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## Human Security in Fragile States



# Reintegration or reconversion?

Probing the nature of Disarmament,  
Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR)  
processes in fragile settings

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# Reintegration or reconversion?\*

## Probing the nature of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes in fragile settings

This research brief argues that Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) practitioners should focus more on ‘reconversion’ and less on ‘reintegration,’ and that they should do so both in terms of policy as well as in research and evaluation. Over the last two decades, the field of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) has become one of the key pillars of international post-conflict intervention. Though now considered crucial for peace-building, what we actually know about the real life outcomes of DDR processes is in fact quite limited. This is also correlated with the idea that DDR, and particularly the concept of reintegration, suffers from a large conceptual deficit. What do we actually mean by this idea of ‘reintegration’? And how does the concept relate to the complex and variegated social adjustment processes that take place at war’s end? In-depth research demonstrates that, rather than seeking ‘reintegration’ into society, demobilizing insurgent groups often have a different aim: they seek to *reconvert* the different forms of capital accumulated during the war into postwar ascendancy.

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# Introduction

This research brief focuses on current uses and practices associated with DDR as an international intervention strategy, and it explores its practical and conceptual limitations. It then proposes a three-pronged strategy going forward which can be operationalized both in terms of policy as well as research and evaluation. These three elements aim to:

1. make explicit, and adjust, the conceptual underpinning of DDR programs;
2. grant specific attention to historical and political factors of the post-insurgent accommodation processes;
3. recognize the crucial importance of internal dynamics of (former) groups of insurgents for the unfolding transition process.

## DDR and its tentative results

Though more elaborate operational definitions are in wide supply, at its core, Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) is considered to be about “the transition of being a member of an armed group to being a civilian.”<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1990s, DDR programmes have been implemented in many countries, often as part of peace settlements to help settle intra-state conflicts.

### **The UN definition of DDR <sup>2</sup>**

Disarmament is the collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants and often also of the civilian population. ... Demobilization is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. ... The second stage of demobilization encompasses the support package provided to the demobilized, which is called reinsertion. Reinsertion is the assistance offered to excombatants during demobilization but prior to the longerterm process of reintegration. ... Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income.

Such programmes proved vital to stability in post-conflict situations, and they have increasingly occupied a prominent place on the agenda of international organizations. Nonetheless, retrospective studies on DDR programs conclude that there is “little evidence at the micro level that internationally funded programmes facilitate demobilization and reintegration.”<sup>3</sup> The measurement of long-term effects of DDR programs is complicated by several factors, such as difficulties in separating the specific socio-economic effects of reintegration programmes from other contextual elements that may affect the socio-economic opportunities of ex-combatants and their families, which is very tricky.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the communities the ex-combatants form or move

1 Klem, B. and P. Douma (2008). *The Struggle after Combat. The Role of NGOs in DDR Processes* (The Hague, Cordaid). See page 7.

2 As listed by the United Nations Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Centre. Definition statement from the UN Secretary-General's note to the General Assembly, A/C.5/59/31, May 2005. Available at [http://unddr.org/what-is-ddr/introduction\\_1.aspx](http://unddr.org/what-is-ddr/introduction_1.aspx); accessed: Nov. 28, 2014.

3 Humphreys, M. and J. Weinstein (2007). Demobilization and Reintegration. In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51(4): 531-567. See page 531.

4 Keen, D. (2009). Economic Initiatives to Tackle Conflict: Bringing Politics Back In. In: *Crisis States Occasional Paper* No. 9.



