10 Former combatants

Assessing their reintegration ten years after the end of war

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Introduction

When years of fighting, hostilities and destruction that characterize intractable conflicts come to an end, many mistakenly believe that it also signifies a return to normal; a return to complete peace and the end of tensions, violence and challenges. However, examples from all over the world and many different conflicts show that this is far from the reality. Intractable conflicts leave people grieving, injured both physically and psychologically, often needing help in forging a way forward: communities that are fragmented and lacking in both resources and relationships that otherwise would have held them together (Coleman 2000). Many countries that have experienced intractable conflicts are found to have regressed economically and in other facets of development (Muggah 2005). Therefore, despite expectations and hope, it is clear that after an intractable conflict, moving forward needs careful consideration, strategizing, planning and implementation of programmes that facilitate a successful transition to a more peaceful post-war and eventually a post-conflict state.

Transitional justice is an important mechanism used when normal justice systems are inadequate for addressing war crimes and past conflict-related abuse and where communities and social relations are fractured and in need of transition to peace (Garcia-Godos and Sriram 2013). One such aspect of peacebuilding and transitional justice is the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-combatants. For a variety of reasons such as the likelihood of recidivism, broken bonds of trust and social cohesion and the long-term goal of reconciliation, it is seen as important to have a particular focus on ex-combatants in post-conflict communities (Nilsson 2005; Berdal and Ucko 2013). Known by the acronym DDR or DDRR, the standard process pivots on three facets: (1) disarmament involving the collection and disposal of weapons; (2) demobilization entailing the discharge of combatants from armed groups; and (3) reintegration as the long-term process of integrating former combatants to civilian status, providing viable employment and placing them in their former communities (Muggah 2005; Waldorf 2013). DDR has become a central part of international peacebuilding, peacekeeping and transitional justice, as it is considered essential for

stabilizing security, limiting the risks of return to violence and long-term social cohesion (Garcia-Godos and Sriram 2013).

This process is long and can be difficult because it is often not linear and sequential (Berdal and Ucko 2013). Defining and identifying combatants who take part in DDR programmes is in itself a sensitive issue especially in the context of civil wars where many combatants are forcefully recruited, or are irregular combatants, “war wives”, or child combatants who may not necessarily bear arms and commit crimes but merely accompany fighting forces (Waldorf 2013). Furthermore, while DDR focuses on ex-combatants and state security, transitional justice focuses on accountability and victims, and the two processes often take parallel paths in terms of operations.

The reintegration aspect of DDR, which is a long-term process, needs to be closely linked with transitional justice processes so that it facilitates the social reintegration of ex-combatants (Waldorf 2013). Social reintegration is basically the process through which ex-combatants navigate their post-war identities and social relationships (Friedman 2018). Community life and social relationships are important components of one’s psychosocial well-being and effective agency. In the case of ex-combatants returning to civilian communities, these steps are seen as critical in reclaiming or forming identities and belonging within the community. The deep stigmatization and reluctance on the part of the community to accept former combatants as members of their ingroups are crucial issues that DDR programmes often fail to address. Waldorf (2013) recommends employing transitional justice mechanisms such as truth commissions, local justice processes and memorialization rituals where ex-combatants are given a public space to tell their stories, apologize, undergo purification rituals or justice processes as solutions to this challenge. Such practices would help the community to individualize criminal responsibility, empathize with the other and not necessarily perceive and treat all ex-combatants as having committed war crimes. Overall, such transitional justice practices may reduce fears, resentment, stigmatization and discrimination against ex-combatants if they are given the chance to tell their stories and make amendments publicly. This, in turn, would benefit their social reintegration (pp. 72–3).

DDR programmes are also important because they allow international bodies, such as the United Nations, governments and government agencies, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to help in post-conflict peacebuilding and transitional justice processes (Muggah 2005). Although there have been about 60 such DDR processes globally, during the past three decades, which have been successful, there also have been contexts where the DDR process has been more difficult and challenging. The Sri Lankan case is one such situation.

