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MEAC Findings Report 21

“It’s Like Starting From Scratch”: Informal Support Accessed by Individuals who Disengaged from Armed Groups as Children in Colombia

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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KEY FINDINGS

- Participants' experiences illustrated how disengaged children's relationships with Government institutions can be marked by a lack of information and mistrust, which if resolved, would increase their chances of accessing services and support.
- For most participants, the nuclear family was the central support network after disengagement, providing financial resources for education and housing, and information on how to register for healthcare.
- The cumulative effects of limited formal State support among participants were most clearly seen with regards to their education. Most had not had access to stable, quality education before, during, and after becoming associated with an armed group. After exiting, most were then unaware of how to register for school, nor did they have the financial resources to do so.

This Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project and accompanying case studies are supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and is being run in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict prevention, conflict transitions, and related interventions into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on findings from a participatory workshop and individual interviews conducted with nine individuals in Cúcuta, Colombia, in July 2022. MEAC is grateful for the opportunity to conduct these activities with this group, and thanks Bogotá-based NGO the Coalition against the Involvement of Children and Young People in the Armed Conflict in Colombia (COALICO) for their support in this endeavour. It presents findings on their experiences of leaving armed groups as children and reintegrating back into civilian life without formal support. This data may be useful to government, UN, and NGO partners working in Colombia, supporting their policies and programming to prevent and respond to child recruitment and reintegration. The report ends with key policy and programmatic recommendations that were constructed with the nine participants as part of the participatory exercise.

Disengagement from Armed Groups in Colombia

Overview: Child Disengagement and Reintegration in Colombia

Children in Colombia have been impacted by the armed conflict there in a variety of ways, from displacement to sexual violence and recruitment. As outlined in a recent MEAC findings report, child recruitment in Colombia has been ongoing since at least the 1980s, affecting children across the country who became associated with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP), the National Liberation Army (ELN), the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and other armed groups. The report from the Colombian Truth Commission, published in June 2022, estimated that in the time period from 1990 to 2017, between 27,101 and 40,828 children were recruited into armed groups in Colombia.¹ Successive governments in Colombia were slow to respond to child recruitment in the 1990s. Since then, as elsewhere in the world, interventions that provide support for children leaving armed groups have struggled to keep up with the changing dynamics of child association to ensure all those eligible receive support, and to understand and address children’s needs upon disengagement, in some cases fostering reluctance among disengaged children to participate in such support.

International guidance on child reintegration highlights the need for comprehensive context-specific approaches that address family, community, and individual factors, from lack of education to poverty and awareness-raising.² A narrow body of academic literature indicates that a holistic approach, addressing physical, psychological, economic, cultural, and social needs rather than only focusing on one aspect, could have the most positive impact in promoting reintegration progress.³ More must be done, however, to fully understand what kinds of interventions have the most positive impact for children formerly associated with armed groups, and to ensure that all affected children have access to support.

¹ Cristal Downing, Angela Olaya, Sofía Rivas, Dr Siobhan O’Neil, and Kato Van Broeckhoven, “Current Dynamics of Child Recruitment in Colombia,” *MEAC Findings Report 14* (New York: United Nations University, 2022); Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, *Hay Futuro si hay Verdad* (Bogotá: Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, 2022).

² Save the Children, *Child Soldiers: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies – A Field Guide* (London: Save the Children, 2001); UN General Assembly, “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,” 26 August 1996, A/51/306 (New York: UN General Assembly, 1996); UNICEF, *Implementation Handbook For The Convention On The Rights Of The Child: Fully Revised Third Edition* (Geneva: UNICEF, 2007); UNICEF, *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups* (New York: UNICEF, 2007); [United Nations Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Center, “DDR: Integrated Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Standards,”](#) last accessed 18 October 2022.

³ Michael Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From violence to Protection*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Neil Boothby, “Mozambique Life Outcome Study: How Did Child Soldiers Turn Out as Adults?” in *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration*, eds. Alpaslan Ozerdem and Sukanya Podder (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2011).

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In Colombia, early interventions to support individuals leaving guerrilla organizations who demobilized under peace agreements in 1991 were designed uniquely for adults. Later, as awareness of the issue of child recruitment in the country grew, the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) began implementing programmes for disengaged children under its protection mandate in 1999. These programmes aim to address factors that could have led to children's participation in the conflict, as well as the needs and priorities of individuals as they leave armed groups. Components of reintegration include access to health, education, psychosocial support, family reunification and stabilization, and awareness of State and local services and institutions with which interaction will be necessary in the longer term. In addition, formerly associated children are eligible to receive economic and other reparations from the Victims' Unit as part of measures to re-establish children's rights.⁴ In parallel to these processes, the Differential Life Pathway (DLP) process was developed for children who left the FARC-EP as a result of the 2016 peace agreement. The guidance document for the DLP process was agreed upon by the Government and the FARC-EP and covers a broad range of components, from education to voluntary participation.⁵

Despite this, there is evidence that over time, some children have left armed groups in Colombia and made their transition to civilian life without any kind of government support.⁶ Alternative programmes have been available from independent entities such as regional or local NGOs who work with children or individuals who have been victimized in the Colombian conflict, but little is known about why formerly associated children end up in these programmes. In order to understand the reasons why some individuals who disengaged from armed groups as children do not access relevant government programming or access alternative forms of support, MEAC carried out qualitative research with a small group of people who had this experience. This activity sought to learn from their experiences in order to ensure obstacles to accessing support are addressed and government and alternative forms of support are better tailored to the needs of conflict-affected young people.

