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Returning to Society: Insights from a Survey on the Return and Reintegration of Former Combatants in South Kivu

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INTRODUCTION

Following an initiative, in 2019, of the Governors of the Provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri to restore peace and security for the development of eastern Congo, the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants again has become a key priority of government and donor policies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A high-level dialogue between the three Governors, representatives of the Congolese Presidency, the Government and Army, the UN Mission, and the World Bank in September 2020 resulted in a new initiative aimed at a community-based dismantling of armed groups. While the details of this new government approach are still being defined and the initiative awaits its implementation, the nascent *Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réintégration Communautaire* (DDRC) concept suggests a radical break with former DDR programs, which so far have had limited effect. Indeed, while the high numbers of demobilized combatants can be seen as a considerable achievement of previous DDR efforts, they have not been able to stop the proliferation of armed groups nor reduce the high levels of violence in large parts of eastern DR Congo and seem to have become, as Boshoff depicted already in 2007, a “never-ending story” (Boshoff 2007). Major critiques of these programs have included a lack of a contextual reading of armed mobilization, a rather technical approach to demobilization, a prioritizing of direct security gains, and a generalised politicization of reintegration (Perazzone 2017).

An often ignored issue is that, in many cases, the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants happens without any formal DDR program, thus missing their direct support and benefits. Little is known about the effects of such informal demobilization and reintegration, which in most cases is the result of individual decisions. This Congo Research Brief contributes to a better understanding of such spontaneous return processes. Its conclusions are based on a survey on the return of former combatants which was carried out in the province of South Kivu.² The survey aimed to understand the perspectives of ex-combatants on different dimensions of their experiences of return and was deployed in the city of Bukavu and in several localities around Bunyakiri in the territory of Kalehe.

This brief does not have the ambition to provide a full and detailed assessment of the effects and challenges of the return of former combatants to civilian life. It focuses particularly on

demobilized fighters today working as motorcycle taxi drivers—*taxi-motards*—operating either in a rural and still highly volatile area (Bunyakiri) or in an urban and relatively stable setting (Bukavu). It wants to understand whether having access to such a livelihood can be a measure for successful reintegration. Similar to Sierra Leone and other cases (Bürge 2011; Menzel 2011), in eastern DRC “motorcycle taxis constitute a decisive post-conflict urban market and sociopolitical fabric” (Oldenburg 2019). Particularly for young ex-combatants, being a motorbike taxi driver is one of the few “spaces of possibility” (Vigh 2010) and thus has become an attractive alternative to life in combat. Of course, in eastern Congo, this is not the only livelihood option for ex-combatants, as many of them indeed also try their luck in mining centers or in trading activities which, since the 1980s, have been important escape routes for marginalized rural youngsters in search of economic opportunities.

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

In total, 128 *taxi-motards* were involved in this research: seventy-eight of them living and operating in the city of Bukavu, and fifty in or around the rural areas of Bunyakiri. In both locations, these respondents were sampled randomly near motorcycle taxi stands and via the snowball method. A number of important differences between respondents from the two locations were observed. Firstly, the Bukavu subset is dominated by an older generation of combatants, with an average age of respondents of thirty-six (only 12 percent were younger than thirty-one, with the large majority between thirty and forty years old, and 16 percent over forty years old). In Bunyakiri, the average age of our respondents was twenty-nine (with more than half of the participants in this subset younger than thirty-one, and 96 percent younger than forty-one). Overall, the ex-combatants in Bunyakiri were mobilized and demobilized more recently and during other phases of the Congo conflicts than those in the Bukavu subset.

Secondly, considerable differences exist in terms of the armed outfits the respondents were a part of and in terms of the average duration of their presence in armed groups. In general, the former combatants from Bunyakiri constitute a more homogenous group, with 74 percent having a background in Raia Mutomboki, some of them after having also served in various previous Mai Mai outfits. Six percent were part of the Kabila-led *Alliance des forces démocratiques*

pour la libération du Congo (AFDL—Allied Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo). Overall, 18 percent of the Bunyakiri respondents had been in more than one group (which can be explained by the different waves of mobilization in the area). Also in Bunyakiri, two-thirds of the respondents had stayed between seven months and five years in the armed group, and over one-fifth had taken up arms for six years or more. But overall, almost half (47.6 percent) of the respondents did not stay for longer than one year in the group. In Bukavu, the background of the former combatants in our dataset is a more heterogeneous mix of, on the one hand, demobilized soldiers from the army and, on the other hand, combatants from mainly AFDL, Mudundu-40, Mai Mai groups, and small numbers of Raia Mutomboki and other groups. On average, over 40 percent of them were mobilized for more than six years, and only 25 percent spent less than a year as a combatant. About a quarter of the respondents from Bukavu were in more than one armed outfit, indicating combatants' relatively strong mobility between different armed groups.

