

Why has it often proved more difficult to reintegrate than to demobilise soldiers following civil wars?

Written by Emma Gordon

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EMMA GORDON, JUL 26 2011

Since the 1989 UN mission in Central America, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) of members of combatant groups has become an integral part of the peace-building process. The basic purpose is a dual one – to re-establish the state's legitimate monopoly over the use of force through demilitarisation (D&D); and to redefine former fighters' (and their families) roles in society through a process of economic, political and social assimilation (R).[1] DDR has proved to be causally associated with reducing the likelihood of renewed violence, while simultaneously reunifying society.[2] However, the process is by no means a simple one, and reintegration has proved to be the most challenging aspect. While disarmament and demobilisation are both finite, with measurable results, reintegration is an open-ended social and economic process tied to the development of the country as a whole.[3]

The 'R' phase of DDR has tended to prioritise establishing economic security for the former combatants through reinsertion packages, and education and vocational training schemes; concurrently it must also provide physical and social security, including treatment for any psychological trauma sustained. Unlike the objectives of D&D, these goals require consideration of the community and national levels – ex-combatants cannot simply go home; there must be attempts at community reconciliation and country-wide reforms. Underlying this entire discussion, is a tension between security and development in policy circles, with advocates of a security-first approach emphasising successful demobilisation and return, while those advocating a developmental approach argue that without extensive reintegration, ex-combatants may return to violence and peace will not be sustainable.

This essay will address the challenges faced during reintegration based on the levels presented above – individual, community, and national. In the latter of these, it will seek to address the impact of complications arising in the early stages of national DDR programmes, particularly during demobilisation. A final section will briefly discuss the impact of tensions between security and development. Throughout, the focus will be on adult ex-combatants that are reintegrated back into civilian life.[4]

Individual level

Combatants participating in DDR have different characteristics in different conflicts – while in Sierra Leone they were mostly uneducated youths, in Eritrea many fighters continued their education in the field.[5] DDR programmes therefore have to be country specific. Nevertheless, there are several common traits: civil wars generally occur in low-income countries where agriculture is dominant, and employment opportunities are scarce; combatants commonly have low levels of education, few professional skills and limited savings.[6] As a result, reintegration programs generally seek to provide economic security for ex-combatants, allowing them to function in society, while also creating substitutes for the other benefits of war – physical security, social status, and influence – and supporting psychological healing.

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Economic Security

The opening phase of reintegration is reinsertion, where demobilised combatants are given cash or goods and returned to their communities.[7] This initial support is designed as a transitional safety net to help soldiers adjust to civilian life, without addressing the problem of social integration.[8] In fact, if too generous they can do the reverse: reviews of the Mozambican DDR program found that the 6 months severance pay, followed by additional reintegration subsidies (totalling a further 18 months pay), was too generous, and gave the ex-combatants a sense of status, hence raising their expectations for what they were “owed”. [9] Privileging the ex-combatants in this way can create community resentment and in worst-case scenarios, the promise of such payments after demobilisation can act as an incentive to enlist with armed groups.[10]

After reinsertion, a variety of methods are introduced to encourage economic security – formal education, vocational training, apprenticeships and micro-credit loans to fund start-up businesses.[11] These have resulted in varying degrees of success, but often suffer from a lack of sufficient market research resulting in recipients who are trained in skills that are either irrelevant or saturated in their prospective job markets. Recipients in Liberia reported that although they appreciated the cash benefits and training schemes, these did not substantially change their economic situation; in fact, Boas & Hatloy found a 44% unemployment rate amongst their respondents.[12]

As already stated, the majority of the country’s that undergo civil war have large agricultural sectors. However, after their varied roles within armed groups, most ex-combatants choose to train in new skills rather than return to the land. In Angola, although two thirds of those with low levels of education chose to return to agricultural provinces, only 20% wanted to work the fields, while the others hoped to find work in nearby towns;[13] the same trend is visible in Liberia and Sierra Leone.[14] In these cases the heavy focus on training for the formal sector, despite the lack of job opportunities, resulted in high levels of unemployment and failed to provide basic economic security.

The number of variables and challenges involved in aiding ex-combatants to become economically self-sufficient, is why reintegration is so difficult. Whereas the earlier stages of DDR involve removing attributes of military life – weapons, command-and-control structures, and a mobilised mindset – reintegration has to (re)establish a civilian life.

