Training and Livelihood Stocks	The DSWD said some of the 100 thousand must be used as capital for the business to grow.	Government's support are insufficient
	What I did with it was I paid my financial debt, but I also used the money to start a business. I bought goats to sell.	
	I also received assistance in PhilHealth and T.E.S.D.A. training with a 180 pesos allowance per day for 45 days.	
	We were also given livelihood assistance like the provisions of carabao, goats, chickens, and ducks, but there was no training about that.	
	I received livelihood assistance, but those ducks were too small to start a livelihood.	
Strength Emanated from Belief in Islam	I became a much better person since I do not hold guns anymore.	Religious Coping Mechanisms
	I became more religious.	
	My faith became stronger than before.	
	Even before, when I have problems, I always pray and ask for guidance from the above.	
Assistance from the M.I.L.F. Top Officials	The M.I.L.F. also helped us adjust since they are why we are here now.	Command from higher MILF Officials
	There was moral support coming from the M.I.L.F. too.	
	In the case of M.I.L.F., if there are things that we notice or do not like, we can immediately tell them.	
Community Support was Not Lacking	In my community, many of them know the struggles of M.I.L.F, so we did not have a hard time going back.	Fear of Community Acceptance
	The community was with us and helped us.	
	Only a few in the community do not know what the MILF fights for.	
	I explained carefully to people that becoming decommissioned does not mean surrendering to the government.	
	There are only a few who are not Mujahidin.	
The family provided moral support	My family is my strength in life. They supported me.	Family will not accept and support the combatants
	My family was always with me.	
	My whole family supported me when I was decommissioned because they knew this was way better than holding guns.	

Coping Mechanisms of MILF Decommissioned Combatants in Community Reintegration

Financial Assistance from the Government. Under the Normalization Program of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, a socio-economic development program gives the decommissioned MILF the chance to reintegrate themselves socially and economically. When the participants were decommissioned, they received financial assistance from the government, but it was not in full. Accordingly, they were supposed to be given a million pesos, but the government only gave a hundred thousand pesos. This cash incentive they received was used in different ways. Some paid their debts, while others used it to start a small business. The challenges of reintegration and the policies, strategies, and guidelines required to ensure a smooth transition for returnees are well documented (Allen et al., 1994; Black & Koser, 1999; Maniraguha, 2001). In addition, the long delivery delays of support packages have frequently resulted in the transfer of enormous obligations to host communities with few resources (Webber, 2011). Kamid shared that he received 100,000 pesos in cash as part of their promise when they are decommissioned. He shared: *Su raki namyakakwa ako sa 100,000 thousand pesos.* (I got 100,000 thousand pesos.) Hamzah also shared: *Su raki emannamyakakuwa ko bun sa 100,000 thousand pesos. Gyutubuimyakwa ko sagyabam yadecommission kami.* (I received 100,000 pesos too. That is the only thing I got.) Cash-based programs are frequently criticized. The impoverished local economies in Cambodia were completely distorted by the ex-combatants' offers of four times the national income. There is evidence that money donated to male ex-combatants is frequently spent on alcohol, with little benefit to the women and dependents (Bertrand & Pauwels, 2000). Above all, there is little evidence to suggest a connection between receiving financial assistance and later finding employment (Knight & Ozerdem, 2004; Berdal, 1996). In the end, receiving cash does not result in either long-term development or reintegration (Lundin et al., 2000).

