# It Takes (More Than) Two to Tango

## ARMED POLITICS, COMBATANT AGENCY AND THE HALF-LIFE OF DDR PROGRAMMES IN THE CONGO

Josaphat Musamba,
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**NOTICE TO READER**

This report draws from long-term ethnographic research by the three authors and seven other researchers. Due to differing constraints, their names cannot be listed here. The Insecure Livelihoods team dedicates this report to our late esteemed friend and colleague Eric Mongo, and his indefatigable work for a more peaceful eastern Congo.

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# Executive Summary

This report investigates the politics of demobilization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In a bid to inform the evolving P-DDRCS, it analyzes dynamics of mobilization and demobilization, accounting for the fragmentation of conflict in recent years. Revisiting past DDR programmes, it also identifies misunderstandings and mistakes concerning armed mobilization and DDR and focuses on a combatant perspective to understand the factors guiding individual and collective decision-making. The report argues that past DDR programmes suffered from significant depoliticization in their conception – foregrounding a technical approach that neglected combatant agency – and a significant politicization in their implementation – driven by opportunities to extract rents. The report reveals the persistence of misconceptions about the broader political economy in which DDR efforts take shape. If renewed demobilization programmes are to be successful, they have to account for past problems, and take innovative and sensitive approaches.

# Table of Contents

# 1 |
# Introduction

During a visit to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (henceforth the DRC or the Congo), in October 2019, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi Tshilombo held a national security council meeting in Bukavu, where he instructed provincial governors of South Kivu, North Kivu and Ituri to design a new disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme that would be more effective than previous ones. This instruction was inspired by the failure of the earlier attempts to put an end to armed mobilization and the spread of conflict, which had been affecting the eastern DRC for over 25 years. Starting in 2004, the DRC witnessed a lengthy series of nationwide and local DDR programmes focusing on Congolese or foreign combatants; these were actually DDRRR programmes (incorporating "repatriation" and "resettlement") and included significant levels of "informal" and often unrecorded self-demobilization (Thill 2021; Vlassenroot and Verweijen 2017). With military operations being conducted periodically and a state of siege having been declared in May 2021 in two of the three most conflict-affected provinces (North Kivu and Ituri), DDR is back on the table.

Based on an analysis of the dynamics of mobilization and the politics of demobilization defining earlier DDR outcomes, this report investigates the potential pitfalls of new DDR efforts currently being designed in the DRC. It argues that past programmes suffered from a depoliticization in their conception (foregrounding a technical approach that rarely accounted for the lifeworlds and agency of combatants) and a politicization in their implementation (driven by opportunities to extract rents and to divert DDR activities to parallel chains of command of the Congolese army). Juxtaposing a critical analysis of previous shortcomings with new empirical data, the report tackles a persisting set of misconceptions about conflict dynamics and armed

mobilization. These misconceptions have led to a narrow technical under-standing of DDR and a disconnect of DDR programmes from the wider political economy in which these take shape. International peacebuilding efforts to which such programmes connect also overemphasised certain triggers of armed mobilization (such as intercommunity conflict) while neglecting other equally important factors. They tend to focus on "actors of violence", often ignoring other actors and processes that shape wartime realities (Lubkemann 2008). Moreover, conflict resolution efforts at large suf-fered from a sovereignty reflex that privileges cross-border dynamics above presumably "local" dynamics. And finally, most larger DDR programmes have struggled to reconcile the tension between efficient overall coordination and situated, tailored solutions.

Tshisekedi's call for a new approach to DDR came at a critical juncture, given numerous surrenders of armed groups that accompanied the start of his presidency in early 2019. These were inspired by the end of Kabila's rule (which for many armed groups had become a major objective), the hopes that came with the new government, and a generalized combat fatigue. After decades of armed mobilization, conflict in the region produced a cer-tain inertia, with armed groups repeatedly splitting and producing a very fragmented conflict geography (Vogel and Stearns 2018). In this context, combatant agency is more than ever informed by the dynamics of their recycling by politico-military elites and their circular return between military and civilian life (Vlassenroot et al. 2020, Vogel and Musamba 2016).

Reviving the ill-fated history of DDR has been a central theme in Tshisekedi's communication since he took office in early 2019. In his inauguration speech, he called upon armed groups and combatants to surrender. In response, government institutions, peacebuilding experts and international partners began working towards a new nationwide approach, culminating in the institution of the *Programme de désarmement, démobilisation, relève-ment communautaire et stabilisation* (P-DDRCS).[1] Rooted in the ephemeral *Commission interprovinciale d'appui au processus de sensibilisation, désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion Communautaire* (CIAP-DDRC),

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[1]  Presidential decree establishing the national DDRCS programme.

which was created following Tshisekedi's visit to the eastern Congo in October 2019, the P-DDRCS is institutionally based within the presidency. While the programme's broad lines and structure were laid out in a 2021 presidential decree, the programme's operational and technical approach were specified in a draft national strategy published in January 2022.

Aimed at informing the evolving P-DDRCS process, this report analyzes the dynamics of armed (de-)mobilization in the eastern DRC, accounting for the fragmentation of conflict actors and the existing conflict geography, and the factors informing the conflict's protracted nature and evolution. Revisiting previous programmes, the report identifies misunderstandings around armed mobilization and DDR and focuses on a *combatant perspective* to understand what guides their individual and collective decision-making. Based on historical and ethnographic analysis, this report seeks to address two sets of questions:

- What does the current conflict geography in the eastern Congo look like and what explains the persistence of armed groups and armed mobilization despite multiple past DDR processes?

- What were the main weaknesses of past demobilization efforts, what are the key challenges to such processes, and what would be different in a community-based approach?

This report is organized in four parts. After some analytical reflections on armed politics and how they are shaped by the logics of circular return and the recycling of combatants, it discusses the evolution of DDR programmes in recent Congolese history. Drawing from in-depth ethnographic field-work conducted by a team of researchers, the report then demonstrates how combatant and conflict realities complicate the linear conception of (de-)mobilization. This informs the fourth part of the report, in which we delineate the larger puzzle of challenges and opportunities that are likely to accompany the upcoming P-DDRCS.

# 2 |
# A History of Demobilization Programmes in the Congo

Since the start of the peace process in 2003, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants has been a crucial part of peacebuilding, state-building, and stabilization efforts in the DRC. The UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) indicates that as of 2022 over 150,000 combatants have gone through different formal DDR programmes.[2] In addition, thousands of foreign combatants have been demobilized and repatriated as part of tripartite DDRRR efforts, while an unknown number of self-demobilizations has occurred as well. Even though this as such can be seen as a considerable achievement, DDR efforts have not been able to prevent the further proliferation of armed groups nor reduce violence in large parts of the eastern Congo. In contrast, the presumed and actual spoils of DDR programmes seem to contribute to the fragmentation of conflict by making it politically and economically lucrative to create or lead an armed group, and tactically necessary to operate smaller belligerent outfits.

The balance sheet of the Congo's DDR experience is patchy and contested. As early as in 2007, DDR in the DRC was referred to as a "never-ending story" (Boshoff 2007). Based on interviews with ex-combatants, Richards (2016) found that while fragmentation may encourage participation in formal DDR, it can also have an opposite effect and provoke remobilization. This led Perazzone (2017: 274) to argue that "the Congolese case shows ... that combined with prioritising immediate security gains, it is the generalised politicisation of reintegration that most likely impeded coherent [DDR]." As

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[2] See https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/ddr.

we discuss in this chapter, misleading underlying assumptions about what should work, a lack of contextual reading of mobilization processes and security challenges, and a rather technical approach to demobilization help to explain the limited impact of previous programmes. While addressing different generations and approaches to DDR, this chapter identifies the reasons for limited success – whether through formal DDR programmes, civil society-driven demobilization efforts or self-demobilization dynamics.

## 2.1 What is DDR?

It is hard to escape acronyms and definitions when it comes to DDR matters. This report takes a light approach and follows basic UN definitions for the sake of clarity. While DDR itself forms a part of larger strategies that aim to contribute to security and stability in conflict-affected environments, it is a politically sensitive process that depends on the willingness of armed actors to demilitarize and demobilize, and thus ideally should take place in post-conflict environments with effective peace or ceasefire agreements. While this is rarely the case in practice, this idea echoes in the current Integrated DDR Standard (IDDRS) that defines DDR as a

> process that contributes to security and stability in a post-conflict recovery context by removing weapons from the hands of combatants, taking the combatants out of military structures and helping them to integrate socially and economically into society by finding civilian livelihoods.[3]

If the IDDRS represents the most widely accepted international nomen-clature, definitions of DDR diverge over time and across contexts, as illustrated by past Congolese programmes (see below). Yet, in defining the three components of DDR, the new IDDRS has remained fully aligned with the UN's previous definitions set out in 2005[4]:

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[3]  UN (2020): IDDRS Glossary, at https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-1.20-Glossary.pdf.
[4]  UN (2005): Note of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly. A/C.5/59/31.
   United Nations, New York.

**Disarmament**

The collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants and often also of the civilian population. Disarmament also includes the development of responsible arms management programmes.

**Demobilization**

The formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. The first stage of demobilization may extend from the processing of individual combatants in temporary centres to the massing of troops in camps designated for this purpose (cantonment sites, encampments, assembly areas or barracks). The second stage of demobilization encompasses the support package provided to the demobilized, which is called reintegration.

**Reintegration**

The process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open timeframe, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country, a national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance.

**Reinsertion**

Assistance offered to ex-combatants during demobilization, but prior to the long-term process of reintegration, as a form of transitional assistance to help cover the basic needs of ex-combatants and their families, which may include transitional safety allowances, food, clothes, shelter, medical services, short-term education, training and employment tools.

## 2.2 Three Generations of National Programming

The different cycles, programmes and funding mechanisms of government-led and internationally funded DDR programmes are largely overlapping and interlocking and make it difficult to offer a succinct overview. However, as Thill (2021) illustrated, three overall cycles can be identified. A first generation includes early beginnings with the *Bureau national de désarmement et réinsertion* (BUNADER), created in 2001, which evolved into the *Commission nationale de désarmement et réinsertion* (CONADER) that existed from 2004–2007 (partly in parallel to an Ituri-focused programme called *Désarmement et réinsertion communautaire*, DCR). After CONADER's de facto breakdown, a second phase began in 2008 but suffered from limited political engagement as the DRC approached the 2011 national elections. From 2013–2018, the third generation operated as *Plan national de désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion* (PNDDR) III.
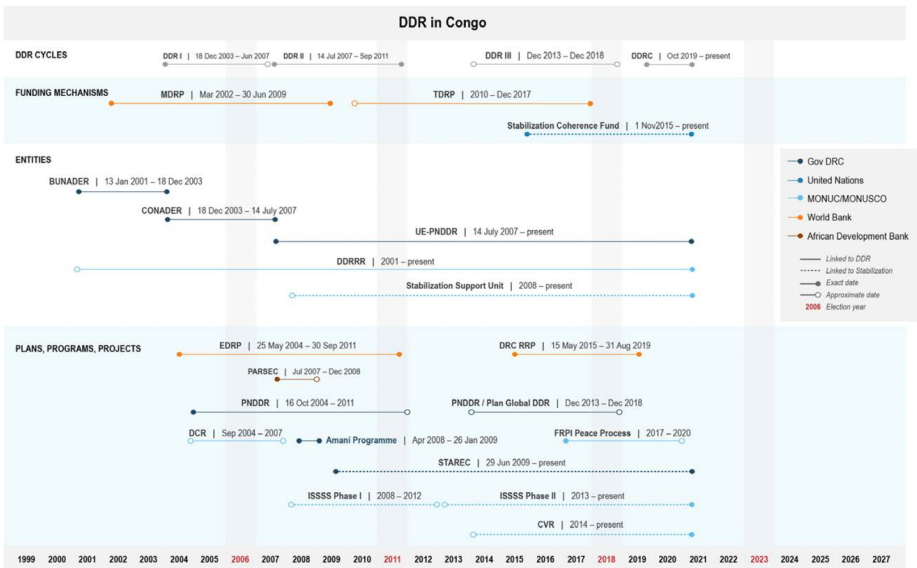


