

DISSERTATION BRIEFS SERIES 2015:07  
**AIDING THE END OF CONFLICT?**  
**REINTEGRATING EX-COMBATANTS IN COLOMBIA**

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Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Colombia*

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The Expert Group for Aid Studies - EBA - is a Government committee analysing and evaluating Swedish international development aid. This report can be downloaded free of charge at [www.eba.se](http://www.eba.se)

Printed by Elanders Sverige AB  
Stockholm 2015

Cover design by Julia Demchenko

## Introduction

As the number and scope of peace operations has grown since the early 1990s, the question of how to ensure that ex-combatants do not resort to renewed violence has grown in prominence. Over the past two decades, the answer has predominantly been to create increasingly ambitious disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs (Torjesen, 2009). By one count, 51 DDR programs were implemented during the 1979-2006 period, with a sharp increase from the mid-1990s and onwards (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis 2010, 1). Today, the “technical” aspects of executing disarmament (the collection and disposal of arms) and demobilization (the discharge of active combatants from armed groups) are codified into policy guidelines such as the United Nations integrated DDR standards (IDDRS), and comparatively agreed-upon. By contrast, how to successfully reintegrate ex-combatants, and how to address crucial political trade-offs – which impact how post-conflict settlements impact broader state-building – are anything but (Guistozzi 2012).

For instance, at the national level, the primary aim of DDR programs is sometimes described as “to stabilise the post-conflict situation, while at the same time keeping the long-term peace-building agenda in mind” (SIDDR 2006, 14). In order to achieve this, difficult political trade-offs however need to be made, including whether to co-opt ex-combatants into state structures and the political process or exclude them, and how to distribute support between combatants, supporters, receiving communities and victims (Torjesen 2009). Likewise, while the core purpose of DDR at the individual level is to prevent “remobilization” of ex-combatants or a transition to criminal violence, several sub-objectives have also been identified from the existing research literature. These include aiding social, economic and political reintegration, psychological well-being and reconciliation (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis 2010, 35). To achieve this, reintegration programs rely on tools such as economic support, access to education, job-training and individual psychological counseling, amongst others. However, in practice DDR programs differ dramatically in terms of total enrollment and budgets per participant (Guistozzi 2012, 2); vary significantly in their design and implementation (Escola de Cultura de Pau 2009); often have to be adjusted as initial flaws are detected (Colletta and Muggah 2009); or may even have detrimental effects (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis

2010). Furthermore, an emerging literature argues that individuals' wartime experiences may result in "emotional legacies" or "anti-social capital", which may impact the prospects for reintegration (Nussio 2012; Nussio and Oppenheim 2014). Consequently, the design of DDR programs vary widely, depending on what Colletta and Muggah have termed macro- and micro-determinants – conflict drivers, type of conflict termination and governance capacity of the state on the one hand, versus the absorptive capacity of society, character of the armed group and security-promoting incentives offered on the other (2009, 431-436). Hence, while it is tempting to think of DDR as a technical exercise for which lessons can be codified into universal guidelines, today there is an emerging consensus that one size certainly does not fit all. To the contrary, even within a single country, programs may need to be adjusted to accommodate the reintegration of specific rebel groups or even sub-groups of ex-combatants.

Against this background, this Dissertation Brief analyzes Colombian efforts to reintegrate AUC and FARC ex-combatants into civilian life from 2002 and onwards. The paper draws substantially from my Ph.D dissertation *A Farewell to Arms. Motivational Change and Divergence Inside FARC-EP 2002-2012*, which is based on nearly 700 survey responses and some 80 interviews with FARC ex-combatants. By way of comparison, it also includes findings from recent research on the reintegration of AUC ex-combatants, including one research project which I am currently involved with. The paper begins by summarizing contemporary research on DDR, followed by a background of the conflict in Colombian and the creation of its current DDR program. Next, the motives of combatant recruitment and defection – and the context in which these decisions were taken – is described, since this informs our understanding of subsequent efforts at reintegration. The paper concludes by analyzing the impact of DDR on conflict de-escalation in Colombia on the one hand, and the challenges and successes of individual reintegration, on the other. Written at a time when the on-going negotiations with FARC seems close to reaching a peace agreement, the final remarks discuss the challenges a potential demobilization of FARC is likely to encounter.

## Fault-lines in Contemporary Research on DDR

In research on DDR programs, there has long been a tendency to focus on program-specific “lessons learnt” and miniature evaluations. More recently, studies have however begun to focus on the political trade-offs involved in designing the broader DDR strategy and how these affect state building on the one hand (Guistozzi 2012; Torjesen 2009) and rigorous empirical testing of assumptions underpinning reintegration programs on the other (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis, 2010). At the national level, trade-offs identified include whether to co-opt ex-combatants into state structures and the political process (at the risk of corrupting the state from within, Jonsson 2014b) or exclude them (at the risk of pushing them to become spoilers or criminals); whether to disrupt war-economies upon which communities may depend; how to balance peace versus justice in transitional justice; and how to distribute support between combatants, supporters, receiving communities and victims (Torjesen 2009).

