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Transition from war to peace: The Ethiopian DDR experience

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Introduction:

The Ethiopian (1991-1997) Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program is an understudied example of success. What scholarly literature does address the Ethiopian process, tends to focus solely on technical aspects and impact assessment. This paper offers a comprehensive review of the rationale, principles, design, implementation and outcomes of the program in the context of the transition from war to peace. While the paper references some secondary studies, it draws heavily on the memory and experience of the author, who served as the head of the program from its design to conclusion.

The Ethiopian experience took place during the same time period as several other African countries that were likewise implementing DDR programs to demobilize tens of thousands of soldiers. However, the Ethiopian DDR program dwarfed these other experiences.

The broader challenges of transition from war to peace and the response designed by the transitional government of Ethiopia, the rationale, strategies, design and implementation of the DDR program are explored here, along with lessons learned from the Ethiopian experiences that apply to other cases.

Transition from war to peace (1991-1994)

From 1974-1991, Ethiopia was ruled by the Communist military junta, the Derg, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) challenged the control of the state, and starting in 1989, and ultimately gained power through a conclusive defeat of Mengistu's forces.

The EPRDF's most immediate and pressing challenge was to establish an inclusive transitional process filling the gap created by

the collapse of government offices. This included creating a comprehensive response to risks related to army, police, and internal security personnel, and tending to issues related to restorative and transitional justice.

Additionally, the EPRDF had to determine the fate of other groups who had fought the Derg within the new political disposition. These groups all claimed to have been engaged in armed struggle and to have armed forces under their command. Other political groups were also established and organized immediately after the fall of the regime. Government offices, major service providing institutions, and economic institutions also were looking to secure their positions within the new arrangement. The EPRDF wanted to create a transitional process that benefitted from the agreement of the majority of the political elites, so the participation of these myriad actors was considered.

At the same time, massive numbers of displaced populations were organized in temporary centers waiting for resettlement to take place. Maintaining the safety and security of local communities was a key challenge, and when the regime collapsed, the local administrations and institutions delivering state services collapsed as well, challenging the capacity of the EPRDF and later the transitional government of Ethiopia to ensure safety and security. The challenge of state collapse was exacerbated further by the scattering of hundreds of thousands of armed men and women from the now-defunct army.

Alongside these security issues, there was a massive demand for justice. Many of those whose loved ones were murdered took up arms left by the Derg's men and women to take justice into their own hands. The EPRDF expected many of these challenges and set broad directions on how to deal with them.

Temporary respite and an inclusive transitional process

Leading armed opposition groups, the EPRDF and others agreed that an inclusive transitional process would be launched in the beginning of July 1991. The process would be led by a broad-based provisional government and the EPRDF would form an interim government until the transitional government was in place.

The first step of the provisional government was to bring the collapsing state institutions (excluding the security institutions) back to work. Shortly thereafter, national and multinational political organizations met to discuss a transitional charter. The charter recognized the right of the Eritrean people to determine their political future through an internationally supervised referendum to be held in two years. It also recognized the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and called for the creation of a constitution drafting commission. Further agreement was reached on sharing executive powers. Thereby the interim government of the EPRDF formally ended and the Transitional Government of Ethiopia was inaugurated.

Transitional arrangements to deal with the safety and tranquility of local communities

Ethiopia is a vast country and maintaining the peace and stability of the communities after the collapse of the state was a daunting task. There was a need to reform security institutions in order to avoid a dangerous power vacuum in the rural areas during the transitional period. The EPRDF created local 'peace and stability' committees, disarmed 'revolutionary guards; and armed militia members who were nominated by the peace and stability committees in the new areas it entered. Through this interim mechanism, the security of local communities was maintained until newly organized police institutions could take over.

Arrangements for transnational justice

As victims of the regime demanded justice, the EPRDF organized a 'truth and reconciliation' exercise, enlisting participants of local communities to share stories, grievances, and information about the identity of perpetrators and the nature of the atrocities they suffered. A special prosecutor's office was organized to try key perpetrators, and the rest of the members of the repressive institutions were given pardon following their cooperation during the public deliberations.

