

In DRC, MDRP helps female ex-combatants regain a livelihood

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Women line up to participate in the MDRP reintegration support project

Women are among the most vulnerable groups in post-conflict situations. This is also true in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where a pilot project financed by the multi-country demobilization and reintegration program (MDRP) specifically targets female ex-combatants and assists them in regaining a place in society.

Female ex-combatants who have been demobilized through the '*Programme national de désarmement, démobilization et réintégration*' (PNDDR – National program for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) in DRC often find themselves heading households alone, raising children as

well as having to provide food and shelter for their family. The women have already received reintegration support through the PNDDR, but they need further help.

As of July 2008, more than 2,600 women were demobilized through the PNDDR (out of more than 102,000 ex-combatants demobilized overall).

Facing Stigma after Demobilization

Even though the vast majority of women and girls were forced into joining armed groups, they face persistent stigma from their own families and communities once demobilized. Specific prejudices include the assumption that the women have been sexually abused and hence have lost their 'purity', the fear that they will return infected with sexually-transmitted diseases, the fear that their military commander or 'husband' will pursue them and threaten their families, neighbors and community, and a presumption that these women will incite bad or 'promiscuous behavior' in other girls. Host communities are sometimes fearful of the aggressive behavior they believe the women may have acquired through their association with the armed forces. They also think the female ex-combatants will be out of sync with culturally accepted gender norms.

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The women's own assumptions on how they will be perceived upon returning to their community can reinforce these perceptions. Aware of the stigma and barriers they may face, the women might choose to marginalize themselves from the community, thereby forming a group of particularly vulnerable ex-combatants who are disproportionately affected by conventional barriers to socio-economic reintegration.

Supporting women's reintegration

The LEAP initiative (Learning for Equality, Access and Peace) is a component of the MDRP focusing specifically on gender issues. In June 2008, LEAP launched a pilot project in the town of Kindu, in the Maniema province, to support vulnerable female ex-combatants in the reintegration process. The project aims to support income-generating activities, train beneficiaries in basic skills, business management, household management and micro-credit, support associations, and raise awareness about gender based violence.

Caritas, a catholic non governmental organization, is the implementation partner. It has an office in Kindu and is familiar with the local context since the organization was involved in the overall reintegration phase of the PNDDR.



Selecting Beneficiaries

“After visits to various parts of the town in Kindu where the beneficiaries live, I can tell you that the social situation of these female ex-combatants is really tough. Most of them were forcibly recruited while going to work in the fields or fetching water. They have endured really difficult moments in the armed groups. Now that they are demobilized, they live in precarious conditions”, said Boniface Nakwagelewi, Project manager for Caritas. He added: *“That’s why this project is so important, because it will help these women’s socio-economic reintegration. It will help them take charge of themselves and their dependents.”*

The pilot was launched through an announcement posted on the Caritas office door and broadcast over Radio Kindu. The local population was informed that they could fill out a short questionnaire to determine their eligibility for the project.

The questionnaire sought information on the number of children in their households, the number of persons they supported, health issues, whether they had shelter or land, how long they stayed in the armed forces, whether they received a reinsertion kit, and how they provided for themselves. Each question had a number of points assigned to it, leading to a total “score”.

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A selection committee, with representatives of the Ministry of social affairs and the PNDDR implementation unit reviewed all applications and selected a total of 200 beneficiaries: 140 female ex-combatants and 60 members of the local community, mainly girl mothers (between 15 and 22

years old), but also a few men. One of the lessons learned in past demobilization and reintegration programs is that it is always a good idea to ensure the local population can draw direct benefits from the programs being implemented and not just the ex-combatants. The chances of a successful reintegration are much higher also if the local community is involved.



The selection committee reviews the completed questionnaires

“I was forcibly enrolled in the Mai-Mai movement as I was going to work in the field. Now that I’m demobilized, I am happy to know that Caritas will help me learn agriculture so that I can take care of myself and my children”, said one of the project’s beneficiaries.

