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Commanders for good and bad

Alternative Post-War Reconstruction and Ex-Commanders in Liberia

Contrary to the general conviction, collaboration with ex-commanders and their informal networks can actually promote postwar stability.

When former generals are integrated into the post-conflict societal structure as brokers of socioeconomic service and mediators between governing elites and former combatants, they can help to provide security and stability.

In the case of Liberia their direct access to ex-combatants makes them suitable for distributing jobs, money, food, scholarships and other resources.

According to dominant approaches to peacebuilding and postwar reconstruction, it is imperative that military command structures be destroyed in the aftermath of war in order to prevent renewed hostilities. This usually happens by means of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes (DDR).

However, this Policy Note argues that, at least in the short term, postwar stability might not always benefit from breaking the ties between commanders and their rank-and-file. The case of Liberia illustrates that when former generals are integrated into the post-conflict societal structure as brokers of socioeconomic services and mediators between governing elites and former combatants, they can help to provide security and stability. Their direct access to ex-combatants makes them suitable for distributing jobs, money, food, scholarships and other resources, which in turn reduce the incentives for remobilisation.



PHOTO: MATS UTAS, NAI

Motorcycle taxis became a booming business in Liberia after the civil war. Many of the riders are ex-combatants. They are closely connected and used by political elites during elections.

Thus, collaboration with ex-commanders and their informal networks can at times promote postwar stability.

Post-conflict informalities

In postwar settings, governance and power tend to operate through informal structures and networks. Rebuilding institutions and fostering democracy takes years and international intervention and postwar reconstruction therefore coexist with these informal systems.

Commonly perceived as dangerous and destabilising, informal governance structures are sometimes referred to as big man politics, rentier states, neopatrimonial regimes or shadow states. However, in a postwar context these networks also have positive functions, such as when elites – including presidents, members of parliament, legislative bodies, bureaucrats, businessmen – govern or pursue business through them in the absence of functioning state institutions.

One informal postwar governance mechanism is brokerage, whereby state functions are outsourced to prominent individuals or to those empowered by the war or the peace process – such as youth leaders, NGO representatives, local businessmen and ex-commanders. When it comes to governing ex-combatant communities, former commanders are often the most efficient brokers.

Ex-commanders as brokers of peace and good business

In spite of undergoing DDR, with its ultimate promise of reintegration, ex-combatants are often marginalised in the aftermath of war. They constitute a group embodying violent agency and these two factors make them susceptible to remobilisation. Securing the loyalty of ex-combatant communities is therefore necessary for postwar stability, yet governing elites often lack direct access to them. Former comman-

ders, on the other hand, are usually found in between elites and ex-combatants in the societal structure. They often function as nodes in ex-combatant networks.

Connections with businesses

By using commanders as brokers for socio-economic services, elites can reach ex-combatants and distribute much needed support, including money, food, scholarships and employment, but also information and political influence. This helps former fighters to reintegrate into society. In return, elites secure loyalty and consequently stability, key features of a successful postwar environment. Elites also use ex-commanders and their networks during elections, when networks are mobilised for political and, at times, violent support.

In turn, ex-commanders can profit from the post-conflict milieu. They are often entrepreneurial and retain a fair part of the resources passing through their hands. Furthermore, they tend to have connections with different businesses,

such as resource extraction sites – forestry, agriculture and mining – that are generally located in rural regions.

In the postwar period, access to these sites can be difficult, but ex-commanders can serve as intermediaries and connect businessmen and elites with them. Former commanders stand to gain materially from brokerage, but also to gain political and social wealth, effectively establishing and reinforcing their status as big men. Brokerage is nevertheless based on bonds of mutual dependence, as ex-commanders cannot ignore the needs and wants of their former rank-and-file. If they do, they risk losing their support base and becoming marginal figures.

Mutual dependence

Similarly, the relationship between brokers and elites is mutually beneficial and reinforcing. Both groups need the other to guarantee their political positions, financial security and societal stability. In this sense,

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there are quasi-democratic elements of accountability, legitimacy and stability inherent in these informal systems.

Ex-Military Networks in Liberia – Peaceful or Violent?

