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DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION OF EX-COMBATANTS: THE IRISH CASE IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the literature on the global experience of demobilization and reintegration of combatants after wars end. It examines the factors that contribute to successful programmes. Among these, the two most frequently emphasized are the political will of all concerned to ensure the programmes work, and the active participation of ex-combatants in their own programmes of reintegration. The article then examines the situation in Ireland. In ways reintegration has failed, and for the same reasons as elsewhere. At the same time, the Irish case shows elements of success to match the best of reintegration programmes worldwide – not least the contribution of highly politicized ex-prisoners to their own reintegration and to conflict transformation more generally. These similarities have emerged in the relative absence of any involvement of the international community in demobilization and reintegration in Ireland, and indeed without direct comparisons made to good practice elsewhere.

KEY WORDS

demobilization; ex-combatants; ex-prisoners; Northern Ireland; reintegration
INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the ending of wars, and in particular wars within one society, has led to the intervention of the international community. Supranational organizations and international NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have engaged with post-conflict societies on a wide range of issues, from brokering peace agreements (Bell, 2000) and supporting truth commissions (Hayner, 2001) to planning reconstruction (World Bank, 1998).

Among such interventions has been the international involvement in promoting DDR – demilitarization, demobilization and reintegration. DDR was a formal part of at least 25 peacekeeping operations up to the year 2001, involving more than a dozen UN agencies and programmes and countless NGOs (Kingma, 2001): ‘Demilitarisation, demobilisation and reintegration are now compulsory elements of all new peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations’ (Kingma, 2001: 1). This recognition has been formalized at the international level in recent decades, as evidenced in statements from successive UN Secretaries-General (Boutros-Ghali, 1994, 1995; Annan, 1998).

There is thus a wealth of published material now available reflecting on the process of DDR. This literature reveals that there is now much experience allowing practitioners, funders and commentators to draw lessons as to which factors appear to be essential in the successful reintegration of ex-combatants. The purpose of this article is precisely to examine the global experience and the lessons of good practice. To anticipate the conclusions to be elaborated later, it can be said that among the factors contributing to successful DDR, the two most frequently emphasized in the literature are the political will of all concerned to ensure that programmes work, and the active participation of ex-combatants in their own programmes of reintegration.

The article also seeks to examine the situation in Ireland in the light of the international experience. The Irish experience of DDR in the past decade has failed in a number of ways, and for reasons remarkably similar to those familiar in other transitional societies. At the same time, the Irish case shows elements of success to match the best of reintegration programmes worldwide – not least the contribution of highly politicized ex-prisoners to their own reintegration and to conflict transformation more generally. The fact that these similarities have emerged in the relative absence of any involvement of the international community in DDR in Ireland, and indeed without direct comparisons made to good practice elsewhere will also be considered.

DEMILITARIZATION, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION

Central to DDR is the demobilization/reintegration aspect, returning combatants – members of state armies and opposition forces – to productive civilian life; this is recognized as ‘both an end in itself and a prerequisite for consolidating the transition to becoming an integrated . . . democracy’ (Heinemann-Grüder and Pietz, 2003: 7). Kingma (2000) cites four reasons for the emphasis on demobilization/reintegration, which will now be summarized.
Although they have been perpetrators of often horrific acts of violence, ex-combatants may also be viewed as victims. Many have been conscripted into regular armies, forced to join irregular forces, or moved by the experience of repression in their families and communities to take up arms. Child soldiers in particular are undeniably victims, in effect kidnapped and required to fight. Their demobilization and reintegration in places such as Liberia (Berdal, 1996) and Colombia (Koth, 2005) form a crucial element in post-conflict policy.

Women ex-combatants can be seen as a particularly vulnerable group in relation to demobilization. In many conflicts they make up a minute proportion of armed groups, but in others, such as with FARC in Colombia (Koth, 2005) and the EPLF in Eritrea (Pankhurst, n.d.), one-third of the force was female. Female ex-combatants face the same problems on demobilization as their male colleagues. However, in addition, they face intense pressures for gender relations to return to the status quo ante. The case of Eritrea reveals the extent of the possibilities and limitations facing women ex-combatants in terms of reintegration on favourable terms. They had experienced an equality under arms which broke radically with traditional gender relations in their society. In the liberated zones, the EPLF had made impressive advances in terms of formal gender equality. For example the marriage law in the liberated areas ‘replaced traditional customs with democratic ones based on freedom of choice, equality and monogamy’ (Pankhurst, n.d.: 2) Thus, although few women made it to become military leaders with the EPLF, they nevertheless experienced an equality which had not been there before. The problem was that ‘the return to peace, for men, meant a desire for normality and for traditional values. These included women behaving like women, not like men . . .’ (p. 5). The result was that in Eritrea, female ex-combatants were seen as too emancipated, even by former comrades, and were rejected as potential wives in favour of more submissive women. In addition, the divorce rate for female ex-combatants was high (Kingma, 2000). As Farr (2002) concludes, ‘Ironically, the male world of the military proves to be more egalitarian than the society which emerges after conflict’ (p. 30).

There are many measures of the inability of female ex-combatants to participate equally in reintegration. Female ex-combatants are often excluded from veterans’ associations (Farr, 2002) – Eritrea, where the ex-combatants’ organization Mitias had a gender unit, is an exceptional case (Pankhurst, n.d.). In addition, reintegration schemes are too often directed solely at men, with women ex-combatants unlikely to benefit from cash payments, land redistribution or training. The grand aspiration of UN Resolution 1325 from October 2000, which urges gender equality in DDR, is rarely achieved.

