



Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Africa: Lessons for South Sudan *Roundtable Highlights*

BACKGROUND

As part of an ongoing series of roundtables examining priorities to stabilize and reform the security sector in South Sudan, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies hosted a gathering of 30 disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and South Sudan experts on October 18-19, 2017. The purpose of the dialogue was to assess lessons in reintegration of ex-combatants from other African conflicts for their relevance to South Sudan. The focus on reintegration (R) aimed to highlight this most overlooked element of DDR and complement previous sessions examining other aspects of rebuilding the security sector in post conflict contexts.

Unlike “first generation DDR programs” involving demobilization of two discrete forces (government and rebel) following a negotiated peace agreement, South Sudan falls into the increasingly common “complex DDR context.” Such contexts comprise a fragmented array of armed groups of which the government is just one actor. Limited control over these groups by political actors coupled with lingering low-intensity conflict make reaching a comprehensive negotiated settlement difficult. In such circumstances, demobilization and reintegration may occur while conflicts are ongoing as a means of decreasing violence and building momentum for peace. To gain insights into such contemporary DDR contexts, the roundtable reviewed reintegration efforts in northern Uganda, Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Burundi, and others to identify and share any lessons for their potential relevance for South Sudan.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reconceptualizing DDR in Complex Contexts

- The dialogue repeatedly **challenged the feasibility of DDR as a concept** for complex conflict contexts. Since DDR has largely been conceived as an organized set of actions for a government and rebel force to take following a peace agreement, it doesn't pertain to many African conflicts today. Indeed, many such conflicts don't end clearly and include multiple rebel groups with a variety of agendas thereby inhibiting unified decision-making and actions. Moreover, government forces often resemble an armed, ethnic militia rather than an inclusive national security force. Attempting to apply a formulaic DDR

framework in such contexts is problematic as there isn't a clear starting point, an incentive for armed groups to demobilize, or clear command and control structures over the respective groups.

- The discussion highlighted the importance of examining some of **the fundamental assumptions that surround DDR**. For example, is there a peace agreement and what is its status? Does the state meet the criteria of sovereignty? Does the state function? Is there a commitment by political actors to disarm and demobilize combatants? How many and what is the nature of non-state armed groups and their relationships with local communities? Are all of the armed groups, including nominally statutory forces, interested in participating in a DDR process? Answers to these questions will vary widely across contexts and will have fundamental implications for developing customized DDR approaches.
- DDR is often perceived and implemented as a technical initiative, when in fact, it **is part of a political process**. DDR is not a standalone activity but an initiative that is part of a broader strategic plan to reduce the number of active combatants and reorient those that remain either into a reformed force with a coherent purpose and command structure or into a community where they can live and support their families. In the absence of the political will and authority over the respective forces, DDR initiatives are likely to fail.
- **Implementing the respective components of DDR are very different** and require widely different skill sets and expertise, yet they are often programmed as part of a single process. Disarmament and demobilization (DD) largely requires security actors to oversee the identification and decommissioning of combatants and assets. It typically takes place over a discrete time period. Reintegration, in contrast, is a developmental and peacebuilding process involving close cooperation with communities over an extended period of time. In fact, a broader community-based development program may be needed to help create the skills and jobs ex-combatants require to secure alternative livelihoods. Accordingly, rather than looking at DDR as a single, seamless concept, it may be more effective to identify the specific needs to be filled and address each with a customized and coordinated response that draws on the designated tools required. The securitization of DDR tends to restrict thinking about what is actually needed, limiting programming.
- Examining the premises of DDR also raises the question of whether **disarmament itself makes sense in all contexts**. In cases where conflict is ongoing, all sides will resist disarming. Such efforts are even more problematic when disarmament is selective, leaving certain groups or communities vulnerable. This is a particular concern when the government is an active party to a conflict. Similarly, disarming communities that depend on guns to herd

livestock, for example, will undermine their means to earn a livelihood. In such cases, disarmament efforts should logically focus less on disarmament itself and more on developing new regulations and laws surrounding gun ownership.

Sequencing: DDR or RDD?

