

FBA Brief 2019

Community-Based Reintegration Support in Eastern DRC



Since the mid-1990s eastern DRC has been plagued by a nearly unbroken series of interrelated conflicts. Over time, conflicts in eastern DRC have evolved from large-scale interstate wars to predominately local conflict. Ongoing approaches to Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) in the region have not co-evolved to suit the current context of local conflict dynamics.

Today, combatants in eastern DRC leave and re-join armed groups in repeated cycles of insecurity, (re)mobilisation and violence. In order to transform these cycles, reintegration support must be delivered through a community-based approach focusing on supporting ex-combatants while simultaneously building communities' absorptive capacity and overall resilience.



Aerial view of northern Kivu when the UN mission in DRC (MONUC) and the World Bank visited former combatants to encourage them to disarm and reintegrate. *UN Photo/Marie Frechon*

Background

Even though hundreds of thousands of ex-combatants have been supported through DDR programmes in DRC, as well as the introduction of MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigades (FIB) and approaches to Community Violence Reduction (CVR), the results for the overall security situation in eastern DRC have been lacklustre. Tangible peace remains elusive for many in eastern DRC, and as many as 120 armed groups are active in the volatile North and South Kivu provinces alone. The continued spread of armed groups brings insecurity and violence, disrupting livelihoods and fomenting social fragmentation. In this setting of protracted conflict, the lines between mobilisation and (re)mobilisation blur as repeated cycles of local insecurity, (re)mobilisation, and violence have emerged.

In this context of ongoing conflict, DDR programmes are tasked with simultaneously delivering targeted support to those who leave armed groups in order to prevent re-mobilisation, but at the same time this very reintegration support must be delivered in a way that also weakens the drivers of initial mobilisation for those at risk of joining armed groups for the first time. These overlapping goals require a community-based approach to reintegration support. However, experiences in delivering community-based reintegration support to date have been limited and piecemeal. There is a need to coherently evaluate

the prospects for community-based reintegration support in eastern DRC. Thus, in 2018 FBA embarked on an empirically-based mapping of the multitude of factors that facilitate and hinder ex-combatants' and persons associated with armed groups' sustainable reintegration in eastern DRC with the aim of developing support for those who leave armed groups and the very communities they return to.

The reintegration mapping was carried out in five rural and urban localities in the North Kivu Province. Localities surveyed were Biiri, Kibabi, Matanda in the Territory of Masisi, and the two Goma neighbourhoods of Ndosho and Bujovu. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a broad range of respondents including 1) male and female ex-combatants, as well as children associated with armed groups; 2) active combatants; 3) at risk groups including youth and internally displaced persons; 4) local and provincial government; 5) social, economic, and security service providers; 6) civil society; and 7) local and international organisations. In total 1,314 respondents (M:999; F:341) were consulted. The results from the mapping have been compiled into five locality reports and one synthesis report that integrates findings from across the region. The remainder of this brief will synthesise key findings and recommendations.

Understanding Cycles of Insecurity, (Re)Mobilisation, and Violence

Understanding cycles of (re)mobilisation in eastern DRC is an important part of evaluating the prospects for delivering sustainable reintegration support. Indeed, there is a complex array of contextual and individual factors that push individuals into establishing or abandoning civilian lives and (re) mobilising into armed groups. This section outlines several key factors propelling cycles of insecurity, (re)mobilisation and violence.

Absence of Security and Services

The reintegration mapping reveals that local contextual factors are important for understanding individuals' decisions to reintegrate or (re)mobilise. Insecurity is the core issue for many - especially in terms of rule of law. Police and military are often absent from rural settings in eastern DRC and even when present, their capacities may not be adequate to represent a credible source of security. In some communities, insecurity may actually be exacerbated by the presence of police or military who have been reported to carry out human rights abuses in the communities they are nominally in place to protect. When combined with weak or absent judicial mechanisms, there is a general sense of impunity for perpetrators. Women and men in communities describe a lack of recourse and sense of helplessness in terms of local security. Many individuals report perceiving armed groups as their best, if not only, possible guarantors of security.

Beyond hard security, the continuous absence of services, especially health and education, contributes to a sense that there are few opportunities available. Economic services such as agricultural, business development, and/or financial services are weak or absent in many settings. As a result, private sector activity is stifled and livelihood opportunities diminished. Indeed, individuals report that the overall weakness or absence of social services contributes to a general anti-government sentiment in many communities.