*The field work this Research Brief draws upon made use of an innovative methodology of reconstructing live trajectories of former FMLN combatants, using historical photographs. The present photograph shows an FMLN unit in 1992. The numbers in the profile below correspond with live histories reconstructed and presented in the PhD dissertation.*

*Photograph: Iván Montesinos. Used by permission.*

into are often undergoing significant economic distortion from post-war reconstruction efforts, such as the proliferation of NGOs aiming to develop projects with different target groups. Furthermore, evaluations of reintegration programmes by and large constitute technocratic exercises commissioned as the programmes are about to finish or shortly after, but in any case much too early to offer more than very tentative conclusions on the process of combatants' reintegration, or to be able to say much about possible remobilization of former combatants in new phases of the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Another more fundamental reason is that in-depth research on DDR and its consequences is still scarce. Most published material is of the 'guide-book' and 'lessons learned' variety and tends to be prescriptive rather than analytical. Debates are geared towards setting appropriate boundaries for DDR programs and on how to best chop up the process into steps and specific time-bounded interventions.<sup>6</sup>

5 Theidon, K. (2007). Transitional Subjects: The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia. In: *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(1): 66-90.

6 The literature on the sequencing and programming of DDR interventions is extensive. For an overview, see Sprenkels, R. 2014. *Revolution & Accommodation, Post-Insurgency in El Salvador*. Utrecht University, PhD Thesis.

Among specialists, reintegration is widely seen as the most complex and problematic phase of DDR. For one, the promise of 'sustainable employment and income for ex-combatants' that is at the core of the UN definition of reintegration is often very difficult to achieve within the context of severe socio-economic deprivation which tends to be the reality on the ground in fragile societies. Furthermore, experts have identified a range of additional issues deemed crucial in moving towards the society's socio-economic reintegration and often disagree on specific goals and priorities.<sup>7</sup> As a result, 'both as a concept and a practice,' reintegration has become 'overloaded and unclear ... an open-ended, catch-all policy engendering varying and sometimes contradictory claims without identifying a clear endstate.'<sup>8</sup>

Critique on DDR programs has been on the rise from several fronts. Some criticize what they consider a mismatch between large investments and the limited socio-economic impact of the programmes, and argue that demobilization could be accomplished for a lot less money but that this is hindered by the fact that 'DDR programmes have become an industry with the consequent vested interests in their further expansion'.<sup>9</sup> A different strand of critique emphasizes the ethical implications of DDR programs, as they may prioritize perpetrators over victims, creating unfairness and inequity, or justify and perpetuate impunity.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the effectiveness of DDR programmes is called into question because different benefits may easily be diverted, turned around or captured by elites.<sup>11</sup>

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7 In this sense, some authors argue that the term DDR does not adequately make visible all the different aspects and phases of the process. Therefore, '[t]he acronym DDR is often expanded with more Rs, because the three terms it covers are considered too limited. An R may be added for 'reinsertion,' which ... refers to the transitional stop-gap measures to help ex-combatants overcome the time lag that commonly occurs between demobilization and reintegration. An R may also be added for resettlement or repatriation, when ex-combatants need to be returned to their home area or a home country. Finally, sometimes an R is added for rehabilitation, which is a more encompassing process than reintegration, as it concerns the wider societal struggle of ex-combatants and other community members to re-establish a normal life with shelter, income, basic facilities, services and so on'. Klem and Douma op. cit., see page 8.

8 ennings, K. (2008). Unclear Ends, Unclear Means: Reintegration in Postwar Societies-The Case of Liberia. In: *Global Governance* 14(3): 327-345. See pages 327-8.

9 Collier, P. (2006). Post-Conflict Economic Recovery. Paper for the International Peace Academy. See page 5.

10 See Lemasle, N. (2009). Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programs: Are Communities the Answer? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association; and Spear, J. (2006). From political economies of war to political economies of peace: The contribution of DDR after wars of predation. In: *Journal of Contemporary Security Policy* 27(1): 168-189.

11 For example, Rozema, R. (2008). Urban DDR-processes: paramilitaries and criminal networks in Medellín, Colombia. In: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40(3): 423-452.