- Closely tied to the conceptualization process are **questions over the sequencing** of DDR in complex environments. In traditional programs, DD were conducted first, followed by R. But the R process has often been an afterthought and it has failed to build lasting links to other important processes, including economic development. This has diminished the impact of DDR initiatives. In complex contexts where there may not be a clear end to the conflict, however, reintegration may be a key means by which to facilitate demobilization (spontaneous or organized). Not only does this mean that the R would come before the DD but that reintegration takes on a conflict mitigation role rather than solely a post-conflict stabilization rationale.
- There are also important differences in the timelines and timeframes of DD and R (respectively weeks or months for DD, months and years for R). Donors often focus on achieving target numbers for DD but fail to take into account how time consuming R may be.
- Even in more traditional conflict contexts, there is an argument that DDR processes could be phased, such that one set of combatants could go through a process followed later by another set. This approach would enable the reintegration effort to begin earlier and continue over the entire course of the initiative. In short, planners should **avoid thinking about DDR in a linear fashion**. The tendency is to follow the DDR template because “that’s what we know,” however, this may not always be effective or appropriate.
- In some cases, it may be more practical to delink the components of DDR altogether. Creating more flexibility may require donors to adjust funding authorizations in order to be more responsive to each context.
- Questions over sequence also have implications for security sector reform (SSR) processes. Ideally, a sovereign government would have some form of national security strategy derived from a participatory national and defense sector review that would define the threats a country faced and the force structure needed to provide for such security. This would serve as the framework to guide demobilization and reform efforts. However, in complex conflict contexts, such a planning framework rarely exists and it would take considerable time to create. Accordingly, in practice, DDR will often need to occur prior to or simultaneous

with SSR. Integration of rival forces as a political expediency, however, is often problematic unless committed to building a genuinely national army.

Clarifying the Objectives of DDR

- Part of the challenge of implementing successful DDR initiatives – and reintegration in particular – is the widely differing objectives that stakeholders may have of the process. For example, does DDR aim to advance stability in a post-conflict environment? Downsize and restructure the military? Promote defections? Disarm combatants? Is the goal reintegration with communities or integration back into the military? While these objectives are not mutually exclusive, they are different and require different sorts of interventions. For example, if the goal is disarmament, DDR efforts need not be limited to ex-combatants since many in the population may possess weapons. If the objective is to provide financial and employment incentives for potential spoilers to lay down their arms, then the focus can be narrower. No matter the objective, it needs **to be explicitly articulated** rather than assumed.
- Clarification of the objectives will have direct implications for **who should participate in a DDR** initiative. In the past, only two groups participated: the national army and an opposing rebel force. But today's conflicts include multiple armed groups, child combatants, refugees, and communities as a whole may be important participants. If DDR encompasses more than traditional ex-combatants, then should the support the combatants receive be different? What are the special requirements to support female and child combatants?
- The case studies highlighted a **mismatch in expectations** between participants and international actors. One reason for this has been donors' unclear communication with target groups about the planned benefits and criteria for eligibility. Given limited communications channels and the propensity for rumors, this is not surprising. Good communication helps to mitigate the risk posed to the credibility and success of the DDR effort if participants have inflated expectations that are then unmet.

Recognizing the Political Economy of DDR

- Different stakeholders have differing objectives for DDR. This raises highly relevant **political economy considerations** vis-à-vis national actors. In conflict-affected contexts with limited employment opportunities, an influx of external resources is often an important revenue flow. Various actors, therefore, will be incentivized to control this flow, benefitting themselves financially or empowering their own (political, military, ethnic, etc.) faction. Aside from resources, influence over decisions such as which groups are disarmed and who

may join a national army have direct implications for power dynamics in a society. **Power-brokers or warlords, therefore, typically pose the greatest challenges to effective DDR processes** in complex contexts, rather than individual ex-combatants.

- Such political-economy considerations, for example, factor into the **preference for long-term cantonments by many national actors** as opposed to less costly and more streamlined alternatives. The relatively lower levels of resources available for reintegration efforts may also explain why this element of the DDR process has received less attention than the others.
- Participants shared widespread skepticism regarding **national DDR commissions** in complex contexts. Assuming that such a commission would function transparently and effectively when the government was an active party to a conflict was unrealistic and likely counterproductive. Rather, alternative means are needed to assess the general public interests in complex contexts.