Poverty and Absence of Livelihood Opportunities

On top of these factors, the crushing weight of poverty and acute underdevelopment are ever-present. In many communities in eastern DRC, there are few livelihood opportunities. Traditional

means of support, such as agriculture or fishing, are dependent on access to natural resources which are often controlled through local power structures based on social or ethnic affiliation. Without access to these key natural resources many turn to activities such as artisanal mining - which often lack clear formal or social regulation. This dynamic can fuel competing resource claims which sometimes escalate to violence.

As a consequence of the lack of opportunities in rural areas, individuals at risk of reintegration or initial mobilisation, move to urban areas. However, the influx of individuals to urban settings such as Goma creates increased competition for livelihood opportunities, and those fleeing rural settings with weak security and services are often the least equipped in this competition. Faced with the lack of better options, many youths therefore become vulnerable for recruitment to gangs and armed groups in their search for survival and protection.

Stigma and Discrimination

In addition to these more general factors affecting a large number of individuals in eastern DRC, there are specific factors on individual level that amplify the effects of these contextual conditions which increase the risk of (re)mobilisation. These include discrimination based on age, gender, ethnic affiliation, and ex-combatant status. For the most vulnerable individuals these factors swirl together into a heightened form of stigma/exclusion. This stigma is a clear barrier to accessing social support in the community. Perhaps most importantly, stigma can hinder acceptance in family structures which are a vital source of support for individuals' reintegration, and a building block for further community acceptance. This is most true for female ex-combatants and associated persons, for whom which the stigma-based barriers to reintegration are profound.

Ethnic dimensions of power and privilege can further influence an individual's position in society, and has implications for their access to tangible and intangible resources - especially livelihood opportunities and pathways for social empowerment. Collectively these factors shape individuals' abilities to (re)integrate, and ultimately their decisions to (re)mobilise into armed groups or not.

In sum, those that are (re)mobilising into armed groups are often the most vulnerable individuals from the most vulnerable communities in eastern DRC. Against the backdrop of ongoing violence and insecurity in

the region, the number of vulnerable individuals and communities continues to grow, and as a result, so does the number of armed groups, and so does the violence and insecurity that creates heightened vulnerability for individuals and communities in the first place. All of this amounts to a self-reinforcing cycle of insecurity, (re)mobilisation, and violence.

Improving Community-Based Reintegration Support

Based on the reintegration mapping, it can be concluded that a key emphasis should be placed on supporting community-based reintegration programmes which support male and female ex-combatants, child combatants, and persons associated with armed groups as they reintegrate into communities, and at the same time strengthen communities' overall resilience and ability to absorb these same groups. In effect the aim of such an approach is to minimise not only re-mobilisation, but initial mobilisation into armed groups. This section explores several key opportunities of improving community-based reintegration support in eastern DRC.

Local Reintegration Plans – Improving Coordination and Legitimacy

A strong emphasis should be placed on creating local reintegration plans which engage the diverse range of actors in each community. These local reintegration plans can serve as the basis for improving overall coordination and establishing the local legitimacy of reintegration support. Local reintegration plans can serve as a rallying point for communities and the diverse range of local, national, and international actors working with them to coordinate their action around. While long-term donor support remains essential, more coordinated approaches present the prospect of a more efficient use of local resources towards collective outcomes. Further, local reintegration plans should be integrated into provincial and national planning processes to ensure that community-based reintegration support connects to more long-term development work.

Local reintegration plans can empower community-owned and driven conflict resolution mechanisms. Trusted local actors, moral authorities such as religious leaders, local government, and other intercommunal structures such as Barza can play a vital role in facilitating communal acceptance of returning male and female ex-combatants. This

local legitimacy cannot be shortcut, and is in many instances the key to rebuilding social cohesion in the community. These actors and fora are also key facilitators for other vulnerable groups facing reintegration challenges, such as refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – who should be integrated into local reintegration plans.

Labour-Intensive Infrastructure Projects

One aspect highlighted in the reintegration mapping is the potentially important role of infrastructure improvements for increasing local security. Investments in infrastructure such as street lights in insecure areas, improved roads to strengthen commerce, as well as other community development projects that improve access to services and resources can have important short term effects on stability. This is especially the case when these labour-intensive activities are carried out by a mix of male and female ex-combatants and persons associated with armed groups, members of receiving communities, as well as other vulnerable groups as a part of cash-for-work projects which create vital incomes streams. The benefits of such an approach extend into the social sphere as well. When ex-combatants and community members work together for the improvement of their communities, it creates a space for trust-building which can contribute to breaking down stigma.

