Challenges to policy and practice in the disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and rehabilitation of youth combatants in Liberia

Sussex Migration Working Paper no. 29

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March 2006

Abstract

Following the end to Liberia's 14-year civil war in 2003, the current challenge is to successfully resettle and reintegrate its displaced population. Central to this, and essential in terms of long-term peace and sustainable development, will be the disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR) of young ex-combatants. If the DDRR programme is to be a success in Liberia, there must be a clear understanding as to why young people have chosen to join armed groups in the first place, and these issues must be addressed through the DDRR programme in order to prevent re-recruitment. Furthermore, although targeted opportunities may be appropriate in the short-term during disarmament and demobilisation; a non-targeted community based model of reintegration and rehabilitation, as advocated in the resettlement of IDPs and refugees, will have the most success with reference to the long-term reconciliation and security of Liberia's war-affected population.

Abbreviations

AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
AI	Amnesty International

Introduction

Liberia has been in a nearly constant state of civil war for fourteen years. The violence and crippling

against a background of destroyed communities, failed education systems and displacement, in which militia activity offers young people a chance to make their way in the world (Peters and Richards, 1998: 183). Many agencies and

weapons and confidence-boosting drugs, rebels took part in massacres attired as if acting out scenes in a Rambo or Bruce Lee film (Richards, 1995: 136).

Children and teenagers who felt powerless and marginalised before the war, experience power as they become more and more involved in the fighting. Whilst some children interviewed by Human Rights Watch (2004a) spoke of fear of death, the killing of other children in fighting, and of those they killed themselves; others bragged about the killings, proud of their advancement to commander status for their ferocity (HRW, 2004: 19).

Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot (2003:31) have found that many youths in a post-conflict setting, although they may no longer have the direct power of the gun, indicate that they are not willing to go back to the pre-war situation "now that our eyes are open". According to Ellis (1999: 286), Liberian conceptions of 'power' do not necessarily relate to the conventional political model, but to the ability to prosper; and from this, all else will follow.

The personal accounts of youth combatants recorded in Sierra Leone by Peters and Richards (1998) repeatedly stress that it makes little sense to stand down voluntarily without any real promise of social reintegration, education, training, or civilian job prospects. Failure to address this complex of aspirations has caused and prolonged the conflict. Indeed, frustrated by the failure of demobilisation to offer a way out, several informants promptly re-enlisted as soon as they had the chance (Peters and Richards, 1998: 187).

Whilst exclusion from education and socio-economic, political and cultural marginalisation continue for youth in Liberia, the very tensions that create conflict remain unresolved. Unless youth can be convinced that they have some kind of future in the remaking of Liberia, and that they can have confidence in the structures of state and civil society, young people will continue to fight.

It is essential that youth combatants are taken seriously as active participants in war, occupying an important political and socio-economic space. As can be seen, there are many reasons why young people choose to fight, whether they be in the cultural context of working life; to provide alleviation from poverty through employment and self sufficiency; due to lack of educational opportunities; to identify with a group; in emulation of role models; or because they feel marginalised from socio-economic and political participation. If the DDRR process is to be a success and long-term peace sustained in the future, account must be taken of the views of youth combatants and the reasons they join armed groups must be addressed.

Demobilisation, disarmament, reintegration and rehabilitation of youth combatants

Disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR) of ex-combatants denotes the formal procedure that follows a peace agreement, and forms a continuum that is part of the entire peace process. Where disarmament ends, demobilisation must begin and eventually lead to reintegration and rehabilitation if sustainable peace and development are to be secured in countries emerging from conflict (UN, 2000: 1).

