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Recommendations for Incorporating Evidence-Based Design into the IAWG's Training Programme on DDR

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About the authors

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About UNIDIR

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)—an autonomous institute within the United Nations—conducts research on disarmament and security. UNIDIR is based in Geneva, Switzerland, the centre for bilateral and multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations, and home of the Conference on Disarmament. The Institute explores current issues pertaining to the variety of existing and future armaments, as well as global diplomacy and local tensions and conflicts. Working with researchers, diplomats, government officials, NGOs and other institutions since 1980, UNIDIR acts as a bridge between the research community and governments. UNIDIR's activities are funded by contributions from governments and donor foundations.

Note

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I. INTRODUCTION

In January 2011, the UN's Inter-agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-combatants (IAWG on DDR) adopted the goal of developing an evidence-based approach for reintegration programming as a Strategic Priority area for the group's joint strategic workplan for 2012–2014.[1]

This development created an opportunity to advance long-time and on-going discussions between the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and numerous UN and partner agencies with whom the Institute had engaged for the previous five years on matters of community security and the application of cultural research to programme design (including but not limited to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the United Nations Children Fund, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration).

In response to this strategic priority area, UNIDIR created and implemented a multi-phase, multi-year project to develop a new tool that could assist field teams design better, evidence-based reintegration projects when working in complex, dynamic, and volatile regions.[2] Much of this work was inspired or adapted from the earlier UNIDIR Security Needs Assessment Protocol project (SNAP, 2006–2010)[3] and learning how to move knowledge to action in administrative systems using innovative methods.

In support of the IAWG's agenda, UNIDIR's research and development (R&D) efforts resulted in two primary outputs:

1. A Conceptual Framework for an approach to evidence-based programming on reintegration (2012)[4]

2. A Prototype tool resulting from the application of that framework for use by UN field staff responsible for the design and implementation of reintegration programmes, projects, and policies (2013)[5]

Throughout the R&D process, UNIDIR regularly presented findings, draft material for consideration, and formal presentations to both the IAWG itself and to the UN more broadly (including the use of a

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1   IAWG Joint Programme Strategy, *2012–2014: Bridging Policy with Practice and Strengthening Capacity in Integrated DDR*, unpublished document on file with authors.

2   The Evidence-Based Design project was supported by generous contributions from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (both of whom were earlier supporters of UNIDIR's SNAP initiative).

3   Between 2006–2010, D. Miller and L. Rudnick co-developed and ran a UNIDIR innovation initiative called the Security Needs Assessment Protocol project (SNAP) that developed new ways of generating socio-cultural knowledge applicable to programming in conflict settings and new means of applying that knowledge through evidence-based design processes. The work from SNAP can be found on UNIDIR's website at www.unidir.org/programmes/process-and-practice/security-needs-assessment-protocol-snap-project-phase-ii, and the second on Evidence-Based Design can be found at: www.unidir.org/programmes/process-and-practice/research-and-development-for-an-evidence-based-design-tool-for-reintegration-programming-phase-iii

4   www.unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/a-framework-document-for-evidence-based-programme-design-on-reintegration-396.pdf

5   www.unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/a-prototype-for-evidence-based-programme-design-for-reintegration-en-610.pdf

design workshop at UNIDIR and close collaboration with UN agencies and field teams in Somalia). The formal launch of the Prototype took place on 13 December 2013 at the Palais des Nations.[6]

The third and final phase of the Evidence-Based Design (EBD) project produced two outputs:

1. A set of recommendations to the IAWG on how to integrate EBD into its on-going efforts to improve DDR cooperation and effectiveness;[7] and

2. A guidance note on how to integrate EBD methods into the training programmes of the UN and its partners for DDR professionals.

This document is the second of those two outputs. It is particularly informed by close attention to the DDR Planning Course.[8]

II. THE DDR PLANNING COURSE

For several years the DDR Planning Course has been taught at the Norwegian Defence International Centre (NODEFIC). It is a week long, mid-to-high level training course intended to "prepare the participants to effectively take part in the planning and preparation phase of a present or future DDR program."

The Training Course is attended by a varied profile of students each year, but generally consists of about thirty students from nearly as many countries, and some two-thirds are UN staff, with others from national militaries.

Over seven days, students are trained on DDR planning methods through a set of learning modules that take lessons from the Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) and apply them to real-world case studies (for illustrative purposes and discussion). The final exercise concerns a fictional case called Carlena—an imaginary country needing a DDR programme. The Carlena case study uses purpose-built materials and data that students use to create DDR solutions.

