Introduction

At the end of every civil conflict the international community, through its agencies and other non-state actors, always provide aid to war-torn countries for reconstructing their communities. This in many cases involves rebuilding infrastructure and restoring the affected communities. One of the most fundamental intervention aspects is a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme. DDR resides in the nexus of development and security agendas and has emerged as a critical development tool kit as well as preventive intervention instrument for sustainable peace and has become a core component of peace agreements. Experience has shown that there is a close relationship between the successful DDR of former combatants and the sustainability of...
Despite the growing support for DDR, there is no clear evidence on whether the process works or not. It is imperative to note that while the international community takes credit for the accomplishments of the reintegration process there have been limited studies and little research done about the actual reasons for its success or the criteria for determining what that success really is and how it should be measured. There has also been very little analysis on the utility and efficacy of different reintegration initiatives and whether they have achieved the objective of granting the returning combatants, and particularly child combatants, a civilian lifestyle that is reasonably free from fear and want.

This article focuses only on the reintegration component of DDR with regard to child combatants and analyses the process of reintegration, the gaps in the current reintegration literature and practice, the challenges of the process, and the role played by the various actors in Northern Uganda that enable formerly abducted children to gain a civilian lifestyle. The article draws examples from the DDR experience in Northern Uganda.

Gaps in the reintegration practice and literature

The United Nations has defined reintegration as the assistance given to combatants to enable them to re-enter civil society. Reintegration therefore includes economic, political and social aspects. Economic reintegration concerns enabling former combatants to find livelihoods by having access to means of production and employment. Political reintegration refers to the process through which combatants become a part of the civilian decision-making process. Social reintegration refers to the creation of an environment in which the ex-combatants are accepted back into their families and communities. Reintegration should include medium- to long-term programmes that consist of cash compensation as well as training for income-generation opportunities aimed at increasing the potential for economic and social reintegration of ex-combatants and their families.

A conceptual gap in the practice of reintegration concerns the confusion of the term ‘reintegration’ with the concept of ‘reinsertion’. It has often been assumed that merely placing individuals back into their communities constitute reintegration. Different programmes on the ground have marked their success by their successful reunification of the ex-combatants with their families. This action, while it may be a component of reintegration, is not reintegration in itself but rather reinsertion. Reintegration has to do with securing the life of an individual to ensure he is free from fear and free from want.
The reinsertion action on its own does not ensure such freedoms and more needs to be done, apart from the reunification, to ensure effective reintegration. In Uganda the government, in collaboration with the international community, has offered resettlement assistance in the form of material goods and cash so as to facilitate the transition to civility. Although the term ‘reintegration’ has commonly been used to cover all activities after demobilisation, reintegration has in practice often been limited to providing reinsertion and resettlement assistance.\textsuperscript{10} This has been because of a lack of funding, lack of good preparation and the deliberate decision by DDR practitioners to limit their targeted assistance to ex-combatants and failing to include the local communities of reintegration.

Much of the literature on reintegration has also focused on reinsertion activities only. This literature focuses on the activities of the reception centres which are responsible for receiving formerly abducted children on their return from the rebel ranks. These organisations play a fundamental role in tracing the families and communities of such children. The role of the Uganda People’s Defence Forces in rescuing and administering the amnesty certificates has also been widely documented.

Very little research has been done on the activities of these formerly abducted children once they have been reinserted back into their communities. This stage is a significant

\textit{Figure 1 Current occupations of formerly abducted children in Gulu, Northern Uganda}

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Current occupations of formerly abducted children in Gulu, Northern Uganda}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: Interviews by author}
component of the reintegration process, as it is during this phase the formerly abducted children have to adopt civilian roles in the community. Failure to properly articulate this stage and to plan for the complexities around it could in fact result in unsuccessful peacebuilding.

Research carried out in Gulu, a district in Northern Uganda, has shown that once returned to the communities, the majority of returnees engage in small business practices. For example, many of the boda-boda riders\textsuperscript{11} in Gulu are former child soldiers. Some of the children are also employed on farms, and in households as domestic workers or in businesses. A large number of returning children also try to obtain further education and training.

The data in the table was obtained from interviews with respondents in Gulu and shows that about 37–40 per cent of the formerly abducted children did return to school or entered an educational institution for some form of training. The organisations and institutions that provide such training therefore form a crucial part of the reintegration process. Their contribution to the process provides a critical basis or starting point for what would be deemed to be successful reintegration. Examples of such organisations in Northern Uganda include Child Voice International (CVI),\textsuperscript{12} St Monica’s Tailoring School for Girls\textsuperscript{13} and the School for War Affected Children (SOWAC).\textsuperscript{14}

**Challenges of reintegration**

To be able to consider the reintegration programme a success, the process must be judged on the extent to which it has reasonably freed formerly abducted children from want and fear and enabled them to survive by securing a livelihood, and to feel safe. To ensure that this is achieved, various challenges have to be addressed.