Past DDRR programmes for combatants in Liberia have had limited success, especially for children and youth. The formal DDRR programme established in 1997 served less than one third of the estimated 15 thousand children associated with the fighting forces during the civil war (Toweh, 1998: 13). According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2004), 89 percent of those children who awaited demobilisation disappeared before the process was completed, and only 78 girls participated despite much evidence that their presence in the armed forces was significantly larger (HRW, 2004a: 30). For many of the children and young people who disarmed during the 1997 DDRR programme, expectations were not met or they were unable to find viable employment opportunities after receiving vocational training (HRW, 2004a: 30).

programme was enlarged from ex-combatants to all conflict-affected groups in order to facilitate and stimulate the spontaneous resettlement of internally displaced persons, refugees and ex-combatants. Investments were then channelled to concentrations of war-affected populations, using decentralised community-based operations (ILO, 1998: 22).

However, such programmes were slow to start up and did not reach many communities. When fighting resumed in 2000-2003, many frustrated young people were re-recruited by armed forces, making the DDRR process a failure. Human Rights Watch (2004a: 31) interviewed one young man who said:

> "I went through the programme in 1997 and received some assistance but it soon ran out. For a while, I did some small jobs around Monrovia, but there was not much to do and I couldn't afford to go back to school. So two years ago, I decided to join the LURD. I figured it was better to fight and try to get something, than hang around town doing nothing."
>
> (HRW interview, Montserrado County, 31st

by soldiers they do not want to admit having been involved (ILO, 1998: 23). Moreover, youth combatants often share the essential characteristics of other war-affected groups, such as IDPs and refugees, in terms of capacities, needs and preferences (ILO, 1998: 12).

Targeted assistance in disarmament and demobilisation

Disarmament is the collection, control and disposal of small arms and light and heavy weapons within a conflict zone. It frequently entails the assembly and cantonment of combatants, and includes the development of arms management programmes. Demobilisation refers to the process by which parties in conflict begin to disband their military structures, and combatants begin transition into civilian life. It generally entails the registration of former combatants; some kind of assistance to enable them to meet their immediate basic needs; discharge, and transportation back to their home communities (UN, 2000: 15).

During the demobilisation phase, ex-combatants should be targeted for pre-discharge and reorientation programmes with briefings, counselling and training to prepare them for the transition to civilian life. Activities should include registration and profile assessment; medical examination, assistance and detoxification for those in need; trauma healing and psychosocial counselling; and life skills training for re-entry into civil society (ILO, 1998: 6). They should also be given information on accommodation, education, training, economic activities, medical and health issues, and legal and civic matters (UN, 2000: 9).

Family reunification is seen as a principle factor in effective resettlement and social reintegration of young ex-combatants, particularly children, and this should be supported during demobilisation by specific tracing procedures and community and family sensitisation programmes to ease their reintroduction into civil society (UN, 2000: 11).

In September 2003, the United Nations Security Council authorised a 15 thousand member peace keeping force in Liberia, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), most of whom had been deployed by the end of March 2004 (HRW, 2004b: 7). The disarmament plan was for UNMIL to register fighters who turned in their weapons and pay each individual a Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA) of US$300 in several instalments as they progressed through demobilisation and reintegration. The first US$150 was to be paid to each ex-combatant after a 3-week stay in the cantonment site.

On the first day of the programme in December 2003, over 2 thousand ex-combatants arrived at the barracks outside Monrovia to turn in their weapons, a much larger number than was anticipated. The situation quickly deteriorated when fighters learned that they would not immediately receive the first half of the $300 allotted to each fighter. A new plan was devised to pay each former combatant US$75 in exchange for a weapon to quicken the pace of the process. Despite a previous agreement not to pay child combatants, it proved difficult not to pay children when they showed up at the site with weapons and ammunition and the plan was revised to include children in the repayment activities (HRW, 2004b: 31). This controversial decision is discussed further below.

After ten days, UNMIL were overwhelmed by the number of former combatants eager to participate and were forced to suspend the programme. Two days of looting and violence commenced in which twelve people were killed, and a curfew was imposed on Monrovia (HRW, 2003: 19). UNHCR were forced to temporarily suspend relocation of IDPs because of the insecurity (O'Neill, 2004: 33).