RETURNING TO SOCIETY: WHERE DO FORMER COMBATANTS SETTLE?

The argument has been made in recent literature that return, despite common assumptions in much policy and academic work, is not always a matter of going back to the place of departure, nor in this case the place of mobilization (Carayannis and Pangburn 2020; Tegenbos and Vlassenroot 2018). This conclusion can also be confirmed by our survey. A majority of former combatants tend to return to the place from where they originally mobilized, with an almost identical rate for Bukavu (63 percent) and Bunyakiri (62 percent). Yet, a very significant portion, almost 40 percent of the respondents, settled elsewhere in search of new economic and social conditions and opportunities. This observation is in line with the outcomes of a similar survey carried out in the Congolese city of Mbandaka, where only 37 percent returned to the place of initial mobilization (Carayannis and Pangburn 2020). Different reasons seem to inform individual trajectories, however. Respondents in Bukavu told us that they settled in urban areas because of family members who lived in or had moved to the city, because of better employment opportunities, to escape from local conflicts in their place of origin, or because they felt more protected there from reprisals from the armed groups they had left. Similar urban pull factors for demobilized combatants have also been identified in earlier studies on the DRC (Verweijen, Vogel, and Musamba 2019).

The Role of Family

The survey on return carried out in Mbandaka showed that combatants return to places where they have support systems on which they can rely (Carayannis and Pangburn 2020). This is clearly also the case for the returned combatants we interviewed in Bukavu and Bunyakiri and, to no surprise, points at the importance of the role of family ties in facilitating the process of reintegration. In both locations, the locus of the biological family—parents and siblings—is the primary reason to return or settle somewhere after demobilization. In Bunyakiri, as in Bukavu, a vast majority of the former combatants who took part in the survey were accepted back into their families upon returning. Overall, reconnecting with family life was a rather smooth process: a large majority, 84 percent, of the former combatants in our survey in Bunyakiri stated that they had not experienced any problems reintegrating into the family. In Bukavu, this number was 65 percent. Among those who did report problems in Bunyakiri, not having any income and mistrust within the family were the most commonly cited. In Bukavu as well, those who reported problems pointed out that the difficulties they experienced were due to a lack of employment or a negative attitude or lack of trust among some family members. A small number also mentioned that after returning from the bush, they were no longer able to fulfill the role they previously held in the family. This said, our results confirm that becoming part of an armed group does not necessarily imply a longer-term rupture with the original social environment. Earlier research already pointed at the fact that combatants in most cases remain strongly connected to their home communities while being enrolled in an armed group (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020).

The Role of Community

Social acceptance is a factor which has a considerable impact on ex-combatants' mobility, as is explained by the differences between our two research sites. In Bukavu, 66 percent of the respondents felt accepted back into the community to which they returned (and from which they often moved on to Bukavu). Yet, while the majority of the former combatants who talked to us in Bukavu did not experience any particular problems reintegrating into their community, 24 percent stated they continued to experience mistrust or felt they were perceived as dangerous or even as criminal individuals by members of the community they originated from—all this because of the armed groups they had been a part of or their military background. While there are other factors which have drawn demobilized combatants to large urban areas (Verweijen, Vogel, and Musamba 2019; see also below), the sentiment of being marginalized or even rejected by their

home societies seems to have been an important push factor for demobilized combatants to leave their home areas and eventually settle in Bukavu. As one respondent stated: “I can’t go back to my village. I would get in trouble if I did.”³ A statement from another interviewee is also telling: “A soldier has a bad reputation in our country. They still considered me a soldier after I returned, with the same reputation that implies.”⁴ Another respondent from Bukavu indicated that community acceptance takes time: “It’s only now that they’re accepting me back, and that they start to understand a little.”⁵ This said, it has to be acknowledged that ex-combatants often experience social stigmatization after their reintegration. Other research has already pointed at their fragile post-combat social and economic situations and the mixed success of reintegration and social acceptance (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020).

