DDR and Post-War Politics: Lessons from Northern Ireland

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JOINT BRIEF SERIES: THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF DDR

This research brief series has been initiated through a collaboration between the Politics After War (PAW) research network, the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section (UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR) with the aim to provide research perspectives and scientific evidence on the intersection of DDR and politics with a particular emphasis on the transformative dynamics of armed groups and combatants.

The editorial board has consisted of Johanna Malm and Ashi Al-Kahwati from FBA, Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, Gyda Sindre, Devon Curtis, Véronique Dudouet, and Jacqui Cho from PAW, and Thomas Kontogeorgos, Ntagahoraho Burihabwa, Kwame Poku and Barbra Lukunka from UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

Introduction

Offering non-state armed groups a share of power in return for ending violence has become a central pillar of conflict resolution efforts. It is hoped that allowing non-state armed groups a stake in the political system will provide them with an incentive to cooperate with rival organizations, support post-war political institutions and support reformed policing structures and justice mechanisms. Such an approach has been central to conflict transformation efforts in places as diverse as the Balkans, Burundi, Lebanon and Nepal, to name but a few.

The participation of formerly armed groups in constitutional politics[1] comes with significant challenges, particularly for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR). As has been acknowledged by the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) module 2.20 on the Politics of DDR, some DDR incentives that help to secure the consent of non-state armed groups to abandon an armed campaign may undermine the

stability of political institutions in the medium and long term .[2] This is particularly true for cases where former armed groups emerge as significant players in post-war politics. For example, non-state armed groups are likely to demand concessions such as the release of their prisoners or amnesties for members. However, given that DDR is not just a technical process but one that requires active political backing, such measures may undermine support from other stakeholders who find such concessions unpalatable.

What are the long-term consequences of DDR decisions taken during peace processes for formerly armed groups who become political actors? This research brief explores this question through an in-depth look at the case of Sinn Féin and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish peace agreement of 1998 is often assumed to be one of the most successful examples of a peace process in the post–Cold War era.[3] However, this research brief challenges some assumptions regarding its success by exploring the causes of political instability that have plagued power-sharing in Northern Ireland in the 24 years following the peace process.

This research brief draws primarily on the authors' research over the past ten years in Northern Ireland on the transition of armed groups to political actors, power-sharing institutions and the role of spoiler groups in conflict transformation.[4]

ONGOING POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN POST-WAR NORTHERN IRELAND

In 1998, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) brought an end to a 30-year conflict over whether Northern Ireland should be reunited with the rest of Ireland or should remain under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom. Although several paramilitary groups were active throughout the conflict, the PIRA, and their political wing Sinn Féin, were the highest profile players. The CPA established a new power-sharing Assembly that guaranteed a share of executive power to all parties in proportion to their share of the vote. This allowed Sinn Féin to enter government and pursue their goals through political means, on the condition that the PIRA end its armed struggle. The CPA was widely lauded as an archetype of how entrenched conflicts could be transformed through power-sharing. Such was the perceived success of the CPA that senior members of Sinn Féin and the UK and Irish governments were asked to advise other peace initiatives in Colombia, the Middle East, Turkey and Spain. But the reality is more complex. More than 20 years after the peace agreement was signed, post-war institutions remain unstable. The Assembly has collapsed or been suspended five times for more than seven years; trust in the institutions is extremely low; identity politics fuels pockets of local discontent; and no mechanism for dealing with the legacy of the conflict can be agreed.

Disarming in parallel with political inclusion

A first key finding from our research on the Northern Ireland case is that the sequence in which non-state armed groups are offered political inclusion in return for engaging with DDR processes is crucial. Failure to sequence DDR processes appropriately can lead to instability in the medium term, even after a seemingly successful CPA is agreed. There is often pressure for DDR to happen after a CPA but prior to elections, out of fear that weapons or the threat of violence will limit the free and fair nature of post-war elections. But making extensive DDR demands of non-state armed groups prior to elections can be counterproductive, alienating armed groups without giving them space to transition into exclusively peaceful actors. The disarmament process can give rise to mistrust on all sides. Independent external brokers may help this process, but the issue of sequencing remains. The optimum sequencing will, of course, depend on the specific political and security context. For example, while it has been argued that peace should be secured before asking non-state armed groups to disarm,[5] this was not feasible in Northern Ireland.

