



Beyond Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-combatants

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For decades, national and international actors have used Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs for combatants as standardized key elements of peace operations, but these programs are not without their problems.

There is an African expression: “Softly, softly, catchee monkey!” which means that with patience and perseverance obstacles can be overcome. The saying exemplifies the qualities and skillset needed by peacebuilders in the difficult task of reintegrating combatants through Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs. What turns people towards armed mobilization and political violence and how can individuals be steered away from it? These are questions that have vexed governments and international organizations for some time now. Yet nobody seems to have a definite answer to what it takes to reintegrate ex-combatants, insurgents and rebels. What kinds of activities and skills underpin reintegration and more importantly: can they be **acquired** over time?

DDR and the Changing Context of Conflict

DDR programs are designed and intended to facilitate the transformation of combatants into civilians (see below). The understanding that DDR programs are essential in helping to prevent war’s recurrence in post-conflict situations is at the heart of current international aid practice and the academic literature on peacekeeping and stabilization.

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Disarmament is the comprehensive collection, documentation, and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of ex-combatants and the civilian population.

Demobilization is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed groups. The first stage involves the processing of combatants in temporary centers. The second stage encompasses a 'reinsertion' package.

Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants return to civilian life and gain sustainable employment and income during the post-conflict recovery period. Reintegration addresses social and economic issues.

DDR programming today is frequently mandated in on-going conflict contexts. There are two major challenges for ensuring the implementation of DDR interventions in these settings:


1. When there is no peace to keep due to on-going hostilities. To this one must add of lack of a political agreement and political buy-in from warring parties. There have been doubts about whether DDR activities will work in such settings (also called non-permissive environments).
2. When ongoing conflicts lack the stability required to facilitate the economic reconstruction needed to provide ex-combatants jobs entering the labor market, raising questions about how to implement effective DDR programs that prevent conflict relapse.

The Scale of DDR

Cartels

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 Weapons being burnt during the official launch of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) process in Muramvya, Burundi. Burundian military signed up voluntarily to be disarmed under the auspices of United Nations peacekeepers and observers. 2/Dec/2004. Muramvya, Burundi. UN Photo/Martine Perret. www.un.org/av/photo/

Weapons being burnt during the official launch of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration process in Muramvya, Burundi. Image by United Nations Photo via [Flickr](#).

DDR has grown significantly during the last decades. The first UN effort in Central America demobilized 18,000 fighters in the early 1990s. In recent years, 101,000 combatants were demobilized in Liberia. 150,000 combatants were due to be processed through DDR in South Sudan before the outbreak of the ongoing civil war and this number is expected to double or triple with the implementation of the peace agreement between the warring factions.

According to the UN department of Peacekeeping Operations, in 2013 estimated mandated caseloads for on-going DDR operations in peacekeeping contexts alone were over 400,000. DDR efforts, in other words, seem here to stay as long as conflicts around the world show no sign of abating.

DDR programs comprise a number of elements. They are highly standardized following the introduction in 2006 of the [United Nation's Integrated DDR Standards](#). Never before have DDR programs been so comprehensive in their scope and areas of competency, comprising an ever expanding field of interventions such as access to land, cash transfers, skills training and job placement.

Despite the abundant [literature](#) on lessons to be learned from previous DDR processes there is little evidence that DDR programs actually produce the

desired outcomes, and important loopholes and gaps remain; particularly around the mechanisms at stake in successful social and [economic reintegration](#) of former combatants.

Very few DDR programs aim to achieve a sustainable reintegration of ex-combatants. Arguably, the aim has been to provide a tangible peace dividend and stabilize the situation in the short term (for instance in Sierra Leone, Liberia, South Sudan, Nepal, just to name a few countries). In other words, the theory and policy of DDR is driven by realist and strategic rationalities: security first.

