

Critical Reflection

following KOFF Colombia & Dealing with the Past Roundtable

Armed Groups, Violence & Demobilization in Colombia

Enzo Nussio¹

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of former combatants is a central element within a Dealing with the Past process aimed at contributing to the guarantee of non-recurrence of armed violence. In Colombia, the government has used DDR as one of its preferred recipes to bring members of the armed insurgency and paramilitary groups back to civilian life. This, even though the protracted conflict between government forces and guerrilla groups is still ongoing. Between August 2002 and January 2010, 52'419 persons were certified as demobilized in the country. The majority of demobilized fighters belonged to the right-wing paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), the main responsible group for war atrocities, especially during the time of their expansion between 1997 and 2002. 31'671 members of the AUC demobilized between 2003 and 2006. In parallel to the demobilization of paramilitary groups, the government of Álvaro Uribe has converted the individual demobilizations of guerrilla fighters into an increasingly important pillar of its counterinsurgency policy. Between 2002 and January 2010, 20'748 combatants, most of them guerrilla fighters of the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo) took the individual decision to demobilize.

The purpose of the KOFF roundtable in June 2012 was to discuss the achievements, shortcomings and lessons learned of recent DDR processes in Colombia and to shed light on the continued violence and the armed groups that emerged after the demobilization of the AUC. The roundtable was attended by representatives of Swiss NGOs and the Swiss Federal Authorities working in and on Colombia. After an input speech by Enzo Nussio, post-doctoral visiting researcher at the Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá) and research associate of swisspeace, who presented his research findings and current debates, the implications on the operations of Swiss actors were discussed.

DDR as a peacebuilding policy – a critical outlook

Various scholars have questioned the limited effectiveness of DDR processes.² Even the United Nations have warned about the specific risks related to the last part of DDR – the social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants.³ However, according to different international standards, DDR should at least contribute to an

¹ Research Associate for the Dealing with the Past Program, swisspeace, and Guest Researcher at the Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá) supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The opinions expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

² Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, *What the Fighters Say: A Survey of Ex-combatants in Sierra Leone*, Working Paper (Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development, 2004); Alberto Caramés and Eneko Sanz, *DDR 2008. Analysis of DDR Programmes in the World During 2007* (Barcelona: Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2008).

³ United Nations, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards* (New York: UNDDR, 2006).

improved security situation in the aftermath of the demobilization of armed groups.⁴ In other words, a successful DDR process should result in a decrease of homicide rates and in an increased sense of security within the population. Exploring the security question for the case of Colombia was one of the stated goals of Nussio's presentation.

The Demobilization of the AUC in Colombia

The Colombian public discourse has been highly critical of the AUC demobilization process.⁵ It was accompanied by criticisms such as non-transparent negotiation agendas, inflated numbers of demobilized combatants, an improvised reintegration program and ongoing violence perpetrated by neo-paramilitary organizations involved in drug-trafficking. Especially this last point, the claim that the underlying power structures of the paramilitary groups do prevail and that the new armed groups, which the government calls BACRIM (Bandas Criminales, criminal gangs), are just operating under a new name but responding to the same logic provoked many controversies.

In spite of all this critique, violence decreased in parallel to the DDR process. A look at the overall homicide rates reveals a reduction since 2002, the year in which the paramilitaries started with a ceasefire in order to enter negotiations with the government.⁶ Drawing on various types of evidence, however, Nussio showed a differentiated picture of the security situation in the aftermath of the paramilitary demobilization in Colombia. He pointed to the fact that the downward trend has shown important variations over the course of the past years and across different regions. Especially in urban areas, the development of homicide rates after demobilization has been less favourable.⁷ To shed more light on the relationship between demobilization and homicides in urban areas, Nussio presented a case study of Montería. In the capital of the Córdoba department, increased state action and the removal of the consolidated paramilitary superstructure has led to a fragmentation among, and competition between post-demobilization armed groups. As a consequence, violence increased in this city and the surrounding areas.

The ex-combatants' perspective

In his presentation, Nussio also developed on the perspective of former combatants, the topic of his doctoral thesis, for which he interviewed a large number of ex-paramilitary fighters.⁸ With respect to the security situation of the demobilized, the Mission of Support for the Peace Process from the Organization of American States (MAPP-OEA), states that, "demobilized combatants still face harassment, threats, displacement, and killings at the hands of the newly emergent structures and, in other cases, on account of personal griev-

⁴ Ibid.; Stockholm Initiative, *Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration. Final Report* (Stockholm: Rolf Tryckeri AB, 2006); CCDDR, *The Cartagena Contribution to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration* (Cartagena: CIDDR, 2009).

⁵ Enzo Nussio, "Learning from Shortcomings: The Demobilisation of Paramilitaries in Colombia," *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 6, no. 2 (2011): 88–92.

⁶ Catalina Bello, "Posconflicto En Colombia: Un Análisis Del Homicidio Después Del Proceso De Desmovilización De Los Grupos De Autodefensa," *Revista Criminalidad* 51, no. 1 (2009): 163–177.

⁷ Kimberly Howe and Enzo Nussio, "Urban Violence After Demobilization: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Post-Paramilitary Colombia," (forthcoming).