This chapter critically examines the nature of the DDR process put in place by the Sri Lankan government, its achievements, pitfalls and the state of the process more than a decade after the end of the war. The chapter first discusses DDR as a concept, transitional justice and the importance of

meaningful reintegration of ex-combatants. Next, it focuses on the Sri Lankan context, its civil war and the implementation of DDR in an environment where the state won an overwhelming military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The chapter foregrounds its findings under three main sections: (1) how the state discourse around DDR and ex-combatants was framed; (2) how it was legitimized by handpicked academics through research; and (3) alternative findings and narratives on the experiences and challenges faced by LTTE ex-combatants and military personnel. In conclusion, the chapter discusses the need for a more transformative politics and programmes for better integration and social participation of ex-combatants in Sri Lanka.

Background: Sri Lanka's war

For 30 years, since the mid-1970s, Sri Lanka was embroiled in a civil war between the LTTE and the government's armed forces. While there is contention about the starting point of the war, many scholars agree that a long-term feeling of deprivation among the Tamil community was pivotal in the formation of the LTTE and its subsequent militancy. Certainly, the attacks perpetrated on the Tamil community in July 1983, known as Black July, was also fertile grounds for recruitment of combatants to the LTTE (Perera 2001). The war raged most severely in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. However, many other areas of the country were also susceptible to violence, characterized by sporadic attacks on government installations and suicide bombings targeting populated areas. While initially recruitment to the LTTE tended to be voluntary, in later years, as the fighting intensified, the LTTE instantiated forced recruitment as a means of bolstering its forces and dwindling ranks. Nevertheless, at the end of the war in 2009, it was estimated that 25,000 combatants, including those who played more civilian/administrative roles, were enlisted by the LTTE (Richards 2014). This also included children, many of them forcibly recruited, and women cadres, some of whom played a central role in combat, bearing higher military ranks and participating in high-profile missions – especially suicide bombing missions (Friedman 2018). On the other hand, it is estimated that during the 30-year war over 300,000 soldiers were recruited to the government's armed forces (A correspondent 2012). The majority of these recruits tended to be from rural areas and lower socio-economic circumstances. Collectively, therefore, the number of former combatants in Sri Lanka who have war exposure run into the hundreds of thousands. Despite this large number of people with direct involvement in military activities on both sides, the focus has been very much on the DDR process involving former LTTE combatants rather than soldiers in the government's armed forces. This was largely the result of the circumstances under which the civil war ended.

In 2009, the Sri Lankan government's armed forces announced the defeat of the LTTE. At the end of the war, it was reported that between 10,000–

12,000 LTTE combatants (depending on different sources) had either surrendered or had been taken into custody by the Sri Lanka military (Roberts 2011; Antonovskaya 2015; Gunasekera and Pathiraja 2019). Additionally, much of the LTTE's weaponry was captured during the final push by the Sri Lanka military.

As a means of moving forward on transitional justice and dealing with the large number of LTTE combatants in its custody immediately after the war, the Sri Lankan government embarked on a process ostensibly geared towards rehabilitating and reintegrating these ex-combatants. Given the nature of its unilateral war victory, the disarmament and demobilization phases of the DDR were already redundant. Rehabilitation and reintegration became a focus only in relation to ex-LTTE combatants and not the state's military personnel (Hettiarachchi 2013, pp. 106–7; Dharmawardhane 2013, p. 28). DDR, which is generally designed as a consensual process between warring parties and a precondition to a ceasefire or peace agreement (Subedi 2013; Antonovskaya 2015), took a different form in Sri Lanka, however, in the context of the state's unilateral victory over the LTTE, whereby the defeated side did not have a say in the process.

Ten years on, the process of rehabilitation and reintegration that the Sri Lankan government embarked upon still raises questions. Despite the fact that its formal phase has more or less come to an end, as we will discuss later in the chapter, many ex-combatants who went through the process continue to struggle, hidden behind new political realities. We will also analyse the situation of the Sri Lanka army soldiers who were not included in the rehabilitation and reintegration process of the DDR programme.

