

Between concepts and reality: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict?

Conference Documentation

Milena Berks, Claudia Breitung, Selina Engelberth, Joanne Richards \ BICC



SUMMARY

This *Knowledge Note* provides key insights from the BICC annual conference titled “Between concepts and reality: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict?”. This conference, held in virtual format on 11 and 12 November 2021, explored whether there is a need for fresh thinking in engaging with (former) combatants. Around 100 international academics, policymakers and practitioners participated online.

The key insights gained and discussed in this *Knowledge Note* are the following:

- / While DDR concepts are informed by situations on the ground, they are also shaped by the structures and mandates of international implementing organisations.
- / Although DDR has evolved over time, overall innovation is lacking. This is partially due to international organisations’ risk aversion and their tendency to stick to the same approaches.
- / Despite the prevalence of lessons learned, many are not applied.
- / Research should play a more prominent role at different levels of DDR processes, in particular at the practical level, with targeted support for practitioners.

Summarising each conference session and breakout group, this *Knowledge Note* explains why the above insights emerged as crucial.

A video documentation of the conference is available on YouTube



Members of the South Sudan Fire Brigade Service parading
in the streets of Juba, South Sudan, during independence celebrations

CONTENTS

Summary	2
Opening Panel: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict?	4
Specific challenges: Where do armed groups go?	7
Breakout 1: Incorporating armed groups into the security sector	8
Breakout 2: From armed group to political party	9
Breakout 3: Reintegrating former combatants into the civilian business sector	10
Wider contexts: Experiences from related fields	11
Breakout 1: Experiences from reintegrating refugees and internally displaced persons	12
Breakout 2: Experiences from countering and “deradicalising” violent extremists	13
Breakout 3: Experiences from programmes in community violence reduction and weapons and ammunition management	14
Closing Panel: Main insights and outlook	15
List of acronyms and abbreviations	17
Imprint	18



Photo courtesy of the National DDR Commission of the Republic of South Sudan

Soldiers during a military parade in Juba, South Sudan

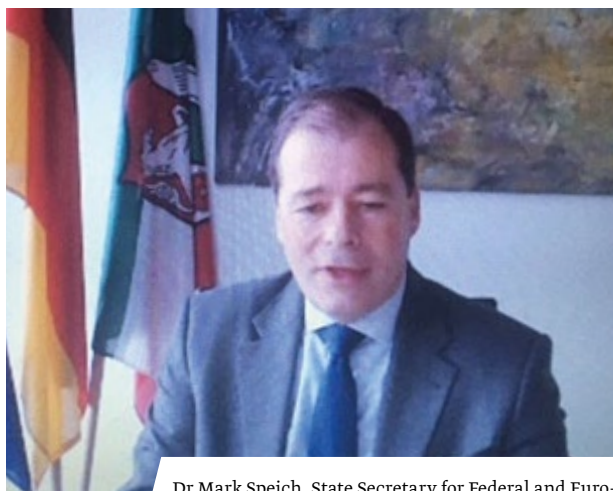
Opening Panel: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict?

The opening panel raised several fundamental questions:
Are the concepts underlying interventions to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate members of armed groups fit for purpose in contemporary conflict settings?
Do existing concepts and frameworks go far enough? What lessons can be learned from the past?

After an online welcome speech by Dr Mark Speich, State Secretary for Federal and European Affairs and International Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, the opening panel explored whether the concept of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) is still 'fit for purpose'. Some of the panellists argued that DDR is no longer a clearly defined concept but rather a "brand" used as shorthand for all interventions that support ex-combatants. Others noted that, while DDR concepts are informed by situations on the ground, they are just as often shaped by the structures and mandates of the organisations that implement them.

While the concept of DDR has evolved over time, some of the panellists pointed to lacking overall innovation. They attributed the tendency of international actors to stick to the same approaches in different contexts at least partially to the structural constraints surrounding innovation. Some of the panellists argued that, because those implementing DDR mostly rely on donor funding, they are reluctant to try new approaches. This is either because of a fear of failure or because they assume that donors will not provide funding for approaches that are not already tried and tested. The panellists argued that donors need to explicitly encourage creativity and take chances on approaches that are not merely 'business as usual'.

