

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) in Africa

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Introduction

The proliferation of UN peacekeeping operations coincides with an increase in UN-led programs to disarm and disband warring parties, as well as reintegrate ex-combatants into civilian life.

“Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration,” or DDR programs as they are known to practitioners, have featured in post-conflict reconstruction from Afghanistan to Haiti. But the bulk of DDR interventions—twenty-four since 1992—have occurred in Africa. The failure of early DDR programs in Somalia and Liberia, partly attributed to their vague mandates, prompted a shift in recent years toward more focused interventions, now codified in a new set of [policy guidelines](#) developed in 2005. Newer DDR programs in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have disarmed hundreds of thousands of combatants, but experts say these programs remain poorly funded, and a lack of research has prevented practitioners from developing better reintegration programs.

Administering DDR programs

A number of agencies administer DDR programs. The United Nations adopts a lead role in most single-country DDR programs in Africa, but various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and aid groups, are also typically involved. In Liberia, for example, UNICEF leads child DDR (for combatants aged seventeen and younger), and no less than six other groups—including the World Food Program, World Health Organization (WHO), ActionAid, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)—administer adult DDR. The largest DDR program on the continent, a multi-country initiative in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa known as [MDRP](#), is run by the World Bank in conjunction with forty other Western and African governments, NGOs, and regional organizations. Though this program does not include disarmament (World Bank policy prohibits it), it currently supports some 455,000 ex-combatants.

The multitude of agencies involved in DDR can often create confusion and management conflicts. But Ingo Wiederhofer, senior operations officer at the World Bank and an expert on DDR programs in Africa, cites the positive relationships between the World Bank and UN missions in [Sierra Leone](#) and the [Congo](#). In a [survey \(PDF\)](#) of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, over 75 percent said the training component of DDR had prepared them well for employment; the most common complaint about the program was that it should have lasted longer. But in the Congo, the reintegration process was “chaotic and problematic,” according to a recent Amnesty International [report](#). “We risked our lives to hand in our weapons,” said a former fighter interviewed for the report. “We are incapable of feeding our families and cannot even pay the rent. The solution is for these people to give us our weapons back.”

In recent years, there has been a push to transfer the work of DDR from international groups to national commissions that coordinate the efforts of all international partners. Some experts praise transfer of oversight to the national government. Henri Boshoff and Waldemar Vray of the Institute for Security Studies, a South Africa-based think tank, write in an analysis of Burundi’s DDR program that the success of the country’s program was due in part to the ability of Burundian authorities to [make their own decisions](#). Yet these national commissions draw criticism for encouraging corruption and inefficiency. Many point to Congo, where the government commission coordinating DDR, known as “[CONADER](#),” has been blamed for long delays in the demobilization process, failures to provide resources to its provincial offices, and a lack of managerial and technical expertise.

Simultaneous phases

Earlier DDR programs were executed sequentially, with one phase concluding before the next one began. But this linear process created numerous timing problems; ex-combatants waited for months in temporary camps before they could return to their communities, and delays in transition payments left ex-combatants without a means of support. Now, many experts stress the need to run the phases in tandem. “They need to be simultaneous from the get-go,” says [Edward Rackley](#), an independent evaluator of UNICEF- and World Bank-administered child DDR programs throughout Africa. An adult program cannot begin until there is a peace agreement that establishes parameters for DDR, but a child program can—and often does—start before a conflict has ended.

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In the disarmament phase, weapons belonging both to combatants and the civilian population are collected, documented, and disposed of (in most cases, destroyed). This process includes the assembly of combatants, often in an area guarded by external forces; collection of personal information; collection of weapons; certification of eligibility for benefits; and transportation to a demobilization center. Disarmament can also include the development of arms-management programs. Problems in this phase can include combatants who try to disarm multiple times to reap financial benefits, as well as commanders keeping back the best weapons.

During demobilization, armed groups are formally disbanded. At this stage, combatants are generally separated from their commanders and transported to cantonments, or temporary quarters, where they receive basic necessities and counseling. Eventually, they are transported to a local community where they have chosen to live permanently.

“Reinsertion” is the transitional assistance offered to ex-combatants during demobilization before longer-term reintegration begins. Such assistance can include cash payments, in-kind assistance (goods and services), and vocational training. Charles Achodo, head of the UN’s DDR program in Liberia, says funding often dries up at this phase in the process. Donors “forget that these people need assistance to become productive members of the community—psychological counseling,

trauma healing support, access to employment,” he says. Wiederhofer adds that the United Nations has difficulty accessing funds for reinsertion and reintegration, but the World Bank does not. “We have not had any program so far where we’ve run out of money,” he says.