(Overview of DDR programmes in the DRC in Thill, 2021)

## FIRST GENERATION (2001–2007):
## BUNADER AND CONADER, WITH DCR IN ITURI

The start of formal DDR programmes in the DRC goes back more than two decades. In January 2001, a mere couple of days after assuming his presidency following the killing of his father, Joseph Kabila issued a decree creating BUNADER. This office was formed as a collaboration between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the DRC's Ministry of Defence, and had a particular focus on child soldiers in anticipation of the formal end of the Second Congo War.[5] After the signing of the Final Act to the Comprehensive and All-Inclusive Accord between the different belligerents, in 2003, CONADER replaced BUNADER. The Peace Accord foresaw the institution of a new army and new political institutions. DDR would work alongside the creation of a new national army and a process of army integration. This led to a two-pronged approach to channel demobilized combatants either into the newly established Congolese army (FARDC) through the *Structure militaire d'intégration* (SMI), or back to civilian life through CONADER. The PNDDR (first generation) was initiated, in 2004, to guide the process.[6]

The number of combatants to be reached was evaluated at 330,000, including all actors, yet the army was slated to include only 150,000 soldiers (Thill 2021). Hence, 180,000 were to be demobilized, even if this number was suspected to be exaggerated by those actors involved in the process to get access to its benefits. A strategic action plan for armed forces was developed but got modified over time, mainly because initial declarations on troop strength by conflict parties did not reflect reality. The programme started in the *centres d'orientation*, where all combatants were registered and disarmed. In a second step, they were oriented, either to the military brassage process in which former armed group members were intermixed and brought together into new army units, or towards demobilization by CONADER and related programmes. CONADER was supposed to guide people to transit centres and provide skill formation and reintegration assistance.[7]

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[5]   Interview, FARDC officer, Kinshasa, 16 April 2013.
[6]   Interview, UEPN-DDR official, Kinshasa, 15 April 2013.
[7]   Interview, Member of Parliament, Goma, 29 March 2013.

In 2005, CONADER and SMI started working, alongside an interministerial commission at national level, with sub-offices at provincial levels.[8] The political coordination worked through provincial and topical commissions as well as through a mixed commission that included armed group leaders. In North Kivu, implementing actors besides CONADER included the then UN peacekeeping mission (MONUC) and local NGOs such as Don Bosco and CAJED. Initially, the programmes worked rather well and their "integration kits" created some success stories. However, the programme did not engage communities of origin in the accommodation of combatants' return, and eventually also caused frustration and disappointment with former combatants. One cause of frustration was the equal treatment for all ex-combatants, regardless of their previous ranks in armed groups. Still, irregularities in the distribution of benefits and allowances to demobilized combatants, and the exclusion of those located in remote areas, all contributed to a lack of confidence in the DDR process (Vogel and Musamba 2016). In addition, CONADER's management did not meet donor expectations: a 2007 World Bank audit noted limited impact, and found high levels of mismanagement and corruption, which, in 2007, eventually forced CONADER to end its activities.

### SECOND GENERATION (2007–2011): UE-PNDDR AND AMANI PEACE PROCESS

The same year, the *Unité d'exécution du PNDDR* (UE-PNDDR) replaced CONADER, followed by the announcement of a second phase of DDR, which was intended to run until 2011. In many respects, this phase was a continuation of the first. Internal weaknesses of the programme caused similar frustration with its main beneficiaries and contributed to a further militarization and fragmentation of belligerents. DDR also remained connected to army integration efforts in a bid to reduce the levels of violence in the east, yet its expectations and flawed results provided an additional incentive to armed mobilization.

A key event in the second-generation DDR was the 2008 Goma Conference, which led to the Amani Peace Process. This process aimed to foster peace in

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[8]   Interview, UN official, Bukavu, 5 April 2013.

the eastern DRC through a *prise-en-charge* of armed groups by way of demobilization and army integration, but also to restore government authority in rebel-held areas. Various substructures emerged and different plans were established to cover the fields of disengagement (from hostilities), demobilization, integration, restoration of state authority and the return of IDPs and refugees. Demands from larger armed groups such as the *Conseil national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) and the *Forces républicaines fédéralistes* (FRF) forced the government into particular arrangements in parallel to the initial process, which was continued with other armed groups. In sync with the PNDDR, the Amani process was funded by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and focused on combatants not eligible for PNDDR. Overall, however, this approach triggered unintended effects, since by

> receiving cash, national and international attention, and the promises of ranks and positions in the military and the politico-administrative apparatus, armed groups were given the impression that 'rebel enterprising' pays. This set an example for others aspiring to social mobility, status and political-economic influence. For this reason, the Amani Conference and associated peace process can be considered a milestone in the post-settlement process of armed group proliferation (Vlassenroot and Verweijen 2017: 106).

In addition, the process failed to deal with what was identified as the primary political goal: the pacification of the CNDP. Soon after the Amani process, fighting resumed and new incentives were created for the reviving, regrouping or instituting of other armed groups. DDR efforts thus contributed to the proliferation of armed groups rather than disbanding them. Despite the high numbers of combatants, cited by donors, who were either demobilized or integrated in the Congo's security services, little progress was made in reintegrating former combatants into civilian livelihoods. According to a 2012 World Bank report, 209,605 ex-combatants went through the two different DDR cycles, 66,814 of whom joined the army (EDRP 2012). Political and security dynamics, meanwhile, complicated the prospects for peace. Military reform that aimed at disbanding parallel command structures triggered a rebellion of the newly created March 23 movement (M23). The rebellion was eventually defeated militarily but sowed the seeds for future cycles of defection, insurgency and military fragmentation. This, and the missing complementarities on the side of security sector reform (Hoebeke et al. 2022), added to the

internal incoherence and lack of capacity of the DDR programme. Finally, in the wake of the 2011 electoral process, political imperatives left hardly any opportunity for successful demobilization, as armed groups increasingly associated with political leaderships. They eventually would force a rethinking of strategies and ambitions and initiate a third generation of Congolese DDR programmes.

## THIRD GENERATION (2013–2018): PNDDR III AND OTHER INITIATIVES

The third national DDR programme, known as PNDDR III, began late 2013 with the establishment of a *Plan Global de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion*. Like its predecessors, it formed part of larger political processes and peace efforts, such as the Addis Ababa 11+4 Framework Agreement and the Nairobi Agreement, which formally put an end to the M23 rebellion and created a new framework for engagement. However, like previous DDR efforts, this programme soon faced significant challenges.[9] Revised in 2014 in close collaboration with MONUSCO, the third generation of DDR took a year to get implemented, partly due to an initial lack of sufficient funding explained by donor hesitation and ongoing military operations (Thill 2021).

The third generation started with a community awareness campaign and recognized the need for communal socio-economic development (Carayannis and Pangburn 2020). Military integration was no longer (officially) offered as an option and the emphasis now was on delocalization of combatants during the demobilization phase, and on community return during the reintegration phase. To mount pressure on armed groups, Congolese authorities threatened to use military action if they did not demobilize before specific deadlines. The World Bank and other donors committed to supporting the process, including with assistance to reception centres in key military bases in the western and southern Congo, such as Kamina, Kitona and Kotakoli. MONUSCO was slated to provide additional logistics to ensure transport and feeding of combatants. However, early into the programme and before donor financing had gone through, harsh living conditions in the camps put a stain on the new programme. In Kotakoli, more than 100 ex-combatants died after

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[9]  See https://suluhu.org/2013/12/27/many-hitches-ahead-for-congos-new-ddr/.

being transferred in late 2013.[10] With donor and MONUSCO intervention, the situation improved but humanitarian issues persisted in Kotakoli, and mutinies by ex-combatants protesting poor treatment occurred in Kamina and Kitona.[11]

During this programme, in total close to 5,000 combatants were demobilized, which was less than half of the 11,000 aimed for in the initial plan of the Congolese government (Thill 2021). Overall, the transfer of demobilized combatants away from their home areas and the harsh living conditions in the relocation centres had a dramatic effect on combatants' trust in the programme and fuelled their general distrust of the Kabila regime (Vogel and Musamba 2016). The joint strategy of demobilization and military operations also created a fear among armed actors of being sidelined, while local security dilemmas went unresolved and community protection remained wanting. The 2010 FARDC regimentation process that had allowed the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) to re-establish itself in Shabunda, Walikale and Kalehe – leading to the rise of the self-defence group Raia Mutomboki – was still fresh in the memories of many (Vogel 2014).

In sum, the third national programme used delocalization as a fix for previous shortcomings, thereby creating new ones. Moreover, despite a more broadly adapted DDR agenda and rhetorical commitment to reintegration, security considerations still took precedence over social and economic aspects. The involvement of army facilities led to an operational leak, with many combatants ending up in new, haphazard FARDC units under the discretionary command of senior officers. A lack of funding towards the end of the programme also complicated both the return transport and the continuation of professional training activities. In the Kivus, the impending electoral process and its *glissement* (the constant delays in its organization) pushed politicians to reposition themselves, which contributed to a further politicization of the demobilization process. These dynamics are another indication of how the decision to leave combat is guided by larger sociopolitical dynamics rather than the mere prospects of reintegration offered by technical approaches (Vlassenroot et al.

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[10] See https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/01/dr-congo-surrendered-fighters-starve-camp.
[11] See https://suluhu.org/2015/06/23/is-ddr-an-epitome-of-international-failure-in-the-congo/.

2020). When donors finally withdrew from the DDR programme in 2017, the gradually deteriorating working relationship between MONUSCO and the Kabila government triggered MONUSCO to end its support for the PNDDR III, which has since survived as a de facto army integration strategy.

## 2.3 Targeted Efforts of Demobilization

There have been several other initiatives in parallel to the national programmes, as part of peace processes targeting specific armed groups or driven by civil society actors responding to the lack of reintegration in formal DDR. In Ituri, the DCR programme was launched in 2004, following an agreement between the 1+4 transitional government and the leaders of seven armed groups operating in Ituri.[12] DCR aimed to end military conflict and commit armed groups to disarmament and community reintegration (Bouta 2005). The agreement included a set of arrangements, such as the appointment of rebel leaders to senior positions within the army, and the provision of a viable alternative to rank-and-file combatants by either joining the army or receiving assistance in returning home and resuming civilian life.

The programme itself was only partially successful: in a first phase, only two thirds of the 15,000 targeted combatants were disarmed, very few of whom were successfully reintegrated into civil life and still fewer opted to join the army (Bouta 2005). However, DCR contributed to a wider strategy of stabilization and local peace building and was connected to and a crucial ingredient of a comprehensive and inclusive political process. Actors involved not only included armed groups, local authorities and the Congolese government, but also the *Comité international d'accompagnement de la transition* (CIAT), which gave the process international political leverage and resulted in engagement, local ownership and coherent planning, much as CIAT had through its prominent role in the 2006 elections. Nonetheless, despite significant MONUC support, DCR did not have a very sustainable

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[12]  The Popular Armed Forces for the Congo (FAPC), the Nationalist and Integrationist Front (FNI), the Revolutionary Patriotic Front for Ituri (FPRI), the Popular Front for Democracy in Congo (FPDC), the Party for Unity and Safeguarding the Integrity of Congo (PUSIC), the Union of Congolese Patriots of Thomas Lubanga (UPC-L), and its splinter group under Floribert Kisembo (UPC-K).

effect on conflict dynamics and armed mobilization. During and after the programme's 2007 closure, the circular return of combatants and regular resuming of fighting remained frequent.

