Demobilizing and Reintegrating Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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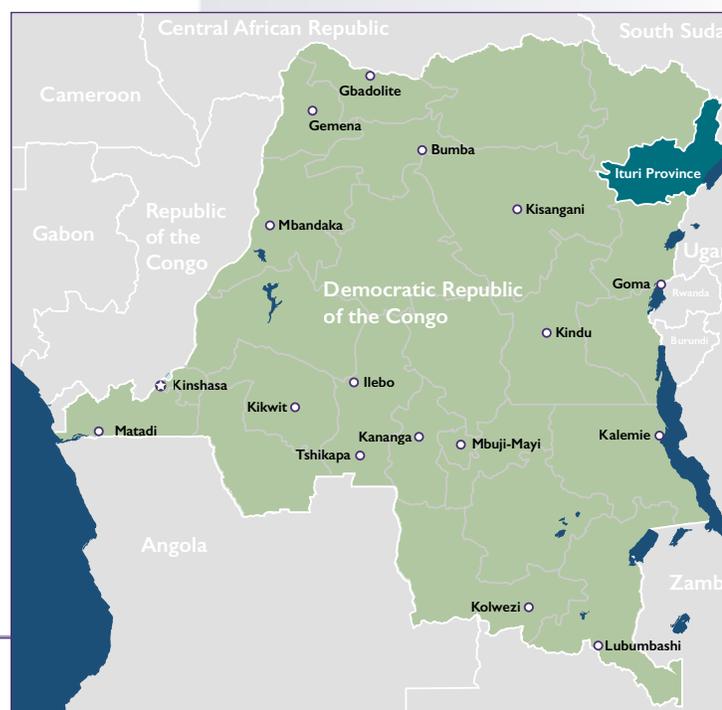
THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC) HAS EXPERIENCED armed conflict both internally and with its neighbors since the mid-1990s.[1] The presence of a variety of armed groups, including foreign fighters, Congolese militias, and rebel forces, has become a major obstacle to peace and security in the region. These armed groups have violated human rights through acts that include murder, kidnaping, torture of civilians, mass rape, the use of child soldiers, and the burning of houses and entire settlements. These conflicts have killed hundreds of thousands and affected millions of lives.[2]

In an effort to halt the warfare, DRC signed the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement in July 1999.[3] This landmark agreement led the UN Security Council to pass Resolution 1279 on 30 November 1999, which established the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), with the goal of facilitating the ceasefire agreement and disengaging all warring parties. Three years later, on 17 December 2002, the main Congolese factions signed the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement, which called for a program of demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants.[4] With international support, the DRC created four distinct DDR programs to help end hostilities in the country: a DDR Reintegration and Resettlement (RR) program aimed at repatriating foreign fighters, two national programs aimed at demobilizing a variety of Congolese rebel and militia groups, and one program that focused specifically on the province of Ituri, where violent rebel groups were particularly active.

Despite these efforts to end hostilities and stabilize the state, the population has continued to experience insecurity and violence. Violence in the eastern part of DRC has been particularly destructive, and new armed groups have emerged despite the peace accords and DDR programs. Ultimately, the protracted violence and lack of security within the country and region demonstrate that these DDR programs were unsuccessful, especially because many ex-combatants have returned to their original jobs as fighters.

This article provides insights into why the DDR(RR) programs failed in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It proposes that five shortcomings led to the programs' demise: an unrealistically short timeline to accomplish the stated goals, inadequate funding, an overemphasis on disarmament, the failure of the DRC government to enact meaningful security sector reform and create competent security forces, and the DRC's troubled relationship with neighboring countries, particularly Rwanda. Overall, the DDR(RR) programs in DRC did not place enough emphasis on long-term efforts during the "reintegration" phase, which was the intended goal of DDR. Successful reintegration requires the parties to address a multitude of problems that

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go beyond illegally armed individuals, including security sector reform, good job opportunities for ex-combatants, and mechanisms for reconciliation and rebuilding trust within the communities that receive ex-combatants.