While female ex-combatants and child soldiers might appear to be the most worthy recipients of humanitarian concern when war ends, all ex-combatants face a situation in which they are required ‘to find alternative methods of income generation and support – a demand for which they are often ill-equipped’ (Gear, 2002: 4). Many have little formal education or professional training prior to mobilization and therefore little basis on which to build
careers after demobilization: ‘When rebels and soldiers are demobilized, they become job-seekers. They join the large group of unemployed youth in countries with a broken economy, due to the conflict’ (Specht, 2000: 6). Those in the lower ranks in particular ‘constitute a socially vulnerable group’ (DAC, 1997: 66).

‘COMPENSATORY JUSTICE’

Ex-soldiers believe they have done their duty, either as defenders of the state or members of liberation forces and they expect their contribution to be officially recognized; in short, they expect ‘compensatory justice’ (Schafer, 1998: 201). Demobilization is a difficult enough transition in itself. The additional experience of being ignored can lead ex-combatants not only to psychological disturbance, suicide or addiction, but also to crime or political disaffection. All of these reactions have been apparent, for example, in the post-conflict lives of MK members in South Africa (Gear, 2002: 14).

Political disaffection has been more apparent in some transitional societies than others. Its basis is usually the failure of the state to deliver benefits to ex-combatants which they believe are due to them as a result of the contribution they have made to the war effort. Thus, in El Salvador ex-combatants occupied parliament and threatened to disrupt the economy if the redundancy payments, credit and land redistribution promised to them did not materialize (Berdal, 1996). In Bosnia-Herzegovina the state’s failure to deliver on pensions and housing led to ex-combatants establishing roadblocks (King, 2000). Often the strategy of ex-combatants’ associations is to play a double game of negotiating formally with the government while simultaneously being happy if their members remind the government of the possible consequences of failed negotiations. Thus in Mozambique the ex-combatants’ organization AMODEG did not directly organize road blocks and other disruption in protest at the slow speed of reintegration, but was happy to acknowledge that the disorder helped its bargaining position: ‘the most effective way in which AMODEG was able to put pressure on the government to meet its demands was its capacity to mobilize its followers and to threaten insecurity’ (Schafer, 1998: 210). Similarly, in Namibia ex-combatants touched a nerve when they threatened to ‘turn Namibia into another Rwanda’ (Colletta et al., 1996: 209), a threat which never materialized. The most spectacular instance of ex-combatant direct action is that of Nicaragua where politically motivated banditry involved not just ex-revolutionary government soldiers – Recompas – but also ex-paramilitary rebels – Recontras – and indeed armed groups which integrated members of both former forces – Revueltos (Oliver, 2000).

However, political disaffection and its violent consequences do not necessarily follow even if the benefits promised or expected do not materialize. The comparison of Eritrea and Ethiopia after their mutual war ended is revealing. Ex-combatants in Eritrea did not expect handouts. They had won a war of liberation and saw the consequent development of their society as their
collective responsibility. In Ethiopia, however, ex-soldiers judged that they had in effect failed in their career as soldiers by failing to stop the Eritrean liberation fighters and were consequently demoralized and disaffected (Kingma, 2000). Similarly, former South African Defence Force members tended to see themselves as military failures (Liebenberg et al., 2003).

**POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION**

The Eritrean example reveals that, far from being a burden or a threat to peace building, ex-combatants ‘can represent a major force for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of war-torn societies’ (Klingebiel et al., 1995: 6). In fact, a survey of ex-fighters in that society revealed a list of qualities or values they had to offer: knowledge of the cultures of different people of the Eritrean nation; self-reliance and self-confidence; perseverance and hard work; discipline, motivation, taking care of others; medical knowledge and skills; capacity to solve conflicts and to be an example for others (Bruchhaus and Mehreteab, 2000). Liberation armies in particular produce individuals who are committed, disciplined and politically astute. Thus, members of the liberation forces in South Africa have been acknowledged as ‘the best of their generation’ (Crawford, 2003). What such ex-combatants lack is not ability but credentials. They have often missed out on formal education or training and are therefore at a distinct disadvantage in the transitional job market.

In the absence of employment the temptation is to turn to crime. The involvement of ex-combatants in crime, either opportunistic or organized, has been evidenced in places such as Mozambique, South Africa, El Salvador, Cambodia, Nicaragua and Angola (Knight and Özerdem, 2004). There are variations between societies. In South Africa (Gear, 2002), it was unemployed rank-and-file insurgents who turned to opportunistic crime, while in Mozambique (Alden, 2002) and Croatia (Heinemann-Grüder and Pietz, 2003) former officers became involved in organized crime. An upsurge in opportunistic crime in post-conflict societies is perhaps predictable where DDR, as in Uganda, was in effect ‘reintegration into poverty’ (Baaré, 2001).

**JEOPARDIZING PEACE**

The threat posed by ex-combatants is thus often stressed in the literature on DDR: ‘Demobilisation efforts around the world have shown that viable employment schemes must be generated or ex-combatants turn to armed banditry’ (Oxfam, 2005: 14). At times, the policies enacted to combat the reality or threat of rising crime have undermined the goals of DDR. Thus in Guatemala, the ending of conscription promised in the peace agreement failed to materialize because of the decision to maintain a large military force purportedly to combat crime (Oliver, 2000). At the same time, this justification for the failure to demilitarize as promised was partly disingenuous,
given that one major factor in the rise in crime was the failure of DDR. The government in effect elected to follow a vicious circle – rising crime means a failure to deliver on demilitarization – rather than a virtuous one – delivering on reintegration can lead to decreased crime.