Context-Specific Support for Traditional Livelihoods

The reintegration mapping also finds that traditional livelihoods such as agriculture, livestock, and fishing can sometimes constitute opportunities for sustainable reintegration. However, the challenge is that these livelihoods in eastern DRC are often closely linked to particular ethnic identities and distinct local power structures that regulate access to natural resources. Supporting reintegration opportunities in one sector over another may therefore run the risk of being perceived as supporting one ethnic group over another. In the worst instances poorly conceived reintegration support in these sectors can instigate new conflicts over resources. Likewise, there are significant gendered aspects of access to natural resources. For example, women may face acute barriers to accessing arable land.

Adding further complexity to the prospect of supporting traditional livelihoods is the fact that the reintegration mapping reveals that ex-combatants

do not prefer traditional livelihoods, while the communities they return to generally suggest these as the most appropriate for those reintegrating. These complexities present a tension for external actors engaged in reintegration support. One potential option is to try to increase the status and desirability of these livelihoods through the introduction of new technology, or developing traditional livelihoods at scale to increase yield and profits. However, it is clear that approaches to supporting traditional livelihood opportunities for reintegration must be anchored in exhaustive and ongoing analysis of specific local contexts.

Urban-Based Reintegration Support

The mapping points to the need to additionally focus on strategies for supporting urban-based reintegration opportunities in eastern DRC. Ex-combatants report that when rural communities remain insecure and with few opportunities, they prefer to reintegrate into urban settings. The service sector, motorcycle-taxi, and farming related trade (for example livestock trade or agricultural supply) are livelihood pathways of significant interest and where opportunities for reintegration support exist. However, moving to an urban setting is not without challenges. In many cases this means foregoing the vital forms of tangible and intangible support that communal and, especially, familial social networks represent. For many, this informal social support is the difference between a sustainable (re)integration trajectory or (re) mobilisation, and in its absence, formal reintegration support becomes even more important.

Gender Adapted Reintegration Pathways

Ensuring the participation of female combatants, as well as women and girls associated with armed groups, in DDR programmes has proved challenging in eastern DRC. The reintegration mapping revealed that reintegration support has primarily been developed to meet the needs of male participants, often with little consideration for the specific needs and priorities of women. Inappropriate reintegration support combined with stigma-based barriers solidify structural disadvantages for female combatants returning to civilian life. These barriers can be so great that many women choose to not identify themselves as combatants and instead “self-reintegrate” – foregoing the vital support that reintegration programming represents. Adapted reintegration pathways should be created for female combatants who do not reintegrate

as a part of a formal DDR process, but nonetheless require reintegration support.

Ongoing Assessments and Analysis

Because community-based approaches to reintegration support are specific to each community, deep contextual analysis is paramount. Generic approaches will continue to prove insufficient. Likewise, in volatile eastern DRC local situations can change quickly and with regularity. Therefore, a heavy emphasis should be placed on ongoing assessments and analysis through innovative and robust approaches to monitoring and evaluation at the local level. In such efforts specific attention should be given to understanding the specific needs of women and girls in reintegration.

Conclusion

By now DRC has an extensive experience with DDR programming. However, what has been called reintegration support in DRC is more accurately described as short-term reinsertion support. While reinsertion support plays a vital stopgap role in the window between demobilisation and reintegration in many traditional DDR programmes, it cannot be a replacement for more comprehensive reintegration support. Especially in a context of ongoing insecurity and violence, the existing reinsertion support has become a sort of “recycling program” where individuals leave armed groups, receive limited support, and eventually (re)mobilise. Ex-combatants describe their experience with the existing support as one of unfulfilled expectations and disappointment that has fomented distrust towards national authorities.

In order to transform the cycle of insecurity, (re) mobilisation and violence in eastern DRC, overall emphasis should be placed on community-based reintegration support which targets male and female ex-combatants and associated persons, while at the same time building community resilience and capacity to absorb returning groups. This is precisely because community-based approaches to reintegration support work to prevent both remobilisation (ex-combatants) and initial mobilisation (other vulnerable groups, for example youth and displaced persons) into armed groups. Community-based support can be complimented by approaches such as Community Violence Reduction (CVR), or emerging approaches to community-based inside mediation. Should the preconditions for a national DDR programme in a post-conflict setting emerge, the work done in

this community-based approach will prove a vital foundation.

However, while it is clear that there is a vital role for community-based approaches to reintegration to play, it is also clear that comprehensive approaches to community-based reintegration support are no panacea. Many of the contextual factors which drive insecurity and violence in eastern DRC are far beyond the bounds of what DDR processes can resolve. Community-based approaches to reintegration focused on community resilience offer a key entry point for beginning the processes of transforming cycles of insecurity, (re)mobilisation, and violence in the region.



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