REINTEGRATION CONSIDERATIONS

Community Engagement with Combatants Varies

- Participants agreed that communities must be more actively involved in the reintegration process. Traditional DDR programs have typically not done so, even though communities are the most affected by the reintegration efforts.
- **Not all ex-combatants have left communities.** In fact, some combatants have lived within communities, fought for them, and protected them. In some instances, communities are highly militarized and the distinction between combatant and civilian is blurred. In other cases, the ex-combatants do not have such relationships. Under such circumstances, considerably more effort will be required to build social ties, which have been shown to be a key factor in dissuading ex-combatants from reverting to the conflict.
- **Community-based programming** helps to address the challenges of eligibility and verifying precise lists of combatants. By finding ways to support entire communities, reintegration efforts can avoid the risk of being perceived as rewarding combatants and fostering resentments. Nonetheless, in some cases, there is a stigma attached to being a former combatant and it's unclear that communities are willing to welcome these fighters.
- Communities will also vary in their norms regarding the role that guns play in society. In some contexts, the presence of guns is a commonly accepted part of

daily life. In others, they are anathema. Understanding these differences is critical when contemplating disarmament initiatives.

- Successful community-based reintegration is a long-term iterative process. While not necessarily costly, consistent multi-year funding is valuable for sustaining the benefits. This process is often labor-intensive, however, underscoring the value of mapping out the available community based groups in a region and matching these with the support that ex-combatants will require. Linking these local groups to national and international actors can leverage their respective contributions.

Trusted Interlocutors

- The case studies reiterated the vitally important role that trusted interlocutors play in successful reintegration efforts. Especially in complex environments where the government may be a key perpetrator of attacks on citizens, there is a deep distrust of government. Consequently, the trust at the community level that local NGOs have earned from working with these communities for years is especially valued and difficult to replicate quickly. These trusted interlocutors, frequently owing to the personal courage and relationships of specific individuals, can be instrumental in convincing combatants or youth susceptible to being recruited into a conflict of coming out of a conflict zone, thereby contributing to mitigation efforts.
- Given the fragmented nature of armed groups in complex contexts, relationships across multiple groups in various parts of a country will be required. Trusted NGO interlocutors provide a mechanism for reaching these groups in ways that government or international actors could not. Given the scale involved, however, multiple NGOs will be needed for this approach to work. Identifying and supporting these networks of NGOs will require international partners to engage differently than traditional DDR efforts.
- A key **reason identified for the failure of reintegration processes** was a lack of **understanding of ex-combatants and** their incentives for joining a conflict and continuing to fight.

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

- The discussion of reintegration recognized that these efforts are part of a larger peacebuilding process. In addition to livelihood considerations, successful reintegration involves strengthening social values, for example, regarding non-violent conflict resolution, prejudices, and inclusion.

- Reintegration efforts must also address **the issue of trauma and its prevalence** not only among combatants but also within communities. South Sudanese reportedly face levels of trauma on par with post genocide Rwanda and Cambodia. Reintegration efforts must therefore consider how to assist combatants and civilians in dealing with this trauma. Given **the limited psychosocial capabilities** in many conflict-affected contexts in Africa, a challenge is to mobilize sufficient numbers of psychologists to provide training or support group leaders, etc.
- Successful reintegration in the context of peacebuilding also points to the importance of fostering justice and accountability so that those who are aggrieved don't feel that they need to take matters into their own hands. Both formal and informal justice institutions may have a role in this regard. Engaging communities in such issues, including through discussions about potential amnesties, is vital.

LESSONS FROM REINTEGRATION CASE STUDIES

Northern Uganda

- Reintegration efforts require trust, time, and medical help.
- Reintegration is a way to get armed youth off of the battlefield. In this way, it is a preventative rather than solely post-conflict activity.
- Youth play an important role in conflict. It's important to understand their reasons for joining an armed group, whether they did so voluntarily, and the role of local populations in supporting youth who leave these groups.
- Youth are not only victims of conflict but also agents of peace.
- Young South Sudanese rebels in the bush felt abandoned by government officials and that promises made to them had not been kept. They said they wanted respect and a voice and to exit their life of fear and suffering. Accordingly, ex-combatants need a platform for mediation and reconciliation.
- It can be useful to look at the generational nature of conflict and the role of culture. It's also useful to look at how the diaspora and those who stay at home perceive the conflict differently.
- If the aim is to draw fighters out of the bush, then donors and NGOs need to be prepared for a long-term support process until they are able to return.
- If large numbers of combatants are now in refugee camps, perhaps the camps can be used as a platform to teach a culture of peace.
- DDR doesn't end when youth lay down their weapons.