⁸ Enzo Nussio, *La Vida Después De La Desmovilización. Percepciones, Emociones y Estrategias De Exparamilitares En Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2012).

ances and reprisals.”⁹ According to the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), 1365 demobilized paramilitary fighters have been killed between 2003 and 2010. Nussio found that ex-combatants react with diverse types of coping strategies to these threats.¹⁰ Some try to live anonymously in large cities, some isolate themselves from their fellow ex-combatants while others simply try to enhance their safety by trying to live a life of a “good citizen”. Only very few demobilized persons would look for state protection when faced with violence due to distrust. Most of them would rather relocate to other places, defend themselves or regroup themselves with remnants of their former armed groups. This last coping strategy is closely related to the creation of neo-paramilitary groups that offer, at least in the ex-combatants’ imagination, protection against potential and imminent threats. Through this bottom-up approach focusing on the ex-combatants’ perspective, it becomes evident that trust-building measures are crucial in a DDR process.¹¹

To conclude, Nussio argued that, although the focus on individuals in DDR processes is important to reduce levels of recidivism and prepare demobilized people for a life in civil society, DDR processes have been held responsible for issues they are unable to address and that lie beyond their mandate. DDR does not change opportunity structures. Hence, persisting illegal economies will continue to be exploited by criminal organizations. This means that the re-organization of criminal activities after demobilization processes occurs independently from reintegration efforts. Also, DDR does not prevent youth recruitment. The recruitment for criminal activities of a new generation depends exactly on persisting opportunity structures and the need of re-organized criminal organizations to refresh their personnel. By 2009, about 12% of the members of neo-paramilitary groups were former combatants. This is to say that 88% of the fighters were persons who had not belonged to the demobilized paramilitaries.¹² Most of them are part of a new generation of adolescents who are entering a world of violence.

Discussion points and current debates

Following Nussio’s presentation, the discussion in the second part of the roundtable then revealed a number of critical issues:

- DDR is not a peacebuilding tool by itself but only one of the elements of a Dealing with the Past process, which accompanied by a wider set of political and societal measures can contribute to a sustainably improved security situation.
- In the perspective of such a holistic approach the programs and projects of Swiss actors working in Colombia do complement DDR efforts by providing humanitarian assistance, implementing job creation programs, working towards the strengthening of civil society and supporting local human rights and peacebuilding organizations.

⁹ MAPP-OEA, *Informe Trimestral XIV* (Bogotá: Organization of American States, 2010).

¹⁰ Enzo Nussio, “How Ex-combatants Talk About Personal Security. Narratives of Former Paramilitaries in Colombia,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 11, no. 5 (2011): 579–606.

¹¹ See also Pablo de Greiff, “DDR and Reparations: Establishing Links Between Peace and Justice Instruments,” in *Building a Future on Peace and Justice: Studies on Transitional Justice, Conflict Resolution and Development: the Nuremberg Declaration on Peace and Justice*, ed. Kai Ambos, Judith Large, and Marieke Wierda (New York: Springer, 2009).

¹² *Semana.com*, “12 Por Ciento De Las Bacrim Son Desmovilizados: Policía Nacional,” *Semana.com* (Bogotá, January 8, 2009).

- Follower groups of the paramilitaries like Rastrojos, Urabeños, Paisas or Águilas Negras share many similarities with the former AUC blocks operating in their areas of influence. They often exercise control over local populations, perform social cleansing and assassinate or punish people they suspect to collaborate with their enemies or report their activities.¹³ It is therefore questionable to consider them as mere criminal groups and not recognizing them as an actor in the conflict.

In the current situation one obvious question arises when talking about DDR in Colombia: What are the lessons learned of this most recent DDR process for possible future demobilizations? What if the FARC demobilizes? Nussio, in collaboration with Kimberly Howe, recently published an article exactly reflecting on this question.¹⁴ They point out that, if such demobilization will take place, the number of persons entering a DDR process is very likely to be several times higher than the current estimate of 8'000 to 10'000 combatants. This is due to the fact that according to UN standards persons associated with armed groups who are not necessarily combatants should be eligible for inclusion. The article also emphasizes that many of the expected demobilized will still be underage when they demobilize since about half of the now active FARC fighters joined the group when they were less than 18 years old. This raises questions about the provision of differentiated assistance but also regarding the judicial consequences for commanders responsible for youth recruitment. One of the key components of every DDR process is the reintegration of ex-combatants. As mentioned before, many former AUC fighters moved to big cities in order to fade into anonymity. However, this may not be a suitable option for FARC fighters as most of them have a much stronger rural identity and background. Responding to their background and skills, a less urban focused economic reintegration program should be put in place.

¹³ *Elespectador.com*, „Bacrim, más que delincuentes“, (November 15, 2012)

¹⁴ Nussio, Enzo, and Kimberly Howe, „What if the FARC demobilizes?“ *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 58-67 (2012), link: <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/article/view/sta.aj/24>

swisspeace

swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It carries out research on violent conflicts and their peaceful transformation. The Foundation aims to build up Swiss and international organizations' civilian peacebuilding capacities by providing trainings, space for networking and exchange of experiences. It also shapes political and academic discourses on peace policy issues at the national and international level through publications, workshops and conferences. swisspeace therefore promotes knowledge transfer between researchers and practitioners. swisspeace was founded in 1988 as the Swiss Peace Foundation in order to promote independent peace research in Switzerland. Today the Foundation employs more than 40 staff members. Its most important donors are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the United Nations.

Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF)

The Center of Peacebuilding (KOFF) of the Swiss Peace Foundation swisspeace was founded in 2001 and is funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and 45 Swiss non-governmental organizations. The center's objective is to strengthen Swiss actors' capacities in civilian peacebuilding by providing information, training and consultancy services. KOFF acts as a networking platform fostering policy dialogue and processes of common learning through roundtables and workshops.

Critical reflections

In its *critical reflection* publications, swisspeace and its guest speakers critically reflect on topics addressed at roundtables. They both make a note of the arguments put forward during the roundtables and carry on the discussion in order to encourage further debates.