

The Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program: Reflections on the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants

The Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission and Program (RDRC/RDRP) were established by the Government of Rwanda in 1997. Their objectives were to help consolidate peace and foster reconciliation and development by providing support to the demobilization and socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants. During the first phase of programming, from 1997 to 2001, over 18,600 ex-combatants were demobilized. In 2002 with the support of the MDRP and the World Bank, a second phase of programming began. To date, an additional 36,750 ex-combatants have been supported by the program in its second phase.

To reflect on its activities and refine programming during its final two years, the RDRP commissioned a series of specialized studies in 2005. These studies addressed questions related to the social and environmental impact of programming, as well as to the impact of program activities on particular sub-groups of ex-combatants. The major findings, lessons learned and recommendations of three of these

studies are summarized in this note. The hope is to stimulate discussion around issues related to the reintegration ex-combatants and inform and strengthen the work of our partners in the region.

Social and Environmental Impact Study

What has been the impact of RDRC reintegration support to ex-combatants (ECs) on the well-being of Rwandan communities?

This study assessed the social and environmental impact of ex-combatant reintegration sub-projects at the community level and gauged the perceptions of community representatives about ex-combatants. More than 570 members of Community Development Committees and Politico-Administrative Committees – local bodies tasked with screening and approving ex-combatant proposals for

the use of their reintegration grants – from all provinces in the country were interviewed for this study.

Lessons learned

Overall, there is trust and acceptance between communities and ex-combatants. Very high numbers of those interviewed reported community acceptance and valuing of EC ideas, skills, abilities and contributions, and a willingness to elect ECs to political positions. ECs were also noted to actively participate in community life, including public meetings, community works initiatives, and unity and reconciliation-building activities.

Ex-combatants are not perceived as a risk to local security. Over 90% of those surveyed agreed that ECs contributed to enhanced security through their ideas, attitudes and actions (such as participating in local security patrols, sharing information on security issues, etc.). Community leaders estimated that resentment by the general population of the benefits provided to ECs is low.

Note: since the 2005 studies on which this note is based were published, the RDRC has commissioned other evaluation and impact work in 2006, 2007 and 2008. This is being reviewed and will be the subject of a similar dissemination paper.

Many ex-combatants use the reintegration grants provided to them by the RDRP for income generation activities. More than two-thirds of respondents knew of income-generating activities in their province. Agriculture, animal husbandry and trade were the most commonly cited projects. A wide range of other activities were noted, including construction, carpentry, cleaning and transport. The most common income generating activity varied considerably by province.

Negative environmental effects from EC projects were not of serious concern to communities.

Local leaders are tasked with screening the prospective income generation activities of ECs for negative environmental impacts and with performing spot checks once the projects are approved. Half of the respondents who participated in the screening process reported that their proposals included mitigation measures against potential negative environmental impacts. The most likely environmental impact cited by respondents was the exploitation of construction materials from local resources (cited by 20% of respondents), followed by negative impacts on natural habitats (cited by 7%).

What are the implications of these findings?

Increased sensitization of ex-combatants, communities and community leaders on environmental protection would be beneficial.

With the prevalence of agriculture and animal husbandry projects among ex-combatant's income generating activities, the potential environmental impacts of agriculture and related mitigation measures should be a priority for awareness-raising. Greater sensitization will enhance the self-regulation of projects by ex-combatants and their families, as well as enhance

the ability of community committees to monitor, and ensure adherence to, mitigation measures.

Including questions on mitigation measures in all project applications and screening processes would encourage environmental awareness, as would the development of clear and simple materials to communicate environmental guidelines. Finally, visits to ex-combatant projects by trained community leaders, with expert support from local MINITERE¹ officers, can promote better compliance with safeguard policies and wider adoption of environmentally sound practices.

Incentives can encourage ex-combatants to adopt sub-projects with environmental and social benefits. Providing training, technical advice and other support can encourage ECs to undertake income generation activities of communal and ecological benefit - such as cleaning services and tree planting. Seeking out and interviewing ECs who have adopted activities with social and environmental benefits will help to identify any obstacles they face, and to gather advice and suggestions on support mechanisms to facilitate such projects.

Study on the reintegration of child ex-combatants

How are former child soldiers adapting to civilian life?

To date, 661 child soldiers have been demobilized through the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program. The study assessed the reintegration of child ECs and the impact on RDRP assistance.

Key questions asked by the study included:

- Do host communities accept back former child soldiers and do child ex-combatants enjoy their return into these communities?
- What are community attitudes and perceptions towards former child soldiers?
- How effective has the RDRP assistance to child ex-combatants been in supporting their socio-economic reintegration?

During the course of the study, interviews were conducted with 232 child ex-combatants from all groups involved in the conflict, as well as key stakeholders including government institutions, civil society groups and community members.