DDR Programs and Conflict Resolution

A disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program aims to transition legally and illegally armed individuals from combatant to civilian life.[5] According to the UN's DDR Resources Center, "the objective of the DDR process is to contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin."[6] DDR, in other words, is an integral part of peacebuilding and sustainable development in post-conflict environments.[7]

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Typically, DDR programs begin with a call for ex-combatants to disarm. The rationale behind disarmament is that ex-combatants with weapons pose security threats to the state, civilians, and countries bordering the conflict state. The disarmament component of DDR usually includes sorting, controlling, recording, verifying, and destroying weapons and explosives.[8] In some cases, ex-combatants are given cash for their arms in a "buy back" program.[9]

Demobilization is a course of action for regulating and controlling the transformation of former soldiers from combatant to noncombatant status.[10] Demobilization often starts with disarmed ex-combatants being confined to designated centers or camps before being returned to society.[11] In addition to persuading the former combatants to lay down weapons and stop fighting, neutral international agencies provide various types of assistance, typically in the form of financial support, which helps these former fighters to begin a new life.[12] These programs often also provide opportunities for the government to compile information and figures on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of the former soldiers— information that the government can use to address the obstacles that may prevent these individuals from habituating to noncombatant life.[13] Demobilization is typically followed by reinsertion, which is a preparatory step in the rehabilitation process that provides moral and psychological support to ex-combatants, and sometimes to their families, for a short period. Tangible support can include food, clothing, shelter, health care, and psychological counseling.[14]

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Reintegration, typically the final phase in DDR programs, aims to strengthen the skills and well-being of former soldiers so that these individuals can achieve social and economic reintegration with their communities and not return to fighting. This phase may provide training in skills needed for self-employment, assistance finding a regular job, education opportunities, and long-term economic assistance.[15] Reintegration is typically the most expensive and time-consuming stage in the DDR process and if done well, successfully transitions fighters back to being peaceful and productive citizens. In some cases, additional steps to the DDR program are added, including the repatriation and resettlement of foreign combatants.

Ultimately, successful DDR programs require considerable time and resources and clear goals to be successful. The effectiveness of such programs depends on the ability of the state to promote humanitarian assistance, support economic and social development, deploy reliable forces to provide security for the population, and demonstrate the needed political resolve.[16] In post-conflict countries,

these very aspects of the state are often weak and ineffective, making the implementation of DDR programs difficult.

DDR Programs in DRC

Initial efforts to create a DDR program in DRC began with the 2002 Pretoria Accords between the governments of DRC and Rwanda.[17] These accords included a DDR program aimed at demobilizing, disarming, and repatriating foreign forces in DRC, specifically Rwandan fighters. The Congolese Army was given 90 days to complete this mission.[18] Ultimately, the program succeeded in disarming only 402 individuals, and there was a disagreement on the number of repatriated troops. Rwanda claimed it withdrew 23,400 troops during the timeframe.[19] The DRC, however, claimed that 20,000 Rwandan soldiers remained in the eastern region of Kivu. One UN report from 2003 claimed that Rwandan forces in the DRC, under the umbrella of the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), had not been demobilized at all.[20]

Rebels, militia groups, and the DRC government signed another peace deal, the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement Peace Accords, on 17 December 2002.[21] The Congolese government launched a nationwide DDR program as part of these accords. The first phase ran from October 2004 to December 2006; the second phase started in July 2008 and was completed in December 2009. Alongside this nationwide program, a separate DDR program was created in Ituri province to run from 1 September 2004 to June 2005. Ultimately, the first phase of the nationwide DDR program succeeded in demobilizing 102,014 individuals, disarming 186,000 individuals, and integrating 83,986 individuals into the national army. The second phase of the DDR program claimed to have demobilized 4,782 individuals, in addition to disarming 12,820 individuals and integrating 8,038 individuals into the national army.[22] The Ituri program reported demobilizing 15,811 individuals and collecting 6,200 weapons, of which 70 percent turned out to be old and unusable.[23] Several agencies disputed the figures on disarmed militias in Ituri. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, claimed that 12,500 combatants were disarmed, while IRIN News put the figure at 9,000.[24]