On the individual level, one crucial question is what to do with leaders of insurgent groups. On the one hand, removing rebel leaders and breaking up the command-and-control structures can be key, since “(w)ithout leaders, even dissatisfied and frustrated former combatants cannot do much, except turn into bandits”, argues Guistozzi (2012, 3). However, the ability of the leadership to control and restrain the rank and file can conversely be seen as a major asset, meaning that disbandment is not always best course of action (ibid; Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis, 2010). In this regard, specific attention should arguably be devoted to mid-level commanders (MLCs). As opposed to senior commanders, MLCs often live with the foot-soldiers, participate in battle, lead by example, form strong personal ties to their subordinates and can inspire foot-soldiers to either fight on or defect (Jonsson 2014, 302-303). Research furthermore suggests that this influence can survive demobilization, and that MLCs potentially can become intermediaries facilitating “remobilization” (Themner 2013), but also potentially upholding peace agreements (Nussio and Howe, 2012). A second challenge concerns the initial steps of disarmament and demobilization. Recent experiences suggest that during disarmament, the weapons handed in initially are old and of little military value. As trust builds, the hope is that more effective weaponry might be handed in, but it is not uncommon for armed factions to maintain arms caches in case the peace agreement fails

(Guistoizzi 2012, 7-8). Furthermore, whereas most practitioners agree that the main objective of DDR is to prevent renewed war, reduce victimization and promote durable reintegration (Muggah 2007) views on how to achieve this diverge significantly. For instance, whereas one school of thought argues that providing jobs and employment is key, achieving this in struggling post-conflict societies is challenging, especially as entrepreneurs and businessmen may shy away from hiring ex-combatants (Guistoizzi 2012, 11-13). As will be shown later, the Colombian DDR program has to varying degrees been confronted similar problems and trade-offs. That said, difficulties have varied substantially between reintegrating collectively demobilized AUC and individually demobilized FARC ex-combatants. Furthermore, if FARC chooses to demobilize collectively, this will presumably create a new set of challenges.

### The Colombian DDR Program and Its Discontents

Viewed historically, it is perhaps unsurprising that a country that has been plagued by recurring episodes of large-scale civil violence for over 150 years, also became the birthplace of one of the world's most long-lived rebel groups. In 1948, popular presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán was murdered in Bogotá, sparking a decade-long period of widespread conflict known simply as The Violence (*La Violencia*) in Colombia. During this period, the nucleus of FARC formed as a liberal self-defense militia, which over time adopted a Marxist ideology. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, FARC was just one midsize guerilla amongst at least seven left-wing insurgent groups. But in 1982, the organization decided to double its fighting units and begin advancing on the urban centers of Colombia. To finance this, the guerilla began taxing the growing cocaine traffickers. Between 1982 and 2002, FARC grew exponentially from an estimated 2000 fighters to some 18 000 combatants and 12 000 militia members. As the guerilla increasingly began to be viewed as a threat to the country's traditional elites, a paramilitary umbrella organization known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Sp: AUC) was formed, composed of a disparate collection of private militias, drug cartels and genuine rural self-defense organization. During the 1990s, AUC mainly carried out atrocities against suspected supporters of FARC, which did little to stop the guerilla, but contributed to a deterioration of the conflict with growing numbers of

civilian victims and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Johnson and Jonsson 2013). During this period, Colombian DDR efforts targeted both rebel groups demobilized during the early 1990s, and invited active guerilla members to demobilize individually. While demobilizing groups such as M-19 was comparatively easy politically, the security of ex-combatants was a major concern, and among some 5000 guerilla fighters demobilized during this period, approximately 1/5 were killed, mainly by right-wing paramilitary units (Guáqueta 2007, 418). Meanwhile, the program meant to individually demobilize fighters did not begin to attract substantial numbers of ex-combatants until around 1999 (Zukerman Daly 2014).

In 2002, following three years of unsuccessful peace negotiations with FARC, newly elected President Alvaro Uribe initiated an aggressive counterinsurgency campaign against the guerilla. As the Colombian Armed Forces grew rapidly - eventually approximately doubling in size - and acquired crucial counterinsurgency skills, they drove FARC from its bases surrounding the urban centers of Colombia. In 2004-2006, following secretive negotiations, the AUC was formally disarmed and demobilized. This created a wave of some 32 000 ex-combatants who demobilized collectively, and led to a decrease in violence against civilians. Meanwhile, individual defections from FARC increased, reaching some 1000 annually.