The project is to be implemented over a 10-month period, from June 2008 to April 2009. Women in Kindu welcomed the program, but some were concerned that its length may not be sufficient to ensure a successful reintegration.

“Caritas says that reinsertion support will stop after 10-month, but that’s too short. We want Caritas to continue to support us for at least 2 years to ensure that all female ex-combatants are really reinserted into society” said another beneficiary.

Training starts

The project team has already started work on two aspects: sensitization of the local communities on gender based violence, and training on basic literacy and numeracy skills for the beneficiaries. Further training on the management of income generating activities and micro-credit is planned. A few categories of income-generating activities were identified: agriculture, small trade and product transformation. This last category can include for example the production of soap from oils and chemicals, which the women then sell in their communities. The project team invites discussion with and feedback from the beneficiaries to tailor the program’s training to their specific needs.

At the end of the project, an evaluation will compare the situation of the 200 program beneficiaries with other women who will not have received support from LEAP. The conclusions and lessons will be shared with other DDR practitioners in DRC and in other countries. The overarching goal is to identify good practices in reintegration that can be replicated and eventually will lead to sustainable peace in conflict-affected countries.

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« We hope that the lessons from this pilot project will result in concrete and practical improvements of the gender component of DDR programs, not only in the Great Lakes region but also in the rest of Africa » concluded Bernard Harborne, MDRP Manager.

The PNDDR – “*Programme national de désarmement, demobilization et reintegration*” – was launched in 2004 with co-financing grants from the World Bank (IDA - \$110.74 million), and MDRP (\$100 million).

The ambitious program targeted up to 150,000 ex-combatants with the objective to help consolidate peace and promote economic stability and sustainable development in the DRC and in the Great Lakes region.

Specifically, the program aimed to:

- demobilize up to 150,000 ex-combatants and help support their return to civilian life;
- promote the reallocation of Government expenditure from military to social and economic sectors.

As of June 2008:

- 102,148 adults have been demobilized, with an outstanding caseload of 60,000 to 70,000.
- 102,013 beneficiaries have received reinsertion payments.
- Reintegration support for 56,297 ex-combatants has been contracted, with over 47,000 beneficiaries engaged in activities.
- 30,219 children have been released from armed groups.

Despite recent violent clashes in the East, the World Bank and the MDRP donors continue to work with the Government to support reintegration activities. Additional financing of US\$50 million from IDA has been approved recently.

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The Learning for Equality Access and Peace (LEAP) Program was launched in August 2007 to strengthen the impact of MDRP projects from a gender perspective.

LEAP has helped cast a light on the difficult situation of female ex-combatants and women associated with armed groups. Indeed, it has helped guarantee equal access to the benefits of demobilization and reintegration for men and women ex-combatants, while acknowledging special needs for women such as separate encampments, increased security, or gender-sensitive psychosocial support.

The first phase of LEAP has proven crucial in contributing to the understanding of gender issues in MDRP-financed programs.

- LEAP has provided a mechanism through which to assess the capacities of National Commissions to mainstream gender into National Programs, to identify gaps and challenges to gender mainstreaming and to generate the capacity to address these issues.
- Gender Action Plans have been produced in partnership with identified 'gender focal points' within National Commissions in Angola, Burundi and the Republic of Congo. In the DRC, a Gender Action Plan is currently being developed since D&R activities have recently been re-initiated.
- LEAP staff has also been instrumental in providing technical assistance to National Commissions by providing specialized training for gender focal points across the region.
- LEAP's flexibility has allowed it to be truly demand-driven and proved effective in mobilizing the required level of support for MDRP-financed initiatives at different stages of implementation.
- LEAP has initiated activities to further the knowledge on the role of gender in DDR programs. For instance studies about youth and conflict in Burundi and Rwanda have been conducted.

For more information on MDRP, please visit www.mdrp.org or contact Bruno Donat, Communications Officer, MDRP Secretariat, World Bank at info@mdrp.org.