

POST-CONFLICT REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES IN SIERRA LEONE

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Introduction

The Sierra Leone conflict escalated in March 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched attacks from Liberian territory into Sierra Leone to overthrow the All People's Congress (APC) government, led by former president Joseph S. Momoh. Unlike other conflicts, provoked by inter-ethnic or religious strife, the crisis in Sierra Leone was a product of a complex combination of internal and external factors. These included nepotism and rampant corruption of those in power, the erosion of state institutions, competition between various factions within the government for control of the country's natural wealth, and external interests in destabilising the country.

The conflict became more complex after the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) government, led by Tejan-Kabba, was overthrown in May 1997 by disgruntled Sierra Leone Army (SLA) officers, who invited the RUF to join forces with them to form the Armed Forces Revolutionary

Council (AFRC). In February 1998, this junta government was ousted by a Nigerian-led Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), with support from a few loyal SLA officers and the Civil Defence Force (CDF) – a pro-government militia that was mobilised by the then-deputy defence minister, Chief Sam Hinga Norman. On 6 January 1999, AFRC and RUF forces stormed the capital, Freetown. Before they were repelled, they burnt down part of the city, and killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of civilians in less than a month. The international community, however, succeeded in negotiating a temporary ceasefire, which

Above: Former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) child combatants load into UN trucks following a ceremony in which they were released from the fighting forces and returned to civilian life in May 2001 in Makeni, Sierra Leone.

eventually led to the signing of the Lomé Peace Accord and the end of hostilities.

On 18 January 2002, the 10-year civil war came to a formal end. The change started with the disarmament and demobilisation of combatants, with the ultimate aim of reintegrating ex-combatants into society. Reintegration (the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income) is a major challenge confronting Sierra Leone. During the war, combatants committed widespread atrocities against civilians, including those in their own communities. These acts of violence created guilt, suspicion and fear about prospects for their return to communities. Promoting and fostering reconciliation between ex-combatants and other community members remains a crucial challenge that impacts national progress.

Sierra Leone is still an extremely poor country, highly dependent on external aid. With the very high unemployment rate, securing employment for ex-combatants represents a major challenge to post-conflict reintegration. The danger of disgruntled ex-combatants drifting into crime – or even renewed conflict – remains a potential threat.

Reintegration Objectives

The main objectives of the reintegration component of Sierra Leone's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme were:

- to facilitate and support the return of ex-combatants to their home communities or preferred communities of return;
- to assist the ex-combatants to become productive members of their communities;
- to utilise the potential of ex-combatants for social and economic reconstruction;
- to promote social acceptance and reconciliation; and
- to reduce the fiscal impact of large defence budgets by providing alternative employment support options for demobilised ex-combatants.¹

The National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR), with support from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and other stakeholders, succeeded in disarming an estimated 72 490 fighters in less than two years, and restored state authority across the country. However, there remain numerous challenges to sustainable post-conflict reintegration in Sierra Leone. Only about 54 439 ex-combatants benefited from the skills training programme, whilst only about 45 000 ex-combatants (as well as some dependants) received food and cooking utensils.² Even the fortunate ones who did receive training found it extremely difficult to secure employment, due to the unavailability of jobs.

All these problems can be attributed to the fact that reintegration was implemented rather hastily to meet

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Disarmament was a major focus of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration phase in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

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a required deadline, and was considered completed by the end of the DDR programme. Also, funds were exhausted in the disarmament and demobilisation phase, with little left for the reintegration component. This is significant, as it is impossible for ex-combatants to forget about their combat life completely during disarmament and demobilisation, if they are not gainfully employed. This would require the support of the reintegration component – a more complex, costly and long-term endeavour that should continue after the official end of the entire DDR programme. In addition, ex-combatants' unrealistic expectations about life after discharge – provoked by incorrect information campaigns – were not managed well by the implementing partners, who lacked reintegration skills and techniques.

These and other problems encountered during the DDR programme are impacting negatively on the long-term reintegration of ex-combatants. In addition, only minimal orientation activities (such as trauma healing and psycho-social counselling, information and sensitisation about the DDR programme and its package, life skills and civic education) were provided for the ex-combatants, due to the very limited time frames provided for demobilisation and reintegration. Furthermore, minimal sensitisation was undertaken in the receiving communities to prepare for the return of ex-combatants. This has resulted in many problems arising between these two groups, as the community members perceive the ex-combatants as responsible for their suffering. As the ex-combatants return to resettle, they are faced with this resentment.

