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TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMMES AND THE LIVELIHOOD OUTCOMES: A CASE OF MILITARY VETERANS IN UGANDA: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Military veterans leave service with discipline, organization and technical skills, yet many find it hard to turn those assets into stable livelihoods. In Uganda, the national programmes designed to move households from subsistence into the money economy rarely identify veterans as a distinct group, and little is known about how far veterans benefit from them. This article reviews the literature that bears on that question. It brings together research on the reintegration of former fighters, veteran transition and employment, cooperatives and savings groups, and the main Ugandan transformation programmes, namely Operation Wealth Creation, the Parish Development Model and the Youth Livelihood Programme. Using the sustainable livelihoods framework and the idea of transition stress as lenses, the review finds that livelihood gains are most likely when capital, land and skills are delivered together, when institutions are coordinated and credible, and when social ties are strong. It also finds that evidence on Ugandan veterans is thin, mostly descriptive and rarely multi-regional, and that self-reported integration can overstate how far communities accept former fighters. The review closes by deriving five hypotheses on programme inclusion, institutional coordination, access to productive resources and social support, which a companion mixed-methods study will test, and by setting out implications for policy and research.

KEYWORDS: Military veterans; Livelihoods; Socio-economic transformation; Reintegration; Cooperatives; Operation Wealth Creation; Parish Development Model; Uganda.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and problem

Armies produce people with skills that economies value: discipline, teamwork, logistics and leadership under pressure. When service ends, however, those skills do not automatically turn into income. Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) argue that most veterans go through a period of considerable stress as they leave service, driven by the loss of military identity, the search for work and the demands of unfamiliar civilian roles, and that this transition stress is more common than post-traumatic stress disorder. Research on entrepreneurship among American veterans' points to the same difficulty from another side, and highlights the importance of education and training during the transition period (Tihic et al., 2024). Uganda has a large and varied veteran community. Official estimates cited in earlier reviews put the number of veterans at more than 165,000, and the number of veteran savings and credit cooperative organizations (SACCOs) at about 310. At the same time, national policy is organized around moving households from subsistence into the money economy. The Third National Development Plan (NDPIII) pursues this through agro-industrialization, community mobilization and mindset change, and governance and security programmes (National Planning Authority [NPA], 2020). Programmes such as Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), the Parish Development Model (PDM) and the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) are the main vehicles. Veterans take part in these programmes, but, as far as the available literature shows, they are seldom named as a distinct group, and their outcomes are seldom reported separately.

This review asks three questions. First, what does research say about the livelihood needs and reintegration of former fighters and veterans? Second, what is known about the design and results of the main Ugandan transformation programmes and of cooperatives? Third, which factors link programme inclusion to livelihood outcomes among veterans, and where are the gaps in the evidence? The answers are used to build a conceptual framework and five hypotheses for a companion mixed-methods study.

1.2 Approach to the review

This is a narrative review. Sources were located through targeted searches of journal websites, institutional repositories and government publications in October 2026, using terms

that combined veterans, ex-combatants, reintegration, livelihoods, cooperatives, Operation Wealth Creation, the Parish Development Model and Uganda. Priority went to peer-reviewed work from 2015 to 2026. Government plans, monitoring briefs and evaluation reports were included where they were the main source of information on a programme. The review is not exhaustive and applies no formal quality appraisal, so its conclusions should be read as a reasoned synthesis and not as a systematic assessment of all available evidence.

2. Key Concepts

2.1 Veteran

The term a veteran differs from one country to the next. Section 82 of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces Act, 2005 covers persons honourably discharged or retired from military service and extends to members of the armed wings of liberation organizations that took part in the struggle against dictatorial regimes from 1971 to 26 January 1986 (Republic of Uganda, 2005). In practice, widows and orphans are often treated as part of the veteran community because household welfare depends on them as well. Former members of other security institutions and of auxiliary groups are not clearly covered by this definition, which makes them hard to see in programme records. This review uses the term in its statutory sense and refers to dependants where the literature does so.

2.2 Socio-economic transformation

In the NDPIII, socio-economic transformation means the movement of households from subsistence production into the money economy, supported by agro-industrialization, community mobilization and mindset change, and by governance and security programmes (NPA, 2020). It is an ambitious and broad idea. For the purposes of this review, it is useful mainly because it shows where veterans are expected to fit: as producers, as members of cooperatives and as participants in the programmes that carry the plan to the household level.