Around this time, the Colombian DDR program was initiated in its current guise. In 2001, the *Programa de Atención Humanitaria al Desmovilizado* (PAHD) was created, which managed the disarmament and demobilization of combatants who exited the war individually. In 2003 the *Programa para la Reincorporación a la Vida Civil de Excombatientes y Alzados de Armas* (PRVC) was founded, managing the reintegration portion of the DDR program (Zukerman Daly 2014, 19). Whilst PAHD later changed its name to *Grupo de Atención Humanitaria al Desmovilizado* (GAHD), and PRVC morphed into the *Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración* (ACR), the organizational structure and division of labor between these institutions has remained largely intact. While far from flawless at its inception, the DDR program in Colombia has gone through numerous changes since its founding, continuously addressing shortcomings that have been detected under way. For instance, between 2002 and 2008, ACR was unified under a single leader, and the flawed design of a program offering ex-combatants seed money to



establish new businesses (in spite of only a fraction of recipients having a business background) was addressed (Morgenstein 2008). More recently, additional changes have been made, including increasing the number of and professionalizing the centers of attention, improving access to training and education, broadening the usage of a national database tracking the progress of ex-combatants and making economic support contingent on active participation in DDR activities (c.f. Zukerman Daly et al 2014). Overwhelmingly nationally “owned” and funded, the reintegration program run by ACR represents one of the most well-funded and ambitious reintegration efforts in the world to date. While budgets give a very limited view of the content of DDR programs, among 22 DDR programs conducted during the post-Cold War era, the Colombian program had the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest total budget, and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest expenditure per participant (Guistozzi 2012, 2). Today, the ACR offers support such as economic assistance, vocational training, access to education, psychosocial workshops and one-on-one psychological counseling, all aimed at facilitating the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life. This reflects both the comparatively strong capacity of the state and the challenge of reintegration in Colombia, where the illicit coca economy offers an alternative source of income to many ex-combatants (cf Human Rights Watch, 2010).

As the Colombian counterinsurgency efforts grew increasingly effective, large groups of FARC combatants also began defecting, eventually numbering over 17 000 in the 2002-2012 period. This constitutes the second main group of ex-combatants who entered the Colombian reintegration program. Compared to the “wave” of more than 32 000 AUC ex-combatants demobilizing in 2004-2006, individual defections from FARC never surpassed 3000 annually.

While no two DDR programs are identical, the Colombian DDR efforts nonetheless sets them apart from most comparable cases. Specifically, whereas DDR programs are typically rolled out as post-conflict stabilization measures, the individual demobilization of FARC combatants is an integral part of the national counterinsurgency effort. The first two step in this process – disarmament and demobilization – is the responsibility of GAHD (under the Ministry of Defence), which verifies whether individuals were indeed members of FARC, and if so, attempt to generate both intelligence and background information from them (Killebrew 2011). Furthermore, GAHD also repeatedly

broadcasts testimonies from ex-combatants confirming that they were being well-treated, in order to encourage further defections from the guerilla (Glenn 2015, 188). By November 2012 FARC formally began peace negotiations with the Colombian state, which may now be nearing a successful conclusion (Johnson and Jonsson 2013; *The Economist* 2015). While difficult to verify, intelligence analysts and FARC ex-combatants alike attributed the decision of FARC to re-engage in negotiations largely to the large-scale defections the guerilla had experienced (Johnson and Jonsson 2013).

### **Why Combatants Joined Armed Groups and Why They Left**

Over the past decade, a growing number of survey studies have begun to map out why individuals joined armed non-state groups and why they eventually left (Arjona and Kalyvas 2012; Zukerman Daly et al 2014; Rosenau et al 2014). Whereas differences in the sample and the phrasing of key questions have resulted in sometimes stark differences between results, enough data has been collected that together with in-depth interviews of ex-combatants, some basic conclusions regarding combatant motives can be drawn. Firstly, paramilitary fighters were more likely to be motivated by promises of material rewards to join the armed group – by one count, 43% of paramilitary ex-combatants enlisted due to “promises of money or goods”, whereas the same was true of only 20% of FARC recruits (Arjona and Kalyvas 2012). This is scarcely surprising, given that AUC combatants were given wages whereas FARC members were not (Gutierrez Sanin 2008). Indeed, together with laxer discipline – as AUC fighters were allowed time-limited membership and leave, resided more frequently in urban areas, and engaged much less frequently in combat against militarily superior forces – this led a significant number of FARC MLCs to switch sides during the conflict (Jonsson 2014).

Secondly, in spite of the nominal left-wing ideological agenda of FARC – to which its senior leadership arguably still subscribes – a small fraction of guerilla fighters joined the conflict due to ideological conviction, as illustrated in Table 1 below. Whereas much of the existing literature on rebel recruitment sets up possible motives as a dichotomy between “greed versus grievance” (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), a continuum from “criminal” to “political” motives (Makarenko 2004) or a taxonomy of “activist” versus

“opportunist” insurgencies (Weinstein 2007), these factors explain only approximately ¼ of recruitment to FARC.

Table 1. Motives for enlistment with FARC in 2002-2010, N= 320.

Motive	Survey response	Primary	Secondary
<b>Ideology</b>	<i>Affinity with ideology of the group</i>	<b>11.3</b>	<b>5.0</b>
<b>Greed</b>	<i>Lack of job opportunities</i>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>10.9</b>
<b>Belonging</b>		<b>30.9</b>	<b>20.3</b>
	<i>Influence of friends</i>	15.0	13.4
	<i>Family tradition</i>	2.2	1.3
	<i>Influence of partner</i>	2.5	1.9
	<i>Family conflict</i>	11.3	3.8
<b>Security</b>		<b>7.2</b>	<b>6.3</b>
	<i>Security</i>	3.8	2.8
	<i>Revenge</i>	1.9	2.5
	<i>Resentment against the army</i>	1.6	0.9
<b>Other</b>		<b>36.3</b>	<b>57.5</b>
	<i>To carry arms and a uniform</i>	12.8	11.3
	<i>Forced recruitment</i>	15.0	7.8
	<i>Other</i>	8.4	38.4
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ACR survey data.

