

Hamber, B. (2007). Putting the 'R' back into DDR. Koff Centre for Peacebuilding

Focus

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Putting the 'R' back into DDR

Dealing with ex-combatants following war or armed political conflict is a complex and challenging task. Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes have been attempted across the globe with varying levels of success. A psychosocial approach raises additional questions and invariably means a focus on the reintegration component of the DDR process. Reintegration however is the part of the process that is the least developed yet the most long-term and difficult to achieve.

Disarmament and demobilisation are finite tasks, their success is relatively easy to assess in terms of cessation of hostilities or weapons decommissioned. Reintegration is more ephemeral with its success deeply entwined in socio-economic and political reality, whilst also being about psychological rehabilitation. On top of this, the reintegration needs of combatants are dramatically variable.

Gender and age specific needs

It is now common practice to consider all those linked with armies in combat as combatants, e.g. active soldiers, those caring for the wounded, those housing combatants, and those smuggling arms. The Cape Town Principles, aimed at dealing with child soldiers, argue that a combatant is anyone who was part of an armed force including cooks, messengers, and girls recruited for sexual purposes. It is important to cast the net as wide as possible when offering reintegration programmes, but such a broad definition raises question about how to deal with a variety of needs. This is cut across by other factors such as gender and age. It is well established for example that female ex-combatants often fail to access reintegration programmes or are excluded. Notwithstanding the work done by many innovative reintegration programmes, there has been at times a one-size-fits-all approach to reintegration.

Economic perspectives...

To date reintegration has largely, although not exclusively, focused on subsidies, as well as skills and educational development aimed at employment and economic reintegration. This is often coupled with activities such as community sensitisation, psychological assistance, reconciliation initiatives and public education. This is important because social and psychological reintegration cannot be divorced from post-conflict reconstruction. It is common in countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia for ex-combatants to point out that the skills they have learned in training programmes are useless in a climate of mass unemployment. Obviously a strong economy and a stable political context are vital to reintegration efforts. However, often employment is seen as the panacea for dealing with social and psychological reintegration, or the relevance of counselling and reconciliation rituals are overly emphasised. A balanced process is needed.

It is interesting to consider for example a relatively prosperous society like Northern Ireland in this regard. Ex-combatants, and especially those released after lengthy prison services, still find it difficult to find work because of discrimination, skills deficits and a small employment market as they are often afraid to work outside of their 'own areas'. Research suggests that 30 to 40% of ex-prisoners are unemployed compared to a national unemployment rate of about 5%.

That said, it would also be inaccurate to simply assume that all those unemployed do not work because of their ex-prisoner status. Many suffer from health problems and some find it difficult to work in environments over which they have little control or are subject to hierarchical relationships. In other words, the legacy of the conflict endures in the structural make-up of the society, but there are also psychological obstacles. This is true for ex-combatants as it is for the society at large.

... and psychological pitfalls

Reintegration as a concept cannot be detached from the psychosocial context in which it is being undertaken. This might sound like stating the obvious, however, from a psychosocial perspective, it is the nuanced interplay between the psychological and political and socio-economic situation that is important. This can impact on how we conceptualise and run reintegration programmes, as well as determine their success.

Training someone for a new job is not simply about teaching them how to do a task. Reintegration demands so-called 'soft skills' such as co-operation, self-reliance, networking ability, community development and social entrepreneurship, not to mention psychological readiness to deal with the challenges a new job will present. It is difficult to teach these 'skills'. Some international lessons suggest these are best imparted through strong active ex-combatant organisations themselves and reintegration programmes that are participatory rather than just training based.

In addition, DDR processes can fail to acknowledge that disarmament and demobilisation are in themselves contributing factors to why some male ex-combatants fail to reintegrate. Some men, as a result of the violent masculinities

Further information:

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shaped during war, can feel emasculated as a result of disarmament. Being trained with basic skills such as food gardening or a trade can be seen as demeaning influencing ex-combatants willingness to continue such work after the training. The meaning attached to a reintegration programme is also important. In South Africa, hundreds of ANC guerrillas who were offered a place in the new military 'walked away' from the process. They felt their 'bush experience' was not valued because of the low ranks they were given in the new integrated military. They felt undervalued. In Northern Ireland, using the term reintegration could alienate some former combatants because it is a term generally used within the criminal justice service. Being part of a reintegration scheme can be seen as a form of ongoing criminalisation. From the opposite end of the spectrum, reintegration as an option can also be a bridge too far for the people ex-combatants have hurt or bereaved, and seen as a reward for violent behaviour. This in turn undermines ex-combatants' chances of ever being reintegrated.

Thus, getting to grips with reintegration is about grappling with issues at the heart of most conflicts, such as the legitimacy of the use of violence. This is a society-wide task and requires political will, as well as being the responsibility of ex-combatants themselves. We also need to move away from seeing DDR processes as essentially functional tasks that need to be undertaken to cement peace. Reintegration cannot simply be about a-contextual investments into training schemes that count success by the number of people who are trained. Capacity building and life skills, as well as dealing with the psychological residue of the conflict in the minds of ex-combatants and other citizens too, should be part of the package.

16.10.2007

Publisher: Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF) / [swisspeace](#)

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Publication dates: The KOFF Newsletter appears in German, English and French on the first day of every month (except August 1 and January 1). The newsletter is distributed electronically.

The KOFF is sponsored jointly by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the following Swiss NGOs:

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