

## GLOBAL INSIGHTS

# Strategic Approaches to Reintegration: Lessons Learned from Liberia



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SIX YEARS AFTER THE END OF THE LIBERIAN CONFLICT, EX-COMBATANTS are no longer considered a serious threat to peace and stability in Liberia. Systematic surveys conducted by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) show that there is no national network of ex-combatants, although local groups of ex-combatants still exist in some locations. From a security perspective, the reintegration of ex-combatants has been largely successful in Liberia. This good news is not a coincidence; it is due to six years of sustained effort to reestablish rule of law throughout the country, to rebuild institutions, to promote early recovery, and to reintegrate the former fighting forces as well as other war-affected populations. The government, with support from the United Nations, many bilateral and multilateral partners, and national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), has worked diligently to achieve this.

This, however, does not mean that all problems related to reintegration are completely resolved. First, there are some persistent localized networks of ex-combatants. These networks often continue to exist for economic reasons as ex-combatant groups engage in a variety of legal and illegal activities. The involvement of these groups in illegal economic activities and other criminal behavior is a particular concern, which UNMIL is addressing jointly with the government, UN agencies, and various international partners.

The second challenge is unemployment, or, more broadly, the lack of livelihood opportunities for ex-combatants as well as for the general population. Ex-combatants have received training, counseling, and career advice, but livelihood opportunities are scarce in a postwar economy, with a very precarious employment situation (85 percent do not earn enough to lift themselves and their families over the one-dollar-a-day poverty line, according to a 2009 International Labour Organization [ILO] study<sup>1</sup>). Faced with a lack of livelihood opportunities, ex-combatants and other high-risk youths sometimes resort to illegal means of income generation, contributing to insecurity and hampering their community reintegration.

When a 2008 US Institute for Peace study asked Liberian ex-combatants if they would fight again, two-thirds responded with a categorical “no.” The remaining one-third cited poverty and lack of economic opportunity as the

main reasons that could make them go back to war. Interestingly, women ex-combatants appeared more ready to fight again for economic reasons than men. Unemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities are therefore considered serious security concerns.

Since 2003, an array of efforts have been undertaken to reintegrate ex-combatants in Liberia, from classic disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) to strategic monitoring and community-based interventions that aim at promoting alternative livelihoods. This article is considering what those efforts have achieved and what was not achievable, explain why it is time to end targeted assistance to ex-combatants in Liberia, and propose the next steps to be taken.

### **The DDRR Program in Liberia, 2003–2009**

An important milestone in UNMIL's mandate occurred on 21 July 2009: the completion of the reintegration component of the official DDRR program, nearly six years after it began. Following a faltering start in December 2003, the disarmament and demobilization component resumed on 15 April 2004, and when it ended on 4 November 2004, over 101,000 persons had been disarmed and demobilized. This number greatly exceeded the initial estimates of 35,000–38,000 ex-combatants, a projection based on the ascribed strength of the warring factions. The jump in the number of DDRR beneficiaries was partly due to a lowering of entrance criteria, namely the amount of weapons to be handed over in order to be eligible for demobilization and reintegration assistance. The relaxing of entrance criteria boosted the number of DDRR beneficiaries, posing a challenge to the planning and implementation of the program. However, it also had the positive effect of including an unprecedented number of women and children associated with fighting forces—22,300 and 11,700, respectively—who, experience has shown, are often left out of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs that have strict weapons-to-combatant eligibility criteria.

The common Programme Strategic and Implementation Framework (SF) for Liberia, which was developed in early October 2003, was the UN's first integrated DDR framework. Incorporating Security Council Resolution 1325 (and later 1820), which mandates gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment, and the Cape Town principles of 1997 on the role of children in armed conflict, the program worked to ensure that women and men, girls, and boys fully participated and benefited from the reintegration program.

The more than twofold increase in the number of persons requiring reintegration assistance had serious financial and capacity implications for the program. In the immediate postconflict situation, very few vocational training institutions were functional or able to absorb eligible beneficiaries in the short timeframe needed to prevent discontent and other destabilizing incidents. The

UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNMIL, and other agencies marshaled Liberia's partners and donor institutions to mobilize additional resources in order to meet the severe shortfall in funding to implement a reintegration program for over 100,000 ex-combatants.