Transitional arrangements to the varied rebel forces that fought out the regime

The demise of the regime came as a result of the struggle of Ethiopian political forces. Cognizant of this delicate balance, the transitional conference agreed that the

EPRDF forces assume the role of a national army in an interim phase, and other groups would be either integrated into the newly formed defense forces or civilian life. No group was to engage in recruitment during the transition period. Insurgents were demobilized at the will and agreement of their political elites.

DDR program as a major project in the transition from war to peace

The Derg regime has one of the largest armies in Africa with forces scattered throughout the country. Understanding the impact of demobilized soldiers on local security conditions and the long-term stability of the nation, the EPRDF implemented a DDR program. The plan developed by the EPRDF and endorsed by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) was driven by multiple political and economic factors.

Politically, the EPRDF saw the defeated army as structurally unfit to the new political arrangement. It was manned by conscripts, rather than professionals, and its history was marred by atrocities against its citizens, making it politically unfit for the new political space. Economically, there was neither a need nor the capacity for the nation to have such a sizeable army. The interim government of the EPRDF created a commission to carry out the demobilization program.

The DDR experience

Broad strategic plan for the project

The commission had three urgent tasks: setting up the institutional structure of the commission; dealing with logistics related to soldiers in the transit camps; and developing a full-fledged DDR program. The DDR process was primarily conceived as a major political project, and success would be measured by the degree to which soldiers were psychologically prepared for civilian life. Reorienting soldiers for civilian life was the program's first priority, and this included providing them with a picture of the political features of the upcoming change and providing them information on their reintegration packages. The need for orderly demobilization and reintegration support stemmed from

not only humanitarian, but also political and economic reasons. The EPRDF knew that former soldiers could play an important role in the stabilization of the nation, and failing to provide reintegration support could prove fatal.

Design of reintegration packages

Although all ex-soldiers had served the army of the military regime, there were four distinct groups that needed to be reintegrated. These groups consisted of: conscripts who were mobilized during the last few months of the civil war; long serving conscripts who originally came from rural areas and sought to return; conscripts and soldiers from urban areas; and disabled war veterans. The design of the program accounted for the unique needs of each of these groups.

The government sought outside donor funds to support the program, and dedicated non-financial resources to the reintegration effort.

All regular soldiers who served the army for over 20 years and all disabled war veterans who met the disability retirement benefits were allowed to process their retirement. The package for rural returnees was aligned with the needs of a poor peasant in a rural setting, and provided them support so they could face the challenges of subsistence farming. Reintegration for urban returnees was more complex. Some with technical skills were offered job placement in the civilian labor market, but this option could not accommodate all returnees. Therefore, the program provided opportunities for urban returnees to access seed money, which helped them enter trades that matched their acquired skills. Pocket money was also made available for some to bridge their needs for house rent and utilities for a limited time. Reintegration of disabled soldiers required processing disability and retirement benefits, providing physical rehabilitation where possible, and assisting veterans to acquire skills for civilian life.

DDR program in practice

The immediate task of the program was to assemble the scattered soldiers of the defeated army into demobilization centers. Through public calls and announcements, over 250,000 soldiers assembled and

were transported to demobilization centers. The US Department of Defense supported this effort, providing food and related supplies for soldiers in temporary, transit, and demobilization centers. The ICRC provided funds to support fuel and allowances. In a matter of six weeks, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were assembled, including soldiers that had fled and repatriated, disabled ex-soldiers, and disabled EPRDF war veterans. All individuals in camps completed a registration form, capturing important data for their respective reorientation and integration programs.

The content of the reorientation program covered three major issues: allowing them to reflect on their previous experience, introduction to the key contents of the Transitional Charter of Ethiopia, and introduction to the reintegration program. The reorientation program included group discussions about soldiers' experiences, the transitional political process, and how to prepare for civilian life.

