

**STRENGTHENING THE
ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS
OF PEACEBUILDING**

CASE STUDY SERIES

**ENHANCING SOCIO-ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITIES FOR EX-COMBATANTS
IN LIBERIA**

ZULEIKA CANDAN

About International Alert

International Alert is a 26-year-old independent peacebuilding organisation. We work with people who are directly affected by violent conflict to improve their prospects of peace. And we seek to influence the policies and ways of working of governments, international organisations like the UN and multinational companies, to reduce conflict risk and increase the prospects of peace.

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About this series

This is part of a series of case studies which explore the socio-economic aspects of reintegration programmes for ex-combatants in a number of conflict-affected countries where International Alert works: Nepal, Liberia and Uganda. The aim is to stimulate discussions at the local, national and international level about the role that private sector actors can play in the effective reintegration of ex-combatants, and to strengthen practice by developing recommendations for future socio-economic reintegration programmes.

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Introduction

Liberia experienced a protracted and violent civil war between 1989 and 2003. This was the culmination of decades-long tensions between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians, compounded by many other factors. Deeply entrenched inequalities between the two groups, corruption and spill-over effects from conflicts in neighbouring countries eventually came to a head through a coup d'état led by Samuel Doe in the late 1980s. At the time of the signing of the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA),¹ Liberia was a failed state with little infrastructure, inadequate governance institutions and poor service provision. Following the CPA the country became reliant on foreign aid for revenue, while being entirely dependent for its security on UN peacekeeping troops. It was in this context that a disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) process was initiated in 2003.

This briefing examines Liberia's DDRR process, seeking to highlight both the positive and the negative aspects of the socio-economic reintegration opportunities which were afforded to ex-combatants. It is based on field research and interviews with training providers, ex-combatants and government officials in Monrovia and Gbarnga, which International Alert conducted in December 2011 and March 2012.

Background

The 14-year civil war in Liberia claimed the lives of over 200,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more. It ruined lives, infrastructure and the economy, and entrenched mistrust among Liberians. Prior to the conflict, the local economy was driven mainly by rubber production, iron ore and other minerals. Despite the abundance of natural resources and the potential for agricultural development, the majority of the Liberian population experienced extreme poverty, with economic and political power concentrated in the hands of Americo-Liberians – the descendants of nineteenth century settlers. Following the war, the UN was given a mandate to support the interim government and assist with the reconstruction of the country through its mission in Liberia (UNMIL).² Part of that mandate was to oversee and implement the DDRR process.

Current situation

The 2011 elections were generally considered fair and free and provided the starting point for the planning of an UNMIL withdrawal. Despite the challenges inherent in delivering development throughout the different regions, Liberia has improved considerably in terms of healthcare, education, infrastructure and security. It is still largely dependent on foreign aid for revenue, but natural resource reserves have the potential to contribute to the diversification of the economy beyond rubber, timber and iron ore. As exploration and exploitation operations begin, the difficulty will be to ensure the participation of the wider population in this newfound wealth. One of the biggest difficulties facing the country today is the large number of unemployed youth, many of whom are ex-combatants. This group has little education or work experience and limited opportunities for pursuing sustainable livelihoods.

¹ Available at http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/liberia_08182003.pdf

² UN Security Council Resolution 1509 (2003) established the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Available at [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1509\(2003\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1509(2003))

The DDRR process in Liberia

The DDRR programme in Liberia had many of the makings of a successful process. With support from UNMIL, the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR) became the coordinating body to carry out the DDRR process for all warring parties.

Disarmament and demobilisation

The first phase of the process was launched in December 2003, but quickly came to a halt as the disarmament camp (cantonment) was overwhelmed by the large number of ex-combatants, leading to rioting in nearby Monrovia. The second phase was initiated in April 2004, with four disarmament camps established in areas known to have a high concentration of warring groups. In order to cope with the intake, the amount of time spent in the cantonments was reduced from three weeks to five days per ex-combatant. The third phase began in July 2005 with the opening of three new cantonments. As part of the demobilisation, ex-combatants were provided with ID cards which entitled them to certain benefits. They could claim \$150 at demobilisation and an additional \$150 to be received at a later stage. In addition, they were offered a reinsertion package (clothing, food, seeds, mattress, etc.) and a short pre-discharge orientation. The latter entailed a preparation for their return to communities as well as psychological and health screening. The unexpectedly large number of demobilised ex-combatants impeded the swift start of the reintegration programme, which left many living in destitute conditions (primarily in urban centres) and also prompted the commercialisation of ID cards and reinsertion packages. By the end of the process in 2005, 102,193 people had been disarmed and demobilised and were considered eligible for reintegration, whereas only 38,000 had originally been expected to participate in the programme.³