## Understanding DDR: an arena of engagement, not an analytical concept

A more fundamental question that needs to be asked is whether DDR programs, in spite of their declared purpose, are really primarily about achieving reintegration. These programmes, and their popularity in the international community, could also (and possibly better) be understood in relation to the practical and discursive functions they perform in facilitating the international actors' engagement in post-conflict settings. First, it is important to recognize that DDR programmes have come to provide a very useful tool for the political bargaining around peace agreements. It allows the international community to offer warring parties concrete incentives to put down weapons and demobilize, while providing the leadership with concrete alternatives to offer their followers, thus facilitating bargaining between elites to achieve a political settlement.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, being able to offer reintegration provisions can be especially important in order for leadership to convince fighters to follow their lead into the peace process, thus demonstrating that 'the struggle has not been in vain' and peace will bring concrete benefits.

The design and implementation of DDR programs allows international organizations to establish significant contact with and oversight of the armed group in question by means of registration and subsequent bureaucratic interaction. This kind of interaction would be very difficult to achieve by other means. It implies possibilities for registration and supervision and despite not offering any solid guarantee that the armed group will not engage in further combat, it credibly provides some form of deterrence while allowing for early warning and dealing with problems if the occasion so demands.

Furthermore, DDR programs have a 'two-birds-with-one-stone' quality that has generally given them a favourable position in international cooperation policies. Fundraisers are able to argue that, if successful, former fighters may become agents for local development, while at the same time refraining from becoming potential spoilers of the peace process through renewed violence or criminal activity.<sup>13</sup> Thus, DDR programme proposals often forward claims that money will serve to obtain both the goals of enhanced security as well as poverty reduction.

It is very probable that the qualities described above have helped convert DDR programmes in a virtual *sine qua non* in international peace building interventions. At this point, in most of the world's armed conflicts, when significant armed groups make it to the negotiating table, it is credible to assume that they are very likely to expect to obtain some kind of DDR package in return for dismantling their military capacity.<sup>14</sup> The United Nations or other peace brokers are likely to lobby for a DDR programme in order to get a firmer grip on the group in question on the group in question. The key quality of DDR programmes is that it allows for an umbrella that different actors can use to legitimize participation in this trade-off. The DDR programmes themselves provide an arena for interaction that connects the different actors.

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12 Di John, J. and J. Putzel (2009). Political Settlements (Birmingham, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre).

13 Muggah, R. (2005). No Magic Bullet: A Critical Perspective on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Weapons Reduction in Post-conflict Contexts. In: The Round Table 379: 239-252. See page 246.

14 Jennings (2008) makes this point with regard to the DDR process in Liberia. Op. cit.

## Reintegration or reconversion?

The rationale that has made DDR programmes into a useful instrument for bargaining and managing the formal dissolution of armed groups bears only limited relevance to the understanding of reintegration as a social process. As 'a theoryless field',<sup>15</sup> DDR literature has been accused of largely ignoring politics, power and history.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the concept of reintegration leans on teleological assumptions and the literature provides little analytical guidance for making sense of the complex and variegated accommodation processes taking place among former participants in insurgent movements. It pays little attention to, and shows limited understanding of, the nature of insurgency and of the build-up of different groups participating in this type of warfare. This often results in an overly simplistic idea of what exactly has to be demobilized and reintegrated, leading to an excessive focus on the combatants, a lack of attention to the wider constituencies that propelled or were dragged into the insurgent project, and disregard for the insurgent groups' internal relations and organizational culture, as well as for the group's multiple entanglements with other sectors of society. The literature furthermore pays little attention to how reintegration itself may function as a socio-political process, as if the arrival of peace somehow annuls the insurgents' sense of collectiveness, their political aspirations and their claims to power. Hence, the concept of reintegration oversimplifies the actual individual and collective agendas at stake.

From the perspective of international organizations, if the aspiration is to achieve peaceful reintegration of former insurgent groups into society, then from the perspective of the leadership of such groups, the aspiration is not primarily about reintegration but more about gaining political leverage in the new context. Rather than thinking about how to dissolve their armed organization or faction, they think about how to *reconvert* it to make it serve the political purposes required to compete for power in the new context.<sup>17</sup> From the perspectives of the insurgents themselves, the dominant logic is a political one, not a military one. When demobilizing their armed organization, they run the risk of losing political leverage. 'Reconversion' can be defined as the process by which former insurgent groups seek collective and individual adjustment to the emerging peace circumstances by using different types of capital acquired over the years (political, military, socio-economic) in new ways, with the purpose of harnessing socio-political accumulation.

