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Recycling Rebels? Demobilization in the Congo

BY CHRISTOPH VOGEL AND JOSAPHAT MUSAMBA

Key points

- In 2015 the Congolese government initiated its third major national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme (DDR III), in order to reintegrate Congolese ex-combatants into civilian life.
- DDR III is facing certain challenges. Military operations against various armed groups are continuing and discourage some combatants from demobilizing.
- The political roots of armed mobilization remain largely unaddressed, casting significant doubt on whether DDR III can ultimately motivate armed group members to renounce life under arms.
- Despite improvements, the involvement of national and local authorities and other interested parties is still relatively modest, in what is mostly a technical approach to foster disarmament and demobilization.
- For DDR III to have lasting success, it will need to be more closely coordinated with the wider political and security context, including the scheduled electoral cycle, for example, and the reasons for the persistence of armed groups.

Introduction

Since the Second Congo War (1998–2003), the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Congolese civil society have attempted, with the support of international partners, to tackle consecutive cycles of armed mobilization. Amidst other peace efforts, a key strategy has always been the DDR of combatants.

The first DDR programme began in 2003. Assisted by NGOs and mainly financed by the World



FARDC helmet in a demobilization transit camp, 2014.

Bank, the *Commission nationale de désarmement et réinsertion* (CONADER, National Disarmament and Reinsertion Commission) was mandated to facilitate ex-combatants' return to civilian life. Although former DDR programmes had little success—the Kivu provinces alone currently count more than 70 armed groups¹—the *Plan global national de DDR III* (Global National Plan for DDR III) was adopted in 2014 and, after a long row over finance and programming, was finally implemented in 2015.

While DDR is considered to be a key part of post-conflict policies that are meant to assist in the re-establishing of peace and stability, the 'post-conflict' label does not apply to the DRC. The eastern part of the country continues to face myriad intertwined conflicts—spells of pervasive violence alternate with periods of relative calm. The defeat of the *Mouvement du 23-mars* (M23, March 23 Movement) in late 2013 opened a window of opportunity for demobilization. Military offensives, however, have regained momentum, flanked by a parallel, army-led demobilization effort. The role of this effort within DDR III is not clear.

This briefing analyses why and how previous DDR processes have failed, and provides a sketch of the current state of affairs and future prospects for demobilization. It reviews the impact of

CONADER and the potential of DDR III, focusing on the role of combatants, commanders and politicians. In particular, the briefing discusses incentives for armed groups to join demobilization programmes under conditions of high insecurity and distrust, as well as the relationship between demobilization and remobilization. The briefing argues that a holistic approach to DDR is needed, which would make it part of a genuine effort at social transformation and reform of the security sector, which in turn casts doubts on its feasibility within the current context of political competition and insecurity in the DRC.

Defining DDR

While the definition of DDR—which has long been a fashionable post-conflict reconstruction tool—varies across countries, there are a few common characteristics. ‘Disarmament’ means removal of weapons and ammunition from combatants whilst the more complex ‘demobilization’ ranges from technical measures such as removing insignia up to very complex processes such as the disbanding of military hierarchies. ‘Reintegration’, in turn, is defined by the UN as a ‘process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status ... with an open timeframe, primarily taking place in communities’. A related but different concept is ‘reinsertion’, here seen as ‘transitional assistance to help cover the basic needs of ex-combatants and their families’.² There are several ways to define the success or otherwise of DDR. In a narrow, technical sense, success means that former combatants are disarmed, demobilized and in some sense reintegrated into either regular security forces or civilian life. In a broader, political sense, it means contributing to overall peace and stability. This includes not only the technical elements described above but also the establishment of an environment in which ex-combatants are involved once more in social and political processes as civilians and wider political grievances are addressed.

CONADER: ‘On juge l’arbre par ses fruits’ (‘A tree is judged by its fruit’)³

CONADER was set up in 2004, as stipulated in the 2003 Sun City Agreement that laid the basis for the creation of a new army, today’s *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC,

Armed Forces of the DRC). CONADER was to organize the disarmament, identification and categorization of combatants, who could choose to either return to civilian life or integrate into the FARDC via the *Structure militaire d’intégration* (SMI, Military Integration Structure).⁴ While the belligerent factions listed 330,000 combatants, this figure was considered inflated and far exceeded the number of troops the government intended to integrate into the army. In orientation centres, people were disarmed and steered either to the army for *brassage* (literally brewing)—that is mixing with combatants from other factions—or listed for a demobilization process. CONADER and SMI started work in 2005, overseen by inter-ministerial commissions.⁵ Although it is intimately related to army integration,⁶ this briefing focuses primarily on the fate of DDR.