The most urgent task of the reintegration program, particularly in its early years, was to facilitate the return of demobilized combatants to their communities in order to create the stability needed to enable the holding of the 2005 elections. Not only was the reintegration program successful in encouraging ex-combatants to return to their communities, but the completion of the DD component of the program was also a benchmark for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The reintegration program was implemented by the Joint Implementation Unit, comprising the UNDP, the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation (NCDDRR), and UNMIL, as well as the Ministry of Planning, other UN agencies (such as the UN Children's Fund and the ILO), and key donors. The European Commission, the governments of Denmark, Ireland, Switzerland, Germany, Iceland, and Sweden, and other donors committed over US\$80 million to the DDRR program. Most of these funds were channeled through the Multi-donor Trust Fund administered by UNDP.

The reintegration program and parallel programs by USAID and the European Commission offered reintegration assistance in the form of vocational training, formal schooling, on-the-job training, and psychosocial counseling to an estimated 97,000 beneficiaries. The exact number of demobilized combatants who benefited from reintegration assistance remains unclear because about one-third participated in parallel reintegration programs, which did not always verify the ex-combatant status of beneficiaries, and others accepted "proxies," that is, participants who were using someone else's demobilization card.

The final phase of the reintegration program was launched in 2008 with funding from the government of Norway in an effort to offer a final opportunity for demobilized former combatants who had not participated in the previous programs to receive reintegration assistance. After an extensive public information campaign, 7,000 verified potential beneficiaries were identified. Of these, 5,000 were interested and participated in the program; 38 percent were women.

In sum, the DDRR program was able to absorb an unexpectedly high number of ex-combatants; it accommodated women and children in greater numbers than other programs had done before; and it convinced the majority of its beneficiaries to return to their communities. In light of the high number of beneficiaries who received reintegration assistance, as well as the low turnout at the final phase of the reintegration program, has been estimated that this type of assistance is now no longer needed in Liberia.

Continued targeted assistance could even be detrimental to overall reintegration and reconciliation efforts as it may reconfirm the perception that ex-combatant status is an entitlement to special assistance. This perception may hurt reintegration efforts and foster resentment among other community members who have suffered from the war without receiving similar benefits.

Reintegration is a long-term process linked to the overall postwar economic and social recovery and development of a country. However, economic and social recovery and development is often slow, while at the same time there is an urgent need for legitimate livelihood opportunities in the peace-keeping and peace consolidation phase. Young ex-combatants and other high-risk youth are vulnerable to recruitment into illegal activities such as the illegal exploitation of natural resources. However, UNMIL has developed a number of approaches to strategically address the link between security, reintegration, and livelihoods, (1) through systematic monitoring of security threats linked to reintegration, (2) through the design of projects that precisely address the identified challenges, and (3) with the premise that reintegration efforts should focus on creating alternative livelihoods and on targeting communities as a whole.

### **Strategic Approaches to Reintegration: Hotspots Assessments and Action Plan**

The hotspots assessments were initiated in response to UNMIL's concerns about how former armed groups and IDPs would act in the 2005 electoral process. They sought to identify and analyze potential areas of trouble ("hotspots") and devise a "hotspots action plan" to address these before they flared up. In this context, UNMIL decided to gather county-by-county information about ex-combatant activities and expectations. The data was gathered, analyzed, cross-checked, and validated by civilian, military, and police components of the mission.

The resulting hotspots action plan proposed a series of livelihood projects and initiatives aimed at offering alternative income generation opportunities to communities in hotspot areas. UNMIL was able to use the information provided by the hotspots assessment for the conception, design, fundraising, and implementation of a series of livelihood projects, which targeted war-affected communities, including labor-intensive road rehabilitation, as well as employment creation in the agricultural and fishing sectors. Arguably the most innovative of the livelihood projects is the project for reintegration of motorcycle taxi drivers, funded by the Peacebuilding Fund through UNDP and implemented by the Liberian YMCA under the Ministry of Transport.

Motorcycle taxi driving is a thriving business in Liberia that engages many ex-combatants and other war-affected youths. Public transport is scarce, and there is a high demand for quick, flexible, and cheap transport. Motorcy-

cle taxi drivers have therefore found a place in Liberia's society and economy. Immediately after the war, the motorcycle business appeared to be dominated by ex-combatants. Since then, however, other youths have increasingly been taking up motorcycle taxi driving and are entering the motorcycle unions, thus enhancing the reintegration experience for these ex-combatants.