A dominant assumption underlying academic theory, policy and practice in the field of peacekeeping is the indispensability of DDR in the early transition from war to peace. Indeed, the rather rigid model of DDR that has evolved over the past decade has become part of the orthodoxy of UN peacekeeping, part of a sequencing of programs and activities that UN missions rarely deviate from. In recent years, this orthodoxy has increasingly been questioned, both in terms of the content of the DDR templates along with the [outcomes/effectiveness](#) of the intervention and, not least, the very serviceability of the concept to broader processes of peacekeeping. The important questions regarding DDR programs we have to ask ourselves are: Why do we approach these issues the way we do? Is the offer of a DDR program better than no program at all since it is believed that they make a substantial difference to the lives of ex-combatants and community members?

Vocation Skills Training vs Spending

The potential success of a DDR programme depends largely on the type, quality and length of the vocational skills training provided to ex-combatants. In

practice, though, the type of training carried out often does not even amount to half of the duration required for a civilian in peace circumstances. In other words, training does not lead to jobs, and it might not even provide access to employment at all. More often than not, training is poorly suited to labour market needs. Furthermore, without capital, the returns on skills training could be low. If the outcomes are that meagre, then why are education and skills training still so central to DDR? For some critical observers, vocational training persists because it is what donors and implementing actors know and are willing to fund, and it therefore involves little risk (the measurement of success is straightforward: the number of graduated trainees). If DDR has been ineffective in facilitating economic reintegration for former combatants, the reason may be that the programs' approach to the problem is wrong because skills training will not be effective in environments characterized by fragility, conflict and violence. In contrast to the poor results of training and education, [recent research](#) has shown that capital-centred DDR activities are among the best performing ones. Capital-centric intervention refers to start-up grants, in-kind capital transfers and cash injections.

[In Burundi](#), for instance, a reinsertion allowance was offered for eighteen months, with the amount depending on rank. A business start-up grant worth about \$1200 was also offered. Comparing the results for those who received it with those who did not, researchers found a large reduction in poverty among the former.

This review of DDR experiences suggests that ex-combatants tend to use the cash received wisely to satisfy their immediate needs and that some manage to save and invest. In Liberia cash transfers had a positive impact on local and national security. This is reflected, for example, in the low levels of violence

reported in parts of Liberia, where the Danish Refugee Council ran a dollar-a-day program for ex-combatants after the war ended. Injections of capital – cash, capital, livestock – seem to stimulate self-employment and raise long-term earning potential. The main assumption is that these programs are cost-effective and enable ex-combatants to expand their income generating activities.

DDR Bureaucracy and the Promise of Peace

An important assumption of DDR program concerns the special needs of ex-combatants – as opposed to the broader population – for reintegration support in order to leave behind militancy and adopt a civilian life and identity.

However, that is not necessarily the case. Ex-combatants are a heterogeneous group, with some of them more at ‘risk’ than others. Some ex-combatants might even share traits with youth at risk of recruitment by radical groups or violent gangs. Programs should be targeted at those at the highest risk of crime, violence, or future insurgency. But increasingly, DDR programs directly target civilians insofar as they have a relation with an ex-combatant (spouses and children), as it is the case in the recently launched [DRC reinsertion](#) and reintegration program. This prompts us to ask: are DDR programs faced with a difficult balancing act between equity and security? In other words, is this kind of targeted assistance rewarding violence? The answer seems to be ‘yes’.

Conclusion

DDR programs, rather than being value-free, amount to a normative process of change, with the aim of altering the identity from that of a combatant to a civilian, and from individual dependency on military structures to civilian self-resilience. It is believed that DDR programs are able to facilitate this change.

DDR as a technocratic intervention amounts to a belief in the ability to arrive at the optimal answer to any discussion through the application of particular practices. In other words, DDR programs keep the promise that disarmament and reintegration can be achieved by bureaucratic means. Bureaucracies require standardization for efficiency and rationalized training.

Today, however, effective DDR requires greater participation of local populations. DDR activities have still not found ways to adapt and respond to local contexts of armed violence and fragility in sensible, realistic and cost-effective ways. DDR interventions require locally differentiated analyses rooted in local perceptions and participation, as well as inclusive processes in designing prioritized programs. To be honest: the bulk of the world's fighters, gang members, insurgents and high risk youth do not want to be reintegrated: but have expectations of physical protection and material support for their own projects. They should have a say in this multimillion dollar enterprise.

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