

2. Executive Summary

This study explores the reintegration processes that ex-combatants, as well as the communities that receive them, go through in the transition from being soldiers to being civilians across the Great Lakes region (GLR) of Africa (Uganda, Rwanda, DRC, RoC, and Burundi). This study uses a cross-country comparative approach capitalizing on survey data collected between 2010 and 2012 from nearly 10,000 ex-combatants and community members across the GLR. This is the first time that such a large sample of data on ex-combatants from across multiple countries has been systematically compared and analyzed, thus the study represents the cutting edge of empirically driven quantitative research on the reintegration processes of ex-combatants.

An important component of the analysis of ex-combatant reintegration processes revolves around their position relative the broader community. As such, this study compares the reintegration processes of ex-combatants with those of community members and therefore, explores in turn the ways in which these two types of reintegration processes interact with each other. Notably, the core structure of the analysis presented in the detailed data analysis in Annexes I and II is not only about ex-combatants and the processes through which they reintegrate, but also an investigation of communities themselves, i.e. their willingness and ability to absorb ex-combatants back into society.

This study presents a snapshot of the social and economic dimensions of the overall reintegration process of ex-combatants and community members. However, the conceptual discussion and analysis of empirical evidence presented consolidates key knowledge and understanding about the broad trends of ex-combatants' reintegration processes across the GLR. Further, the findings here no doubt carry weight for understanding ex-combatants' reintegration processes in contexts beyond the GLR.

2.1 Key Findings

This study has found that across the GLR, ex-combatants have been largely successful in navigating reintegration processes and have shown a positive trajectory towards reaching parity with the broader community. **Across the GLR, an overall positive trajectory of reintegration over time is visible despite the fact that most ex-combatants encounter structural barriers and serious social and economic challenges in reintegration processes.** Regardless, there are also cases where individual ex-combatants fall behind the arc of this generally positive reintegration trajectory. In addition, this study has found that communities across the GLR have played a generally positive role in facilitating the reintegration of ex-combatants despite certain exceptions.

The communities that ex-combatants return to and the dynamics within these communities are the contexts into which ex-combatants must reintegrate and, therefore, are vital to the understanding of barriers that ex-combatants face and the processes by which ex-combatants succeed in reintegrating. **It appears that in the GLR countries, if communities are on a positive trajectory towards improved stability and social cohesion, ex-combatants can then root themselves in this larger societal transition.** However, if this larger transition is less evident, as it is in DRC, there may be structural barriers to the possibilities of ex-combatants' reintegration. Furthermore, if communities are unwilling to receive ex-combatants due to stigma, distrust, economic scarcity or fear, there will be limits to ex-combatants ability to actively engage in the processes of reintegration. In this sense, reintegration is a two-way process that involves the transformation of ex-combatants and communities together.

Core to the analysis presented in this study is the idea that the **reintegration processes may in part take place independently from reintegration policy and programming - though processes are simultaneously**

encapsulated within programming. With or without assistance from reintegration programming, ex-combatants in the GLR have returned to communities and navigated the complex set of transitions that reintegration processes entail. Reintegration processes are fundamentally unique in that they are highly contingent on both the characteristics of the individual ex-combatants and the contexts into which they reintegrate. However, this study finds that despite the vast range of respective variation in ex-combatants' reintegration processes across the GLR, there are also boundaries to such variation, which form the outlines of the broad shape of ex-combatants' reintegration across the GLR.

Indeed, a key finding of this study is that while Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, DRC and RoC all display a variety of distinct trends and unique processes in the various dimensions of reintegration, their overall reintegration trajectories are remarkably similar. For this reason, the analysis presented in this study focuses primarily on the narrative of the overall trajectory of reintegration processes in the GLR – only delving into distinct country level processes when they diverge significantly from this overall trajectory. The most notable break in the overall trajectory of reintegration across the GLR at the country level occurs in DRC, where an extremely shallow, and in some regards negative, trajectory of social reintegration processes stands out.

