The demobilisation of military personnel

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Introduction

This chapter considers a key aspect of implementing demilitarisation in Africa. By focusing on military personnel, it will assess to what extent demobilisation can contribute to building more effective security in a less costly way. The data on which the chapter is based come largely from countries where armed conflict has ended but its principles apply to countries which might decide to demobilise, say, as part of a larger demilitarisation process.

Theoretically, armed forces are maintained to protect the security of citizens and the state, and thereby make human development possible. One could also argue, however, that since in so many low-income countries so much money is spent on the armed forces, that downsizing of these forces would save costs and allow additional spending on development. Demobilisation would also send a positive message to other countries in the region. The demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants could thus create opportunities for sustainable peace and human development.

This chapter does not try to assess actual or perceived security threats to countries, nor the most effective and efficient ways of dealing with these threats. It will thus not try to define the optimal size of armed forces. Rather, it examines the dynamics and complexities of actual demobilisation conducted in recent years in Africa. It will show that a positive impact on peace and development is not automatic. Demobilisation does not necessarily lead to a net increase in resources available for direct development expenditures in the short term, given the importance of the costs of resettlement and reintegration of the ex-combatants. In cases of modernisation of the armed forces, demobilisation does not necessarily lead to decreases in military expenditure. There are some situations where the demobilisation processes might negatively affect a peace process.

The next section will present some general theoretical considerations of how demobilisation could contribute to peace and human development, and is followed by a description of some general characteristics of demobilisation and reintegration support in Africa. The next section assesses the development impact of post-war demobilisation exercises in Africa. This is followed by an
analysis of the ways in which the demobilisation and the resettlement and reintegration of ex-combatants could have an impact on the development or recurrence of conflicts. Some conclusions with regard to the central question are drawn in the final section.

The potential contribution of demobilisation

Demobilisation and reintegration are often seen as central components of peace and development policy after a violent conflict. During wars military expenditures are usually very high (as percentage of GDP and government expenditure) and many able-bodied men and women are drawn away from more productive activities. Their move back to civilian activities in a situation where the economy and social and physical infrastructure are usually in a bad shape can contribute to the reconstruction and recovery of a region or country. There is also a more general argument for downsizing of armed forces in Africa—for countries without a recent history of armed conflict. In 2000, about 2.3 million Africans served in their countries official armed forces; and African states spent about US$17.5 billion on their defence forces (BICC 2002). Most of these military expenditures go to wages and salaries. Demobilisation would therefore, through a reduction of military expenditure, normally allow for more development-oriented spending by government, and thereby increased levels of human development. Lower budget deficits would also have a positive effect, particularly on investment and employment opportunities, through lower interest rates and/or lower inflation. In addition to these financial shifts, able-bodied people are released for more economically productive activities.

Besides the economic and development impact, the initiative of downsizing the armed forces would have a positive impact on the image that a country projects. Potential enemies in the region would receive a positive message as a result of the demobilisation. It can thus be perceived as a potentially important confidence building measure.

If the demobilisation is part of a broader security sector reform, some cautionary notes seem appropriate. During wars or under repressive regimes, armed forces often deal with most external and internal security functions. A major challenge then becomes to reorganise the government’s role in protecting its citizens’ security and human rights. To address internal security, often a new national police force needs to be created, which is civilian, professional, well-trained and worthy of the respect of the entire population. It might then seem logical to shift soldiers to the police force. However, this should be approached with reluctance (Neild 2001). Their training might not be appropriate and old habits might die hard. From a military expenditure perspective it might seem positive, but in actual fact similar activities might now be paid for through the police budget rather than the defence budget.

Reductions in the number of military personnel are in some other cases part of a military reform aimed at achieving ‘leaner and meaner’ military organizations. This can include the acquisition of new technologies or the upgrading of existing equipment, or the reorientation of forces towards new roles. Demobilisation has indeed in several cases been used to get rid of these soldiers that do not meet the required standards in respect of age, health, disciplinary problems, etc. Demobilisation does therefore not always equate to a reduction in military capacity or expenditure.

