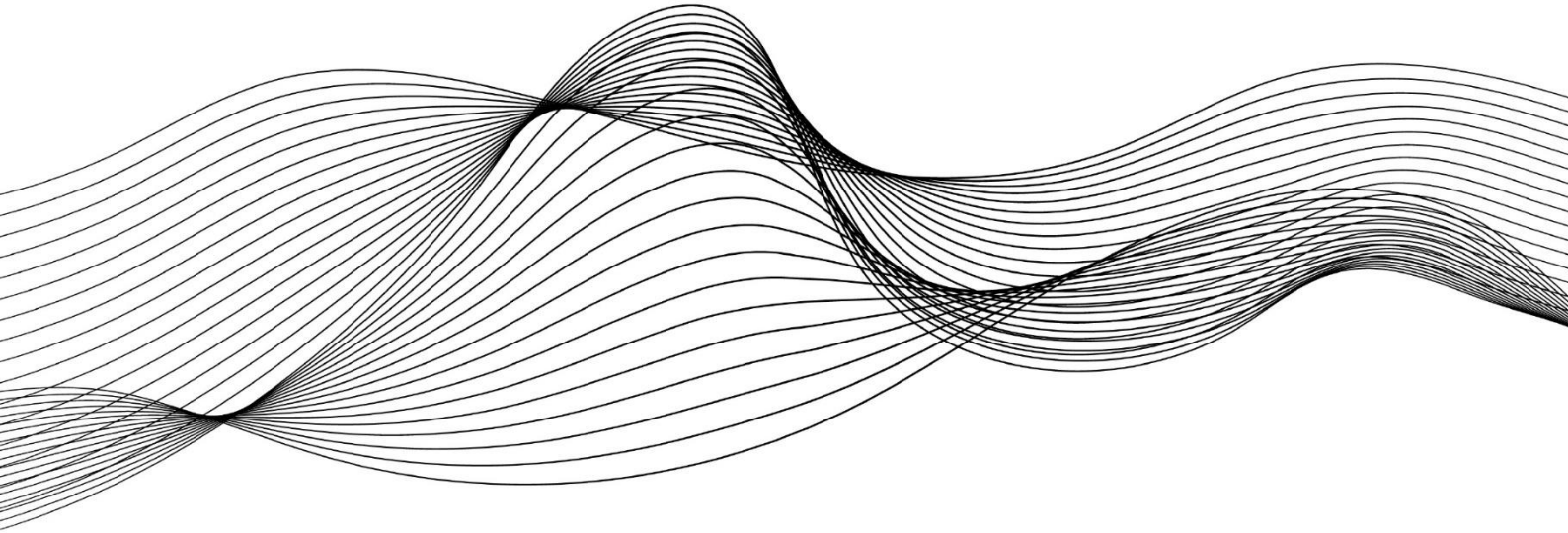




**UNIDIR**

**MANAGING EXITS**  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT



# **Conflict Exits** **Assessment** **Framework**

December 2023

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
Project Overview	7
Goals and Structure	8
Potential Benefits	9
<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Definition</b>	<b>11</b>
General Definition	11
Conflict Exits Outcome Yardstick	12
<b>Key Desirable Outcomes – A “Conflict Exit” Index</b>	<b>13</b>
Refraining from Engagement in Conflict-related Violence	13
Refraining from Providing Support Functions for the Armed Group	14
Limited Reliance on Members of an Active Armed Group/Force	14
Disidentifying with an Active Armed Group/Force	15
Evidence of a Commitment to Live Non-violently and De-normalizing Violence	15
<b>Conditions that Support Sustainable Conflict Exits</b>	<b>16</b>
Economic Well-being	16
Social Well-being	18
Psychological Well-being	21
Political/Civic Engagement	22
Supporting Conditions (Rule of Law, Services, and Security)	23
<b>Objectives and Approaches for Studying Conflict Exits and Assessing Interventions Meant to Support Them</b>	<b>26</b>
Objectives	26
The Characteristics of Rigorous Assessment	27
<b>Research and Learning around Conflict Exits and Transition Processes</b>	<b>32</b>
Contextualizing Individual Progress and Controlling for External Factors	34
<b>Data Sources, Collection, Integration, and Management</b>	<b>37</b>
Types of Data	37
Data Collection	38

Data Integration	39
Interoperability	40
Protection	40
<b>Research Ethics</b>	<b>40</b>
Sensitivity to Conflict and Security Risks	40
Informed, Consensual, and Voluntary	41
Embed Research in Existing Programming Cycles	43
Confidentiality, Privacy, and Data Protection	44
Inclusive Approach and Participation	44
Context Flexibility	45
Sexual Violence	45

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# Summary

Despite decades of international support to assist individuals and groups exiting armed conflict, significant questions remain as to whether such interventions work effectively and, if so, under which conditions. Given the significant implications for international peace and security and the limited amount of rigorous research in this space, policymakers and practitioners have called for a common and more comprehensive evidence base to navigate important decisions on these issues.