Strikingly, in Bunyakiri, a large majority, 78 percent, reported having been favorably accepted back into their community upon returning from the armed group, while 12 percent found themselves not accepted. A number of interlocutors felt they were accepted, but not without some reservation, suspicion, or initial fear. Based on the results in Bukavu, it can be assumed that a large part of those who felt difficulties in reintegrating into their home communities in Bunyakiri indeed moved to urban centers such as Bukavu, Beni, Goma, Bunia, or Butembo. Interestingly, in their responses, several Bunyakiri respondents believed the acceptance by their home communities was rather self-evident, because their community supported their initial mobilization into the armed group—mostly Raia Mutomboki—and appreciated the cause of the struggle (the protection of the community against attacks from Rwandan FDLR) and the sacrifices they made. “I’m very much loved here, the population continues to congratulate me for having protected them from the FDLR,” stated one respondent.⁶ Another returned combatant recalled that the local population organized a feast on the day he demobilized, to celebrate the group’s service to the community, but also to honor the combatants who died.⁷ Unsurprisingly then, in Bunyakiri, over half of our interlocutors mentioned not experiencing any particular problems. Fewer than 20 percent of them reported having experienced problems in finding employment, while an equal number stated they felt they were perceived as dangerous and were mistrusted because of their armed group experience.

TO DDR OR NOT TO DDR?

DDR—demobilization, disarmament and reintegration—has been a key pillar of internationally supported efforts to stabilize

the eastern DRC. Since 2003, three generations of DDR programs have been launched in the DRC, with limited success.⁸ As Thill argues, in the DRC, DDR “may be described as a diffuse web of plans, processes, programs, projects, and practices that involve a range of implementing organizations, monitoring agencies, state institutions, and donors situated at the local, national, regional, and international levels” (2021, 6). Already in 2001, a *Bureau national pour la démobilisation et la réinsertion* (BUNADER) was created that initiated the first DDR Program, mainly addressing child soldiers. Following the signing in 2003 of the Final Act of the Sun City Peace Agreement, which included a number of arrangements for the disarmament and reintegration of signatory armed actors into the army or civilian life, on a national level a *Commission nationale de désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion* (CONADER) replaced the BUNADER. It had to monitor, coordinate, and implement DDR and was funded by the World Bank as part of the Multi-Donor Reintegration Programme (MDRP). The CONADER-led National DDR Program (PNDDR) started in 2005 and aimed at the demobilization, disarmament, and socio-economic reintegration of combatants. This program caused frustration and disappointment among former combatants and eventually also contributed to a local economy of armed mobilization and a constant recycling of combatants for economic gain. Facing several challenges, including a lack of real impact and the mismanagement of funds, in 2007 CONADER was replaced by the *Unité d’exécution du programme de désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion* (UE-PNDDR). A second DDR phase was launched and lasted until September 2011. Following the signing, in 2013, of the Nairobi Agreement that put a formal end to the M23 rebellion, a new DDR strategy was launched by the Congolese government. The *Plan global de désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion* announced a third DDR phase; it sought to deal with some of the pitfalls of previous phases and invest in particular in the reintegration of combatants. Again it was faced with serious challenges. As mentioned already, a new DDRC program is currently being prepared and discussed by the government; it is centered around a community-based dismantling of armed groups and would include a radical break with former DDR efforts.

A deeper analysis of these programs points at the complexities and ambiguities of each DDR trajectory and illustrates that the decision of combatants to leave the bush is guided by socio-political dynamics rather than the prospects of reintegration offered by well-designed technical approaches (Perazzone 2017; Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020). Despite the strong policy interest and massive resources that have been invested into each of the DDR

cycles, our survey confirms the difficulties and mixed results these programs have experienced. It also makes clear that the return of ex-combatants is not always a matter of passing through an official DDR process.