Provisions of Training and Livelihood Stocks. The participants received one hundred thousand pesos and training from TESDA, such as training in carpentry, livelihood, livestock raising, and the like. The training period lasted for 45-60 days. The government told them they would receive a daily allowance and tools during the training. However, the government did not give those to them. Reintegration is how former warriors achieve civilian status by obtaining stable jobs and incomes (UN, 2010). It is expected that the reintegration process will be made easier by providing vocational skills training, the development of jobs, help for entrepreneurs, psychological reorientation, and support from family members (Berdal, 1996). On the other hand, the research that is currently available reveals that reintegration initiatives frequently fail to offer long-term employment opportunities for former fighters (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). In a reintegration process of decommissioned MILF combatants, the participants are vulnerable and in the disadvantaged category and need economic, psychological, and social assistance to survive. In this regard, the participants are longing for support from the government that they should be provided with agricultural machinery and agricultural support in general. This is anticipated as the participants are farmers, which is the only job they know (Gear, 2002). Mohammad shared that, along with other ex-combatants, he received TESDA training and an allowance for 45 days. He said: *Myag-training kami sa T.E.S.D.A. Gyoto a training naadena allowance yan a 180 pesos sa myaka-45 days.* (I received TESDA training with an allowance of 180 pesos for 45 days.) In addition, Hafiq shared that he received skills training from TESDA and an allowance of 38 days. He said: *Ku myawg'namyaka-pangagi kami sa TESDA Skills training. Inenggyangkamisagamit a para sa carpentry. Su training na myaka-38 days ago binigyang kami sa allowance a 200 pesos umanggay.* (Before, we had skills training in TESDA. We were given tools for carpentry and an allowance of 200 pesos for 38 days.)

Strength emanated from the belief in Islam. These MILF decommissioned combatants were very religious even before they joined the MILF group. Now that they are decommissioned, they have become more religious and have strengthened their faith in Islam. Their belief in Islam stayed and even increased. Alhasan shared that one of his coping mechanisms was his prayers when he reintegrated into the community. He said: *Sukadsasambayang ko. Apya bun kumyawnaaaden a problema ko na di mawasukadsasambayang. Ku Allah ako pangnisatabang.* (I prayed. Even before, I prayed to Allah and ask for help and guidance.)

Assistance from the M.I.L.F. top officials. While it is true that the government has supported the decommissioned combatants, there is still assistance from the top officials of the MILF. This is to keep the organization as it is by not losing what they have fought for so many years. The participants also believed that the M.I.L.F. would not dismay them even if they were now part of the decommissioning. They know that they will be supporting them throughout their journey of decommissioning. Kamid shared that the M.I.L.F. still supports them when they ask for help. He shared: *Amayngkaaden a kailanganaminasu M.I.L.F. ip'g-assist sarekamimakarawt bus a puro a gobyernosupetataronami.* (If we have something to say and need, the M.I.L.F. helps us relay it to government officials.) Mohammad added that there is huge moral support from the MILF. He said: *Su moral support a MILF namasla.* (There is moral support coming from the MILF officials too.)

Community Support was not lacking. The participants cope with their situation with considerable help from the community. The community where they come from fully supported them in all the decisions they have

undertaken. There is minimal evidence to suggest that former fighters struggle to fit in with society (Annan & Patel 2009). Recent research, however, indicates that ex-combatants become accepted by their community and perform on par with other members (Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman, 2009; Blattman & Annan forthcoming; Boothby et al., 2006; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Muggah & Bennet, 2009; Williamson, 2006). But most of this research is limited to male. Zainab shared that their community knows what the M.I.L.F. fights for; therefore, they have supported them in their reintegration. He said: *Mas madakelsa area namisunakatuntaysanginiibaninidegna M.I.L.F. bale da kami gedkalegenisakinambalingannamisa area nami.* (Many people understand the purpose of the M.I.L.F., so it was not hard to return to the community.)

The family provided moral support. Family is the most critical aspect for the participants when they reintegrate into the community and become decommissioned. Thus, the immediate family members of the decommissioned combatants provided moral support when they were reintegrated into their community. Alhasan revealed that he lives calmly and peacefully with his family and is not thinking about anything else. He shared: *Kaped ko supamilya ko imanto. Kena kami den pagitongsaantunasan ka katawanaami a safe kami sayaimanto.* (I am with my family now. I do not think of anything because I believe I am at peace now.) Hafiq further revealed that his wife and kids supported him in getting decommissioned. He said: *Sukarumakoa go suwata ko nakaped ko sagyaba a kya-decommissioned sarekami baya. Maslasusupportairan.* (Throughout the decommissioning, my wife and children were there with me, and they were a source of support for me.)