The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative was created to answer this call and help fill this information gap. MEAC is a unique multi-year collaboration to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict<sup>1</sup> and assessing the efficacy of programmes designed to support their transition away from the battlefield. The MEAC project is led by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), with generous support from the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience in the Lake Chad Basin; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR). Over the course of the project, including in earlier stages of this framework’s development, MEAC also benefited from generous support from Norway, SDA, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UNDP, IOM, and UNICEF.

The following framework guides how MEAC conducts its studies and assessments in conflict-affected contexts. It is being shared publicly to continue supporting practitioners working to design, implement, and assess interventions to prevent and respond to armed conflict. The framework helps inform the types of data collected throughout the programming cycle, how data collection is designed and structured, and how the resulting data is used, integrated, and shared.

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<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that there are different types of violent conflict, this framework is focused on *armed conflict*. The ICRC defines “International armed conflicts exist whenever there is resort to armed force between two or more States. Non-international armed conflicts are protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups, or between such groups arising on the territory of a State [party to the Geneva Conventions]. The armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity and the parties involved in the conflict must show a minimum of organisation.” International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [“How is the Term ‘Armed Conflict’ Defined in International Humanitarian Law?”](#) Opinion Paper, March 2008, p.5. While the authors of this framework recognize that there are alternate definitions in use and debates about minimum levels of intensity and armed conflict designation, the framework is scoped broadly as to apply across a range of contexts, including many that would fail to meet the metrics of the definition above.

The framework was drafted through broad multidisciplinary consultations with practitioners working in conflict-affected contexts, policymakers, and experts from political science, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, criminology, social work, public health, and neuroscience. Drawing from best practices in these fields and practitioner needs on the ground, the framework was designed as a guide to improve understanding of trajectories into and out of conflict and assess the impact of interventions meant to facilitate and support conflict exits and reintegration progress (e.g., DDR<sup>2</sup>, stabilization efforts, SSR,<sup>3</sup> SPRR,<sup>4</sup> and children’s and community reintegration programmes). The framework adopts a holistic approach – both to the types of data gathered but also with regard to the time period of concern. The framework outlines an approach to examine an individual’s entire conflict journey (and comparable data for non-associated peers) that allows for the isolation of factors that increase the likelihood of recruitment and those that promote reintegration progress.

By understanding the pre-recruitment period (or life prior to conflict onset), the factors that led to the association, experiences in the armed group (or in conflict), how and why they exited, and what life has been like since then, it is possible to better understand the factors that influence recruitment and reintegration and to contextualize the progress ex-combatants and ex-associates are making in their transition to “civilian life.” The framework provides a set of semi-universal metrics that can be contextualized to different locations to provide comparable reintegration progress data across conflicts. Recognizing the dynamic nature of armed conflict, the framework was designed to be a “living document,” and one that will be updated as the realities on the ground demand. The framework is intended to improve the quality, breadth, depth, and comparability of information gathered around individual, group, and community conflict transitions, and thus the international community’s knowledge of what it takes to leave conflict behind for good and build a sustainable peace. The framework promotes several innovations:

- A common set of metrics to measure conflict transitions to improve the comparability of individual assessments across contexts.
- Context-specific measures alongside standardized outcome measures to ensure the local utility of the collected data.
- A holistic approach to studying conflict trajectories and the use of comparable, multi-dimensional metrics of well-being (e.g., economic, social, psychological, political/civic) that are thought to signal or support a transition away from conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> DDR – Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

<sup>3</sup> SSR – Security Sector Reform

<sup>4</sup> SPRR – Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

- Rigorous assessment methods to examine programmatic impact, particularly with regard to longitudinal, large-scale quantitative studies.

Approaches to conducting the requisite community-level studies are needed to contextualize reintegration progress for those leaving armed groups and determine what needs to be done at the community level to improve community receptivity to those returning. Options for new research approaches (e.g., randomized control trials (RCTs), survey experiments) and outreach technologies that may help lower the cost of follow-up interviews (e.g., phone versus in-person), reduce the burden on research subjects/programme beneficiaries and staff and address shifting security conditions.