2.3 Livelihood outcomes and programme inclusion

Livelihood outcomes are the results people achieve from the assets they hold and the opportunities open to them. In this review they cover income stability, asset holding, food security, savings and perceived economic security. Programme inclusion has two parts: simple participation in a programme, and deliberate targeting of veterans within it. The distinction matters because a veteran can be present in a general programme without being reached by any measure designed for veterans.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

3.1 The sustainable livelihoods framework

The sustainable livelihoods framework explains livelihood outcomes as the product of the assets people hold, the structures and institutions that shape their access to those assets, and the wider context in which they live. Natarajan et al. (2022) recently reformulated the framework to give more weight to structural, relational and spatial influences and to treat livelihoods as dynamic rather than fixed. The framework suits veterans well. Their assets are unusual: discipline, organizational cohesion and command experience on one side, and often thin land holdings, savings and civilian networks on the other. Whether those assets become a livelihood depends heavily on institutions, including the agencies that manage veteran affairs and the programmes that distribute inputs and credit.

3.2 Transition stress and social ties

The second lens comes from research on leaving military life. Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) describe transition stress as arising from the loss of military identity, difficulty finding work and the need to take up new civilian roles, and they present it as far more common than post-traumatic stress disorder. Their evidence comes largely from the United States, so it cannot be carried over to Uganda without care. The underlying idea travels well, though: leaving a closed, command-based community can weaken the social ties on which economic life depends.

3.3 Bringing the lenses together

The two lenses suggest that veterans' livelihoods depend on three things: the assets they can reach, the institutions that govern that reach, and the social support that helps them use it. This is the logic behind the conceptual framework developed in Section 6.

4. Review of the Evidence

4.1 Reintegration and economic support for former fighters

The strongest experimental evidence on economic support comes from Liberia. Blattman and Annan (2016) offered ex-fighters agricultural training combined with capital inputs and counselling. Fourteen months after the programme ended, participants had increased their farm employment and profits and had shifted work hours away from illicit activities, while training without capital appeared to have little effect. Liberian ex-fighters differ from Ugandan veterans, but the finding tests an assumption that runs through much programme design, namely that skills alone are enough. It suggests that they are not, and that land, capital and markets need to arrive together. Sharif (2018) reviews the conceptual and practitioner

literature on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, with a focus on the Great Lakes region, which includes Uganda. She observes that reintegration programmes seem to run into the same obstacles in every new context, that standardized approaches are often irrelevant to people on the ground, and that returning ex-combatants affect local governance structures. The lesson for veteran programmes is that general schemes, however well-funded, may miss the specific position of former soldiers unless they are adapted to it.

4.2 Social reintegration, trust and the limits of self-reports

Two studies from northern Uganda show how complicated social reintegration can be. Bauer et al. (2018) used behavioural experiments with former recruits of the Lord's Resistance Army and found that individual cooperativeness rose with the time a person had spent with the group, especially among those abducted young. Parents of former soldiers trusted them more because they expected them to be trustworthy, and the authors found no evidence of preference-based discrimination. Their reading was that the effect of forced recruitment on social capital is not necessarily harmful. Osborne et al. (2018) reached a more cautious conclusion. In their study, self-reported surveys howed ex-combatants to be well connected and active in their communities, yet behavioural experiments revealed a continued reluctance among other community members to share with or cooperate with them, and fewer resources were committed to ex-combatants than to others. Two points follow. Social capital after conflict is real but contested, and the way it is measured matters a great deal. A study that relies only on self-reports may paint a rosier picture than behaviour would. The populations studied here were abducted fighters and not state army veterans, so the findings should be applied with care, but the methodological warning applies to any survey of veterans.

4.3 Veteran transition, employment and entrepreneurship

Beyond Mobbs and Bonanno (2018), research on veteran entrepreneurship offers a second line of evidence. Tihic et al. (2024), illustrating on a national survey of military-affiliated entrepreneurs in the United States (n = 2,649), stress the importance of entrepreneurship education and training during the transition period and note that the effectiveness of such programmes remains understudied. Both bodies of work come from high-income settings where veterans' benefits and labour markets differ greatly from those in Uganda. They are useful mainly for what they say about mechanisms: transition is a distinct stressor, and tailored support at the point of exit may matter more than generic support later.