Rural and Urban Reintegration

With the return of ex-combatants and other war-affected groups to the communities, access to land is now an extremely important issue. For women in particular, land inheritance traditions exclude them from ownership. Also, it is almost impossible for people from the city to own land in rural areas, and it is beyond the scope of the DDR programme to reform constitutional, customary and statutory laws to guarantee ex-combatants' access to land. The strides made by women (especially after the enactment of the gender bills) and people from the city to possess land in the provinces, compounded by the numerous land disputes that have erupted as ex-combatants return to repurchase their lands, are challenges faced by the local authorities. The ability to resolve such disputes should be informed by resettlement and reintegration policies, especially in

order to handle the retaliation tendencies of community members. The community members tend to be of the view that people coming from the city to settle in the provinces are all ex-combatants, who likely have lifestyles that are 'inhuman', and it would be difficult to cope with their presence. A community member revealed:

"We have forgiven them (ex-combatants) but it is extremely impossible to forget. Their behavior reminds us of their evil ways and we tend to deny them community privileges which stand as obstacles to their reintegration."³

The ex-combatants' reinsertion benefits are perceived by other community members as rewarding perpetrators of violence and atrocities, rather than an investment in peace and reconciliation. This often adds to the tensions between community members and ex-combatants. Ex-combatants' difficulties in reintegrating into rural village life have resulted in their influx into the capital city and big towns, where they are facing accommodation problems. Many have entered slums, where the degrading conditions do not offer many opportunities for reintegration.

Reintegration of Youth

Children, young persons and young adults fall within the category of youth (18-35 years). For both boys and girls, categorised as youth, the DDR approach was largely inappropriate. Ex-combatants under 18 years of age were regarded as child soldiers and were treated as children, not taking into account the extended responsibilities that many of these young people have as providers. Those just above the age of 18 years were treated as adults, in programmes with a 'livelihood focus', which neglect young people's needs for 'catch-up' education programmes and their ambition for careers and better futures. The specific nature of this group is that they are neither children nor adults, but have distinct characteristics as a result of their in-between status and the experiences they have been through.

This group, classified as 'youth', accounts for more than 50% of the population of Sierra Leone. The population of ex-combatants, who are mainly youth themselves, have joined this larger and more powerful group. Ex-combatants are no longer considered a special group with special concerns and needs, but as part of the working population, responsible for their individual development and the larger national develop-

ment. However, their low skills capacity makes it almost impossible for many of these young people to be part of reconstruction and mainstream programmes carried out by service providers, which would build their self-esteem and status. One such programme is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Youth Engagement Programme, which involves broad collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Sports in supporting the implementation of the National Youth Policy. This is done through capacity-building and advocacy for youth activities in the communities, under the Reintegration and Transition to Peacebuilding Programme.⁴

Even when there are efforts to engage these young people in decent employment and activities, their lack of education and skills impede them from benefiting from whatever is made available to them. Many are idle youth, who failed to pursue education or learn a skill that would contribute to the development of the nation and serve as their source of income. This is significant, as the unemployed youth resort to their arms and weapons to provide them with the illusion of power and importance and to generate both recognition and remuneration, contributing to further 'insecurity'. In this way, conflicts provide 'employment' for many young people (including the large number of child soldiers and the so-called 'war entrepreneurs'), who choose to be engaged in unlawful income-generating activities during such situations. Youth unemployment is, therefore, increasingly considered not only as a socio-economic issue but also as a political and security issue, posing a serious obstacle to peace, security and development in Sierra Leone.

Psycho-Social Problems

Many ex-combatants are suffering from mental health problems. War trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affect their physical, mental, emotional, behavioural and social abilities – that is, all aspects of their functioning. They are unable to come to terms with their past, and find it very difficult to reintegrate into society carrying their emotional and psychological baggage.

The minimal therapy and trauma counselling that was provided for ex-combatants, and the unavailability of established counselling centres with both trained psychotherapists and counsellors, have resulted in an increase in the number of ex-combatants and war-affected people suffering from PTSD. Many have

since lost their jobs, because they are unable to behave 'normally' in their places of work and among people.