Several observers have blamed UNMIL for insufficient preparation and little dissemination of information to fighters about the precise sequence and content of the DDRR process. Special Interim Care Centres for children and women had not been prepared, and cantonment sites had not been adequately staffed or provisioned. However, Human Rights Watch (2003: 19) point out that UNMIL were under considerable pressure to begin the programme due to the significant number of fighters, including children, who had begun 'spontaneously demobilising': leaving their units (although not necessarily their command structure); retaining their weapons; and integrating into displaced or home communities in the months running up to the official DDRR start date.

After a four month delay, the DDRR process again got underway in April 2004. Under the new programme, no upfront cash payments were to be made to ex-combatants. The first US$150 would be made after a minimum seven day stay in the cantonment site, at which point ex-combatants would be discharged and provided with transport to facilitate their return to the community of their choice. A final instalment of US$150 would be made after three months, assuming that ex-combatants would be participating in specific reintegration projects (HRW, 2004b: 31).

Since then cantonment sites have been set up in eight counties: Bong, Grand Bassa, Bomi, Montserrado, Grand Geddeh, Nimba, Lofa and

in the first place, or may rejoin in the future, namely due to poverty and lack of access to education, employment and hopes of prosperity.

Finally, with the distribution of cash payments to ex-combatants, account must be taken of intrastate conflicts and their regional dimensions, as arms buyback or exchange programmes stimulate illicit regional arms trade and weapons proliferation. Whilst the surrender of weapons is worth US$300 in Liberia, the reward in Côte d'Ivoire is US$900. This has led to fears and suggestions that armed elements in Liberia are crossing over to Côte d'Ivoire to triple the financial value of their weapons (Isima, 2004: 3).

Nevertheless, according to Isima (2004: 5), cash payments have been proven to be the most effective and efficient option as they: reduce transaction costs; offer flexibility to beneficiaries; permit more transparent accounting; can adapt more closely to the specific needs of the beneficiaries; are easy to distribute; are used for social and productive investment after consumption needs have been met, thus stimulating the local economy; and have a positive psychological effect of empowering ex-combatants to take charge of their lives (Isima, 2004: 5).

However, this raises the question as to why cash payments are made to ex-combatants, but not to civilian refugees or IDPs. Baaré (2005: 19) suggests a broader programme of transitional payments to not only ex-combatants, but also refugees and IDPs, providing flexible security and empowerment. Indeed, targeting of cash payments to ex-combatants can be difficult since cash is of inherent value to all in a post-conflict society (Isima, 2004: 5). It is suspected that three times the number of people have registered in Liberia for disarmament and demobilisation than initially predicted in order to gain financially from the programme, many of whom may not be ex-combatants as only one in four have actually handed in a weapon (IRIN news, 20 December 2004).

A spokesman for the NCDDRR, told IRIN in December 2004 that, as result of the large number registering for disarmament and demobilisation, the programme had run out of funds to provide education and training for the 103 thousand who had come forward as ex-combatants (IRIN news, 20 December 2004). The UNDP has appealed for a further US$58 million to train demobilised combatants over the next three years, warning that any disruption to the process will have serious consequences for the overall peace process in Liberia (IRIN news, 20 December 2004).

It is important to note in this context that cash payments create only a very short-term breathing space in placating dissatisfied combatants. Assistance must be followed closely by effective transitional economic reintegration measures. The most effective inducement and persuasion for combatants to disarm is a credible DDRR programme that offers opportunities for new, non-violent livelihoods (Knight and Özerdem, 2004: 505). When "combatants are asked to give up their arms, they face a 'point of no return': they and their leaders must have faith in the future where the advantages of peace outweigh those of war" (ECHA, 2000 cited in Knight and Özerdem, 2004: 506). In effect they are surrendering the security and economic surety that their weapons provide, in exchange for opportunities and assistance in finding new peaceful livelihoods. Thus issues arising from *why* youth combatants join armed groups must be robustly addressed through the reintegration and rehabilitation process.