Central African Republic

- Don't create expectations that you can't meet, don't do harm (the DDR program was only DD and thus inadvertently created incentives for individuals to arm and mobilize themselves), and be realistic about people getting rid of their guns.
- The fuzziness over who is an armed group plays to these groups' advantage in terms of leveraging resources. Accordingly, there's a political economy of information and a lack of trust that comes from not sharing information.
- In CAR, armed groups want to enter the state security sector, they want status, a job, and a pension.
- Given the fragmented nature of the conflict and economic underpinnings to the violence, it may be more effective to focus on development than DDR.

Liberia

- Liberians also endured widespread trauma.
- The program was considered successful, though a key lesson was the importance of managing expectations.
- DDR was successful in part because Liberians were sick of war, the NPFL was defeated, and Taylor fled following his ICC indictment.
- There was no stigma in Liberia for being an ex-combatant, except for some women who had trouble finding husbands because they were seen as damaged. Relatedly, self-demobilization is gendered as more women did so. Another assumption, that men do not have a duty of care, that they do not spend their stipends to take care of their families, was false.
- Large-scale community-based programs in remote areas (e.g. road rehabilitation) were very effective in absorbing local labor, contributing to reintegration. This wasn't formally part of DDR but a complementary initiative that greatly contributed to the success of DDR.
- UNMIL's hot spots reporting – where the JMAC and DDR worked together to identify potential flashpoints to focus on road rehabilitation worked well but it misunderstood the role of mid-level commanders who used their positions to resolve crisis. UNMIL didn't understand that the commanders were now seen as community leaders.
- Other programs that worked included supporting long-term development through support to small-scale industry. In return for giving ex-combatants an internship, businesses were refurbished. Simultaneously, they also became fixtures in their communities.
- 1:1 benefits for combatant: non-combatant helped spread the benefits of recovery efforts and rebuild communities
- Liberians used community meetings (over the course of a year) to bring people together to ask for and give forgiveness.

- UNMIL was very effective and helped to provide an umbrella of security that allowed DDR efforts to gain traction. UNMIL also helped to prevent patronage arrangements from undermining recovery efforts
- UNMIL radio played an important role in public messaging.

DRC

- Building trust is primary, as is dealing with trauma. The reintegration process is continuous, not a one-time event.
- Reintegration requires doing preparatory work with communities and ex-combatants, including trauma healing. Trauma occurs at three levels: the individual, the family, and the community. Given the absence of psychologists, it could help to train some trainers or perhaps some support group leaders.
- Community based R is iterative and should begin with mapping the location and capacities that already exist. This can be a challenge because donors often don't want to do the work needed to show that these local organizations can be trusted and should be funded.
- Reintegration has a livelihoods/economic development component. This requires doing a good market analysis and identifying new economic opportunities. Micro-loans can help. In the DRC, one micro-loan program with ex-combatants and women had an 80% repayment rate. Agricultural cooperatives were also helpful.
- Radio clubs where people heard stories and community programs were also successful: there are more than 300 radio clubs in eastern DRC.
- The Community Based Reconciliation System (CBRS) was another innovation in that it focused on weapons and teaching weapons safety until they could be collected. A challenge to this, however, was that this funding was unpredictable, creating a lack of trust.
- Donors need to be more flexible in their planning and integrating local organizations.

SOME APPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH SUDAN

- **Important to recognize the complex context**
 - The population is highly traumatized.
 - Government is actively involved and responsible for human rights violations.
 - The government feels it can win and therefore it is not ready to disarm.
 - Roughly half of the country's population is displaced.
 - Vast majorities of some communities (e.g. 85% of Shilluk) have left the country. This creates some highly fluctuating social dynamics that must be navigated.
 - The national Army is better characterized as an ethnic militia.

- National DDR not viable for now
 - Any space is at the subnational level (geographically and outside of elite)