While initially DDR seemed to work, irregularities rapidly appeared. There were few prior social and economic assessments of those demobilized and their communities of origin. Often, communities were neither informed as to what was about to happen nor prepared to accommodate ex-combatants. This exacerbated insecurity in areas that received a large influx of ex-combatants. Such areas began to see new land conflicts and economic pressure on communities intensified. Furthermore, DDR fostered the perception that joining a militia would lead to economic gains, as the demobilized received money and material supplies. The continuous availability of cheap weaponry increased opportunities to hand in old arms in exchange for money and to buy new ones. In addition, most of the recovered arms later disappeared, when individuals resold weapons to leaders of armed groups, thus helping to regenerate militias.⁷

One of the reasons why DDR was at odds with realities on the ground was that much of CONADER’s strategy was based on the case of Sierra Leone, while home-grown expertise was ignored—only one staff member of the agency preceding CONADER was retained, for example.⁸ The empty CONADER offices suggested a lack of direction and responsibility. Adding to that, poor knowledge of the context, in particular of security and social and economic conditions, was pervasive. Some of those demobilized for example received goats, which were immediately stolen by the rebels

of the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR, Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda). In another case, diesel grinding mills were handed out. Not only were they insufficient, some broke down and no spare parts were provided.⁹ In Kamituga, South Kivu, where the condition of the roads prohibits any cycling, CONADER partners were to distribute bicycles but ended up selling them privately. A Goma-based CONADER coordinator stole potatoes to resell them in Kinshasa.

With donors unwilling to assure oversight beyond provincial capitals and large towns, misuse of DDR assets reinforced distrust among target populations. While it was suspected that embezzlement involved the most senior staff, an evaluation became impossible after CONADER's headquarters in Kinshasa burnt down.¹⁰

The payment of allowances to beneficiaries sometimes included non-combatants pretending to be former fighters. This saw many of them re-entering DDR multiple times, a strategy that was made possible by the lack of a central database. At the same time, many remotely located ex-combatants were never able to access any DDR programme and were largely abandoned by the official process. In Mwenga and Shabunda, South Kivu, many of those who were self-demobilized went to work in mining sites such as Kamituga or Lugushwa. Some would eventually rejoin militias such as the Raia Mutomboki. When asked why they remobilized, ex-combatants often emphasized that promises made to them were not kept. In the words of one ex-combatant: 'We feel betrayed. We were demobilized by CONADER and CARITAS said they would help, but nothing. Some of us became bandits, others joined armed groups again.'¹¹ A DDR official added, 'If someone quits, they have to be taken care of, otherwise they will become thieves'.¹²

Challenges to successful demobilization

The experiences of CONADER hint at a number of obstacles and risks to lasting and successful DDR in the Congo. There are four main factors that impede a smooth rollout of DDR and affect patterns of mobilization: local security dilemmas between and within communities; resistance by elites with political agendas; perverse incentives for commanders; and social processes among rank-

and-file ex-combatants, which lead them to be recycled as rebels.

Local security issues

In most of the conflicts in the eastern Congo, competition over land, livelihoods, identity and power creates security dilemmas for armed groups that impede DDR. An armed group may only be willing to lay down arms if its opponents do the same. Entering DDR thus requires armed groups to take a leap of faith—and if DDR fails, this faith is lost.

Due to such security dilemmas, many militias refuse to disarm or join regular security forces, claiming to be protecting their communities against domestic and foreign threats. Others who did demobilize, re-mobilized as adversaries did so too.¹³ In the Bafuliiru Chiefdom in Uvira, South Kivu, for instance, insecurity continues due to the activity of numerous Mai-Mai groups and local tensions over customary power.¹⁴ The *Forces d'autodéfense locales et légitimes* (FALL, Local and Legitimate Self-Defence Forces) operating in this area, also known as *biloko* ('things' in Lingala), justify their presence by invoking local insecurity, which they say they need to address, given that neither the army nor the police are able to secure this vast mountainous territory. 'Security is non-existent. If, in certain destroyed villages, people can live [again], it is thanks to the Local Defence. DDR III can only work if the Congolese government provides security to the population',¹⁵ explained a leader of this militia group.