Instead, it seems that personal relations – to friends, family members or guerilla fighters present in one’s community – often mattered more than ideational or material incentives. Beyond this, recruits were typically young, male, came from poor socio-economic backgrounds, and from families that were disproportionately victimized in the conflict and experienced high levels of intra-familial violence (Arjona and Kalyvas 2012). Hence, whereas researchers are typically searching for a single, decisive motive for recruitment, even earnest respondents often perceive recruitment as a process or the result of a combination of factors:

*I have always thought that there were several reasons for why I joined the guerilla. Next to the school where I went as a child there was a FARC base. I grew up with only my mother, but my father was a FARC member and I have often wondered if that influenced my decision to join. Then, when I was 11 I asked to join FARC but was turned away because I was too young, but I did that because my grandmother beat me, to get away from home. Then, when I was 17 I started to work as a miliciana in an indigenous community, without the knowledge of the community. And when I was 19 I moved on to work as a guerillera interna in a FARC base, but this time out of ideological conviction. By that time, my boyfriend and the father of my one-year old daughter had already joined the organization.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “Sandra”, Bogota February 2008.

Furthermore, disaggregating motives for recruitment into FARC reveals surprising results, which shed some light on the decision-making process of would-be guerilla members. For instance, comparing motives for enrollment between 1982-2001 and 2002-2010 does not show any significant differences between recruits who joined during the respective periods (Pr= 0.958). Given that FARC expanded dramatically during 1982-2001 and were seemingly successful on the battle-field, while they contracted dramatically and experienced highly visible set-backs in 2002-2010, these results are puzzling. This suggests that recruits did not necessarily consider the relative costs and benefits associated with guerilla membership *prior* to enrollment – or if they did, were not privy to very accurate information. If they had, motives for enlistment should arguably have shifted over time, since the risks associated with guerilla membership likely increased dramatically, while benefits shrank. The interviews suggested that this non-variation over time can indeed be largely explained by recruits’ often cursory cost-benefit analysis prior to enlistment, which they frequently attributed to their own young age at the time (Jonsson 2014a, 263-264). In fact, the decision to join FARC was often taken with a surprising lack of consideration for both the irrevocability of the decision and its likely long-term consequences – a lifetime of combat, ending with death, severe injury or incarceration.

Several of the respondents remarked specifically about their age at the time of recruitment when asked whether they thought about the risks prior to joining FARC. According to one respondent, early on he even thought the fighting itself was enjoyable. “Well, a young kid does not think about that [eg. the risks]. A young kid likes the adrenaline [...]. For some time, I really liked the war. Having a nice gun, shooting... it was very cool.”<sup>2</sup> Most strikingly, the respondents typically answer that they took the decision to join FARC in a matter of hours or days. GADH officials – who debrief ex-combatants – also remarked that they were surprised that so many ex-combatants they talked to could not articulate why they joined FARC:

There is a strange thing, Michael, among the people I have talked to. [...] The people don’t even know why they ended up in the guerilla [...] Others say, ‘I was drunk and a friend said let’s go and when I noticed [eg. sobered up], I was there, involved [with FARC]...illogical things like that. [...] Many [join] because they are on vacation, so for example, they send

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “David”, Teofilo Forero, Villavicencio, June 2011.

me on vacation and I'm there when I see a guy and I fall in love, 'ay how sympathetic' [eg. good-looking], I enter, they never see her again. [...] Yes, they don't know why they join, it's a little crazy.<sup>3</sup>

These responses, which are illustrative for a majority of answers given in over 80 interviews, fit poorly with theories that assume that would-be recruits take a conscious decision, based on a rational cost-benefit analysis of their opportunities, and the likely consequences of their actions. They also explain why a large number of recruits expressed surprise and shock at the harsh realities of life inside the guerilla.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the experience of battle, and the often harsh treatment of FARC fighters by MLCs, undermined the motivation of many respondents:

[O]n a daily basis [you/the front] were in combats, so I think the people [FARC combatants] (...) were tired of that and so [they] ended up deserting, because there was always *compañeros* that were killed. So one said "no, well imagine, one here to get killed and [then they] bury you like a cow".<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the reasons to enlist with FARC were diverse, motives for defection were more uniform – more than 43% of respondents answered that their primary motive to exit was either “to be with the family” or “to regain liberty”, as shown in Table 2 below. Furthermore, while security was largely unimportant as a motive for enlistment, more than 1/5 of respondents exited due to different types of threats, mistreatment or fear (in a survey from GAHD, two of the three most common reasons to exit were “mistreatment” and “pressure from military operations”, Rosenau et al 2014, 280). When considering these numbers, it should also be noted that many interview respondents were initially reluctant to admit that they had exited due to fear. Instead, they initially mentioned innocuous motives such as missing their families, only to later on mention that they suspected that they were about to be punished by their commander, or feared for their life during combat. Hence, it seems plausible that the survey responses may in fact under-report the importance of fear in motivating defection (Jonsson 2014, 275).