One way to render approaches to disbanding armed groups 'fit for purpose' is to combine innovative thinking with a solid base of evidence. The panellists drew attention to the beneficial effect of lessons learned: One panellist from the National DDR Commission of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) described the outcome of one such lesson learned, namely the ineffectiveness of vocational training. This triggered a change in the approach to DDR in the DRC: Instead of focusing on training ex-combatants to be self-employed, they focused on increasing ex-combatants' engagement with the private sector. The panellists and participants also addressed why, despite the existence of many lessons learned studies, many lessons are not applied, pointing to the high turnover in some institutions and the lack of institutional memory as possible reasons. Some highlighted that lessons learned are often anecdotal reflections without empirical evidence, while others noted that the generalisability of lessons learned is often unaddressed. This hinders the usefulness of lessons learned, as it is difficult to know which lessons can be applied to which contexts. As one participant noted, what may have negative consequences in one country may have positive impacts in another.



© BICC \ Susanne Heinke

Dr Mark Speich, State Secretary for Federal and European Affairs and International Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, expressed his hope that the conference will contribute to a fruitful exchange between research, policy, practice and civil society

The conference proceeded along the following outline of general sessions and associated breakout groups:

Opening Panel: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict	
Specific challenges: Where do armed groups go?	Breakout 1: Incorporating armed groups into the security sector
	Breakout 2: From armed group to political party
	Breakout 3: Reintegrating former combatants into the civilian business sector
Wider contexts: Experiences from related fields	Breakout 1: Experiences from reintegrating refugees and internally displaced persons
	Breakout 2: Experiences from countering and “deradicalising” violent extremists
	Breakout 3: Experiences from programmes in community violence reduction and weapons and ammunition management
Closing Panel: Main insights and outlook	



© BRCC \ Claudia Breitung

Members of the Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC), in Gao, Mali, handing in their weapons for safe storage

Specific challenges: Where do armed groups go?

This session explored what happens to armed groups once an armed conflict ends. Three breakout groups discussed three different pathways for these groups: Entering the security sector, transitioning into a political party or integrating demobilised combatants into the civilian business sector.

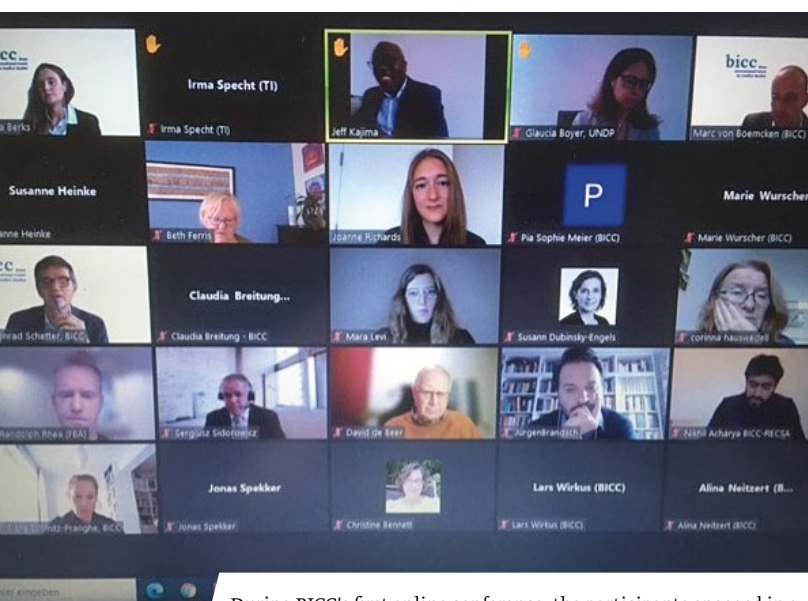
Breakout 1: Incorporating armed groups into the security sector

This breakout group discussed the integration of armed groups into the security sector, drawing on insights from South Sudan and the DRC. The panelists focused on the integration of armed groups into national armies and agreed that army integration should help to consolidate or reinforce the legitimacy of the state. If this is not achieved, then integration has failed. The panellists also agreed that integration is part of a political process and that security sector reform (SSR) and DDR practitioners need to understand political and military dynamics.

The two examples highlighted the many challenges associated with integrating armed groups into national armies. The example of South Sudan illustrated that, without a cap on the number of combatants to be integrated, the prospect of army integration may spur recruitment among armed groups as commanders may consider integration as a means of providing for 'their men' and ensuring that their interests are well represented in the new armed forces.

Likewise, the example of the DRC shows how integrating different armed groups into the national army can create parallel chains of command. It can also lead to desertion. For example, there were no sanctions for deserting the national army, so individuals who were not happy with the rank they were given in the integration process could simply leave and join other armed groups. By doing this, they were later able to renegotiate their integration rank.

Finally, breakout group participants noted the challenges of balancing the short-term security imperatives of DDR with the long-term good governance imperatives of SSR. In this regard, measures should be taken to ensure that short-term integration activities do not create national armies riven with parallel command structures that are even harder to reform in the long term.