From late 2019-2023, this framework was beta tested across six countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Iraq, and Colombia) as part of a series of multi-year pilot projects to stand up information collection systems and implement long-term assessments of conflict exits and transitions and various interventions meant to support them. Updated with the learning from these studies, the framework is being released as a living document to be used, interrogated, and updated as needed to support prevention efforts and reintegration practitioners. Ultimately, the MEAC framework seeks to help the international community adopt a more coherent and empirically based approach to designing, implementing, and assessing interventions meant to support conflict exits and transitions. Armed with better quality and more relevant information, and working in greater unison, the international community can expect to be able to craft more effective and efficient interventions to assist individuals, their communities, and groups in sustainably transitioning away from violent conflict and building sustainably peaceful societies.

# Introduction

## Project Overview

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 UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative.<sup>5</sup>

Despite decades of interventions to help armed groups and individual members exit armed conflict, there is a significant knowledge gap as to which interventions work effectively, for

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<sup>5</sup> The MEAC initiative was launched by the UNU-CPR in 2018 and built upon three years of research on UN Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), as well as child recruitment and use by armed groups in "new" conflict contexts.

whom, and under which conditions. This scarcity of knowledge undermines effective programming (as well as prevention efforts); presents challenges for crafting coherent mandates and effectively allocating resources; and ultimately, increases the likelihood of recidivism and conflict resurgence. As practitioners are asked to respond to ongoing<sup>6</sup> or “new” conflict contexts, characterized by the proliferation of armed actors and groups designated as terrorists or labelled as ‘violent extremists,’ the lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of certain interventions may carry increased risk.

MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that seeks to address existing knowledge gaps about how and why individuals and communities exit conflict today and what types of interventions are likely to ensure their transitions are positive and sustainable. Through this framework and the accompanying multi-method toolbox it has developed, MEAC seeks to advance 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 in order to generate the evidence base needed effective programme design and implementation. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.

## Goals and Structure

The MEAC initiative seeks to create a first-of-its-kind rigorous and longitudinal study on the sources of resilience, challenges, and obstacles associated with individual and community exits from armed conflict. To achieve this goal, the project articulated a common approach for the United Nations in assessing interventions intended to support conflict exits, a converging vision for what exit “success” looks like, and a roadmap for studying individual exit trajectories from armed conflict. This framework was then used to inform several multi-year pilot studies that, in turn, helped further refine the framework, and generated (and continue to generate) significant data on how and why individuals become involved in conflict, the nature of their involvement, the circumstances and motivations for leaving, and the factors and interventions that help shift their orientation away from armed conflict.

This framework lays out an agreed way forward for the United Nations entities working on reintegration for how they and their local partners can assess an individual’s and/or community’s progress in exiting armed conflict and building peaceful societies. To that end, the framework starts by identifying the specific research questions of interest, proposing a set of

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<sup>6</sup> And thus, lacking the traditional pre-conditions for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) interventions, including: “the signing of a negotiated peace agreement that provides a legal framework for DDR; trust in the peace process; willingness of the parties to the conflict to engage in DDR; and a minimum guarantee of security.” The Integrated Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) “[The UN Approach to DDR](#),” *Module 2.10*, p. 2.



core “conflict exit” outcomes to measure an individual’s or community’s successful desistance and disengagement from armed conflict and parties to it, as well as supporting conditions and outcomes thought to be associated with permanent and positive conflict transitions that can be used and adapted across contexts. The framework then comes back to why it is important to study exits from armed conflict and conflict transitions, and how this can be done. This is followed by a description of the key methodological approaches for rigorously studying conflict exits and transitions and the impact of interventions intended to promote and support them, as well as considerations for setting up the supporting data collection and information management system necessary to study exit progress over time and conduct rigorous programming assessments. Finally, the framework includes a section on the research ethics that must inform such research, learning, and assessment efforts.

This framework is designed to provide practitioners and policymakers with a guide for approaching the assessment of interventions meant to support and sustain conflict exits (e.g., defectors programmes, DDR, stabilization efforts, SSR, children’s and community reintegration) and the broader research and learning necessary to contextualize these efforts. The framework advocates for an approach to research and assessment that both produces comparable cross-programme results and allows for enough flexibility to tailor the system to the unique dynamics of the local context. This framework was rolled out across several countries from late 2019 through 2023. The goal is for the framework and the accompanying toolkit to support linkages and facilitate mainstreaming across programming by DPO, IOM, UNICEF, UNDP, and World Bank-led or sponsored programmes. The framework is considered a living document and will be adapted to reflect insights and lessons learned as the MEAC project moves through its rollout stage.

