

# NOREF Policy Brief

## Demobilisation and disarmament in peace processes

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### Executive summary

This policy brief explores the conditions under which non-state armed groups generate and maintain the political will to restore the state's monopoly over the use of force by examining lessons learnt from recent peace processes with regard to the timing, sequencing, ownership, and modalities of disarmament and demobilisation. It argues that rebel movements will usually only agree to formally disarm and disband their troops and dismantle their command structures once they are confident that they can ensure the safety and well-being of their combatants, that comprehensive agreements have been reached over the substantive conflict issues, and that their political aims will be achieved, or at least that they will be able to pursue them effectively by non-violent

means. Practical recommendations are thus offered for mediators and peacebuilding agencies to facilitate comprehensive negotiations; support a synchronised implementation of disarmament and state reform; delay demobilisation processes in order to maintain cohesion in fragile post-war transitions; suggest context-sensitive disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration terminologies; design appropriate protection measures for combatants and their communities; increase local ownership by supporting participatory and self-managed transition schemes; and verify the parties' implementation of their commitments as confidence-building measures.

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## Introduction

The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of non-state armed groups in the aftermath of intra-state violent conflicts has become a crucial component of post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding programmes, prompted by the realisation that peace and stability are heavily dependent on the restoration of the state's monopoly over the use of legitimate force. From the perspective of combatants, however, attempts by the state or international agencies to disarm and dissolve their organisations as quickly as possible during a peace process in the absence of (or as a precondition to) substantive measures to address the root causes of conflict fail to take into account their acute security dilemmas during volatile war-to-peace transitions and tend to be perceived merely as “counter-insurgency by other means”. In fact, in recent years there has been an increasing acknowledgement within the peacebuilding community that DDR and security sector reform (SSR) are mutually dependent, and are in turn heavily conditioned by their broader political environment.

In this context, the purpose of this policy brief is to explore the conditions under which non-state armed groups generate and maintain the political will to restore the state's monopoly over the use of force by examining the timing, sequencing, ownership, and modalities of disarmament and demobilisation during the negotiation and implementation of peace accords. The findings are based on a recent participatory research project bringing out the experience and self-analysis of former combatants who have made the shift from state challengers to peace- and statebuilding agents in South Africa, Colombia, El Salvador, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Burundi, Southern Sudan, Nepal and Aceh.<sup>1</sup>

## Security dilemmas encountered by combatants during peace processes

From the perspective of most armed opposition movements, challenging state authority through the use of force does not represent an end in itself, but is envisioned strictly as a means of achieving their broader sociopolitical objectives. Their armed insurgencies are rooted in collective grievances against undemocratic state policies, often based on experiences of discrimination and oppression. Therefore, from their perspective, their renunciation of force and the dismantlement of their illegal militant structures are interdependent with the transition of power towards more accountable and legitimate state institutions that can provide a more secure environment for them and the ethnic or social constituency that they (claim to) represent.

Arms management indeed represents a highly sensitive component of peace processes. On the one hand, for state actors, the readiness of rebel movements to decommission their troops represents an important confidence-building measure and a guarantee that they are genuinely ready to commit to conflict transformation. On the other side of the conflict divide, however, acute strategic and security concerns also have to be taken into consideration. For non-state actors, the possession and use of weapons might perform a number of complementary functions, including a strategic role in the fight for military supremacy, a safety role in the provision of physical protection for fighters and their surrounding environment, a governance role in community policing, a political role as a “bargaining chip” to be exchanged for political concessions, and a symbolic role through which combatants create their collective identity. Consequently, premature demands on the part of governments towards their armed challengers to disarm in the early stages of (or even prior to) political negotiations represent a major concern for such combatants. Security challenges are particularly acute for armed groups engaged in bilateral peace processes with the government while other guerrilla groups, paramilitaries or criminal gangs are still roaming the country.

<sup>1</sup> See Véronique Dudouet, Hans J. Giessmann & Katrin Planta, eds, *Post-war Security Transitions: Participatory Peacebuilding after Asymmetric Conflicts*, London, Routledge, 2012; and Véronique Dudouet, Hans J. Giessmann & Katrin Planta, *From Combatants to Peacebuilders: A Case for Inclusive, Participatory and Holistic Security Transitions*, Policy Report, Berlin, Berghof Foundation, 2012.

When it comes to the demobilisation of illegal underground organisations, a similar contrast can be observed between international policy guidelines and reality on the ground. On the one hand, the United Nations Integrated DDR Standards (UNIDDRS) recommend a swift dismantlement of militant structures (including decision-making bodies and chains of command) after a cessation of hostilities, so that members can demobilise and register for reintegration schemes. However, abrupt demobilisation might create a security vacuum, leading to disorder and disorientation among former combatants after being dissociated from their group and thus suffering disruption to their collective identity. Growing feelings of impatience and discontent with the slowness of the peacebuilding process can also trigger a return to violence by unsatisfied splinter groups, in the absence of cohesive structures preserving internal discipline and hierarchy. Symbolically, a one-sided demobilisation of non-statutory forces while the state's security apparatus remains largely intact might also create feelings of unfairness and imbalance, all the more because peace negotiations usually take place in situations of relative power balance (or "mutually hurting stalemate").