Many of the reintegration programmes for formerly abducted children have tended to follow a top-down approach, ignoring the input of the local communities. This has also been the case with many of the international organisations and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who have implemented programmes which they deemed to be successful without any local input. However, to be successful any reintegration attempt must include the community at grassroots level. The community will help to resolve issues of impunity and its involvement will also help locals to accept the returning children, who in many instances served as combatants, on their own terms and in accordance with the dictates of their culture. A good illustration of local involvement is the involvement of locals in suggesting and offering opinions during the drafting of programmes run and administered by St Monica’s. This is done by means of forums at which the director holds public meetings with members of the community. Discussions and local initiatives in the different reintegration programmes are encouraged. CVI, an
international NGO, also involves the girls they care for in the programmes, in that the girls are asked to define what they perceive success to be.

The ideal objective of reintegrating formerly abducted children is to provide them with a civilian lifestyle that promotes peace. However, the reality is starkly different from what one would envision, for most nations that have been devastated by war simply do not have the resources to provide for proper reintegration. Lack of job opportunities and inadequate rehabilitation facilities for most of these returning children often drive them to resort to crime for their survival. This is why the programming for the reintegration process by the different actors is of vital importance. From observation it was clear that programmes developed with indigenous input took into consideration details that were relevant to the local community. On the one hand are the SOWAC programmes which have been drawn up by government officials in the Ministry of Education. While the majority of its workforce is indigenous and they consulted with the locals, the CVI programmes were drafted by international expatriates based in Gulu. On the other hand, the programmes run in St Monica’s are relevant to the local people and the structure of the institution was greatly informed by the fact that the sisters who run the centre are members of that same community. Furthermore, many of the staff members and instructors have first-hand experience of the devastation of the war – they had also lost relatives, friends and homes – and were therefore committed to restoring their communities. Their personal experiences and knowledge of the economic hardships suffered in the area gave them an advantage in developing a programme that is useful and relevant to the local community and the returning children.

There is a tendency that programmes are aimed at formerly abducted children but do not involve them. A factor that could hinder peace agreements is the way in which combatants view their absorption into the community once a conflict comes to an end. To ensure successful reintegration it is imperative that one establishes what the demobilised population – in this case formerly abducted children – think of the process. The success of any reintegration effort is tied to whether those being reintegrated view the reintegration process as meaningful. Their opinions and their interpretations of reality are crucial. However, this will differ from one community to the next and therefore each one must be considered in each programme to ensure successful reintegration. This kind of involvement goes a long way towards ensuring that the returning children reintegrate properly and live peacefully among the rest of the population.

In evaluating reintegration, a basic question that should be asked is whether the activities in reception centres or other aspects have been designed to ensure the freedom of the returnees from want or fear. It is not enough to train these children and give them skills; it is equally important that institutions and organisations take into consideration what comes after that and implement plans to ensure that these children have opportunities within the community. St Monica’s, for example, has put in place a work system in
which they approach potential employers, and it has also established a business tailoring unit in which most of the girls are employed. In contrast, the CVI, while concerned with providing skills and helping the girls recover, did not seem to have planned for the girls for when they left the institution. The ability of a skills or education programme to provide follow-up opportunities after its completion, at least for some of the children, is a prerequisite for ensuring successful reintegration.

There has been a great deal of criticism about the isolation of formerly abducted children with many arguing that there is a need to mix these children with the rest of the community. This is because isolation essentially creates a ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality. The purpose of reintegration is to place the children back into the community and it therefore defeats the purpose if the formerly reintegrated children are put up on their own and away from the rest of the community. This action perpetuates stigmatisation and could lead to more discrimination, thus complicating the integration of the returning children. One such school is SOWAC, which was built especially for formerly abducted children. Admission to the school is based on the production of an amnesty certificate. The St Monica’s and CVI programmes have attempted to mix the children with those who had not been formerly abducted. Although the people running the programmes understand the harsh experiences that some of the abductees have gone through, they have attempted to provide structures in which all children, abducted or not, can experience childhood. Even though the idea in SOWAC is noble, it might be difficult to reintegrate these children with the community after further alienating them by educating them separately.