Rehabilitation and reintegration

The key components of Liberia's reintegration programme were agriculture, vocational training and apprenticeships, enterprise development and formal education. A survey of ex-combatants conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2004 established that 57 percent were interested in vocational training compared to 38 percent who were willing to pursue formal education. Only 3 percent expressed an interest in agriculture.⁴ Those seeking to engage in formal education were provided with scholarships that covered education fees (and also sustenance in primary school). Ex-combatants undertaking vocational skills training were given options such as carpentry, masonry, IT, tailoring, hairdressing, tie-dyeing and agriculture. They were provided with subsistence support which was tied to their training attendance, and were also supplied with tools for their selected professions.

3 N. Alusala (2008). *Disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration in Liberia*. Case study contribution to the project 'DDR and Human Security: Post-Conflict and Security-Building in the Interests of the Poor', Centre for International Cooperation and Security, University of Bradford and International Institute for Security Studies (Pretoria).

4 UNDP (undated). *Liberia disarmament demobilisation and reintegration programme (DDRR) Activity Report, December 2003 to August 2004*. Available at <http://bit.ly/RFERGz>

Outcomes

Despite its shortfalls (for example the larger than expected number of ex-combatants, which led to a funding gap and a timescale that was impossible to keep), the DDRR process in Liberia achieved at least some of its objectives. It was successful in disarming the warring groups, which helped to keep the peace following the CPA. The reintegration trainings also served a positive purpose. They did not necessarily provide attendees with long-term livelihood opportunities, but nonetheless helped them adjust back to normal life as participants benefited from psycho-social support and life skills coaching.

Previous DDRR attempts in a quiet period of the civil war (1997) had generated the understanding that reintegration programmes should not be separated from community needs and that reconstruction efforts ought to avoid furthering tensions between ex-combatants and receiving communities. This understanding was subsequently reflected in the National Transitional Government of Liberia's *Results Focused Transition Framework* (RFTF).⁵ Unfortunately, the practical implementation of this initiative was hindered by the unexpectedly large numbers of DDRR participants. Alert's interviews with training providers and workers at different cantonment sites⁶ revealed a considerable disconnection between what ex-combatants were provided with on the one hand and the needs of receiving communities on the other. Many ex-combatants expressed a fear of returning to their communities, something that interviewees believed could have been mitigated through community initiatives to benefit both ex-combatants and other community members.

Women in particular were given no special consideration in the DDRR process, despite the importance that women's activism had played in ending the war and the large number of females in the warring groups.⁷ In interviews with Alert staff, participants in the Mass Action for Peace (a women's peace movement) expressed the view that women in Liberia were excluded from discussions about the design of the DDRR process.⁸ Little outreach to self-reintegrated women, coupled with the lack of women's involvement in the design of DDRR initiatives, led to a relatively small number of females registering at the cantonments. Moreover, the camps could have appeared rowdy and dangerous to women, as there were many armed men milling around the sites.

There were also other ways in which Liberia's DDRR was not adjusted to local realities. As a former member of the NCDDRR indicated,⁹ its format was adopted from other contexts. As a result, many ex-combatants received training in vocations which would be of little use to them upon graduation. Had there been more extensive market surveys undertaken or more concerted efforts to involve the business community and women's groups, reintegration training might have helped provide the skills needed in the post-conflict context and also contributed to tackling the vulnerable position of some of Liberia's poorest people, including women.

5 National Transitional Government of Liberia, with UN and World Bank (2005). *Results Focused Transitional Framework* (Revision, April 2005). Available at <http://www.lr.undp.org/docs/RFTFRevision.pdf>

6 Interviews by International Alert in March 2012 with training providers and cantonment site workers in Gbarnga.

7 A. Sherif (2008). 'Reintegration of female war-affected and ex-combatants in Liberia', *Conflict Trends* (ACCORD), Issue 3. Available at <http://www.accord.org.za/publications/conflict-trends>