Research Methodology

This report is based on findings from a participatory workshop and individual interviews with nine participants between 19 and 50 years of age in Cúcuta, Colombia, in July 2022. All of these individuals had been recruited by and left the FARC-EP as children (under the age of 18 years old). None of the nine individuals participated in any sort of formal reintegration support; instead, they sought support elsewhere. Due to the size of the group, there are limits to how far the results can be

⁴ Unidad de Víctimas, [Un proceso de atención y reparación integral para: Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Desvinculados](#), (Bogotá: Unidad de Víctimas, 2017).

⁵ Consejo Nacional de Reincorporación (CNR), [Lineamientos del Consejo Nacional De Reincorporación \(CNR\) para el programa integral especial de restitución de los derechos de los niños, niñas y adolescentes que salgan de las FARC - EP](#) (Bogotá: CNR, 2018).

⁶ Diana Feo Ardila and Lorena Fernández, [El Estado Colombiano frente a los niños, niñas y adolescentes \(NNA\) desvinculados de grupos armados al margen de la ley: ¿un enfoque de restitución de derechos?](#) (Buenos Aires: IV Seminario Internacional Políticas de la Memoria, 2011); UNICEF Colombia, ["Los Niños de Colombia quieren Conocer la Paz."](#) Press Release, 9 December 2015.

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generalized beyond the participants. Given that people who have not received any formal support after disengaging from armed groups as children are a hard-to-reach population, however, the findings included in this report contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of child reintegration in Colombia, and are important for facilitating broader conversations and engagement around effective programming for young people after they exit armed groups.

The workshop was reflective of emerging participatory research practices with conflict-affected populations.⁷ This type of approach can afford participants a more central role in shaping data collection through conversation, exchange of ideas and experiences, and formulation of recommendations that can be conveyed to policymakers and practitioners. Participatory methods empower disenfranchised populations by lessening the power imbalance between researcher and respondent, allowing participants to be agents of change with increased control over the process of producing the evidence upon which decisions about matters that affect them will be made.⁸ In the case of research with young people who were formerly associated with armed groups, these methods can place them at the centre of research about their own trajectories⁹ and allow their views and experiences to inform peacebuilding policy and practice.

In the workshop, participants were asked to share their experiences of transitioning to civilian life after leaving the armed group. They then formulated, jointly with MEAC facilitators, recommendations that aim to strengthen local and national-level policies to ensure that young people, and their communities, receive the support they need to both prevent and respond to child recruitment and overall insecurity. Individual interviews were held separately to delve deeper into some of the topics discussed in the workshop and to more fully understand participants' experiences. This report draws mainly on the observations from the workshop and related interviews.

Findings

The following findings are organized around six challenges that affect access to programming and reintegrating into civilian life without support. These challenges are not necessarily unique to disengaged children who have not received formal support; however, the lack of support during the transition to civilian life may have exacerbated the impact of these challenges, such as interrupted education and healthcare, and potentially created additional obstacles to surmounting them. The

⁷ Research practice in the peacebuilding field was, until recently, reflective of traditional methods of data collection, with an emphasis on collecting data *from* people and protecting them from potential ethical hazards, rather than allowing them to participate, and become active agents, in the research process.

⁸ Marc A. Zimmerman, "Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 23, No. 5 (October 1995); John W. Creswell, [*Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*](#), (London, New Delhi, and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).

⁹ Margaret Cargo, Garry D. Grams, Judith M. Ottoson, Patricia Ward, and Lawrence W. Green, "Empowerment as fostering positive youth development and citizenship," *American Journal of Health Behavior*, Vol 27, No.1 (February 2003); Sonia Nieto, "Lessons from students on creating a chance to dream," *Harvard Education Review*, Vol 64, No. 4 (December 1994); Ira Shor, *When students have the power: Negotiating authority in critical pedagogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Emily J. Ozer and Laura Douglas, "The Impact of Participatory Research on Urban Teens: An Experimental Evaluation," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 51, No.1-2 (March 2013).

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report ends with a section on public policy and programmatic recommendations that were formulated jointly by the participants and the MEAC facilitators.

The Challenges of Reintegrating Without Formal Support, and the Alternative Sources of Support that Participants Found

Participants in the workshop and interviewees were of many different ages, and for some – especially those who turned 18 years old before 1999 when the ICBF initiated programming to support children leaving armed groups – there was no available support for children when they disengaged. In the 2000s, as support options were created for those who were considered under Colombian law to be victims of the conflict (such as individuals who left armed groups under the age of 18 years old), these individuals decided not to access any such services. For some participants who had disengaged after the ICBF and other programmes were in place and were eligible for support, they decided not to attempt access for a range of reasons. In almost all cases where eligible participants bypassed support, their decision was largely due to a lack of information about available services and how to access them, and fear of stigma and discrimination by the institutional service providers themselves. The participants discussed the challenges they faced after exit, many of which had preceded their involvement in the armed group, and even made them vulnerable to recruitment. A lack of access to education and health services had accumulated effects and left them struggling and falling further and further behind their peers.

The next section focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences of bypassing or not being eligible for formal support, and the particular challenges associated with their self-reintegration journey. The following section examines how, in the void left by the lack of State-supported interventions, many participants turned to their families. Experiences and challenges that participants encountered in specific areas (education, health, income generation, and security) are then examined in detail.

