

RECIDIVISM: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL NETWORK FACTORS

This Spotlight analyzes the economic factors and social processes that contribute to recidivism among former combatants from illegal armed groups in previous reintegration processes in Colombia, as well as in international contexts such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Afghanistan. We examine how war economies combine with domestic economic dynamics to both perpetuate cycles of participation in illicit sectors, as well as give rise to emergent paths to recidivism. Additionally, the critical but often overlooked role of former mid-ranking commanders in illegal armed groups in disproportionately contributing to recidivism dynamics is examined. Finally, we offer several recommendations for supporting a reincorporation process that addresses early and head-on some of the core contributing factors for ex-combatant recidivism.

WAR ECONOMIES AND VIOLENCE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

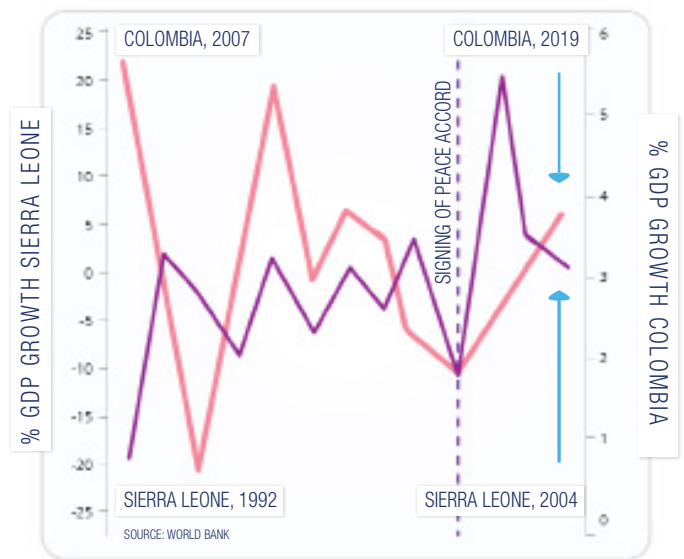
The continuity of conflict violence partially lies in the rents that it offers for a select, but powerful and wealthy few - either nationally or in global legal and illegal war economies (e.g., arms, trafficking of persons or drugs, and extortion). These rent potentials complicate transitional schemes intending to sustainably reintegrate former combatants within the bounds of legality. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, postconflict efforts to regulate and control war economies such as timber and illicit mining in gold and diamonds were, at best, only partially successful. Further complications arise when monopolistic control over war economies previously maintained by illegal armed groups breaks down due to the end of conflict. Competition for control over these economies emerges, and violent suppression often dominates as the primary mechanism for managing this competition and controlling rents.

Violence entrepreneurship, on the other hand, presents as a distinct but related contributing factor to recidivism of former members of illegal armed groups. Also in Sierra Leone, for example, the combination of few employment opportunities in the licit sectors in the postconflict period and the presence of criminal entrepreneurs looking to exploit local groups with a high potential for violence, resulted in steadily increasing crime rates since the end of war in 2002 until at least 2011. Taken together, findings from research in this area suggest that weak licit economies (and, in turn, weak job markets) along with violence entrepreneurs can contribute to the mobilization of populations with a high potential for violence; demobilized ex-combatants emerge as most vulnerable to these dynamics.

The graph to the right presents the GDP growth in Sierra Leone and Colombia in the ten years prior to the signing of their respective peace accords, as well as the projected GDP growth for Colombia through 2019, and the recorded figures for Sierra Leone in the three years following the January 2002 peace accord.

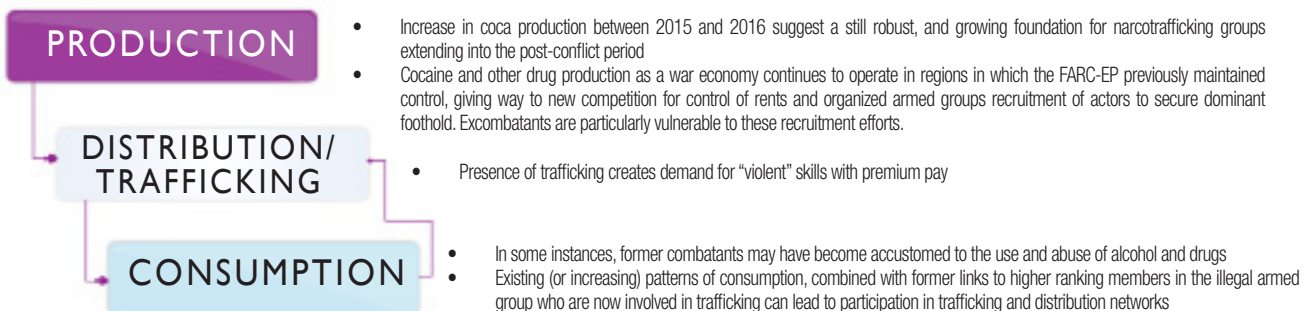
Though Colombia’s growth has been far less volatile leading up to the accords (note that the rates for Colombia have been plotted on a secondary axis to facilitate comparison), the two countries share similar development patterns in these periods. Thus, while Colombia’s GDS is projected to continue growing – albeit at slower rates than in previous periods – the comparison suggests that historic economic patterns as they relate to licit and illicit employment opportunities may yet have an important role to play in the dynamics of recidivism in the near term.

