

# From soldier to civilian: the challenge of reintegration



Armed conflict is an all too familiar theme for journalists in many parts of Africa and Asia. But what happens when the fighting stops? Do people just put down their guns and go home? Do they even have homes to go to? And how will they make a living and support their families? The end of hostilities is often only the beginning of a much longer period of building peace.

The disbanding of armed groups and the successful reintegration of demobilised soldiers into the community is an essential part of any peace process. In some countries this has been done successfully. In others there are huge problems. A recent story from Colombia suggests that demobilised paramilitaries are now operating as 'private security' gangs, extorting money from local businesses. So it is clear that the way demobilisation and reintegration is planned and carried out is very important.

Above: Peace can only be arrived at when former fighters are disarmed and successfully reintegrated into their community.

## Media toolkit on communicating research

This is the second in a series of briefing documents for the media from the RELAY programme. The programme works with Southern print and broadcast journalists to communicate the findings of academic research in an accessible way through the media.

If you would like further information about the RELAY programme or wish to sign up to receive future media briefings by email, please contact [media@panos.org.uk](mailto:media@panos.org.uk). More information about Panos London and the Panos Network can be found at [www.panos.org.uk](http://www.panos.org.uk)

There is now a large body of research into how various peace-building initiatives reintegrate demobilised soldiers and other war-affected populations into society. These initiatives have been the subject of much debate. By looking at this research and understanding the issues, journalists can relate them to the situation in their own country.

There are plenty of news and features angles for stories around post-conflict reintegration. What about the Afghan mujahideen who chased the Soviet army out of the Hindu Kush, and who are now being trained to use their skills as mountain guides? Or the Rwandan soldier, badly injured in the war, who has used a special grant for disabled ex-soldiers to set up a scrap metal business?

It is often the poorest people in any society who are worst affected by war and its aftermath. So, successful post-conflict reintegration programmes are central to poverty reduction and development in Africa and Asia. Journalists can explain complex issues simply and relevantly, and reporting them openly enables more people to play a part in the reintegration process.

## Approaches to post-conflict integration

There are different research views on how former fighters should be reintegrated into society.

Roland Paris of the University of Colorado is critical of 1990s international peace-building initiatives that promoted democratisation and economic liberalisation in countries that had experienced civil war. Although this approach was meant to facilitate the equal sharing of the benefits of peace, Paris and others argued that liberalisation itself can be highly destabilising and divisive and can ultimately work against peace and prosperity. He concluded that effective political and economic institutions are important foundations of peace.

### Reintegrating former fighters: the short-term, targeted approach

Until recently, the dominant approach to post-conflict reintegration focused almost exclusively on those who had actually taken part in the fighting – armed men and women. Priority was given to them because it was felt that they would pose a security threat unless their economic needs were met. So they were encouraged to give up their weapons and return to their communities, and were usually offered an economic incentive to do so – cash handouts or land, or skills training.

There are some clear benefits to the short-term approach. Weapons are taken out of circulation, militias are disbanded, and money is injected into the economy. Foreign donors see that their contributions are producing results. As Beatrice Pouligny, at the Centre of International Studies and Research in France puts it, 'Very superficial short-term action on disarmament and demobilisation seems to please donors, rather than long-term action heading towards reintegration in all its dimensions.' In other words, donors are willing to pay if their commitment is relatively short term.

But the short-term approach doesn't always work. David Keen of the London School of Economics cites Somalia as a place where violence became institutionalised because those in power had no interest in allowing the revival of representative central government.

The approach also fails to acknowledge that many soldiers have fought for an ideological cause. Economic incentives cannot tackle the torments faced by ex-soldiers returning to civilian life.

Sierra Leone provides an interesting case study. There, the World Bank funded two separate initiatives between 2000 and 2003: the first aimed to help reintegrate demobilised fighters into social and economic life, and the second provided basic infrastructure and services to communities most affected by the war.

The first initiative was explicitly targeted at ex-combatants, and the World Bank is proud that it exceeded its target of disarming 45,000 fighters. However, the Bank acknowledges that the second initiative – to help communities – required an entirely different, non-targeted structure so that the communities themselves can be central to the reintegration process.