The day-long Carlena exercise tasks students to produce a viable reintegration plan by turning knowledge—from numerous sources—into effective plans that will satisfy political actors, meet administrative requirements, and most importantly, achieve the positive social impact required for the specific circumstances of Carlena. To do this, they are divided into four groups and use an imaginary mandate from the UN Security Council, the political agreements that set the parameters for the exercise, and the context-specific data about Carlena that comes from numerous fictitious non-governmental organizations, the UN or media reports.

At the conclusion of the exercise, each of the four final plans is presented to the whole group and critiqued by the training staff and other students to point out weaknesses and strengths of each plan.

In April 2014, instead of running the annual course, the United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations' Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (DDR Section), with the support of NODEFIC,

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6   See   www.unidir.org/programmes/process-and-practice/research-and-development-for-an-evidence-based-design-tool-for-reintegration-programming-phase-iii/designing-for-impact-creating-more-effective-programming-in-complex-environments

7   L. Rudnick and D. Miller, *Implementing Evidence-Based Design into Practice: Recommendations to the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*, 2015, UNIDIR.

8   These recommendations pertain to the course itself (i.e. its structure, components, etc.), which are not specific to the institution hosting the course.

brought together "a select group of twenty-two practitioners and academics who specialized in a range of areas that were seen to be having an increasing impact on the work of 'DDR', as mandated by the Security Council in peace operations around the world."[9]

The workshop produced a report entitled "Evolving Operational Perspectives on Armed Group Management and Violence Reduction" (henceforth, the Workshop Report). The report's introduction explained that:

> [I]t had been recognized for some years previous [to the meeting] that there was a need to retool DDR training, beyond what was prescribed in the International DDR Standards (IDDRS), to prepare staff to better meet some of the new challenges that they were facing in the field. Beyond this, however, the actual outputs of the workshop reflected a consensus on the overarching need for a careful re-think of the Organisation's approach to DDR in order to make it more in line with some of the present realities concerning armed groups in the field.

It is increasingly accepted among the IAWG's officers that a business-as-usual approach to training and implementation of reintegration planning is not producing the results needed in the field. Therefore some aspects of the course need to be reconsidered and revisited in terms of approach and technique.

III. RETHINKING THE COURSE BASED ON THE 2014 ASSESSMENT

NODEFIC states that the aim of the course is "to create a new generation of planners who understand the role of different actors and the importance of co-operation and co-ordination during planning exercises, carry out planning jointly and start planning early on in peacebuilding process."

While the criteria of a good plan are not explicitly stated in the course, a review of the materials suggests that a good plan is one that is:

1. **Political viable** among relevant stakeholders;

2. **Administratively accountable** to relevant frameworks and Results-Based Management (RBM) systems; and

3. **Locally useful** in terms of value to the beneficiaries, local communities, and national recovery.

Political viability is achieved by ensuring that the final plan is aligned to the mandate and can be accepted (or adopted) by the principal stakeholders. Senior UN staff have traditionally excelled in this area, which is a skilled activity that depends on experience and judgment. The course handles this well, with knowledgeable trainers guiding students in understanding how to define and manage that complex political space.

Administrative accountability has improved significantly in recent years with the incorporation of RBM into the training programme, which better ensures that activities, outputs and outcomes are aligned to one another and support each other strategically. There remains some confusion by students on RBM in part because the training course fails to differentiate between different administrative planning objectives and students do not learn how to align administrative outputs to levels of administrative authority. This means that students are using RBM techniques to create strategic, operational, and

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9   *Evolving Operational Perspectives on Armed Group Management and Violence Reduction: Workshop Report*,
      Oslo, 2-4 April 2014, p. 1, section A, para. 3 (unpublished document, on file with authors).

tactical solutions at the same time, which confuses the students and therefore generates confusing results. Recommendations on how this can be improved are presented in Section IV.

It is the **actual social impact** of operational plans—on beneficiaries and those indirectly affected by their successful or less-than-successful reintegration—where the systematic weakness of the entire system is demonstrated. The logic is simple: **Just because something is politically accepted and properly administered does not mean it will be effective**. The UN system has placed so much attention on "doing things right" that it has neglected to build the theory, tools, and partnerships needed to "do the right things".

The course designers clearly want to emphasize context-specific knowledge for use in planning. For the Carlena exercise, for example, students are provided with 59 documents (hundreds of pages of material) about this fictional country, grouped under the categories of:

- Foundation Documents;
- Simulation Instructions for Participants;
- The New Carlena International NGO Network;
- Military Information;
- SALW Information;
- Reintegration Issues;
- Cross-Border Issues;
- Economy;
- Health;
- Gender, Women and Children; and
- Human Rights.