The converse of this scenario is that a robust programme of DDR can contribute to peace building. It can recognize the needs of ex-combatants, men, women and children; it can compensate them for the sacrifices they have made during war; it can recognize the potential contribution they can make to society and thus lessen the possibilities of political disaffection and crime. Whether there is evidence that any such programmes have ever delivered on these promises is the question at the core of the next section.

**SUCCESSFUL DDR: THE LESSONS**

In terms of demobilization, DDR has produced some impressive results. In Nicaragua between May 1990 and November 1992, the Sandinista army was reduced in strength from 90,000 to 15,520, a reduction which was ‘one of the most dramatic in military history’ (Oliver, 2000: 267). During the same period 23,000 Contras were also demobilized. The largest demobilization in absolute terms was that in Ethiopia with 509,200 soldiers involved (Ayalew and Dercon 2000; Kingma, 2000). In addition, 22,000 insurgents were also demobilized (Babiker and Özerdem, 2003). The demobilization of 54,000 fighters in Eritrea in 1993 was the largest in relation to population – 2 per cent (Bruchhaus and Mehreteab, 2000). In El Salvador the peace agreement delivered a 50 per cent reduction in army personnel, along with the demobilization of 8000 FMLN insurgents (Oliver, 2000). The end of conflict in Guatemala led to a 33 per cent reduction in the size of the army, the abolition of civil patrols, and the demobilization of the insurgent UNRG (Oliver, 2000).

But beyond the numbers, the measure of political transformation is the failure or success of efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants into society. There are a number of instances which have been judged as failures: Angola on two occasions (Alden, 2002), Cambodia and Liberia, for example. Specific elements of the DDR programmes in these and other societies have been singled out as inadequate or ineffective. In Liberia, a cash for weapons deal offered $300 for each weapon handed in, much more than the price of a weapon locally. As a result, it was estimated that as many as 60 per cent of those who handed in a weapon and earned the cash were not ex-combatants (Paes, 2005).

Cash schemes come in for a great deal of criticism. In Cambodia, ex-combatants were offered four times the national income, thus totally distorting poor local economies. There is evidence that cash given to male ex-combatants is often squandered on alcohol, with women and dependants seeing little benefit (Bertrand and Pauwels, 2000). Above all, there is no proven correlation between cash handouts and subsequent employment (Knight and Özerdem, 2004; Berdal, 1996). Ultimately, cash payments do not lead to either reintegration or long-term development (Lundin et al., 2000).
Experience in Africa proves that training programmes to raise the skill levels of ex-combatants with a view to them becoming self-employed may not be an efficient use of scarce resources, especially where employment opportunities are limited (Ball, 1997). Likewise in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the World Bank felt that ‘employment and training were deemed more preferable to a one-time severance payment’, training schemes led to little subsequent employment and almost no development of small and medium-sized businesses (Heinemann-Grüder and Pietz, 2003: 25).

Many DDR schemes have depended on international financial support. In Uganda foreign aid accounted for 89 per cent of the cost of DDR, in Mozambique 85 per cent, and in Ethiopia 65 per cent (Kingma, 2000). While lack of foreign aid does not inevitably lead to failure – Eritrea is deemed a success, even though foreign aid accounted for only 10 per cent of the total DDR budget (Bruchhaus and Mehreteab 2000: 125) – it has been a factor in some failures. Thus in Nicaragua, while the USA provided $31 million for the demobilization and reintegration of Contra rebels, the Sandinista army received only $5 million, from Spain (Oliver, 2000).

Some DDR programmes have fallen at the first fence, demobilization, while others – such as those in Uganda and Liberia – have successfully cleared that obstacle but have not managed to deliver in terms of reintegration. These failures run much deeper than the merely technical issues raised in the preceding paragraphs. To elaborate on this point, we will examine the factors which are judged in the literature to have been crucial in the success of a number of DDR programmes.

Mozambique is accepted as a success story in terms of DDR (Alden, 2002). Uganda is presented by the World Bank as a ‘model case’, though there were specific, almost unique circumstances involved, not least that it was a peace-time demobilization (Baaré 2001). In some ways the success in Eritrea was also virtually unique: DDR in a formerly liberated zone which had won independence, led by highly politicized, self-reliant and committed ex-combatants (Bruchhaus and Mehreteab, 2000). The Eritrean example provides lessons in best practice, as we shall see.

The evidence is that DDR works best when it is a stage in a process. Ex-combatants are reintegrated into a society where genuine efforts are made to develop the society overall. Thus, while schemes may initially be directed specifically at ex-combatants, the goal must be to mainstream those programmes within a wider strategy of development. Reintegrating ex-combatants into poverty is not success, and is part of the reason why many conflicts reignite (Babiker and Özerdem, 2003). Moreover, while poverty and inequality may not be the root cause of violent conflict, unless there is development, there is less space to remove the root causes of conflict (Berdal, 1996). Thus, experience shows that special efforts for ex-combatants are necessary in the demobilization phase, but that reintegration works best if it is part of more general post-conflict reconstruction, linked to the economic revitalization of the society overall (Ball, 1997). The initial DDR phase may be time-limited – Berdal (1996: 8) states that 2–3 years is a ‘minimum period’
for reintegration programmes to get under way, and another 3–5 years is
needed before full impact can be measured – but substantial reintegration,
like reconstruction overall, is a long-term process (Kingma, 2001).