## Understanding violent conflict

The success or failure of post-conflict demobilisation and reintegration partly depends on the dynamics of the conflict in question. Many conflicts are complex, but by investigating the causes of conflict journalists can better understand and comment on the prospects for successful post-conflict reintegration. The causes of conflict influence the nature of people's grievances, and can be divided into three areas:

**Underlying causes** – factors arising from how society is set up

- illegitimate government, lack of political participation, unequal access to natural resources, jobs or education and health care, competition between different ideologies, religions or identities

**Immediate causes** – factors that contribute to an environment conducive to violence

- large numbers of guns in circulation, human rights abuses, instability in bordering countries, actions of diaspora populations living outside the country

**Triggers** – single key events that set off or escalate conflict

- elections, assassinations, currency collapse and rampant inflation, military coups, rising food prices

*Source: Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peace building: tools for peace and conflict impact assessment published by APFO, CECORE, CHA, FEWER, International Alert and Saferworld in January 2004.*

More research is emerging which suggests that sustainable peace can only be achieved if everyone affected by the conflict is eligible for assistance, not just the former fighters. This 'developmental' approach interprets demobilisation and reintegration in a much wider sense, and sees it as a long-term process, only achievable over a number of years.

### Rebuilding communities: the longer-term, developmental approach

Those who advocate a developmental approach to post-conflict reintegration believe that as far as possible, reintegration should be community-based, with the benefits of peace being shared by all members of society if it is to be a lasting peace.

Beatrice Pouligny, who supports the idea of community-based reintegration, points out that those ex-soldiers who are not taken back into a community often turn to crime, or become involved in other conflicts, creating new security risks. But she is also aware of potential drawbacks and raises important questions.

## Headlines

### **AUC paramilitary group completely demobilized in Colombia**

Xinhua News Agency, 19 April 2006

### **Kinshasa accepts militia leaders plea to join army**

allAfrica.com, 14 July 2006

### **Afghan warlord backs plan to disarm militias**

Financial Times, UK, 27 February 2006

### **Sierra Leone's forgotten 'bush wives'**

BBC African Perspective, broadcast 11 June 2006

How, for example, do you identify the people in the community you should be negotiating with – how can you be sure that you are dealing with the real person in charge? Does the community have sufficient resources to absorb ex-soldiers and ensure their livelihoods? Has the community itself suffered during the conflict, and will this affect how people feel about the reintegration of former fighters?

Liberia is an example of a country where the community-based approach to reintegration didn't work. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided assistance such as sanitation, health care and education. It also provided skills training to people in areas such as farming to help them earn a living for themselves and their families.

When peace in Liberia collapsed, the community-based approach came in for some criticism, not least from UNDP itself. It recognised that the political institutions had been so damaged during the war years that the communities had been unable to sustain the development programmes.

Eritrea and northern Uganda provide other examples of where communities have been destroyed to the extent that it is virtually impossible to rebuild them.

But community-based reintegration has worked well in some rural settings, as Anicia Lala found in her research in 2005. In Mozambique, tradition was very important to reintegration processes. Traditional rituals and ceremonies 'cleansed' demobilised soldiers and ensured their acceptance back into their families and communities. As a result, post-conflict rural Mozambique saw increasing numbers of marriages and land granted to returnees.

South Asian villages often have mixed ethnic populations and militant separatists from one ethnic group, such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka, have expelled another. Neera Chandoke of Delhi University underlines the importance of working to rebuild relationships between different ethnic groups living in the same community. This can be done with the support of village elders, through social and economic initiatives as much as by traditional ceremonies.

Employment schemes have worked for female fighters in South Asia, enabling them to contribute to family finances and overcome the shame they are often made to feel when they return to their villages.



Female ex-soldiers can find it difficult to reintegrate into the community after conflict. The expectation is that they will return to traditional female roles, having fought and killed alongside men.

### **Reintegrating former fighters: women and children**

Female and child soldiers are neglected by reintegration programmes quite simply because governments don't want to admit that women and children have taken part in fighting.

Elise Barth, who has studied the reintegration of female soldiers across Africa, points out that women are encouraged to behave like men while they are in the army and to fight and kill, but when they return home they are expected to take up their traditional roles of work, cooking and child rearing.

This, she says, can be difficult. No one has taught them how to combine the role of ex-fighter with that of wife and mother. In many cases, she says, female ex-soldiers try to hide the fact that they have taken part in the war for fear of social disapproval.

These difficulties have led some women to long for the time when they were in the army. Barth writes about Eritrean women who, while they were fighters, felt respected and equal to men. Afterwards they felt they had lost out, that they were not valued or respected as part of society.

Some demobilisation schemes have even discriminated against women and children because they operate on the basis of 'one man, one gun'. In Sierra Leone, for example, women who had been members of the Revolutionary United Front but who hadn't carried weapons received no assistance because they had no gun to turn in. Many turned to prostitution as a way to make ends meet.