Although the exact number of those repatriated, demobilized, and disarmed remains debatable, hundreds of thousands participated in these DDR programs, making them

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Peacekeepers assist with disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration in the DRC.

some of the largest in the region, if not the world. Despite a large number of partici-
pants, however, violence and insecurity have persisted in the DRC.

Shortcomings of the DDR Programs in the DRC

As mentioned above, five main factors contributed significantly to the
shortcomings of the DDR programs launched in the DRC: an unrealistically
short timeline, inadequate funding, an overemphasis on disarmament, the
failure of the DRC government to enact meaningful security sector reform
and create competent security forces, and the DRC's troubled relationship
with neighboring countries.

Aerial view of camps for people displaced by conflict

All of the DDR programs initiated in the DRC suffered from unrealistically short timelines. The initial DDR(RR) program targeted external fighters such as former uniformed troops from Rwanda, Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR), the FDLR, a Hutu nationalist militia in DRC, and forces of the Interahamwe, a Hutu paramilitary organization. The program allowed only 90 days for both the pullout of Rwandan armed forces and the dismantlement of former FAR forces and Interahamwe.[25] This timeline, measured in days and months, did not allow enough time for progress toward solving the major issues of demobilizing, disarming, dismantling, and repatriating the militias, but instead increased pressure on officials to achieve quick results. The program's overseers were not able to tackle the most difficult problems associated with removing and repatriating these outside forces from within DRC, such as identifying and gathering foreign fighters, some of whom had been in the country for decades. Nor was there sufficient time to train, mobilize, and consolidate enough government troops to oversee the process. The short timeline also did not allow sufficient time for UN forces to deploy and help implement the repatriation process. Initially, the MONUC deployed only 8,700 troops in the DRC, not nearly enough to oversee such a large DDR program or provide general security to the areas where the DDR process was occurring.

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Another key obstacle to successfully executing the DDR programs in DRC, both in the short term and over time, was the lack of adequate funding. An insufficient allotment of funds (USD$200 million) caused the DDR program to run out of money halfway through the proposed process and created gaps in services for those wishing to demobilize and those already demobilized. International assistance allocated only USD$14 million for integration and army reform.[26] This lack of funding greatly hindered security sector reform initiatives and made it difficult to integrate irregular fighters who wished to join the DRC military.

The lack of success in the DDR(RR) program and national DDR programs in the DRC can also be attributed to an overemphasis on disarmament. The DDR(RR) program succeeded in disarming only a reported 402 individuals.[27] The nationwide DDR program disarmed 186,000 individuals in the first phase and 12,820 individuals in the second phase.[28] In Ituri, between 9,000 and 12,500 combatants were disarmed.[29] The total number of weapons that were collected through the national program is unknown, but the figure was 6,200 weapons for the Ituri program, of

which 70 percent were old and unusable, suggesting that ex-combatants did not truly disarm.[30] Ultimately, given the hundreds of thousands of armed individuals in the DRC, the number of those who were disarmed is low.

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to lasting peace in the DRC has been the lack of security sector reform throughout the country, particularly in the east. This failure has negatively affected the rule of law, civil order, and the justice system. The government's inability to create competent, professional security forces and deploy them throughout the country caused citizens to take up arms to provide their own security. The absence of government-provided security in the eastern region, for example, especially in the rural areas, created an unstable environment that impelled citizens to join militias and armed groups for self-protection. Corruption in local government structures further undercut overall popular support for the government, including any security it provided.[31] Under the supervision of traditional chiefs, communities took to hiding weapons for self-protection from both criminal gangs and government security forces and organized local militia groups for protection, which further weakened the progress of the DDR programs. Thus, ineffective governance and lawlessness in eastern DRC created fertile conditions for the emergence of militia groups that threatened the security of the local population, despite the implementation of the DDR programs.