The only armed group originating from the 1999–2007 Ituri war is the *Front patriotique de résistance de l'Ituri* (FRPI). Its trajectory is illustrative of the constant in-and-out positioning of armed groups in DDR processes and of the continual shifting of official responses between military pressure and negotiations. The FRPI has survived thanks to a persistent political and socio-economic marginalization of the Lendu-Ngiti community, its strong yet ambiguous ties with local society and the extractive and abusive behaviour of the Congolese army (Hoffmann et al. 2016). Despite committing to a ceasefire in 2006 that foresaw military integration in 2007, the FRPI went back to fighting in 2008 and has never fully demobilized since. Unsuccessful negotiations between the group and Congolese authorities, usually centred around military ranks, amnesty and one-off payments, occurred between military campaigns, including joint operations by the FARDC and MONUSCO.

In 2017, a negotiation process was initiated through the government programme for stabilization in the eastern Congo known as STAREC. It led to the 2019 cantonment of over 1,000 FRPI combatants and the early 2020 signing of a peace agreement. Again, the result was short-lived and fighting resumed in September 2020. The 2017 process, however, showcased the potential of locally driven and owned peace and demobilization efforts. Key to this process was the Bunia-based NGO *Appui à la Communication Interculturelle et Auto-Promotion Rurale* (ACIAR), which had extensive experience in promoting reconciliation between local communities through trust-building structures. ACIAR initiated the 2017 dialogue based on inclusion and trust. Through a series of dialogues and peace committees at community level, trust was instilled between key stakeholders, eventually leading to buy-in from provincial and national authorities. ACIAR was mandated to start negotiating with the FRPI, resulting in the start of a DDR process and the signing of an agreement with the Congolese government in 2020.

Other DDR approaches include Community Violence Reduction (CVR), a MONUSCO programme developed since 2016 as part of its civilian protection

and stabilization mandate to replace MONUSCO's support of the third national DDR programme. CVR programmes move from a security focus towards a decentralized, community-based strategy to reduce the level of violence and the proliferation of armed actors in society. While such approaches have been pursued by Congolese civil society before, CVR was presented as a paradigmatic shift towards an engaged and participatory DDR. Between 2016 and 2018, 63 CVR projects were implemented, most of them short-term and context specific.

Moreover, various Congolese civil society organizations and development actors have initiated programmes that either directly or indirectly aim for the demobilization of combatants. Many of these initiatives are connected to national DDR policies and implement their DDR efforts in partnership with Congolese authorities. Examples of actions include the sensitization of armed groups and combatants to join formal DDR processes, such as the work supported by the platform of Protestant Congolese Churches (ECC) and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in South Kivu, or the support of demobilized children and sustainable reintegration projects. Other actions include incorporating DDR components in broader strategies. One example is the *Tujenge Amani* programme, implemented by *Action pour la Paix et la Concorde* (APC) in Kalehe (South Kivu). This initiative focuses on community resilience to conflict, social dialogue, capacity building for conflict transformation, socio-therapeutic support and socio-economic recovery of demobilized and unemployed youth. Such programmes directly engage with communities in facilitating the reintegration of ex-combatants into society yet have limited impact on larger politico-military dynamics contributing to armed group proliferation.

## 2.4 The Elephant in The Room: Self-Demobilization

Recent research has revealed that many demobilized combatants were never part of formal DDR processes. This is not exceptional to the Congolese context and has been observed elsewhere (Kiyala 2015, Özerdem 2012, Ortega 2010). Self-demobilization refers to demobilization by combatants themselves, as a result of the disbanding of armed groups or a deliberate decision of combatants to leave or escape. It can happen during combat or peacetime,

voluntarily or involuntarily, and with or without the consent of armed group commanders. Self-demobilization reflects combatants' mobility and navigation capacity. In the eastern Congo, many current combatants have been part of different armed groups and/or the Congolese army in their own military trajectories. Moving from one group to another in most cases includes a passage through civilian society, often outside of any formal DDR programming or *prise-en-charge*. A recent survey with former combatants who became motorbike taxi drivers in South Kivu offers valuable insights into this self-demobilization (van Acker et al. 2021). Most ex-combatants reported that they had never entered any formal DDR programme. This suggests that the context of mobilization and demobilization may be more decisive than is DDR approach design. Key to successful demobilization was the support of their family and community, and the individual capacity to mobilize social capital. Returned combatants were in most cases not socially marginalized or excluded but proved to be active social agents in community life. Social and political ties to former comrades and superiors often remained intact and a defining factor in their social and professional life.

The survey also shows that combatants have mixed views concerning formal DDR. While those who benefited from training or economic support improved their socio-economic position, others are strongly sceptical, as our interviews over ten years demonstrate. This confirms that when training and material support (either through formal DDR or NGO-led assistance programmes) are aligned with the context and the returnee's interests, DDR can be sustainable. Above all, the survey shows that returning to society is not just an event but a long-term process, with often uneven outcomes depending on individual trajectories as well as social and political context. At the same time, these individual experiences also illustrate that successful reintegration is largely depending on the context and that the risk of remobilization is determined not only by the success of individual trajectories, but also by existing security conditions in the community. This is an important finding for future DDR, for it again illustrates that providing long-term livelihood perspectives, either on an individual or a community level, can generate successful results only when linked to the lasting improvement of security conditions.

# 3 |
# Armed Politics and Demobilization

Given the entrenched character of conflict in the eastern Congo, it is essential for conflict resolution policies, DDR included, to address its underlying drivers and logic. Over the course of several decades, dynamics of violent conflict and armed mobilization have evolved and multiplied. If many deeper causes have not disappeared, remained unaddressed or even been further exacerbated, intermittent causes, path-dependent evolutions and tit-for-tat dynamics have over the years added to more long-standing drivers of mobilization. Structural patterns such as tensions over land, resources, identity and local political power persist, yet the increasing importance of armed labour as an "occupation" (Debos 2016) has endowed armed mobilization with a cyclical and iterative character, as illustrated in the proliferation of armed groups and combatant life stories that have come to resemble literal rebel curricula.[13] Armed groups have become part and parcel of the existing social environment, a result of their persistent character.

When looking at the current conflict geography, a most striking observation is its continual fragmentation. Since the formal end of the Congo Wars via the 2002 Sun City Agreement, there has been a clear trend towards a growth in numbers and an atomization of armed groups, from 20 to 30 belligerent groups at the time of the 2008 Goma peace conference to over 120 in the latest Kivu Security Tracker and UN mappings.[14] A closer look reveals a considerable diversity in their incentives, social embeddedness, strategies,

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[13]  The idea of rebel curricula is borrowed from Rachel Sweet.
[14]  See, for instance, Kivu Security Tracker 2021 and MONUSCO unpublished.

political connectedness and conduct (Stearns and Vogel 2015), with probably no more than 20 mustering the military capacity and structure to exert influence beyond specific areas. Yet, over the years, most armed groups have become a key ingredient of local daily realities, with demobilization efforts often contributing to rather than containing their proliferation. Many armed groups are dominant, persistent participants in local order-making and power brokers in politics, resource control and social relations. They collude with local and national political and customary leaders and use different techniques and strategies to impose or sustain their authority. At the individual level, their conduct can be considered acts of social rupture yet at the same time experiments in constituting new social spaces, a new way of life, and a new identity to those participating in them; for combatants, joining armed groups has become as much a way of making sense of changing realities as a response to security threats or mobilization efforts (Vlassenroot et al. 2020).

Through the prism of two intertwined effects of previous demobilization processes – the "circular return" guided by individual combatant agency (Vlassenroot et al. 2020) and the "recycling of rebels" triggered by structural politicization of DDR programmes (Vogel and Musamba 2016) – this section sketches the political, social and economic drivers of armed mobilization and examines two logics which deserve particular attention when considering DDR.

## 3.1 Shades of Armed Mobilization

While the number of armed actors in the eastern Congo is steadily increasing, patterns of mobilization have shifted over time. The foreign supported large-scale rebel movements and Kinshasa-backed coalitions of rural-based nationalist self-defence groups that characterized the Congo Wars (1996-2003) have been replaced by predominantly small-scale and mainly locally rooted armed actors (Vlassenroot and Verweijen 2017, Stearns and Vogel 2015).

Three key dynamics have contributed to the proliferation of armed groups. First, persistent causes of conflict and insecurity (access to resources and power, citizenship, identity politics and the presence of foreign armed groups) continue to inform the need for protection and claims of self-defence. Second,

armed groups have built connections with politico-military elites within a militarized political and economic competition over time. This "democratization of militarized politics" (Vlassenroot and Verweijen 2017) has resulted in local elites relying on armed structures to bolster their power bases or reposition themselves in the national political arena, and in armed groups investing in political alliances to increase political leverage, authority and access to resources. Third, attempts to reverse armed mobilization through military integration, negotiations offering peace dividends, ill-designed military responses and the concomitant lack of incentives to resolve conflicts contributed to this proliferation.

Without suggesting a typology for these groups, different indicators today explain their diversity and importance. One such indicator is their *military organization*. Most of the armed groups currently operating in the eastern Congo are small, weakly structured and have limited military capacity. Only a minority of armed groups can be considered militarily important, with a considerable number of members, military organization and capacity. A second indicator is their *social embeddedness*. Many contemporary armed groups depart from an agenda of community protection. In most cases, these groups remain relatively well-embedded in society, for which they act as *armées communautaires* or local defence groups. The lack of presence and security provision by the Congolese army or the threat of foreign armed groups offers these groups a justification to serve as protection forces. And finally, there is the presence of *explicit political claims and agendas*. In most cases, these are limited to community protection, but this does not prevent many groups from legitimizing their existence with explicit political demands, ranging from the creation of specific administrative entities to discourses of good governance. However, these indicators only partially capture the multiple reasons, ambitions and conduct of armed groups. Different incentive structures, aims and behaviour often overlap, making it difficult to suggest a typology or to make sense of the overall insecurity in the eastern Congo. Numerous studies highlighted the political character of armed mobilization in the eastern Congo, and the extent to which insurgency thrives on the "social anchoring" of combatants (Stearns 2018) and depends on how combatants straddle different social fields (Musamba 2019).

Life in an armed group represents a specific (though not the sole) setting of socialization. Such a setting is largely informed by a group's history and the narratives it invokes to justify its existence. These draw from a variety of issues, including land and resources, identity politics, regional tensions, socio-economic marginalization, historical trajectories, tit-for-tat logics and influence by leading figures. As much as these narratives frame combatant ideology, they also impact operational patterns. Some fight for business, others for politics – even if it is hard to disambiguate, as stated and actual objectives rapidly evolve and overlap, in particular in cases of coalitions or splits. If many groups function as self-defence forces within a limited perimeter, others focus on specific targets or enemies irrespective of their origins and embrace a more expansive posture. In both cases, identity and autochthony can be important markers of their conduct. While the vast majority are Congolese, there are a handful of foreign armed groups, notably the FDLR, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), *Résistance pour un état de droit* (RED)–*Tabara*, the *Front national de libération* (FNL) and the *Ralliement unité et démocratie* (RUD)–*Urunana*.

Given armed groups' relative military might and political importance, their presence alone in some cases is a key factor provoking armed mobilization among Congolese communities. Congolese armed groups often have different repertoires than foreign ones, even if there can be neat ideological similarities, such as between the FDLR and Nyatura groups operating in Rutshuru and Masisi territories. In sparsely populated areas, armed groups tend to be smaller and often align with or coalesce in ephemeral alliances with more powerful belligerents such as the Congolese army or the FDLR. Some groups are emanations of army defections, others emerge by chance as armed civilians turn to more structured entities. Some groups indulge in mysticism, others have entrenched political ideologies and still others combine both. Some groups are able to impose their rule and claim territorial control, others rely on hit-and-run activities as a mode of survival.

