Introduction

We must realise from the outset that there are limitations on what we may learn from the use of historical case studies. The variables are so many, so diffuse and so complex, changing unevenly and in a non-linear fashion through time, that even where we are able to lay claim to perfect knowledge, we would find our efforts to construct predictive theory frustrated by the particularity of events and circumstances.

That said, historical case studies remain all we have to guide us as we struggle to come to terms with a challenging but otherwise uncertain world. A large degree of modesty is becoming, therefore, as we patch together ‘lessons learned’ to construct some heuristic ‘guide to best practices’.

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)

DDR – as the activities involving disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration have become known – broadly consists of three related processes considered vital to post-conflict peace-building. Disarmament, naturally, implies depriving combatants of the means with which to continue or resume hostilities. Demobilisation and reintegration seek to reduce the economic and manpower burden on society of sustaining a large standing military force, and reintegration describes the effort to assist ex-combatants wishing to return to rewarding and productive civilian livelihoods. Taken as a whole, DDR seeks to reduce the will and ability of combatants to return to armed conflict.

As should be evident, however, this is only part of a broader peace-building process, which must also attempt to reduce the economic, social and political incentives for a return to violence. There are large and impressive manuals on how to do DDR, with diagrams, organograms, and advice on do’s and don’ts. They are necessary reading for anyone about to embark on organising a DDR operation; necessary, but certainly not sufficient. Like so many technical manuals, they often describe a dispassionate and bloodless world, far removed from the harsh realities faced by confused, often terrified and traumatised,
people for whom the transition from war to peace involves new and sometimes equally frightening uncertainties and risks. Unlike the peacekeepers, they do not leave to go elsewhere at the end of the process, they continue to live it. And often, this being the nature of donor fatigue, they do so alone, for the ‘modern world’s’ attention span has made it difficult for us to come to a full understanding of the protracted and often unrewarding tasks that constitute peace-building.

It is widely argued, and generally accepted among practitioners, that the acronym DDR may actually contribute to misperceptions about the sequencing of the three related processes thus grouped. Informed opinion suggests that the planning for the R (reintegration) should precede by some time the attempted execution of the DDs (disarmament and demobilisation), if the latter two exercises are to be useful. Unfortunately, much media and political attention is concentrated on the highly visible, and relatively easy, DD processes and very little on the relatively difficult, R.

Reintegration is vital if a return to war is to be avoided in the near to medium term. But this requires the transformation of certain of the conditions that may have contributed to the eruption of conflict in the first instance, or may have arisen as a direct consequence of the war environment. In particular, R’s success is predicated upon the movement from a ‘conflict economy’ to a ‘peace economy’, which implies not only a change of economic activities, but of control over the levers of economic production and exchange themselves.

It will be apparent that this is easier said than done, not least because the ‘peace economy’ that preceded the outbreak of conflict may itself have been incapable of sustaining the livelihoods of the local population or key segments of it. This will almost certainly have contributed to the attractions of violent solutions to local pressures and discontents. The conflict would also have seen the emergence or consolidation of new power relationships, including those concerning the configuration of relations of production and exchange. The beneficiaries of such power shifts probably will be reluctant to trade their hard-won advantages for the uncertain gains of peace, especially if the new arrangements seem impermanent. Appeals to the greater good of the population are unlikely to carry much weight with local entrepreneurs of violence.

This leaves the delicate question of how would-be peacemakers are to accommodate potential spoilers in any new politico-economic dispensation without openly seeming to reward armed recalcitrance.

West Africa

West Africa’s zone of conflict embraces a number of contiguous states: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea. The dynamics of the several conflicts involving these countries feed into each other in a way that makes the
‘resolution’ of one without the others virtually impossible. The region illustrates that ‘conflict economies’ are not circumscribed by international boundaries, and that creating or sustaining a ‘peace economy’ in one state may be rendered virtually impossible by the existence of a ‘conflict economy’ next door. Indeed, it may be argued that this – as much as overlapping issues of political grievance – is precisely how the contagion of war is spread regionally, particularly where the state is weak and its borders extremely porous.