Table 4: *Insights Learned and Shared in the Community Reintegration*

Major Themes	Thematic Statements
No more fear	I learned how to live a life for my family.
	I am no longer afraid.
	We are relieved by the current situation now.
	There is less fear in us.
Being decommissioned helps our livelihood	Our life is better now because of the help of the 100 thousand pesos.
	Those skills I learned, I now put into practice.
	The peace agreements and this decommissioning helped us a lot.
	The decommissioning ID is very useful in our transactions.
There are still unfulfilled promises	Their program to reintegrate us into the community is good, but we are still hoping and waiting for their promises
	I hope the government will give the remaining promises they told us before.
	We have been longing for the remaining things the government promised.
	If the government does not give the remaining promises, it will be hard for the next batch to trust them.
Respect, acceptance, and willingness of the community	I know everything will be fine because of this agreement wherever I go.
	This is undeniably beautiful.
	We are being respected as M.I.L.F. decommissioned combatants.
	The community became more open to us.
Cooperate with the government	This peace agreement gave us peace of mind.
	Use the decommissioning ID rightfully.
	Do not be abusive.
	Let us wait for the other opportunities from the government.
Do not give up one's ideals	Let us do our job as decommissioned combatants.
	Let us not ruin the government.
	Do not forget our Jihad Fi Sabilillah (for the sake of Allah)
	We are not surrendering. This is only a part of the agreement.
Do join the next batch of decommissioning	There should still be consultations with the M.I.L.F.
	We shall not forget what we have fought for a long time.
	Join the decommissioning because you will get a lot of benefits.
	You join the decommissioning because you support the decision of M.I.L.F.
	This is a sign of respecting the agreement in the Bangsamoro.
Becoming decommissioned does not mean surrendering to the government.	
This decommissioning is a good way to start the peace agreement.	

No more fear. Now that the Bangsamoro Organic Law is in place, the participants have no more fear of the government and its soldiers because they now trust them. As revealed by the participants, some have already

worked with the soldiers in some community services. Hamzah shared that he is no longer scared and has learned to look for a source of living to sustain his family's needs. He shared: *Penggalbek ako den salyukagya di ako den kalekan.* (I am now working because I am no longer afraid.) Mohammad also revealed that because of the current peace agreement, he feels secure, not only as decommissioned combatant but also as a normal Bangsamoro. He also shared that he has a job now. He said: *Gyaba peace agreement ayaimantonakaramdamanamii safe kami. Da makagkaid sarekami. Myakatun ako sagalbekan a da den a pagitungen ko makapantagsakadtitimbaka.* (I feel safe with the current peace agreement because I know nothing will happen to me. I also work now and do not think of anything else regarding the battle.)

Being decommissioned helps our livelihood. As stated, when the participants received the one hundred thousand pesos after being decommissioned and now that they have already reintegrated into the community, it helped their livelihoods significantly. The participants are now free to look for a livelihood to support their daily needs. The Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (SIDDR) and the United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards (UNIDDRS) have recognized economic reintegration's emphasis on government employment and benefits provision as centered approaches and the best practice in reintegration program design. Participatory methods are believed to open opportunities for social and political reintegration. Such strategies encourage former fighters' active participation in civic and communal life and their involvement in identity-transformation processes that counteract prevalent misconceptions about war and violence and establish new social and cultural identities and interests (Buxton, 2008). Guiapar revealed that they now have a better life through the help of the financial assistance they received. He said: *Mas migkapyamambusukapembuhaybuhaynamisagunasamasla I nakatabangna 100 thousand antu ka nakanggaysalekamisagalbekan.* (Our life is better now because the 100 thousand given to us gave us a source of living.) Hafiq also shared that he is now practicing the skills he had learned from the training they attended when he was decommissioned as his source of living. He said: *Sumga skills a kyatutunang ko nagagamit ko den imantongamga personal. Mataw ako den mumbalsawalayimanto.* (I now put into practice those skills I learned in carpentry.)