GDP Growth in Sierra Leone and Colombia in the ten years prior to the signing of their respective peace accords



RECIDIVISM AND NARCOTRAFFICKING: THE BIRTH OF A CYCLE

As arguably the most salient of war economies in the Colombian context, the production, distribution, and, more recently, consumption of narcotics merits dedicated attention as it relates to potential recidivism of former combatants. Below is an analysis of the way in which narco-trafficking contributes to recidivism in both the Colombian and global contexts.



WHY THE MIDDLEMAN MATTERS

Findings on the effects of ex-combatant maintenance of command-and-control structures from illegal armed groups post-demobilization have been mixed. As such, there is no universally accepted prescription to fully dismantle these structures in the reintegration process, as they can serve as important sources of social support, solidarity, and opportunity for reincorporating individuals.

Nonetheless, there are clear instances in which these command and control structures may contribute to recidivism. Most importantly, analysts point to the middle ranking members of a given illegal armed organization as critical populations for stabilizing reintegration and peacebuilding efforts. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, for example, parts of the command-and-control chains of armed groups allowed for efficient mobilization of vigilante and “protection” groups that contributed to a long-term upturn in armed violence post-accord. Criminal entrepreneurs also made use of

small groups of former combatants who were linked to their immediate superiors as a way of ramping up their own illicit activities, such as drug trafficking.

Other researchers have found that middle-ranking commanders can serve as “first movers” into criminal networks. Following, they recruit their previous lower ranking soldiers into their new and growing criminal networks. This effect compounds as well: as more former combatants participate in criminal networks, ties to ex-combatant peers becomes an increasingly powerful driver of group and individual criminal activity. Why is it that these middle-ranking commanders have such a powerful influence over recidivism trends of the rank-and file? They are uniquely situated between the foot soldiers of the illegal armed group and the political elite. Below are three cases in which middle-ranking commanders from illegal armed groups were key contributors to recidivism after the formal end of war.

INTERNATIONAL CASES OF MOBILIZING EX-COMBATANTS THROUGH MID-RANKING COMMANDERS

LIBERIA

Large patron/client networks ranging from government leaders to street youth largely comprised ex-commanders from the Liberian Civil War.

These networks were often leveraged for boosting the numbers at political rallies or attacking the economic interests of political rivals.

REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Ex-militia members, though dissatisfied with the government reintegration program, did not re-mobilize until former commanders called them to arms.

Political elites needed a response to a surprise attack against them, but did not have direct access to rank and file fighters. They thus called on former mid-level militia commanders to mobilize their soldiers.

AFGHANISTAN

During the Afghan transition 2002-2005, many former warlords attempted to transition to business and politics, though they retained their illegal armed ties to bolster their influence.

In more rural, dispersed regions that lacked strong centralizing figures, former middle ranking warlords tended to focus instead on controlling the drug trade.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No international context can offer a direct comparison to the Colombian case, nor can prior findings in previous collective and individual demobilizations within Colombia predict the recidivism patterns to follow in the coming years. However, several useful recommendations emerge from an analysis of the range of reintegration efforts presented in this Spotlight.

1. Design specific programs and incentives for the mid-ranking commanders. Often, DDR programs often design the bulk of their incentives for high-level leaders and rank-and-file soldiers. In the Colombian case, the Amnesty Law is one example of the way in which peace accord negotiators look to process and reintegrate thousands of individuals through broad stroke measures that reserve longer justice proceedings for more serious offenders. Middle-ranking commanders may or may not fall within these broad strokes. To prevent mobilization down the road by elite illegal interests, programs should attend to those individuals, who possess a profile distinct from their lower ranking counterparts (e.g., resources, connections, and skills).
2. Ensure reach of reincorporation programming to remote areas with illicit (war) economies & track former combatant migration patterns over time. Even if former combatants originally situate themselves near reincorporation programs, if disillusioned with the process, they may migrate to more remote regions where illicit war economies persist. This was the case in Sierra Leone, when many of the ex-combatants who were either not reached by or disillusioned with the reintegration efforts migrated to diamond extraction operations and were often later recruited as mercenaries. It is easy to imagine how coca production and illegal mining in Colombia may create similar pulls.
3. Concentrate recidivism prevention in the early stages of reincorporation. In previous studies of Colombian paramilitary demobilization, researchers found that within two years of demobilizing, those ex-combatants disillusioned with the reintegration process had already begun to return to structures of violence and crime. This finding suggests that the early, brief period at the start of reincorporation for the former FARC-EP who will be entering civilian life within two months may be the most critical for stabilizing their trajectories within the bounds of legality.

¹ Judith Vorrath: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssor-411569>.

² Enzo Nussio and Kimberly Howe: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.955916>

³ Josjah Betina Kunkeler and Krijin Peters: <http://www.ijcv.org/index.php/ijcv/article/view/155>

⁴ Lawura Ralston: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-7079> (And Judith Vorrath, see End Note i)

⁵ Judith Vorrath, see End Note i

⁶ Sara Zukerman Daly, Laura Paler, and Cyrus Samii: http://sarabzukermandaly.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/colombia_main_submit.pdf

⁷ Anders Themnér: https://books.google.com/books?id=IGSrAgAAQBAJ&dq=outledge+studies+violence+in+post-conflict&source=gbs_navlinks_s; Mats Uljas: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:163000/FULLTEXT01.pdf>; Antonio Giustozzi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13533310601114285>

⁸ Jonathan Morgenstein: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2008/11/consolidating-disarmament-lessons-colombias-reintegration-program-demobilized>