Globally debates rage among donors, NGOs, recipients and others as to
the nature of reconstruction. On one side is the more technical argument,
that reconstruction is about economic revival, business and infrastructure.
This approach is underpinned by neo-liberalism (World Bank, 1998). Critics
of neo-liberalism stress the social aspect of reconstruction (Moore, 2000),
and support what the FMLN referred to as ‘quality reconstruction’ (Oliver,
2000: 278). Indeed, neo-liberalism can hinder reintegration; the rigidity which
accompanies structural adjustment programmes is entirely inappropriate for
DDR, and more financial flexibility is essential (Ball, 1997). To cite one
example: in Mozambique, the People’s Development Bank, set up in the
socialist era, provided rural credit and was a key element in the early phases
of demobilization. However, the bank was later privatized, at which point it
allocated only 8 per cent of its loans to agricultural credit (Hanlon, 2002). A
source of development funds to ex-combatants – and others – was thus cut
off. Compare this to the contribution of a different approach to banking in
Eritrea. Here ‘barefoot bankers’ advised farmers, and a system modelled
on Bangladesh’s Grameen Bank provided micro-credit (Bruchhaus and
Mehreteab, 2000). These factors played a key role in assisting ex-combatants
to reintegrate. Financial support of DDR needs to combine the attributes of
the ‘generous banker’, the ‘political fixer’ and ‘the light hand of the auditor’

Likewise, a less neo-liberal approach to DDR can recognize the value
of participation. Veterans’ associations, representative organizations of ex-
combatants, are of course valuable (Colletta, 1997; DAC, 1997), but of greater
value is the involvement of ex-combatants in their own reintegration. It is
accepted wisdom in the field that DDR works best if it is participatory
(Kingma, 2001). Community-based committees for DDR, which include ex-
combatants, can plan, allocate funds and generally build local capacity which
has often been damaged through conflict (Ball, 1997). Community-based
programmes have shown the most success – in societies such as Somaliland,
Uganda and Eritrea (Berdal, 1996). Once again, the example of Eritrea comes
to the fore: insurgents had already started building the new society in the
liberated areas before they won the war (Kingma, 2000). Reintegration was
not government-managed but was undertaken through family and community
networks by ex-combatants themselves. The same skills of self-help and self-
reliance which had been of value then were crucial in building the new post-
conflict society. Mitias, the representative organization for ex-combatants,
was not just a ‘veterans’ association’ but the lead player in a community
development-inspired and politically motivated process of reconstruction
(Bruchhaus and Mehreteab, 2000). In Guatemala the UNRG’s Toriello
Foundation played a similar role (Special Commission for Incorporation,
1998; Arroyo, 1999; Oliver, 2000). In effect, ex-combatants in these societies
revealed that as liberation fighters they had not been separated from the
communities in which they were based. What was needed was reconstruc-
tion, not reintegration, and they had the capacity, skill and political wisdom
to take a lead role in that reconstruction.

Such an approach requires that the ex-combatants have the political space
in which to work at reconstruction. A flexibility is thus required on the part
of the state and other actors which moves away from rigid models. Take the
issue of decommissioning of insurgent weapons. In theory, insurgent weapons
should be decommissioned early in the process of DDR, preferably in the
demobilization phase (Kingma, 1996). However, ex-combatants in such a
scenario are likely to feel highly vulnerable and insecure. Trust may have to
be built. Consequently, ‘they can gain an added sense of safety if they are not
forced to disarm fully, especially not before the political terms of an agreement
have been fulfilled’ (Walter, 1999: 154–5). Struggles over decommissioning
can become a barrier to progress, with weapons coming to stand for wider
issues of political disagreement which remain unresolved. In Bougainville,
for example, the Papua New Guinea government refused to withdraw
troops from insurgent areas until all insurgent weapons were collected and
destroyed. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army, on the other hand, insisted
that troop withdrawal and weapons disposal were linked issues and offered
to store their arms in the interim with a competent third party (Böge, 2000).
In such situations ‘it may be necessary to begin reintegration before full
disarmament’ (Knight and Özerdem, 2004), a decision which flies in the face
of conventional DDR strategies (Özerdem, 2002), but which can enhance ex-
combatant feelings of security and thus break the logjam preventing progress.

Such flexibility is possible given the political will. In fact, of all the ingre-
dients which contribute to the success of DDR – technical planning, funding,
cessation of hostilities, guarantees of human security – political will is ‘the
chief criterion for success’ (Berdal, 1996: 21). ‘“Politics” has to come first; only
then, on the basis of a real political solution of the conflict, will demobiliza-
tion, resettlement and reintegration support be natural – and often inevitable
– components of postwar rehabilitation and development’ (Kingma, 2000).

**DEMOBILIZATION IN THE IRISH CONTEXT**

To first appearances, the process of DDR in Northern Ireland does not seem
to fit the pattern of cases we have considered to date.

The ceasefires declared by republican and loyalist groups in August and
October 1994 respectively opened the way for intense negotiations between
the British and Irish governments and local political parties. This eventually
led to the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement of April 1998, on the basis of
which a cross-community power-sharing executive was expected to be formed
for the local legislative assembly. Although the Belfast Agreement was in effect
an international document and was lodged as such with the United Nations
(Campbell et al., 2003), there has been relatively little international involve-
ment in the Irish peace process in comparison with most others globally in
recent years. Admittedly the involvement of US President Clinton – driven by a personal commitment and initially in the face of opposition from the State Department and his National Security Adviser (O’Clery, 1996) – was crucial in breaking the logjam by assuring Irish republicans that taking the political road would open doors, not least to the White House, and deliver benefits. The European Union was also involved, providing money for projects linked to peace and reconciliation. But there was no UN involvement in the Irish peace process, no projects funded by the World Bank and involving international NGOs. There was in effect, despite the EU money, no articulated commitment to reconstruction such as was being enacted in a number of other societies contemporaneously.