## Potential Benefits

The framework offers tactical and strategic benefits to practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. For practitioners on the ground, the framework helps orient and guide more rigorous, multifaceted approaches to initial, situational awareness, and impact assessment. In this regard, the framework not only assists practitioners in meeting their existing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) requirements, but also offers a robust guide to research, learning, and assessment that supports empirically driven programme design and real-time programmatic tailoring. This framework supports the expansion of large-scale, mixed-method studies of individual and community conflict exits and assessments of interventions intended to support them while controlling for contextual conditions beyond the control of beneficiaries and practitioners (e.g., security situation), a major advancement. By helping further the international community’s knowledge of how and which interventions work, the framework aids practitioners in their efforts to effectively communicate a programme’s impact to different audiences, including partners and donors.

At the strategic level, an improved understanding of exit trajectories, the conditions that promote and/or signal their sustainability, and the efficacy of interventions meant to bolster them will help support effective policymaking, mandating, and resource allocation. Ultimately, armed with a stronger evidence base on the factors that lead to and facilitate permanent exits from violent conflict, the international community will be better able to interrupt cycles of armed conflict and promote sustainable peace.

The long-term vision of the MEAC project is to create a living assessment and data collection system to build M&E and research capacities, promote evidence-based programme design and implementation, and contribute to a broader understanding of the factors that fuel conflict cycles.

## Research Questions

The motivations for the MEAC project are twofold: first, it seeks to enhance the international community’s understanding of what exits from armed conflict look like (and what constitutes “reintegration”<sup>7</sup> success – both in specific contexts and as reflected in the common goals of UN-led interventions). Second, and relatedly, the project seeks to enhance the international community’s understanding of the impact of interventions meant to support transitions away from armed conflict and support the effective design and implementation of policy and programming.

The following research questions seek critical information on how to capture conflict exit processes and best support these transitions:

- A. What constitutes successful transitions away from armed conflict?
- B. What conditions/factors help support and sustain transitions away from armed conflict?

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<sup>7</sup> The Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) define reintegration as “the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance.” This definition came from a Note by the Secretary-General on administrative and budgetary aspects of the financing of UN peacekeeping operations, 24 May 2005 (A/C.5/59/31). IDDRS, “[Reintegration](#),” *Module 4.30*, p. 2. Five years later, the Third report of the Secretary-General on Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, 21 March 2011 (A/65/741) recognized that “economic aspects, while central, are not sufficient for the sustainable reintegration of ex-combatants,” and that there needed to be “serious consideration of the social and political aspects of reintegration.” IDDRS, “[Reintegration as Part of Sustaining Peace](#),” *Module 2.40*, p.3. There are serious conceptual and focus issues with these definitions (indeed, neither even mentions the overall impact of interest – violence/conflict reduction – and the focus is largely on what the United Nations does rather than on the processes an individual goes through to leave conflict with or without interventions). While a full critique of these definitions goes beyond the parameters of this footnote, they are noted here for two reasons – first, they provide information about how UN partners have traditionally thought about reintegration and the goals (and impact) of reintegration-related programmes and second, the problems with these definitions and the knock-on effects they have for effective impact assessment are at the heart of the changes the MEAC project hopes to effectuate.

- C. Specifically, which family- and community-level factors support or are associated with successful individual transitions away from armed conflict?
- D. Specifically, which interventions aid or bolster an individual's and/or community's transition away from conflict?
- E. What conditions/factors hinder individuals' transition away from armed conflict?

# Definition

## General Definition

This project defines conflict exit as the process whereby ex-combatants and individuals formerly associated with armed groups transition away from serving an armed group or armed force to a way of life that does not involve such service or conflict orientation.

It is important to clarify a few key terms in this definition:

First, it is important to ensure that “ex-combatants and individuals formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups” encompass the entire population that we are interested in. While the scope of this framework encompasses individuals who have left armed groups, militias, and self-defence forces of varying closeness to the state and even those who have spent time in armed groups and armed forces in the same conflict, it does not include right-sizing armies and the retirement of state security force personnel (e.g., army, police). That said, it is important to note that the line between state forces and militia and self-defence groups is often blurred, which can complicate determining which groups should be included under the framework.

This raises the question of whether individuals who leave armed groups and are integrated into state security forces have successfully exited armed conflict. The definition of conflict exit put forward in this framework focuses on those transitions to a life that does not involve an orientation to conflict and service to one of its parties. That said, it is important to recognize that for many of those exiting armed groups and integrating into the armed forces, their relationship with the conflict becomes legal, and they may enjoy a “civilian” aspect to their life that had not been possible during their association with an armed group. There are likely important similarities in their transition and important conflict exit outcomes that remain important for assessing the successful integration of ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals. Thus, while requiring a different frame of study, this line of inquiry would fit broadly under the scope of this project, and much of the framework that follows remains relevant for such cases.