Demobilisation and reintegration in Africa

Over the last 20 years, a considerable number of African countries have experienced processes of demobilisation, resettlement and reintegration, usually associated with the ending of violent conflicts. The demobilisation and reintegration experiences in Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe have all been different, within their distinct political and socio-economic contexts, but also have several similarities.

Reasons to demobilise

Decisions to demobilise are always based on specific military, political and socio-economic circumstances but in somewhat more general terms are usually based on one or more of the following six factors (BICC, 1996 p. 153):

1) Multilateral, bilateral or national peace accord or disarmament agreement
2) Defeat of one of the fighting parties
3) Perceived improvement in the security situation
4) Shortage of adequate funding
5) Perceived economic and development impact of conversion
6) Changing military technologies and/or strategies

The African demobilisations reviewed (Kingma 2000b) confirm this pattern. In most cases the demobilisation followed a peace agreement (factor 1) e.g. in Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. In several cases, the government army was defeated (factor 2). In Ethiopia, for example, the defeat of the Derg army in 1991 led to its total demobilisation. Regarding Eritrea, the defeated army was demobilised in Ethiopia, but the victorious Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) went through a demobilisation as well, following independence in 1993.
In most countries, factors 3 and 4 also played a central role in the decision to demobilise. The security threats had usually changed and could be addressed by different means and/or a smaller army. In most countries, usually with limited capability to mobilise domestic resources, public funding was very limited and the need for development spending was high. Factor 5 did play a role most clearly in South Africa. The future of the apartheid era armed forces was agreed upon in a lengthy negotiation process and then formalised by the new democratic government in 1994. After the integration of several forces into the new South African National Defence Force (SANDEF), demobilisation – or ‘rationalisation’ as it is called in South Africa – was intended to allow spending on the vast development needs of the country.

Factor 6 – changing military technologies and/or strategies – has been less common as a driving force behind demobilisation in Africa. In the case of Uganda in the mid-1990s, however, this appears to have played a role. The government’s objectives of the demobilisation were explicitly threefold: budgetary, social and military. The military objective was to retain a leaner, better-trained and motivated armed force. It is quite clear that pressure from the group of large development assistance donors has pushed this decision. On the other hand, Uganda appears to have made clever use of the momentum. One could even argue that the donors have assisted in modernising its armed forces, by providing alternatives for many soldiers regarded as below the quality required for a modernised force.

The demobilisation exercise

Given the specific circumstances in the various countries, the procedures of the actual demobilisation exercises varied considerably. Generally, once the decision to demobilise was made, practical plans needed to be worked out and financing obtained. Successful post-war demobilisation and resettlement require good data for planning purposes, effective logistics and management, and substantial resources for shelter, registration, transport, provision of basic needs, etc (BICC 1996; Colletta et al 1996a, 1966b; Ball 1997; Kingma 2000a; and World Bank 1993). In several cases, such as Ethiopia (1990s), Namibia and South Africa, the demobilisation required that several groups of combatants be repatriated from neighbouring countries.

The observed cases of demobilisation usually involved a large number of different actors, each with their own roles and interests. They ranged from the demobilised combatants themselves, their families and associations, to other groups trying to reintegrate the security forces, the business community, the government, democratic opposition groups, NGOs, donors and UN agencies. In some demobilising countries, for example Mozambique, the international community played an active role in supporting the demobilisation, resettlement and reintegration process; while in others, such as Eritrea in the 1990s, the new government conducted most of the activities itself. In several cases, the complexities and political sensitivities of the exercises were particularly high, because regular soldiers were demobilised along with ex-guerrilla fighters and members of militia groups.