4.4 Cooperatives and savings groups

Cooperatives are a natural entry point for veterans, because many already organise themselves in SACCOs. Kayongo et al. (2022) argue that cooperatives can help address

Uganda's productivity challenges, but that their vibrancy depends on a culture of cooperation and trust, a sound legal and regulatory framework, enabling institutions, a supportive socio-economic environment and the political economy. A SACCO that lacks these conditions is likely to struggle to deliver more than modest savings and credit services. The studies located for this review did not examine veteran SACCOs directly, which is itself a finding.

4.5 Uganda's transformation programmes

Operation Wealth Creation, launched in July 2013, distributes agricultural inputs and mobilizes households toward commercial farming with the aim of raising household incomes. A monitoring brief by the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development reported increased incomes and productivity among supported farmers (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development [MoFPED], 2017). Such briefs are descriptive and rely on selected beneficiaries, so they cannot show whether veterans benefit in the same way as other households.

The Parish Development Model, introduced in February 2022, extends the same logic to the parish level, with pillars that include production, financial inclusion, governance and attitude transformation. In a qualitative study of 50 beneficiaries in two parishes, Asiimwe (2025) found gains in financial inclusion, productivity and social capital, alongside delayed disbursement and a perception that the programme had become politicized. Kayizzi-Mugerwa (2024) also reflects on the rationale, impact and relevance of the PDM as a bottom-up approach to economic development in Africa. Because the PDM is young, its longer-term effects, and its effects on specific groups such as veterans, remain largely unexamined.

The Youth Livelihood Programme offers the most rigorous Ugandan evidence on a revolving-fund scheme. An experimental evaluation supported by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation reported mixed results: on some measures of direct income, youth in the programme group lagged behind comparison youth, while the programme created employment for other people, and most youth chose fast-earning projects that required little capital (Kasirye, 2019). The evaluation also noted implementation delays. Delay in disbursement thus appears as a recurring theme across the YLP and the PDM, and it is a reminder that what a programme promises and what it delivers on time can differ.

4.6 Where veterans stand in these programmes

Veterans do take part in these initiatives, but mostly through the general channel and not through arrangements designed for them. The clearest exception is the food and animal feed security effort of financial year 2022/2023, in which the veterans' cluster reportedly received UGX 7.5 billion and cultivated 4,709 acres, about 32 per cent of the 14,732 acres available

for immediate use by August 2022. Earlier programmes such as Entandikwa and the YLP were designed around other target groups, and veterans and their children were not singled out within them. None of the programme studies located for this review reports outcomes for veterans separately.

4.7 Institutional coordination

Institutional coordination is the least studied factor. The management of veterans has passed through several arrangements, including the Uganda Veterans' Assistance Board and, since 2016, the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs, and it is described as fragmented, with former members of other security institutions, auxiliary forces, widows and orphans only partly covered. Where responsibilities are split, veterans can fall between agencies, and programmes such as OWC and the PDM may reach them only by chance. Three sources support the concern. The NDPIII treats coordination across government as a condition of delivery (NPA, 2020), Kayongo et al. (2022) list enabling institutions among the prerequisites for cooperatives, and Sharif (2018) shows how reintegration programmes interact with local governance structures. None of them tests coordination for veterans directly.

5. Synthesis

Table 1: Synopsis of the main sources reviewed.