Second, “serving” does not imply willingness, nor is it limited to service in military roles. An abducted woman who is forced to clean and cook, a child who is paid to perform logistics

support functions, and a volunteer who fights all perform duties that contribute to the capacity and functioning of the armed group or armed force; they all serve the armed group or armed force in some way.

Third, recognizing that the characteristics of successful transitions away from conflict are highly contextual, the definition specifies that the framework focuses on a “way of life that does not involve such service” to an armed group or armed force. Conflict transitions may look very different from culture to culture and place to place, but their universal element is that such a life is defined in contrast to combatant/military life, a life involved with or supporting violent conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, in applying the MEAC framework to different contexts, it quickly becomes clear that association with and exits out of armed groups should not be treated as dichotomous states. Rather association can encompass a wide range of types of engagement with and proximity to an armed group. This could range from being a uniformed combatant to a porter, to a part-time paid labourer, to a woman married to a fighter, and many other types of engagement. In rolling out the MEAC framework and toolkit in Iraq, one of the key populations of study is families with perceived ISIL affiliation usually due to the engagement of a relative with the group (e.g., father, brother, uncle), which highlights not just the import of shades of engagement but the issue of perceived association. The perception of association is central given that reintegration is a “two-way street” that relies not only on individual transitions and factors but those of the receiving community as well.

## Conflict Exits Outcome Yardstick

The process of exiting armed conflict is likely complex and multifaceted, such that a single outcome or indicator on its own (e.g., employment status or level of criminal activity) is unlikely to signal whether an individual has fully and permanently transitioned away from conflict. Moreover, an individual's reintegration process and its success are likely characterized by individual-level and contextual idiosyncrasies.

Yet, there are certain core outcomes - highlighted in the definition above - that this project puts forward as compatible with successful and sustained transitions away from conflict. These outcomes focus largely on an individual's desistance from conflict-related violence, disengagement from active parties to conflict and support for violent conflict, and their identity and accepted norms related to conflict and violence. While recognizing that there are significant differences in the character of “civilian” life across contexts, there are certain universal norms

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<sup>8</sup> Given this conceptualization, a separate but related approach is necessary for examining transitions by ex-combatants from armed groups who are integrated into the military was part of their negotiated exit from armed conflict.

that the United Nations tries to promote in its conflict exit support that is largely captured here by the “conflict exit” index (e.g., commitment to pursue political change non-violently). As such, it is necessary to try to capture progress towards these core values and goals promoted by the international community.

For each overarching outcome of interest, it is useful to have a few metrics – perhaps that use different research approaches (e.g., objective, subjective). The goal is to create a *largely* universal index of outcomes and metrics for the minimum outcomes associated with conflict transitions that can be captured across contexts. Alongside the core index of conflict exit outcomes, related outcomes of importance can be contextualized and used in tandem to ensure both some degree of comparability across contexts and contextual specificity of findings. For example, when assessing economic well-being, it can be helpful to use observational data in addition to self-reported data. In some places, the material used for one’s roof is a good metric, but for nomadic communities that do not use fixed dwellings, that metric is ineffective.

Many of the outcomes of interest listed below can only be collected with self-reported surveys. Yet, individuals who continue to serve or support an armed group or armed force may be hesitant to admit as much. Thus, it is important to note that incentives to underreport may lead to inaccuracies in this data collection method and overly optimistic assessments of behavioural change if used on their own. As such, this framework advocates for the use of different research approaches, points of entry, and data sources to triangulate information and provide a more accurate picture of conflict transitions.

## Key Desirable Outcomes – A “Conflict Exit” Index

The following key outcomes relate largely to an individual’s association with or engagement in political violence, involvement with an active armed group/force, and relationship with a violent identity and/or norms. Change along any single one of these metrics does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that an individual has successfully transitioned out of armed conflict, but taken in combination, positive shifts across all - or most - of the following dimensions suggest evidence of an individual’s successful transition away from armed conflict. The following are key components of a “conflict exit” index:

### Refraining from Engagement in Conflict-related Violence

More than any other outcome, an individual's behaviour – specifically whether they stop engaging in conflict-related violence – is central to the international community's understanding of what constitutes an exit from armed conflict.<sup>9</sup> Such activity can be measured both through self-reported survey questions and through outside sources, such as police records if made available. Other types of violence – both conducted by exiting individuals (e.g., interpersonal, criminal) and to them – may be essential to understanding the sustainability and quality of their transition, and they will be dealt with separately (see page 22).