Lessons Learned

Child ECs are not a homogeneous group and require tailored support. While over 85% joined the conflict when they were 16 years old or younger, they are now of varied ages (both minors and those over the age of majority), have varied family situations (10% have partners or children of their own), and have varied educational and skill backgrounds. Particular divergences are often seen between child ex-combatants from the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) and those who were combatants with armed groups (AG).

The Ruhengiri child rehabilitation center has been highly successful. Children at the center benefit from a range of support including rehabilitation activities, psychosocial counseling, life skills training, literacy, numeracy, civic/cultural education and social activities. Respondents judged the center to be well-managed and child-friendly.

Child ex-combatants want support for education and training. A majority of child ECs were students

¹ Ministry of Lands, Settlement, Environment, Natural Resources and Mines

at the time that they joined the conflict and are still eager to learn. After demobilization, 77% of them continue with education, vocational training or apprenticeship and their drop-out rates are low. There is a noticeable discrepancy between ex-RPA and ex-AG child combatants with respect to both literacy and their level of education prior to, and after, discharge, the former reaching higher percentages on both indicators.

Family reintegration of child ex-combatants has been generally successful. After rehabilitation almost 90% ex-combatants join families or foster families, in which the vast majority receive a warm welcome and enjoy harmonious relations. Consultation of child ECs prior to reunification and community preparation can be improved: more than half of the child ECs interviewed said that their views on being reunified with their families had not been sought; on the receiving side, efforts to sensitize host families prior to the reception of children could also be strengthened. More attention should also be paid to the 27% child ECs who, even while living with their families or other support units, are squatters.

Community reintegration has been positive but there is scope for improvement. A majority of respondents felt that their relations with their neighbors were good and no negative feelings about child ECs were expressed by the community members or authorities interviewed. Worryingly, however, 72% of child ECs do not participate in communal activities and 43% do not belong to a social group. This suggests the importance of additional sensitization of communities to reduce any stigma and discrimination against ECs; it also highlights the need for support to encourage child ECs to join or form social groups.

The psychosocial needs of child ex-combatants are often overlooked. Eighty nine percent of child ECs were not screened for disability at discharge, which suggests that large

numbers of young people with post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) remain untreated. Stigma persists around psychosocial issues. Absent or inadequate capacity to detect these issues among those teaching and working with child ECs has led to the perception that many problems are “normal” among child ECs. There is a need to involve communities in ongoing psychosocial support, rooting assistance in existing community structures and local traditions, as well as to increase the capacity and training of staff working with child ECs to address psychosocial needs.

What are the implications of these findings?

Capacity-building in communities would help them better assist with the reintegration process of child ex-combatants. Increased sensitization, training and other capacity-building support for communities can help local leaders and social groups to take a more active role in:

- reducing stigmas around child soldiers;
- encouraging child ECs to participate in community activities and networks
- providing guidance to children and their families on reintegration issues
- assuming responsibility for reintegration support activities after the close of the RDRP.
- Mutual trust could be increased by facilitating more contact between child ex-combatants and the community prior to their reinsertion.

Greater attention needs to be paid to addressing the psychosocial needs of child ex-combatants. A first step could be the commissioning of a study to assess the extent of

psychosocial problems among child ex-combatants, their manifestation and existing means of providing effective psychosocial support. More traditional mechanisms for providing psychosocial support should also be explored, as well as the potential for increasing collaboration with agencies providing this type of support to other vulnerable children and youth.

Study on the Reintegration of Female Ex-combatants

How have female ex-combatants fared after their demobilization? And how accessible and appropriate have the benefits offered by the RDRP been to female ex-combatants?

The reintegration experience of female ex-combatants is often markedly different than that of their male counterparts or of female civilians in general. Since its formation in 1997, the RDRP has supported the reintegration of over 330 female ex-combatants and worked to address their particular needs through targeted assistance mechanisms.

This study carried out an in-depth analysis of the social and economic integration experience of 120 female ex-combatants (over one-third of the total target group) and drew several lessons for strengthening the gender-sensitivity of projects.

Lessons Learned

Female ex-combatants generally enjoy strong family and community ties. Eighty percent of the women interviewed were well received by their families upon their return, though regular contact with extended families is often constrained by the cost of travel, large distances and time pressures. A vast majority of female

ECs felt that they had good relations with their neighbors and almost half felt that social cohesion had improved. Only about half of respondents were married or living with a partner, who, in the majority of cases is also an ex-combatant. Female ECs find other ECs better able to understand them and their experiences, though these couples can be economically vulnerable if both partners lack civilian experience and job skills. The 50% of female ECs who do not have partners (eg. widows, single parents) are also particularly economically and socially vulnerable.