The state narrative of the DDR process

Just as the details around the final stage of the war have been a tightly guarded secret, so too were the details about the rehabilitation process that ex-LTTE combatants underwent. The rehabilitation process was completely under the control of the Sri Lankan government forces, especially the Sri Lanka Army. The immediate aftermath of the war also saw a complete ban on any other party, whether local and international NGOs, researchers and scholars, or advocacy groups with contacts with the war-affected population in the newly “liberated” provinces. The government at the time carefully crafted a narrative in which any organization that had expressed sympathy or concern for the Tamil community in the North and East were labelled as “anti-Sri Lanka” and “pro-LTTE”. This was not surprising given the antagonism of the government to many international and local advocacy and NGOs (Gomez 2018; Höglund and Orjuela 2013; Webber et al. 2018). It was the case, however, that a small select team of psychologists and academics were given access to the rehabilitees (Webber et al. 2018). However, ten years after the ending of the war, ex-combatants who underwent the rehabilitation process are still reluctant to talk about their experiences. Trying to

understand what ex-LTTE combatants underwent during rehabilitation requires, therefore, a piecing together of information from many different sources. This is important because it provides a basis for a better understanding of the rehabilitation programme in Sri Lanka and of ex-combatants as “forgotten actors”.

According to the Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation (BCGR), the military arm in charge of the rehabilitation process, it was formalized in 2006 through a gazette notification to enable ex-LTTE combatants who had surrendered, or who had been taken into custody by the Sri Lanka government armed forces, to be rehabilitated. However, given Sri Lanka’s long history of ethnic strife and insurrection, the idea of rehabilitation had been in the official discourse much longer. The first occasion upon which Sri Lanka employed a rehabilitation programme was in 1971 after the defeat of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection. It was not conceived as a comprehensive programme but is generally considered a success, as the JVP has evolved into a strong political movement (Hettiarachchi 2013). The current programme for the rehabilitation of ex-LTTE combatants has been set up under the Ministry of Defence, with some involvement of the Ministry of Justice, and is now vested with the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and Legal Reform. The procedure for rehabilitation began with the categorization of the rehabilitees according to their levels of exposure and involvement, gender and whether they were adults or children. Throughout its existence the commissioner of the BCGR has been a senior army officer (BCGR 2011).

The rehabilitation programme established at the end of the war stood on six pillars (Webber et al. 2018). These were (1) spiritual, religious and cultural rehabilitation; (2) educational rehabilitation; (3) vocational rehabilitation geared at livelihood development; (4) family, social and community rehabilitation; (5) psychological and creative therapies rehabilitation; and (6) sports and extracurricular activities.

Access to rehabilitees and research

The final stage of the war, when fighting was at its most intense, was dubbed a “humanitarian mission” by the government. In the same vein, the DDR programme was dubbed “humanitarian mission two” (Hettiarachchi 2018). The rehabilitation of ex-LTTE combatants was legitimized and, nationally and internationally, promoted as being “based on Buddhist principles of forgiveness and compassion”. The LTTE cadres were constantly described as “diehard ruthless terrorists” and “human beings whose minds were distorted”, who were in need of reversing their “radicalization process” (BCGR 2011; Hettiarachchi 2014). As we will discuss later in the chapter, the Sri Lanka DDR programme was justified as a mechanism of transitional justice geared towards fostering reconciliation and social cohesion, although others have described it as a tool for strengthening the victor’s security and

governance, legitimizing social and political control of ex-combatants and silencing minority voices (Schröter 2013; Subedi 2013).

While the BCGR describes a six-pillar process, according to other sources the programme was described as a 6+1 process, with the rehabilitation of the community added as a separate pillar (Hettiarachchi 2015). Furthermore, detailed information on the programme was available only to a hand-picked group of persons who had been granted access to the rehabilitees during the rehabilitation period. Interestingly, a number of papers written by this group describe the rehabilitation process as a success story (see Kruglanski et al. 2014; Hettiarachchi 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018; Webber et al. 2018). Their papers also include the discussion of some empirical work conducted by this team. For example, Webber et al. (2018, p. 542) describe studies conducted with the rehabilitees while they were still at the rehabilitation centres, which examined attitudinal change induced by the training. Using questionnaires (translated into, but not necessarily validated in, local languages) measuring embeddedness, extremism attitudes, deradicalization and change of status, the researchers concluded that those who completed the rehabilitation process had given up their “radical”, “extremist” and “terrorist” ways (Webber et al. 2018).