## Refraining from Providing Support Functions for the Armed Group

It is often the case that individuals formerly associated with armed groups or armed forces performed support services to sustain the latter's activities (e.g., surveillance, cooking, fundraising for the cause). Given the wealth of ways in which an individual can support parties to the conflict, measuring the extent to which an individual discontinues their work supporting an armed group/force may provide an indication of an individual's exit progress. Refraining from violent actions alone is not a sufficient metric for evaluating conflict exit if an individual continues to engage in activities that support armed groups or armed forces or otherwise contribute to violent conflict.

## Limited Reliance on Members of an Active Armed Group/Force

It has long been believed that to break out and stay out of organized violence, an individual needs to distance herself/himself from the network that oriented her/him towards violence in the first place. Ending violent conflict "...requires breaking the command and control structures operating over rebel fighters ... thus making it more difficult for them to return to organized rebellion."<sup>10</sup> Research on exits from street gangs similarly finds that diminished ties with gang networks are associated with more sustainable desistance in offending.<sup>11</sup> However, measuring the *presence* of ties to armed group members does not capture the extent to which individuals value and rely on armed group members. There is a fundamental distinction between an individual whose sole or primary ties are with armed group members and an individual who maintains connections with armed group members but also has important ties with non-armed group members. Additionally, it is one thing for an individual to retain ties with former comrades

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-Combatants in Colombia", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62(1):64–93, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Joanna Spear, "Disarmament and Demobilization", in Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, eds., *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> David C. Pyrooz, Scott H. Decker, and Vincent J. Webb, "The Ties That Bind: Desistance from Gangs", *Crime & Delinquency*, 60(4), 491–516. 2014.

from a defunct armed group or armed force that is no longer engaged in conflict as compared to someone who maintains ties with individuals associated with an active party to the conflict. Questions remain regarding whether armed groups or relationships with former comrades in arms can be transformed and repurposed toward non-violent productive activities (e.g., legitimate business enterprises). Until this debate is resolved, this framework advocates collecting information on the extent and strength of ties an individual retains with current and former armed group/force members as well as with civilians in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between disengagement and the sustainability of conflict exits.

## Disidentifying with an Active Armed Group/Force

Exiting conflict is not just about shifting social networks (and behaviours), but also about one's identity with the conflict and parties to it. How one thinks of oneself – particularly if other group identities have supplanted that of the armed group/force – is thought to be an important outcome associated with conflict exits. Research highlights the importance of capturing the strength of ex-combatants' identification with their former faction and provides several approaches to doing so, including asking ex-combatants to rank how they identify themselves (e.g., as their *nom de guerre*, occupation) and asking them how they perceive their communities identify them.<sup>12</sup>

## Evidence of a Commitment to Live Non-violently and De-normalizing Violence

Beyond engaging in conflict-related violence, which can be difficult to directly measure, it is helpful to assess how individuals perceive their commitment to living non-violently and their respect for norms around the use of violence (both with regard to pursuing political aims and more broadly). De-normalizing violence and demonstrating a commitment to living non-violently may be indicative of the extent to which an individual has transitioned away from conflict. Research suggests that frequent exposure to violence likely increases an individual's likelihood of using violence as a means of resolving conflict. This is potentially due to an individual's desensitization to violence and subsequent erosion of norms around its prohibition.<sup>13</sup> Thus, measures of an individual's understanding of an appropriate and justifiable use of violence may provide insight into her/his grasp of the difference between the norms

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<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Littman, "Perpetrating Violence Increases Identification with Violent Groups: Survey Evidence from Former Combatants", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(7):1077–1089, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Littman and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "The Cycle of Violence: Understanding Individual Participation in Collective Violence", *Advances in Political Psychology*, 36(1):79–99, 2015; Nicholas Carnagey, Craig Anderson, and Brad Bushman, "The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life Violence", *American Journal of Political Science*, 2014.

promoted by her/his former armed group/force and society at large and the ability to shift behaviour to adhere to the latter. There are numerous examples of researchers and practitioners asking ex-combatants hypothetical survey questions to gauge when they consider the use of violence to be justifiable.<sup>14</sup> In addition, these measures may also be indicative of the extent to which individuals are desensitized to violence,<sup>15</sup> or possibly the extent to which violence has become normalized in certain war-affected communities.

## Conditions that Support or Indicate Sustained Conflict Exits

A series of supporting conditions and outcomes is thought to contribute to successful and sustainable transitions away from armed conflict. Drawing on the recent research on ex-combatant reintegration, the framework identifies five broadly conceptualized categories of conditions that support, or in some cases, are indicators of, successful and sustainable conflict exits.<sup>16</sup> These include a series of conditions or factors that could be roughly organized under the concepts of economic well-being, social well-being, political/civic engagement, psychological well-being and rule of law.<sup>17</sup> These categories are broad organizational heuristics, and there is some overlap across them. Many of the programmes that the United Nations and its partners support in post-conflict (and, increasingly, in ongoing conflict) contexts seek to promote these conditions in order to advance the ultimate goal of ending violent conflict and sustaining peace.