There are still unfulfilled promises. The participants revealed that the government has unfulfilled promises since the start of the decommissioning process. As per information from the participants, the government told them they would get a million pesos, but the government only gave one hundred thousand pesos. Apart from this, the government also promised training, seminars, housing, and more. Countries such as the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Colombia have shifted the focus away from paternalistic reintegration programs and towards more participatory approaches. These participatory approaches guarantee the involvement of ex-combatants, members of the receptive communities, local and national partners, and other stakeholders in dialogue and decision-making processes (Buxton, 2008; Kaplan & Nussio, 2013). By doing so, they bring attention to the significance of the 'social' in reintegration, which is the recognition of the processes of socialization and re-socialization experienced by ex-combatants and other members of communities (Anaya, 2007), which are how political reintegration can be made possible. Zacaria hopes to receive the remaining promises of the government. He said: *Ya ko kapang'ni-ng'ninamakwasu da ami pen makwa a pidtaruiransarekami.* (I hope the government will give the remaining promises they told us before.) Kamid also hopes the government will give the remaining promises before the next batch of decommissioning. He said: *Bago susunod a batch sa decommissioning namakanggay a gobyernosulangon a pidtaroiransarekami.* (Before the next batch, we hope the government gives the remaining unfulfilled promises they have told us.)

Cooperate with the government. Having been decommissioned, the participants have worked with the government to implement the decommissioning. With their experiences so far, the participants shared that combatants who have been decommissioned need to cooperate fully with the government for more peaceful community reintegration. Hamzah shared to follow what is written in the peace agreement to benefit everyone. He stated: *Tumanentan osunmyakasuratsa peace agreement aya ka gyabaimakatabang a benarsarektano.* (Let us follow what is written in the agreement because this will help us all.) In addition, Kamid said to use their decommissioning identification card correctly and not be abusive. He said: *Gamitanniyosu I.D. niyosamapya ago di kanupagabuso.* (Use the ID in the right manner. Do not be abusive.)

Do not give up one's ideals. The participants believed that decommissioning is not about surrendering. It is about fulfilling the promises and following the instructions of the top officials of the M.I.L.F. However, they also believed that while they were now decommissioned, they conveyed to others not to give up their ideals. Jihad is what the group is all about. Hafiq reminded their fellow ex-combatants that they should not forget their fighting purpose even if they have decommissioned. He stated: *Apyaantupeninggay a gobyernosarektanona di*

tanulipatansu Jihad fi sabilillah ka gyabasuinipaglabantanukumyawnamyawna pen. (Even if the government has given many things to us, do not forget our Jihad.)

Do join the next batch of decommissioning. The participants viewed decommissioning as a perfect platform for everyone to be in peace. Thus, they asked those M.I.L.F. members who are not yet decommissioned to join the next batch of decommissioning. The participants hold great hopes for their fellow MILF fighters to participate in the decommissioning procedure. The participants expressed their eagerness for the decommissioning of their fellow soldiers. However, they also mentioned a few things the implementing agency will consider. Since these former MILF fighters have been with their comrades for years, it seems that what they desire for themselves is also what they desire for their comrades in the fight for the right to self-determination (McMullin, 2013). Abdullah saw the effect of being decommissioned and asked the other MILF members who were not yet decommissioned to join the next batch. He said: *Nelay nu bun mambuikapyannaniyaba a decommissioning any ana sekanu den indecide o mamong kano o di.* (You already saw the goodness of the decommissioning, so it is up to you to join.) Hamzah also encouraged the MILF members to join the decommissioning to enjoy the benefit. He said: *Among kano sanyaba decommissioning ka mapyai benefit nin.* (Do join this decommissioning because you will enjoy its benefits.) In addition, Mohammad reminded his fellow combatants that joining the decommissioning is not about surrendering but supporting and respecting the decision of the MILF. He shared: *Among kano sagyaba a decommissioning ka kenabagyakya among sayanamidsurrender ka kya among sayanapedsupportahantanusuMILF.* (Join this decommissioning not because you think you surrendered but because you support the MILF.)