Implementing the program came with several challenges. Elites from the previous regime and politically opposed groups argued that the program would deny them grounds for recruitment efforts. Additionally, outside donors mistook the demobilization camps for 'concentration camps' and were opposed to the process. To combat this opposition, the commission engaged in regular reporting on the process of orientation and organized donor field trips to the DDR camps. The commission also engaged in extensive planning of the DDR program, and presented appeals to donors for repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation programs. Donors expressed distrust and skepticism at the commission's ability to manage the required resources. Ultimately, the commission disengaged with the UN agencies and donor support associated with it and went ahead with its project, relying solely on meager support from government coffers. However, as the program started to rollout, some bilateral support was forthcoming.

The commission collected detailed data from the four target groups for reintegration planning purposes.

1. Over 78,000 of those who came from rural areas were found to have served in the army for less

than a year. At the end of reorientation, they were given transport to their respective areas, food ration cards, and were excluded from any reintegration assistance.

2. Nearly 170,000 of the total number of those who served over a year in the army from rural areas decided to return to their areas of origin. They were provided a piece of land for farming, tools, and 10 months food ration assistance.
3. Approximately 100,000 people were from urban centers and their reintegration package included a 10 month food ration, pocket money, employment support, technical assistance, and access to capital through a revolving loan fund. Some critics doubted the viability of the revolving fund, but the commission defended it saying it fostered ex-combatants' self-reliance.
4. About 30,000 people were classified as disabled veterans. Their reintegration package included physical rehabilitation, processing pension payments, and training for selected trades. Employment placement support was also provided, and technical assistance support was provided to those who opted to start their own small businesses.

Reintegration of EPRDF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) combatants followed similar principles and approaches. The reintegration program actively continued until 1997, and was successful in its objectives of reintegrating ex-soldiers into civilian life. Later, the program was assessed by independent consultants, international organizations, and academics, and rated successful.

Additionally, another comparative study of DDR experiences of Mozambique, Uganda, Namibia, and Ethiopia made by the World Bank also found that the Ethiopian DDR experience was the most successful in terms of meeting its planned objectives. It succeeded not only because it enabled the largest number of soldiers to receive reintegration assistance, but also because its intervention modality most effectively met the program's planned objectives.

Key Lessons from the Ethiopian experience in transition from war to peace

1. Successful DDR is only possible in the context of an inclusive political process

An inclusive political process for transition from war to peace is vital and helps determine the legitimacy of any security related program. In non-inclusive political processes, there can be contested legitimacy, which makes the success of security related programs like DDR less likely to be successful.

2. Peace and stability as a key orienting strategy to all government activities

During the transition from war to peace, maintaining peace and stability should be the primary motive of government actions. The EPRDF was clear on this point, which overall oriented the strategy of all of its activities. Maintaining peace and security in communities is of the utmost importance; a transitional process that fails to use peace and stability as an orienting strategy to all government work will lose focus and miss opportunities for necessary community participation in the peace building endeavor.

3. DDR is a demand driven project

DDR is ill-suited to a post-conflict environment where the security forces are a loose coalition of armed groups and there are no organized security institutions. By the same token, DDR is not a project to talk about while a state is engaged in an active war.

4. DDR requires clarity of objectives and goals

The essence and practice of DDR is basically political. At the beginning, the DDR commission in Ethiopia had major limitations in its technical capabilities, but benefitted from clarity on the objective of the project and the goals it wanted to achieve. This clarity was instrumental in providing strategic guidance and to the continued improvisation of program details and implementation. National actors must own the project and it must be driven by

the needs of the national political process for the clarity of objectives and goals to be achieved.

5. Donor support can only be effective if and when it supports demand locally owned projects

Support and intervention by donors can play a catalytic role to assist transformation from war to peace, but care should be taken that the availability of funds does not hatch projects simply tailored to the supply.

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