Thus, in order to better understand transitions away from conflict - and to evaluate the impact of various programmatic interventions meant to support these transitions - it is necessary to measure the following sets of conditions.

### Economic Well-being

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Webster, Jennifer Mendel Whitehill, Jon Vernick, and Elizabeth Parker, *Evaluation of Baltimore's Safe Street Program: Effects on Attitudes, Participants' Experiences, and Gun Violence*, (John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> It is unclear whether "re-sensitizing" ex combatants to violence by bolstering their empathy for victims of violence and developing a natural aversion to violence is possible. This remains a potential opportunity for development.

<sup>16</sup> Often it is unclear what the causal relationship between certain outcomes and conditions may be. For example, is attaining meaningful employment an indication of a successful exit from armed conflict or does it help facilitate it? Given the lack of longitudinal data on the subject, it is difficult to know at this stage.

<sup>17</sup> "Rule of Law" is used here broadly to capture a wide range of security conditions, clarity and confidence in the rules that govern society, and respect for equal protection and access under the rules.



Policymakers and academics alike have traditionally viewed economic well-being as crucial to, and sometimes constitutive of, sustainable exits from armed conflict and successful reintegration. Behind this perspective is the assumption that involvement in armed conflict is often motivated by economic needs or appeals (or, in some cases, opportunism and greed).<sup>18</sup> As such, an individual's economic well-being has been thought to be key in altering her/his opportunities outside an armed group or armed force and making re-recruitment appeals less appealing. Although this seems to have been the case in some contexts, evidence from contexts such as the Liberian conflict suggests that economic woes have not always been the main drivers of combatant recruitment and organization.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, thinking has evolved on the meaning of economic well-being and the best outcomes to capture it beyond simple measures of employment. The latter had traditionally failed to accurately capture the economic well-being and opportunities open to certain subgroups (e.g., subsistence farmers, women who worked in the home, and children in school). Fortunately, additional measures can be employed to provide a fuller picture of economic well-being, many of which are fairly straightforward to gauge with surveys.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that these economic outcomes are probably highly correlated - meaning that obtaining gainful employment is likely related to having higher income, which is also likely related to more consumption - multi-dimensional measures provide a more nuanced characterization of an individual's economic well-being and ensures the economic well-being of certain populations (e.g., women, children) aren't misinterpreted.

- **Gainful employment:** Employment has typically been a main outcome of interest in studies of ex-combatant reintegration and violence prevention more generally. This is in part the result of empirical evidence from a number of settings that suggests economic opportunities can deter recidivism - for example, agricultural training programmes in Liberia were shown to have a deterrent effect on ex-combatants' engagement in illicit activities,<sup>21</sup> and at-risk youth employment programme appear to reduce the frequency of arrests for violent crime.<sup>22</sup> As a result of these findings, and because employment was also thought to provide a sense of purpose and enhance self-worth, many have viewed gainful employment as an indicator of the sustainability of conflict exit. It is worth noting that studies have often treated employment status as the most important outcome, despite the fact that it only captures one potential facet of economic well-being and only a single dimension of successful transition out of conflict.

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<sup>18</sup> Collier Paul and Hoeffler Anke, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56: 563-595, 2004; Peter Redfield and Edward B. Rackley, *Reintegration or the Explosive Remnants of War*, (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Morten Boas and Anne Hatloy, "Getting in, Getting out: Militia Membership and Prospects for Re-integration in Post-War Liberia", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 46(1): 33-55, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, "Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion? A Field Experiment with High-Risk Men in a Fragile State", *American Political Science Review*, 110(1):1-17, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Heller. "Summer Jobs Reduce Violence Among Disadvantaged Youth." *Science*, 346:1219-1222, 2014.

- **Consumption:** In measuring economic well-being, an individual's consumption, such as food consumption, is a widely used measure of economic well-being in development economics. Unlike employment, measures of consumption provide a more accurate picture of an individual's economic well-being, whereas macroeconomic conditions such as high inflation may render wages insufficient for subsistence.
- **Income:** Another standard measure of economic well-being is individual and family/household income. Like consumption, one of the benefits of income measures is that they can be comparable across contexts, whereas wages from employment may vary substantially across contexts. In addition, individuals may receive income from sources such as rent, which are not accounted for in wages, and which may be particularly important to certain sub-groups (e.g., women, elderly).
- **Assets:** Owing land, vehicles, livestock, tools, or monetary savings may signify that an individual may not need to rely on armed groups for a salary. Asset acquisition is also important because it provides a measure of economic well-being that can persist despite unemployment and is well suited to the ways in which women in some contexts accrue or manage economic assets: For example, in certain contexts, women are known to invest in gold and other valuables that can be converted later into cash.

