

Associations of Demobilized Combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Local dynamics and internal synergies

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITS OF A COLLECTIVE APPROACH TO REINTEGRATION

Executive summary

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 58% of households declare that at least one of their members belongs to an association. In such a vibrant associative context, collective approaches in the reintegration of ex-combatants have progressively been implemented.

However, there is little information on how associations deal with ex-combatant reintegration and contribute to mending the economic and social fabric.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, the Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program (TDRP) financed a study led by Dr. Natacha Lemasle in six towns: Kinshasa, Kisangani, Kindu, Kalemie, Lubumbashi and Likasi.

Dr. Lemasle carried out collective interviews (focus groups) with association members representing a vast range of activities (carpentry, tailoring, brick making, vegetable gardening, livestock farming, soap making, etc.). Most associations that participated in the study included both ex-combatants and community members: some of the associations were first created by ex-combatants and later joined by community members, others were created by community members and subsequently opened up to ex-combatants newly arrived in the area.

268 Congolese in total, members of 26 associations, participated in the collective interviews. In order to cross-check the information collected, Dr. Lemasle also conducted one-on-one interviews with representatives of the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (PNDDR), local implementing agencies, NGOs as well as some members or leaders of these associations.

While it could have been expected that these associations—organized around a specific trade or economic activity—played mainly an economic role, the study showed that their primary function is of a social nature. These associations essentially have a function of mutual support and offer a way to cope with vulnerability. Out of the 26 associations visited, 25 spontaneously justified their existence by the need for assistance mechanisms in order to cope with unexpected shocks. Almost all associations visited thus declared supporting part of their members' medical expenses, 3 associations out of 5 declared participating in funeral expenses, and 2 out of 5 stated that they provided loans to cover their members' children school fees.

Associations also play an important socialization role between ex-combatants and host community members. Encouraged by donors and NGOs, ex-combatant associations have indeed opened up to

community members and vice-versa. Such interactions between both groups help to provide newly-arrived ex-combatants with access to production means. Associations, and particularly their presidents, vice-presidents and counselors actively participate in conflict resolution between association members, but also between association members and the host community.

On the other hand, such ex-combatant associations play a limited economic role and rarely generate revenue. Out of 26, less than 5 associations managed to generate sufficient income to be regularly redistributed to their members. The study identifies four key obstacles to income generation:

- High costs of association registration and complex administrative procedures
- Lack of access to micro-credit
- Lack of knowledge of market demand
- Lack of management capacity

In order to reinforce the economic potential of these associations, simple measures aiming at assisting with the association registration process, facilitating micro-credit access and offering management training could have a significant impact.

The results of this study have been presented to the PNDDR in Kinshasa, and to key partners and implementing agencies. The subsequent discussion confirmed the need for support of ex-combatant associations, particularly by facilitating their legal registration procedures, providing basic management training and access to banking services and micro-credit.