Finally, DRC's relations with neighboring countries has continued to be a challenge to peace and stability. Rwanda, in particular has continued to meddle with DRC militias. For example, according to one report, Rwandan deserters from the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) aided Congolese Tutsis in forming the March 23 (M23) rebel group after the DRC government failed both to protect the Tutsi population in North Kivu from Hutu militias and to dismantle the FDLR.[32] In March 2013, the UN passed Resolution 2098, which authorized the use of offensive operations in the eastern DRC to counter M23, and the rebel group was finally neutralized in November 2013.[33] Clearly, more work is needed to build better relationships between the DRC and its neighbors, and to create mechanisms for removing foreign fighters from DRC.

Creating Better DDR Programs in DRC

The protracted armed conflict in DRC is the product of decades of poor governance, ethnic conflict, interference and spillover violence from neighboring states, and insufficient and unprofessional security forces. Decades of insecurity have produced an array of illegally armed groups and militias with a variety of different goals. Given this complicated and lengthy history, creating a DDR program that truly reintegrates ex-combatants back into civilian life or integrates them with government forces requires a holistic approach that focuses not only on the fighter but also on society, the economy, and the government. And while this task is enormous, steps taken in the near term could help move DRC in a better direction.

First, DDR should be understood as a long-term process, and the goal should be the "R"—reintegration—which creates the conditions for ex-combatants to take their place in society as productive and peaceful citizens. The temptation in DDR programs is to focus on demobilization and disarmament because these are short-term efforts and highly measurable; however, demobilization and disarmament are more measures of performance than they are measures of effectiveness. In the end, the goal should be to reintegrate ex-combatants into society and give them incentives to stay demobilized and possibly disarmed over the long haul. Demobilization, in other words, should be a step towards reintegration—not its own goal. As the program unfolded in DRC, hundreds of thousands of illegally armed individuals were demobilized, but there is little evidence to suggest that these individuals stayed demobilized. Persistent insecurity, lack of jobs, and conflicts within local communities have prevented many of these individuals from moving beyond demobilization to reintegration.

Similarly, focusing on disarmament does not guarantee reduced violence or stability. In countries that have experienced protracted conflict, weapons tend to be plentiful and focusing on removing all or most weapons from a conflict zone is time-consuming, expensive, and ineffective. As the conflict in the DRC has shown, individuals turned in old or non-functioning weapons rather than truly disarming, thus rendering the disarmament program pointless.

Focusing on reintegration requires addressing a multitude of problems beyond the presence of illegally armed individuals. Most notably, ex-combatants need to have a pathway to earning a living; without a job and the ability to provide for their families, fighters are unlikely to lay down their weapons. Post-conflict countries, however, often have weak economies and lack opportunities for individuals to earn a living. Furthermore, communities receiving ex-combatants must be prepared for them and find mechanisms for reconciliation and rebuilding trust. Without the buy-in and acceptance of the local population, efforts at truly reintegrating ex-combatants are unlikely to succeed.

International donors could help the reintegration process work by providing funding for job training over an extended period of time. In particular, the focus should be on initiatives that aim to develop human capital, including education, vocational training, and farming skills for the whole community, not just for ex-combatants. This one effort—human capital development at the community level—could go far in transforming conflict zones and helping them become more economically productive and harmonious spaces. The development of

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human capital could thus become a vehicle not only for reintegrating former soldiers but also for rehabilitating war-torn communities. Similarly, jobs programs could be structured in such a way as to reintegrate ex-combatants and help them work towards reconciliation with their communities and societies.[34] UN Development Programme-funded fishing cooperatives in Ituri, for example, helped bring villagers and former combatants together to work for a mutually beneficial purpose.[35]

Perhaps the greatest challenge with DDR programs is that their success requires commitment from several government sectors. In a state that is attempting to end internal conflict, DDR and security sector reform must take place simultaneously to address shortcomings in government security forces and the threat of illegally armed individuals and groups.[36] In the case of the DRC, the country's security forces were small, poorly equipped, and inadequately trained, all of which greatly hindered their role in the DDR process. As noted earlier, international donors directed only a small portion of the total budget for the entire DDR program to reforming the DRC's military.[37] The international community clearly did not see security sector reform as a priority.