Other benefits of war

In most of the cases examined, there was a motivation-incentive dissonance due to a presumption that the majority of insurgents were fighting for economic reasons. In their respective studies on Afghanistan and Liberia, Waldman and Boas & Hatloy found a variety of primary motivations, including security concerns and community pressures.[15] Not taking these into account can lead to an imbalanced reintegration policy design, which fails to tackle fundamental enlisting motivations and hence misunderstands the priorities of ex-fighters.

The reintegration period is one of personal adjustment where ex-combatants lose not only the economic benefits afforded by membership of armed groups but also a certain social status and influence.[16] Rather than being a crucial part of a group that relies on them for daily survival, their presence becomes an embarrassment. In certain cultures that cherish the concepts of honour and shame, for example the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, it becomes all the more important to reintegrate ex-combatants with a degree of honour and respectability.[17] This is particularly crucial when it comes to commanders or middle-ranking officers – in both Mozambique and Liberia the leadership of many organised criminal gangs are made up of mid- to high-ranking officers from demobilised armed groups who were dissatisfied with being grouped with foot soldiers in the DDR process.[18]

The loss of social status is particularly acute for former female combatants who acquired new roles during conflict. Having weapons and acting as a crucial part of the organisation, women are able to break free of their normally submissive traditional roles.[19] In their study of female combatants in Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique, McKay & Mazurana found that, aware they had transgressed social norms, many women chose to return to their communities without drawing attention to themselves.[20]

At the individual level, reintegration proves to be challenging due to the scope of its objectives and the variety of

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needs for different combatants. Policy design has often been based on incorrect assumptions about combatants' motivations for fighting, leading to programmes that are ill-suited to their needs. Contrary to this, demobilisation, though not without its problems, does not rest on any particular assumption – the goal is to identify those to be demobilised and send them to cantonment.

Community Level

While each country needs a national reintegration programme, it has to account for differences between combatants and the communities they are reintegrated into. Many 'classic' DDRs have faced reintegration problems due to a failure to consider the wider community; this is not a concern for demobilisation. As a result, emphasis has now shifted from top-down interventions to community-designed approaches, which rely on existing social institutions and focus not just on combatants but the community as a whole.[21]

In order for ex-combatants to be fully reintegrated, there needs to be a process of reconciliation, normally in the form of national attempts at post-conflict justice.[22] This will help the community to come to terms with past violence, while also helping the combatant create new norms and values that deal with how to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.[23] The community emphasis stems from the argument that it is not the individual combatant who has split from society, but rather that war has broken down society as whole and destroyed social bonds within communities.[24] As such reintegration, more so that the earlier stages of DDR, should be seen as a social contract linked to the wider development of the community.

Despite the assumption that ex-combatants would be shunned by the communities they attempt to reintegrate into, in many cases the vast majority report high levels of acceptance – 90% in Sierra Leone, 70% in Liberia, and 85-90% in Mozambique.[25]. Evidence suggests that the stronger the social network already in place – as in rural compared to urban areas – the higher the chances of “successful” reintegration;[26] other variables include the abusiveness of the ex-combatants former unit.[27] Such differences cannot be directly accounted for in national reintegration programmes, but rather rely on a more flexible, community-specific approach.

Considering the often higher than expected acceptance levels, reintegration programmes are in danger of unnecessarily favouring the demobilised, and by providing them benefits, risk separating them further from the community.[28] Jennings argues that in Liberia, DDR over-emphasised the needs of former combatants (and the consequences of failing to meet them) which created a “no satisfaction, no peace” dynamic.[29] Unlike the demobilisation and reinsertion phases, this means reintegration needs to be tied to community development as a whole, therefore creating a far more complex set of programming goals.

National Level

As well as being tied to community-based development, successful reintegration can only come with the development of the country as a whole, and certain contextual factors can limit the effectiveness of any reintegration programme. In order to ensure the physical security of demobilised ex-combatants, as well as remove the option to remobilise, there needs to be an all-inclusive peace process, followed by an effective D&D program. In Sudan, DDR proved challenging due to the presence of a plethora of smaller armed groups that were not part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and as such were not included in the official DDR process.[30] The presence of such spoilers creates insecurity, and increases the risk of remobilisation.[31]

Part of a sequence

Reintegration is the final stage of a national DDR program, and as such, it pre-supposes effective disarmament and demobilisation.[32] The latter of these is particularly important, and is not without its own complications.