Resistance by political elites

Without the political will of elites, DDR is impossible. In the eastern Congo, political manipulation both triggers armed mobilization and discourages combatants trust in DDR. Elites often exploit xenophobic fears and use militias to bargain for political posts. Elites—as opposed to individual combatants—stand to gain little from DDR. Through intermediaries such as customary authorities and businesspeople, political elites may invest capital to mobilize ex-combatants or supply them with weaponry. Customary chiefs, many of whom simultaneously hold political office, embody important ethnic, political and economic interests.¹⁶ In various Raia Mutomboki factions, recruitment works through kinship, and commanders need

to consult chiefs and others instrumental in the arming of militias.¹⁷ In Bunyakiri, Kalehe, South Kivu, Raia Mutomboki considers a national parliamentarian its leader.¹⁸ Customary leaders can, however, also support demobilization, such as the case of the Raia Mutomboki factions of Nyanderema, Lukoba and Blaise in Nindja, Kabare in 2015. Getting chiefs and politicians on board is vital to the success of DDR.

Incentive structures for commanders

Integration into the army and receipt of a military rank used to be incentives for commanders of armed groups to leave the bush. Worryingly, some peace accords, along with the politicization of DDR even encouraged armed mobilization, as was made clear at the 2008 Goma conference.¹⁹ However, in the course of 2013 the government in Kinshasa abandoned wholesale integration of armed groups and the giving out of army ranks and positions to commanders. One reason for this change in approach was the detrimental effect on the military—the emergence for example of *battalions cadre* (battalions consisting only of higher-rank officers who were not operational and often had little training or education). Since it abandoned this policy, however, it remains unclear what the government has to offer to leaders of armed groups who are still willing to lay down their arms. Many high and mid-level commanders expect rewards similar to those they could have expected in the past, and therefore either openly refuse or covertly obstruct DDR programmes that lack such benefits.²⁰ There is, therefore, a need to rethink the incentives for commanders in any future DDR initiatives.

A revolving door for rank-and-file combatants

DDR programmes focus mostly on livelihoods. Social identity and status have thus far largely been ignored. During the Congo Wars, a whole generation of Congolese youth became accustomed to living the rebel lifestyle.²¹ Access to popular culture such as music, clothes or drugs, and the representation of militias as fearless fighters defending noble causes created a powerful draw for many young people. According to these romanticized accounts, a farmer has to work hard every day but a rebel can sit around and wait for his or her daily bread. Previous DDR

programmes underestimated this and did not sufficiently support combatants' efforts to redefine their social roles in a civilian environment.²² Moreover, demobilization often meant a career for the fickle, while army loyalty was not rewarded. Such dynamics led numerous demobilized and reintegrated combatants to rejoin militias.²³ Others simply played the game, temporarily joining DDR programmes and siphoning off material benefits but eventually returning to a life of arms.²⁴

Taken together, these four factors create major obstacles for DDR III, which is itself far from being free of other weaknesses and challenges.

DDR III: Prospects for the next generation

These obstacles notwithstanding, a new programme was presented in June 2014. Although ready on paper, DDR III could not start until late 2015 when sufficient initial funding was secured through bilateral donors and the World Bank. By November 2015, more than a year after its launch, only half of the anticipated 25,000 recipients (ex-combatants and host communities) were enrolled. Funding remains insufficient despite a World Bank pledge. It is unclear how funds have been disbursed—some officials claim to have received nothing.

Besides being the first such programme to be preceded by an awareness-raising campaign, DDR III is also the first to insist on transferring combatants from their home turf to other parts of the Congo.²⁵ However, this poses another major obstacle to participation. Those in the programme with families cannot simply leave for faraway DDR centres. The conditions in the centres also give cause for concern. Kotakoli, one of the transit centres in ex-Equateur province, was closed due to a lack of provision for healthcare and food, which resulted in more than 100 inmates starving to death. Kamina, in ex-Katanga, made the headlines as commanders attempted a mutiny, complaining that combatants were being deprived of medicine and food.²⁶ Although UN contractors have begun building reinsertion centres in the military bases of Kamina and Kitona, in ex-Bas-Congo, they now face allegations of inefficiency. In sum, the most innovative part of DDR III—temporary relocation—is proving to be one of the main obstacles, since

reports of these incidents make their way back to eastern DRC and discourage potentially interested combatants.

With an uncertain electoral period ahead, time seems to be already running out for DDR III. What began with army-led awareness-raising across the Kivus now encounters myriad constraints. While certain militia members want to demobilize, others seek integration into the security apparatus instead—and officials do not always seem to make it clear to combatants what options they have within and beyond DDR III. In addition, accusations of the FARDC failing to protect the population and rampant insecurity makes militia leaders wary of laying down their arms. In other cases, the army's carrot-and-stick approach—progressing with offensives while preaching the mantra of DDR—did not produce results. This could clearly be observed among the Raia Mutomboki combatants in Bunyakiri. While certain combatants surrendered, others developed a more aggressive posture as they were dislodged from the Burhale-Shabunda road into and pushed adjacent forests.²⁷