Resettlement and reintegration

Leaving the armed forces is only the first part of the demobilisation process. Subsequently usually follows the resettlement of ex-combatants in the location where they prefer to live; and finally, reintegration – in which they find a new and productive role in civilian life. The last phase is basically open-ended. Although reintegration is essentially a single, but complex process, which also involves the family of the demobilised, a distinction is often made between different components of reintegration, namely economic, social and political. The process also has psychological aspects, as most ex-combatants go through a process of adjusting attitudes and expectations, and many are still dealing with traumatic experiences related to the war.

The word reintegration is in some cases a misnomer, as not all ex-combatants return to their area of origin. Sometimes their skills have more relevance and marketable value in other areas. In certain situations, after the ending of the war, the villages from which soldiers or guerrilla fighters came sometimes no longer exist. And in cases where the ex-combatants have committed atrocities in or near their own communities (as happened at times in Mozambique), they would find it difficult to return to these communities. More generally, we should note that ex-combatants and their societies have often been considerably transformed by wars, especially in countries where the conflict has lasted for a long time, such as in the Eritrean liberation war.

Development impact

We have outlined some of the contributions that demobilisation exercises could potentially make to peace, security and development and provided background to demobilisations in Africa over the past two decades, most of them following the termination of an armed conflict. An important question is whether the potential benefits actually materialised in both the short and long term?

The African demobilisation and reintegration support efforts that were more or less completely implemented achieved fairly mixed results. Some have been implemented rather systematically, while others happened sponta-
neously. Some were conducted rather smoothly; many faced considerable problems in their implementation. There have also been some outright failures to demobilise. In Angola, demobilisation was tried, in both the early and mid-1990s, but both efforts failed and the country slipped back in full-scale war in late 1998. The demobilisations in Eritrea and Ethiopia in the mid-1990s were initially quite successful. However, they were completely reversed after the outbreak of war in May 1998. Renewed demobilisation and reintegration recommenced in both countries in 2001.

Assessing the impact of demobilisation and reintegration in terms of development and security is difficult, particularly because it is hard to distinguish from the impact of the often associated post-war processes and interventions such as democratisation, economic stabilisation, fiscal reform, infrastructural rehabilitation and repatriation of refugees. In addition, accurate data on military expenditure and broader resource use by the military and rebel movements is hard to obtain – if at all available. It is therefore difficult to establish the size of a possible financial peace dividend.

Despite the above difficulties, an assessment of the impact of demobilisations on the basis of the experiences in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Uganda in the mid-1990s has been conducted. It found that there were generally no major direct financial benefits from demobilisation (Kingma 2000). Savings were often not as high as expected, and the costs of the demobilisation and reintegration support have proved to be very high. However, the savings of wider resources were in some cases considerably broader, because not only financial resources were used to support the war. The research also indicates that if the reduction of the number of military personnel were kept at the lower level and the number of ex-combatants eligible for pensions is not too high, financial benefits would be likely to materialise in the long-run.

In most of the African countries that implemented demobilisation and reintegration programs, post-war economic conditions were such that these activities could not be funded solely by domestic resources. Governments and NGOs had limited capacity and resources. External funding contributed to the speed with which the demobilisation and resettlement was implemented, and in principle freed up resources for productive use elsewhere. When we consider how the demobilisation and reintegration support were financed in most cases, a fiscal peace dividend appears quite quickly, when external donors provided substantial financial support. This, however, does not take into consideration the loss of any external military assistance received during the war. The studies also showed that the educational and skills level of the ex-combatants was generally low. This particularly affected the success of economic reintegration in urban areas. It should however be noted that despite low levels, in Eritrea and Ethiopia the average educational level of ex-combatants was still higher than that of other civilians, possibly because the ex-combatants did possess some additional skills. However, although ex-soldiers in Ethiopia appear to be generally more educated than the rest of population, they do not appear to have acquired much by way of skills for successful self-employment. The Ethiopia study (Ayalaw and Derecon, 2000) found that although education generally tends to result in quite substantial earnings in rural areas, for ex-soldiers these earnings were only sufficient to compensate them for lower asset (livestock) levels. It should be noted that in addition to low education and skill levels, the combatants released were in some cases those with the most health problems. In Uganda, many ex-soldiers died soon after their demobilisation, most as a result of AIDS.