One outcome of all this is the consolidation of a fragmented, violent order, with significant parts of the rural population living under armed group influence. To grasp the full effect of armed group presence, we thus have to move away from analyzing armed mobilization as a pure security matter

and see armed groups as being shaped by social structures from which they emerge and with which they are connected, but also as actors reshaping these social spaces as part of their conduct. Armed groups are part of volatile social and political orders marked by diverging degrees of compliance with and resistance to public authority. Their conduct intersects with that of other stakeholders, including customary leaders, local officials, civil society or rival groups. Armed groups engage in different facets of social life, including subsistence economies, trade and exchange, justice and customary rule and electoral politics. In their attempts to project power, they often refer to statehood and mobilize symbols and practices of stateness. As much as armed groups engage in fighting with government forces, they may also provide state-like order that paradoxically allows other state officials to operate, which helps explain why the latter are often willing to collaborate and negotiate statehood with armed groups. Territorial aspirations are a key element in these processes, even if it often starkly fluctuates from direct visible control to hidden influence, from full territorial control to limited control over neuralgic areas or obligatory passage points. Moreover, the territorial dynamics of armed group control are contingent upon the impermanence of mobilization, for instance among groups that do not feature a "standing army", or the variability of checkpoints (Muzalia et al. 2021) and other techniques of security governance and control. Territorial control can also overlap or be shared with government authorities. It is very volatile and can quickly change.

## 3.2 Circular Return: The Problem of Apolitical Planning

One underexplored angle to understanding armed mobilization and the challenges linked to DDR is combatant agency and the social logics of (de) mobilization. Past DDR programmes have embraced technical fixes, casting a blind spot on these social dynamics of combatant mobility. In projecting a teleological image and suggesting there is a neat difference between combatants and civilians, these programmes saw demobilization as a linear process by which any participant will automatically return to civilian life. At the same time, such programmes often tended to reduce the cycle of mobilization and demobilization to a security challenge, thus largely ignoring the complexity of the underlying social dynamics that drive these cycles.

In the eastern Congo, combatants are often in a continuous state of mobility between civilian and combatant life, enacted through a strong capacity to navigate different social spaces. This permanent condition of circular return between armed combat and civilian life is guided by multiple motives, individual and collective incentives, and defines how combatants respond to political or security dynamics, mobilization and demobilization campaigns, or their own personal challenges or ambitions. Armed mobilization is part of larger socialization processes, in which armed groups themselves form relatively autonomous social spaces with their own rules, procedures, relationships and hierarchies that inform the behaviour of their members and the relationships between them and with their social environment. For combatants, armed groups thus offer spheres of action and spaces of opportunity (Vlassenroot et al. 2020).

A definite return to home communities can mean a relative loss of the capacity to mobilize these opportunities, as is illustrated by the marginalization and frustration often experienced after demobilization. Return to combat, in this sense, can be explained as a renewed claim to what was lost as a consequence of demobilization. It helps to understand why being part of different social spaces (civil and military) has become a persistent condition of life of many combatants, guided by a complex interplay between social and political dynamics, collective needs and grievances, and individual interests. Yet not everyone prefers to be in this state of pendular mobility, and some of those who have gained from formal DDR processes prefer not to return to combat out of fear of losing these gains. This, however, does not prevent ex-combatants from being exposed again to insecurity and consequent armed mobilization, as in the case of the Raia Mutomboki, which emerged in response to FDLR attacks in Shabunda and Kalehe around 2010. In other areas, including Ruzizi Plain in South Kivu, rampant insecurity has led to similar situations:

> I am not alone, there are many of us and we live without problems, even those who are still in armed groups have no problems returning home. This reality is very visible here, where among a hundred young people, you may easily find seventy have one day taken up arms.[15]

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[15]  Interview, ex-combatant, Kiziba, 28 March 2021.

DDR processes often ignore this combatant agency and the capacity to navigate between social spaces. They tend to start out from the belief that such programmes can operate in a vacuum amidst surrounding political dynamics, including the persistence and evolution of conflict – be it over resources, local political power or identity. Hence the given individual socio-economic situation is often underestimated when it comes to the potential for returning to society. However, when reintegration means losing social and economic capital, it remarginalizes combatants (Utas 2005), leaving returning to combat a viable alternative (Vlassenroot et al. 2020). Having been a combatant once in this sense provides the opportunity to navigate between the social spaces of combatant and civilian life and even use both roles simultaneously. This also affects the interplay of regular and irregular security forces. In areas of ongoing military operations, defections of government troops armed groups is a regular phenomenon.

Examples include the South Kivu highlands of Uvira and Fizi (Verweijen et al. 2021) but also other areas such as the area linking Masisi, Walikale and Lubero in North Kivu (Congo Research Group 2020, Sungura et al. 2021). There, shaky alliances between armed groups and the army's practice of using proxy forces against enemies triggered renewed mobilization of combatants who have previously gone through DDR programmes. In other cases, logistic and programmatic weaknesses of DDR efforts have left combatants with little trust in formal DDR and made them decide to return to combat. Moreover, patterns of stigmatization, vengeance and harassment by both government security forces and the very armed groups they have left pose an additional obstacle to former combatants willing to reintegrate into civilian life:

> Since I returned to Kanyabayonga after undergoing MONUSCO's DDR in Goma, I [even] had to sell my shoes. I live with the community except that as demobilized, we suffer under the local FARDC units in Bwito. Some soldiers in our community even destroy our demobilization documents. Luckily, after some seven months, the community gradually started accepting even though our problem remains the FARDC soldiers.[16]

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[16] Interview, ex-combatant, Kanyabayonga, 30 March 2021.

As a field-based DDR advocate in South Lubero points out, such forms of discrimination can be a key factor driving a return to armed groups in areas affected by continuing insecurity:

> The major problem today is the arrest of ex-combatants by the [government] security services, pushing them to return to armed groups, rather than having those same services think about how to involve them for the better of the country – such as integrating them in intelligence services – after having trained them.[17]

While such incidents usually happen to former combatants that have self-demobilized and lack the documentation and institutional protection of having gone through official DDR, others who have gone through government and UN-led programmes are not exempted. While these issues highlight the difficulties of reintegration, they also point at the limits of combatants' navigation capacities between different social spaces, which is an additional constraint to successful DDR. The decision to be part of an armed group also impacts their position in other social spaces, compromising chances of social reintegration and claims towards legitimate status in society.

## 3.3 Recycling Rebels: The Problems of Politicized Implementation

A complementary element to explain problems of past DDR processes is their politicized implementation and diversion by security actors. As opposed to the concept of circular return that highlights combatant agency and the importance of the multiple social fields that current and former combatants navigate, the "recycling rebels" refers to the structural deficiencies of DDR programmes, and their subsequent politicization (Vogel and Musamba 2016).

From the very start of formal DDR processes in the DRC, the political context was not favourable to success. Invoking discourses that their communities would be at risk if they would demobilize, political and customary elites tried early on to convince recently demobilized combatants to return. The complex interplay between elites and armed groups continues to compromise

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[17]  Interview, NGO worker, Kanyabayonga, 28 March 2021.

demobilization and has contributed to a democratization of militarized politics (Vlassenroot and Verweijen 2017). This is particularly the case in moments of intense political competition, such as elections, but also in the wake of new DDR opportunities, when political leaders aim to keep their armed allies in place, as the announcement of the P-DDRCS has again illustrated.[18] The recycling of rebels, that is, the return to arms driven by elites, is often related to the positioning of political and military leaders during peace negotiations. Defunct or previously non-existent armed groups tend to see peace conferences or impending DDR programmes – such as the 2008 Goma conference – as an opportunity to build up armed movements as political or economic levers. Driven by a strategy of positioning themselves, elites have resorted to creating armed groups – sometimes only on paper, with accompanying demands for ranks or political postings, but sometimes also through an effective military build-up – in a bid to leverage peace dividends. Often, these ex nihilo creations poach communities with many former combatants and transform into self-fulfilling prophecies. One example is the Mai-Mai Shikito between 2006 and 2008. While the founders of this group ultimately failed to collect significant perks during the Goma conference, its political instigators lacked the financial and political means to keep their group in check. Its field commanders, consequently, took matters into their own hands and began operations to sustain the movement (Vogel and Musamba 2016). Other cases, where commanders had been successfully absorbed in the first place but resorted to rekindling armed groups as they got dissatisfied with the ranks and operational functions they were given in the army, are recurrent as well:

> I know several commanders who had been given positions [in the Congolese army] and then left again to join [or create] an armed group due to the injustice [sic!] that they have experienced in the FARDC.[19]

If the politics of wholesale army integration officially stopped in 2010, the precedent it created has continued to weaken demobilization efforts since. During the third national DDR programme that started in 2014, military interference into what was on paper intended a process of reintegration into

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[18]  Interviews with different interlocutors, Bukavu 14 October 2021.
[19]  Interview, ex-combatant, Luofu, 3 April 2021.

civilian life only was common. If disarmament and demobilization remained under military control, these parts were intended to end in a civilian-led reintegration effort that foregrounded professional training prior to the ex-combatants' returning home. However, for logistical reasons most of the programme was implemented in military-controlled transit and preparatory camps, as well as major army bases outside the combatants' regions of origin. Against the backdrop of mismanagement, insufficient follow-up and the sudden end of funding, thousands of demobilized combatants were stuck in bases such as Kitona and Kamina, where they got corralled by senior army officers who began building new units to deploy in later operations. This practice was initially popular, with many combatants already sceptical of civilian reintegration, given the low quality of professional training and discouraging news from those already back home. Many of them willingly joined the semi-official new units in the hope of ranks or positions, while others aimed to secure amnesty. As with wholesale integration in the 2000s, this has proven very problematic. Reflected in Congolese laws and international (including UN) guidelines, there is a broad consensus that DDR should not lead to amnesty for capital crimes. Moreover, army recruitment is legally organized by a number of laws that stipulate open calls, consent and a set of criteria relating to age, education and fitness.

These patterns of recycling further eroded trust in DDR programmes. Ex-combatants forgotten in military bases or abandoned elsewhere have repeatedly engaged in protests or defected from camps, such as Mubambiro and Rumangabo in North Kivu and Nyamunyunye in South Kivu. Others invoked inhumane treatment, including the lack of food, medicine, and information, to justify their return to arms. Similar instances have occurred in the specific context of the FRPI peace process in Ituri (Bouvy et al. 2021).

# 4 |
# Case Studies

Since the beginning of the wars, children had begun to fear the army, but today everyone is a fighter and people have no fear anymore. People can leave and join armed groups and remain standby in case of need [to defend ourselves] because we're in a difficult situation.[20]

This section draws from recent case-study research to highlight contemporary and contextual obstacles to successful DDR. Across three examples, it illustrates the diverse social geographies of armed groups, and the contextual specificity of claims, motivations and histories of belligerents. It also highlights differences and commonalities when it comes to combatants' willingness (or lack thereof) to enter demobilization programmes. The three vignettes bring together examples from South Kivu (the Twirwaneho in Fizi and Uvira territories) and North Kivu (the Nyatura in Masisi and Rutshuru, and the Mazembe in Lubero territories).

A first example relates to the security context in southern Lubero territory and parts of adjacent Rutshuru territory. In a context of existing historical antagonisms, most notably between the Nande and Kobo community and the Rwandan FDLR and Hutu civilians associated with it, recent military evolutions led to the emergence of a new class of Nande-led armed groups known by the umbrella term Mazembe. This class of groups, together with its Walikale-based allies and with the support of the Congolese army, has curtailed the influence of both the FDLR and the RUD-*Urunana* in the area. Section 4.1 illustrates, though, how past DDR programmes and mistrust

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20  Interview, government official, Madegu, April 2021.

towards the central government continue to spark reluctance towards future demobilization programmes. Although the national political transition following the 2018 elections coincided with a large wave of surrenders in 2019 (as discussed above), a sizable number of Mazembe ex-combatants have since disappeared from transit camps where they had been waiting, in vain, for support and reintegration.