The Institutional Void: Why Participants Had Not Accessed Available Formal Support After Disengagement

The Colombian citizenry's relationship with the State has been historically fraught, or even non-existent. State institutions, especially non-military state service providers such as schools, hospitals, and other entities, have not been present in most rural areas over Colombia's history. It is only in recent years that efforts have been made to close this gap and ensure that disenfranchised rural communities have access to such institutions. The gap, however, is far from closed and many communities continue to lack basic services and distrust State institutions due to their history of abandonment. Participants' experiences illustrated how disengaged children's relationships with government institutions can be marked by a lack of information and mistrust, which if resolved, would have increased their chances of accessing services and support. Participants reported that at the moment of disengaging they had not had, and did not know where to seek, information about how to request State assistance, services, and benefits. The fear of being publicly discriminated against for having been part of an armed group was widely reported as making participants nervous to engage with any State representative on the topic of disengagement from an armed group. In cases in which, in order to access a service, they had to talk about their time with an armed group,

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they reported having felt discrimination and little empathy, ultimately leading them to avoid such situations entirely.¹⁰

For example, an essential component of access to State services and assistance in Colombia is to register for the Identification System for Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programmes (SISBEN). This registration is necessary to access public health services, but is also used by the Victims' Unit and other entities to assess whether an individual victim's right to health is being fulfilled. As one participant stated: "You are a person when you enter into the SISBEN."¹¹ People who register for the SISBEN as adults are generally asked to report why they had not previously registered; focus group participants reported that this process was extremely difficult for them as they had to choose between accessing these services by sharing their stories in order to register, or not sharing and continuing to be barred from access. Some participants expressed that they felt they had been revictimized as part of this registration process, due to this requirement.¹² Others said that after having found the courage to share at least enough information to register, the SISBEN officials made derogatory comments or seemed unwilling to assist them in completing their registration and accessing services, compounding the trauma of the experience.¹³

In another example of the impact of interaction with institutions on this population's transition to civilian life, one participant felt that when trying to access psychosocial support, she had been forced to take part in an "office conversation [full of] uncomfortable curiosity" involving questions about her life story.¹⁴ In general, in order to avoid these situations participants would avoid engaging with any State institution, or if absolutely necessary, would engage but share as few details about their lives as possible. A few had received support from the government in more recent years after having registered as victims of forced displacement. But, they had not registered as victims of forced recruitment despite being eligible to do so because they did not think that State officials would treat them fairly; they believed that sharing that they had been associated with an armed group would lead to discrimination. Furthermore, participants expressed concern over the confidentiality – or lack thereof – maintained by the State, as there was a fear that any information shared with the State could be leaked, including to armed groups who would put participants' security at risk. Isolation from the State was also therefore a protective measure that could prevent individuals and their families from being exposed to, and threatened by, armed groups.¹⁵

In general, participants' relationship with the institutional architecture of the State was underscored by a combination of abandonment and lack of information, fear, and mistrust, which led them to refrain from approaching any institution for support after disengagement. Thus, even when they were eligible, participants did not access services and benefits such as economic or livelihood support, education, health services, and psychosocial support, despite these interventions being available to ease their transition to civilian life. Instead, upon leaving the armed group, participants relied on families as their main source of information about state services available to the general population

¹⁰ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ MEAC, *Interview 9* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

¹⁵ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

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(not disengaged people specifically), as well as social and financial support. Although this somewhat improved the ability of respondents to navigate state bureaucracy – when they chose to access it – the impact of family knowledge of state services had limits. Many family members – from the same communities as the disengaged individuals – also had limited knowledge of institutional processes, so were not best-positioned to advise on how to access every service and support process available to them. This meant that the disengaged people – even when supported by family - often bypassed interventions that may have helped them overcome the challenges they faced in their transition to civilian life.

A Dual-edged Sword? The Family’s Role Before and After Children’s Association with Armed Groups

The one constant that appeared in all nine participants’ narratives was that they had turned to family as a source of support and information when leaving the group. Whether or not they had told their families exactly where they had been and what had happened to them while with the armed group, once they were back, it was the family who told them how to access basic services available to the general population, how to register in the SISBEN, or how to obtain their identity document, among other practical matters. In some cases, family members had also provided financial support for participants’ education, housing, and other needs, stepping into a role that the State had not fulfilled, and providing alternative forms of support.¹⁶ One participant described the challenges of finding an “honest job, to be able to start working - from there it's like starting from scratch.”¹⁷ The family assumed an essential role in these situations, providing, for instance, a reference or recommendation for a job vacancy, or ensuring that participants had the means to continue their education.¹⁸

For most participants, the nuclear family had become the central support network, and they avoided making friends or other social connections. Many experienced difficulties in establishing bonds of trust that allowed them to build their future with a support network. Closeness with a friend – and the conversations that may result from such a relationship – became a potential trigger for thinking about their connection to an armed group. For others, friendships had been painful in the past, especially if they had been forcibly recruited alongside friends, or friendships had been forged within the group, and then friends had been lost either when they escaped or when friends were killed.¹⁹ Some participants, therefore, emphasized that “friends do not exist”²⁰ because such relationships were seen as risk factors for either remembering trauma or experiencing loss once again.

Furthermore, the focus group and interviews highlighted the many facets of family associations with armed groups, as has been documented in relevant literature.²¹ For some participants, it was their parents who sent them to an armed group, for reasons that included economic difficulties and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (Eds), *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

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gender-based violence,²² For example, a father told his son that he should join a group in order to become more masculine: “I was 11 years old when I heard that I was going to the group because my dad wanted me to be more of a man. He would say that men had to be more masculine (...). I heard that my dad made an agreement, like a sale [with the armed group].”²³ Others had sought to protect their families from death and so had turned themselves over to the group.²⁴ One participant stated: “The group told me there was one way to save my family... I had to leave with [the group]. I looked at my mom, I simply did not want my family to get killed, so I accepted.”²⁵ And for another participant, domestic violence and the separation of parents was the driving factor; his mother beat him regularly for getting into fights at school, so he joined the armed group to escape this violence and satisfy his basic needs, such as food.²⁶ Others wanted to help their families with financial commitments, and were attracted to the salaries offered by the armed groups.²⁷ One participant who entered an armed group at 11 years of age explained that: “I went to the group with the desire to work and provide for my family, but unfortunately that is not what happened.”²⁸ His family was left without their son, and with the same meagre income as before.