Even where schemes have been set up to cater specifically for women and children, problems can arise. For example, the Ethiopian government set up factories with the express purpose of reintegrating young women fighters from the Tigray People's Liberation Front. But the women had become so aggressive as fighters, and reluctant to accept a traditional submissive role, that they would not accept instructions from their managers, and eventually had to be replaced.



Much attention is now paid to the reintegration of former child soldiers. There's an increasingly strong view that the most appropriate way to help them adapt to civilian life is through community-based events and traditional healing rituals, as opposed to psychological counselling. The church has also played an important role in this, in countries such as Mozambique, Uganda and Angola. Mazurana and Carlson's research revealed that Sierra Leonean women who had lost children opened their homes to former child soldiers.

### **Building social capital**

There is now an increasing emphasis on the role society plays in the success or failure of post-conflict reintegration. Where there is a strong civil society – where churches, community groups or veterans' associations exist independently of government – it is believed that ex-fighters are more likely to be successfully reintegrated into their communities. To sustain peace it is vital to build social respect for ex-fighters who have been isolated from society for long periods.

World Bank research says there is evidence to show that social cohesion and solidarity – or social capital – is critical for poverty alleviation and sustainable human and economic development.

In Namibia, church-led repatriation committees rebuilt trust between former adversaries, who then became neighbours in development. In Somalia, where local government infrastructure had completely broken down, NGOs have worked to re-establish traditional bodies like the council of elders, as a way of fostering social capital. Neera Chandoke's research in the Punjab region of India revealed that community elders, retired soldiers, religious leaders and local professionals came together to support war-affected communities and ex-soldiers.

Irae Baptista Lundin describes the ritual of reconciliation in rural areas of Mozambique, designed to cleanse the former soldier both physically and spiritually. During a ceremony conducted by a traditional healer the spirits of both the soldier's relatives and those of his victims are appeased. In some regions, she says, former enemies are brought together and everybody sits down to a specially prepared meal as a sign of reconciliation.

The longer term 'developmental' approach to reintegration after conflict believes that communities affected by the conflict should be assisted as much as the ex-fighters themselves. Many civilians may have lost their homes and livelihoods.



All countries emerging from a period of conflict have to face issues of reconciliation and adjustment. South Africa had a truth and reconciliation commission; Sierra Leone had this and a special court to try people accused of the worst war crimes; Mozambique had nothing.

### **Should ex-soldiers be punished?**

All countries emerging from a period of conflict have to confront the issue of justice. Should ex-soldiers or their commanders face trial in a criminal court for acts committed during the conflict? What are the potential consequences of arresting leaders of armed groups? What could happen if the leaders of armed groups that committed atrocities are allowed to take part in the political process at the end of the conflict? Are there ways to deal with these issues without bringing people to trial?

Often there are political reasons why it is not feasible to hold trials. Those implicated in crimes are simply too powerful, and are often central to any post-conflict political settlement. In Afghanistan, for example, many observers have expressed concern that leaders of armed groups responsible for atrocities were eligible for election to parliament in 2005.

Truth commissions are sometimes seen as an alternative, or an adjunct, to criminal trials. They have now been established in more than 20 countries, to investigate human rights violations and to recommend ways of avoiding them in the future.

In Sierra Leone, transitional justice has taken two forms: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on the one hand, and the Special Court on the other, which has tried a limited number of defendants accused of bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In South Africa, perpetrators of human rights abuses were offered amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of their crimes. This also raises questions. Should someone be able to walk free after having admitted to terrible crimes? Some people, especially victims and their relatives, felt that the desire for justice should be balanced carefully against the need for reconciliation.

Conversely in neighbouring Mozambique, there was no truth commission. Lundin says the major argument for not having one there was that African culture functions under a principle of forgiveness not confrontation and that a truth commission would reopen the wounds of war that had begun to heal. But did this allow impunity to prevail? Was it convenient for political leaders on all sides not to have to re-examine the past too closely? Alcinda Honwana of the UK-based Open University, shows in her research that traditional methods of reconciliation are not achieved without psychological cost to the community.



## What role does the media play in the success or failure of post-conflict reintegration processes?

A London School of Economics report warns that the actions of the media in post-conflict states can aggravate tensions instead of reducing them. Where the state is fragile and unrepresentative and the political process unstable, a liberalised media can work against peace by undermining the formation of functioning states. In Rwanda the promotion of a free media provided airtime for hate radio. In Peru, academic and talk show host Alberto Fujimori won the presidential election through a popular media campaign but then dissolved democratic state institutions. In Uganda privately owned media acted as a channel to ease public discontent whilst alternative political parties were suppressed.