In addition to insufficient numbers of properly trained and equipped government forces, the UN mission in the DRC was unable to mobilize enough MONUC forces or deploy them quickly enough to help provide security and oversight of the DDR process. The result was a security vacuum in critical areas, particularly outside major cities, and an inability to successfully identify, repatriate, and demobilize foreign fighters and domestic militants. The rushed timeline of the DDR programs made matters worse because it did not allow adequate time to mobilize or deploy the MONUC forces, nor did it provide time to better train and professionalize DRC forces for the DDR mission.

Alongside security sector reform, the rule of law should be considered one of the fundamental ingredients in the overall DDR process. The rule of law has all but disappeared in parts of the DRC as a result of protracted conflict and poor governance. In some provinces, government forces are as much a threat to the local population as illegally

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armed individuals and groups. Under these conditions, the government is unable to create security, establish rule of law, or build trust with the population. To help reestablish security and civil structures, the UN and other international organizations should have provided better and longer training of the DRC's security forces, including better human rights training. As it was, very little time and money went into professionalizing DRC's forces. In addition, international organizations should have provided desperately needed training for lawyers and judges, the lack of which has undermined due process and the prosecution of war-related crimes. In both the short and long run, security is unlikely to take hold without a strong justice system, and justice is not possible without addressing rule of law—the ability to enforce the law and the capacity to prosecute those who violate it.

Finally, international organizations and regional actors need to rigorously address the role that neighboring countries have played and continue to play in the persistent violence in the DRC. Former Rwandan forces, in particular, have been a major source of instability. The presence of several Hutu nationalist forces within DRC, including the FDLR and Interahamwe, and the rise of the Tutsi M23 (which Rwanda allegedly funds), have perpetuated conflict in the Kivu region and caused ongoing civilian casualties and human rights violations, particularly against the Tutsi populations. Although some of the peace accords attempted to address the persistence of Rwandan rebel forces in DRC and compel their repatriation, these measures did not completely remove the Rwandan militants or pressure the Rwandan government to make meaningful changes. The DDR programs in DRC demonstrate that, in many cases, demobilizing armed combatants requires a transnational or even regional approach in order to stabilize a country and end the fighting. ❖

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NOTES

1   This article is taken from MAJ Hakimu's master's thesis. See Badura Hakimu, "Insecurity in the DRC: The Obstacle to Peace and Security" (master's thesis, US Naval Postgraduate School, December 2016).

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13 Coletta, Kostner, and Wiederhofer, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration," 174.

14 Edmonds, Mills, and McNamee, "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration," 33.

15 Theidon, "Transitional Subjects," 71.

16 Knight, "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration," 28.

17 The 2002 Pretoria Accord focused specifically on relations between the DRC and Rwanda. It aimed to further implement the 1999 Lusaka agreements and stipulated the withdrawal of Rwandan forces from the DRC in exchange for the demobilization of pro-Hutu forces in the country, including former FAR, FDRC, and Interahamwe. See "Peace Agreement between the Governments of Rwanda and the DRC on the Withdrawal of the Rwandan Troops from the Territory of the DRC and the Dismantling of the Ex-FAR and Interahamwe Forces in the DRC," UN Peacemaker, n.d.: https://peacemaker.un.org/drcrwanda-agreementwithdrawal2002

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19 Marriage, "Flip-Flop Rebel, Dollar Soldier," 294.

20 Ibid.

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