Non-targeted assistance in reintegration and rehabilitation

Reintegration and rehabilitation programmes are assistance measures provided to former combatants that should increase the potential for their economic and social reintegration into civil society. Generally reintegration programmes include cash assistance, vocational training and income-generating activities (UN, 2000: 15). Reintegration should lead to rehabilitation and long-term development initiatives that enable lasting peace and prosperity. Participants at a seminar on the challenges of reintegration of ex-combatants in DDRR programmes in West Africa emphasised that the 'R' in DDRR is multifarious: not only reintegration and rehabilitation, but also, resettlement, repatriation, reconciliation, recovery s Tw4recovery

cultural ceremonies assuage the ill spirits associated with the young person's actions during conflict and reconcile them with ancestral spirits and hence the community as a whole (Verhey, 2001: 18). Furthermore, the value of jobs and education, keeping youth busy, and giving them future prospects can not be underestimated in preventing the development of trauma (Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot, 2003: 22).

Education

Education is generally seen as critical for restoring a sense of normality to the lives of young people. In addition it provides a 'cooling off' period, helping to make a break with their military past, enhancing confidence and self-esteem, establishing a new identity, and reorienting them to civilian life. Education can also include vital training in life skills, including nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS awareness, and managing finances.

One child rights specialist reported that in a conversation with a military commander about child soldiers in Liberia, the officer declared that children with education, those that can read and write, are more difficult to recruit and generally more questioning of authority. Therefore, it is believed that the key to fully reintegrating youth combatants and breaking the cycle of re-recruitment in Liberia lies in education (HRW, 2004a: 41).

ICG (2004: 24) believe extensive revision of curricula will be required to promote civil awareness and tolerance. There has been a tremendous "beating down of Liberian values, and the mentalities of many have been corrupted", making education, especially civic education, a necessary part of the reconstruction agenda (ICG, 2004: 24).

The transitional government of Liberia, working with UNICEF, has committed itself to providing universal primary education with school fees waived for the poorest children (HRW, 2004a: 41). However, education support for ex-combatants has been initiated against a backdrop of a collapsed education system, characterised by poor or irregular remuneration of teaching staff, lack of teaching materials, books and deteriorated support infrastructures (UNDP, 2005: 2). By the end of 2004, contracts had been drawn up with 103 educational institutions, including grade schools, universities and computer schools, accommodating approximately 7202 students. However, 95 percent of these schools are located

initiative. A National Youth Conference is planned for this year to lay the foundation for the development of a long-term post-war, integrated and cross sector youth policy that will mainstream youth concerns on issues such as education, employment, health, HIV/AIDs and juvenile delinquency, amongst others (UNDP, 2004: 27).

A community-based approach

It is thought that 90 percent of Liberians are war affected, with most villages looted, destroyed or burned down (ILO, 1998: 19), and over one quarter of the population displaced by the conflict (UNDP-World Bank, 2004: 2). The struggle will be to retain the peace during the return of thousands of refugees, IDPs and ex

percent of the population is unemployed and 80 percent live below the poverty line (ICG, 2004: 23). Reintegration of IDPs, returning refugees and

Prevention of re-recruitment must reflect the multitude of ways in which youth become involved in hostilities. It must recognise the cultural and individual needs of the youth involved, and will require greater investment in practical measures, such as education and non-formal youth activities, community level advocacy, and income generating activities as part of the reintegration and rehabilitation stage of DDRR (Verhey, 2001: 23).

The capacity of the community into which youth combatants return will be crucial to the entire DDRR process. Therefore, this thesis concludes that youth combatants should not be treated as a distinct or separate group, but should be part of a community-based approach to reintegration and rehabilitation of the whole displaced and war-affected population. Thereby, the community as a whole can work towards rebuilding and reintegrating both civilians and ex-combatants through the reconstruction of community facilities, education and training institutions, and income-generating activities. However, it is also important to ensure that former youth combatants are well represented in all projects, as their reintegration into civilian life is essential to lasting peace (ILO, 1998: 36).