Factors determining successful demobilisation

In addition to the development impact discussed above, there are ways in which the resettlement and reintegration of ex-combatants could have an impact on the reoccurrence or development of conflicts. Generally, demobilisation has the potential to contribute to peacebuilding and human security. In Mozambique, for example, it directly contributed to a decline in the threats to the rural population (Baptista Lundin et al, 2000). However, there are also a number of factors that are important in determining whether the cessation of armed conflict is sustained.

Political and institutional environment

The progress and impact of demobilisation and reintegration depend to a large extent on the political and institutional environment in which they occur. In cases where there is hardly a state or any external power to keep parties to their agreement, demobilisations have little chance of success. Ideally, the state would guide and protect the processes of demobilisation and resettlement. If the state is not able to protect such people, even minor disputes or conflicts can escalate into armed conflicts between groups. Tensions and minor conflicts are inevitable in fluctuating and difficult socio-economic situations. However, it is the lack of mechanisms to resolve such disputes peacefully that can lead to the escalation of conflict and the outbreak of violence. During the demobilisations in Mozambique and Namibia, the UN played such a role. The failure of the first two demobilisation efforts in Angola showed that, even with UN presence, cessation of hostilities and the political will of all parties are the minimum requirements for success.

The confidence and security perceptions of citizens, including ex-combatants, is also affected by how past and ongoing human rights violations of members of the armed forces are handled. This is not a simple matter, and
several incidents happened during the encampment and demobilisation process. However, there have been few incidents directly related to reintegration. Although there have been criminal activities involving ex-combatants, it is not clear that they are more inclined to crime or violence than other citizens facing similar hardship.

Availability of weapons
An additional connection exists between demobilisation and the potential for conflict, as a result of easier access to weapons. Although in some countries, the disarmament of the demobilised was carefully conducted and strictly controlled, in other cases large numbers of weapons remained in the hands of ex-combatants, or ended up in the hands of others. For example, inadequate disarmament of combatants in Mozambique has significantly increased the number of uncontrolled weapons circulating in southern Africa. Considerable numbers of weapons are also believed to have leaked from government forces during and after several demobilisations. Small arms are easy to smuggle across the long and porous borders of Africa, and easy access to these weapons increases the risk of people resorting to violence in case of disputes.

Social and cultural norms and psychological impact
In the complex process of reintegration, conflicts might result from social and cultural differences that have developed between civilians and fighters during the war. Even if ex-combatants do find employment, their military norms and lack of certain life-skills might create difficulties. In addition, it has been shown that ex-combatants tend to identify themselves as such for a considerable period after they have been demobilised. This has been particularly noticeable in Eritrea, Mozambique (combatants from the liberation struggle), Namibia and Zimbabwe, especially when ex-combatants face difficulties with reintegration or perceive that they have not been sufficiently supported or rewarded.

Female ex-fighters, as well as other women in war-affected communities, face specific problems once war has ended. They have usually acquired new roles as a result of the war, but men or the wider community often refuse to accept these roles in peacetime. In Eritrea, for example, where about one-third of the fighters of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) were women, they were expected by men to return to their traditional roles after the war. A high divorce rate has been observed. In a survey conducted in Eritrea in 1997, 27 per cent of the female ex-fighters was divorced or separated and four percent were widows (Bruchhaus and Mehreteab 2000).

Economic opportunities and competition for natural resources
Opportunities for ex-combatants to establish new livelihoods have a crucial bearing on the success of demobilisation, and formal sector jobs are often scarce after a period of war. Even if the exact sources of conflict cannot be pinpointed, most intra-state conflicts are the result of weak states, poor governance, and poverty, deprivation and inequality. One potential source of disputes is access to arable land, or the reclaiming of property in general. In Zimbabwe, the continuous struggle for land has been further complicated by violently expressed demands by ex-combatants for more equitable access to land (Chaiyto 2000).