## Right timing of arms management and demobilisation

Empirical evidence in recent peace processes contradicts conventional assumptions that the readiness of irregular armed groups to disarm unilaterally is a necessary precondition to start talks, or that DDR should precede SSR. Instead, in these processes, negotiations over arms management only took place towards the end of the peace talks, and DDR provisions were carefully embedded within comprehensive peace accords that aimed to redress the root causes of violence by transforming state institutions and offering governance incentives to former state challengers. Alternative measures were undertaken to build confidence among the government or national security forces towards the peace process, and to secure their political will to undergo the necessary reforms, such as cessations of hostilities or ceasefires, that demonstrated the parties' readiness to renounce the use of force.

Once decommissioning modalities are spelt out in a peace agreement, their implementation should be carefully timed, in strict reciprocity and, if possible, simultaneously with appropriate security or political measures by the state, such as the demilitarisation (downsizing or withdrawal) of regular armed forces, the election of a democratic government or a constituent assembly, or the implementation of power devolution measures.

Similar observations can be made with regard to the timing of demobilisation. Internal consultation and debate that precede, accompany or follow inter-party negotiations play a major role in influencing the move from militancy to negotiated transitions. This includes horizontal debates between various leaders or factions, but also vertical communication down the chain of command in order to gather support for a non-violent political strategy, educate members and supporters about the peace accord's provisions and their various professional (re)conversion options, and maintain intra-group discipline and compliance during volatile peace processes. Therefore, co-ordination and communication channels should be maintained during the early stages of peace implementation through the cantonment of troops in assembly areas, the formation of self-run security organs as "interim stabilisation measures",<sup>2</sup> and/or the provisional maintenance of command structures in order to retain control over combatants and prevent the creation of security vacuums. This need is especially acute in cases of interim or vague peace accords that delay the resolution of core political issues until future negotiations, referendums or technical agreements are initiated.

Once post-war political democratisation (or self-governance) and security sector integration options have been clarified, the demobilisation of non-statutory security forces should be accompanied by the consolidation of civilian entities – be it in the form of political parties or former combatant associations and other support structures.

2 See Nat Colletta & Robert Muggah, "Rethinking post-war security promotion", *Journal of Security Sector Management*, 7(1), 2009: 1-25.

## Additional security guarantees

Besides a careful timing and sequencing of DDR processes, mediators or peacebuilding agencies might introduce other measures in order to increase combatants' safety and political will to comply with their commitment to disarm and demobilise.

- *Context-sensitive terminology*

Given the negative connotations of the term "surrender", which most rebel groups associate with "disarmament", alternative labels should be found in consultation with the respective parties. The term "decommissioning" is often found to be more acceptable, because it is associated with a voluntary process of "putting weapons beyond use", while the terms "management of arms and armies", "demilitarisation" or "forces reduction" highlight the importance of parallel and equal processes of arms reduction and/or downsizing on the part of both statutory and non-statutory forces.

- *Combatant protection measures*

Peace processes should also encompass the provision of specific measures to protect the lives and freedom of demobilised combatants. These may include (conditional) amnesty provisions, de-proscription from terrorist blacklists and other measures to legalise their status, or individual protection schemes to reduce fighters' concerns over being attacked after having given up their arms, such as their relocation in safe areas or the deployment of bodyguards and armoured vehicles to safeguard their lives. Rebel negotiators themselves often design various schemes as a backup in case of a breakdown in the peace process, such as the underestimation of the number of troops and weapons during negotiations (combined with weapons caches being kept long after official disarmament deadlines).

- *Securing ownership through participatory and self-managed schemes*

(Former) combatants should also be recognised and promoted as active peacebuilding agents and partners, based on the understanding that they will only feel genuinely committed to a transition process if they are centrally involved in driving it. Rebel movements should thus be encouraged to carry out self-managed DDR schemes, for

instance by collectively destroying their own weapons rather than handing them over to the state, or by leaders formally instructing their members to move forward exclusively by non-violent political means.

- *International monitoring and verification*

In light of the principle of local ownership, international intervention should be confined to light-handed roles such as providing capacity building through technical and financial assistance, enhancing security through the physical presence of international peacekeepers (e.g. in cantonments), or monitoring the parties' effective implementation of their commitments. For instance, international commissions to verify the process of decommissioning can be called for to secure the confidence of state institutions and the broader public that the former state challengers are genuinely committed to putting their arms beyond use.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Based on these various findings, various recommendations can be offered to international actors intervening in contexts of intra-state peace processes, such as third-party mediators during back-channel and formal negotiations that precede or follow peace accords, as well as international peacekeeping missions and peacebuilding agencies during the early stages of peace implementation. Such actors should:

- advise state actors not to insist on unilateral disarmament as a necessary precondition for substantive agreements on the roots causes of the conflict, or on a premature dismantling of rebel organisations and command structures, as they can play important security and symbolic roles in volatile post-war contexts;
- be aware of context-specific sensitivities (and symbolic or political connotations) that surround the terminology of arms management, and explore mutually acceptable concepts and labels;
- encourage the parties to adopt a holistic approach to arms management comprising reciprocal demilitarisation measures by state and non-state armies alike, and

- parallel implementation time frames for decommissioning and state reform;
- suggest appropriate individual and collective protection schemes to ensure the safety of demobilising combatants;
- devise, in conjunction with the conflict stakeholders, context-relevant interim mechanisms to maintain cohesion and discipline in the early phase of peace implementation;
- support combatants' ownership of arms management and demobilisation schemes;
- co-ordinate the work of the various peacebuilding agencies in charge of supporting DDR, SSR and democratisation processes in order to ensure their coherent planning and parallel implementation; and
- if required by the parties as confidence-building measures, monitor or verify their compliance with their agreed commitments.