

The Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia

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After four years of peace negotiations, the 52-year-long civil war between the Colombian government and the left wing guerrilla FARC-EP recently came to an end. What will happen now to the thousands of combatants who are laying down their arms and what are the challenges to their reintegration? Could a gender aware reintegration programme hold the key to long-term peace?

On November 30, 2016 the Colombian government formally ratified a revised Peace Agreement after a national plebiscite rejected the original peace accord. The agreement ended the longest armed conflict in the western hemisphere and in Latina America.

The FARC-EP (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*) started the demobilisation process in January 2017. The combatants

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are currently gathered in 23 transitory areas (*zonas veredales transitorias de normalización*) and 7 camps that will be in force for 180 days. The government is expecting around 6.300 combatants to reach the areas. In relation to children associated with the armed group, the High Commissioner said that the delivery's protocols will be activated upon FARC's arrival in the zones: as FARC combatants enter the zones they will be delivering the minors and UNICEF will receive them.

The FARC's demobilisation and disarmament is supported by the [United Nations Special Mission in Colombia](#). The mission has the mandate to monitor and verify the disarmament, and be part of the tripartite mechanism that will control and verify the definitive bilateral ceasefire and cessation of hostilities.

Once the FARC's members are settled in the transitory areas, the first step will be for arms and weapons to be laid down and registered. Unstable armaments will be destroyed on site and the UN Mission will remove all the weapons from the camp after 180 days.

After the demobilisation and disarmament, the former combatants will also go through a reintegration process that, at present, is based on the current legal framework implemented by the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (*Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración: ACR*). The Colombian government agency ACR is the institution in charge of the reintegration process. The ACR was created on 3 November 2011 as a new state agency ascribed to the Administrative Department of the Presidency of the Republic.

Overview of the Colombian reintegration process

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The reintegration of former combatants is a formidable challenge for Colombia. In addition to the FARC's members that will soon reintegrate, [data from the ACR](#) shows that there are currently 15,043 persons taking part in the governmental reintegration process and a further 15,478 former combatants have completed the reintegration programme since the ACR's creation. Among the persons currently going through the reintegration programme, 47% are former paramilitaries, 42% are former FARC's combatants who demobilized before the peace agreement and most of the remaining former combatants were enrolled with the guerrilla ELN (*Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional*).

Additionally, if the on-going negotiation between the ELN and the Colombian government succeeds there will be another collective demobilization of about 2,500 combatants. This figure includes both men and women but not children. Although it is impossible to know with certainty how many children and adolescents are currently linked to the armed groups or have been demobilised in the last few decades, between 1999 and 2013 the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) assisted [5,417 children and adolescents](#) who were separated from illegal armed groups (28 percent of them are girls and 72 percent boys).

The ACR takes into account national and international guidelines on DDR, such as the [United Nations Integrated Standards for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration \(IDDRS\)](#). The main components of the reintegration process are social and economic assistance (such as payments for basic living expenses), psychosocial care, vocational training, and access to the national health system. The reintegration model includes [eight dimensions](#): personal, productive, family, habitability, health, educational, civic and security.

Challenges to the reintegration process


 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas guard the location of talks between Manuel Marulanda, Marxist rebel chief of the FARC, and Colombian President Andres Pastrana in Los Pozos, Caqueta, 750 km (466 miles) south of Bogota, 09 February 2001. The two began 09 February a second day of talks that could relaunch the fragile peace process in the violence-torn South American country. AFP PHOTO/Luis ACOSTA

Image credit: [Silvia Andrea Moreno/Flickr](#).

The reintegration of former combatants is a key factor in the stabilisation of countries that are transitioning from conflict to peace. Unsuccessful reintegration could lead to the creation of new armed groups, the expansion of criminal activities and the recurrence of violence. In transitional and violent settings “unemployed, demobilized young men, socialized to violence and brutality during war, are more likely than others to form gangs, particularly in urban areas, and pose a constant threat to the security of women and children” (De Watteville, 2002: ix). As it has been acknowledged by the international agencies working in reintegration, creating alternative livelihoods and jobs opportunities is exceptionally difficult in post-conflict or conflict settings. The high number of former combatants to reintegrate into the civilian life poses an arduous challenge for the second most economically unequal country in Latin America, with an estimated [unemployment rate of 8.3](#) and one of the highest and most inequitable [concentrations of land ownership](#) in the world.

Colombia has already experienced the consequences of an incomplete reintegration process. After the demobilization of the paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Spanish: *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*: AUC) in 2005 and 2006, new armed groups emerged. Those groups are referred to as Las Bandas emergentes en Colombia o bandas criminales emergentes (BACRIM), meaning emerging criminal gangs, by the Colombian

government but it has shown similar continuity with the previous AUC structure and often some mid-level paramilitary commanders have [joined this new groups](#).

There is a risk that many demobilized combatants will receive recruitment offers or will be threatened into joining the new organizations and narcotraffic groups, as has happened in the past. A recent [Wall Steet Journal article](#) reported that the Brazilian gang *Primer Comando* is recruiting FARC's members in order to extend its drug network and routes. Since one of the main factors that can jeopardize the reintegration of former combatants is the enormous Colombian drugs trafficking market, the government launched a [comprehensive strategy against illegal crops](#) with the goal to substitute and clean about 50,000 hectares of illicit crops in 2017.