In Bunyakiri (98 percent) as in Bukavu (88 percent), almost all of the former combatants stated that, when part of an armed group, they were aware of the existence of these DDR programs and opportunities. However, this awareness was not at all reflected in the degree of their participation in such programs. Although there is a very substantial difference between the Bukavu subset (68 percent participation) and the Bunyakiri one (22 percent participation), many of the returned combatants who took part in our survey never participated in any formal DDR program and became so-called “*auto-démobilisés*” (self-demobilized). This observation raises some questions about the role of formal DDR programs in the larger landscape of peacebuilding interventions and strategies. It should be stated though that besides formal DDR programs, in both contexts local NGOs have been actively involved in supporting former combatants’ return home. In Bunyakiri, over a third of the former combatants told us they benefited from some assistance from local NGOs. In Bukavu this was the case for about 20 percent of those we interviewed.

In Bunyakiri, where a majority of respondents were part of Raia Mutomboki and, on average, were mobilized and returned more recently than in Bukavu, we can see clearly articulated reasons for the hesitation to join a formal DDR trajectory. One of the most cited explanations for not participating was a lack of trust in the program, sometimes in terms of the benefits, but also in terms of personal security: “We did not have any confidence in the program, particularly because we saw how our elder relatives who fought with the Mai Mai were given nothing but false promises when they took part in the DDR program. This sentiment was widely shared among us fighters,” according to a former Raia Mutomboki combatant who demobilized in 2014.⁹ “I didn’t want to participate, because I was scared that it was a trap, and I would get arrested after enrolling,” added another former Raia Mutomboki combatant who left in 2008.¹⁰ The role of the Congolese army (FARDC) should be mentioned here as a complicating factor. While local civil society organization leaders supported ex-combatants in returning home, FARDC commanders complicated this return and often asked for money or other support from ex-combatants’ families.

Respondents also commonly reported they were not being guided towards any of the deployed programs. Some former combatants considered there was no need to be assisted with

reintegration, because as Raia Mutomboki, they were supported by the population: “Many of us did not go through DDR. Only those who had committed crimes had something to fear.”¹¹ Their testimonies confirm that there was a great preparedness to welcome the combatants back into the communities, which points at the strong local embeddedness of these Raia Mutomboki in local society. As argued elsewhere, this armed group was able to build a high degree of legitimacy during its first years of operation as part of its ambition to protect the population against security threats caused by the FDLR, even if it has to be acknowledged that this trust has always been tenuous (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014).

In Bukavu, where most of the respondents demobilized over a decade ago, the issue of trust was not very clear cut, and commonly cited reasons for not participating in formal DDR programs were diverse: for some there was no program available at the time, for others their personal circumstances at the time did not allow them to participate, and still others were simply not interested or did not see any concrete benefit. As one who fought for four years with the AFDL followed by another year with RCD told us: “I was on good footing with the people in my neighborhood. I didn’t see any reason why such a program would concern me.”¹²

Most of the former combatants in Bukavu who participated in DDR programs can be considered part of the first generation of DDR participants, with a majority of our interlocutors (59 percent) having participated between 2000-2007 and having received different forms of support.¹³ Most respondents who participated in DDR in Bukavu reported having received some form of material assistance, in many cases a kit containing a bicycle, cash, and some clothes or housewares (64 percent of participants). In addition, about a quarter of the Bukavu respondents who participated in DDR reported having received training (mostly mechanics training) as part of the program. Asked whether the benefits received in the DDR program met the expectations, over one-third of the respondents told us they were not satisfied and reported not having benefited as significantly as they had expected. However, most respondents did feel their initial expectations were met in one way or another. For about 17 percent, these benefits were only limited and with no enduring effect, yet a significant share (43 percent) of the DDR participants from Bukavu reported that their expectations were met, and that the benefits received remained helpful even today. Also, those who took part in a DDR program in Bunyakiri reported having received some benefits. Some mentioned material assistance in the form of cash or a “civilian kit” or mechanic’s toolbox, or transport fees to return home. Five reported they received no benefits worth mentioning.