Women and Girls' Concerns

The social acceptance and economic reintegration of many female ex-combatants is impeded by health and psychosocial problems associated with the stigma of forced sexual activities, childbirth, abortion and having been fighters. Carrying children of rape, or being abandoned by their 'bush husbands', makes it difficult for female ex-combatants to cope with life – especially when they lack education, skills and a means of livelihood. Many have also developed varying degrees of attachment to their commanders. Some of these relationships resemble those of families in the traditional sense, while others are based on a strong loyalty built in combat. Some women were simply abducted, then abandoned. These women have suffered the most abuse and poor health, and have very limited prospects for the future. Many women were even unable to access the reintegration opportunities provided, because they lacked the time and supplementary financial means to attend the training courses that should have ameliorated their living conditions.

There are many other women involved in combat who, because of the 'possession of arms' criteria for entering into the DDR programme, were excluded from the benefits and opportunities of reintegration. They were left to find their own way through life, and are suffering triple discrimination – as women, ex-combatants and the poor. Those who do survive still find it very difficult to proceed with life in the expected traditional women's roles, which are opposed to the more powerful combat roles they held during the conflict. Reintegration programmes have failed to address these multiple challenges facing women.

Family Reunification

Many children associated with the fighting forces lost their parents and relatives during the conflict, and now have no-one to take care of them. For those whose parents survived, their deplorable conditions prevent them from taking care of their children. On the other hand, some children are still not willing to go home, because they ran away from home as a result of the physical and sexual abuse to which they were subjected. For those children desperate to be reunited with their families and return home, it has been difficult for the

THE EX-COMBATANTS' REINSERTION BENEFITS ARE PERCEIVED BY OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS REWARDING PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE AND ATROCITIES, RATHER THAN AN INVESTMENT IN PEACE AND RECONCILIATION



A member of the Freetown Single Limb Amputee football team practises in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Nearly all the players were victims of Sierra Leone's brutal civil war.

UNICEF, the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society (SLRCS), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other organisations helping children, to unify them with their families through their tracing and family reunification programmes.

Some of these children were placed into the formal education system, but have dropped out because they were not given scholarships to cover their entire schooling. Others who were provided with skills training opportunities – without proper monitoring of their commitment and progress – are now goods-carriers in the markets, mini bus (*poda poda*) apprentices and involved in other such meagre jobs and activities for their daily survival. An interview with one such child revealed:

"I want to go to school but I don't have someone who will pay my fees, the money I get is insufficient to upkeep me, not to talk of paying fees."⁵

Imprisoned Ex-Combatants

There are some ex-combatants imprisoned at the Pademba Road Maximum Prison in Freetown, for

so-called 'security' reasons. They have been denied the opportunity to be part of the reintegration component of the DDR programme. These ex-combatants need to be released and reintegrated into their preferred community of settlement. They should be counselled and provided with civic education, life skills and education to foster their gainful employment into decent work and activities. The alternative is that they will be easy recruits for criminal activities upon their release, and further contribute to insecurity and instability. A recently released inmate indicated in an interview:

"It is very disheartening to spare some people ... leaving others to suffer. There is no country in the whole world where peace, love and unity shall hold firmly without equal rights and justice".⁶

Due to a lack of political will, the past government failed to release all imprisoned ex-combatants, and paid minimal attention to them and the human rights abuses they faced. This was a contributing factor for some of the violence that ensued during and after the recently



A main reintegration goal, in Sierra Leone, was to assist ex-combatants to become productive members of their communities.

concluded elections by sympathisers on the outside, who were mainly ex-combatants and ex-servicemen. Imprisoned ex-combatants remain a threat to peace and security, even as inmates, as the Maximum Prison is a recruitment target for insurgents whenever there is an uprising. There is a dire need for the new government to address this neglected group and issue.

Skills and Vocational Training

The NCDDR was faced with the problems of limited funds and facilities available for the reintegration of the large number of ex-combatants who had completed the disarmament and demobilisation phase, due to the lack of consistent funding through the Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) and the capacity of implementing partners. This resulted in the delivery of only short-term training opportunities, without many apprenticeships or on-the-job training in existing workshops or businesses. Also, the vocational trainings that were offered by the NCDDR focused on carpentry, masonry, hairdressing, tailoring, metal works and so on, but there are limited employment opportunities for such trades.⁷

Apprenticeships or on-the-job training should have been an excellent means of social reintegration and reconciliation, as they offer insertion through association with a mentor or trainer into an already existing

socio-economic network, consisting of groups and communities of people who are not ex-combatants. This should have resulted in more sustainable employment and reintegration. However, the lack of education and the training coordination capacity, the lack of official accreditation of the certificates and qualifications attained, the shortage of well-experienced trainers, and trainers who used rigid, instructor-oriented methodologies, turned the training into quick-fix endeavours with little impact. A staff member of one of the implementing institutions said in an interview:

“...we told them they will become carpenters, hairdressers, mechanics even though we knew it was almost impossible because the short trainings provided was insufficient for them to be able to compete with the well-trained and experienced professionals of these trades.”⁸

Without any significant access to micro-credit schemes and few job opportunities, the skills development training has lost its potential value to ex-combatants. Many used their reinsertion benefits to buy basic diamond mining equipment, and are presently in the Kono District mining for diamonds.⁹ Others bought motorbikes and are running them on a commercial basis.