The second example discusses the security complex on the highlands of Uvira and Fizi, where the area around Minembwe and Madegu is a long-standing hotspot of mobilization, largely centred around identity narratives. Following several historical periods of contestation and violence, open conflict erupted in 2015 and has created a highly volatile context to the present day. One collective armed actor involved in the current conflict are the Twirwaneho, who claim to be a self-defence group composed of Banyamulenge and bring together local youth as well as ex-combatants of previous armed groups and army deserters, such as its leader Michel Rukunda Makanika. Former Banyamulenge combatants of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD) and the FRF who had since integrated into the Congolese security forces have gone AWOL and are likely to have joined the armed struggle again. In recent years, the Twirwaneho have mostly engaged in clashes with Mai-Mai and Congolese army units. As section 4.2 shows, the group justifies its existence with communal security concerns, presenting itself as a protection force for the lives, cows and property of Banyamulenge, and views the new P-DDRCS with suspicion, potentially affecting community protection.

The third example takes a look at the Nyatura, a cluster of armed groups recruiting Congolese Hutu. These groups trace their history back to the early 1990s, with several waves of mobilization leading to different armed outlets. Looking at one specific Nyatura group, section 4.3 pays attention to the urban dynamics of demobilization. It illustrates how the legacy of failures during the PNDDR III and the cantonment, without a programme, of combatants in transit camps such as Mubambiro, near Goma, is pushing many ex-combatants into very precarious social conditions and even fuelling renewed mobilization. Not having been taken care of in Mubambiro, many returned to their villages, others joined armed groups, while some remained in limbo, believing they would be integrated into the FARDC. A significant

number of ex-combatants from the Nyatura group *Collectif de mouvements pour le changement* (CMC) dissimulated in various boroughs of Goma, trying to make ends meet without, however, cutting all links to their group. As the CMC split into two factions in 2021, the role of Goma-based ex-combatants as messengers became highly relevant, even if it came with particular dangers for the concerned individuals.

The three examples illustrate different shades of armed politics and highlight how context shapes the willingness to (de)mobilize. Moreover, and as also demonstrated in the overview on past formal and self-made demobilization initiatives, the three cases point to a number of potential limitations and obstacles of the P-DDRCS programme. Numerous combatants concerned by the new programme have in the past not had a chance to participate in DDR when they were willing to do so, got stuck in transit camps with no programming or support, or chose to structure their own paths of circular return independent of any formal programming. While the three cases can hardly be generalized across the panoply of more than 100 distinct belligerents in the eastern Congo, some commonalities emerge. One key insight is that formal DDR, such as the upcoming P-DDRCS, is but one driver of demobilization. As suggested by the notion of circular return, combatants operate their own agency when deciding to join, leave or stay with an armed group. These choices can be individual even if informed by context, possibility and social surrounding. In addition, mechanisms of recycling come in at the social level, as demonstrated in all cases – whether it is Banyamulenge leaders rallying their community for self-defence, ex-Nyatura helping each other out to hide in Goma, or ex-Mazembe reporting back to peers over the lack of care in Mubambiro. Such dynamics, in addition to context variables, should be starting points of any successful demobilization effort.

## 4.1 Mazembe: Shaky Alliances and Bargaining Chips

The umbrella term "Mazembe" refers to a set of armed groups operating in and around Lubero territory in North Kivu. While their mobilization is strongly conditioned by recent shifts in armed politics in the area, many of the groups can partly trace their genealogy back to early Nande-based Mai-Mai groups such as the Bangilima and the Kasindiens in the early 1990s,

and to key former rebel leaders such as Fabien Mudoghu, Vita Kitambala or Lolwako Pokopoko. If these actors played important geopolitical roles in the context of the Second Congo War (1998–2003), when the *Grand Nord* area covering Lubero and Beni was largely controlled by Mbusa Nyamwisi's RCD-Kisangani/Mouvement de libération (K/ML) rebellion, mobilization fragmented in recent years. Between 2009 and 2013, the only major group in the area was Kakule Sikuli Lafontaine's UPCP armed group, emerging from the earlier PARECO. An eager collaborator with the FDLR and the RUD-Urunana based in southern Lubero, Lafontaine faced increasing legitimacy problems among Lubero's populations, leading to the disintegration of his movement around 2014 that opened the way for the creation of later Mazembe factions as well as the arrival of the NDC-Rénové rebellion from Walikale.

## ORIGINS AND EARLY ALLIANCES AMONG THE MAZEMBE

If there are some question marks as to the birth of the term Mazembe – reminiscent of the DRC's often unbeatable football team from Lubumbashi – the different factions subscribing to this broader label, since 2015, all partly recruit from former Mai-Mai groups that have been involved in previous generations of mobilization in the Lubero area. Moreover, a couple of convergent dynamics provided additional motivation for combatants to join the newly emerging cluster:

> First, these new armed groups drew on long-standing anti-FDLR and anti-Hutu sentiment following years of FDLR presence in this area … Second, lucrative income from mining, timber, and taxation provided a strong incentive for unemployed youth and former Mai-Mai combatants to join the ranks of this new militia (Congo Research Group 2020).

Between 2015 and 2018, the main Mazembe faction was the *Union du peuple pour la défense des innocents* (UPDI), an armed group with origins in the Ikobo (Walikale) and Baofu (Lubero) areas and led by Marungu Muliro, who was later absorbed by the Nduma Defence of Congo (NDC)–*Rénové* and then killed under unclear circumstances. The UPDI was subsequently led by Kitete Bushu and experienced a significant split as commanders under Kasereka Kasyano "Kabidon", a former dawa-maker and Lafontaine confidante, defected to create the *Front patriotique pour la paix/Armée du peuple* (FPP/AP) – the second big Mazembe faction.

With Kitete's death, UPDI dwindled into insignificance and Kabidon remained the key Mazembe leader in Lubero. While objectives may have shifted, the initial legitimation of the larger set of – often ephemeral – Mazembe-style groups has been the fight against the FDLR and other "foreign" forces. This justification, the UPDI's late Kitete Bushu once explained, is limited to actual Rwandan combatants and exempted Congolese Hutu who had settled in Lubero for many decades. Nonetheless, different episodes of violence – most notably a series of tit-for-tat massacres in Miriki and Luhanga, cast some doubt on the declarations. From 2015 to 2017, the group worked in perfect harmony with Guidon Shimiray's NDC–Rénové, which had come from Walikale in a bid to expel the Rwandan FDLR. This collaboration worsened later on, in part due to individual competition over gold mines along Lubero territory rivers. Other Nande-dominated Mai-Mai groups, such as the UPLC in the Beni area, maintain friendly connections with Mazembe leaders and have occasionally tried rallying them into anti-ADF operations. While Mazembe groups such as UPDI and FPP/AP emphasise their popular support and proximity to the civilian populations they protect, human rights activists have deplored the pervasive use of token-based head taxes (similar to those of the NDC–Rénové).

**INTERNAL FRAGMENTATION AND UNLUCKY ALLIANCES**
Internal strife and infighting inflicted a heavy blow to the larger Mazembe universe between 2018 and 2020, with only the FPP/AP mustering a sizable group as of 2021. Moreover, like other Mai-Mai groups in the eastern Congo, Mazembe factions often entered into coalitions as junior partners, either with large armed groups such as the NDC–Rénové or the Congolese army itself (Congo Research Group 2020). Perhaps the most important internal conflict, except for Marungu's recruitment by Guidon Shimiray that marked the de facto end of the first generation of the UPDI in early 2016, was the split between Kabidon and Kitete, the two erstwhile main leaders of the movement. Supported by customary leaders and motivated by Kitete's alleged treason of Mai-Mai ideals, Kabidon called out his erstwhile boss's violations and rallied local public opinion. Having grown in numbers and acquired more firepower, the FPP/AP later launched operations against the UPDI, leading to the elimination of Kitete and other commanders. The remaining UPDI combatants dispersed, surrendered to MONUSCO or joined the FPP/AP. The short-lived Mazembe genealogy echoes the evolution of localized

armed groups in other parts of the Kivus, where mobilization and demobilization are two sides of the same coin. It is therefore difficult to gauge to what extent the breakdown of groups such as the UPDI and others will lead to lasting demobilization or trigger dynamics of recycling and circular return.

**"YOU WILL NOT BE INTEGRATED INTO THE FARDC"**
In response to pressures by the army and other armed groups, as well as due to infighting among Mazembe groups, many UPDI combatants have ended up passing via the Mubambiro camp that serves as army-led transit where disarmament operations are conducted prior to sending combatants to Kamina, Kitona or other DDR venues. Between 2016 and 2019, many of them entered the FARDC in the previously described system of informal integration. However, increased scrutiny, rumours of a fresh overall DDR effort as well as the army's very own recalibration following key events in 2019 brought these practices to a halt.[21] A direct consequence, given the lack of prospect of a new DDR programme as of late 2021, has been a rise in defections from these transitory army camps. While some of them have returned to armed groups, others got stuck in Lubero's main peri-urban hubs such as Kanyabayonga:

> There have been zero achievements to the benefit of ex-combatants. They are abandoned to their fate. In fact, we're wondering why there has never been a serious DDR programme. Even the [UN's] DDRRR just gave one-time handouts without any real support or follow-up.[22]

In sum, the evolution of the Mazembe label reads like a hyperbole of (de) mobilization dynamics more broadly. Rooted both in longer genealogies of insurgency and resistance, these groups started off with an agenda mostly geared toward self-defence but quickly got consumed in leadership quarrels and larger conflict dynamics leading to disintegration and influencing the political stance of commanders as much as supporters. The Mazembe story is one of strikingly fast mobilization and demobilization, which reflects the slow development and rolling out of DDR programmes. As in other areas, the early 2019 post-electoral window of opportunity also saw Lubero-based

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[21]  These events include but are not limited to the election of President Felix Tshisekedi, the death of General Delphin Kahimbi, the demotion of General John Numbi and the permutation of General Gabriel Amisi to non-operational functions.
[22]  Interview, intelligence official, Kanyabayonga, 30 April 2021.

combatants laying down arms. However, in the absence of a broader DDR effort, it is likely that these combatants will mostly self-demobilize or remain potentially on standby.

## 4.2 Twirwaneho: Security Voids and Resistance to Demobilization

From 2015, tensions mounted again in the highlands linking Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga in South Kivu. During that period, long-standing local political and communal tension mixed with the aftershocks of the contested Burundian elections that same year. Incoming Burundian armed groups, as well as the regular cross-border deployment of Burundian government forces, contributed to remodelling alliances and animosities between Mai-Mai groups, Banyamulenge armed groups and foreign armed groups previously operating in the area. On the highlands around Minembwe and Bijombo, marked by long-standing local security dilemmas as well as militarization and conflict over land and cattle, the impact of regional politics merged with underlying drivers of conflict that for many years had fomented local political and economic conflicts, alienating communities and compromising cohabitation. In consequence, a tenuous security situation spiraled out of control in late 2015, as political manipulation intensified on all sides. If armed Banyamulenge previously regrouped as Gumino, a successor to former FRF factions, tactical imperatives and the longue durée of political divisions led to the consolidation of the decentralized Twirwaneho movement (Stearns et al. 2013, Verweijen et al. 2021).

**CONTINUITIES OF VIOLENCE IN THE HIGHLANDS**
The Twirwaneho emerged around 2008, mainly in response to different Mai-Mai groups that had joined forces to loot cattle belonging to Banyamulenge cattle owners. Also spelled "Twigwaneho", this term translates as "let's defend ourselves", and stands for a semi-autonomous armed structure that focuses on the protection of cattle and herders hailing from the Banyamulenge community to which it is closely connected. In a bid to counter frequent cattle raids, the first self-defence group going by the name of Twirwaneho was created in 2008 by Rabani Ntagendererwa Musemakweli (Verweijen et al. 2021). The group organized counterattacks against the

Mai-Mai raiders mainly in 2008 and 2009, before being dormant for a few years (Verweijen et al. 2021) and leaving the high-profile role to the Gumino armed group, a more structured movement, but with more fluctuating support in the community.