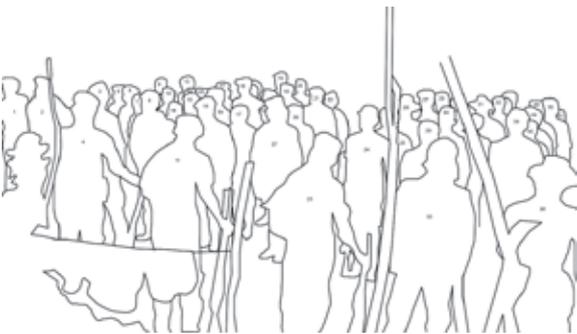
The concept of post-insurgent reconversion draws attention to the importance of multiple transformations and accommodations, collective as well as individual, that actually take place within and among former insurgent groups during the postwar transition period. Contrary to the idea of 'reintegration', this concept allows consideration of the phenomenon of what happens to insurgents after the war ends as a relational process embedded in a particular historical and political context. To view former insurgent groups as dynamic social fields built out of historically constructed relations, allows an examination of both the postwar changes taking place among former insurgents as well as possible continuities or legacies of wartime participation. This can be applied not only to the accommodations that occurred within the organizational models and networks of the insurgency to different postwar associational and institutional expressions, but

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15 Nilsson, Anders (2005). *Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-War Societies*. (Stockholm, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). See page 35.

16 Kriger, N. (2003). *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe. Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980-1987* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press). See page 20.

17 Recent in-depth research into the postwar adjustment processes of El Salvador's former guerrilla movement FMLN clearly demonstrated how this worked. While the FMLN participation in DDR programmes was labeled as 'reintegration' by donor organizations and the international community, in internal strategizing documents leadership avoided the word reintegration and instead spoke of a series of reconversion strategies geared towards gaining political ascendancy in the new context. In: Ralph Sprenkels (2014). *Revolution and Accommodation. Post-Insurgency in El Salvador*. Phd Thesis, Utrecht University.



*A group of FMLN combatants getting ready for the assault of a military post, in December of 1981. More than half of the individuals in this photograph did not survive the war. Many of the survivors continued to play important roles within the FMLN in the post-war period. Photograph: author unknown. Photograph: author unknown. Courtesy of IEHAA-UIGCS.*

also pertains to how individual participants have adjusted and realigned themselves both within the realm of the (former) insurgent relations as well as within broader society. It provides the thinking about DDR processes with a theoretical basis that has been lacking thus far.

## **Implications for DDR policy and research**

The most important implication of the conceptual reflections presented above is that DDR programmes (including research and evaluation efforts on them) need to pay more attention to the different parallel adjustment processes taking place among the participants in the demobilizing group, and how these processes are connected to reconversion dynamics. The assumptions underpinning DDR intervention strategies should be made explicit. DDR programme proposals should be based on theoretical models that are in line with contemporary social theory, which also implies that they should be particularly sensitive to the specific context of the country. For inquiry and evaluation, rather than asking whether or to what extent former insurgents 'reintegrated' into society, a much more precise and relevant question would be to ask what different types of adjustments and accommodations have taken place on a collective as well as on an individual level, and what kind of positions, roles and arrangements these have produced in the post-conflict setting. An analytical focus on such accommodations may draw our attention to the actual changes (and continuities) that occur on a collective as well as on the individual level, and how these relate to DDR processes.

Two specific aspects merit additional consideration both for policy makers and researchers.