In West Africa, the DDR process has already been hailed, both prematurely and mistakenly, as an example worthy of emulation by other peackeeping missions. Certainly, statistics were produced suggesting the surrender of a large number of small arms and the willingness of numbers of presumed combatants to return to pacific livelihoods. It is conveniently forgotten, however, that reaching this stage depended on the use of robust force to quell the outward signs of armed dissidence, and that the reconstitution of the state machinery is taking place under conditions that may be likened to an international protectorate.

The international community will be unlikely to embark on such a costly exercise in every case requiring similar treatment. Neither is the success of this venture in any way assured. Political arrangements suggest a return to much of the status quo ante bellum, and control of the diamond fields, which precipitated and provided the funding for conflict, remains contested. The remainder of the national economy is largely subsistence in nature, and the results of training ex-combatants or disgruntled youth prior to insertion into notional livelihoods are going to be uncertain.

It is little wonder that the United Nations (UN) Security Council has decided to extend the mandate of its reduced Sierra Leone peacekeeping mission; ostensibly to complete the rehabilitation of state structures, but also to hold the ring against those from within and without tempted to return to a criminal or combat economy.

Similar caveats could be issued about the situation in neighbouring Liberia, where the influence of Charles Taylor’s economic networks may have been curbed by exile, but certainly not terminated. Making peace or legal economic operations an attractive policy option for local power brokers will remain an outcome difficult to realise. In Côte d’Ivoire the peace process is threatened in more fundamental and obvious ways, and the rivals are unlikely to embrace disarmament, or each other, until the political impasse is breached.

**Great Lakes**

In this region, too, the pronouncements of diplomats and politicians have outrun reality in ways that suggest the availability of easier options than is, in fact, the case. The fanfare that accompanied the signing of peace accords in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi, while reflecting common
relief at the reduction in levels of bloody conflict, have not marked the end of civil strife. Indeed, the political will of local actors to commit fully to the realisation of the agreements to which they are party must be in serious doubt.

In the case of the DRC there are formal agreements outlining the process by which the internal parties will disarm and demobilise and a new national army formed. Of actual progress towards this end, however, there is little evidence, despite the recognition that this is a vital first stage in the reconstitution of a functioning Congolese state.

It would appear from recent events that most, if not all, of the contesting factions and their leaders regard the likely retention of power at local level as preferable to its possible loss in a centralised system. The international community’s principal local tool, the UN mission, seems incapable of swaying events one way or another, and finds itself isolated in its commitment to a peace agreement ridiculed in practice by the local principals. In such circumstances, DDR remains a cynical joke.

In Burundi, the peace accords reached at Arusha after such protracted effort – and subsequently amended to permit the inclusion of the major armed rebel faction – have been only partially executed, not least in that neither the army (FAB) nor the rebel FDD are willing to proceed with DDR until such time as they have jointly defeated the FNL. Even assuming this victorious outcome on the battlefield, the combatants will retain their arms to assure their dominance over the rival civilian Tutsi and Hutu parties. The idea that peace and disarmament can be achieved in time for presidential or legislative elections to be held is nothing short of laughable. If the FNL is removed from the equation, however temporarily, the potential to return to violent conflict will remain essential for anyone seeking to dominate the political arena.

That the UN has now assumed responsibility from the African Union for the monitoring of this troubled process will have been greeted with some relief in Addis Ababa, and not only for financial reasons.

Conclusion

The international community persists in focusing attention on the technical, military aspects of peacekeeping and peace-building, presumably because these appear doable and relatively short term. The matter of addressing the underlying internal political, economic and internationally structural dynamics would involve decisions and commitments on which the UN system is unable to reach or sustain consensus.

‘Successful’ DDR by itself looks good in the reports of the secretary-general and in the media soundbites and news clips. It is visible, but in the contexts described above, it is illusory.