Returning to armed protection and forming armed groups for self-protection is not a novelty among the Banyamulenge, and it antedates their participation in the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération* du Congo-Zaire (AFDL), the RCD and other previous armed groups such as FRF or Gumino. This form of decentralized, unsystematic mobilization has existed for several decades in the area and also within other communities. The term Twirwaneho itself draws on a larger history of self-defence. As Brabant and Nzweve (2013) highlight, the (need for) protection of cattle has been known to exist at least since the era of the Mulelist rebellion in the 1960s and emerges whenever there is a need for protection. When defeated Simba combatants of neighbouring communities entered the Hauts Plateaux in search of refuge in 1966, some of them engaged raids targeting Banyamulenge-owned cattle. Banyamulenge youths, who initially had supported the Simba rebellion, now turned against the latter and joined the already existing *Abagirye* ("*warriors*") self-defence force of young volunteers. Taking inspiration from the earlier *Abagirye*, the Banyamulenge mobilized in defence of emerging armed groups in neighbouring communities, under the leadership of Musemakweli around 2008 (Brabant & Nzweve 2013: 90).

Yet, armed mobilization in the area is not just limited to the protection of cattle. In 1996, Banyamulenge joined the AFDL and RCD rebellions where they bore the brunt of operations, leading to resentment by other Congolese communities. The resulting characterization of Banyamulenge as a fifth column of Kigali led to their stigmatization by other Congolese and to a fall-out between leading Banyamulenge figures and their erstwhile Rwandan partners, when, after the RCD war, the former felt first instrumentalized and then abandoned by Kigali. The reunification process that followed the AFDL and RCD wars, in 2003, then triggered a series of real and perceived security threats to the Banyamulenge, as well as a number of political claims to which they responded with the creation of their own, back then highly visible and structured armed groups (Stearns et al. 2013). However, in parallel, less

formalized ad hoc military units already existed, including ex-combatants that had gone through CONADER, former combatants of the RCD era and veterans of the Mulelist era. While some members of the Banyamulenge military bourgeoisie have pursued revered army careers, others have gone back and forth or mostly stayed on the side of irregular armed forces, most notably the *Forces républicaines fédéralistes* (FRF). This group, which initially was a political movement created in 1998 to stand up against Kigali and to promote a federalist view on Congo's territorial organisation, turned into a politico-military movement in 2007 until it gave up armed struggle and integrated the FARDC in 2011. As tensions eventually lessened with the formal disbanding of the FRF and its opponents such as the Mai-Mai Nakabaka, the Twirwaneho's then-leader Masomo Matorotoro self-demobilized as well (Brabant and Nzweve 2013). However, from 2015 onwards, tensions mounted again, giving new impetus to armed mobilization in the area.

## ORGANIZATION, OBJECTIVES AND HISTORICAL ROOTS

While the term Twirwaneho has come to fame beyond South Kivu's highlands in recent years, it describes – in Kinyamulenge – a more long-standing concept and can be translated as "let's defend ourselves". Twirwaneho factions loosely collaborated with FRF units in the early days of mobilisation, and with the Gumino in more recent times since 2015, often exchanging arms and ammunition. These groups, clan-based internal competition and conflict notwithstanding, have all engaged in the protection of transhumance (Brabant & Nzweve 2013). A few years later and after the neuralgic 2015 moment, the Twirwaneho label came to renewed popularity in consequence of increased Mai-Mai and foreign combatant activity on the *Hauts Plateaux*.[23]

Yet, as opposed to simplistic narratives of conflict in the area, the Twirwaneho – like Mai-Mai groups in the area – have on several occasions engaged in cooperation beyond narrow ethnic framing. In early 2015 for instance, Banyamulenge self-defence groups allied with their Banyindu and Bafuliiro counterparts to counter local insecurity, but this alliance quickly fell apart

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[23] If the main foreign armed actors were the Burundian opposition organizing in RED-Tabara and FOREBU, Mai-Mai coalitions include the Biloze Bishambuke and groups under Amuri Yakotumba and Ebuela Mtetezi.

due to mistrust (Verweijen et al. 2021) and led to the re-establishment of the Twirwaneho under the leadership of former Gumino commanders. In 2017, the Twirwaneho reorganized both as a military and political organization, the latter led by Kamasa Ndakize Wellcome (United Nations 2021). Organized per zone and subdivided into different areas with each area having its own commander (Verweijen et al. 2021: 58), the Twirwaneho became quickly more well-known and appreciated by local populations than the Gumino. They also began actively recruiting in the highlands as well as in refugee and IDP camps, sometimes invoking lucrative livestock jobs to recruit young adults (United Nations 2021: annex 96).[24] While the group benefits from legitimacy in the eyes of much of the Banyamulenge population, it has also been accused of engaging in human rights violations (United Nations 2021). In mid-2020, the FARDC defectors Colonel Michel Rukunda "Makanika" and Colonel Charles Sematama began working on a merger of Banyamulenge groups (including Gumino and smaller groups) under the Twirwaneho label.

**RESISTANCE TO DEMOBILIZATION AND STANDBY ARRANGEMENTS**
Given the ongoing insecurity in the highlands around Minembwe, Itombwe and Bijombo in South Kivu, it comes as no surprise that many Twirwaneho are suspicious of DDR. Despite their participation in dialogue events such as the Murhesa meetings, they have little appetite to demobilize. Even civilian representatives, such as the mayor of the contested Minembwe municipality, have voiced an understanding for the presence of combatants:

As to ex-combatants, if you have one or more in your village, your hopes of surviving increases because they will coordinate to defend the villages. Telling these people to disarm for good without offering alternatives of protection will never go through.[25]

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[24] Deception and false promises are also used for recruitment by other armed groups in the region, as the ADF's recruitment practices in Kampala and in the Busoga area of Uganda highlight. See interview, ex-combatant, Beni, 15 October 2016; interview, ex-combatant, Beni, 15 October 2016; interview ex-combatant, Beni, 17 October 2016, Interview, ex-combatant, Beni, 17 October 2016. See also United Nations 2021: 8; United Nations 2016: 11

[25] Interview, government official, Minembwe, 1 April 2021.

Another village chief seconded this:

> These days, Minembwe tries to defend itself through its own children. It's not me who will be telling these children to leave their arms and the Mai-Mai. [Because then] the FARDC will come and burn us alive in our houses … This government must stop distracting the people and get involved [in security] before thinking about the demobilization of armed groups. You can't cause a war and then come and talk about DDR.[26]

However, since CONADER, and in addition to military operations that triggered Twirwaneho surrenders and captures, there have always been localized demobilization efforts, even if many individuals remain potential de facto arms bearers as the idea of circular return would suggest:

> Usually these young people return … At the start of these wars the children feared the FARDC, but today that everyone is a fighter, no one is afraid anymore because people know they can leave and return. This makes it difficult to understand who is an ex-combatant and who is not … We have several boys who left armed groups on their own without being influenced, they are there, like so many others.[27]

Moreover, a sizable number of Banyamulenge civilians are army or police defectors. From a broader angle, the heavy militarization of South Kivu's highlands coupled with consistent security dilemmas, foreign intervention and the predominantly ethnic framing (even if not fully accurate) are posing formidable challenges to any demobilization effort. Top-down and externally driven DDR efforts are highly likely to stand in competition with efforts by communities to convince combatants to disband armed groups but stay on call within the community and remobilize in case of danger. As the above citations stress, the little trust in the central government's peacebuilding efforts is matched by fears that any demobilization would open the door to rival armed groups or allow army commanders critical of the Banyamulenge to roam freely. While community-based demobilization efforts can address this particular situation, their success will likely depend on the ongoing intersections of violence and insecurity all across Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga.

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26  Interview, government official, Gitavi, 1 April 2021.
27  Interview, government official, Gitavi, 1 April 2021.

## 4.3 Nyatura: Invisible Demobilization and Urban Survival

Nyatura is an umbrella term for what can be considered broadly the third generation of Congolese Hutu armed groups in and around the Masisi area. Rooted in a rich genealogy that dates back to the 1990s "Combattants" and "Gardes Civiles" armed groups, most Nyatura factions have roots in the *Patriotes résistants congolais* (PARECO) between 2007 and 2009 (Stearns 2013, Sungura et al. 2021). This section investigates the rural-urban connections of Masisi- and Rutshuru-based Nyatura combatants inasmuch as they play out in the context of (often informal and hidden) practices of (self-)demobilization, and subsequent social challenges of combatants struggling to make ends meet in Goma and continuing psychological and social linkages to their former comrades and groups. These dynamics relate both to combatant agency, which is a focus of this report, as well as to the socio-spatial character of armed group management, including urban political and supply networks (Verweijen et al. 2020).

**APPROXIMATING THE NYATURA UNIVERSE**

Rooted in earlier cycles of conflict, the cluster of armed groups currently subsumed under the label "Nyatura" ("those who hit hard", in Kinyarwanda) emerged roughly around 2012. While its erstwhile justification can be seen – similar to the PARECO's anti-CNDP stance between 2006 and 2009 – as a counter-movement to the then-M23 rebellion, the presence and proliferation of Nyatura factions in Masisi and Rutshuru (with outliers in Kalehe) is also a result of failed and misled demobilization efforts in the past. As mentioned above, previous DDR programmes often led to a fragmentation of belligerents. PARECO included different currents of Hutu mobilization, alongside its other wings that later evolved into the *Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain* (APCLS) and Lafontaine's *Union des patriotes congolais pour la paix* (UPCP). Nyatura groups, in contrast, are more scattered and characterized by frequent splits and changes in leadership. In the past ten years, the number of identifiable groups has broadly ranged between ten and 30, even though most factions are insignificant beyond their narrow home turf (Kivu Security Tracker 2021). Some of the larger groups operate in a classic self-defence approach, with combatants not forming a sort of standing army, but hailing from peasant populations and regrouping only

in case of operations. The Nyatura faction led by Delta Gashamare until 2020 is an example, as testimonies by surrendered combatants in Mubambiro illustrate.[28] Another, and perhaps the most important faction is the CMC, led by Dominique Ndaruhutse.

Although the CMC split in late 2021, it had for many years been one of the dominant belligerents in the eastern Congo. Rooted in the PARECO factions of commanders Bapfakururimi and Muchoma, the CMC emerged around 2013 when Dominique Ndaruhutse aka Domi, a Hutu combatant from the Bukombo area in Rutshuru, jumped into a leadership void and quickly rallied numerous troops to his movement. With significant support from the FDLR – particularly in terms of training and armament – the CMC turned into the Rwandan rebel's major bulwark, fending off pressure by the FARDC, the NDC-Rénové and occasional incursions by Rwandan special forces, but it also developed its own clout around southwest Rutshuru and into Masisi. Yet its anchoring among the smaller Nyatura factions in Bashali area always remained tenuous, owing in part to the logics of proxy warfare employed by both the FDLR and its FARDC and NDC-Rénové enemies, but also the more generalized dynamics of insecurity and the interplay of mobilization and demobilization in an increasingly fragmented conflict geography.

### THE CHALLENGES OF LEAVING ARMED GROUPS
Like other Nyatura groups, and armed groups in the eastern Congo more widely, the ranks of the CMC are characterized by high fluctuation of staff and recruitment. From 2014 to 2019, this organizational weakness had mostly been absorbed by the FDLR's offering of well-structured military training its *groupement d'écoles* but increasing pressure and fighting in western Rutshuru made these courses more difficult to maintain and regular clashes led numerous CMC combatants to flee or surrender. The group's leadership reacted with a more stringent policy of pursuing and punishing defectors. While combatants often manage to leave and dissipate to either far-flung villages across Rutshuru and Masisi or to Goma, where they would either try their luck in the Mubambiro DDR camp or simply vanish in town, we gathered

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[28] This observation is based on long-term ethnography and longitudinal interviews by one of the authors.

evidence that Domi's commanders found themselves in routinely fighting over defections. This was the case, for instance, when in 2019 "Colonel" Heri tried to defect with a dozen combatants, leading to internal skirmishes in Bukombo area. In other cases, defectors are tracked, on occasion arrested, tortured and occasionally killed.