A recent hotspots assessment found that motorcycle taxi drivers tend to create security problems. Motorcyclists are feared for being reckless drivers with limited knowledge of traffic rules and little or no respect for public order. Additionally, the majority are not properly equipped for driving motor taxis and lack proper identification, registration, or any form of insurance. As a result, motorcyclists are frequently a hazard to themselves, their passengers, and other people. Even more worrying, motorcycle taxi drivers have been increasingly involved in violent civil disturbances and retributive acts. In the most significant security incident to date, over 100 motorcycle taxi drivers from the Gbarnga union protested violently against the death of a fellow driver in March 2009. The protesters attacked several buildings and burned a police station. Similar smaller-scale incidents have been noted in other parts of Liberia, and the speed and effectiveness of mobilization that motorcycle unions demonstrated in these incidents are of concern.

To address this, UNMIL—together with UNDP and the Liberian YMCA—designed the aforementioned project—initiated in June 2009—that combines community relationship-building with traffic training and proper licensing of motorcycle taxi drivers together with the Liberian National Police and the Ministry of Transport. Project beneficiaries work with the Liberian National Police (supported by UNMIL's police force) to improve their driving and interpersonal skills and acquire driver's licenses issued by the Ministry of Transport. YMCA facilitators help the beneficiaries improve their client orientation and set up a dialogue with the communities around the parking lots used by the motorcycle taxi drivers. The Peacebuilding Fund provided initial funding for the training of 1,500 motorcycle taxi drivers in five project locations, and additional funding is being sought to train more beneficiaries, cover all fifteen provinces of Liberia, and institutionalize the training and licensing process. Similar projects could be developed to support the reintegration of other groups who are already engaged in livelihood activities.

The case of the motorcycle taxi drivers shows how current security threats that are related to ex-combatant reintegration merge with the quest for livelihood opportunities and with reintegration challenges of other war-affected youth. In one sense, the lawless behavior of many motorcycle taxi drivers is not uncommon in postconflict Liberia, where incidents of civil violence are frequent and many war-affected youth resort to violence as a means of resolving conflict. With or without an ex-combatant background, these youth are seen to "behave like ex-combatants" and are facing similar problems, namely lack of education and livelihood opportunities. Rather than targeting ex-com-

batants in general, the challenge today is to monitor and address specific situations where ex-combatants and other war-affected people are not effectively recovering.

The idea of using community-based livelihood projects to address security challenges is not entirely new. However, it has rarely been done in a peace-keeping environment and has consequently raised a number of questions: Who should be responsible for such a project's implementation? How can it be done? How can we be sure that these efforts actually have an impact on the security situation? In the next section, we will review UNMIL's experience with emergency employment creation through labor-intensive road rehabilitation.

### **Creating Emergency Employment Through Labor-intensive Road Rehabilitation**

If unemployment is considered the greatest reintegration challenge in Liberia, then employment creation should be the most effective means to promote reintegration. This, however, has been a major challenge in Liberia. The pressure for rapid employment creation is high—after years of conflict, people need to see peace dividends. Moreover, employment programs need to be flexible to quickly respond to emerging security threats in an instable peacekeeping environment with little or no infrastructure.

Together with the World Bank, the UNDP, and other UN agencies, UNMIL has been using labor-intensive techniques to carry out road repairs to improve accessibility, create short-term employment, and lay the basis for stability in vulnerable communities. Projects target communities with ex-combatants in border regions, rubber plantations, or other areas deemed critical for security. Community members earn \$3 per day (\$5 for overseers) and are encouraged to incorporate women and other war-affected populations in the workforce. Employment activities include roadside brushing, construction and cleaning of drainages, installation of culverts, manual stone crushing, repair of wooden bridges, and construction of concrete open box channels.

The programs are being implemented under three funding arrangements: (1) the “Food Support for Local Initiatives” (Food for Work) program, which is implemented by UNMIL in collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP) and consists of labor-intensive road rehabilitation and agricultural projects; (2) the labor-intensive road rehabilitation project implemented jointly by UNMIL and UNDP in close coordination with the Ministry of Public Works, with funding from the World Bank; and (3) the “Special Engineering” projects, which are implemented directly by the peacekeeping mission. These projects assist actors on the ground in rehabilitating critical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, through labor-intensive methods.