In 2003, after more than a decade of civil war in Liberia (1989–1996, 1999–2003) the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed. The DDR process began at the end of 2003, but did not benefit most of the participating ex-combatants in the long run.

More than ten years after the end of the civil war, commanders and former combatants in Liberia are still involved in informal networks. These networks and former command structures have been identified as obstacles to peace and stability in Liberia.

However, our research shows that most of these networks are no longer military in structure and are not dissimilar to other informal networks intrinsic to Liberian society. Today, former commanders and their networks are active in the business sector, security work, governance, education and farming. These networks are used by businessmen, large-scale farmers and others who perceive the former commanders as reliable managers and the ex-fighters as good workers.

Through the ex-commanders, Liberian politicians exert control over ex-combatant networks all over the country and can profit from their labour on plantations and mines. Furthermore, during the 2005 and 2011 national elections in Liberia, politicians made use of ex-combatant networks, and former commanders functioned as mobilisers, ensuring that their ex-combatants became registered members of parties and mobilised during political rallies.

Finally, international and national development organisations have also made use of them to reach out to marginalised groups. For example, several NGOs cooperated with a female commander to provide female ex-combatants in Monrovia with information about counselling and other services.

However, these networks have also been used for renewed warfare. With the outbreak of war in Côte D'Ivoire in early 2011, some Liberian ex-commanders remobilised their networks and crossed



PHOTO: MATS UTAS, NAI

Motorcycle taxi drivers in Ganta, the second largest city in Liberia. Young men like these in picture are often organized by ex-commanders for various activities.



The largest market in Monrovia, Red Light, is the home of a particularly large ex-combatant community, who are able to avoid the attention of the police and other authorities among the large crowds. Former commanders maintain partial control over their networks of ex-combatants, often for the purposes of illicit and clandestine business.

the border to fight alongside forces loyal to President Laurent Gbagbo and those supporting Alassane Ouattara.

Interestingly, our research shows that the networks that did remobilise were often weak in structure and lacked strong ties to Liberian ruling elites. The ex-commanders presiding over these networks did not have access to resources for distribution and were less integrated into society.

Employment possibilities

Not only did the Ivorian crisis offer ex-commanders and fighters the opportunity to address their economic grievances, but also the former a chance to reconstitute their hold over ex-military networks. Most such networks, however, did not remobilise. These networks were generally well integrated into

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society and embedded in systems of socio-economic provision with Liberian elites. Financial support, education and employment possibilities funneled through former commanders made ex-combatants in these networks feel they had too much to lose by engaging in renewed warfare.

What can we learn?

The Liberian case illustrates that collaboration with ex-commanders as mediators and brokers of labour and patronage in the postwar setting can help reintegrate ex-combatants into society.

This is a way for postwar elites to create stability and control in the absence of strong state institutions. Thus, contrary to the basic DDR presumption that military structures should be dismantled at the end of war, our research points to the possibility that strong ex-military networks – with connections

to the state-building project – may be less likely to remobilise during military crises than weaker ones.

Where DDR processes have failed, this situation could be perceived as an alternative, domestic solution to postwar insecurity. However, due to their inherent potential for remobilisation and destabilisation, these networks and structures need to relinquish their position in the long run.

For information on publications within this project, please visit: http://www.nai.uu.se/research/finalized_projects/the-informal-realities-of/

Policy recommendations

1 In the long run, it is important that ex-military networks are restructured. In the short-term, working through such networks may be necessary, since ex-commanders can help provide socioeconomic services to ex-combatants and remove incentives for recourse to violence and remobilisation. Employing ex-commanders as brokers can be useful in cases where DDR processes fail to address the economic grievances of large segments of the ex-combatant popu-

lation, and where weak state institutions are unable deliver other forms of assistance to ex-fighters, and the presence of domestic or regional entrepreneurs of violence generates a market for experienced fighters.

2 Brokers can facilitate efforts to reconcile social groups whose relationships are characterised by hostility.

3 International and national peacemakers or development actors can use ex-commanders to reach out and identify ex-combatants or other marginalised groups that need assistance, for instance, female ex-combatants.



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