The sequencing of when the PIRA should decommission its weapons and when Sinn Féin should be allowed to enter the power-sharing Assembly was the main source of instability that hindered the implementation of the CPA and post-war political stability. The leaders of Sinn Féin and the PIRA had strong incentives to delay decommissioning as long as possible. Doing so enabled the leadership to appea-

se PIRA hardliners, reassured concerns that the UK government might renege on negotiations once the PIRA had lost its firepower and allowed Sinn Féin to maximize its bargaining power. However, unionists and members of the UK government perceived the reluctance to engage fully in decommissioning as an indication of the PIRA's limited commitment to peace, increasing mistrust and suspicion about sharing power with Sinn Féin. One potential option to avoid this drawn-out process was offered by US mediator Senator George Mitchell as early as 1996, but it went unheeded by the UK government. Mitchell called for PIRA decommissioning and the political inclusion of Sinn Féin to happen in parallel, in a way that would build confidence on all sides. With hindsight, such a sequence, if it were possible to implement, would have had significant potential to reduce tension and overcome barriers on all sides.

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD OF PIRA DECOMMISSIONING

When peace talks first began in earnest in 1995, the UK government insisted on PIRA decommissioning prior to any negotiations. This created an impasse that led to the collapse of negotiations. Subsequently, the UK government changed tactics and aimed to secure a CPA before seeking the decommissioning of PIRA weapons. As part of the 1998 CPA, an Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) was established to oversee the process.[6] Although there was some very limited engagement with the IICD by the PIRA, few concrete steps were taken. Sinn Féin entered government in 1998, even though the PIRA continued to hold weapons, acted as a police force in certain neighbourhoods, engaged in criminal activity, policed internal 'dissidents' and spied on Sinn Féin's rivals in parliament. This rendered it politically impossible for unionist parties to share power with Sinn Féin. As a result, the new power-sharing institutions collapsed four times between 2000 and 2007 (twice for 24 hours, once for three months, and once for five years), and public support for the power-sharing institutions declined.[7] The crisis was only resolved when Sinn Féin came under increasing pressure from the UK, Irish and US governments to put their weapons beyond use. Decommissioning was eventually declared completed by the IICD in 2005, after seven years of instability.

The importance of transparency and accountability when offering DDR incentives

A second key finding of our research is that an integrated approach to DDR requires an assessment of how DDR processes are linked to transitional justice. Issues that sit at the intersection of DDR and transitional justice – such as prisoner releases and amnesties – seek to balance the short-term aims of DDR with the longer-term requirements of transitional justice. This is especially true in cases where non-state armed groups have made a shift to the political arena. However, DDR policies potentially exist in tension with transitional justice mechanisms. As an incentive for their engagement in wider DDR processes, schemes for prisoner release and reintegration are sometimes used to facilitate the transition towards supporting and functioning within new political institutions. While they are controversial, such schemes are nevertheless used as a tool for inclusion and a bargaining chip to encourage groups to disarm and demobilize. For example, in the case of Northern Ireland, a formal agreement on prisoner releases was reached as part of the CPA (see

But such incentives potentially undermine trust in post-war political institutions and justice mechanisms in the long term. Therefore, policies to facilitate the transition of armed groups into political parties – however controversial – require transparency among all actors involved (including non-state armed groups, mediators and governments), with clear lines of reporting and accountability, if they are not to undermine trust in post-war political institutions.

Power asymmetry and the importance of government accountability

A third important finding relates to the accountability of governments who lead peace negotiations. There is a tendency to treat governments as neutral political actors that can act as a third party to facilitate mediation and support reconciliation, even when they are parties to the conflict. This places governments in a powerful position to not only decide the conditions for political involvement but also de-

THE EARLY RELEASE OF PRISONERS AND DEALING WITH 'ON THE RUNS'

Following the peace agreement, prisoners on both sides who qualified for the early release scheme were freed on the condition that they turn away from paramilitarism or risk re-incarceration. While this scheme was controversial, especially with victims of the conflict, it was viewed as successful in facilitating Sinn Féin's support for the peace process and minimizing splinter groups. The early release scheme did not make provisions for individuals who were suspected of terrorist offences but had not been convicted, or for those who had escaped from prison. Sinn Féin sought for such individuals to go unprosecuted, but unionists were strongly opposed to what they saw as a pardon.