Most program benefits are well received. Ninety nine percent of women have received the reinsertion and reintegration benefits to which they are entitled, which they most commonly use for livelihood promotion, family expenses, housing and children's schooling. Most female ECs rely on their reintegration package for their livelihoods. Only 40% of respondents received support from the Vulnerability Support Window (VSW). While all female ECs are eligible for VSW support, some suggest that they are screened away for being married or looking too well off to the evaluating committees. There is a need to ensure transparency, information dissemination and regulation of VSW eligibility and screening processes.

More gender-sensitive training is needed to promote sustainable livelihoods for female ex-combatants. Over two-thirds of the female ECs interviewed were employed (both formal and self-employment), though about half of these women were only in part-time, seasonal or occasional employment without long-term security or a stable and sufficient income. Women's livelihoods are impaired by institutionalized discrimination which limits their ability to inherit housing, property, land and other productive assets. The majority of female ECs are young and literate, however, with 88% having completed primary school – which suggests a good foundation on which to build training in

vocational and life skills and additional educational opportunities.

To address the needs of female ECs, training programs should include gender-appropriate subjects, accessible facilities, and child care provision, as well as ensure widespread information dissemination about application procedures. Many female ECs do not participate in training programs because they find them unsuited to their interests or socially unacceptable (e.g. carpentry, welding, mechanics), or too far away to access given their household responsibilities and lack of alternative child care.

More support on money management would be beneficial. Female ECs noted that they were unused to credit, having little savings or financial security and would therefore benefit from additional training on savings, investments and overall money management. While credit is a risky form of support for many of these women in the short term, initiatives which undertook awareness campaigns on credit (risks, benefits, best practices for productive use) and provided early seed money or grants could help women to gain experience with money management and be better placed to benefit from credit over the long term.

Women's health issues are often overlooked. Seventy eight percent of female ECs did not undergo medical screening at demobilization, which suggests a need to conduct greater sensitization around mental and chronic illnesses, infectious diseases, and the medical screening process itself. Moreover, while female ECs had good knowledge of HIV/AIDS transmission, they had very low condom use and very low knowledge of referral and support services for HIV positive persons. The demobilization and reintegration process could provide a valuable means of discussing health and sexuality issues by providing information on health services available to civilians. Finally, many PTSD-related conditions were related by the female ECs

interviewed. This highlights the need for psychosocial and mental health support (counseling, social support, information and practical guidance) for female ECs. Ensuring the presence of women among the team of mental health service providers is crucial.

More space for discussing gender issues throughout the DDR process would be valuable. Many female ECs would particularly value special additional sessions during the demobilization process for discussing gender issues and other problems specific to women. They would also welcome better psychological preparation for gender-related aspects of reintegration.

What are the implications of these findings?

Explicit targeting of vulnerable female ex-combatants is crucial. Female ex-combatants who are widowed, separated, single mothers, ill, etc., require specialized and targeted reintegration support. The RDRP and its partners should ensure that such women are informed of the vulnerability support window and its potential uses, and given special assistance as required (e.g. child care allowance) to benefit from other available support in their communities.

Livelihood support for female ex-combatants merits additional investments. Gender-sensitive training adaptations (appropriate subjects, child care facilities) should be a priority. Money management skills may be a crucial element of building a sustainable livelihood for many women who have no experience with savings and the cash economy. The RDRC and its partners should also consider what role they can play in promoting the employment of female ex-combatants through advocacy with public, private and civil society employers and by incorporating female ECs into government run labor-creation programs.

Female ECs would benefit from joining associations in their communities. Participation in local groups can promote socioeconomic integration and help to rebuild social capital. Including the partners of ECs and women in communities of return in counseling activities, gender-issues discussions and trainings on promoting participation and building networks can help female ECs to become better integrated into informal social networks in their wider communities.

The existing Ndabaga association would also benefit from strategic capacity building support to increase its grassroots orientation and act as an umbrella group for other women's organizations.

Gender issues could be better mainstreamed throughout the RDRP. Female ECs interviewed felt that the program could benefit from additional gender sensitivity and awareness training for program staff

members as well as greater representation of women within program structures. Ensuring gender-sensitivity in programming (whether appropriate forms of information dissemination or training opportunities) is crucial. Inviting female ECs to participate in planning an exit strategy for the program is one way to provide a platform for the views of female ECs and for addressing their particular reintegration needs into the future.

For more information on the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program or to request copies of the full studies, please contact:

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The Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) is a multi-agency effort that supports the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants in the greater Great Lakes region of Central Africa. MDRP is financed by the World Bank and 13 donors – Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the European Commission. It collaborates with national governments and commissions, and with over 30 partner organizations, including United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations.

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