But the report also acknowledges the important role the media can play in promoting national integration. Radio Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo contributed to peace by providing a shared and trustworthy source of news. Ultimately, the report is in favour of ethical, investigative journalism in post-conflict societies.

### Key lessons learned

Some key lessons can be drawn from the experience of programmes dealing with reintegration of demobilised fighters into their villages and communities:

- **Cantonment:** ex-soldiers were often encouraged to live together in designated areas, having laid down their weapons, in a process known as cantonment, as a first step towards reintegration. This procedure used to be strongly favoured by UN agencies. But in Angola, mismanagement of cantonment is thought to have contributed to a renewal of hostilities.
- **Managing expectation:** one potential danger of targeting ex-soldiers in the reintegration process is that expectations may begin to exceed reality. Some researchers point to rising levels of crime after a conflict as a consequence of excessive expectation and subsequent disappointment. South Africa is commonly cited as an example of this.
- **Cash handouts:** these are seen as problematic, as money given to ex-soldiers to help them resettle is often spent before they have returned home. This has been documented in Mozambique and Uganda, for example. It is not clear that handing out cash promotes sustainable peace.
- **The need for strong government:** strong political will and commitment to the reintegration process is needed. In Uganda, President Museveni actively requested World Bank assistance in demobilisation. In Angola, both sides agreed reluctantly to demobilisation, but the research showed that the rebel group UNITA subsequently undermined it at every turn.

## Key questions for journalists to ask

When talking to researchers about their work, it is important to ask specific and focused questions. Don't ask about the pros and cons of the targeted or non-targeted approach to demobilisation. An unfocused question will elicit a long-winded answer that probably won't provide the information required. It is best to be clear about exactly what kind of information is being sought before the question is asked.

So, questions such as these should work well: 'How many fighters were demobilised in Sierra Leone between 2000 and 2003?' 'What happened to the people who were demobilised?' 'How many of them found employment?' 'How many of them were able to return to their communities?'

These are all questions of fact. Equally the validity of the research should be checked. Has the researcher arrived at their conclusions honestly and have they drawn general conclusions from an appropriately sized body of data? The researcher should not be trying to use his or her research to support a previously held belief.

So ask questions like: 'How many women did you speak to in Eritrea?' 'How many of them expressed nostalgia for the days when they took part in the liberation struggle?' 'Have all of them found it difficult to return home to be wives and mothers?' 'Did any of them actually say they hated carrying a weapon and are thankful to be home?'

These again are questions of fact. It might be a good idea to ask researchers about the conclusions they have drawn from the work they have done and the data they have gathered. Two researchers could be interviewed who hold opposing views on a particular subject, views that could be juxtaposed in an article. In post-conflict reintegration there are often no right and wrong answers and approaches to it are constantly changing.

Again, questions should be focused and specific: 'Do you think it was a mistake to take a community-based approach in Liberia?' 'What has led you to say that the demobilisation and reintegration process in Afghanistan was badly planned?' 'Was the South African Truth Commission a success in your view?'

Researchers are not always right. Their conclusions and opinions can be challenged. A good technique is to use the opinion of one expert to challenge the view of another.

## Potential newspegs

- Anniversary of a ceasefire
- International days (e.g. International Women's Day, 8 March)
- Visit of senior official or politician to war zone

## Organisations conducting research on demobilisation and reintegration

**Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC):** promotes peace and development with the main emphasis on arms, peace building and conflict.  
Tel: +49 228 911 960  
Email: bicc@bicc.de  
www.bicc.de

**Centre for International Cooperation and Security, University of Bradford:** operates a project on Conflict and Development with a strong component on demobilisation and reintegration.  
Tel: +44 (0)1274 235 172  
Email: cics@bradford.ac.uk  
www.brad.ac.uk/acad/cics/projects/development/index.php

**Cranfield University Global Facilitation Network for Security Sector Reform (GFN-SSR):** provides research to facilitate policy development and capacity building for the security sector.  
Tel: +44 (0)1793 785020  
Email: gfn-enquiries@gfn-ssr.org  
www.gfn-ssr.org

**Crisis States Research Centre:** aims to provide a new understanding of the causes of crisis in the developing world.  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7849 4631  
Email: csp@lse.ac.uk  
www.crisisstates.com

**Developing Countries Research Centre, Delhi University:** relevant research focuses on conflict in India and the impact of systematic violence on cities.  
Neera Chandoke, Director  
Tel: +91 11 276 66281  
Email: chandoke@hathway.com  
www.drcrcdu.org