About half (51 percent) of those in Bukavu who were part of a formal DDR process stated that the material assistance and training they received had been or continued to be useful in the context of their current professional activities. This is especially the case for those who pursued mechanics training, but some interlocutors also mentioned that the motorcycle or cash they received assisted them in their first steps as motorcycle taxi drivers. Interestingly, for some of our interlocutors in Bukavu, the enduring benefit of having participated in DDR programs was not merely expressed in material terms, but in terms of being able to move away from a life as a combatant and become an ordinary civilian again: “the real advantage, is that I’m no longer a soldier.”¹⁴ DDR programs helped them to cut the links with their former militarized social networks, but even more symbolically represented the transition from a military to a civilian position. Even if our respondents were chosen from a group which can be considered as somewhat successful examples of reintegration because of their access to livelihood opportunities as taxi drivers, these findings also do bring some nuance to the prevailing pessimism about DDR’s achievements in the eastern DRC; they show that training received during DDR can be an asset if it is tailored to personal interests and the economic opportunities present in the context of return.

However, as can be concluded from our survey, lack of trust in the programs is often a key constraint and prevents former combatants from joining them. As one interlocutor from Bunyakiri who dropped out of the program told us: “There were no advantages in DDR. After a few days, I dropped out and left the center, hungry, but also out of uncertainty. There was not enough information, some people told we would be arrested, others that we would be enrolled in the army.”¹⁵

PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY LIFE AND POLITICS

A rich literature has documented how ex-combatants have tried to build up new social capital when demobilising. It is commonly observed that they remain connected to the larger social network of the armed group. This is, for instance, the case in Sierra Leone, where war-time mobilization networks tend to continue after the termination of conflict (Utas 2005), and in Mozambique, where former RENAMO combatants’ military background remains an important identity in post-war politics and society (Wiegink 2013). In some cases, former combatants turn into strategic actors in the mobilization campaigns of local politicians, a phenomenon described by Christinsen and Utas as “politricks” (Christinsen and Utas 2008).

Similar dynamics were observed during our research and indicate that those former combatants who participated in the survey

have invested considerable efforts into building new social networks. In Bunyakiri, an overwhelming majority (92 percent) took part in associational life, with 32 percent of the ex-combatants reporting membership in two or more associations. Obviously, given their position as *taxi-motards*, the most commonly cited associations were *taxi-motard* associations (which in most cases serves as a social protection mechanism) and local youth associations. Other professional and social associations commonly mentioned included agricultural cooperatives, local development associations, sports associations, or religious associations. Over half (54 percent) of respondents in Bunyakiri were part of the executive committee of a community-based organization, and 52 percent actively participated or worked in a local social or infrastructural development project.

Among our respondents in Bukavu, involvement in local associational life was less widespread than in Bunyakiri, which can partly be explained by the difference in social settings. Nearly half of the ex-fighters in the city (45 percent) were not involved in any organization. Several interlocutors added that they did not have the time for this. Forty-six percent were part of one association, with the remaining 9 percent involved in two or more associations. In addition to associations of motorcycle riders, several respondents in Bukavu added that they participated in the *Salongo*¹⁶ community works groups. About 20 percent were also members of the executive committees of professional or community-based associations, while almost 30 percent had participated in a local development project or activity in Bukavu.

These rates, and the differences in terms of participation in associational life between Bunyakiri and Bukavu are, as such, not surprising. Adherence to local and often microlevel associations in various economic and social domains points at the strong community life in rural areas of South Kivu. Realities and opportunities of life in the more metropolitan urban context of Bukavu offer other avenues for social life. Nevertheless, these rates suggest that both in Bunyakiri and in Bukavu, former combatants are far from isolated or marginalized individuals, and actively participate in their communities.

Several cases in the existing literature illustrate the politics of recycling and the active participation of former combatants in political campaigns, in most cases because of their mobilization by local Big Men. Eastern Congo is no exception to this. In Bunyakiri, almost three-quarters (72 percent) of our interlocutors took part in a political rally in the year before being interviewed. This is significantly more than in Bukavu, where about 30 percent took part in a rally. One reason for this is ongoing political disputes, partly also centered around customary conflicts, which continue to condition

political realities and create social cleavages around Bunyakiri (Hoffmann, Vlassenroot, and Mudinga 2020). In areas such as Bunyakiri, armed group mobilization (and thus also remobilization of returned combatants) continues to be linked to dynamics of political competition and bargaining, while urban-based national and provincial level politicians often act in conjunction with armed groups—be it out of ideological considerations or in pursuit of their own interests (Vogel and Musamba 2016; Verweijen, Vogel, and Musamba 2019). It should be noted, though, that it is not uncommon for motorcycle taxi drivers in general, in Bukavu as in Bunyakiri, to be mobilized by politicians for their campaigning in return for money. This explains why we see, in both contexts, that former combatants often attend the meetings of different politicians.¹⁷

