

Successes and Lessons Learned: The Ex-Combatant Reintegration and Community Support Project in the Central African Republic Draws to a Close

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The Central African Republic Ex-Combatant Reintegration and Community Support Project (PRAC, from its French name), supported by the Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP), has officially closed and is winding down operations.

Launched in 2004, the PRAC aimed to support the social and economic reintegration of 7,565 ex-combatants associated with different militia groups involved in the last conflict before March 2003. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has been the executing agency for the project, in collaboration with the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (CNDDR, from the French), funded with a US\$9.8 million grant from MDRP and \$3.3 million from UNDP.



The project provided ex-combatants with reintegration support, which included training in a chosen livelihood, such as fishing, and an associated start-up kit with supplies. The PRAC also funded rehabilitation of small infrastructure, such as schools and health centers, in communities where ex-combatants resettled.

Implementation of the program was significantly delayed early on. Establishing and verifying the lists of eligible ex-combatants and checking the identity of those claiming combatant status proved difficult. Additional delays in service delivery, coupled with lack of consistent and comprehensive communication, led to riots and violence from frustrated beneficiaries. The government commission was furthermore not highly involved in the program in the beginning.

A mid-term review of the program then resulted in considerable acceleration and progress after April 2006, which has permitted the program to close on time with its objectives achieved. The CNDDR became increasingly involved in implementation, as did local commissions. Quality of service also improved markedly. In the fall of 2006, the list of the remaining 2,000 ex-combatants was finalized and transmitted to the project. As of now, all 7,565 ex-combatants have received training for a chosen reintegration activity and received their reintegration kits.

That said, reintegration activities did face some challenges. A large number of ex-combatants in the first group to receive support chose micro-business – considered one of the most difficult reintegration livelihood options – and then did not



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attend the recommended training. Many of these individuals failed. Once reintegration orientation was improved, the percentage of those opting for micro-business decreased and attendance of training increased. Those who chose agriculture or animal husbandry reintegration training and support have proved most successful. Those who have chosen professional or technical fields also seem to be doing well, although this needs further investigation.

In addition to reintegration, the PRAC also carried out 44 social and sanitary community projects of good quality in host communities, of which 20 were completed and have been handed over to the national authorities. Another 14 additional projects have been approved, but will be financed by the UNDP-funded Security for Development Project, which has already begun its work with communities. There was some question in a recent review of whether local authorities had been sufficiently included in these projects, and to what extent such projects have had a real impact on ex-combatant social reintegration. Post-project assessments will further examine these and other issues

Now, as the program closes, several aspects remain to be finalized. Ongoing activities must be completed, and provisions put in place to allow for follow-up of the fourth and last group, whose reintegration support will continue for a time after the overall program has closed. Memorandums have been signed with the support organizations to ensure this occurs. Secondly, links to ongoing or planned long-term community-based development initiatives must be forged to ensure that initial reintegration of ex-combatants leads to long-term reintegration.

However, because the CNDDR was initially delayed and subsequently implemented within a compressed timeframe, gradual scaling down will not be possible. The UNDP and the Government are therefore working together to ensure that short- and medium-term transition measures are carried out.

This closing strategy will include: a communications campaign to inform beneficiaries about the closing of the PRAC, and alternate sources of support; clear institutional roles for implementation of follow-up activities; and training to build capacity of stakeholders to handle the transition and associated activities.

There is also a great deal of analysis of the program to be done. One lesson already clearly learned is that clear and total communication on a regular basis is vital; silence leads to suspicion, anger and presuming of the worst among beneficiaries, with sometimes violent consequences.

To be examined in particular is the role of community infrastructure support, and whether it in fact increases community acceptance of ex-combatants or speeds up their reintegration. The PRAC model of a national program executed by an external agency also remains to be studied; the impact of this arrangement is as yet undetermined, and there are sure to be lessons to be learned.

Fabrice Boussalem from the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, states, “The very positive impact of the PRAC has already been recognized by main stakeholders. In addition to the impact of its activities for the benefit of both ex-combatants and communities, the project also facilitated the development of complementary initiatives and projects in the areas of community-based recovery through the “security for development” effort, of transitional justice and of small arms reduction and control. These efforts are supported by several bilateral partners, namely France, Sweden, Ireland and Japan.”

For more information on MDRP, please visit www.mdrp.org or contact Bruno Donat, Communications Officer, MDRP Secretariat, World Bank at info@mdrp.org.