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Demobilisation is defined as 'the formal disbanding of military formations and, at the individual level, as the process of releasing combatants from a mobilised state.'^[33] As such, it includes breaking the bonds established during wartime and begins the process of redefining combatants as civilians. Logistically, demobilisation is also crucial as it includes registration of combatants, surveys of their needs and aspirations, counselling, and medical screening.^[34]

Traditionally, demobilisation has assumed cantonment of ex-combatants as a necessary step since it ensures participation in the programme, and facilitates access to available services.^[35] However, supplying cantonment sites has often proved challenging,^[36] and pressures of increased numbers (due to lax eligibility criteria) can lead to a rushed reinsertion process. In Mozambique for example, the UN mission had originally hoped to initiate basic literacy and civic education classes in cantonment sites yet this proved to be logistically impossible.^[37]

Many DDR programs have also been plagued with delays in the demobilisation stage, with ex-combatants growing increasingly restless in poor conditions at cantonment sites.^[38] Knowing the potential for insecurity this creates, agencies responsible for disarmament and demobilisation attempt to process the largest number of combatants in the shortest possible time, and promise benefits and services which have not necessarily secured enough funding to become a reality.^[39] This emphasis on planning the D&D phase can have grave consequences when it comes to reintegration; in Burundi many former combatants had to spend reinsertion money on either building homes or paying rent, and due to a lack of skills and job opportunities, got increasingly deep into debt while waiting for reintegration payments.^[40]

While demobilisation encounters its own difficulties, the sequential nature of DDR means these are magnified during reintegration. Rather than act as the first step towards reintegration, demobilisation can become little more than a waiting period between the turning in of weapons and the collection of reinsertion payments,^[41] hence failing to achieve one of the major objectives – removing combatants from a mobilised state; changing how they define themselves. Without altering this mindset, it becomes extremely hard to effectively build a flourishing civilian life for the ex-combatants.

Tension between security and development

Underlying the entire discussion of DDR is a tension between security and development priorities amongst policy makers. For those with a 'minimalist' approach, DDR is seen as a security strategy to consolidate peace and neutralise potential spoilers.^[42] In this instance, the emphasis is very much on D&D, with reintegration serving to mollify the ex-combatants. Alden argues that the international community saw reintegration in Mozambique from this perspective, and declared it a success in that it achieved a 'negative peace.'^[43]

Community leaders, however, argued that full reintegration equates to 'social peace' and can only be achieved over time; a position held by the 'maximalist' camp.^[44] By emphasising human security and the need to address roots causes of the conflict, 'maximalists' link reintegration to sustainable development, therefore greatly increasing reintegration's scope (and complexity).^[45] The competing definitions add extra challenges to the planning of reintegration, as well as confusing the expectations of both implementers and recipients of DDR programmes.

Conclusion

Reintegration post-civil wars has proved to be a challenging process due to the nature and scale of its objectives. True reintegration cannot be achieved in a short number of years, and requires the development of the country as a whole. While certain security-minded policy makers see a more limited scope for reintegration, this comes from an outsiders' perspective, and those involved on the ground tend to favour a broader, more holistic approach.

The initial objective of reintegration is to provide ex-combatants with economic security, which will then allow them to

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function in, and contribute to, the community they are reinserted into. By providing ex-combatants with skills that make them valuable to the community, they also maintain dignity and social status. This can only occur with reconciliation and community acceptance, thus requiring a complex policy design, which accounts for the wider community, and encourages national development.

Unlike reintegration, demobilisation is primarily concerned with the individual, and its limited objectives do not require such complex policy design. However, past attempts at DDR have shown that demobilisation is more than just a technical process. Issues during cantonment have led to agitated ex-combatants with high expectations for the reintegration stage, and there have been failures to change the mindset of ex-combatants to prepare them for civilian life. In many senses, combatants will only be fully demobilised once they are fully reintegrated, and feel part of a civilian community, hence making the distinction between the two processes somewhat arbitrary.