QUITTING AN ARMED GROUP IS NOT A RUPTURE WITH THE ARMED GROUP ENVIRONMENT

This persistent connection of demobilized combatants with elites and political networks that are linked to armed groups has been a concern for DDR interveners. One of the assumptions of classic approaches to DDR is that in order to demobilize combatants, they should be delinked from military structures and wartime social networks (Sharif 2018). We have argued elsewhere, however, that armed groups are not mere military structures that can easily be dismantled, but also entail a web of social relationships (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020). Results from our surveys confirm how wartime social networks remain very resilient and continue to play a significant role in the professional and social lives of combatants after they have left armed groups. In Bunyakiri, a large majority (84 percent) of the former combatants we talked to has pursued professional activities with other former combatants from the same armed group of which they were a part. Interestingly, also in Bukavu, this professional link with other former combatants is still the case for roughly half (51 percent) of the respondents, despite a more cosmopolitan urban environment and a subset of respondents whose lives under arms had already been behind them for a much longer period than those who participated in the Bunyakiri survey. Similar research in Mbandaka shows that such bonds between former combatants need not be problematic per se and can constitute important forms of solidarity in civilian life (Carayannis and Pangburn 2020).

While social contacts between former combatants remain largely intact and lead to professional collaborations, this is not necessarily the case with old comrades who are still mobilized. The number of interlocutors who reported contacts with active armed

group or army members, indeed, is significantly lower. Nevertheless, such links with active members are far from uncommon in both settings: 10 percent in Bunyakiri and 12.5 percent in Bukavu work with currently active combatants or military. And outside their professional activities, in Bunyakiri, almost one out of five (18 percent) of the interlocutors confirmed they or their families continued to receive some form of support from currently active combatants. In Bukavu, this kind of support was considerably less significant, however, which can easily be explained by the absence of armed groups in Bukavu's direct neighbourhood. Such findings confirm insights from earlier ethnographic research on combatant life and return to South Kivu, which concluded that armed groups are social spaces that continue to play a significant role in daily life after "return" (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020).

MATERIAL WOES: THE RISK OF RE-MARGINALIZATION AND REMOBILIZATION

While motorcycle taxi associations might not provide the same strong bonds of solidarity as the Toleka taxi union does in Mbandaka (Carayannis and Pangburn 2020), our interlocutors in Bukavu and Bunyakiri confirm that this professional opportunity has helped in their reintegration into society after leaving combat. Nevertheless, in both settings, former combatants realize that this source of livelihood is rather fragile. In Bunyakiri, a clear majority reported that since their demobilization, they were better off materially than when they were in the armed group. However, more than 20 percent of the respondents evaluated their current material conditions—in terms of food, clothing, shelter and material possessions—as worse than during their time in the armed group. Only 4 percent felt there was no difference between being in the armed group and their situation after returning to society. In Bukavu as well, a large majority reported feeling better off compared to when they were mobilized, but 10 percent felt they were worse off now, and another 11 percent saw no difference between their life in the armed group and their current material situation.

Compared to other citizens in their communities, however, in Bunyakiri 50 percent evaluated their material well-being as significantly inferior to other citizens, while around a quarter felt there was no difference with other citizens in terms of material wellbeing. In Bukavu, a majority, 60 percent, thought there was little difference from other citizens, while 32 percent estimated they were better off. Importantly, only 22 percent reported to be sufficiently capable of providing the necessary income for themselves and

dependent family members in Bunyakiri, even when many of the respondents had more diverse livelihood options by combining their moto-taxi with agricultural activities. In Bukavu this rate is notably higher, but still more than half (52 percent) of the respondents reported they were not capable of taking care of themselves and their families. It confirms that leaving armed groups also includes a loss of social and economic capital, which is not easily compensated when back “home” and might lead to marginalization and frustration.

