

Book review

From soldiers to citizens: Demilitarization of conflict and society

João Gomes Porto, Chris Alden and Imogen Parsons 2007

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The focus of this book falls into the greater discussions of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. This book provides an in-depth analysis of the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process and delves into an even deeper conversation about the concept and practice of Reintegration. The authors use empirical research on the Angolan DDR process to assess the merits and challenges of our understanding of the process of reintegration.

The authors base the arguments of this book on the assertion that demilitarisation of any conflict is the key to building sustainable peace in post-conflict states. This book makes a crucial argument that if this process is to lead to sustainable peace, then it must enjoy a deep commitment from individuals and communities. The authors adopt an earlier argument that when an ex-combatant returns and surrenders from war the agreement he makes with the Government can be seen as a social contract (Knight and Ozerdem 2004). The DDR process, therefore, is not only a mechanism to establish good governance but it is also a commitment by any recipient government to assist returning ex-combatants in their transition to citizenry.

DDR programmes have received significant attention from academics and policy makers because of the rising numbers of programmes all over the world and the involvement of the international community in supporting these activities. This process has involved incumbent governments, non-state armed groups and third parties that act as mediators. In this book the contributors argue that it is important – if these processes are to be effective – to include them in the long-term development agenda of a State (Ball and Van de Goor 2006). This position has been opposed by those who do not think that military issues should be included in the process of development. The authors have, however, argued that these issues require appropriate responses from development practitioners and therefore security problems need to be integrated into the development conversation. According to the authors, it is the long-term nature of this process and the different complexities involved that must not be underestimated if reintegration is to be successful.

An insightful contribution made by this book is the fact that the DDR processes are often administered in environments in which the political, social and economic structures have been seriously devastated. Most states emerging from war are characterised by weakness, poverty and underdevelopment, which limit the possibilities for achieving the objectives of DDR programmes (Gomes Porto and Parsons 2003). The authors then contend that this environment is critical to the success and failure of the process (Douma and Klem 2008).

A significant contribution of this text is discussion about the place of the receiving society in the process of reintegration. The authors make the case that where DDR only targets the returning combatants, this could greatly inhibit their reintegration into the society. A better approach would be to treat ex-combatants no differently from any other vulnerable group – such as the internally displaced persons (IDPs). The authors make a clear assertion that the process of DDR involves more people than simply the ex-combatants and, as such, there must be equity in the treatment offered to both the communities and the returnees. It is the authors' belief that such involvement of the communities would enable better support for, and reception of ex-combatants.

This book brings a wealth of information to the field of peace and conflict studies. The empirical research base on which the arguments about DDR practice depend gives the reader an opportunity to better understand the practice and the critical challenges of implementing the DDR programmes in weak post-conflict states. The presentation of the empirical research in qualitative discussions and quantitative representations enable the reader to question some of the assumptions frequently made about reintegration. A good example of this is the notion that returnees are always rejected by their communities. The authors in this text argue that this is not always the case and their empirical research establishes that 90% of the returnees reported that they were received positively.

Another useful contribution made in this book is the analysis of the relationship between ex-soldiers and the internally displaced population. The authors contend that the experiences and struggles of this group are not significantly different from those of the returning soldiers, and that the recognition of the disadvantages of preferential treatment of ex-combatants in weak and poor societies is also a vital aspect of reintegration.

The analysis shows how identity and the transformation of identity play a crucial role in successful reintegration, and this is an essential contribution of this text. The identity of an individual forms the basis of his/her citizenship and loyalty. As such the authors' analysis of the political life of ex-combatants is a necessary aspect of DDR.

In conclusion the authors have successfully communicated the importance of a properly effected DDR in securing a post-conflict state. The use of Angola as a case study makes it easier for the reader to understand the theoretical assertions and arguments of the authors. The discussions that marry the theory and practice of reintegration gives this text some objective basis from which practitioners and academics can draw a wealth of understanding of post-conflict peacebuilding practices. This book provides a detailed analysis of the practice, challenges and opportunity of the DDR process in transforming ex-soldiers into citizens.

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