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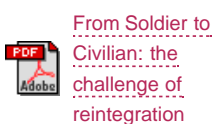| Home | About Relay | Where we work | Learning & Impact | Practical resources | Blog |

From soldier to civilian: Challenges of reintergration

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From Soldier to Civilian: the challenge of reintegration

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Overview

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.

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.

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Key Issues

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.

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.

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.

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Resources

Organisations conducting research on demobilisation and reintegration

Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC): promotes peace and development with main emphasis on arms, peace building and conflict

Tel: +49 228 911 960

Email: bicc@bicc.de

www.bicc.de

ILO InFocus Programme Crisis Response and Reconstruction: the main emphasis of the programme is on employment-related interventions.

Tel: +41 22 799 62 70

Email: IPFCRISIS@ilo.org

www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/recon/crisis

Institute of Security Studies

PO Box 1787, Brooklyn Square,
Tshwane (Pretoria)
0075
South Africa

Phone: +27 12 346 9500/2

Email: iss@issafrica.org

www.iss.org.za

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

United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR): research focuses on finding ways to prevent new conflicts and overcoming existing ones.

Phone: +42 22 917 31 86

Email: undir@unog.ch

www.unidir.org

Cranfield University Global Facilitation Network for Security Sector Reform (GFN-SSR):

provides research to facilitate policy development and capacity building the security sector.

Phone: +44 1793 785020

Email: gfn-enquiries@gfn-ssr.org

www.gfn-ssr.org

Iternational Crisis Group: produces regular analytical reports in order to prevent and resolve dadly conflict.

Phone: +32 2 502 90 38

www.crisisgroup.org

Crisis States Research Centre: aims to provide a new understanding of the causes of crisis in the developing world.

Phone: +44 207 849 4631

Email: csp@lse.ac.uk

www.crisisstates.com

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

Rights and Democracy: supports human rights and democratic values. Recent research on the role of girls in armed groups.

Phone: +1 514 283 6073

Email: dd-rd@dd-rd.ca

www.dd-rd.ca

The Initiative for Inclusive Security: looks at the crucial role of women in peace building and the impact of DDR on women.

Phone: +1 617 868 3910

Email: information@womenwagingpeace.net

www.womenwagingpeace.net

International Alert: focuses on building sustainable peace in post-conflict environments.

Phone: +44 20 7627 6800

Email: communications@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org

Centre for International Cooperation and Security, University of Bradford: operates a project on Conflict and Development with a strong component on D&R.

Phone: +44 1274 235 172

Email: cics@bradford.ac.uk

www.brad.ac.uk/acad/cics/projects/development/index.php

Post-war Reconstruction & Development Unit (PRDU), York University: specialises in issues of post-war recovery and reconstruction and humanitarian intervention in complex emergencies.

Phone: +44 1904 432 640

Email: sc23@york.ac.uk

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Links

African Journals Online (AJOL): provides access to African published research. Access to online summaries is free at **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**

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**

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**

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