One of the main challenges for former combatants is to find a sustainable and decent employment. Most of the ex-combatants have an extremely limited education level and it will be very challenging for them to succeed in the increasingly competitive job market. Many of them joined the armed groups as teenagers and did not complete a formal school education. The governmental reintegration programme developed learning programs for adults and it offers education opportunities. However, adults' education has many challenges and not all former combatants succeed in completing the studies. Among those who took part in the reintegration programme, 21.875 passed the primary level of elementary school, 8.064 passed the second grade of elementary education, 14.967 graduated from the high school and 2.763 attended further education. Most of the jobs that are accessible with a low education level are paid the national minimum wage, which in 2017 is about 240 euro (737,717 Colombian pesos). Without doubt, the drugs cartels and the armed groups offer payments

that are much higher than those of the regular job market for unschooled persons.

Additionally, the former combatants have to overcome the trauma generated by the war. It has been estimated that in Colombia 90% of the people who enter the reintegration process have some kind of psychosocial affectation. There are also gender specific risks and challenges effecting the reintegration phase. Demobilised women may face stigma and discrimination. In Colombia, where gender roles and patriarchal models are very strong, female combatants that have transgressed traditional gender norms – by joining the armed groups – face difficulties in their personal lives and for many of them returning to their families is not an option. It has been reported that 87% of individually demobilised women choose to leave in anonymous urban environments like Bogotá and Medellín, instead of their native towns.

The gender dimension of reintegration programmes

The importance of a gender mainstreaming approach during the reintegration processes is widely recognized today and many manuals and guidelines have been designed to reflect this (United Nations 2014, UN Women 2012). Also, the literature emerging in the conflict resolution field examining masculinities and transitional justice shows the importance of addressing militarized and hegemonic identities as a key step toward peace (see Specht 2013; Enloe 2008; Cockburn 2010). However, the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants frequently overlooks the relationship between masculinities and the construction of peace (see Flisi 2016). Still there is limited knowledge on how to deconstruct wartime masculinities and too few attempts to promote non-violent ideals of manhood.

In Colombia different initiatives are emerging that focus on the gender dimensions of the transition to the civilian life, with a special focus on family relationship, positive masculinities and gender roles. In this sense, the Colombian ACR's reintegration programme has elaborated a [gender strategy](#). The strategy promotes non-violent gender relations, both in the reintegration process and in the families. This is done through the implementation of psychosocial activities that include a gender and new masculinities perspective. To this extent, competencies such as non-violent conflict resolution and assertive relationships are encouraged by cultivating the ability to identify and generate constructive relationships. The focus is on effective communication, tolerance, empathy, emotional assertiveness and the demilitarization of masculinities and femininities.

Many of the challenges of a reintegration programme are related to the community, family and domestic spheres. The anthropologist Kimberly Theidon, who [researched](#) the reintegration of former combatants in Colombia, highlights the risk of an increase and “domestication” of violence. Similarly, researchers showed an increase in sexual violence against women and girls as well as other forms of violence after the reintegration of paramilitaries (see [Caicedo Delgado 2007](#); [Londoño & Ramírez 2007](#)). Tackling gender based violence is an important component of a holistic and integral reintegration programme. A successful gender strategy is not limited to a focus on womens' needs and should also consider the gender dynamics and the relationship within the family and the community. A transformative gender reintegration programme should include activities that are able to tackle gender stereotypes such as initiatives to promote the role of men as care givers, equal redistribution of the childcare responsibilities and womens' economic and political empowerment, among many others examples. Since the end of 2011 the ACR designed and

implemented a special focus on tackling interfamily violence that is composed of 24 activities aimed to address both men and women. But the effectiveness of those activities is not known and further research is needed to identify the impact in the long term.

Conclusions

In Colombia fighting narcotraffic and criminal armed groups should be at the forefront of the government strategies to ensure a successful reintegration. However, there other many other aspects of the reintegration that are equally important and should not be overlooked such as technical and professional education, employment generation, psychosocial caring, family and community support, domestic violence and gender specific needs. There is important evidence of the Colombian Government´s efforts to incorporate a gender approach into the reintegration programme. Colombia could provide valuable examples in elaborating strategies to tackle violence against women and deconstructing militarized masculinities as part of the reintegration process but further evidence on this needs to be collected.

Isabella Flisi is an international development worker and researcher with almost 10 years of experience working on human rights in Colombia and in Latin America. She has worked with different international organizations: Peace Brigades International, Christian Aid, War Child Holland, FAO and KIT-Royal Tropical Institute. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Ulster University Transitional Justice Institute, where she is researching child soldiers´ reintegration and reparations programs from a gender perspective. Flisi has both a master´s degree in international cooperation and a B.A. in anthropology from the University of Bologna, Italy. Her expertise covers conflict transformation, peace-building, DDR, gender-based violence and

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