Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

Towards a new EU strategic approach to support DDR:

Gathering Input from Civil Society

17-18 February 2021

Meeting Report

Background

The objective of this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Policy Meeting was to gather analysis and recommendations of civil society experts for the development of the new EU Strategic Approach to support disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR). Specific objectives included:

- Identifying lessons learned and recommendations on making EU support to DDR processes (more) successful;
- Identifying lessons learned and recommendations on how to better connect EU support to DDR to other types of support, e.g., security sector reform (SSR), mediation and transitional justice;
- Identifying best practice in safeguarding human rights and international standards throughout.

Participants also reflected on how different women, men, boys and girls experience recruitment and disarmament, and presented best practices in addressing the different needs of different people in DDR processes.

The meeting brought together 33 participants, including representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) and officials from both the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

This report includes the key points and recommendations which were expressed in the meeting. They may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the EU institutions.

The following comments and recommendations were made by civil society participants:

Understanding the context

- DDR programmes should be tailored to the nature and characteristics of the armed groups involved, including their political aspirations. It is therefore very important to engage the groups with a **long-term approach**.
- DDR programmes should recognise the different typologies of individuals and adjust accordingly. Not every individual is engaged with an armed group to the same extent or has chosen to join it for the same reasons. It is therefore crucial to analyse **push and pull factors** for individuals to join armed groups. In North-east Nigeria, pull factors include economic incentives (e.g., loans, credits, salary provided by Boko Haram, etc…) and persuasive narratives; push factors include lack of trust in the government, abuses by state security forces, and exclusion from official decision-making processes.
- The reasons why former combatants choose to engage in a DDR programme can also vary. Examples from Colombia showed that former combatants were interested to engage in DDR

programmes when these addressed three main needs: a) economic concerns: former combatants need a new stable source of revenue; b) personal protection: many people have "enemies" from war and fear for their own security; c) legal status: former combatants fear to be persecuted by political rivals and therefore need the guarantee of a transitional justice process.

- The **role of women** is often overlooked in DDR processes. Due to the conflict situation, their role in the communities may have changed a lot and in many cases they have become the breadwinners in their family and community leaders. In North-east Nigeria, their role as recruiters is also important. In some contexts, women encourage younger siblings to take arms. Some women also deliberately join armed groups.

- Stakeholder analysis is extremely important to identify the roles of individuals in a community. A common wrong assumption is that reintegrated former combatants lose influence over the rest of the community. Examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) show that some influential reintegrated individuals were able to mobilise the youth to re-engage in armed groups.

A holistic and community-based approach

- Reintegration is a long-term approach, which not only involves the targeted individuals but also the whole community in which former combatants are reintegrated. Experience shows that **holistic and community-based approaches** are more successful and sustainable on the long run. Positive examples include preparatory work with the receiving community before, during and after reintegrating former combatants, and **psychosocial and economic support** to both community members and reintegrated former combatants. When some of these elements are missing, the likeliness of former combatants re-joining armed groups increases.

- A holistic approach is very challenging to put in place because it requires funding, organisational **capacity and resources** that many implementers – especially local NGOs – are lacking. The need for a long-term perspective also discourages donors to get involved. It is also very important to monitor progress and change continuously, but is likewise extremely challenging due to the limited availability of resources.

- Some examples of DDR processes showed both advantages and challenges when adopting a holistic approach. In Colombia, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration were negotiated separately by different teams, with different expertise and objectives. This allowed for detailed policy frameworks on each component, but brought challenges in the implementation because of the resulting lack of coherence in policy and synergy and coordination among the teams working on the three components.

- DDR processes tend to fail when they are not **inclusive**. In many contexts, DDR processes exclusively target individuals who have been arrested by the government and tend to overlook the rest of the community. When programmes fail to be inclusive, community members might perceive former combatants being rewarded with economic opportunities through DDR programmes, and this creates a **feeling of injustice**. The resulting tensions within the communities can even lead to the collateral effect of people radicalising and joining an armed group in retaliation for the exclusion from DDR processes.

- Communities often have a hard time accepting former combatants back among them, because of existing grievances and an uncompleted healing process. For this, it is important that communities are prepared to welcome former combatants. The way former combatants and the new role they are associated with are presented to the rest of the community is crucial. One way of making reintegration smooth and effective is to make sure former combatants take on the **role of service providers**, so that the rest of the community can see the benefit of having them back.

- Reintegration usually has to take place in communities where violence is still widespread and the grievances at the basis of the conflict have not completely been addressed. This exacerbates tensions between former combatants and community members: as the first are often stigmatised for the role they had in the conflict, the latter keep feeling insecure. To address this issue, it is important to sensitise the communities on the challenges associated with reintegration.
- DDR initiatives should be implemented when communities are ready to receive former combatants. The international community often pushes for quick reintegration, without paying enough attention to the context. In line with the current thinking on the **humanitarian-development-peace nexus**, DDR programmes should be accompanied by conflict-sensitive development programmes and humanitarian assistance to address existing issues (e.g., lack of economic opportunities, lack of access to basic services, etc…) which risk being exacerbated by new tensions introduced by reintegration programmes.