In order to bolster the claim of the efficacy of the rehabilitation programme, the researchers also conducted a second, follow-up study (Webber et al. 2018, p. 562). In this study, rehabilitees who had completed the programme were compared to a sample from the community. Again, it was found that the rehabilitees were more likely to express attitudes that rejected extremism and violence. Additionally, the study also concluded that rehabilitees were more likely to have positive attitudes toward Sinhala people and the Sri Lankan government. The researchers asserted that they were not associated with the then government or the military in any way (Webber et al. 2018, p. 546). However, their findings were used to refute and question opinions that were critical of the government’s handling of the immediate aftermath of the war. These studies were hence instrumental not only to defend the government’s conduct in handling the Tamil community in academic discourse on the end of the war, but also in promoting the government’s case in the face of international criticism. The researchers were invited to speak at different government-sponsored or government-organized forums to share their findings (Kruglanski 2012). However, questions regarding the research ethics and methodology can be raised.

For instance, the researchers do not discuss the power dynamics of the context within which their research was conducted (Kruglanski et al. 2014; Hettiarachchi 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018; Webber et al. 2018). The fact that they were allowed into highly restricted facilities would have immediately signalled to the rehabilitees that they were sanctioned by the government and the military. Therefore, given the restricted freedoms conferred on the rehabilitees, the notion of informed consent and voluntary participation becomes problematic. It is unlikely that, in this context, respondents would perceive

that they were in a position to decline taking part in the research without fearing consequences. Overall, the unilateral victory that ended the war, and the ethos of triumphalism vs subjugation that governed the relationships between Sinhala and Tamils, between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil community, between the state military and the former LTTE combatants, appears to have permeated a specific reading of the context that orients the goals and conduct of the research. These issues are not addressed in their work published so far.

The rehabilitees also included children, but there is little information provided in the studies as to how standards of informed consent and voluntary participation were met in the case of these minors. Additionally, the context and the manner in which data was collected raises some methodological questions. The studies do not address how the military presence during data collection was handled. This becomes important in the context of other reports that rehabilitees were forced to complete questionnaires while at the rehabilitation centres (Roberts 2011). The likelihood that they would freely and without fear respond to the questionnaires needs to be critically examined. Therefore, the findings and the assertions made in these studies need to be read with caution.

Challenges and experiences faced by former combatants and the Sri Lanka military

In contrast, a larger number of studies have pointed to difficulties of reintegration. The success of a post-war DDR process is measured by the success of the reintegration of former combatants (Khan et al. 2018). Given the constraints of access to ex-combatants while on the rehabilitation programme, and the ethical challenges associated with this situation, many researchers approached ex-combatants only after they had been released for reintegration into the community. These studies pay careful attention to ethical concerns and security in working with such a vulnerable population (Krishnan 2012; Azmi 2015; Friedman 2018; Kabir 2018; Gunasekera and Pathiraja 2019). One particular reason for the security concerns is that many ex-combatants believed they were under continuous surveillance by the military and police.

Although ex-combatants had completed the formal rehabilitation programme stipulated by the government, the CID and army intelligence officers were believed to follow them within their communities (Roberts 2011; Azmi 2015). While the official justification for this surveillance was that it was to ensure the non-involvement of ex-combatants with groups or people that could pose a threat to the country, many ex-combatants saw this as a sign that they were not trusted by the authorities. Ironically, although the main aim of the rehabilitation programme was to ensure that they became reoriented towards the community, continued surveillance has caused their ostracism, as including them in social interactions risks bringing unwanted

attention to the whole community. This is further compounded by the fact that family members or associates of ex-combatants have been questioned or pursued by the authorities due to missteps by an ex-combatant (Roberts 2011).