© BICC | Susanne Heinke

During BICC's first online conference, the participants engaged in a lively virtual discussion

Breakout 2: From armed group to political party

This breakout group discussed why armed groups get involved in politics and the challenges and constraints of transforming armed groups into political actors. For this, the panellists compared the case studies of Colombia, Northern Ireland and Mozambique, three cases where armed groups transitioned from violent to non-violent politics. Overall, they acknowledged that there can be many ways in which armed actors move into the political sphere, be it through civic activism, party formation or individual engagement.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Mozambique, one panellist argued that armed groups are always political actors and need to be seen as such. DDR interventions should not be regarded as separate from wider political processes but rather take a holistic approach to political transformation.

The panellists widely stressed that the transition from violent to non-violent politics is not always linear and straightforward. Particularly in settings where the government has been a conflict actor, armed groups need sufficient security guarantees to be able to transform into non-violent actors. The Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), for instance, entered the political process without having fully disarmed. Colombia, moreover, illustrates how social and political movements can transform into armed groups and then back into politics.

The discussion further showed that the transition from violent to non-violent politics poses several challenges. Using Colombia as an example, one panellist noted that newly formed political groups that have emerged out of conflict can face difficulties in maintaining unity. The lack of capacity, inexperience in running politics and limited understanding of the state's structures, laws and citizens' rights, as well as a militant background and associated behavioural patterns were mentioned as further factors that can complicate the transformation process. Former armed groups that turned into political actors may also have a very distinct understanding of their representation in the state. It was thus emphasised that it is important to fully grasp and better understand how these actors comprehend 'the state' and their representation in it.

In Northern Ireland, the difficulties of some former armed actors in transforming into political actors were rooted in the struggle to develop distinct political programmes with overarching political goals. Some even faced difficulties in developing a cross-community profile.

Following the analysis of key challenges, participants emphasised how important it is to provide sufficient external support for transforming armed groups into political actors—still an underfunded process with limited donor attention. While there are certain risks attached, incentives provided to Northern Ireland through European Union-funded programmes for peace helped considerably to promote the transition process.

Breakout 3: Reintegrating former combatants into the civilian business sector

A central takeaway of this group was how critical it is to understand the context in which former combatants socially and economically reintegrate. Experiences from Colombia pointed to practical factors that make such reintegration successful, such as fair wages and a sustainable income from market opportunities. The panellists noted that vocational training should not exist in a vacuum but rather focus on market needs and be followed by actual employment. However, vocational training is often insufficient to allow former combatants to independently run their own businesses.

One measure to avoid such a vacuum is to strengthen relationships between the companies offering job placements and agencies funding reintegration programmes. More integrated programmes would increase benefits for all stakeholders, including the combatants themselves, the communities and the private sector. In many contexts, reintegration into the civilian business sector is particularly difficult because the demand for labour is small.

Participants discussed concrete examples of cases where incentives provided in reintegration programmes exceeded later earnings within the labour market, discouraging former combatants from entering the job market. The phenomenon of ‘reintegrating people into poverty’ was also addressed as a central challenge for socio-economic reintegration efforts. More innovative approaches are needed that also explore the informal sector and existing opportunities. In addition, the discussion also pointed to the unintended consequences that programme initiatives can have for communities. An example was given of income-generating initiatives for women in a specific locality that changed the overall societal structure of that village. Overall, the strong need for programmes to be context-specific and beneficial to the whole of society, not only to individuals, was one key learning. The panellists and conference participants stressed the need for more thinking ‘outside the box’ to develop sustainable ideas.



© BICC \ Claudia Breitung

Makpandu refugee camp, Yambio County, South Sudan

Wider contexts: Experiences from related fields

This session examined the interlinkages between reintegrating former combatants and other fields of work, such as reintegrating refugees and internally displaced persons (Breakout 1), deradicalisation and countering violence extremism (Breakout 2) and community violence reduction (Breakout 3).

Breakout 1: Experiences from reintegrating refugees and internally displaced persons

Both fields of practice—DDR and forced displacement—have a similar understanding of “sustainable reintegration.” The panellists highlighted that the concept of “durable solutions” used in the literature on forced displacement could also apply in the field of post-conflict security. According to the 2010 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Framework (IASC), “a durable solution is achieved when IDPs no longer have specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and such persons can enjoy their human rights without discrimination resulting from their displacement”. This also implies the establishment of criteria and benchmarks to determine the extent to which a “durable solution” has been achieved (e.g. safety and security, an adequate standard of living, access to livelihoods, restoration of housing, land and property).