It is to these same families that many of the participants returned when they disengaged. These contrasting roles have provoked some experts to raise the question of whether family reunification, or return to families in communities where recruitment risk is high, is always in the best interests of children leaving armed groups.²⁹ In some cases, nuclear families knew little to nothing about participants’ experiences in their armed group, as they had not shared many details, not perceiving a need to do so – “what do they need to know for?”³⁰ In other cases, romantic partners and children knew the history of recruitment and passage through war, as well as the violence carried out by the participants when they were in the armed group. In all cases, reunification with family involved the challenge of reckoning with their past and making decisions about how much to share about their experiences in the group.³¹

As has been reported elsewhere in the literature,³² the family, therefore, represented the absolute core of support for these individuals, both when they left the armed groups as children and since then as they rebuilt their lives as young people and adults. This meant that the family was not only serving in the role of social support – and indeed, doing so to a greater extent due to some participants’ reluctance to form friendships – but was also substituting the State as a service provider and protector. As participants were unable to access support for disengaged people and as victims of forced recruitment under Colombian law, their families were the ones who filled in the gaps that the State had left, providing them with information about how to access education and health

²² MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

²³ MEAC, *Interview 6* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

²⁴ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

²⁵ MEAC, *Interview 8* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

²⁶ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ MEAC, *Interview 7* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

²⁹ Jareme R. McMullin *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013),.

³⁰ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Randolph Wallace, *A Comparative Study of Ex-Combatant Reintegration in the African Great Lakes Region : Trajectories, Processes, and Paradoxes* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2014).

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services, and also financial support for these services. Some reported that they regretted the burden this had placed upon their families, many of whom were already in vulnerable situations before they took on this state substitute role. However, they believed they had had no other option in order to make the transition to civilian life.

School as Both an Opportunity and a Site of Trauma

During the research activities, education – or a lack thereof – was highlighted as a key factor in both the trajectory into, and the experience after, armed group association. Access to quality education in Colombia has been a challenge for decades, especially in rural communities, and many participants highlighted the cumulative effect of this challenge over time – reporting obstacles to education after they left the armed group, which compounded their lost years of education while they were in the armed group. Most participants came from rural areas, where geographic constraints led to a low presence of the State and children have less access to schooling. As explained by one participant: “Since we were in the countryside, it was very difficult to access schools because they were located far away from where we lived.”³³ In addition, participants added that the schools that were available lacked the necessary resources to provide children with a good education, such as books or desks. These infrastructure issues were accentuated by teachers’ lack of training and professionalism, which led children to feel demotivated to pursue their education. Furthermore, parents often did not have the economic resources that would have allowed them to send their children to school instead of to work. As a result, sending their children to armed groups often represented an opportunity to avoid the costs associated with raising a family. According to participants, lack of education, combined with other structural social problems such as poverty or intrafamilial abuse, was one of the main factors that explained their entry into armed groups.³⁴

Participants reported encountering a series of obstacles that limited their chances of receiving the education, and therefore the tools, they needed to succeed in their transition to civilian life – a point for concern given the connection made in existing literature between education and reintegration success.³⁵ This marked a continuation of their stalled formal education, which had been interrupted during the years they were with the armed group and had already left them at a disadvantage compared to their non-affiliated peers. First, many participants reported that after leaving the armed group they were forced to change residences along with their families due to security threats. These displacements prevented their access to many services such as education, as they were forced to adjust to new locations where they did not know how to register with State entities that would facilitate such access. In addition, participants explained that even once they were more settled, the lack of information from the government and other entities continued to represent an obstacle to accessing education opportunities that might have been available to them.³⁶ Additionally, there were no educational options that were tailored to their skill level and maturity. Finally, participants highlighted the financial costs involved in accessing education, especially for those who wanted to pursue a

³³ MEAC, *Interview 5* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

³⁴ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

³⁵ Maria Paula Arango and Stephanie Zuilkowsky, “[Differentiated Meanings of Education in the Reintegration of Ex-combatants in Colombia](#),” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* (January 2022).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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university degree. Many had not been able to afford these costs due to their unstable economic situations, and had to abandon their studies.³⁷ Others had started families and prioritized the education of their children over their own; this challenge was particularly underscored by one single mother, who explained: “I have tried to study and move on, but right now, it is impossible to get a degree. When you have children, you dedicate everything to your children. You are not able to provide for yourself. But, I would like to keep on studying.”³⁸

Those who were able to enter school when they left the armed group encountered different challenges, again often referring to the additional burden placed on family members who had helped them to pay for their studies. Other obstacles included stigma and discrimination. One participant, in particular, reported facing rejection from other students, teachers, and even school principals when he entered the school system. He explains that “when I reached the institutions in order to study at school, I felt a lot of rejection due to my age, because I was too old.”³⁹ He explained that the fact that he missed so many years in the educational system due to his time in the armed group meant that he was not at the same educational level as other children of the same age. Even though he sought remedial education (at his family’s expense) in which his classmates were also older than the level of their studies would normally imply, his peers and teachers asked a lot of questions that he was not comfortable answering, preferring instead not to reveal details about his past that he felt could put him in danger. This led to the people at his school expressing distrust in him.⁴⁰ Another participant mentioned that she never even tried to enter the education system after exiting the group, because she wanted to avoid exposing herself to these instances of discrimination and stigmatization from society. School, therefore, became a site of discrimination – another obstacle to overcome, and one that in some cases led to the perpetuation of the lack of education that had begun long before.⁴¹

The discussions that MEAC was able to facilitate on education with these nine participants highlighted a broad scope of factors that affect access to education as part of the basis for a stable transition to civilian life. The discussion also clearly illustrates how individuals go about seeking alternative support when they cannot access reintegration programming – how even without someone laying out their priorities for them, they pursue education, turning to family as a principal source of support to do so.