The question about what to do with these individuals – who became known as 'on-the-runs' (OTRs) – was seen as too controversial to be included in the formal peace negotiations. Instead, an agreement was reached in secret between the UK government and Sinn Féin, under which OTRs would not be sought for prosecution in the future, introducing a lack of transparency around the issue. In 2014, when the scheme came into public view, the UK government justified the deal as 'necessary' for the peace process. Their argument was that if the UK government had rejected Sinn Féin's demands for reassurances about the OTRs, the PIRA would have had less incentive to engage with the peace process.[8] On the other hand, public reaction reflected how the incident undermined political stability, as cooperation among political parties declined and popular support for the new institutions fell. What is more, victims described the secret arrangement as 'degrading'[9] and a subversion of justice.[10]

termine the mechanisms for transitional justice and specify who should be subject to them. Prioritizing certain parties of a conflict, especially through secret side-deals, creates disparity in DDR processes, undermining political cooperation in post-war institutions as well as public support and trust in delivering the promises of a peace agreement.

The failure to establish clear mechanisms and procedures by which to prosecute historical crimes committed by members of the British armed forces continues to be divisive in Northern Ireland. Since 2018, a small number of British soldiers have been scheduled to face trial for historical crimes committed in the 1970s. However, in May 2021, a high-profile trial of British soldiers collapsed, and other pending prosecutions against army personnel were halted.[11] Sinn Féin and other nationalist parties, the Irish government and victims' groups robustly criticized this decision. Although not officially an amnesty, it is clear that many in Westminster did not support these prosecutions, and legislation is being proposed to prevent future potential legal action against British soldiers who served in Northern Ireland. This is problematic, because throughout the peace process the UK government claimed to be neutral and to be in a position to broker a peace deal that would respect all sides. However, the government's willingness to drop the prosecutions, despite their negative impact on reconciliation, showed the limits of their claims of neutrality.[12] This further stoked division between politicians from different sides during what was an already fragile period.

Minimizing the clash between DDR and the goals of transitional justice requires transparency and the promotion of a shared understanding of the principles and consequences of DDR and how policies will be implemented. As the Northern Ireland case demonstrates, this lack of transparency and ad hoc approach resulted in inconsistent treatment when it comes to holding parties across the conflict accountable for past actions. Despite several attempts to agree to mechanisms to deal with the legacy of the conflict, the issue remains divisive and has been an important contributing factor towards the suspension of political institutions.

Enduring networks and structures of non-state armed groups in 'post-war' politics

Our research findings also underscore the importance of understanding the enduring organizational legacies of former non-state armed groups that transform into political parties and partake in constitutional politics. Such enduring networks can have effects on long-term political stability and community relationships that are potentially both positive and negative. After the signing of a peace agreement, it is common for non-state armed groups to transition towards the dual strategy of political

engagement alongside violent tactics. Therefore, violence remains an enduring feature of the post-agreement landscape. In fact, it is common for violent incidents to increase in the period immediately following a peace agreement, as splinter groups emerge and intra-communal violence is used to minimize dissent. While the term 'post-war politics' is often used to signal the period following a peace deal and the implementation of new political structures, it is important to note that 'war' and 'post-war' are not distinct phases.

In cases where direct methods of political engagement are encouraged as part of the peace process, non-state armed groups need to be understood as complex organizations in terms of their aims, organization, leadership and networks. Political parties with roots in, or connections to, armed revolutionary groups are not 'new organizations', and there is often a tendency to undermine how these structures are embedded in new constitutional politics, as well as informal networks such as local community groups or civil society. It is often in the interests of non-state armed groups to preserve these networks and hierarchies to maintain organizational discipline. As a result, even when progress is made in terms of decommissioning, these existing structures of power and influence within non-state armed groups endure in the long run and can be deemed harmful to political cooperation and community relations if organizations are perceived as still operational, despite a full commitment to the political process.