The Belfast Agreement stressed the need for decommissioning of paramilitary arms and the normalization of state security arrangements. All signatories agreed ‘to use any influence they may have to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years’ (Belfast Agreement, 1998: 20). Decommissioning of IRA weapons had been raised early in negotiations between republican representatives – both IRA and Sinn Féin – and the British government prior to the IRA ceasefire of 1994. The British preference was for a standard DDR route, namely, decommissioning, or at least a significant start to it, before the establishment of new political institutions. Republicans did not agree. Their unwillingness to decommission stemmed from three factors: ideological (Irish republicans have never surrendered arms at the end of a period of conflict); tactical (violence or the threat of it can bring political gains); strategic (until it is clear that the conflict is truly over, it is necessary to hold onto weaponry for future possible use) (Schultze and Smith, 2000).

However, the debate on decommissioning became overly focused on the IRA to the point of downplaying the extent to which decommissioning required the involvement of other actors. Thus, while loyalist weapons posed the main threat to the peace process throughout this period (Brown and Hauswedell, 2002), loyalists at no point came under similar pressures as did republicans to disarm. Unionism’s fixation on this one issue of IRA decommissioning revealed at least as much about the deep divisions within that constituency over dialogue and political modernization as about a genuine desire to demilitarize Northern Ireland entirely. The British Labour government lost a number of opportunities to explore further the republican position of decommissioning in the context of taking all the guns out of Irish politics. In fact, as a lead player in the process, the British government could have helped produce a different scenario. Disarmament as precondition pandered to unionist queasiness about entering negotiations. At the same time, the failure to normalize those aspects of militarism which were under British control represented a missed opportunity to enhance republican confidence and provide a fillip to the peace process. In effect, republicans were demanding normalization as the price of decommissioning, whereas the British were demanding decommissioning as the price of normalization. While unionists, backed increasingly by the British and Irish governments, saw decommissioning as a precondition to substantive talks, republicans saw it as a tangent,
introduced belatedly in order to placate unionists (Brown and Hauswedell, 2002). While the impasse existed, the British were not willing to admit Sinn Féin to talks to establish devolved institutions.

This impasse was eventually broken by the USA, with Clinton’s appointment of Senator George Mitchell to head an International Body on Decommissioning. This Body recommended a twin-track approach, that is, that the issues of decommissioning and talks be separated, each to be negotiated at its own speed. The British government was unwilling to concede this, and as a result the IRA called off its ceasefire in 1996. ‘All party’ talks began but Sinn Féin was excluded. In 1997, Labour won the British general election and the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, signalled a change of British policy by arguing that ‘decommissioning is secondary to actually getting people into talks’ (quoted in MacGinty, 1999: 240). The IRA ceasefire was restarted, Sinn Féin entered talks, and in February 1997 the issue of decommissioning was relegated to an institution outside the main talks, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD). It is in this context that the minimalism of the statement on decommissioning in the Belfast Agreement becomes clear. Decommissioning was in effect deferred. This was unsatisfactory for the unionists in the Assembly, as a result of which the unionist First Minister, David Trimble, delayed the establishment of an Executive.

The Executive was eventually established in the absence of any actual decommissioning, with republicans holding ministerial office. Trimble was opposed by a large minority in his own party; in addition his main rival, the Democratic Unionist Party, was able to make a great deal of capital from his agreement to ‘enter government with terrorists’. In this atmosphere of political opposition and wariness on the unionist side, the institutions were suspended on four occasions, with the backing of the British government, over unionist objections to the lack of IRA decommissioning.

Eventually the IRA agreed to have its arms dumps inspected by the IICD on three occasions, June and October 2000 and May 2001. IICD reassurances that the weapons were in storage rather than use convinced the British government to move a short distance towards normalization, scrapping 5 of its 71 military installations (Brown and Hausewedell, 2002). The IRA then began a series of acts of partial decommissioning, first in October 2001 (confirmed by the IICD as significant), culminating in the total decommissioning of all its weapons in August 2005. Despite this, the DUP, now the majority unionist party, refuses to believe that republicans have fully embraced democratic politics, in effect demanding a period of ‘quarantine’ before considering the re-establishment of devolved government.

State demilitarization speeded up finally in response to IRA decommissioning. A number of non-core British army installations, including watch towers at the border in South Armagh, were dismantled; by August 2007 only 11 core installations will remain (McHugh, 2006). By the same date, British army strength will be reduced to the peace-time level of 5000, one-sixth what it was at the height of the conflict. Simultaneously, the three Northern
Ireland-based regiments of the Royal Irish Regiment, totalling 3000, full and part-time, will be disbanded (BBC News Online, 2 August 2005). Once full normalization has been achieved in Northern Ireland, the plan is to reduce the overall British Army establishment from 108,500 to 102,000 (BBC News Online, 21 July 2004).