In the final exercise of the training course, students are instructed to develop a strategy for DDR on the basis of the information provided and to "justify their choices". While there are instructions to use the knowledge to design a locally useful plan, students (who either are, or will later become, field staff) are left uninstructed on to <u>how</u> to mobilize that knowledge as a strategic asset in the crafting of locally viable solutions. Put another way, students have no theory, tools, techniques, visual aids, or procedural explanation on how to differentiate what is merely "nice to know" from that which they "need to know" in order to achieve strategic goals in the context of the Carlena mandate.

Faced with a stack of research material, students still must determine which pieces of information can be used as evidence for evaluating whether a proposed course action may be a good one. While the management aspects are well instructed to ensure political and administrative compliance, there is a need for new solutions to both design and evaluate propositions for action in terms of possible local effectiveness (i.e. social impact).

How should a student evaluate the material? How can it be used as evidence to support effective decisions? And, once these questions are answered, how do we build the necessary systems to ensure that this takes place systematically in our organizations?

In a perfect world students and DDR practitioners would have available to them a vast and well-researched repository of best practices on the most challenging reintegration scenarios. Practitioners could then select from available options and use them as a basis for tailor-made reintegration plans whether or not the context was a familiar one.

The concluding recommendations of the 2014 Workshop Report map out the contours for such an aspiration by describing a "community of practice, straddling the UN Membership, UN Headquarters, field practitioners, and the academy, with a shared conceptual approach and knowledge-base concerning contemporary DDR. This community [could] serve as an incubator for the new tools and solutions that DDR needs to be successful in the contemporary strategic environment."

The world that practitioners actually face, however, is about as far from this scenario as imaginable. While long-term strategies are laudable and should be developed, practitioners today face a very different reality:

1. **Despite "best practices" and "lessons learned", there is no evidence base on what works,** and therefore when designing reintegration programmes it is rare to have evaluated options to choose from.

2. Even when there are options to choose from, **there are no grounds upon which to make a choice** because the DDR Planning Course does not prepare students to select among semi-applicable solutions or adapt them to local context.

3. **Practitioners are in fact <u>improvising</u> as much as they are <u>innovating</u>**. While it is commendable that innovation is coming from the field, practitioners themselves recognized that the results fall far short of what is needed. A continued pattern of failing to differentiate improvisation (which can as often be negative in outcome as positive) with actual innovation (which is creating new solutions previously unachievable with other methods) will undermine the urgency needed to build an agenda of work to rectify the situation—to the detriment of international peace and security and the lives of those who are impacted by DDR programming choices.

What is therefore needed is a well-functioning system for the generation of transparent, responsible, and accountable solutions to local, high-stakes challenges of peace, security and development.

Without such a change to the education and training systems at the UN, students-cum-practitioners will continue entering the DDR profession unprepared for the realities they face and without the tools necessary to address them. The traditional solution suggested is a long-term, expensive, and slow research programme of identifying "best practices" that might (and might not) produce the evidence base needed to better design programmes.

It "might not" for two reasons:

• First, research most often results in *negative findings.* Research is more likely to produce knowledge about how "not" to do something rather than providing guidance on "how to" do it.

• Second, not every situation has a "best practice" or universal solution. This is not because the best practice has yet to be identified, but rather because it is not there to be found in the first place. In short, the natural world operates by rules that the social world does not. So while the safe storage of weapons might be subject to a universal standard, the reintegration of people from a plurality of socio-cultural, religious, tribal, and linguistic societies may not.

To even suspect there is a universal solution—equally effective in Haiti, Nepal and Iraq—is to entertain a theory about reintegration that is not even explicit or argued today, let alone defended or proved. Indeed, it is the misinterpretation of local practices and meanings through the lenses of our own cultural and administrative assumptions that can most profoundly disrupt the planning process because they result in ways of seeing different societies (and therefore acting in them) that turn out to be wrong. Just as computer programmers emphasize that regardless of how

accurate a program's logic is, the results will be incorrect if the input is invalid (exemplified in the expression "garbage in, garbage out"), the same is true for designing reintegration activities.

What students and practitioners now need is a *problem-solving approach* to programme design specifically developed to attend to situations and tasks such as those actually faced in modern contexts. The problems they face are invariably specific (that is, they pertain to a particular set of actors, places, goals, conditions, resources and so on). It is more reasonable to assume that what works in one place *will not work* in the next, than to assume it will. Therefore, **the focus of training must shift from applying best practices to utilizing best processes.**

It is from this framework for understanding the operational planning requirements for UN field staff that UNIDIR has developed the EBD process—a solution to this problem that is ready to be adapted for DDR planning to assist field staff to design more locally applicable reintegration solutions for positive social impact.