These policies make it harder, and often dangerous, for individuals to secretly leave groups such as the CMC, while official policies to dismiss members of armed groups are rare, if they exist at all. Nonetheless, numerous combatants – in particular from Nyatura groups such as the CMC – have fled their groups in recent months and years, often with Goma as a destination. However, the city remains intensively connected to dynamics of armed mobilization, with recruiters, suppliers, political representatives and intelligence operators from different armed groups hiding out more and less visibly, often in particular parts of town, such as Ndosho for the Hutu population (Verweijen et al. 2020). The following section will discuss a few examples of ex-combatants making ends meet in Goma, balancing subsistence with constant efforts and anxieties around their own and their families' security.

**URBAN FORESTS: SURVIVING WITHOUT REINTEGRATION**
In interviews, ex-combatants often tend to compare their life in and outside armed groups. In this context, the use of metaphors is frequent to describe their everyday situation. One such metaphor is the forest, and respectively Swahili words such as *pori* or *musituni*. Combatants that have made it safely from places in Masisi or Rutshuru to Goma have already managed a series of potential security problems. Some of them may have risked their lives separating from the group, others had to navigate frequent army and other checkpoints at risk of being identified and detained given their past or present association with armed groups (see Muzalia et al. 2021). Yet, once in Goma, they face a new set of challenges. In the absence of broader DDR efforts, the only formal way to count as demobilized is to surrender to the Mubambiro transit camp run by the FARDC in Mubambiro near Goma, or to surrender to a UN base and get channelled through MONUSCO's Munigi base. In theory, demobilized combatants would get a sort of identification token proving their passage but this has happened irregularly in recent years given tensions between the army and the UN and a lack of clarity about how these

processes should be organized in the absence (but eager anticipation) of a new DDR programme.

More often than not, ex-combatants settling in Goma are thus left on their own and need to rely on social and family networks to organize their urban lives. While some of them are former urban dwellers and have functioning networks in the city, others struggle to connect with peers or find neighbourhood contacts. Yet, compared to native villages, Goma offers the advantage of increased anonymity, by which ex-combatants navigate the risks of stigma and denunciation. Ex-combatants preferably seek new occupations and jobs either as security guards or taxi drivers, driving motorcycles owned by wealthier entrepreneurs against a daily share of the income. However, without an electoral card (which serves de facto as national identification in the DRC), it is often difficult to find such jobs, as employers and owners are weary about whom they recruit. Moreover, while the private security sector in Goma is thriving, senior staff can choose among a wide array of applicants for jobs and, thanks to their professional experience, often have a keen eye for combatant habits. They are thus likely to require a demobilization identification whenever they feel an applicant may be a former armed group member. Other jobs, in turn, have even higher entry barriers or require studies and diplomas.

Against this backdrop, ex-combatants often refer to Goma as a place of relative safety but also as an "urban jungle" where it is difficult to make ends meet legally and which remains occasionally dangerous due to former comrades' efforts to find them or the occasional control by government security services such as the civilian and military intelligence offices.

# 5 |
# The DDRCS Puzzle

*If someone quits a rebel group, he needs to be looked after, otherwise he will become a thief.*[29]

Against the backdrop of past failures, a new approach to demobilization is emerging in the form of the new national and internationally supported DDR programme P-DDRCS. While the underlying challenges to successful DDR, rooted in part in the protracted character of conflict in the Congo, have not fundamentally changed, the P-DDRCS represents an interesting window of opportunity. While not novel – the notion of communities featured prominently in previous DDR generations – the focus on "community-based" DDR has grown into a dominant paradigm as Kinshasa and its international partners have contributed to the design and contours of the fourth generation of nationwide DDR in the Congo. In so doing, the new P-DDRCS strategy implicitly borrows from a number of "local" and smaller demobilization efforts, such as the FRPI process, Tujenge Amani, CVR projects or work that culminated in the Murhesa dialogue (see below).

The draft version of the national strategy, which was made public at the end of January 2022, clarifies the Congolese government's view of the programme, defines the different roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and presents the institutional framework. Important to note is that the structure of the programme includes a visible presence at the level of territories and gives provinces a coordinating role. The strategy is centred around a number of priorities which echo objectives of previous state-led stabilization

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29  Interview, armed group spokesperson, Bukavu, 8 March 2013.

and reconstruction programmes. Key priorities of P-DDRCS include the resolution of conflicts, peace and social cohesion, the restoration of state authority and security, community reintegration and recovery, and stabilization. Demobilization and reintegration of armed combatants no longer is considered a unique objective but integrated into a wider community support approach.

Putting combatant agency, communities and context at the centre of the new programme design is a welcome answer to depoliticize past DDR concepts, but no guarantee of adequate implementation close to the lived realities of those concerned. Examples from Haiti and Northern Ireland show that community-based programmes can have a comparative advantage in ticking these boxes but also serve as reminders that structural politics and violence can reverse progress later (Schuberth 2017, Dwyer 2012). Moreover, with North Kivu and Ituri under a state of siege since May 2021, the eastern DRC remains a politically and geographically rugged terrain insofar as textbook guidance posits ceasefire as a key condition. As UN operatives and analysts keep repeating, running DDR in a context of ongoing insecurity inevitably creates security dilemmas and needs, and affects trust in the programme. In order to account for the pitfalls and obstacles to sustainable demobilization and return, this chapter links historical experiences and theoretical reflections with an assessment of the current political-institutional climate to gauge the prospects for P-DDRCS.

## 5.1 Mistakes Made and Lessons Learned

Past DDR programmes came with heavy bills and massive logistics investment yet could not prevent the circular return of combatants and the recycling of rebels. This section regroups a number of key shortcomings of these programmes. In light of the need to produce enumerable results, internationally funded or -led programmes often neglected the complicated processes of vetting. This often created a sort of open market, where access to reintegration kits and compensation not only motivated random individuals to adhere to the programme but also entire armed groups to constitute themselves with the sole aim of extracting rents from DDR programmes, as confirmed by an FARDC witness:

> Sometimes people are demobilized twice but never reintegrated, hence they go join integrated brigades or back to armed groups, just to do some DDR again afterwards.[30]

Armed groups not interested in demobilizing at all used DDR as a retirement plan for elderly combatants or to get rid of outdated weaponry. Also, in these cases, insufficient or incomplete vetting and poor institutional memory led to frequent instances of repeated demobilization:

> Many ex-combatants have participated in DDR with only one arm or one uniform, while hiding others. Even civilian arms bearers (hunters etc.) went to get kits.[31]

More generally, the tension between military interests and ambitions to reintegrate combatants into civilian life has been a constant cause of tension. If army integration was officially stopped in 2010, following donor pressure, it lives on until today even if less visibly. Not only has the military influence undermined civilian options for ex-combatants and become part of a larger range of circular return options, it also drives the recycling and subsequent (ab)use of rebel combatants. On the side of programming, missing funds, the lack of a centralized database and high opportunity costs for donors to monitor a complex and lengthy process such as effective reintegration, all have led the World Bank, UN entities and others to disengage, opening the door to incomplete execution of DDR programmes. This lessened the credibility of DDR programming overall, with projects that had been financed or announced eventually never happening on the ground:

> We don't have any DDRCS here. We would really like to be part of this programme, but we have no hope. We are merchandise for NGOs. I told you about that one person who had presented his DDR project and his financing plan to us, but since he left, he has never returned.[32]

Other problems concern the lack of psychological support, poor engagement with combatant agency, and real-life challenges of recently demobilized

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[30] Interview, FARDC official, Bukavu, 24 April 2013.
[31] Interview, ex-combatants (focus group), Bunyakiri, 9 March 2013.
[32] Interview, ex-combatant, Kiziba, 28 March 2021.

combatants, such as stigmatization:

> Indeed [mental health] is a major issue. We involve psychologists and priests or pastors to couple prayer with psychological advice for ex-combatants facing psychological problems because of dawa.[33]

This led numerous combatants to see DDR as short-term gains at best, and useless at worst. The intermittent presence of DDR programmes solidified its reputation as a short-term yet unsustainable cash cow.[34] Some observers have also criticized a lack of context-sensitivity, and indeed, some of the guiding documents provided by the UN to Congolese authorities as early as during BUNADER were copy-pasted from DDR strategies for Sierra Leone and Liberia. DDR staff was often recruited in urban areas – Goma, Bukavu or even Kinshasa – and lacked local knowledge or were distrusted by populations and combatants, a phenomenon triggering mistrust and jealousy in intervention contexts as studies on humanitarian action and public health interventions demonstrated at large (Brabant and Vogel 2014, Congo Research Group 2021).

More broadly, DDR programmes from BUNADER to PNDDR III faced recurrent weaknesses in accounting for diversity and grounded knowledge. Often, this led to ill-fated training, support and reintegration policies. Flagrant examples include handing out tilapia (a 20-40 cm-sized staple fish in the Great Lakes) fishing nets to ex-combatants settling on the shores of Lake Kivu, where *sambaza* (tiny fish from the area) fishing is a key income-generating activity. In other cases, flour mills were handed out but after a few months ex-combatants were unable to find spare parts for repair and experienced tensions over who was allowed to work the mill:

> We are ex-combatants, demobilized in 2005. People from CARITAS and CONADER have said they will help, but nothing has been done to assist, thus some have joined bandit groups others have joined armed groups again. Little support was given, for instance one diesel mill to be worked by five people to produce manioc flour was given to a hundred people, creating

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[33] Interview, NGO worker, Kanyabayonga, 28 March 2021.
[34] Interview, former armed group leader, Uvira, 28 February 2013.

tensions. After a few months one mill fell apart with no spare parts available. Same for bicycles, 5 for 50. Marginalized by the society, many are called defectors or rebels. Instead of reintegration there was only creation of associations by demobilizing themselves.[35]

Many ex-combatants and community members lament DDR interveners' lack of locally situated knowledge. One ex-combatant made a telling allegory, stating:

As much as a doctor needs to see patients in the hospital [to cure them], you also need to actually see and talk to the demobilized in order to know how to help them.[36]

Ex-combatants also made clear connections between misguided implementation of DDR efforts and the risk of remobilization:

When we demobilized in Bukavu, nothing happened so we came back to Kamituga. Only bicycles were given, which is ridiculous in Kamituga, given the mud. In the end, a CARITAS agent sold them bicycles in Mwenga. Many of us have meanwhile joined armed groups again.[37]

From bicycles, to sewing machines, fishing nets and flour mills, international and Congolese DDR programmers banked on stereotypical sectors to kickstart ex-combatants' return to civilian life. Coupled with vertical, top-down processes of deciding who would need what, this further complicated the prospect of sustainable DDR. A former DDR staffer remembers:

Sewing machines and bicycles were distributed, but no training was given. Some got carpentry equipment but no training. Others received cameras to be photographers, but no means to rent a studio. People were sent home with six months of transitional payment, which arrived depending on logistics. CONADER was a vicious circle for re-recruitment. Most got their kits but in lack of follow-up, some ex-combatants would return to armed groups depending on how 'the wind blows.' Many calculate their civilian salaries, e.g. as a hair cutter with 60 dollars a month compared to rebel opportunities.[38]

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35  Interview, ex-combatants (focus group), Bunyakiri, 9 April 2013.
36  Interview, ex-combatants (focus group), Bunyakiri, 9 April 2013.
37  Interview, ex-combatants (focus group), Kamituga, 2 May 2013.
38  Interview, FARDC official, Baraka, 14 March 2013.