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Partial as a result of a lack of alternative opportunities, significant numbers of ex-soldiers of the former South African Defence Force (SADF) and some other African armies have found their way into mercenary companies. The actual number is not known, and it is hard to assess the impact of the ‘supply side’ on the activities of mercenary firms in the region. In many countries, such as Mozambique and Uganda, private security firms also hire large groups of ex-soldiers. In these cases, the de-militarisation of the state through demobilisation seems to have fed the militarisation of wider society.

Initial fears that demobilisation would lead to a boom in crime have not been confirmed in the four countries studied (Kingma 2000). In Mozambique, usually creates some dilemmas. It is generally felt that soldiers and ex-combatants who violated human rights should be appropriately punished. But harsh punishments might increase tensions, for example, between ex-soldiers and the rest of society. In addition, some groups might believe that the violations they perpetrated during the war should be treated differently to those of others. In particular, the issuing of blanket amnesties has been very controversial. African nations have thus far handled these issues of transitional justice in a number of ways.
Yet another cause of potential future conflict lies in post-war trauma that is often not adequately dealt with. In the demobilisations reviewed, many people have been victims or perpetrators of horrendous violence. This has left deep emotional and psychological scars among ex-combatants and others, and this may be reflected in depression, apathy or rage. Post-war trauma, especially in combination with alcohol or drug addiction, could disturb public life and affect the capacity for non-violent resolution of conflict.

With regard to the threats indicated above, special attention needs to be given to former child soldiers – especially to girl ex-soldiers, who face multiple problems after demobilisation. At demobilisation, these young ex-combatants often lack parental care and access to education. Many former child soldiers have been seriously traumatised by the brutal experiences they have undergone, which usually have a profound impact on their social and emotional development. If reintegration of these former child soldiers fails, it could lead to new cycles of violence, as they could easily be recruited into armed groups.

Appropriateness of reintegration assistance

Reintegration support has the potential to contribute to peacebuilding. It has indeed helped to buy time for large numbers of ex-combatants and has contributed to establishing new livelihoods. Assistance in the process of resettlement and reintegration has usually been provided by governments, local and international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral agencies.

Reintegration assistance can negatively affect peacebuilding and lead to tensions and conflict if there are perceived to be unjustified inequalities in the assistance that different groups receive. In planning for demobilisation and reintegration support, policymakers face the dilemma of whether or not to treat ex-soldiers as a special target group, especially if some are blamed for atrocities committed during the war. It has been argued that some types of direct support to ex-soldiers and guerrillas is justified (Kingma 2000a). However, any support given to ex-combatants has to strike a balance between dealing with their specific needs and not creating discontent among the other members of their communities. Among analysts, a consensus has developed that special aid for ex-combatants and their dependants is required during the immediate demobilisation and resettlement phase, but that support for reintegration should be aimed as much as possible at the entire community and be part of general rehabilitation efforts.

The question of the use of foreign military to help in the delivery of demobilisation and resettlement assistance needs to be raised. Because of the logistical skills and equipment available, it is tempting to use the military in the delivery of assistance in difficult situations. However, there are serious doubts as to whether using the military is cheaper than civilian government agencies or NGOs which can do the same job. Soldiers have the tendency to militarise the social environment, and this generally does not contribute to self-reliance and peacebuilding. Military organisations are often interested in winning hearts and minds, for instance by building bridges and health-care facilities. But they often still have to learn the basic principles of development co-operation; for example, letting go of a top-down approach, taking account of long-term sustainability, involving women in the process, and showing the required cultural sensitivity. There are thus many grounds for keeping the delivery of assistance as demilitarised as possible.