The negative impact of these enduring networks on political cooperation and stability should not be underestimated, nor should their potential for coercive control over some communities. Uncertainty about the continued commitment to peaceful politics of formerly armed groups in Northern Ireland has been a cause of concern throughout the post-agreement period. However, enduring networks that originated within non-state armed groups can also help to increase support for exclusively peaceful strategies and prevent the emergence of splinter groups. Therefore, rather than disbanding and breaking down the structures of an armed group in order to facilitate a transition to constitutional politics, practitioners should fully assess how these organizational networks can either support or hinder CPAs over the longer term.[13]

Conclusions and implications

This research brief has examined some of the challenges that arise when non-state armed groups are incentivized to end their use of violence by offering them a share of political power. While offering a route to political inclusion is a powerful way to encourage non-state armed groups to engage with DDR processes, it also raises distinct challenges. As noted in the IDDRS module 2.20, DDR processes shape post-war political dynamics. In particular, the module refers to the importance of building support for DDR processes among all actors and recognizing the political dynamics of DDR processes, as well as the possibilities of harnessing the political aspirations of non-state armed groups. The case of Sinn Féin and the PIRA in Northern Ireland has

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS 'LEAVING THE STAGE'?

PIRA decommissioning was declared complete in 2005, and political leaders in Sinn Féin announced that the armed group had 'left the stage'. However, ten years later, a report on paramilitary groups concluded that the PIRA and the paramilitary organization's decision-making body, the Army Council, continued to oversee both the PIRA and Sinn Féin with an overarching strategy, albeit with 'a wholly political focus'.[14] The continued existence of paramilitary support structures in Northern Ireland proved harmful to political progress and cooperation.

This development brought into question Sinn Féin's commitment to the CPA and the extent to which the PIRA had actually put their weapons beyond use. For the unionist community, who already felt as though they had 'lost out' in many aspects of the peace process, support for Northern Ireland's power-sharing political institutions was again placed under further strain, with some unionist politicians leaving the Executive.

important lessons for practitioners trying to implement the principles of this module.

First, our research shows the relevance of considering the long-term consequences of DDR processes on constitutional politics and community relations even if they may seem beyond the mandate of specific DDR programmes. Northern Ireland is often heralded as an illustration of how entrenched conflicts can be solved by setting up power-sharing institutions and the importance of facilitating armed groups' transition to exclusively peaceful politics. Over two decades since the CPA, Norther Ireland's continued political instability, lack of any transformative transitional justice mechanisms and the persistence of identity politics challenge this assumption.

Second, we find that the timing and sequence of political inclusion and DDR processes are vital to building trust in post-war institutions. The exact requirements will vary in different contexts, but careful assessment to identify the best sequence is important and running the processes of inclusion and DDR in parallel may be the optimum ideal. The transition from violent to exclusively peaceful politics is never clear cut, and non-state armed groups often occupy a grey area, even after a peace agreement has been accepted. Therefore, including former armed groups in political institutions prior to completing decommissioning can undermine trust and render it difficult for opponents to share power with them. However, demanding decommissioning prior to inclusion is likely to alienate non-state armed groups from the peace process.

Third, our research shows that some decisions to secure DDR gains in the short term may hinder transitional justice and post-war political stability in the longer term. Granting amnesty to former combatants may be vital to securing their support, but this can lead to wider resentment and mistrust. Of course, all peace negotiations entail difficult choices and trade-offs. But it is important that DDR practitioners assess the long-term trade-offs of DDR provisions agreed during the negotiation phase. Ensuring the transparency of DDR can avoid undermining trust in post-war politics.

Fourth, we suggest that it is important that governments who were parties to the conflict be seen as fully accountable for their actions. No matter how much such a government claims to be a neutral broker of peace, it was one of the parties to the armed conflict. As such, it often holds a unique and powerful position in the post-war period when it comes to making critical decisions with implications for post-agreement political stability: for example, regarding the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms.