Healthcare Needs Created by Conflict, Unfulfilled After Disengagement

The participants reported physical and mental health impacts from their time in armed groups, which in many cases had created needs that were unmet by a weak public health system that has historically been ill-equipped to address the health-related effects of conflict and has not prioritized mental healthcare for any sector of the population. The first key challenge identified was the lack of available information about available healthcare. Most of the participants had joined the ranks of an

³⁷ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

³⁸ MEAC, *Interview 2* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

³⁹ MEAC, *Interview 6* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁴⁰ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁴¹ MEAC, *Interview 2* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

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armed group as minors in rural areas or the outskirts of cities, where relevant institutions were not present.⁴² They then exited the group when they were still very young, so at the time of their departure they had never engaged with a health provider and did not know how or where to seek support. For example, for one participant who had her first menstrual period while in the group, she did not have access to information about self-care measures that she could take. No sanitary pads or other protection were available, so she used cloth, toilet paper, or newspaper as protection. She struggled to learn how to manage menstruation after departing the group as she did not know where to turn for support.⁴³ Other examples regarding a lack of information included registration for the SISBEN (described above), which most participants said they had not known how to do, presenting additional obstacles that limited their access to medical care. Family members therefore frequently stepped in to fill information gaps, both about self-care and the institutional architecture of healthcare in Colombia.⁴⁴

Some participants also mentioned the physical health consequences of their time in the group, and how these impacted their re-entry into civilian life. Participants mentioned that their time in the group was characterized by intense military training and long and exhausting walks carrying heavy loads, which took a physical toll on their small bodies. The negative impacts of these experiences were exacerbated by the fact that group members were often not given sufficient food or warm clothes.⁴⁵ As described by one participant: “When we arrived at the camp, they trained us, they would make us jump between tires, carry [a piece of] wood all day pretending it was a rifle – and we were all hungry and wet because of the rain. We had to learn to survive.”⁴⁶ The physical strain of these experiences caused long-term effects that affected participants after they left the group.

Mental health issues were also reported. Some participants reported living in constant fear of being found by members of the group they had been a member of, which resulted in a series of mental health issues that negatively impacted their education, work, and relationships. For instance, one participant explained that after leaving the group “any noise would wake me up. I would walk to the kitchen and look for a knife. I thought they were coming for me.”⁴⁷ She also mentioned suffering from recurrent nightmares and abrupt changes of mood as a result of her experiences in the group. For some who were victims of sexual violence or were forced to commit acts of torture, this became a daily battle in which dreams, hallucinations, and the relationship with their own body were marked by trauma, which some said they did not think they would ever overcome, emphasizing that “the damage is already done.”⁴⁸ The same participant who had experienced recurrent nightmares reported additional post-association trauma relating to her witnessing forced abortions in the group. She realized she was pregnant once she escaped the group but was extremely scared that the group would find her and hurt or take her baby away. This perception was based on the trauma she experienced as a result of the forced abortions which the group forced her to assist. This trauma extended to her interaction with a doctor who was providing prenatal care, as she believed that he

⁴² Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, [Plan Nacional de Salud Rural](#) (Bogotá: Ministerio de Salud, 2018),.

⁴³ MEAC, *Interview 8* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁴⁴ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ MEAC, *Interview 8* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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was also going to try to take the baby away – even though she had no reason to believe he was associated with the armed group. She, therefore, limited her visits and interaction with him in order to minimize this perceived risk.⁴⁹

Furthermore, participants preferred not to share their stories with other people, in order to protect themselves and their families from stigma and security risks. They felt that this further isolated them from society. Others pointed out that it had become almost impossible to get to doctors because they had difficulties leaving their homes due to conflict-related physical impediments and mental health challenges. According to one participant, the situation was particularly difficult for girls within the group due to the gender-based violence they experienced.⁵⁰ She explained that girls of all ages, including herself, were recurrently raped by male group members, especially commanders, and were forced to take birth control measures such as injections and pills in order to prevent pregnancy and forced abortions.⁵¹ These experiences left her with both physical and mental trauma that continued to affect her and for which she had never felt comfortable enough to seek help.⁵²

Participants attributed different effects to this isolation. Some felt it exacerbated the trauma that had resulted from their time in the group, others felt it made it harder to access services, and some felt it protected them from the perceived ill effects of sharing traumatic stories. In addition, participants referenced the low level of prioritization that mental health is given in the Colombian health system – a situation that was even more acute many years ago when workshop participants disengaged. This meant that the trust and attention that would have allowed healing and emotional health could not be achieved even in cases in which participants did seek interaction with a relevant government entity. In fact, the majority of workshop participants said that their priority was to forget their experiences, believing this was the most expeditious way to ensure what they called “mental catharsis,” allowing them to reduce the pain of memories. In these cases, the regret over not being able to access mental healthcare was a regret that they had no support in forgetting their experiences.⁵³ However, no matter what psychological support they would have sought, it had not been available to them, or they had not sought it out due to a lack of information or fear of stigma and re-traumatization.

Overall, the focus group and interviews highlighted how the trajectory of experiences before, during, and after association with armed groups – as children upon disengagement, and as adults later on – impacted access to health services and the ability to overcome trauma and physical health conditions. Traumas stemming from the constant feeling of insecurity, from violent in-group practices to which they were exposed, and from physical and psychological gender-based violence that they suffered were therefore left untreated. Furthermore, the lack of information and knowledge about how to access health services graduated into a reluctance to seek treatment due to fear of additional trauma, exacerbating both the mental and physical health impacts of war. As in other sections, family

⁴⁹ MEAC, *Interview 2* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

was a crutch for mental health support, but without professional help to overcome these impacts, many participants continued to suffer due to their childhood association with an armed group.