Reintegrating into Civil Society

Despite the logistical challenges of disarmament and demobilization, reintegration—the acquisition of civilian status and sustainable employment and income—is considered the most difficult phase of any DDR process. An Institute for Security Studies (ISS) paper calls it [“the Achilles heel of DDR” \(PDF\)](#). Rackley says donors have the mistaken idea that “As soon as you get guns out of their hands, they are suddenly innocuous human beings again, but that is not the case at all.” Others argue that reintegration’s difficulties push it beyond the scope of any DDR process, and thus this phase should be confined to reinsertion. Because DDR originally focused on short-term disarmament, reintegration is the least developed phase, in some cases confined to vocational training in one or two fields. “You have to provide an economic alternative to living by the gun,” says Rackley. But in post-conflict countries, job opportunities are scarce, and sometimes communities are hesitant to employ ex-combatants. In Liberia, “there is no stigma,” Achodo says, but with unemployment around 80 percent, “It is still hard to find jobs.”

The increased emphasis on national commissions means international agencies are working to involve local communities in the reintegration process by incorporating local reconciliation customs. Yet little research exists on reintegration and its effects on nations recovering from conflict. “Although there are instances of “bad” DDR and a few of “good” DDR, the qualitative information necessary for better analysis and development of [reintegration] guidelines is generally lacking,” says the ISS paper.

Columbia University’s Macartan Humphreys and Stanford University’s Jeremy M. Weinstein argue the abusiveness of an ex-combatant’s unit—not taking part in DDR —is the most significant determinant of reintegration success. In their research on ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, they found weak evidence that participating in DDR [improves reintegration prospects \(PDF\)](#) for individuals.

Women and Children

As recently as Sierra Leone's DDR program in 2003, in which only seven thousand of an estimated 48,000 child soldiers were demobilized, DDR interventions practiced a "one man, one gun" policy focused on disarming adult male combatants. Women and children associated with the fighting groups were often excluded from the process. Newer DDR programs have worked to include special groups, but some say these expanded mandates have sacrificed efficacy by trying to include too many people. Groups involved with security prefer to deal only with armed combatants, while humanitarian organizations want to include women and children in the DDR process. In Liberia's recent DDR program, the number of demobilized persons grew to 112,000 because women and children were considered under the same disarmament criteria as ex-combatants. The UN's Achodo, who administers Liberia's program, argues different criteria should be applied to special groups so that resources can be allocated to those who really need them.

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Some suggest that women and children should go through a parallel process that is not labeled DDR. Very few women have enrolled in DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo because the program developed a cultural stigma. As noncombatants, women do not need the demobilization component of the program, and including them may perpetuate the relationships established during combat. Though children often do need demobilization, many agree that child soldiers need to be separated from adult combatants to break the psychological links between children and their military commanders.

Yet the degree to which child soldiers need special treatment varies widely; some have only been fighting for a few months and have families to return to, while others have been fighting for five or six years and may need extensive counseling. Another problem arises when children perceive they are not receiving the same benefits as adult ex-combatants. The World Bank's Wiederhofer notes that in Burundi, at least 80 percent of children were heads of households who thought of themselves as adults. "If you start treating them as children," he says, "It is counterproductive to their reintegration and they resent it."

Improving DDR

The inclusion of women and children in newer DDR programs indicates the willingness among international groups to adopt lessons learned from earlier DDR programs and develop more effective interventions. Recent efforts such as the [Stockholm Initiative \(PDF\)](#) on DDR, a year-long working group spearheaded by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the United Nations' effort to develop the Integrated DDR Standards, have contributed to a growing body of research on the efficacy of DDR. Yet Wiederhofer says, "It is too early to tell how they will be used in the field." Rackley agrees that "all these agencies are still groping to figure this out." However, experts say DDR—flawed as it may be—is necessary to any post-conflict reconstruction program. In Iraq, the decision to disband the army without a DDR program "was a massive boost to the [forces of instability](#) in the country," writes Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution.

Consensus also exists among agencies and researchers that a DDR program is only as good as a country's peace agreement and overall reconstruction efforts. In a paper for the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Nicole Ball and Luc van de Goor write, "DDR should be viewed as part of a broader [security, stabilization, and recovery](#) strategy, rather than a stand-alone intervention." If peace does not hold in a country, ex-combatants may quickly return to fighting because they can profit from it. Neighboring countries can also derail the process. In southern Sudan, phase one of DDR is [underway \(PDF\)](#) after the [Comprehensive Peace Agreement](#) signed in 2005, but cross-border recruitment of Sudanese child soldiers by Uganda's Lords Resistance Army [continues](#).