Those who squandered all they were given are now in a deplorable and frustrating situation, with little or no hope. They believe that they did not achieve anything from the war or the DDR programme.

Summary and Conclusion

One of the most complex challenges of post-conflict reintegration in Sierra Leone is that proper and comprehensive socio-economic profiling, opportunity mapping and labour market analyses were not undertaken to provide information and balance the needs and ambitions of ex-combatants, the needs and expectations of receiving communities and, most importantly, the potential and limitations of the market and economy. Also, the reintegration component of the DDR programme was not closely linked with broader socio-economic recovery and reconstruction processes.

The incorporation of reintegration actors such as relief and development agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs) on the ground in the different communities, would have ensured not only the sustainability of reintegration schemes for ex-combatants, but also the economic impact of such initiatives (for example, employment creation, vocational training, micro-credits and so on). This could have contributed to the broader process of economic revitalisation, by building a bridge between post-conflict recovery and sustainable development. Integrating reintegration with the broader plan for socio-economic recovery and reconstruction would have harnessed the important economic multiplier effects and capacities it generates to the wider goals of development. Also, extra efforts by the government to build the capacity of the ministries responsible for employment and youth would have enabled them to provide jobs for ex-combatants, rather than leaving the burden on INGOs, NGOs and CBOs alone.

The ability to meet these and other numerous challenges will ultimately determine whether or not Sierra Leone is destined to become a permanent breeding ground for war, chaos and illegal commercial activity, or whether it is destined for a far more peaceful future that may be compared to post-conflict Namibia or Mozambique. Sierra Leone is a litmus test for the United Nations' (UN) re-engagement in Peace Support Operations, and for its determination to do things better, based on lessons learnt.¹⁰

The government's willingness and support is very crucial to achieving sustainable reintegration, peace and development. Although this has been manifested by the past government, the dynamics of politics and their self-interests did not allow its full and ultimate realisation. Many people are wondering whether this

new government will exercise much commitment to post-conflict reintegration as a long-term process that should continue, even though the DDR programme is said to have been completed.

The new administration needs to expand in a rapid manner – the pace, scope and scale of national recovery activities, led by government agencies such as the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), and the complementary activities and programmes of the ministries (for instance, the Institutional Reform and Capacity-Building Project, implemented by the Decentralisation Secretariat under the Ministry of Local Government), in order to sustain the gains made thus far.

Key DDR actors and stakeholders need to examine these challenges and other lessons learnt, so that these issues can be addressed in future peace support operations. Reintegration must move beyond just getting ex-combatants back to their pre-war status and positions, as this renders them easy prey for combat re-recruitment and reinforces ethnic and gender-related inequalities. Changing and improving ex-combatants' status and situations will inevitably guarantee the more successful reintegration necessary for sustainable peace and development. 📌

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Endnotes

- 1 DDR, Lessons Learned in Sierra Leone – DDR Coordination Section, UNAMSIL. 28 August 2003, p. 5
- 2 Updates on the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants by PRIDE. December 2006.
- 3 Interview with a community member by Allan Quee of PRIDE, in Kailahun. February 2006.
- 4 DDR, Lessons Learned in Sierra Leone – DDR Coordination Section, UNAMSIL. 28 August 2003 p. 23.
- 5 Interview with a child ex-combatant by Zinurine A. Alghali, at PRIDE office in Freetown. 17 August 2007.
- 6 Interview with a recently released inmate associated with the conflict by Zinurine A. Alghali of PRIDE, in Freetown. June 2007.
- 7 Updates on the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants by PRIDE. December 2006.
- 8 Interview with a service provider by Ibrahim Bangura of PRIDE, in Makeni. June 2006.
- 9 Updates on the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants by PRIDE. December 2006.
- 10 Yambasu, Lucy (2006) 'Post-Conflict New-Construction in Sierra Leone', Freetown: PRIDE, p. 6 (unpublished paper).