Importance of local ownership

- Informal **community-led reintegration processes** exist outside formal government and NGOs-led DDR processes and are usually quite successful. These examples should be looked at more carefully by practitioners for best practices and as indicators of fertile ground for reintegration. The EU could support research projects looking at these dynamics in more detail. Functioning **traditional dispute settlement mechanisms** are often overlooked by the international community, which tends to enforce practices that are not necessarily helpful to local communities.
- Similarly, more synergy between the international community and the local governments should be sought. For example, the Nigerian government has rolled out several initiatives on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), which also include components of reintegration, but co-operation with the international community in the implementation of these policies has failed.
- DDR processes also seem to be constructed separately from existing **local mediation** activities and **peace committees**. Leveraging existing community practices by building a DDR process around them could increase both local ownership and effectiveness of the DDR process overall.
- Local ownership can also be increased by engaging **traditional** local and **religious leaders**, which sometimes tend to have more authority and be more trusted than representatives from the government, international organisations or NGOs from outside the community.
- Providing communities with the task of **monitoring and evaluating** DDR processes has also proven successful in better assessing the effectiveness of DDR initiatives thanks to a better understanding of local dynamics and priorities. Score cards evaluation systems involving host communities were for instance used in North-east Nigeria to assess the reintegration of certain women and girls. In addition, monitoring is particularly important to make sure no new groups enter the vacuum left by demobilised groups. However, the implementation of this practice is currently very limited due to a structural lack of resources and capacity.
- A DDR process can also be improved by a better involvement of local media. Successful DDR examples from DRC include setting-up youth-led media outlets in which former combatants became journalists and discussed DDR-related issues.

DDR and security sector reform (SSR)

- In many contexts, it is necessary to view **DDR and SSR as reciprocal elements**. If armed groups know that their engagement in DDR will be accompanied by formal SSR, they will be more inclined to engage, with the assurance that official security forces will become more balanced and representative of the diversity of the country (e.g., more ethnically diverse, less biased, more democratic, etc…).

- The main goal of SSR should be to **improve security within communities**. Due to the way many SSR processes are currently put in place, former combatants will often be more attracted to join the regular army than to go back to the community with a 'civilian' role. This does not contribute to reducing the perception of insecurity.
- It is important that DDR and SSR are reciprocal and interventions are **context-specific**, because armed groups are rarely the only source of insecurity. For example, in North-east Nigeria, Boko Haram is only partly responsible for the widespread perception of insecurity, which is also due to the issues of kidnapping, regular criminality, conflicts between herders and farmers, and abuses by State security forces.
- Language choices can also have a positive effect on the process. The traditional use of 'DDR' and 'SSR' is often associated with military defeat. Expressions such as 'disposition of forces' or 'normalisation process' highlight the need to transform the conflict and can increase the political will for non-state armed groups to join such processes.
- Differently from 'regular' members of armed groups, children are released on the basis of UN-sponsored action plans, which are not necessarily implemented at a specific time or in relation with an SSR process. While some elements for **children reintegration** will be coherent with SSR provisions (e.g., screening processes, training to prevent re-recruitment, etc…), other might not. In order to prevent boys and girls from re-engaging with armed groups, it is important that children reintegration programmes also address the transition to adulthood, so that support to vulnerable individuals is maintained throughout.

Linkage between DDR and peace processes

- In general, DDR issues are considered at a late stage in peace processes. This can lead to serious **discrepancies between the provisions included in the peace agreements and the ambitions of armed groups**, thus affecting the effectiveness of the implementation of DDR processes. In many contexts, there is virtually no communication between teams implementing peace processes and teams implementing DDR activities. Due to the variety of roles played by the EU in peace mediation, a horizontal integration of DDR expertise within mediation teams would have a positive effect on the implementation of DDR programmes.
- Better consideration of DDR issues in peace processes would also reduce the risk of excessive ambiguity in the provisions included in the documents. In some examples, the DDR policy is vague and can be interpreted in different ways, in other cases, it is extremely detailed and therefore difficult to implement.
- **Eligibility criteria** for beneficiaries of DDR programmes are very sensitive. Eligible individuals are often some who have committed serious crimes and have contributed to violence in communities, where they often return without having gone through proper reconciliation or transitional justice processes. To prevent DDR programmes creating a sense of injustice among community members, it is important that eligibility criteria are transparent and conflict-sensitive, and that being eligible for such programmes does not mean being laundered of the crimes committed.
- It is also particularly important to pay attention to the risks connected to engaging in DDR programmes with some armed groups while others are still at war. This situation might put demobilising combatants at personal risk and might increase the attractiveness of going back to arms if the reintegration process is not satisfying.
- Due to the sensitivity of this issue, it is important that framing and design of DDR processes go **hand in hand with transitional justice**. Examples from African contexts show that community-owned formal and informal transitional justice and truth-finding processes tend to be more successful than processes set up by the international community.

DDR and P/CVE

- Labelling a programme as PVE or CVE usually has a **negative impact** on the effectiveness of the programme itself and therefore on the capacity to transform the conflict. Armed groups engaged in a formal P/CVE programme lose authority and are therefore disincentivised to take part in it. In some contexts, being affiliated with an armed group involved in P/CVE programmes implies being potentially subjected to prosecution. This further disincentivises individuals to take part in such programmes.
- Labelling programmes as such also creates an automatic assumption that the people involved are a security threat rather than vulnerable individuals. This is very problematic, especially for adolescents, due to the subsequent stigmatisation that occur when they are reintegrated in communities.
- Due to the negative connotation associated with P/CVE, NGOs implementing programmes labelled as such might be perceived as hostile by potential beneficiaries of the same programmes. This further endanger the position of civil society operating in fragile contexts.
- In addition to careful labelling, successful P/CVE initiatives depend on a clear framework of eligibility criteria. This is particularly important to prevent armed groups to hold back their best fighters so that they can remobilise at a later stage.