Economic Challenges as a Driver of Child Recruitment and a Constant After Disengagement

In the course of the workshop discussion, participants emphasized that income generation was the most important component of the transition to civilian life and, more generally, in preventing ex-combatants from returning to armed groups, given that poverty and the lack of livelihoods and education were fundamental contributors to their initial recruitment. Many participants dreamed of establishing their own business or having a stable job in order to start or provide for their own families.⁵⁴ One participant stated: “I just want to have my own business to move on with my family and to live in peace.”⁵⁵ Another participant said: “I would like to have a job or some sort of economic support. That would be good. I would like to have a food business, such as a restaurant.”⁵⁶ However, participants highlighted a series of factors that prevented them from fulfilling these dreams.

First, participants explained that the labour market in Colombia was extremely competitive, and they found that they did not meet the requirements necessary to access certain jobs due to their lack of education and professional experience because of the time they spent in an armed group.⁵⁷ This reflected how the historic lack of economic opportunities in the countryside, combined with the lack of education mentioned above, has been particularly problematic for younger generations in Colombia; and perhaps even greater for disengaged people. One participant reported that his lack of technical skills prevented him from being able to compete for jobs, and believed, based on experience interacting with formal entities, that his status as disengaged and displaced would increase the likelihood that he would be rejected from employment.⁵⁸ Therefore, participants found themselves in a disadvantaged position compared to other citizens, especially those who were from cities and were more accustomed to navigating the formal and informal labour markets. Similar to more than half of the Colombian population,⁵⁹ most participants worked in the informal sector, placing them in a more unstable economic position than if they had contracted employment. Not being able to access steady work had real implications for participants. Some reported living in the streets as a result of their unstable economic situations after they left the group, prior to securing a stable income.

Furthermore, due to the fear of stigma and discrimination, participants reported having decided not to share their stories with potential employers or government agencies that could have provided them with economic assistance available to those considered victims of the conflict (including children). This assistance could have helped them economically as they searched for employment or even helped them navigate the labour market. Many reported feeling abandoned by the State in

⁵⁴ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁵⁵ MEAC, *Interview 5* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁵⁶ MEAC, *Interview 2* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁵⁷ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁵⁸ MEAC, *Interview 5* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁵⁹ Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas (DANE), [Empleo informal y seguridad social: Información mayo-junio 2022](#) (Bogotá: DANE, 2022).

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this regard.⁶⁰ They criticized the lack of information available on livelihood opportunities that disengaged individuals could potentially secure when returning to civilian life, an oversight that eventually marginalized them from the rest of society.⁶¹ As a result, many had to seek economic support through other means, mainly through their families, as discussed above.

Although income generation was highlighted among participants as the most important factor in their return to civilian life, it was also one of the most challenging to access and maintain. Lack of education and experience over time, as a result of having been part of an armed group as children, had a cumulative effect that left them in a disadvantaged position in the labour market. This disadvantage was exacerbated by the social stigmatization and discrimination they felt as former members of armed groups, which marginalized them even more from both the labour market and from any government support that might have been available to them as victims. As a result, participants again often turned to their families for support, creating additional burdens for already scarce family resources in many cases.

Perpetual Insecurity as a Driver of Recruitment and Post-association Challenges

Communities around Colombia, especially in rural areas, have been exposed to violence, the presence of armed groups, and the accompanying absence of the State for decades. Many participants had lived in such communities and had become associated with an armed group, and been kept in the group, through force, due to constant security threats from other group members. One participant explained that “[armed group members] told us that if we escaped, they would kill us – we had to be there.”⁶² More specifically: “They would tell us that if we escaped, they would look for our parents because they knew where they were.”⁶³ The armed group also exerted pressure on child members to stay in the group through physically violent means. Participants mentioned witnessing murders, torture, and other violations against other children and adults. Women participants also reported sexual violence they experienced as girls, at the hands of group members who used sexual violence as a weapon to keep them in the group.⁶⁴ One woman stated: “I was in the group for four years. They raped me. I had to put up with the situation. All the men in the group raped me.”⁶⁵

Exiting the group often does not represent an escape from violence; new threats emerge during the transition to civilian life. Although successive governments have launched campaigns to tackle insecurity and the proliferation and continuation of armed group activity in Colombia, violence continues and often targets those who have left armed groups and are in socially vulnerable positions. This was reflected in the experiences and perceptions of research participants, as many felt upon exiting their group that they had to escape and move away from their hometowns to new and unfamiliar places to protect themselves and their families. One participant explained that he and his family had to move more than once and that if he had not done so, he believed that his family

⁶⁰ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶¹ MEAC, *Interview 6* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶² MEAC, *Interview 2* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶³ MEAC, *Interview 7* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶⁴ MEAC, *Focus Group* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶⁵ MEAC, *Interview 8* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

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would have been killed by members of the group he left.⁶⁶ He explained that moving represents a way “to protect one’s life” in these contexts. Another participant explained that after leaving the group, not only was he threatened by current members, but he also had to be extremely cautious regarding threats from paramilitary groups as well as threats from the armed forces, both of whom were battling against his former group (the FARC-EP).⁶⁷ Other participants also feared that their children would be recruited into armed groups. For example, one participant explained that her two children had indeed been recruited into armed groups and that she managed to get them out, leading to threats and heightened security risks for her entire family.⁶⁸ Overall, participants reported that in order to protect themselves and their families from different kinds of threats they had to take measures such as avoiding certain places, being cautious when walking on the streets, avoiding big groups of people, or arriving early or late to their daily activities so as not to keep a predictable schedule. However, despite taking these measures, participants reported continued security threats and living in constant fear up to the present day, which has posed major obstacles in their transition to civilian life alongside their families.