8 Interview by International Alert on 21st March 2012 in Monrovia.

9 Interview by International Alert on 26th March 2012 in Monrovia.

Lessons learnt

1. **Encouraging and supporting ex-combatants who participate in skills training programmes to join together and work collectively can add value to reintegration programmes.** Working collectively has the benefit of peer-support and allows trainees to utilise different vocational skills, increasing their chances of success, as they have more funds to re-invest in tools and greater absorption capacity for losses. It also has the benefit of facilitating long-term support by training providers. Alert's research revealed that the latter encouraged ex-combatants to form cooperatives to enhance their capacity for acquiring tools and renting business premises.¹⁰
2. **The psycho-social component of vocational skills programmes is of crucial importance to the ability of ex-combatants to reintegrate into society.** Alert's research with training providers in Gbarnga and Monrovia emphasised the value of life skills coaching, regardless of the time or quality of the training provided. Prior to joining the programmes, many war-affected persons had little or no experience of education or the labour market. At the time of their enrolment they were also struggling with trauma and were in dire need of counselling. The psycho-social element of the vocational skills training allowed them to deal with their experiences, learn to socialise and work with previous enemies, as well as share workloads and responsibilities. This provided ex-combatants with essential life skills, which complemented the technical skills acquired through vocational training.
3. **Managing ex-combatants' expectations regarding training and livelihood opportunities is key to their success.** Many of the training providers that participated in Alert's research reported unrealistic expectations on the part of ex-combatants. This would translate at times into reluctance to join the training options available or an inability to find a job upon graduation, as ex-combatants were not prepared to accept the opportunities on offer. In Liberia the most promising livelihood option is agriculture, however few ex-combatants seemed positive about it. It would require a long-term investment before it can yield a return and it would be hard to find investment capital. Despite this, training by Action on Armed Violence (formerly Landmine Action) for ex-combatants has demonstrated that it is possible to raise interest in agriculture among ex-combatants.¹¹ In the challenging environment of post-conflict economies, ex-combatants need to understand the challenges of the labour market and be able to make a judgement as to what the best long-term livelihood investments might be. Governments should also provide the necessary incentives to encourage and support viable livelihood options for ex-combatants, particularly in agriculture.
4. **Training providers and centres should be located close to the potential beneficiaries, so as to increase the likelihood of attendance and successful follow-up by programme staff.** The importance of having *local* training providers and facilities should not be underestimated. Not only does this facilitate the attendance of participants, especially women, but it also allows programme staff to engage in follow-up activities. Support can be in the form of continued advice as trainees join the workforce, to ensure that they have mentors or find apprenticeships with local tradespeople. Training providers in Gbarnga¹² and Paynesville¹³ who took part in Alert's research explained that they had found it difficult to conduct follow-up visits with those trainees who were located outside of the central areas. Training providers tend to also benefit from their proximity to local businesses. Closer cooperation with private sector actors would have ensured that ex-combatants' skills were in sync with local market needs.

¹⁰ Interview by International Alert on 14th March 2012 with a training provider in Gbarnga.

¹¹ C. Blattman and J. Annan (2011). *Reintegrating and employing high-risk youth in Liberia: Lessons from a randomised evaluation of a Landmine Action agricultural training programme for ex-combatants*. Available at https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/blattman_annan_ex-com_reintegration_ipa_liberia_1.pdf

¹² Interview by International Alert on 14th March 2012 with a training provider in Gbarnga.

¹³ Interview by International Alert on 27th March 2012 with a training provider in Paynesville.

Conclusion

The DDRR process in Liberia encountered difficulties from the very beginning due to the oversubscription that it generated. The two main issues that arose as a result, and which produced the biggest impacts, were the lack of sufficient funds for the large number of ex-combatants who came forward, and the impossibility of providing assistance within the stipulated timeframes. Nonetheless, the process was instrumental in generating some valuable lessons for future DDRR initiatives.

It demonstrated that while vocational skills and education are important, community-based components of reintegration programmes are key. The involvement of the receiving communities – men and women, young and old – in the design and implementation of DDRR facilitates successful reintegration by ensuring that the livelihood skills acquired by ex-combatants ultimately contribute to local community needs. Liberia's experience has also underscored the value of providing ex-combatants with life skills, of effectively managing their expectations and of providing realistic opportunities for the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods.

Reintegration initiatives should thus be a part of larger development strategies and be able to draw upon long-term commitments by donors, governments and development partners alike. They should furthermore involve businesspeople and women's groups from an early stage, ultimately empowering ex-combatants not only to secure sustainable livelihoods in challenging economic environments, but also to contribute to the rebuilding of societies whose social fabric has been torn apart by violent conflict.

International Alert.

346 Clapham Road, London SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800, Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900

general@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org

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