The panellists also noted that the concept of ‘mobility’ currently used in connection with returnees could be applied to ex-combatants. Mobility is a critical resource for overcoming protracted displacement that also applies to ex-combatants when they try to reintegrate. Migration—forced or not—is not a single act but rather an ongoing negotiation between mobility and immobility. Therefore, the question of how to support mobility should be reflected in the context of DDR (e.g., the use of ex-combatant networks, remittances, etc.).

The breakout group also focused on intersections in programming for refugees and ex-combatants. The panellists outlined that programmes targeted at refugees and ex-combatants face similar challenges. Both groups have comparable programming needs, for example, in relation to security upon return, the establishment of livelihoods and the need for psycho-social support. However, this kind of support is often missing or lacking capacity on the ground, particularly considering the special situation and needs of children. Regarding the establishment of livelihoods, the panellists underlined the weakness of vocational training, which, although often the tool of choice for internally displaced persons (IDPs)/refugees and ex-combatants, does not necessarily lead to employment.

The group discussion also showed that despite the similarities both groups share, there is a constant effort, even within community-based reintegration programming, to categorise and place people into different conceptual ‘boxes’ (ex-combatants vs. ex-combatants with special needs vs. women associated with armed forces and groups, refugees vs. refugees with special needs, etc.). This was outlined as a major challenge faced by both fields of practice.

The panellists argued for a more unified approach to reintegration and highlighted that each approach shares a similar understanding of reintegration and its challenges. A critical obstacle to merging practice on reintegration is the so-called victim–perpetrator divide—ex-combatants are considered perpetrators of violence given their role in a conflict, whereas refugees or IDPs are victims of a conflict, who require protection. This divide assumes that individuals take on very clear and distinct roles in a conflict, as either a combatant or a civilian/refugee/IDP. In reality, however, the lines between these roles are blurred.

Breakout 2: Experiences from countering and 'deradicalising' violent extremists

This breakout group discussed lessons learned from programmes to counter violent extremism. The panellists highlighted how insights from DDR efforts in conflict zones can be usefully applied to address the return of foreign fighters to European countries. They also noted the additional complexities associated with supporting reintegration in contexts where armed groups may still be active and where communities may have been very recently exposed to violence.

The panellists noted that one of the biggest challenges in dealing with armed groups, both violent extremist and otherwise, is social stigma and acceptance. Stigma can make it particularly difficult for former members of armed groups to find work and may contribute to recidivism. The degree of stigma may also vary, influenced by factors such as community perception and the abusiveness of the armed group. In violent extremist settings, stigma may also be influenced by whether the armed group is labelled or formally designated as a terrorist organisation by the state.

During the discussion with the participants, it became clear that religion and ideological radicalisation are not necessarily decisive factors for joining violent extremist groups. The panellists underscored how reasons, such as disempowerment, a sense of injustice, economic hardship and disenfranchisement often intersect. The panellists also emphasised that there are no one-size-fits-all approaches to the highly individualised process of deradicalisation. It was also noted that, for deradicalisation programmes to successfully achieve personal transformation, a range of different activities are required. These activities could include dialogues with religious leaders but should also include other activities that build self-worth, such as team-building activities, discussion groups and even sports.

Breakout 3: Experiences from programmes in community violence reduction and weapons and ammunition management

This breakout group explored how community-level approaches to violence reduction and security interplay with DDR interventions. The participants specifically reflected on the utility of community violence reduction (CVR) programmes and how they link to transitional weapons and ammunition management (WAM) initiatives.

The panellists noted that CVR programmes are increasingly used as a bottom-up tool to address violence within communities and underlined the need to link CVR initiatives to other development and stabilisation efforts to make them more effective. Integrating community-oriented and localised understandings of violence into conflict analysis was highlighted as particularly important. This local-level analysis should be combined with elements from other levels of analysis, including the higher political, technical and regional levels. Overall, there is a need for a greater understanding of the root causes of conflicts. Creating dedicated knowledge management systems could help generate such knowledge more systematically and produce and disseminate analysis in a more targeted manner.