Indeed, the distribution of cash proved to be unsustainable. In interviews, ex-combatants from the CONADER era as well as recent interlocutors in the Mubambiro transit camp agreed that short-term cash payments did not support sustainable solutions such as opening a business or investing in agriculture and expressed concern over the lack of micro-credit options. While some organizations such as FAO and ad hoc cooperatives created by ex-combatants have tried such initiatives, these received little support. In Bunyakiri, CONADER and Caritas once asked ex-combatants to create a cooperative but failed to support it later on, claiming it had too many members. Instead, they fell back on distributing bicycles and cash. To receive the monthly 25 USD in Bukavu, ex-combatants paid an equal amount in transport. Similarly, in the Mwenga territory, CONADER had a light footprint operating mostly from Bukavu. While Kamituga, the area's largest urbanized area, has not a single paved road, bicycles were distributed. Those who did not return to armed groups call themselves *domestiques ambulatoires* ("walking maids"), making ends meet with unskilled, ad hoc labour without long-term prospects, as was observed in Mubambiro. Others seek employment in mobile, unskilled sectors – mining, motorcycle taxis or private security companies – where work and social life resemble the militarized structures they know (van Acker et al. 2021).

Corruption further undermined credibility and trust in past DDR programmes. If the burning of CONADER's head office in March 2007 – just before an impending audit – remains the most flagrant example, the diversion and theft of assets were as frequent as internal nepotism – the better part of which was met with disinterest and lack of follow-up by donors. This added to political interference and persistent tensions between security sector interests (and lack of reform) and DDR objectives (Hoebeke et al. 2022). During CONADER, the looming electoral process of 2006 steered political and donor emphasis towards the integrated brigades meant to form the backbone of the new national, post-war army FARDC. This, however, significantly politicized the tasks, interests and composition of the SMI, and undermined its independence in vetting combatants. This militarization of DDR continued later on. While PNDDR III aimed at delocalizing DDR programming out of the very areas of armed mobilization, it ended up placing combatants in army bases and under a heavy influence of army interests. Moreover, the centralized character of the process undermined local initiatives not formally tied to either CONADER, UE-PNDDR, PNDDR III or

other government- and donor-led processes. As a result, combatants were left in a limbo of legality, at risk of being harassed or arbitrarily detained. This has persisted through the post-PNDDR III 2019 surrender waves. In the absence of an official process, combatants either self-demobilized or were processed via UN and FARDC camps in the hope of receiving some form of identification, which however, does not always happen. This alone highlights the missing of opportunities and the pressing need to rethink DDR.

## 5.2 Institutional Competition and Competing Definitions

While international partners were discussing the conditions of their support and informing the design process of the national strategy (made public in early 2022), the Congolese state was characterized by complex institutional interactions and overlapping interests and competencies with regards to DDR. This raises some questions about the future functioning of the institutional design of the fourth national DDR programme, the P-DDRCS. Several line ministries, agencies and programmes have had a say in previous programmes and have been vying for a seat at the table in future ones. In its decree creating the P-DDRCS, the presidency decided to moderate these tensions by situating the new DDR coordination in-house. Yet it remains to be seen how concerned ministries (Planning and Defence) will align in the set-up. Until recently, the UEPN-DDR had been positioned in the Ministry of Defence, while STAREC depends on the Ministry of Planning. Both have been abolished through P-DDCRS. Moreover, the entity tasked with following up the Addis Ababa framework agreement is another institution situated in the presidency. At provincial level, the CIAP-DDRC has emerged following the initiative of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri governors, in a bid to locate DDR programming in the most affected areas. CIAP-DDRC borrowed from previous community-based programmes such as Tujenge Amani, or the work by the *Initiative pour un leadership cohésif* (ILC) that culminated in the Murhesa dialogue but has been overtaken by the new national commission.

In reassembling this institutional interplay, politics and influence are likely to play an important part. The creation of P-DDRCS was preceded by political battles in Kinshasa, mostly inside the now defunct *Front commun pour le Congo* (FCC)–*Cap pour le changement* (CACH) coalition. With the Ministry

of Defence in FCC hands and STAREC's legacy of Kabila-era staff in key positions, CACH aimed at reasserting control through the former deputy defence minister, a UDPS member, including at the Murhesa dialogue. The CIAP-DDRC was promoted by three governors that rallied Tshisekedi, before the creation of the *Union sacrée pour la nation* (USN) in late 2020 loosened the deadlock. With political wrangling out of the way, the presidency issued foundational decrees and plans for the P-DDRCS. Although Kinshasa and its partners agree on "community-based" reintegration, a lack of clarity on the essence of the P-DDRCS prevails, despite the January 2022 publication of a national strategy. Meanwhile, Tommy Tambwe's nomination at the helm of the P-DDRCS caused controversy, particularly within civil society structures, given his previous links to armed groups including the RCD, the M23 and some of its smaller allies.

Despite key priorities now being defined in the national strategy, different perspectives on the DDR approach remain. For some, community-based DDR means focusing on the receiving communities, while others see it as a programme where combatants undergo DDR in their communities. On the donor side, there is also a strong alignment on promoting transitional justice, refuting military integration and closing the loopholes of amnesty for grave crimes aimed at cutting dividends of violence. Less agreement exists, however, on the pilot cases that may inspire a broader community-based DDR process. Both the STAREC and MONUSCO-led FRPI process and initiatives such as the Murhesa process claim the term "community-based" and are sponsored by different donors. MONUSCO, in turn, on paper mandated with steering the DDRRR process for foreign combatants, has in recent years run its CVR programme, managing numerous DDR-oriented micro-projects that also claim to be "community-based". This happened alongside local NGOs, such as APC and others, which have been doing community-based DDR for years at a very small scale.

One such community-based model is the Murhesa dialogue. This dialogue has its origins in previous initiatives with a community-centred angle, including Tujenge Amani and other peacebuilding projects led by the ILC. Joining a consortium with the NGOs ZOA, the International Rescue Committee and Search for Common Ground, the ILC organized a roundtable for armed group leaders on prospects and obstacles to demobilization. In the absence of formal DDR, the dialogue's imminent aim was to broker ceasefires between armed groups in South Kivu (with an

idea to replicate these other provinces), and thus ease access for humanitarian actors, lessen violence and pave the way for DDR. Yet in two rounds of dialogue in 2019 and 2020, the Murhesa process struggled to create lasting impact. The first dialogue reflected mistrust between the conflict parties on the South Kivu highlands – Twirwaneho and different Mai-Mai groups (some of them boycotting the event altogether) – which precluded a positive outcome; the second deadlocked over the army's presence. Despite the open calls for collaboration by participating military officials, referring on the record to all armed group leaders as *wazalendo* ("patriots"), this lack of trust could not be bridged.

While there were many reasons for this, one of the main challenges was the black box of regional dynamics not tackled by Murhesa, such as the main conflict areas including the Minembwe highlands, the Kitchanga area, the Beni violence and the Djugu crisis. Another reason for the deadlock emerged from the refusal of formal army integration, this being a key ambition for many groups. Certain armed groups being absent, and others being represented by "real-false" delegates, ongoing military operations and the "state of siege" in North Kivu and Ituri presented major obstacles to dialogue.

## 5.3 Taking Politics and Combatant Realities Seriously

From a practical viewpoint, demobilization often seems to be doomed to failure. Yet, even though previous programmes fell prey to politics, poor implementation and a misreading of conflict realities in the eastern Congo, and even though combatants lack trust in DDR, at best using it as a revolving door with benefits, the absence of DDR is not necessarily much better:

> The current absence of DDR is a huge problem, as MONUSCO's DDRRR section gets daily calls of Congolese combatants willing to leave arms. Combatants feel abandoned and complain.[39]

One the one hand, the rebel lifestyle and the concomitant socialization in military structures in an environment marked by violence entrenched a combatant habitus, as highlighted in the logics of circular return and the preference of many ex-combatants to integrate the army or the police (Vlassenroot et al.

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[39] Interview, UN official, Goma, 28 March 2013.

2020, Verweijen 2013). Incentive structures for sustainable return to civilian life remain relatively weak. Studies have shown how youth aspirations, globalized iconographies and the rhetoric of liberation and self-defence have merged into a set of patterns that can lead to a glorification of combatant life (Jourdan 2011, Vlassenroot et al. 2020). Such analysis was missing in previous programming, where combatants were not impressed by DDR kits composed of items contradicting their lifestyle.

On the other hand, combatant life is often miserable in reality, with little resembling the gold-chain-wearing warlords of Hollywood blockbusters. Combatants, except for operations, spend an enormous amount of time just hanging out and waiting, walking incredible distances on foot (Brabant 2016) and living in dire conditions. Many of them report constant fear of either their own commanders or enemies who may attack during their time in armed groups. In our interviews in Mubambiro, a great number of combatants stressed their desire to go back to village life and farming (even if many also have ambitions in the army or private business).

This is indeed an opportunity for renewed DDR, but also a potential threat given that numerous demobilizing combatants in recent years have grown increasingly disillusioned as they wait for a new programme. As already illustrated elsewhere in this report, some of them report back to their peers, who are being called to leave the forest with uncertain prospects. Others continue to informally leave, flee and try to make ends meet in urban areas in a mix of anxiety and poverty. Still others may wearily remember the cases of armed group leaders such as Morgan in Ituri or Bede Rusagara in the Ruzizi Plain who were killed after failed negotiations of surrender.

Against this backdrop, it is ultimately important to match opportunity with action and work towards an efficient development of the P-DDRCS strategy. This strategy, as urgent as it may appear, needs to be well thought out. Learning from past DDR programmes, this fourth round will need to take combatant agency seriously – as scattered it may be throughout the thousands of life stories of combatants – and foreground a politically sensitive approach that is based on the careful inclusion of communities at all levels and sees reintegration not as the mere last step of a process, but the key objective.

# 6 |
# Conclusion

We want peace, but if peace cannot happen, we'd rather be rebels because otherwise we cannot survive.[40]

As this report has revealed, the history of demobilization efforts in Congo is rich with examples, failures and lessons that need to inform the fourth national programme, known as P-DDRCS. As donors and government stake-holders are developing the new programme's details on financing, pro-gramming and operationalization, the eastern Congo stands at a critical juncture marked by new peaks of violence (e.g. Djugu, Beni or Minembwe), an unprecedented state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri, and a closing window of opportunity that have marked the early days of Tshisekedi's presidency. Despite his call to lay down arms, conflict actors remain sceptical about how the DDR carrot relates to the stick of military operations in the state of siege, but also with past failures of DDR in mind. Several armed groups, including Nyatura factions and Mai-Mai groups, temporarily surrendered, but left the army-led transit camps after waiting for a not yet existing new DDR. These lost moments of opportunity risk compromising future DDR efforts.

In addition to the operational challenges, and the difficulty of quickly bro-kering and financing the new P-DDCRS without sliding into too hasty pro-gramming or implementation, this report highlighted that, whatever their quality, DDR programmes have to include a solid response to the dynamics of circular return and the recycling of rebels. As this report has discussed,

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[40] Interview, ex-combatants (focus group), Bunyakiri, 8 April 2013.

such a challenge has been inadequately addressed by previous DDR efforts, despite the fact that political and governance dynamics are linked to individual incentives and ambitions as much as they are to the prevailing security conditions of communities.

Driving new DDR under the premise of a community-based approach that goes beyond the standard development vocabulary and mere focus on armed actors can reconcile these frictions by effectively politicizing the understanding of armed mobilization in its social and economic context. But it can also depoliticize the implementation of DDR programmes through a high level of decentralized, community-based inclusive approaches that could limit overall capture by elites and be tailored with respect to specific contextual factors. Doing so is no easy task. It involves a shared commitment and a holistic vision accounting for ex-combatant agency throughout the whole process. At the same time, it demands increased attention to families, communities of return and their social realities as well as a clear strategy to deal with those detracting such process and exogenous factors, including regional dynamics.

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