Timing can be critical in resettlement and reintegration assistance. During both demobilisation efforts in Angola thus far, frustration and upheaval among the ex-combatants occurred at the point of encampment and discharge stage because the provision of basic needs such as water, sanitation, shelter and food was insufficient. Many similar problems flared up in Mozambique as well, largely due to the urge to get the demobilisation process over with quickly. These experiences show that if the prospects for the ex-combatants are not clear, and the period of encampment is too long, violence and rebellion are likely to undermine the demobilisation and resettlement process and, potentially, the overall peace process. It is worth noting that if the reintegration support relies heavily on external funding, it is possible that terminating or scaling down of aid can lead to the collapse of the reintegration process, leading to frustration and unrest.

Conclusions

This chapter has analysed demobilisation processes in Africa, asking whether demobilisation is an alternative way to increase security. Experiences with post-war demobilisation in Africa have shown that in terms of impact, some had a beneficial effect on peace and human development, while others had a neutral or negative effect on these processes. We have seen that demobilisation can certainly have a positive impact, but does not automatically address the major development and security challenges in societies emerging out of war. The political context and supporting measures are often critical. The clearest example is the case of Angola, which has shown twice that the organisation of demobilisation cannot substitute for political will. Demobilisation has little chance to succeed if one of the major parties and its leadership are not fully committed. Only on the basis of a real political solution of the conflict, will demobilisation, resettlement and reintegration support be natural – and often
inevitable – components of post-war conflict transformation, rehabilitation and development. Research on several demobilisations in Africa has shown that the financial benefits of post-war demobilisation are not always as positive as hoped for. Savings as a result of demobilisation are often not as high as expected and come slowly, while the actual direct costs of the demobilisation and reintegration support have been shown to be high. Moreover, as pointed out in the previous section, the complex processes of demobilisation, resettlement and reintegration can also result in new social and political conflicts. Even if the conversion is managed smoothly at the technical level, it has the potential of causing social and inter-group tensions.

The benefits of demobilisation are likely to appear further down the road. If a reduction of the number of military personnel is to be kept at the lower level and the number of ex-combatants eligible for pensions is not too high, financial benefits are likely to materialise in the long run. We should also note that many of the problems indicated in the above analysis are due especially to the post-war context and characteristics of the demobilisation and reintegration processes themselves. In a more stable political environment the benefits of demobilisation will be more manifest. The fundamental potential for benefits from conversion still stands. A gradual, well-planned and transparent downsizing of the armed forces would in the medium- to long-term produce the opportunity to spend public funds more productively, and enhance confidence in the region. Demobilisation could be directly linked to – or integrated in – development policy. Its impact would largely depend on the way it is managed. Initial costs and risks as indicated above should certainly be considered, but can be prevented or outweighed by the benefits.

Notes
1. This chapter is part of ongoing research at the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) assessing the impact of demobilisation and reintegration support. It draws among others on research that the author conducted within collaborative research projects on the Impact of Demobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa, managed by BICC, and on Demilitarization and Peace-building in Southern Africa, coordinated by BICC and the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in Cape Town. Funding for the research by the Volkswagen Foundation (Germany) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (Ottawa, Canada) is gratefully acknowledged.
2. A considerable body of literature exists on the demobilisation and reintegration experiences in various African countries, for example Angola (e.g. Ball and Campbell 1998), Eritrea (e.g. Bruchhaus and Mehreteab 2000; Klingebiel et al. 1995), Ethiopia (e.g. Ayalew and Dercon 2000; Colletta, et al. 1996b), Liberia (e.g. Specht and van Empel 1998), Mozambique (e.g. Coelho and Vines 1994; Barnes 1997; Dolan and Schafer 1997; Baptista Lundin et al 2000) Namibia (e.g. Preston 1994; Colletta et al. 1996b), South Africa (e.g. Motumi and Hudson, 1995; Motumi and McKenzi, 1998; Marluke 1999; Molakalene 1999; Batchelor et al., 2000), Uganda (e.g. Colletta, et al 1996b; Kazoora 1998) and Zimbabwe (e.g. Musemwa 1995 Rupiya 1995). For an overview of demobilisation and reintegration experiences in Africa, see (Kingma 2000b).

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