The intelligence landscape is changing also. By 2007 MI5 will have taken over ‘national security’ locally from the Special Branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (Thornton, 2006). This will ensure that, if and when devolution is reactivated, control of intelligence will not be in local hands and certainly not in a government department possibly headed by a Sinn Féin minister. By 2007, the Force Research Unit, notorious for its involvement in the ‘dirty war’ against the IRA (Rolston, 2006a), will have been renamed the Joint Support Group and will have been removed from Northern Ireland. The 14th Intelligence Unit, one of a number of such units operating in Northern Ireland, will be renamed as the Special Reconnaissance Regiment and will be redeployed in Iraq (The Times, 18 April 2005).

The police complement will be reduced to 7500, from 11,392 in 1999. This downsizing involves early retirement and severance, including the disbanding of the 2935-strong full-time police reserve (Oversight Commissioner, 2005).

Superficially, this paints a positive picture of demilitarization. However, there is little sign of a peace dividend overall. The costs of severance pay, new building and re-equipment have contributed to a rise in security expenditure and no diversion of military funds to such social needs as health and education. Security costs in 1998–9, the year the Belfast Agreement was signed, were £604 million. By 2001–2 this had risen to £812 million, and by 2005–6 to £831 million (NIO/HM Treasury, 2003). Part of that cost is comprised of severance pay to downsize the police service, most of which was incurred between 2001 and 2003. But, excluding the cost of severance, the security budget increased by one-third in the seven years following the signing of the Belfast Agreement (Hillyard et al., 2005).

The Belfast Agreement contained no detailed blueprint for the demobilization and reintegration of combatants. Instead, there was an accelerated programme for the release of politically motivated prisoners in jail at that point. By July 2000, 447 prisoners were thus released: 194 loyalists, 241 republicans and 12 non-aligned (Shirlow et al., 2005). This represented a minute percentage of the approximately 10,000 republicans and 5000 loyalists who had served jail sentences during 30 years of conflict. Beyond them were the activists who had never been jailed.

Those released under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, like those released previously, faced a number of obstacles in relation to reintegration. Re-establishing day-to-day relationships with partners and children was a process fraught with difficulties for all concerned (McEvoy et al., 1999; Jamieson and Grounds, 2002). And finding employment often proved problematic. One study has revealed that around 70 per cent of republicans and 30 per cent of loyalists interviewed had been first imprisoned between the ages of 16 and 20, and concluded that when released they had ‘a lack of skills or the
possession of skills or qualifications that were no longer valid’ (Shirlow et al., 2005). Another study found that the republican prisoners questioned ‘had significantly higher educational qualifications at the time of release than other men, and considerably higher qualifications than other unemployed men’ in Northern Ireland (Jamieson and Grounds, 2002: 26). Many of these qualifications were acquired in prison; more than half of those questioned in one study had acquired academic qualifications during imprisonment (Ó hÁdhmaill, 2001). However, they did not necessarily guarantee employment for ex-prisoners. Ex-prisoners were over-represented among the unemployed in their local areas, with a marked differential, as indicated by Shirlow et al. (2005), between republicans (40 per cent unemployed) and loyalists (29 per cent unemployed). Difficulty in finding employment is due to a complex mix of factors, including official and legal blockages to employment, unofficial prejudice against ex-prisoners in general and republicans in particular, and a ‘chill factor’ which makes it difficult and possibly dangerous for ex-prisoners to work outside their own areas (Ó hÁdhmaill, 2001). These factors can explain why politically motivated ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland experience unemployment levels more akin to those of long-term criminal offenders than war veterans (Jamieson and Grounds, 2002).

Despite these obstacles, there is little evidence of a phenomenon which, as we have seen, has been common in a number of other societies, namely, an extensive post-conflict crime wave involving ex-combatants. Undoubtedly, there have been a number of cases of high-profile ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland being reincarcerated because of continuing offending. Most of these have been loyalists, and most have been for non-political offences, related to the specifics of the participation of loyalist paramilitaries in the supply of illegal drugs.2 Given the wariness about prisoner releases in Northern Ireland, it is likely that any hard evidence of substantial offending by politically motivated ex-prisoners would be seized on as proof of the foolishness of government policy, yet there has been no sign that recidivism has been seen as a major source of panic.

But the absence of an ex-combatant crime wave is not of itself proof of successful reintegration. The Belfast Agreement (1998) recognized ‘the importance of measures to facilitate the reintegration of prisoners into the community by providing support both prior to and after release, including assistance directed towards availing of employment opportunities, re-training and/or re-skilling, and further education’ (p. 25). This statement matches the best of global practice in its commitment at an early stage in the peace process to the reintegration of ex-combatants. However, it was not matched by any practical actions. For example, the first Programme for Government of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly did not mention the need to reintegrate politically motivated ex-prisoners. It was left to the initiative of a local NGO to deliver in this respect: the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT, later renamed the Community Foundation of Northern Ireland CFNI), which had been instrumental in helping set up a number of ex-prisoners’ centres in 1995.
A European Union special programme was designed to support the Northern Ireland peace process; from 1995 to 2000 this Peace I programme, as it was known, provided €500 million. From 2000, Peace II provided €450 million for peace-related projects (European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation, n.d.). Peace I prioritized social inclusion, not only supporting the vibrant civil society sector in Northern Ireland, but also proactively seeking out areas where community capacity was weak. Initiated as a speedy response to the ceasefires and commencing in the middle of an EU funding round, it was outside mainstream EU structures and thus allowed for risks to be taken in peace building (CFNI, 2003). This gave CFNI the space and flexibility to use its initiative to fund a sector, the ex-prisoner community, where, in the face of local antagonism to this constituency, such support might not have been forthcoming. CFNI lobbying was central to the decision to fund ex-prisoners’ groups from the EU peace programme, and the NGO was designated as the body to disburse funds to ex-prisoner groups. Between 1995 and 2003, 61 ex-prisoner groups and a further 29 affiliated projects received €9.2 million from the EU peace funds (Shirlow et al., 2005), approximately 0.9 per cent of the overall budget.