Possible Reintegration Actions

- So long as conflict is ongoing, planners should focus on elements of reintegration that can be advanced quickly even prior to the signing (and upholding) of a peace agreement among all armed groups. This will likely require working through local NGOs.
- Donors should strive to reach a shared political economy analysis so as to facilitate complementarity of funding efforts and avoid reinforcing some of the disparities in access to resources and influence that are contributing to the conflict.
- Given the state of the conflict and insecurity, comprehensive, national programs are impractical. Nonetheless, some options can be pursued, even if ad-hoc.
 - Undertake a conflict-mapping exercise that attempts to understand the wide-ranging security realities within South Sudan and why combatants have picked up arms and are continuing to fight. As one participant noted, South Sudan is currently a highly heterogeneous conflict environment with arguably five separate theatres.
 - Locally-focused reintegration efforts are needed given the fragmented nature of conflict. These should be based on a commitment to understanding the varying motivations driving combatants in each context.
 - Low investment “risks”, “small bets” may be valuable for job creation and trust building:
 - Infrastructure development, small business development, vocational education
 - Media work
 - Draw on lessons from Pibor where communities are getting together to work in micro facilities
 - Reconciliation work with South Sudan Council of Churches
- Value in mapping out key local peacebuilding NGOs, identifying their capacities, and determining how to support them. This can be complemented by baseline assessments of any ongoing demobilization, reintegration, or development initiatives.

- Similarly, it is important to reach out to those in refugee camps as they have networks inside South Sudan.
- There are questions over what role UNMISS can play. It cannot be expected that the mission can provide a security umbrella that would allow more comprehensive development and DDR initiatives to gain traction.

Concluding Observations

While it was not the purpose of this dialogue to attempt to reach a consensus on the way forward for South Sudan, several overarching observations can be made.

First, is the recognition that alternative approaches to DDR are required in complex contexts, such as South Sudan. Attempting to apply a conventional template in such contexts is prone to mismatching actions with the realities on the ground. An illustration of this is with regards to the number of armed actors. Default DDR formulas often operate on the understanding that there are two (or just several) rival armed groups that are answerable to a political authority. In the case of South Sudan there are dozens of armed actors, many of which are not controlled by a political structure. Unless there is an inclusive arrangement that draws in these myriad actors, it can't be expected that these groups will abide by any terms that are adopted.

Another key observation was the value in exploring reintegration opportunities as early as possible. Such efforts can contribute to enticing some fighters or potential fighters to come off the battlefield both through structured and unstructured means. This requires building relationships with a network of NGOs who have access to and the trust of young men in conflict-affected regions. Such initiatives would need to be undertaken from a development approach over a multi-year timeframe that would likely occur prior and subsequent to any disarmament and demobilization efforts that are pursued. Activities to target fighters might involve works programs, skills development, or small business management training. While the conflict is ongoing, such initiatives may need to be supported from refugee centers, such as in northern Uganda. Reintegration efforts may also target communities more generally as a means of creating employment opportunities and fostering stabilization. Focusing on community-based development also sidesteps the political and logistical challenges of identifying and registering who is or isn't a fighter.

The multiplicity of armed actors, coupled with the perception that the government has been a key perpetuator of ethnically-based violence in the ongoing conflict highlights the unviability of a state-based National DDR Commission approach. Such a Commission would not have credibility in the eyes of many South Sudanese and would empower (through resource allocations and decision-making on disarmament) one set of actors (i.e. the government) at the expense of others. In this way, a state-based

National DDR Commission could exacerbate an already highly polarized social and political atmosphere. If any such Commission is to be created, it would need to be chaired by a NGO and have wide participation among rival armed groups to address equity and transparency concerns.

DDR efforts in South Sudan must also be aware of the political economy implications of these engagements. The legacy of DDR in South Sudan is that of political actors using DDR resources as a rent-seeking opportunity to burnish patronage networks. For example, the focus on cantonment areas is problematic given past abuses of this mechanism. These are costly undertakings that have historically lasted for months – thereby generating significant revenue flows for national actors. In the current complex and resource-constrained environment, available funds would be better focused on reintegration and development efforts, emphasizing instead a streamlined registration process for ex-fighters. Accordingly, to the extent that international partners (across the security, diplomacy, and development spheres) have a shared political economy assessment prior to the launching of any significant DDR activities, the more likely their efforts will be effective and reinforcing.

While DDR would ideally be linked to an established national security strategy framework that emerged from a participatory strategic defense and security review (SDSR) process, this sequencing is unlikely to be possible in the complex environment of South Sudan. Instead DDR or, as suggested above, RDD initiatives will likely need to take place simultaneous to a SDRS process. Similarly, any DDR activities would ideally be nested within an overarching security sector reform (SSR) process. However, it will likely take some time for concerted SSR to get underway (guided by the completion of the SDRS). DDR efforts should proceed in the interim, nonetheless. This may require establishing some general “working principles” that provide direction to DDR efforts until such time when the strategic reviews have been completed and adopted.