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Iveth Carmen, GADH, Ministry of Defense, Bogotá July 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “David”, Teofilo Forero, Villavicencio, June 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “Héctor”, Frente Aurelio Rodriguez, July 2011, Bogotá.

Table 2. Motives for defection from FARC by motive, 2002-2012. N= 694.

Motive	Survey response	Primary	Secondary
<b>Ideology</b>		<b>12.2</b>	<b>7.8</b>
	<i>Lack of ideology</i>	7.8	4.9
	<i>Injustices against the population</i>	4.5	2.9
<b>Greed</b>	<i>Unfulfilled promises</i>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>2.4</b>
<b>Belonging</b>		<b>24.2</b>	<b>21.0</b>
	<i>Because of compañeros who demobilized</i>	4.0	1.7
	<i>To be with the family</i>	20.2	19.3
<b>Security</b>		<b>20.3</b>	<b>9.2</b>
	<i>Difficulties in combat</i>	4.5	1.3
	<i>Mistreatment</i>	2.3	2.9
	<i>Threats against you</i>	6.6	2.7
	<i>Threats against the family</i>	3.6	0.9
	<i>Assasination of a family member</i>	3.3	1.4
<b>Other</b>		<b>38.0</b>	<b>59.5</b>
	<i>For believing in the program of the state</i>	3.5	3.0
	<i>Regain liberty</i>	23.2	26.1
	<i>Commander's orders</i>	1.0	0.4
	<i>Other</i>	10.4	30.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ACR.

These findings – that security was a major motive for defection, and that security concerns were related more to *internal* than to external threats – diverges from previous research on motives in FARC. That this would be the case is however intuitive, given that combatants feared execution if captured while attempting to defect, but also being killed *after* having defected.<sup>6</sup> Whereas it may sound implausible, several respondents recounted stories of having witnessed ex-combatants surrendering, only to later be found dead and reported as “killed in combat”.<sup>7</sup> Declassified US intelligence reports also illustrate that US analysts were concerned over these “false positives” already by the early 1990s (Evans 2008). Whereas Colombian officials unsurprisingly did not raise this issue during interviews, they conceded that a critical role of their information campaigns is to convince FARC combatants that it is safe to defect:

Inside the guerilla the leaders tell lies, if you hand yourself in the army will kill you, or they will capture you, they will put you in a helicopter and throw you out. You give them information and done, afterwards they discard you and kill you.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “Luzia”, in Norte de Santander, February 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with FARC ex-combatant “Sandra”, Bogotá February 2008 and “Roger”, 16<sup>th</sup> front, Sep. 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with intelligence analyst, GAHD, Ministry of Defense, Bogotá July 2011 (1)

Likewise, there was intense fear of execution inside FARC if someone attempted to defect but was caught. Most combatants took great precautions when defecting<sup>9</sup>, and some respondents even stated that they believed that sometimes commanders would carry out “war councils” in order to set an example and ensure discipline, by maintaining a certain level of fear amongst the foot-soldiers. It was also clear that many respondents were deeply affected by witnessing executions of fellow combatants. One ex-combatant saw combat frequently, but claimed that “one gets used to that”. By contrast, the respondent was deeply troubled by executions:

I saw a *compañero* who was there 21 years and he was totally insubordinate and he was summoned to a war council [...] and he was shot, they brought him and killed him [just] like that” [...] It demoralizes the combatant a lot because someone who was there 21 years and they shot you [...] in whatever moment, it ends with them killing [you].<sup>10</sup>

Given such “double barriers” to defection, it may not be surprising that many FARC combatants had to perceive direct threats to their lives before deciding to exit. Summarizing sentiments expressed repeatedly during interviews, the head of GAHD made similar remarks. “These people don’t want to die for their groups, thank God. I am not saying that they are cowards, not at all, but they are not committed enough to want to die for their groups as combatants in some other countries.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, once demobilized, FARC ex-combatants could not return to the guerilla, since they faced possible execution if they did. Needless to say, this has reduced the rate of recidivism to the guerilla (as opposed to into criminal networks) dramatically.

## The Impact of DDR on Conflict De-Escalation in Colombia

When considering the national-level security results of the Colombian DDR program to date, it seems to have been at least a partial success. While there is as of yet no post-conflict situation to stabilize, the demobilization of the AUC has coincided in time with a decrease in conflict intensity, as well as sharp decrease in crimes such as kidnappings, homicides and forced displacement (Gutiérrez Sanin and González Peña, 2012, 116). As fighting between AUC and other parties has seized, and the paramilitaries were the

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “Vincente”, 14<sup>th</sup> front, Bogotá September 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “David”, Teofilo Forero, Villavicencio, June 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Marcela Durán, GAHD, Ministry of Defense, Bogotá June 2010.

suspected perpetrators of a disproportionate share of human rights violations, drawing a causal connection between their demobilization and these positive developments seems highly plausible. However, violence is increasing in areas where reintegration is occurring, and has remained continuously high in areas where opportunities to extract rents have coincided with weak state presence (Nussio and Howe 2014b). That said, to date the net effect of the demobilization of AUC on security in Colombia has arguably still been positive (Gutiérrez Sanin and Gonzalez Peña, 2012).