A further challenge arises in communities that are so impoverished that it is a struggle for children to attend school, and where preferential treatment of children who had been aggressors in the past over those who had not been in the bush further complicates the dynamics of reintegration. In Gulu, for example, many formerly abducted children use their amnesty certificates to obtain scholarships and grants for businesses, while these services are on the whole not available for children who were not abducted. This obviously creates tension between individuals who were abducted and those who were not.

Another challenge when it comes to the reintegration of children arises from mixing boys and girls in the same institution. SOWAC has for example attempted to administer its programmes to a mixed group. However, during the war many of the abducted girls served as wives and were raped by their male counterparts. In this situation the girls always played subordinate roles in comparison to their male counterparts, making it unlikely that placing them in the reintegration programme together with the boys will help them reintegrate into normalcy. As a matter of fact, this action could to some extent be construed to recreating the bush structure in a formalised setting. Furthermore, according to a recent article in a local newspaper, research among these girls has shown that the ex-Lord’s Resistance Army rebels still harass some girls and still consider them to be their wives. An environment where the girls and boys are mixed enhances fear for
some of the returnees and increases the negative power that others have. The high drop-out rate in SOWAC is indicative of a defect in the system structure.

Since a significant number of the female returnees return to their communities with children, reintegration programmes should take this situation into account. Many of the girls who return from the bush are unable to go to school or join any vocation teaching centre because they have to take care of their children. This is an aspect that must be taken into consideration if reintegration is to be considered effective. St Monica’s, for example, has a day-care facility where the girls who are enrolled in their programme can leave their children when they attend school – it has the added benefit that their children also benefit from the basic education they receive there. CVI also makes provision for the children of these girls when planning their programmes. Clearly girls in these programmes feel more socially accepted and this in turn enhances their participation and return to the community.

**Conclusion**

Successful reintegration is the cornerstone of lasting peace. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts must endeavour to ensure that reintegration activities are successful. Governments and the international community must ascertain that those who have returned are equipped with a reasonable chance to live a life that is free from want and fear. To ensure successful reintegration the process must address their needs. The programmes that are created and implemented must be practical and relevant to ensure that they give these formerly abducted children an opportunity to lead normal lives. The organisations must develop programmes that address society’s needs and ensure the relevance of the trades and skills they teach formerly abducted children. Programmes must aim to offer these children a chance at economic independence within the setting of their communities.

The programming should be based on holistic principles, by ensuring economic survival, social freedom and political participation, as these are the essential components for not only effective but also useful reintegration programmes.

In addition, the nature and the causes of the conflict must be addressed. Suffice it to say that the conditions in the north of Uganda are harsh, which makes it extremely difficult to implement ideal reintegration programmes. Many members of the communities live in internally displaced persons camps and with very limited resources it is a constant challenge for those who have returned to survive. One would argue that if reintegration implies taking a returning child to an impossible and harsh reality, there is little sense in trying to reintegrate these abductees. Though most of the children were forcibly conscripted into the Lord’s Resistance Army, the harsh realities of reintegrated life could in many instances frustrate their chances of a normal life and force them to turn to crime to survive. The aim of reintegration programmes must therefore be to ensure that
these returning children are established within the confines of what the local community defines as normal life. This implies that programmes must be realistic, accurate and most of all relevant.

The success of reintegration in Northern Uganda does have huge implications for peace in the region. The desire for lasting peace can only be met if there is proper reintegration which deals with human insecurities and if the root causes of the conflict are addressed.

Notes

2 A Ozerdem, Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants in Afghanistan: lessons learned from a cross cultural perspective, Third World Quarterly 23(5), 961–975.
5 M Berdal, Disarmament and demobilisation after civil wars, London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996.
9 N Ball and B van de Goor, Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration: mapping issues, dilemmas and guiding principles, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, ‘Clingendael’ Conflict Research Unit, 2006.
11 The term ‘boda-boda’ refers to motor cyclists who transport members of the public for a fee.
12 CVI is a Christian international organisation that seeks to restore the voices of children silenced by war.
13 St Monica’s Tailoring School for Girls is a centre that was founded in 1975 by the Italian Missionaries Sisters to promote the cause of disadvantaged girls and young women in pursuit of social justice. In recent years the school has been run by indigenous Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and has worked to provide skills to formerly abducted girls who in most cases are also child mothers.
14 SOWAC is a boarding school facility that was built and funded by the governments of Uganda and Belgium.
16 Ibid, 2.
17 Interview with Norbert Mao, a former Member of Parliament for Gulu, on 27 August 2008.