In terms of seeking support or protection in response to current security risks, fear of stigma and discrimination prevented many participants from engaging with the police or other potentially relevant government institutions. Many reported having been discriminated against by different governmental institutions in both their hometowns and the communities to which they had moved, and therefore preferred not to repeat the experience in order to report a security threat. They referred specifically to the police as the institution they distrusted the most, due to discrimination and violence in police engagement with the civilian population, especially vulnerable populations. Overall, participants felt that State entities were not taking responsibility for their security and that they had to manage security risks alone. One participant explained that support in tackling security threats was the one type of assistance that he felt would have had the most positive impact on his life today, if he had had such support when he left the armed group as a child and during his transition to civilian life.⁶⁹

The discussion made it clear that these security threats have represented significant obstacles in the transition to civilian life as they prevented participants from accessing government support, education, health, income generation, and other areas mentioned above, as well as presenting risks to their families. This reinforced participants’ decisions to isolate themselves and avoid certain people and places in order to protect themselves and their families, further preventing them from receiving appropriate support over time.

The Impact of These Challenges

The experiences of the nine participants illustrate many of the challenges that disengaged children encounter when making the transition to civilian life, especially when they do not have formal options for support. The snowball effects of their reduced access to education and healthcare before, during,

⁶⁶ MEAC, *Interview 5* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ MEAC, *Interview 9* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

⁶⁹ MEAC, *Interview 3* (Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia, July 2022).

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and after their time in the FARC-EP, combined with a lack of information about and distrust of the institutions providing support, undermined the group's efforts to rebuild their lives. This was especially apparent for older participants who had been unable to complete their education and who still felt the physical and mental health impacts of their time in the armed group and did not feel that State institutions were able to provide them with confidential and effective support in these areas. Furthermore, the isolation of participants from their social surroundings was apparent, as distrust in both State institutions and in potential friendships had resulted in them avoiding relationships that could have provided them with social support and could potentially have led them to be more active members of their communities. The cumulative impact of these challenges, therefore, had a long-lasting effect on their ability to lead productive and fulfilling lives after their association with the armed group, representing a long-term challenge to peacebuilding in Colombia.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

In the final part of the focus group discussion, MEAC facilitators asked participants to discuss the measures policymakers and practitioners should take to address the challenges they highlighted. Recommendations reflected the six key areas that characterized participants' concerns in making their transition to civilian life without formal support. It is important to note that some of these challenges are also likely to have impacted those children who had accessed support, for example insecurity after exiting a group or distrust of State institutions. The implications for those without formal support, however, appear to be even more significant. The following section is based on the recommendations that participants constructed for policymakers and practitioners who are working with children, young people, and communities transitioning away from conflict. Recommendations are structured around the different types of intervention involved in their implementation.

Information and Awareness

A lack of information about programmatic support available to children disengaging from the FARC-EP formed the crux of many of the challenges faced by participants in their transition to civilian life. Therefore, in order to strengthen access to services such as education and healthcare for individuals who have been part of armed groups, participants recommended information campaigns to ensure ex-combatants were aware of opportunities and processes. Social media and other similar platforms were highlighted as ways to reach younger populations more effectively; radio programmes would also be effective in reaching rural communities in which awareness of institutional support has historically been low. In the case of healthcare, such information campaigns should include measures to reach people with disabilities and those living with the physical and mental health-related impacts of conflict. Participants also highlighted the critical need for awareness campaigns that demonstrated how former members of armed groups could register for the SISBEN and other healthcare and education services, given that this information gap was identified as a core obstacle in the transition to civilian life.

Presence of and Trust in Institutions

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In order to address the challenges outlined above with regard to accessing and interacting with State institutions, participants stated that it was key that the presence of the State was strengthened in places in which it had not historically been present – a recommendation that formed a core component of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP. Extended State presence should be accompanied by information campaigns so that citizens know how to access services. Such campaigns could help build the trust needed for vulnerable populations to effectively engage with State service providers, such as individuals who have left armed groups and may be reticent to share information with State reintegration providers. This, they believed, would make it more possible for members of vulnerable communities to access state-supported health, education, and other services that would contribute to both recruitment prevention and broader approaches that addressed poverty and insecurity. Participants believed that through donors and other entities, such as UN Verification Missions, the international community had an essential role to play in building such a State presence by providing oversight.

One area of governance signaled out for particular attention by participations was policing. Participants highlighted how the police-community relationship had an effect on perceptions of safety, and specifically how protected communities felt with regard to the presence of armed groups. Participants recommended that the Government take measures to decrease corruption in the police force and thereby improve trust in the police among community members. The group believed that the police could help reduce insecurity if as an institution it had a stronger relationship with the community and an improved understanding of the challenges faced by children and young people especially; corruption was considered a significant barrier to such a relationship, and so a key issue to resolve.

Measures to Address Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma and discrimination were identified as significant obstacles to family, social, and economic life, as many participants had experienced rejection in these contexts that resulted in them avoiding social relationships and interactions with people in society, and especially in State institutions. Participants, therefore, suggested that spaces for dialogue be created so that families, State institutions, and society more broadly could better understand what it means to be part of, and disengage from, an armed group, especially in terms of the coercion that is often involved in childhood recruitment. Similarly, the group highlighted the importance of teaching children and young people about coexisting as a society – including ethics, respect, and tolerance – in order to prevent stigma and discrimination.