**1. The historical and political factors of the post-insurgent accommodation processes**

To think through post-insurgent accommodation processes, it is important to be able to count on an understanding of the insurgent group that is as accurate and nuanced as possible. Such an endeavor is not always easy, since most insurgent groups have made extensive use of clandestine methods in order to make their organization inscrutable to enemies. The guerrilla army itself is often no more than the tip of the iceberg in a much more complex and sophisticated organizational structure. Networks of collaborators and supporters often play crucial roles. The insurgents' organizational networks often spread out over several countries and implicate different subgroups and sectors. Such ties may have important pre-insurgent antecedents, and have often become further developed during the insurgency itself, evolving into strands of social standing, loyalties, mutual expectations and internal rifts. Insurgent groups are likely to have developed parallel governance structures, actually exercising some forms of sovereign power among certain social groups or in certain parts of the country. In this sense, it is important to acknowledge insurgency not only as a type of military aggression, but also as a form of proto-state building. For DDR practitioners, it is important to take into account that all of these historical and political factors form the foundations on which postwar adjustment processes take shape.

**2. The crucial importance of internal dynamics of (former) insurgents groups for the unfolding transition process**

Insurgent movements are often complex coalitions of different factions and subgroups that have joined efforts against common enemies. Interfactional conflicts might have played an important role during the insurgency and also the insurgency project may have forced participants to overcome internal differences or to postpone factional strife. It is quite common for factional disputes to re-surface during the postwar transition. Other conflicts may also arise because of newly emerging differences between leadership and rank-and-file, or between various subgroups of the movement.

Such conflicts often have a significant impact on postwar political developments and sometimes lead to renewed armed confrontation as, for example, in the cases of South Sudan and Afghanistan. Factional conflicts can also fuel the rise of veteran groups that mobilize on behalf of such factions. Factional disputes and veteran politics can continue to play an important political role even decades after the end of the war, as exemplified by a country like Zimbabwe. The international community might wish that certain insurgent groups would disappear as power holders in the postwar context, this aspiration is likely to be unrealistic. It might be more fruitful to accept post-insurgent reconversion as a political phenomenon without an *a-priori* negative judgment. This can translate into finding ways to offer particular incentives and technical support to the former warring factions to convert their support structures into political parties or other types of organizations.<sup>18</sup> The reconversion process can be seen as a window of opportunity to engage with former insurgents to try and promote commitment to peaceful, legitimate, transparent, and democratically-oriented organizational structures. This means the political dimension of DDR must be much more prominently and explicitly addressed in future programmes.

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18 Dudouet, V. (2012). Intra-Party Dynamics and the Political Transformation of Non-State Armed Groups. In: International Journal of Conflict and Violence 6(1): 96-108.

## In conclusion

The idea of reintegration does not adequately capture the actual adjustment dynamics of insurgent groups in transition from war to peace. Our thinking on DDR programmes needs to acknowledge the importance of the reconversion dynamics such groups engage in. The key logic of reconversion is the use of the different forms of capital accumulated during the war into postwar ascendancy. Post-insurgent reconversion processes are best understood as complex and contentious processes of accommodation in which the internal relations of the insurgent movement play a crucial role. Rather than relying on false or problematic dichotomies, such as that between (former) fighters and communities, the notion of post-insurgent reconversion invites policy makers and practitioners to consider the impact of external interventions on the socio-political dynamics of former armed groups and their broader support structures, harnessing potentially positive effects of the postwar adjustments and preventing negative impact. It is important to incorporate understandings of post-insurgent reconversion into our thinking on DDR because it allows us to deepen our analysis of unfolding political processes in fragile and conflict-affected settings and helps to engage in practical responses that are politically sensitive and sensible.

Further reading:

**Revolution and Accommodation. Post-Insurgency in El Salvador.** Ralph Sprenkels (2014). Phd Thesis, Utrecht University.

The Special Chair Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction focuses on the everyday politics and practices of service delivery, livelihoods and disaster risk reduction in the institutional landscapes of conflict- or disaster-affected areas. It engages in multi-sited qualitative and quantitative research. Research of Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction is collaborative, interacting with policy and practice throughout the process to enhance research uptake.

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