Additionally, there is deep distrust among many combatants. Aside from fears of being relocated, they are either afraid of stigma at home or vengeance for their involvement in a conflict. Others are put off by the negative examples of those of their peers who have ended up dead or in jail. For example, former Raia Mutomboki leaders are under residential surveillance and one Mai-Mai leader was sent to military prison. Another Raia Mutomboki leader is allegedly not joining DDR because he owes money to an FARDC commander. Discouraging news about the treatment of Paul Sadala, Germain Katanga and Bede Rusagara—all former militia leaders—also spread rapidly.²⁸

In sum, two main dynamics currently impede a smoother rolling out of DDR III. Firstly, militias strongly distrust the programme—both for past failures and from fear of being relocated from their communities. Secondly, they distrust a government army that lures them into demobilization while

continuing to carry out military operations. Neither MONUSCO nor other third-party actors have so far acted as an honest broker to resolve this tension.

Policy implications: The need for a new approach

DDR programmes—in the DRC and elsewhere—are not just technical exercises. They are rather profoundly political processes. Despite this, none of the recent DDR programmes were preceded by much research. This has led to incorrect assessments prompting adverse reactions from combatants, commanders and associated elites. In particular, glossing over conflict dynamics and the politics of armed mobilization has reduced DDR in some contexts to a type of 'cash for weapons' programme, rather than an attempt at sustainable demobilization and reintegration.²⁹ DDR III should therefore more actively involve ex-combatants and commanders, as advisors and examples, and should refer more to experts in Congolese civil society and government.

Political processes such as DDR also need a modicum of stability to work. One of the main ingredients of the continuing volatility in the eastern Congo is the deficient performance of the security services, which poses a major obstacle to DDR. Without a national army which is perceived as a neutral and capable security provider, security dilemmas and elite political bargains will continue to undermine DDR. There is thus a need for a serious, genuine and comprehensive reform of the security sector, which so far has not been tackled by Kinshasa and without which no DDR programme can ever hope to be effective. In addition, continuing military operations should be carried out only if they do not undermine demobilization efforts. If the FARDC tries to do both simultaneously, the result cannot be anything other than distrust. Restoring that trust in the government is crucial to success. Such a long-term process should therefore start at the outset by treating properly those who surrender.

Notes

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- 2 United Nations, 'Note of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly', May 2005, A/C.5/59/31. This briefing will not address DDRRR (DDR for foreign combatants, which includes repatriation and resettlement prior to reintegration back home).
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- 5 Missak Kasongo and Pamphile Sebahara, *Le désarmement, la démobilisation et la réinsertion des combattants en RD Congo*, Brussels: GRIP, 2006.
- 6 Judith Verweijen and Maria Eriksson Baaz, *Between Integration and Disintegration: The Erratic Trajectory of the Congolese Army*, Paper prepared for the DRC Affinity Group, SSRIC, 2013.
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- 8 Interviews 821, Bukavu, 5 April 2013; 816, Goma, 27 March 2013; 829, Kinshasa, 16 April 2013.
- 9 Interviews 809, Bukavu, 11 March 2013; 815, Goma, 26 March 2013; 824, Bunyakiri, 9 April 2013.
- 10 Interviews 802, Uvira, 28 February 2013; 819, Goma, 29 March 2013; 821, Bukavu, 5 April 2013; 839, Kamituga, 2 May 2013.
- 11 Interviews 801, Uvira, 28 February 2013; 809, Bukavu, 11 March 2013; 838, Kamituga, 1 May 2013.
- 12 Interviews 807, Bukavu, 8 March 2013; 823, Bunyakiri, 8 April 2013.
- 13 The case of CNDP and PARECO, both temporarily integrated into the FARDC, is illustrative. When parts of the CNDP reincarnated as M23, a substantial share of ex-PARECO resurfaced as Nyatura. See: Jason Stearns, *PARECO: Land, local strongmen and the roots of militia politics in North Kivu*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2013; and Jason Stearns, *From CNDP to M23: The evolution of an armed movement in eastern Congo*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2012. Interviews 817, Goma, 28 March 2013; 818, Goma, 29 March 2013; 819, Goma, 29 March 2013; 829, Kinshasa, 16 April 2013.
- 14 See Judith Verweijen, *A Microcosm of Militarization: Conflict, governance and armed mobilization in Uvira, South Kivu*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2016.
- 15 Interview 855, Uvira, 27 November 2015.
- 16 Interviews 831, Bukavu, 23 April 2013; 819, Goma, 29 March 2013; 835, Bukavu, 25 April 2013.
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Credits

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