Since 2006, UNMIL employment creation projects have created over 75,000 jobs, equaling 2.3 million workdays, with women making up over 20

percent of beneficiaries. Ex-combatants and returnees were included in the work force. In all, over 600 kilometers of primary road network and nearly 200 kilometers of feeder roads have been rehabilitated, which facilitated access to remote areas of Liberia throughout the year. This output directly supported the achievement of UNMIL's key mandate of ensuring peace and stability and enhanced access for delivery of humanitarian and development support.

The strategic use and targeting of short-term labor-intensive programs in addressing security concerns, where precipitated by the lack of economic opportunities to sustain reintegration for war-affected populations, is essential in maintaining peace and stability. In the case of Liberia, jobs created around plantations illegally occupied by ex-combatants and communities have pacified the situation and provided the government with the space to renegotiate concessions; also, jobs created in or near the porous border regions provided would-be recruits with alternative employment, rather than fighting in wars in neighboring countries.

Employment programs need not be limited to infrastructure projects such as road rehabilitation. In many countries the agricultural sector offers huge opportunities for employment, and often employment in agriculture may be more sustainable. In Liberia, the same technique used in labor-intensive road repairs could have also been applied in the agricultural sector, in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture, to create alternative emergency (or, if possible, sustainable) employment. The prioritization of the kind and areas of intervention depends on the needs and requirements of all partners, including the government, communities, UN, and donors. Also, the timing or sequencing of short-term labor-intensive programs is crucial so as not to distort local coping mechanisms such as subsistence farming practices. Road rehabilitation projects in Liberia were greatly supported by local communities during the lean agricultural season.

A very early use of this kind of intervention should be envisioned for the period immediately after the military deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission and the establishment of a minimum level of security. Important emergency employment initiatives could be prepared during the early stages of integrated mission planning. Peacekeeping missions can provide the necessary infrastructure and outreach in remote areas while UN agencies have the advantage of being already present in the country.

An independent impact assessment conducted in 2008 by the Liberia Institute for Public Administration in Lofa, Nimba, River Gee, and Grand Gedeh counties found that short-term labor-intensive road projects had a positive impact on the security situation in communities because many unemployed individuals were provided opportunities to engage in legitimate and legal livelihoods. Many of the beneficiaries have since reinvested their income to establish and expand livelihood activities. The general perception is that crime in communities fell considerably during and after the implementation of the

project, and the majority of respondents were of the view that youth and other potential “trouble-makers” are now playing a more productive role in their communities than they were before the project was implemented.

Over 70 percent of beneficiaries said that following the project their living conditions had improved. This should not be surprising since most beneficiaries reported that they had invested a portion of their wages in income generation ventures such as farming and petty trading, which has led to an increase in household income even after the labor-intensive projects were completed. Income earned from the projects was also used to support relatives, to repair and build homes, and to improve household nutrition of the project participants. More than 90 percent of respondents were of the opinion that the short-term jobs have helped to promote community peace and reconciliation in a number of ways: people are now working together more constructively, and more people are able to take care of their families and themselves.

### **Moving Forward on Reintegration**

The experience with DDRR in Liberia shows that a targeted assistance program may help with the immediate reintegration of ex-combatants. Nevertheless, long-term reintegration of ex-combatants and other war-affected populations is highly dependent on the availability of alternative livelihoods. Faced with the absence of employment opportunities in a postwar economy, reintegration programs are under pressure to find short- and medium-term solutions in order to stabilize the situation until long-term economic recovery shows its effects. Based on UNMIL’s experience in Liberia, this article suggests that the strategic use of emergency employment creation programs in priority areas can help bridge the gap between peace and economic recovery, reduce vulnerability, and offer alternative livelihoods to ex-combatants and high-risk youth within their communities.

### **Notes**

Andrea Tamagnini has more than twenty-five years of experience with the UNDP and recently concluded his assignment as director of the Reintegration, Rehabilitation, and Recovery (RRR) component of UNMIL. The RRR is the successor entity to UNMIL’s Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) component, once the DDRR process moved beyond demobilization. Teresa Krafft has worked with the United Nations at its headquarters and in the field. Since January 2009, she has been associate DDR officer with UNMIL.

1. International Labour Organization, “A Rapid Impact Assessment of the Global Economic Crisis in Liberia,” prepared for the Republic of Liberia with technical assistance from James Heintz, November 2009. Available at [http://www.ilo.org/empolicy/what/pubs/lang--en/docName--WCMS\\_116721/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/empolicy/what/pubs/lang--en/docName--WCMS_116721/index.htm).