Furthermore, although the 6+1 rehabilitation uses the term “beneficiary” to describe an ex-combatant, the terms “ex-combatant” and “ex-LTTEer” have become entrenched both in official communication and day-to-day discourse. This identity is formalized by a certificate provided to all rehabilitees, which includes information on the rehabilitation process, that they are required to carry throughout their lifetimes (Gunasekera and Pathiraja 2019). This impedes successful reintegration, as having to carry such documentation means that ex-combatants cannot expunge their past histories and move forward. Having to deal with such labels also has negative repercussions on a person’s ability to secure employment. Many firms do not want to employ people with such a past for fear of attracting the scrutiny of the authorities on their businesses or organizations. Additionally, despite the LTTE having claimed to be the sole representative of the Tamil people, many Tamils have mixed feelings about the group. Therefore, people do not always trust those who associated with the LTTE (Usoof-Thowfeek 2018).

Livelihood and work-related challenges

While these reasons are associated with high rates of unemployment among ex-combatants, a shortage of viable employment opportunities further exacerbates the situation. According to the BCGR, unemployment rates have been as high as 16% among the ex-combatant group at certain times. The Northern Province in general tends to have a very high rate of unemployment, largely due to its history of under-development and exposure to the war. With the restriction on movement placed on the rehabilitees by the BCGR, ex-combatants are limited to finding work within the community (although some have been able to secure employment abroad with permission from the Bureau). Although the rehabilitation programme focused largely on the acquisition of skills such as carpentry, masonry, mechanics, information technology, etc., the work most commonly available in the Northern Province tends to be daily wage work, often centred around development projects. More recently, however, these opportunities have also become limited with southern contractors bringing their own labour force (Silva et al. 2018). Other job opportunities have been on the controversial military-run agricultural farms in the North and East. These are viewed as attempts by the Sri Lanka military to take control of the agricultural production in these provinces, in a context whereby local farmers are unable to compete with large-scale farms powered by free and/or cheap labour. Self-employment among ex-combatants has also been promoted by the government, but due to the above-mentioned reasons and the lack of entrepreneurial training, many have not been able to sustain these endeavours. This is especially true

for child ex-combatants, who, because of their involvement in the war, lost years of education that would otherwise have prepared them for a career. As such, none of the prospects promised by the government really provided a clear career path for ex-combatants (Miriyaagalla 2014).

Female ex-combatants

The situation of female ex-combatants has been of particular interest in the discourse about rehabilitation and reintegration. With very traditional gender norms still prevalent in Sri Lanka, and particularly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, women are particularly susceptible to challenges in reintegration. For example, women associated with the LTTE and who have been in combat are seen as deviant and are therefore stigmatized and ostracized from their communities. Where women in general have found it difficult to find work, given the nature of the job market in these provinces, some female ex-combatants are also heads of households. Having to sustain themselves and their families within the narrow confines of acceptable gender roles has been quite distressing (Usoof-Thowfeek 2018). This is particularly so as the measure of successful reintegration for female ex-combatants is adopted within these narrow, conservative and traditional gender norms. For instance, marriage and starting a family are regarded as key markers of the successful reintegration of a woman (Krishnan 2012, p. 10; Martin 2017, p. 81). State- and military-sponsored mass weddings were quite common at the end of the rehabilitation processes. These were often graced by high-level politicians and military personnel, and were widely telecast over electronic media with little regard for the privacy of the rehabilitees involved. However, not all of these marriages result in “happily ever after”, given the higher rates of divorce, separation and abandonment among ex-combatants (Gunasekera and Pathiraja 2019). This adds another layer of challenge to the experiences of female ex-combatants who face further stigma and ostracization when a marriage fails. But most importantly, these narrow interpretations of gender roles prevent women from imagining a future for themselves in which they have the freedom to redefine their expectations of what is possible and acceptable.