A second channel through which the DDR program has contributed to conflict de-escalation in Colombia is through mass-defections from FARC, which over time became more important than battle-field deaths in weakening the group numerically. Initially, it should be noted that defection data here include militia members, but arguably also a sizable proportion of individuals who had limited links to FARC.<sup>12</sup> Even keeping this caveat in mind, defections were arguably a central cause of FARC's gradual demise in 2002-2012. As illustrated in figure 1, whereas the number of FARC combatants killed and demobilized were comparable in 2002-2006, in 2007-2010 a combatant was almost three times more likely to defect than to be killed in battle. Furthermore, between June 2002 and September 2009, a total of 1 236 mid-level commanders defected from FARC, and their proportion of all demobilized individuals rose from 3% in 2002 to 12% in 2009 (Arias et al, 2010, 7, 17). As MLCs were crucial to the guerilla– with first-hand knowledge of personnel, trafficking routes, tactical battle experience and so forth – and their defections severely weakened the military capacity of FARC.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with FARC ex-combatant “Ricardo”, Bogota June 2010. The Ministry of Defense eventually put in place mechanisms, such as lie-detector tests, in order to weed out opportunistic joiners from the demobilization program. After initiating this practice, 12-13% of would-be entrants into the demobilization program have been weeded out (interview with Iveth Carmen, GAHD, Ministry of Defense, Bogotá September 2012).



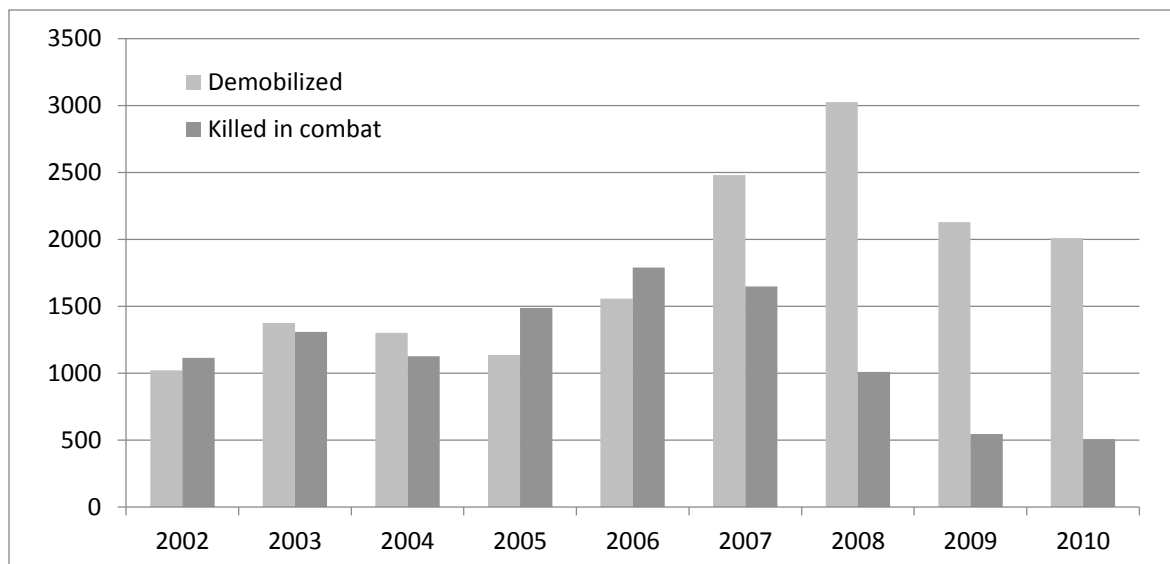


Figure 1. FARC combatants defected and killed in battle 2002-2010.

Beyond this, the results of the reintegration have been limited in part by AUC and FARC war-time behavior and lack of legitimacy. For instance, on the national level, possible measures to reintegrate the AUC – including political participation and inserting ex-combatants into the Colombian Armed Forces – were discarded due to the paramilitaries’ massive human rights abuses and involvement in the drug economy (Guáqueta 2007; Guáqueta and Arias, 2011). Regarding Torjesen’s (2009) dilemma of whether or not to disrupt war economies (and other “governance structures” created by armed groups), it can be noted that in areas previously controlled by the AUC, insecurity has increased after “protection collapsed” (Nussio and Howe, 2014). This is likewise a major concern in areas currently controlled by FARC, especially in areas with extensive coca cultivation or drug trafficking (El Tiempo 2012). Furthermore, transitional justice measures have been harshly criticized from a human rights-perspective, as former paramilitaries were offered reduced sentences, with its leaders sentenced to eight years of incarceration in return for admitting all the crimes committed they had committed during the conflict. Gutiérrez Sanin and González Peña argue that the level of de facto impunity was “intolerably high if measured by the yardstick of the heinous nature of the crimes committed by the paramilitary” (2012, 127). But this impunity was not necessarily more extensive than that during previous DDR processes in Colombia, or those accepted in peace agreements in other countries. Instead, the controversial nature of the concessions offered to AUC ex-combatants is due to the high level of collaboration between the political elites offering

them. This was not a compromise between enemies, but rather an agreement between erstwhile allies, Gutiérrez Sanin and González Peña argue (2012, 117-118). Notably, transitional justice measures agreed in the on-going negotiations with FARC are strikingly similar to what was offered to the AUC, in which the leaders charged with “the most serious and representative crimes” will benefit from alternative penalties – not in prison conditions but “with effective restriction of liberty” - if they confess their crimes (The Economist 2015).