IV. MOVING FROM BEST PRACTICES TO BEST PROCESSES: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUTTING EVIDENCE-BASED DESIGN TO WORK

Programme design, at its core, is about creating or selecting activities for implementation. Using an evidence-based approach to programme design means creating or selecting activities on grounded claims about the value of acting certain ways in distinct circumstances (i.e. here and now, or then and there, or always and everywhere). The role of evidence in programme design is to make as rigorous, valid and sound a case as possible about the value of a course of action in and for a given context.

The EBD model therefore supports pragmatic action that will facilitate the achievement of strategic goals in locally viable ways.

For many practitioners this will seem familiar because it is sometimes done intuitively or implicitly. The difference in EBD—as opposed to experienced-based design or negotiated design—is the requirement to explicitly anchor the proposed or selected set of activities in evidence, and align those activities to the strategic goals.

The reason that EBD does not require a pre-established base of evidence about past successes—as does the best practice approach—is because it is not about applying scientific <u>findings</u>; it is about using scientific <u>method</u> to support the design process. In this way, **EBD is not a best practice approach for selecting evidence when decision-making; it is a best process approach for building a reasoned case when designing**. This is a game-changing innovation for field programming and a chance to fundamentally alter the way implementing agencies and their personnel—at the local, national and international levels—craft solutions for local impact.

The DDR Training programme is scheduled for evaluation in the third quarter of 2015 in light of the observations that came from the 2014 Workshop—which, not incidentally, echo and re-iterate many of the observations that come from both the academic literature on DDR and practitioner views as well.

Starting immediately, in preparation for this evaluation, UNIDIR recommends the following:

1. **That the 2016 course integrate a training module on Evidence-Based Design** that explains what it is, how to do it, and how it complements, supports, and also differs from Results-Based Management.

2. **That the Carlena Exercise start to introduce socio-cultural knowledge** as being *mission critical* when designing sustainable reintegration programmes, so that students no longer plan imaginary programmes that satisfy political and administrative systems while neglecting the most important factor that will cause them not to work: the *differences* in the world's societies.

3. **That the course introduce gaming and dynamic modelling**. All reintegration programmes take place over time in highly complex scenarios. Military scientists and military senior staff regularly utilize wargaming scenarios where conditions change (the weather, the tactics of the enemy, the political situation, etc.), forcing soldiers to adapt and innovate using tools to reach shared objectives (i.e. their "mandates"). But peace training has not even begun build the relevant tools, models, training, exercises or other instruments necessary to prepare for design, decision-making, and leadership comparable to the investments made for war.

   The DDR training programme is static: students are not prepared for their plans to be undermined by events or for their strategies to be challenged. The Workshop Report noted that "Innovation most often comes from the field, where necessity truly is the mother of invention." This is a positive way of looking at it. A negative way is to say they have to innovate because field practitioners were not provided the training or tools to do otherwise. It is time to move beyond experimentation and improvisation and professionalize our methods to meet our goals. It is time to take scenario-building, prototyping, cooperative planning, and "peacegaming" as seriously as war planners take "wargaming".

4. The final, full-day **exercise to build a DDR Plan should use the EBD Process** to help the students work through a series of productive steps to…

   - set goals;
   - map knowledge;
   - differentiate the "nice to know" from the "need to know";
   - identify knowledge gaps and build research agendas for demand-driven research from partner agencies;
   - take multi-stakeholder perspectives on goals to ensure that the "solution space" is carefully mapped;
   - craft "design propositions" for local action using available knowledge and new techniques from "design thinking" for creative and transparent proposal generation;
   - learn new techniques for challenging (rather than validating) propositions to separate out those that are not well reasoned from those that are;
   - test proposals for action against confidence criteria; and
   - conduct programme blueprinting.

   … so planners can ensure that the specific actions proposed are grounded in evidence and not simply selected from standardized practice or individual experience.

UNIDIR stands ready to assist with implementation of these recommendations.

ABBREVIATIONS

BCPR	Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DPKO	Department for Peacekeeping Operations
EBD	Evidence-Based Design
IAWG on DDR	Inter-Agency Working Group Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-combatants
IDDRS	Integrated DDR Standards
NODEFIC	Norwegian Defence International Centre
R&D	research and development
RBM	results-based management
SNAP	The Security Needs Assessment Protocol
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDIR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research