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND IMPLICATIONS

Implication for Practice

The reintegration of the decommissioned MILF combatants into the community will never be easy. They are adjusting toward the people and the whole system inside the society governed by the Philippine government. It is crucial to comprehend the ex-combatants' own perspectives of what facilitates and hinders their everyday practice of citizenship and, consequently, their overall experience of reintegrating into society, if the social reintegration of ex-combatants is fostered by their capacity to participate in community life and is enhanced by recognition from other sectors of society. The community plays a significant role in helping ex-combatants achieve sustainable reintegration in all aspects, even if many players, including the government, family, social workers, case workers, and others, are involved in the process. For social workers handling these cases, they must always be knowledgeable about the dynamics and relationships of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's decommissioned combatants and their families. Cultural differences and tribal affiliations of the decommissioned combatants must be emphasized when working with them. This is to ensure that they are all well-acknowledged. Although the participants identified supporting mechanisms for their process of reintegration, they also pointed out some significant obstacles, such as becoming the target of discrimination and rejection. To make self-employment more secure and sustainable, economic development interventions should strengthen and assist ex-combatants, their families, and their communities in maintaining their current jobs and creating new ones. This will be supported by highly relevant skill training and business support. While these decommissioned combatants are reintegrating, social workers must also work with their families, wives, children, and community. This is very crucial to support their reintegration. Any support that they can give to them will be counted.

Implication for Future Research

Future research may be considered using this study as a basis. Future problems never mentioned in this study will be emphasized and remedied. More related questions and queries will be added to gain more data for analysis and further studies, including the wife and children of participants. The next research may focus on the female MILF Combatants on their community reintegration and how the community accepted them, and how they are currently living. There are also certainties for other research opportunities regarding the research participants' scope since this study is limited to decommissioned combatants in selected MILF Camps. Thus, the next research may include other members of armed groups like MNLF, NPA, and the like. In addition, other research can explore the current status of the ex-combatants after they have been reintegrated since 2019 through a descriptive quantitative survey to determine the level of how well they have adopted and adjusted after being reintegrated.

Concluding Remarks

The recently established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the new Bangsamoro regional government have impacted many lives. The decommissioned MILF combatants are not exempt from this situation. The government and the MILF are ending their conflict due to the present peace

accord, and the combatants must lay down their weapons and decommission. However, adjusting to life after decommissioning is significantly more difficult than adjusting to life while serving. Numerous problems, difficulties, and challenges existed for the decommissioned MILF fighters before and after the peace agreement was signed. To date, the government needs to step in and assist these ex-combatants and Bangsamoro Filipinos in reintegrating into society. Making everyone's lives better is what development means. Although the decommissioned combatants believe in improving their living conditions in their reintegration into the community through the financial and training assistance given by the government, they still need assistance in all forms to guide them in reintegration into the community.

With the government's unfulfilled promises, the current government must give the remaining things they have told the MILF combatants before the next batch of decommissioning. This way, the next batch of combatants will fully trust the government in its sincere way of achieving the long overdue peace. In addition to current interventions of the government in the combatants' lives, they may also consider the family and the whole community. The ex-combatants' immediate family members and community are a very good avenue to help ease the community reintegration as they will be the ones who fully understand them. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao government, particularly the Bangsamoro Transition Authority and the different ministries, must create sustainable programs and social services which will have an impact on the social development of these ex-combatants. As a result, most program indicators used by the international community to evaluate the reintegration of former combatants have to do with quantifiable economic changes. Additionally, the goal of generating quantitative indicators would not be appropriate for evaluating the results and outputs that would be anticipated from social reintegration. Without qualitative indications, it would be challenging to provide an accurate and thorough assessment of the effects of social reintegration. This article examined sophisticated perspectives of the social reintegration of ex-combatants. In the end, the successful reintegration of former combatants requires an environment of stable and predictable peace. As a result, the international community must continue its efforts to stabilize and normalize the situation in the region.

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