Lastly, the resources devoted to reintegrating ex-combatants have understandably been criticized when compared to the limited support given to the families of victims, or the 4 million internally displaced persons in Colombia (Nussio and Howe 2012; cf Torjesen 2009).

### **Achievements and Challenges in Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Colombia**

On the individual level, how well efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants socially, economically and politically have succeeded to some extent remains an open question, and the topic of a survey study which I am currently involved in. However, even pending such research, some initial, troubling outcomes can be noted. Firstly, out of the 55700 individuals who initially entered the ACR reintegration program, only 32 200 (or 57.8%) were still actively enrolled by 2013 (ACR 2013). While little is known regarding what has become of the 23 500 individuals who left the program, a large number of ex-combatants have been killed in connection to turf-wars between drug cartels, or efforts to remobilize ex-combatants (Nussio and Howe 2012).

Whereas ex-combatants from AUC and FARC today enlist in the same reintegration program, the outcomes of their reintegration process seemingly differ, depending in part on the character of the armed groups which they left, and the manner in which they did so. Early on, concerns were repeatedly raised that a large share of the AUC ex-combatants demobilized were not in fact eligible to enter the DDR program, but sought to take advantage of DDR benefits, including the de facto amnesties offered (Nussio and Howe 2012). In demobilizing FARC ex-combatants, the state been better able to weed out non-combatants, as it gradually has accumulated information about the identities of FARC members (Jonsson 2014, 285). Furthermore, with more than 32 000 AUC ex-

combatants demobilized, only 18 000 weapons were handed in. Arms were reportedly kept in a stockpile, some of which may currently be used by criminal organizations (Nussio and Howe 2012). By contrast, when FARC fighters defect they are offered rewards for handing in arms, which many do (Jonsson 2014, 249).

Furthermore, “recidivism” – mainly to drug cartels which some perceive as “successor organizations” to the AUC – has been a notable concern, but primarily among AUC ex-combatants. In a study drawing on a survey with some 1100 ex-combatants, estimated that some 24% of ex-combatants had engaged in recidivism, i.e. renewed criminal activity following their demobilization. Furthermore, of the respondents, 46% had been offered to re-enter a criminal organization (Zukerman Daly et al, 2014, 6-7). The study specifically found that the reintegration program had been very effective at reintegrating individually demobilized ex-combatants, a majority of whom are former guerilla members from FARC (2014). While several factors can plausibly contribute to this, the differing demobilization processes arguably contribute strongly. Guerilla ex-combatants took a personal decision to exit; risked their lives to escape; are sometimes pursued by the organization even after leaving; lost connection to their combatant networks; and typically expect to be executed if they attempt to rejoin (Jonsson 2014, 212). By contrast, paramilitary ex-combatants were principally ordered to demobilize collectively; took no personal risk in so doing; often went through the reintegration program together with other members from their fighting unit; and sometimes live in regions where their former MLCs organized criminal successor groups to the AUC. If they received threats, it was often used to pressure them into remobilizing (Nussio and Howe 2012). That the latter group was more likely to choose or be coerced to engage in recidivism is hardly surprising, and arguably had little to do with the design of the ACR reintegration program *per se*. On a related note, regarding whether to disrupt command-and-control structures (cf Guistozzi 2012), Zukerman Daly et al find that ex-combatants who maintained links to commanders and other ex-combatants was at higher risk of recidivism, and suggest that the ACR program should strive to reinforce positive social capital (to family members) while countering risk-generating social capital (to other ex-combatants and MLCs) (2014, 8), with Nussio and Oppenheim reaching similar conclusions (2014).

## Drawing Lessons from a Unique Case and Implications for Aid Policy

As the challenges of successfully reintegrating ex-combatants become increasingly apparent, initial optimism regarding DDR programs as a “magic bullet” has dimmed. In 2004, a United Nations report described the demobilization of combatants as “the single most important factor determining the success of peace operations” (United Nations General Assembly, 2004). More recently, sceptics have pointed out that such claims are not supported by the empirical record of war-to-peace transitions (Guistozzi 2012), and that DDR programs tend to rest on untested assumptions (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis 2010, 2). Even so, the question of how to prevent ex-combatants from re-engaging in violence remains as pertinent as ever, as does the need to identify what factors make DDR programs most likely to succeed.