Reintegration and rehabilitation are a continuous process that should end in a situation where short-term war-related approaches are replaced by long-term development objectives (ILO, 1998: 15). Therefore, DDRR programmes should be part of an overall integrated recovery strategy that encompasses economic development, security sector reform, the integration of refugees and IDPs, justice and reconciliation (IPA, 2002, 1), and long-term development. This represents a challenge of monumental proportions and requires a long-term commitment from the international community.

Donor funding is absolutely essential to the ongoing success of the DDRR programme in Liberia. Indeed the 1997 DDRR programme clearly illustrates that the best laid plans by the most well-informed experts will falter if resources are withheld, undermining the preparation and implementation of DDRR.

The UN Special Representative for Liberia, Jacques Klein, has predicted that recovery for Liberia will take at least four to five years. Donors have pledged more than US$520 million for long term reconstruction. However, by the end of 2004, only US$31 million had been received (UNDP, 2004: 10). Furthermore, due to more than double the number of ex-combatants presenting themselves to the DDRR as initially predicted, an appeal has been made to the donor community for an additional US$39.5 million (UNDP, 2004: 10).

Liberia's reconstruction requires serious long-term commitments and a focus on hard issues. It will require the rebuilding of a devastated social and economic infrastructure to provide opportunities for the successful return to a productive society of ex-combatants, refugees and IDPs. Furthermore, if Liberia is to achieve peace, reconstruction must be felt throughout the country. Donors tend to concentrate on the capital and central government, aiding unbalanced development. Planners should gear projects towards building local structures and encouraging the return to villages of those who have been economically, politically and socially marginalised (ICG, 2004: 21).

Finally, it is crucial for DDRR programmes to recognise the regional dimensions of the conflict. War has a tendency to 'spill in' and 'spill out' of neighbouring states, and combatants often migrate with the fighting from country to country, contributing to levels of insecurity (IPA, 2002: 6). As demonstrated, the war in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire is now becoming a magnet for fighters from Liberia with no other prospects but to rejoin armed groups.

Although IPA (2002: 6) point out that it is unrealistic to involve neighbouring countries in the design and implementation of DDRR programmes, it is important to consider the impact of regional conflict in a country such as Liberia; and question the impact that the cessation of violence and the development of DDRR programmes might have on other countries in the sub-region (IPA, 2002: 6). Coordination with neighbouring peacekeeping forces in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire will be needed to ensure that guns and youth combatants do not spill across borders and undermine the fragile stability of Liberia's neighbours (HRW, 2003: 20). 8 3 0

refugees or as part of the community as a whole, are valued and supported in the future.

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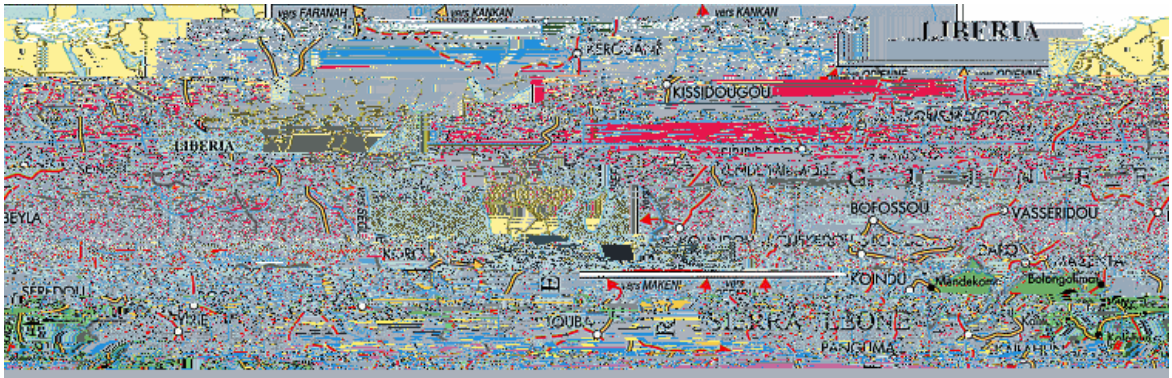
Appendix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