Source	Setting	Focus	Point most relevant to this review
Blattman & Annan (2016)	Liberia, ex-fighters	Field experiment: agricultural training, capital and counselling	Training with capital raised farm work and profits; training alone had little effect
Sharif (2018)	Great Lakes region, including Uganda	Critical review of reintegration programmes	Standardised approaches often misfit local realities; the same obstacles recur
Bauer et al. (2018)	Northern Uganda, former rebel recruits	Behavioural experiments	Cooperation rose with time in the group; parents trusted ex-soldiers
Osborne et al. (2018)	Northern Uganda	Experiments and social tie survey	Self-reports showed good integration; experiments showed less sharing with ex-combatants
Mobbs & Bonanno (2018)	Mainly United States	Review of transition research	Transition stress is common and arises from identity loss, work and new roles
Tihic et al.	United States, n	Survey of military-	Education and training during

Source	Setting	Focus	Point most relevant to this review
(2024)	= 2,649	affiliated entrepreneurs	transition matter; effectiveness understudied
Kayongo et al. (2022)	Uganda	Framework for cooperatives	Trust, regulation, enabling institutions and environment shape cooperative success
MoFPED (2017)	Uganda	OWC monitoring brief	Reported higher incomes and productivity among supported farmers; descriptive
Kasirye (2019)	Uganda	Experimental evaluation of the YLP	Mixed income results, employment for others and implementation delays
Asiimwe (2025)	Two parishes, Uganda	Qualitative study of the PDM	Gains in inclusion, productivity and social capital; delays and politicization
Kayizzi-Mugerwa (2024)	Uganda	Review of the PDM	Examines rationale, impact and relevance of the PDM

Source: adapted from the sustainable livelihood's framework (Natarajan et al., 2022), research on veteran transition (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018) and programme documents (MoFPED, 2017; NPA, 2020).

Note. OWC = Operation Wealth Creation; PDM = Parish Development Model; YLP = Youth Livelihood Programme; MoFPED = Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

5.1 What the literature agrees on

Four points recur across the sources. First, assets need to come together. Training without capital achieved little in Liberia (Blattman & Annan, 2016), and cooperatives need trust, regulation and enabling institutions as well as members (Kayongo et al., 2022). Second, delivery and institutions shape results. Delayed disbursement and perceived politicization weakened the PDM in the study reviewed (Asiimwe, 2025), and implementation delay was reported in the YLP evaluation (Kasirye, 2019). Third, social ties matter but are hard to measure, as the northern Uganda studies show (Bauer et al., 2018; Osborne et al., 2018). Fourth, leaving service is a distinct stressor that calls for tailored support (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Tihic et al., 2024).

5.2 Gaps and contested points

Six gaps stand out. First, Ugandan programme evaluations do not report on veterans as a distinct group. Second, evidence on Ugandan veterans is, to our knowledge, mostly descriptive and drawn from desk reviews and small studies confined to single districts, and it tends to describe programmes rather than test relationships. Third, institutional coordination is widely cited and rarely tested. Fourth, many studies rely on self-reports, which Osborne et al. (2018) suggest may overstate social integration. Fifth, much of the best evidence comes from other populations, such as American veterans, Liberian ex-fighters and former Lord's Resistance Army recruits, and its transfer to Ugandan army veterans is uncertain. Sixth, the PDM and similar programmes are recent, so follow-up periods are short.

6. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The gaps above point to a framework in which livelihood outcomes are the dependent variable and four factors are proposed to explain them. Table 2 sets out the constructs and the sources that anchor them.

Table 2: Constructs, anchoring sources and hypotheses.

Construct	Meaning in this review	Anchoring sources	Hypothesis
Programme inclusion	Participation in, and deliberate targeting by, OWC, the PDM, SACCOs and similar programmes	NPA (2020); MoFPED (2017); Asiimwe (2025)	H1
Institutional coordination	Clarity of roles, coverage and delivery across agencies	Kayongo et al. (2022); Sharif (2018); NPA (2020)	H2
Access to productive resources	Capital, land, skills and markets	Blattman & Annan (2016); Natarajan et al. (2022)	H3; mediator in H5
Social support	Family, community and peer support	Mobbs & Bonanno (2018); Bauer et al. (2018); Osborne et al. (2018)	H4
Livelihood outcomes	Income stability, assets, food security, savings and perceived economic security	Natarajan et al. (2022)	Dependent variable

Source: *adapted from the sustainable livelihood's framework (Natarajan et al., 2022), research on veteran transition (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018) and programme documents (MoFPED, 2017; NPA, 2020).*

Note. SACCOs = savings and credit cooperative organizations.

Five hypotheses follow.