Given the changing nature of conflict, the panellists also stressed the need to better understand types and actors of violence as well as the changing nature of weaponry used in these conflicts (small arms and light weapons-SALW, unmanned aerial vehicles-UAVs or drones and improvised explosive devices-IEDs) and, based on this enhanced understanding, adapt WAM policies and practice. In this context, WAM must not be seen as an isolated tool primarily focussing on physical security and stockpile management (PSSM). There are wider strategic questions, such as weapons supply, transfers and better monitoring of these, as well as end-user control, that must be considered. The discussion thereby revealed that engagement is necessary at several levels to tackle the problem of weapon circulation and misuse. This includes the international level through enhanced export control mechanisms, the regional and national level through fostering improved arms control legislation and the local level through community sensitisation in the context, for example, of CVR initiatives. Regarding local level WAM initiatives, the panellists stressed the need for a more in-depth understanding of the role of weaponry within communities. Using the opportunities that WAM offers may, for instance, contribute to reducing the risk of high-risk items, such as IEDs, through confidence-building mechanisms in connection, for example, with CVR.



Wheelbarrows awaiting delivery to ex-combatants in Western Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan

Closing Panel: Main insights and outlook

In response to the key question posed by the conference organisers, “Are current responses to deal with armed groups ‘fit for purpose’?”, the conference revealed that several DDR-related concepts are, in fact, shaped more by the logic of international implementing institutions than by the realities on the ground.

Several implications of this conclusion were raised during the final panel:

First, when significant international focus is placed on a particular tool or method, the roll-out of this tool can outpace the development of its conceptual foundation. This may result in a situation where a specific tool—such as CVR—becomes widely applied, with immense resources allocated, without sufficient knowledge of how, why and when this tool achieves the desired effect.

Second, the concept of reintegration is still too often seen as action taken by outside actors ('delivering assistance to ex-combatants') while, in fact, it is a process that individuals go through and that communities participate in. This calls for a change in the discourse on reintegration, a discourse which should move away from the service delivery perspective and instead zoom in on assisting the wider reintegration process. Such re-alignment of the reintegration discourse may also include a critical analysis of the concept of 'ex-combatants,' including questioning the often-prevalent assumption that ex-combatants always pose a security threat.

Third, broad national ownership was raised as another decisive factor for the success of any intervention aimed at disbanding armed groups. However, while societal support seems to be undisputed, the panellists pointed to the fact that much of the discussion on how to deal with armed groups is still centred around the United Nations as the main actor. This implies a need to carefully assess the systemic reasons why national authorities face difficulties being in the driver's seat and an open debate on how to achieve true national ownership.

Another insight raised in the final panel was that the reintegration of ex-combatants can be seen as a form of social support and, therefore, as a practice of care. However, such a perspective may still face much resistance from outside actors and affected communities alike, as they might struggle with the notion of caring for a social group like ex-combatants. While there was some controversy among the panellists about the concept of care, they considered it helpful to underline that assistance to any reintegration process needs to be based on the recipients' perspectives. Care ethics would, for instance, centre needs assessments around the needs that the recipients themselves articulated. This line of thought also triggered deeper thinking into why the international community and implementing actors might be reluctant to use this concept when dealing with ex-combatants.

Finally, this panel also reflected on the role that research and researchers can and should play regarding processes focused on disbanding armed groups. The panellists suggested that, instead of seeing researchers as 'information machines' who provide a grand narrative or lessons using big data, they should rather be brought into the practical picture to tackle specific questions or issues that practitioners or key stakeholders may be facing, whether at the grassroots or all the way up to the international level.



A video conference documentation can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NbnqRzH7V0&t=1343s>

List of acronyms and abbreviations

CVR	Community violence reduction
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee Framework
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IEDs	Improvised explosive devices
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
MOC	Operational Coordination Mechanism
PSSM	Physical security and stockpile management
RENAMO	Mozambican National Resistance
SALW	Small arms and light weapons
T-WAM	Transitional weapons and ammunition management
UAVs	Unmanned aerial vehicles

**bicc **

Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) gGmbH

Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1, 53121 Bonn, Germany
+49 (0)228 911 96-0, bicc@bicc.de

www.bicc.de

www.facebook.com/bicc.de

bicc Bonn
International Centre
for Conflict Studies

DIRECTOR

Professor Dr Conrad Schetter

AUTHORS

Milena Berks, Claudia Breitung, Selina Engelberth, Joanne Richards

EDITOR

Elvan Isikozlu

COPYEDITOR

Heike Webb

SUPPORT

Susanne Heinke, Pauline Doffiné

DATE OF PUBLICATION

31 August 2022

LAYOUT

kipconcept gmbh, Bonn

CONCEPTION EDITORIAL DESIGN

Diesseits - Kommunikationsdesign, Düsseldorf



Online: ISSN 2521-7828

Print: ISSN 2522-2023

Funded by

Ministry of Culture and Science
of the German State
of North Rhine-Westphalia



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License;
[cf. \[creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/\]\(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