The Colombian DDR experience offers some reasons for cautious optimism, but also illustrates the need to manage expectations, and recognize challenges likely to arise along the way. As noted by Colletta and Muggah, whereas DDR is often treated as a technical issue where “best practices” can be drawn into general policies, in practice DDR is often an intensely political exercise, and programs need to be tailored to local circumstance (2009). These claims have been broadly reinforced by the Colombian experience of DDR to date. While the DDR program has contributed to a reduction of conflict intensity at the national level, this progress has partly depended on the character of the armed groups demobilized. For instance, it seems that it has been in many ways easier to reintegrate previous members of the state-hostile FARC, than the paramilitary AUC. When the AUC demobilized, the Colombian state struggled to identify its members; included non-combatants into the reintegration program while leaving actual combatants outside; command-and-control structures remained partly intact; and there has been a significant problem with “remobilization” into criminal successor groups (Nussio and Howe 2014; Human Rights Watch 2010). By contrast, when individually demobilizing FARC combatants, the state had better insight into who the combatants were; could gradually weed out “opportunistic” non-combatants; command-and-control structure were ruptured through the act of exiting the guerilla (Jonsson 2014); and recidivism has been a more limited problem (Zukerman Daly et al 2014). In other words, in spite of AUC and FARC ex-combatants having entered into the same reintegration program, the outcomes

differed depending on the armed group they exited, and the manner in which they did so. This reinforces the importance of understanding and differentiating between the motivations of different insurgent groups (c.f. Romanuk and Webb, eds, 2015) and tailoring DDR programs to local circumstances, while being squarely inconsistent with the idea of developing standardized “one size fits all”-policies for DDR (cf. Colletta and Muggah 2009).

Likewise, whereas the ACR has gradually adopted its approach to address problems detected, it is not clear whether the “lessons learnt” are applicable in other DDR processes, even within Colombia itself. For instance, as noted above, a significant drawback of the demobilization of the AUC was the failure to fully dismantle command-and-control structures, and the limited attention devoted to mid-level commanders (Nussio and Howe 2012). If FARC chooses to demobilize, its commanders will likely strive to maintain some level of control over their cadres, as a source of influence as well as for security reasons. Analysts have argued that this is not necessarily negative, since a total dismantlement may lead to “fragmentation and further increases [ex-combatants] vulnerability to remobilization” (Nussio and Howe 2012). That said, remobilization of AUC ex-combatants has typically been led by their former mid-level commanders, and there is a palpable risk that similar pattern may recur within parts of FARC, particularly in areas where the illicit economy is extensive (El Tiempo 2012). A pragmatic solution could be to recognize the importance of mid-level commanders, by for instance offering them special incentives and reintegration routes, while simultaneously closely monitoring the risk for continued involvement in the coca economy, particularly amongst fronts which are currently heavily involved in the trade (Jonsson 2014, 29). Since MLCs inside FARC often repress not only civilians, but also their own subordinates, it furthermore seems reasonable that any maintenance of command-and-control structures is based on voluntary participation of the ex-combatants themselves (Jonsson 2014, 152).

Lastly, a final point concerns the importance of ensuring the security of ex-combatants as a means of making reintegration as successful as possible. A central finding from my dissertation was the importance of personal security in motivating defections (Jonsson 2014, 267-268). Furthermore, recent history illustrates the very real risks that demobilization entails for left-wing ex-combatants in Colombia. For instance, 1/5 of left-

wing guerilla members that demobilized during the early 1990s were killed (Guáqueta 2007, 419) and some 3-5000 members of the Union Patriótica (a political party with ties to FARC) were murdered during the late 1980s. Likewise, today there are signs of an assassination campaign targeting social movements associated with FARC (Johnson and Jonsson 2013). Hence, there is a palpable fear amongst FARC members that they may be targeted for violence if they lay down their arms. If FARC chooses to sign a peace agreement, it is thus crucial to ensure effective security measures and a rapid law-enforcement response if this occurs. If not, FARC ex-combatants are likely to seek independent security arrangements, presumably through their old networks.

In conclusion, many of the outcomes of DDR in Colombia have depended on the manner in which the demobilization of the armed groups occurred, or on the ability of law enforcement to manage problems such as recidivism, protecting ex-combatants and re-establishing a state presence in areas previously controlled by armed groups. If FARC eventually demobilizes, the process of reintegrating ex-combatants is likewise likely to be beset by number of fairly predictable challenges – violence against ex-combatants; remobilization of specific MLCs and their cadres; FARC maintaining arms caches; the guerilla seeking to maintain control over former members regardless whether they acquiesce or not; challenges in finding employment for rurally based ex-combatants; and criminal organizations attempting to take control over areas which the guerilla vacates. In this process, the international donor community can be of particular use in helping to plan ahead for likely contingencies, and especially whole-of-government responses to issues such as recidivism, the security of ex-combatants and establishing a state presence in areas previously controlled by FARC. Likewise, in the absence of an international monitoring mission, empowering local actors to fill this role is key, since problems need to be identified and recognized, in order for DDR programs to adapt their approaches. Fortunately, donors have previously filled this role, and Colombian NGOs and state authorities alike are highly capable, making this a realistic prospect.

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