Finally, to understand how surviving military structures impact the functioning of new political institutions, an assessment of group structure, leadership and support networks needs to be integrated into the DDR planning cycle. In making the transition from armed group to political party, it is common for organizations to maintain a hybrid political/military structure. Individuals associated with armed groups, including former political prisoners, carry the credibility to provide communal leadership and potentially encourage wider support for a peace process. While considering how groups engage with new political institutions, the relevance of informal communal politics should also be factored into any assessment of group transformation.

Endnotes

[1] By 'constitutional politics' we refer to actors agreeing to abide by the rules of politics and engaging in political institutions as set out in a constitution (or CPA) rather than attempting to overthrow the existing system through violence or revolutionary politics.

[2] See more about IDDRS: https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf

[3] For some further context to this argument, see John Bew. 2011. The lessons of Northern Ireland: Collective amnesia and the Northern Ireland model of conflict resolution. IDEAS reports - special reports. Nicholas Kitchen. ed. (SR008). LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Retrieved from: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43487/

[4] Matthew Whiting. 2018. Sinn Féin and the IRA. From Revolution to Moderation. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Matthew Whiting. 2018. 'The Strategic Transformation of Sinn Féin and the IRA.' Government and Opposition 53(2): 288-311; Matthew Whiting and Stefan Bauchowitz. 2022. 'The myth of power-sharing and polarisation: Evidence from Northern Ireland.' Political Studies 70(1): 81-109; Sophie Whiting. 2016. 'Mainstream Revolutionaries: Sinn Féin as a "Normal" Political Party?' Terrorism and Political Violence 24(3): 483-503; Sophie Whiting. 2015. Spoiling the Peace: The Threat of Dissident Republicans to Peace in Northern Ireland. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Sophie Whiting. 2015. 'Conflict resolution and terrorists as spoilers.' In Caroline Kennedy-Pipe et al., eds., Terrorism and Political Violence. London. Sage.

[5] Matthew Longo and Ellen Lust. 2009. 'The case for peace before disarmament.' Survival 51(4): 127-148.

[6] For background on the IICD and the full decommissioning process, see The Final Report of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. March 2011. Retrieved from http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/IICD-Final-Rpt

[7] See the 'paramilitaries and decommissioning' and 'political efficacy and trust' sections of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, retrieved from https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/polatt.html

[8] House of Commons, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. March 18 2015. The administrative scheme for 'On-the-Runs': Second report of session 2014–15; pp. 79, 81. Retrieved from: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmniaf/177/177.pdf

[9] John Beggs, Adrian McNamee, Ann Travers and David Scott. 9 June 2014. Oral evidence session before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee HC177. Retrieved from: http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/northern-ireland-affairs-committee/administrative-scheme-for-ontheruns/oral/10383.html

[10] House of Commons, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. 18 March 2015. The administrative scheme for 'On-the-Runs': Second report of session 2014–15: 10. Retrieved from: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmniaf/177/177.pdf

[11] For background, see Rory Carroll. 2 July 2021. 'Northern Ireland prosecutors drop Troubles-era cases against ex-soldiers.' The Guardian, retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/02/prosecution-of-soldiers-over-northern-ireland-troubles-deaths-halted

[12] See how former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Hain criticized the current government for undermining British neutrality through this process. House of Commons, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. 9 Sept 2020. Oral Evidence: Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past: The UK Government's New Proposals, HC 329. Retrieved from: https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/879/html/

[13] The importance of organizational structures and DDR was a recurring theme in this series of research briefs, as can be seen in John Ishiyama. 'Rebel party organization and durable peace after civil conflict'; Veronique Dudouet and Claudia Cruz Almeida. 'Political engagement by former armed groups outside party politics. Ozlem Tuncel, Carrie Manning and Ian Smith. 'Political Integration and Post War Politics'. 2022. Joint brief series on the Political Dynamics of DDR. Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, PAW and UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR.

[14] The Secretary of State delivers an oral statement to Parliament following an assessment of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, House of Commons. 20 October 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/secretary-of-states-oral-statement-on-assessment-on-paramilitary-groups-in-northern-ireland

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The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups.
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