- *H1.* Greater inclusion in socio-economic transformation programmes is positively associated with livelihood outcomes among veterans.
- *H2.* Stronger institutional coordination in the management of veteran affairs is positively associated with livelihood outcomes.
- *H3.* Better access to productive resources is positively associated with livelihood outcomes.
- *H4.* Stronger social support is positively associated with livelihood outcomes.
- *H5.* Access to productive resources partly mediates the relationship between programme inclusion and livelihood outcomes.

A mixed-methods design is well suited to testing these hypotheses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A survey across several regions can estimate the associations, while interviews and focus groups with officials, cooperative leaders, widows and dependants can explain how and for whom they operate. The use of both strands also answers the measurement concern raised by Osborne et al. (2018), because accounts from interviews can be set against survey responses.

7. Implications and Conclusion

7.1 Implications for policy and practice

If the framework is borne out, several implications follow, and they should be treated as provisional until the companion study reports. Programme guidelines and monitoring data should identify veterans, widows and orphans as a group, so that their outcomes can be seen. Capital, land, skills and market access should be packaged together and not offered in isolation. Veteran SACCOs need support with governance, record keeping and financial literacy. Disbursement should be timely and transparent. A coordinating structure for veteran affairs should cover all categories of veterans and their dependants. Finally, social support, whether through peer networks or community sensitization, should sit alongside economic support.

7.2 Implications for research

Future work should test relationships across several regions and not within single districts, include veterans outside SACCOs and comparable non-veteran households, and follow veterans over time to separate the effect of inclusion from the selection of better-off veterans

into programmes. Studies should combine self-reports with other forms of evidence, in line with the lesson from northern Uganda.

7.3 Limitations of this review

The review is narrative and not systematic, it relies on sources reachable through the searches described in Section 1.2, and it includes grey literature where peer-reviewed work was absent. Some programme figures come from earlier reviews and official estimates and should be confirmed against Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs records. The evidence base on Ugandan veterans is thin, so several conclusions rest on analogy with other populations.

7.4 CONCLUSION

Veterans are a disciplined and organized group, and Uganda's transformation programmes offer real channels through which their livelihoods could improve. The literature suggests that gains depend less on whether veterans appear on a beneficiary list than on whether capital, land and skills reach them together, whether the institutions responsible for them work in a coordinated and credible way, and whether they have social support. Yet the evidence on Ugandan veterans is thin and rarely disaggregated. The hypotheses developed here, and the mixed-methods study designed to test them, are intended to help close that gap.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations draw on the descriptive results and the literature. They concern priorities that veterans themselves endorse, and they should be refined once the inferential analysis is complete.

8.1 Policy and institutional recommendations

1. Coordination had the highest agreement of the five statements. A single coordinating structure should cover army veterans, those from other security institutions and auxiliary forces, widows and orphans, with clear roles for each agency and district focal points drawn from the existing OWC structures (NPA, 2020; Sharif, 2018; Kayongo et al., 2022). Therefore, make coordination a priority.

2. Programme inclusion had the widest spread of opinion and the strongest disagreement. Responses should be broken down by region, SACCO, rank, sex and dependants, and followed by targeted outreach. OWC and the PDM should name veterans, widows and orphans in their guidelines and report outcomes separately for them, since monitoring briefs now describe benefits to farmers in general (MoFPED, 2017). Finding out who feels excluded is important.

3. Delay and perceived politicization weaken programmes (Asiimwe, 2025). Clear timelines and published criteria for veteran groups would help protect the credibility of the schemes. Disbursing funds on time and transparency is paramount.

8.2 Programme design recommendations

1. Respondents rated access to productive resources highest, and 81.0 per cent endorsed resources as the channel through which inclusion works. Training without capital achieved little in the Liberian experiment (Blattman & Annan, 2016), so start-up capital should accompany skills development, and programmes should track what veterans actually receive and not merely who is enrolled. Deliver capital, land, skills and markets as one package is recommended.

2. Support should focus on governance, record keeping, financial literacy and trust among members, which are the conditions that determine whether cooperatives deliver (Kayongo et al., 2022). Strengthen veteran SACCOs is recommended.

3. Four in five respondents endorsed social support as linked to livelihoods. Peer networks, community sensitization and targeted help for widows and dependants would address the isolation that can follow the end of service (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Pair economic support with social support is recommended.

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