RETURN IS NOT DEFINITE: THE RISK OF REMOBILIZATION

The recycling and remobilization of former combatants has been one of the major flaws of DDR efforts in the DRC (Boshoff 2007; Vogel and Musamba 2016). The argument has been made that armed groups in the DRC function as alternative social spaces, whose attraction to a range of people is founded on a complex interplay of motives, sentiments, and interests. While some of these are related to social identity formation, ideology, or the need for protection, there is also the reality that limited livelihood opportunities are a driving incentive to join armed groups and provoke a dynamic of “circular return” (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020). Besides these incentives and motives, Vogel and Musamba (2016) also point at a number of additional factors affecting mobilization patterns, including unresolved and structurally rooted local security dilemmas between and within communities; resistance by elites with political agendas; and perverse incentives for commanders.

Our findings demonstrate that because of all these factors, the risk for remobilization, even among long-term returnees, remains an issue of concern. Overall, the figures on possible remobilization from our surveys point to the fact that also in rural and urban South Kivu, the idea of final reintegration cannot be assumed to be definitive for many former combatants: in Bunyakiri, 46 percent of respondents stated they would consider remobilization, while in Bukavu 21 percent of the *taxi-motards* we consulted reported they considered this possibility.

An eventual return to armed combat was not motivated by nostalgia for armed-group life, nor by trying to reclaim what was lost upon returning to civilian life per se, but by the persistent need to seek other options in order to secure their livelihoods or to protect their communities. In Bunyakiri, the most commonly stated motivation to rejoin (20 percent of all respondents) was the eventual need to protect their communities again. This seems remarkable, considering that most of these combatants reported that they demobilized either because of the hardships of life in the bush or because they felt that,

at the time of demobilizing, the enemy (FDLR) had been defeated. There is a contextual explanation for these motivations: in Kalehe territory, narratives of persistent threat continue to circulate and are often expressed in identity discourses. Since the disappearance of the FDLR following the armed operations of the Raia Mutomboki and other armed actors, these mobilization discourses also drew on another register, that of an eventual return to the region of Rwandophone Congolese refugees from camps in Rwanda.¹⁸ Economic incentives guide 12 percent of our respondents in Bunyakiri. For them, taking up arms again remains an option when financial conditions—a good salary—are not met. Eight percent reported they would remobilize in case of economic hardship or loss of livelihood opportunities or land access/ownership. Interestingly, another 8 percent suggested they only wanted to remobilize under some form of formal recognition by the state, in the national army or a movement which is not labeled as a “negative force.” While this was not explicitly asked in the survey, among those who were not prepared to remobilize in Bunyakiri, the hardships of life in the armed group were commonly cited as the main reason not to take up arms again, even if they would be paid well. In Bukavu, the most commonly stated motivation for an eventual remobilization was material and explicitly linked to a recognized position and a decent salary in the regular army, a motivation which should probably also be understood in connection to the promise at the time of the survey by the newly installed Congolese President Tshisekedi to provide a better salary to soldiers in the Congolese Army. But in Bukavu as well, some interlocutors evoked the patriotic need to protect and defend the country, this often without stating clearly against which forces.

CONCLUSIONS

Our survey conducted in Bukavu and Bunyakiri did not have the ambition to present an assessment of the impact of DDR processes in the DRC as such, but rather to collect a number of experiences from the current socio-economic position of ex-combatant *taxi-motards*. This was in order to deepen our understanding of demobilization and reintegration cycles. We selected this group, as mentioned earlier, because of the popularity of this profession among former combatants. As we could learn from the testimonies of our respondents, becoming a *taxi-motard* is, particularly in an urbanized context, a mobile and one of the few economic opportunities left for those who reintegrate into society. It also provides a new social environment and a space where former combatants can meet and continue to collaborate.

