

# DDR and Return in the DRC – A Foolish Investment or Necessary Risk?

*Tatiana Carayannis and Aaron Pangburn argue that it is time to rethink Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programs in the Democratic Republic of Congo.*

**This article is part of our #LSEReturn series, exploring themes around [Displacement and Return](#).**

After numerous cycles of violence, ceasefires, and peace deals, thousands of Congolese former rebels have demobilised, disarmed, and tried to return to their communities of origin in search of a better life. Some entered formal, internationally-supported Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programs (often with support of the UN or World Bank), received skills training and/or financial assistance, while others self-demobilised and embarked on the challenge of return reliant on their own connections to survive. Despite the high numbers of combatants who have participated in these programs, armed groups continue to plague the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The remobilisation of ex-combatants is quite frequent, and few realise the improvement of livelihoods these programs promise. Even with the evolution of DDR policy, which now recognises the need to integrate communal social-economic development, in practice, [immediate security gains](#) are still prioritised over sustained efforts at supporting reintegration and return. This lack of support and attention to demobilised combatants is part of the purpose for the [Politics of Return](#) project, as few have tried to analyse how they manage the difficulties of everyday life, and engage with unfamiliar public authorities. [Frustration and disappointment](#) are often the most prevalent sentiments and in some communities in the DRC, the demobilised have been branded the “eternally dissatisfied.”<sup>[1]</sup>

## *Democratic Republic of Congo*

The latest DDR plan, the third major national initiative since the end of the Congo Wars in 2002, was finalised in July 2014, with the intention to address the approximate 12,000 combatants remaining in the DRC. However, the rollout of this plan encountered many obstacles, including the [high-profile starvation tragedy in Kotakoli camp](#) where over 100 ex-combatants and their dependents died awaiting the next stage of the program. Since then, the process has continued to run into delays, varied significantly from the original text, and even prompted [episodes of protest and violent crackdowns between ex-combatants and soldiers in Kitona military base](#) outside of Muanda, Kongo Central. This had led to a great deal of reluctance from donors to fund it and from armed actors to lay down their arms.



A photo from Gemena Airport, where the Army is awaiting the arrival of political “notables”  
Image Credit: Tatiana Carayannis

Despite three years of activity, [a recent mapping of groups in the DRC](#) identified that there are still approximately 120 armed factions in the eastern part of the country. MONUSCO, the United Nations peacekeeping mission has picked up much of the slack to support the government's implementing agency (UEPNDDR). The UN continues [to support](#) 1,366 FDLR combatants and their dependents (60 per cent are children) at three camps located in Walungu (South Kivu) and Kisangani (Tshopo) and Kanyobagonga (government-run in North Kivu). Two additional military camps Kamina (Haut-Lomami) and Kitona (Kongo Central) hold an [additional 1000 ex-combatants](#), where they administer reintegration preparation training with World Bank support. [The UN in their latest strategic review](#) has recommended that the mission redirect its support from these camps, and focus on more flexible structures where community-violence-reduction programming can more effectively target both ex-combatants and other youth at risk. In Eastern Congo, MONUSCO has 37 projects targeting these vulnerable populations. However, [detailed in the Strategic Review](#), 3,777 ex-combatants have completed their skills training and already been sent back to the east for "long-term community-based reintegration."

Nearly all of the first cohort of ex-combatants have received their reintegration kits, however [as of September 2017](#), only 40 per cent of the members of the host community also participating in the program (out of a planned 1890) have collected theirs. This difference will likely feed into the perception in Congo that those who took up arms in DRC receive undue privilege over the rest of the community. Moreover, this program is occurring in a context where state security services and armed groups continue to engage in predatory behaviour against the population, and displays of non-violent protest are often squashed with force. Uncertainty over the proposed electoral calendar is likely to further intensify local competition for power and resources.

Over the next six months, the UEPNDDR and other international implementing partners (Caritas, FAO and IMPP) will monitor whether this new group of demobilised feel socially accepted, if they are maintaining their chosen economic activity, and if they are meeting their household food consumption targets.<sup>[1]</sup> However, by only looking into these narrow outcome indicators, this program will suffer the same fate of previous DDR initiatives in Congo that failed to incorporate or understand the true political and security risks to the program's success. How does ex-combatants' return influence local authority in the community? Will they be targets for remobilisation by neighbouring armed groups, or the political elite? How does their return affect the local economy, or the communal social balance? Will their return inspire claims for justice? These are just a few of the additional questions that will help determine whether an effective return of ex-combatants is possible in 2018 in the DRC.

### *Final Reflections*

At a broader level, the challenges of returning combatants in the DRC prompts a more fundamental question. Are these programs actually having the opposite effect of their original intent? In the absence of a major national buy-in and a genuine political framework to broker community divides, are these small investments in community development, and perhaps some short-term training for the ex-combatants worth the risk of inspiring new rebels and creating a new generation of dissatisfied former fighters? Some might say yes by highlighting the second chance these programs present to thousands of young Congolese, others could argue in a moment of extreme political tension and armed rebellion, the risks to DDR III might outweigh these possible rewards. Nevertheless, wherever one ends up in this debate, ignoring the political implications of return at this current moment is dangerous. The UN's increased emphasis on violence reduction programming is welcome, and if other implementing partners do not have the capacity or interest to monitor these important variables, local organisations, academics and researchers must fill this gap or the errors of the past DDR processes will once again haunt the prospects for a more peaceful Congo.

**Find out more about the [Politics of Return](#) and our [Trajectories of Displacement](#) research projects, which are based at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa and funded by ESRC/AHRC.**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

[i] Interview, Gemena, February 2015

[1] The program also offers support to ex-combatant households, psychosocial support, and take note of the special needs of female ex-combatants, but these components of the reintegration program are not evaluated until after the initial phase. [DRC Reinsertion and Reintegration Project – Results Framework, World Bank](#)