Discussion in this essay was very much limited by spatial constraints, and as a result there are several areas that could do with further research or analysis. Throughout, the discussion has focused on DDR programmes and policy design, with no attention paid to individual demobilisation and reintegration that occurs outside of these programmes. This is a far less common occurrence, but several studies, notably those by Humphreys & Weinstein, have found that being part of a DDR programme did not necessarily facilitate more successful reintegration.[46] Further analysis on this could have added another dimension to the argument: the role of outside actors in DDR. The discussion could also have benefitted from a closer look at second generation DDR and how this is an improvement on traditional methods. However, it is a relatively new development and a lack of case studies makes it harder to evaluate.

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[1] Berdal (1996), p. 5; Humphreys & Weinstein (2005), p. 3; Nilsson (2005), p. 4. Nilsson's definition of reintegration is used here since it includes both a political dimension, and ex-combatants' families.

[2] Muggah (2007)

[3] Coelho & Vines (1995); Jennings (2008)

[4] Child soldiers have a separate DDR programme with separate challenges; the same is true of those being integrated into new armed forces. Female combatants also have separate programmes that will be mentioned, but not fully discussed.

[5] Woldegabriel (1993), p. 134

[6] Berdal (1996), p. 45

[7] In some cases 'reinsertion' is a separate stage, for example the DDRR programmes in Liberia and Uganda. The DPKO has also previously referred to reinsertion as the final part of demobilisation (DPKO (2010b)).

[8] Berdal (1996), p. 47. Levels of reinsertion subsidies have varied massively – from \$15 resettlement allowance (Angola) to 2 years severance (Zimbabwe) – but there appears to be no correlation between the size of cash payment and employment found

[9] Knight & Ozerdem (2004), p. 512

[10] Waldman (2010)

[11] Solomon (2008), p. 11

[12] Boas & Hatloy (2008), p. 49

[13] Vines & Oruitemeka (2008), p. 254

[14] Solomon (2008), p. 12. Notes that 3.7% of demobilised fighters in Liberia and 16% in Sierra Leone expressed a preference for agriculture.

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[15] Waldman (2010); Boas & Hatloy (2008), p. 33

[16] Kingma (1997), p. 155

[17] Waldman (2010), p. 6.

[18] Alden (2003; Stankovic & Torjesen (2010) , p. 10

[19] Kingma (1997), p. 162; Anaya (2007), p. 184

[20] McKay & Mazurana (2004) cited in Gordon (2010), p. 12

[21] Colletta & Muggah (2009), p. 444-5; DPKO (2010a, 2010b)

[22] Restorative and traditional justice methods such as truth-telling commissions and the *gacaca* courts in Rwanda are particularly helpful to reintegration as they emphasis forgiveness as opposed to retribution, and are conducted at community level.

[23] Nilsson (2005), p. 55

[24] Springer (2006), p. 249-251

[25] Taken from the following studies, respectively: Humphreys & Weinstein (2005), p. 13; Jennings (2008), p. 336; Alden (2003).

[26] Knight & Ozerdem (2004) , p. 503

[27] Humphreys & Weinstein (2005), p. 4; Stankovic & Torjesen (2010), p. 11

[28] Boas & Hatloy (2008), p. 52

[29] Jennings (2008), p. 336

[30] Muggah (2007). The same is true in Iraq, where many militias were neither defeated nor victorious in the war, as such they did not see themselves as part of the process. Mowle (2006), p. 42

[31] The presence of spoilers is further enhanced by an excess availability of arms. Where disarmament programs are ineffective regional trade in weapons can also be exacerbated (as in Southern Africa after DDR in Mozambique)

[32] There are examples of RDD programmes, such as in Tajikistan, but these are rare.

[33] Berdal (1996), p. 39

[34] Many demobilisation programmes have been criticised for their eligibility requirements, which then limits the recipients of reintegration assistance

[35] Springer (2006), p. 163

[36] Berdal (1996), p. 43

[37] Alden (2003)

[38] Knight & Ozerdem (2004), p. 508

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[39] Springer (2006), p. 252

[40] Gordon (2010) p. 24; Uvin (2007)

[41] Lamb (2008)

[42] Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2006)

[43] Alden (2003)

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] Klem & Douma (2008), p. 10

[46] Humphreys & Weinstein (2005, 2007)

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