The EU funds allowed for the dynamism of the ex-prisoner groups to be channelled into projects which proved beneficial not just for the ex-prisoner constituency but for the wider society. An independent evaluation (Harvey, 2003) noted that the work of the ex-prisoner groups contributed significantly to training and retraining, supported the process of healing, revealed a wide level of community involvement, involved participants in a manner which was in keeping with the best practice of community development internationally, and encouraged self-help.

The success and vitality of the ex-prisoner movement are revealed through a consideration of Coiste na n-Iarchímí, an umbrella organization for republican ex-prisoner groups. Coiste began in November 1998. At its height it represented 24 groups and employed 95 staff throughout the island of Ireland. Its stated aims are to secure the full integration of republican former prisoners through recognition of the contribution they have made to the community and can make in the future; to facilitate former prisoners in contributing to peace and justice in Ireland; and to deepen the links with community organizations, employers and others (Coiste, 2002). Coiste’s work thus ranges from counselling through job- and training-related activity to lobbying and advocacy on behalf of the republican ex-prisoner constituency in relation to continuing discrimination. Ex-prisoners are refused access to Public Service Vehicle licences which would allow them to work as taxi drivers; they cannot claim for compensation for injuries under criminal injuries legislation; loans for small business set-up or otherwise and mortgages are often refused, as are visas to visit countries such as the United States and Australia; and they are unable to adopt or foster children (Ritchie, 2002).

Coiste’s affiliated groups are active at many levels in republican communities. An obvious priority is to provide advice and support for ex-prisoners and their families on everything from legal rights to job skills advice. But many
have gone beyond this. Some have created employment in the social economy, such as a not-for-profit construction company in North Belfast, while in West Belfast Coiste runs political tours. This latter enterprise is an imaginative development also in terms of conflict transformation; after the tour of republican West Belfast, clients are handed over to a UVF-affiliated ex-prisoner group, EPIC, for a tour of loyalist West Belfast.

Conflict transformation is evident in much of the work of Coiste and its affiliates, through dialogue outside their community, including with victims and loyalists, and their imaginative programme entitled *Processes of Nation Building* (Coiste, 2004). This involves outreach to a broad cross-section of Irish society, North and South. It is a programme founded on inclusivity, with meetings taking place not just with other nationalist groups and organizations, but also with the unionists, the churches, Protestant and Catholic, trade unions and business organizations.

For republicans, the experience of imprisonment was one of intense politicization (McKeown, 2001). Rather than representing a hiatus in political development and activity, prison was seen as a site of struggle and resistance (McEvoy, 2001), where they honed their individual and collective political understanding and activity. The ideals of self-help and mutual aid which were paramount during their years of imprisonment became central in their post-prison activities. Whether in relation to their own organizations or more generally their work in the community in such areas as interface tension, youth, and community restorative justice, they gained a reputation for commitment, dedication and reliability. Rather than representing a problem for their communities, they became a key asset contributing to community development, the strengthening of civil society and ultimately conflict transformation. In fact, republicans would argue that this should come as no surprise; they did not need to be reintegrated as they were never separated from the communities of resistance which produced them.

The situation of loyalist ex-prisoners is less clear-cut. Loyalism’s political purpose is predicated on the maintenance of the Northern Ireland state, with loyalty to Britain secondary and even ambivalent (Graham, 2004). Any change to the status quo, no matter how apparently benign, is a potential threat. Given that, loyalism’s reaction to change, even change sponsored by the British government, is to resist – hence loyalists’ insistence that they exist to defend their communities against a range of enemies, from Irish republicans to British reformers. Defence is thus at the heart of loyalism (Rolston, 2006b). When they can represent themselves as defenders of their community, they can acquire a level of support from that community. But outside that role, they are viewed with suspicion by the community (McAuley, 2004). Their roots in the community are neither as deep nor as robust as those of republicans.

One consequence of this is that prison was more likely to be viewed as a hiatus rather than an opportunity for political development and resistance. And release from prison for loyalists is often harder than for republicans: ‘loyalist former prisoners were still treated by many members of their residential community with senses of loathing and mistrust, even after a long
period of release’ (Shirlow et al., 2005: 51). In one study, all the loyalist ex-prisoners interviewed said that they found reintegration either problematic or very problematic (Crawford, 1999). At the same time, many loyalist ex-prisoners had professions and skills before imprisonment, with the result that reintegration, at least in terms of employment, was easier than for republicans. As one loyalist stated, ‘Most UVF men saw themselves as irregulars. When the war ended that was it. They went back to being plumbers, welders or whatever their trade was’ (Shirlow et al., 2005: 71).

As on the republican side, there have been loyalist ex-prisoner organizations, such as the UVF-affiliated EPIC. They too have engaged in counselling, training and lobbying activities, although little in terms of the social economy. They have also played a key role in their communities in terms of conflict transformation and have on occasions come to find much in common with republican ex-prisoner organizations. In fact, loyalist ex-prisoners have shown a level of courage and openness in relation to conflict transformation ahead of that of many unionist elected politicians.