One of the key conclusions of this survey is that most respondents never entered a formal DDR process but auto-demobilized without being assisted or accompanied by any official DDR structures. They returned first and foremost to a place where they initially felt supported by family and their community, and results from our survey suggest that these families and welcoming communities are key to making a return succeed. Such a conclusion supports a shift in focus of official DDR policies towards a community-based approach, as is currently being prepared by the Congolese government. Recent reflections on DDR in the DRC and beyond, indeed, have become increasingly sensitive to the need to move beyond an individual-combatant-focused approach and to give the broader community the lead over the reintegration process.¹⁹

Our respondents have rather mixed positions towards the formal DDR processes. While in Bukavu, many first-generation combatants did participate in DDR and often continued to experience the benefits of the training they received many years after, the majority of the more recently returned respondents from Bunyakiri did not show much trust in DDR or felt no need to take part in such a program in order to be able to return home. Our findings reveal that both in the case of a formal DDR process and of NGO support, when training and material support are aligned with the economic opportunities of the context and the interests of the returnee, however, there can be enduring benefits. Still, even several years after returning to civilian life, former combatants continue to face significant challenges. Despite having a means of livelihood, in both contexts, ex-combatant *taxi-motards* consider this livelihood and their material circumstances to be vulnerable.

While economic support can indeed help to sustain the reintegration of former combatants, this also depends on the existing necessary social capital they can mobilize. Our research additionally shows that returned combatants are not per se isolated and marginalized but active agents in the public life of their communities. At the same time, the social ties and, in the case of Bunyakiri, political links to their former armed groups and members continue to be part of their professional and personal environment. This conclusion confirms that former combatants can rely on the social capital built during their armed mobilization.

Return is not just an event, but a long-term process, with often uneven outcomes which depend on individual trajectories as well as the social and political context. That context matters and also becomes clear when comparing the potential for remobilization. In both locations, material motivations come into play. But especially

in Bunyakiri, this potential for remobilization is not just determined by the success of their individual demobilization trajectory, but by the perceived need to protect the community from (foreign) armed groups and population movements. Providing longer-term perspectives on sustainable livelihoods and secure communities to young people in the eastern DRC are challenges which cannot be simply addressed through the technicalities of individualized DDR approaches, which have been at the center of stabilization efforts in eastern DRC since 2003. These require a firm commitment to lasting political solutions.

ENDNOTES

1 The authors are respectively Post-Doc researcher at Ghent University, Professor at Ghent University, and PhD student at Ghent University and researcher at GEC-SH.

2 The survey was carried out by a team of researchers from GEC-SH Bukavu: Jérémie Byakumbwa Mapatano, Bienvenu Mukungilwa Wakusomba, Alice Mugoli, Elisée Cirhuza, and Eric Batumike Banyanga.

3 Interview, September 22, 2019.

4 Interview, September 20, 2019.

5 Interview, October 4, 2019.

6 Interview, October 21, 2019.

7 Interview, October 21, 2019.

8 For a detailed overview of the different DDR programs and cycles, see Thill 2021.

9 Interview, October 20, 2019.

10 Interview, October 21, 2019.

11 Interview, October 21, 2019.

12 Interview, September 19, 2019.

13 Note: not all of our interviewees remembered when they took part, and some declined to answer.

14 Interview, October 4, 2019.

15 Interview, October 15, 2019.

16 *Salongo* refers to compulsory civic work in which the entire population is supposed to participate.

17 Insight from co-author's personal observations. In our questionnaire responses, UNC was the most mentioned party, with 9 out of the 24 respondents from Bukavu having attended a meeting of that party.

18 See International Refugee Rights Initiative et al. 2019.

19 See Åström and Ljunggren 2016.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Congo Research Briefs are a joint publication of the Conflict Research Group (CRG) at Ghent University, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the Study Group on Conflicts and Human Security (GEC-SH) at the Centre de recherches universitaires du Kivu (CERUKI), and the Governance-in-Conflict Network (GiC). These briefs provide concise and timely summaries of ongoing research on the DRC that is being undertaken by CRG, SSRC, GEC-SH, GiC, and their partners.

The survey on which this research brief is based was carried out by a team of researchers from GEC-SH Bukavu: Jérémie Byakumbwa Mapatano, Bienvenu Mukungilwa Wakusomba, Alice Mugoli, Elisée Cirhuza, and Eric Batumike Banyanga.

We would also like to thank Christoph Vogel for his very helpful comments on earlier drafts.

This research of this brief was co-funded by the Centre for Public Authority and International Development (CPAID) of the London School of Economics (LSE) in collaboration with Ghent University.