In order to improve security conditions for disengaged people, participants considered awareness-raising within communities to be essential in tackling stigmatization and discrimination that might result in security threats against the disengaged population. Such awareness-raising should inform communities about the realities of recruitment and association with armed groups so that communities could understand the experiences of disengaged and demobilized people and are therefore less likely to discriminate against, and even threaten, them. Community support mechanisms, such as spaces for dialogue, were considered essential to repairing the social fabric and creating a safe environment free from these threats. Complementarily, stigma was identified as

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a key barrier to disengaged people interacting with and trusting in the police, and awareness-raising for the police force was recommended in order to address this issue and strengthen police capacity to support disengaged individuals in their transition to civilian life, especially in terms of their ability to report threats and other challenges to the police themselves.

Finally, participants recommended that all measures be carried out with a gender-responsive approach, in order to tackle the stigmatization of women in the workplace and in society more broadly. Such anti-stigma efforts were thought to reduce discrimination, and participants believed that social family relationships and interactions would be stronger, more honest, and more supportive if such efforts were made.

Security

In addition to reducing stigma and increasing trust in the police to improve security, participants believed that government-implemented protection measures, supported by the international community in order to ensure impartiality, would have a positive impact in reducing security threats faced by disengaged individuals. Further measures to improve community security, including for disengaged individuals, provided by participants centred on dismantling armed groups, including through the eradication of illegal crops in order to reduce financing through drug trafficking, and generating work opportunities to reduce incentives to join armed groups.

Education, Income Generation, and Healthcare Programming for Disengaged Individuals

Participants suggested a series of policy recommendations to tackle the aforementioned obstacles that prevented them from satisfying their educational, income, and healthcare needs. Higher education and job training were considered essential to ensure that young people who had been members of armed groups could compete in the labour market and sustainably transition to civilian life. Furthermore, the discussion explored addressing communities' educational needs to prevent child recruitment. Recommendations in this area ranged from improving school infrastructure in rural areas to ensuring that children had adequate materials and teachers received better training – all of which would address not only access to, but also the quality of, education. Other specific areas that participants said would be most useful included making remedial education programmes free, which participants believed could reduce the chances of individuals, including children, entering or re-entering armed groups or becoming involved in criminal activity.

With regard to healthcare measures for disengaged individuals, participants emphasised the importance of mental healthcare in a confidential and anonymous setting. Given that many felt they had experienced trauma while in the armed group and had chosen not to seek mental healthcare due to fear of stigma and discrimination, they again suggested that information and trust-building processes be prioritized. This, it was felt, would make a significant difference in affected young people being willing to access mental healthcare support, supporting their transitions to civilian life.

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With regard to overcoming poverty and other vulnerabilities through stable, sufficient, and sustainable income, the conversation focused on two complementary measures that the State could provide for disengaged people and other vulnerable populations so that they could establish their own businesses: seed capital and training. The first was necessary to enable individuals to start operations, as most would not otherwise be able to provide such funding themselves. Training was also considered essential to ensure that disengaged people had the information and tools to manage their own initiatives sustainably, as they would not otherwise have the breadth of knowledge needed to be fully independent in such endeavours. Participants believed that training should adequately address differentiated needs such as age, gender, disabilities, or other dimensions of identity and experience. They also recommended that training and monitoring continue for the start-up period of any operation so that State entities could step in and provide additional, tailored support as necessary, and ensure the best use of seed capital and good entrepreneurial practice. Most participants considered these entrepreneurial activities preferable to employment with a third party, as they would not be affected by stigma and discrimination and could avoid having to explain their past to others.

Support for Families

Participants considered that support to families was key to both preventing child recruitment and ensuring a successful transition to civilian life. Participants highlighted how family-focused interventions (like those employed for poverty alleviation or to address domestic violence) could have helped address the family-level drivers of their recruitment, and thus reduced the likelihood that they joined an armed group. Given that children often return to the families with whom they were living at the time of their recruitment, such measures could be essential to ensuring that the same conditions that enabled their association with armed groups in the first place are not perpetuated and do not result in re-recruitment or recidivism. In terms of the transition to civilian life after disengaging, participants pointed out that their families had faced unnecessary burdens as they were fulfilling the role of the State in providing support to their disengaged relatives. Strengthening state reintegration programming along the lines described above – with increased trust-building as well as implementation of more robust education, healthcare, income generation, and other support – would therefore alleviate this burden and allow families as well as disengaged individuals themselves to move past the challenges of conflict and build more peaceful lives and communities.

Conclusion

The focus group and interviews offered a unique opportunity to understand the experiences of children who had left armed groups in Colombia and made the transition into civilian life without formal support. Their self-reintegration journeys presented many challenges common to all who exit an armed group, but also illustrated how a lack of formal support can exacerbate the cumulative effects of being under-served and the impact conflict exposure can have over time. Participant narratives highlighted how the same factors that can create obstacles to long-term reintegration after association (e.g., lack of education), were often some of the reasons behind participant's initial involvement with the armed group and could potentially create a vulnerability for re-recruitment.

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These observations suggest the importance of addressing these factors, not just to promote individual transitions to civilian life, but also to prevent future cycles of conflict.

The participatory nature of the research methodology used in the focus group meant that participants felt able to share their experiences and ideas about how to resolve the challenges they identified. In many cases, this was the first time they had been asked for their opinion, and by their accounts, the first time they had felt comfortable sharing their perceptions and ideas with a third party. This kind of methodology is essential to tailor reintegration interventions to the needs and aspirations of children and young people so that the systems in which the international community and national stakeholders are so heavily investing do not remain inaccessible and isolated – and indeed isolating – to the very individuals they aim to support.