While this study finds that ex-combatants across the GLR have had general success in reintegration processes, they still face many challenges. For example, ex-combatants are worse off than community members in terms of overall economic activity, wealth, and income security – though this should not indicate that economic reintegration is not taking place. In fact, ex-combatants display a steep positive trajectory in economic processes. **Economic dimensions to reintegration are important; however, evidence in the GLR suggests that economic gains of ex-combatants cannot be fully actualized without engaging the set of comparatively slowly moving social reintegration processes.**

In terms of social reintegration processes, ex-combatants face immediate trust and stigma barriers in the community and are slow to build social networks and establish strong social capital in the community. **Building social capital through expanding social networks, and in**

turn building social cohesion more broadly in the community, are at the core of social reintegration processes in the GLR. An essential pathway to expanding social networks is through marriage and family unit, a domain in which ex-combatants across the GLR face considerable barriers. Again, this does not suggest that social reintegration is not taking place, as ex-combatants and community members show key improvements and an overall understanding that social reintegration processes take place over a long timeframe. So while social reintegration may show an overall shallow, yet positive, trajectory, this may be a feature inherent to the nature of the slow processes of reshaping ex-combatants' self-identity and their identity in the eyes of society, from one of soldier to civilian.

The consistent segmentation of ex-combatant and community member samples by age, gender, and disability throughout this study has led to the identification of some distinct subgroups that are at risk. **Young ex-combatants (age 18-30) lag considerably behind the rest of ex-combatants in terms of social and economic reintegration. This appears to be a result from their time lost in establishing social and economic footing while participating in conflict – as the majority of those aged 18-30 were mobilized as adolescents (under 18).** Despite their laggard position in absolute terms, young ex-combatants are found to have an overall positive trajectory of reintegration across the GLR. Likewise, while disabled ex-combatants face unique challenges related to their health, including diminished livelihood potential, they also display a similar positive trajectory.

However, both female ex-combatants and female community members break significantly from the overall positive trajectory of reintegration in the GLR, and display evidence that suggests a distinct narrative of structural disadvantages, especially acute in female ex-combatants, that leaves both populations at risk for marginalization and social isolation. **In this sense, gender based disadvantages in the GLR are a broader issue that is not only exclusive to ex-combatants.** Compared to their respective male populations, female ex-combatants and community members consistently perform weaker on most social and economic indicators. When comparing female ex-combatants and community members, female ex-combatants almost always

perform worse. It appears that the stigma associated with ex-combatant status has to an extent an amplifying effect on already distinct range of gender-based disadvantages that female community members face.

The core of the structural challenges that female ex-combatants face revolve around the stigma barriers to building new familial networks through marriage and in turn the ability to leverage these familial connections towards social and economic outcomes. In addition female ex-combatants are worse off than female community members in terms of education and skills, a gap that will need to be closed if female ex-combatants hope to gain parity with female community members, let alone males. These dynamics collectively place female ex-combatants on a distinctly different overall trajectory of reintegration than the rest of ex-combatants that, while positive, is so shallow that the disparity between females and males could grow – leaving females at clear risk for further social and economic marginalization.

DRC receives special attention in this study as a standout case of ex-combatants' reintegration in the GLR. In DRC, both ex-combatants and community members face social and economic challenges to a degree generally beyond what is found in the other GLR countries. As such, both ex-combatants and community members perform weaker across almost all indicators of reintegration processes explored in this study than in any other country in the GLR. The core challenge of reintegration in DRC is that communities display weaker levels of

social capital and social cohesion than are visible elsewhere in the GLR. **The broader societal shift towards peace and development, which appears to have served as catalyst to ex-combatants' reintegration in the other GLR countries, is visibly diminished in the contexts of continued local violence and insecurity in Eastern DRC.** As a result, although ex-combatants in DRC have quickly caught up to community members across core reintegration indicators, they have had little ground upon which to root during the broader processes of reintegration.

The case of ex-combatants' reintegration in DRC presents a paradox. DRC is the country in the GLR that has the greatest level of parity between ex-combatants and community members across core indicators. **Though ex-combatants in DRC face an extensive range of disadvantages, the extent of these disadvantages to the wider community is relatively insignificant compared to other GLR countries. However, ex-combatants and community members in DRC together are arguably the worst off among those in all the other GLR countries.** As such, the processes of ex-combatants' reintegration and broader societal transformation in DRC appear perhaps the weakest across the GLR. This study grapples with this seeming contradiction and its implications for reintegration policy and programming. It may be that reintegration policy and programming have limited abilities to directly shape some elements of reintegration processes.