CONCLUSION

Disarmament has customarily been treated as an important issue, but the heightened status it has received in Northern Ireland... is virtually unprecedented. (Brown and Hauswedell, 2002: 52)

In some ways the Irish case provides a lesson in how not to conduct DDR, especially in relation to the way in which the fixation on decommissioning dogged political progress for more than a decade. Undoubtedly the issue of disarmament was emotionally and politically significant to a number of parties to the peace process. But this is no less true of many other societies coming out of periods of protracted and violent political conflict. Struggles over decommissioning have acted as a barrier to progress elsewhere, with weapons coming to stand for wider issues of political distrust between protagonists. But political will, as has been found in DDR programmes worldwide, is the chief criterion for success. In Northern Ireland there was a failure of political will. Much could have been learned from other societies which were more flexible, seeing the prize of conflict transformation as being too important to be delayed by a demand, however principled, for the prior surrender of insurgent weapons in advance of political negotiations and institutions.

However, the debate on demilitarization in Northern Ireland, as on demobilization and reintegration, took place in splendid isolation from any reference to the international experience. This is all the more remarkable when it is considered that international personnel were recruited at points to oversee and legitimize some of the arrangements surrounding political transformation. Apart from the US involvement at the political level, Canadian, South African and Finnish personnel have been drawn into institutional arrangements around decommissioning, and the issues of prisoner releases and policing...
reform have included the official participation of experts from South Africa and the United States. Despite this, there was no explicit attempt to learn from other transitional societies in relation to DDR, nor any involvement of international expertise.4

Furthermore, such success as there has been in relation to reintegration of ex-combatants in particular is due less to any specific blueprint from government or plans drawn up by local politicians than to the approach perfected by the prisoners themselves, and in particular republican prisoners, in enduring and resisting the experience of imprisonment previously. This was coupled with the imaginative intervention of one local NGO which managed to secure external funding from the EU to support the prisoners’ initiatives. The result was that a number of developments emerged in Northern Ireland in relation to demobilization and reintegration which can match the best practice in DDR globally – such as the commitment to self-help, mutual aid and community development.

With more support – financial and otherwise – demobilization and reintegration in Northern Ireland could have been even more exemplary. To take the question of funding: in Peace I there was a dedicated measure for ex-prisoners. But in Peace II ex-prisoners had to compete with other groups for funding on a range of measures, none of which were specific to ex-prisoners. Most obviously, they could apply for funding for training and retraining projects. Although this clearly was of relevance to ex-prisoners, the end result was that it tied the ex-prisoner groups to a less imaginative methodology: proving how many members had undertaken computer training programmes, for example, rather than the less tangible outcome of improving capacity or advancing reconciliation (Harvey, 2002). Peace II did not have the flexibility, ideological and financial, which Peace I had nor which the best of DDR schemes internationally have.

EU funding in Northern Ireland was undoubtedly crucial in the development of ex-prisoners’ groups: ‘if the Peace Programme had not decided to support ex-prisoners, no one else would have done it and this society would have had to deal with a very significant number of prisoners and their families who felt increasingly marginalised’ (NIVT, 2001: 8). At the same time, many of the recipients of the funding, such as Coiste director, Mike Ritchie, have concluded that ‘no comprehensive and strategic attempt to address ex-prisoner concerns has yet been undertaken north or south’ (Conflict Transformation Papers, 2003: 24).

This failure was in fact emblematic of a wider failure, the lost opportunity to enact a robust programme of reconstruction in Northern Ireland. In fact, the concept of ‘reconstruction’ was studiously avoided by the British government, the Northern Ireland Office and the EU, as if to concede the concept was to imply that somehow Northern Ireland could be seen as being like failed or failing states such as Afghanistan or Somalia. Given that there had been no ‘regime change’ in Northern Ireland, the British government was unlikely to accept international involvement in ‘reconstruction’. Such a concession would have flown in the face of three decades of British management of the
Northern Ireland conflict which prioritized ‘normalization’ rather than an admission that the state was failing or had failed (Hillyard et al., 2005: 197).

For the ex-prisoners, highly politicized as a result of prison resistance, the groundwork for reintegration was laid by their own actions. This is not to deny that there were real emotional and other issues outstanding on their release, but it is to emphasize their roots in the communities to which they had returned. The same skills of self-help and self-reliance which had been of value in prison struggle were crucial in building vibrant ex-prisoner groups which can match the best of such groups elsewhere. Moreover, they have been centrally involved in local conflict transformation and indeed cross-community activities. In short, what ex-prisoners needed was not reintegration narrowly defined, but a robust programme of reconstruction and a recognition of the skills and political wisdom they had to take a lead role in that reconstruction.

NOTES

1. Elections to be held in early March 2007 are expected to lead to the diametrically opposed parties, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein, being tasked by the British government to form an Executive by the end of the month. Given DUP reluctance to share power with ‘former terrorists’, devolved government is unlikely to be re-established instantly.

2. The Independent Monitoring Commission (2005) produced figures on recidivism which must be taken with great caution given the inevitable politicization of the Commission’s role because of its total dependence on police sources.

3. The information which follows derives from a series of interview with Coiste’s director, Mike Ritchie, in late 2005, informal discussions with a number of other officers, and published sources, including Coiste’s newsletter.

4. A belated and brief exception to the rule was a speech delivered by Kofi Annan in Derry in 2004 where he urged in general terms the reintegration of former fighters as a sine qua non of peace (Shirlow et al., 2005).

5. A detailed comparison of the activities of Coiste na n-Iarchimí with those of Eritrea’s Mitias and Guatemala’s Foundation Guillermo Torriello is beyond the scope of this article but could well be revealing in this regard.

REFERENCES