**ILO InFocus Programme Crisis Response and Reconstruction:** mainly focuses on employment-related interventions.  
Alfredo Lazarte-Hoyle, Director  
Tel: +41 22 799 88 22  
Email: Lazarte@ilo.org  
www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/recon/crisis

**Institute of Security Studies:** focuses on human security issues including human rights, governance, justice, crime and internal displacement.  
Tel: +27 12 346 9500/2  
Email: iss@issafrica.org  
www.iss.org.za

**International Alert:** focuses on building sustainable peace in post-conflict environments.  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7627 6800  
Email: communications@international-alert.org  
www.international-alert.org

**International Crisis Group:** produces regular analytical reports in order to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.  
Tel: +32 2 502 90 38  
www.crisisgroup.org

**International Peace Research Institute (PRIO):** concentrates on the forces behind violent conflict and on ways in which peace can be built.  
Email: info@prio.no  
www.prio.no

**Makerere Institute of Social Research:** relevant research focuses on conflict in Uganda and Rwanda.  
Tel: +25 6 77 490 310  
Email: misr@imul.com  
www.uganda.co.ug/misr

**Post-war Reconstruction & Development Unit (PRDU), York University:** specialises in issues of post-war recovery and reconstruction and humanitarian intervention in complex emergencies.  
Tel: +44 (0)1904 432 640  
Email: sc23@york.ac.uk  
www.york.ac.uk/depts/poli/prdu/welcome.htm

**Rights and Democracy:** supports human rights and democratic values. Recently carried out research on the role of girls in armed groups.  
Tel: +1 514 283 6073  
Email: dd-rd@dd-rd.ca  
www.dd-rd.ca

**Saferworld:** works to prevent armed violence and create safer communities.  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 4646  
Email: angus@saferworld.org.uk or general@saferworld.org.uk  
www.saferworld.org.uk

**The Initiative for Inclusive Security:** looks at the crucial role of women in peace building and the impact of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration on women.  
Tel: +1 617 995 1900  
Email: information@womenwagingpeace.net  
www.womenwagingpeace.net

**United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR):** research focuses on finding ways to prevent new conflicts and overcome existing ones.  
Tel: +42 22 917 31 86  
Email: unidir@unog.ch  
www.unidir.org

**World Bank Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit:** assesses causes, consequences and characteristics of violent conflict and designs specific development efforts for war-affected countries.  
www.worldbank.org/conflict

**African Journals Online (AJOL):** provides access to published African research. Access to online summaries is free at [www.ajol.info](http://www.ajol.info)

**Development Gateway:** join different topic groups and download research papers and other documents at <http://topics.developmentgateway.org>

**Eldis:** a gateway to information on development issues at [www.eldis.org](http://www.eldis.org)

**Google Scholar:** a search service for accessing academic research across the web at <http://scholar.google.com>

**id21:** a free development research reporting service for UK-based research on developing countries at [www.id21.org](http://www.id21.org)

**South Asia Research Network (SARN):** promotes the production, exchange and dissemination of research knowledge at <http://sarn.ssrc.org>

**Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN):** promotes debate and knowledge-sharing on poverty reduction processes and experiences in Southern Africa at [www.sarpn.org.za](http://www.sarpn.org.za)

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**Beatrice Pouligny, 2004** – [www.ceri-sciences-po.org/cherlist/pouligny/rapportpouligny.pdf](http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org/cherlist/pouligny/rapportpouligny.pdf)

**Elise Barth, 2002** – [www.prio.no/page/Publication\\_details/9429/40567.html](http://www.prio.no/page/Publication_details/9429/40567.html)

**Anicia Lala, 2005** – [www.ssronline.org/ebooks\\_pages.cfm?b=7&id=115&p=115](http://www.ssronline.org/ebooks_pages.cfm?b=7&id=115&p=115)

**London School of Economics, 2006** – [www.crisisstates.com/download/publicity/crisis\\_report\\_low.res.pdf](http://www.crisisstates.com/download/publicity/crisis_report_low.res.pdf)

**Dyan Mazurana and Kristopher Carlson, 2004** – [www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/articles/sierraleonefullcasestudy.pdf](http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/articles/sierraleonefullcasestudy.pdf)



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For further information contact:

**External Relations Unit**  
Panos London  
9 White Lion Street  
London N1 9PD  
UK  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 1111  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7278 0345  
media@panos.org.uk  
www.panos.org.uk/relay

Panos Media Toolkit on Communicating Research

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