Rehabilitation and reintegration within the Sri Lanka military

While a significant body of literature has focused on the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-LTTE combatants, the process for soldiers of the Sri Lanka military has gained little attention. The rehabilitation and reintegration of military personnel has been completely under the purview of the military. While the government has been eager to speak of the rehabilitation of the LTTE combatants, the process in relation to Sri Lankan military personnel has garnered very little attention. Most discussions on the topic have been from a purely physical well-being aspect, focused on those who have

suffered injury and/or are disabled. This is the focus of institutions such as Ranaviru Sevana and Abhimansala. Weisdorf and Sørensen (2019) describe this focus on disability as being protective for the soldier (p. 97). They contend that, despite being disabled, it allowed soldiers to take on a certain level of heroism. However, ten years after the ending of the war these institutions are hardly ever heard of and there is little discussion about the programmes that help former military personnel. What has been continuously missing from this discussion is the question of what mechanisms should be put in place to support those who have not been disabled in fighting but who have still been directly involved in combat. For example, these soldiers are trained in the use of weaponry and some have only known a life of combat for several decades. Therefore, it is important to have some training that prepares them for civilian life, especially upon retirement and during periods of relative peace. This is particularly the case when, after the end of war, the military diversified into other ventures, such as the tourism service sector where soldiers did become involved in the management and running of hotels, but where the numbers involved in such ventures have been small.

Additionally, with the unilateral victory by the Sri Lanka armed forces in 2009, one wonders whether maintaining the image of the army as unfaltering and undefeated also played a role in suppressing the narrative on military rehabilitation. To admit that soldiers needed help with reintegration would damage the narrative constructed about the Sri Lanka military and thereby be considered disrespectful. The result of this is that thousands of military personnel with weapons training, who directly experienced the horrors of war, have been left without the help they might need to reacclimatize to civilian roles. Certain statistics suggest indeed that help is needed: researchers have pointed to high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological disorders among military personnel exposed to war (Fernando and Jayatunge 2013). The toll exerted on families and communities when large numbers of military personnel suffer from such psychological distress can be substantial. Additionally, there have been reports of ex-military personnel and deserters' involvement in crime. In one report, according to police statistics, military deserters were involved in 18% of crimes committed in the country (Colombage 2014). The government's strategy so far has been to announce amnesty periods periodically and once a considerable number of deserters have surrendered or have been arrested, they are discharged from the military with no programmes that prepare them for civilian life. However, this is not a far-reaching solution to help those in the military reintegrate into civilian lives during more peaceful times.

Conclusion

Ten years after the end of the war, Sri Lanka still needs to confront the reintegration needs of those who had, for several decades, fought the war. Both former military personnel attached to the Sri Lankan armed forces as

well as those who had fought on the side of the LTTE seem to have been left behind to fight another battle. In the North and East, rehabilitees are resentful towards government and military authorities as well as their own communities because they are unable to move forward. The system has not given them the freedom to redefine themselves in relation to their current lives, make public amends and gain the acceptance and trust of their communities. Who they are today, and who they will be tomorrow is, above all, defined by their past: in some cases, a past that was chosen for them.

On the other hand, for those in the government armed forces, being disabled is the most acceptable way of having a voice in the reintegration debate. Those who have not suffered such a catastrophe have had to continue to play the role of the invincible, ever-unfaltering soldier, called upon to fulfil many different tasks – from keeping the city clean, to selling vegetables, to working in the hospitality industry and, mostly recently, preventing the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This status change cannot be easy. It is clear that if this situation is left as is, it poses a threat to future reconciliation and social cohesion, as the country attempts to move forward from a history of violence and conflict.

As much as DDR might be viewed as a next required and inevitable step in post-war scenarios, ensuring the inclusion of forgotten actors such as ex-combatants and state military personnel in transitional justice processes such as this is of paramount importance for meaningful reconciliation and sustainable peace. Limiting the militarization and surveillance of ex-combatants is a long-overdue first step. Ideally, government institutes, together with civil society, could then take steps to initiate a truth-telling process and provide the space to share the pluralistic memories of ex-combatants and communities, in order to seek communal forgiveness and acceptance, restore the dignity of victims, address justice concerns, help outsiders to understand the different sociocultural and political circumstances that led people to become parties to violence, or promote ritualistic penance and communal healing. Such steps would benefit not only ex-combatants and their communities but also the state by meaningfully addressing international allegations of human rights abuse, inculcating trust in national and international transitional justice and reconciliation processes, and encouraging forgotten actors to participate more proactively in peacebuilding as well as in the socio-economic and political development of the country.

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