## Social Well-being

For many years, internationally backed reintegration programming was predicated on the assumption that ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals had left their communities to fight and support armed groups and armed forces. Returning to their communities and finding acceptance were viewed as necessary hallmarks of a successful exit from armed conflict, although the exact reasoning was rarely explicit. Social science suggests that, indeed, successfully transitioning away from organized violence may depend on the extent to which individuals become less embedded with those still actively perpetrating and supporting it<sup>23</sup> and build social support networks that can serve as protective factors against outside shocks and internal struggles.<sup>24</sup> Yet, it may not be necessary for an individual to return to her/his community of origin or home community (indeed, many ex-combatants and associated individuals never leave their communities) and restore previous social networks in order to successfully and sustainably exit armed conflict. It is thought, however, that establishing non-

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<sup>23</sup> For an example of the impact on embeddedness on gang exit see, David C. Pyrooz, Gary Sweeten, and Alex R. Piquero, "Continuity and Change in Gang Membership and Gang Embeddedness", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 50(2) 239-271.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see T. S. Betancourt, E. A. Newnham, R. McBain, R. T. Brennan, "Post-traumatic stress symptoms among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone: follow-up study", *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 203(3). 2013.

combatant/affiliated relationships that promote norms of non-violence, are oriented toward ‘civilian life,’ and serve as a support network can help bolster an individual’s transition away from armed conflict.

- **Reducing Embeddedness with active combatants and associated individuals:** Evaluating an individual’s shifting level of embeddedness with an armed group/force may provide a good indication of her/his conflict exit progress. It is important to recognize that it may be unrealistic to expect ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals to completely stop associating with other former ex-combatants, particularly in cases where entire communities or other family members were involved in conflict,<sup>25</sup> and/or they suffer collective stigmatization or obstacles to re-joining society. Community security actors (CSAs), for instance, can arise from within communities and can be intricately intertwined and venerated within local society. This means that those exiting CSAs often reside within the same communities as the groups they are leaving, with their family, friends, and neighbours likely still involved, it can be difficult to sever ties completely. Yet, reducing reliance and interaction with people *actively* involved in the conflict is thought to be a key indicator of an individual’s shift in conflict orientation, raising questions about how to measure and support exits from CSAs.
- **Extending and deepening social ties beyond former combatants:** The expansion of an individual’s network beyond active and even former combatants/associated individuals to include meaningful relationships with people not involved with the conflict can be an important indicator of their shift away from conflict and acceptance by others. Survey questions can be formulated to capture the role that other former combatants, and commanders in particular, play in an ex-combatant’s life either as family members, friends, business partners, partners-in-crime,<sup>26</sup> mentors or employers. In addition, the reception of family members and other senior community members can be indicative of the extent to which they are accepted into society.<sup>27</sup> Evidence suggests that the level of acceptance of ex-combatants/associated individuals from their family<sup>28</sup> and communities, assists their ability to expand their social networks, which is a major

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Blair, “International Intervention and the Rule of Law after Civil War: Evidence from Liberia”, *Working Paper*, 2018, pp. 1–39.

<sup>26</sup> Preliminary evidence from the Colombian case suggests that former combatants may have leveraged their ties to other former combatants to engage in criminal activity. Mateo Vásquez-Cortés, “Criminality as a Social Process: Evidence from Colombian Ex-combatants”, *Working Paper*. 2019

<sup>27</sup> Blattman and Annan, “Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion?”; Christopher Blattman, Julian C. Jamison, and Margaret Sheridan, “Reducing Crime and Violence: Experimental Evidence from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Liberia”, *American Economic Review*, 107(4):1165–1206, 2017; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, “Demobilization and Reintegration”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(4):531–567, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Randolph Wallace Rhea, *A Comparative Study of Ex-Combatant Reintegration in the African Great Lakes Region: Trajectories, Processes, and Paradoxes*, (World Bank: Washington DC, 2014).

determinant in limiting the risk of recidivism.<sup>29</sup> Examining social networks only from the individual ex-combatant perspective provides too narrow a view of reintegration, which is essentially a “two-way street” that requires both the ex-combatant to transition and acceptance from the community/society that receives them. The composition and quality of social networks can prove crucial in facilitating exits from armed groups,<sup>30</sup> changing perspectives on outside options beyond an armed group and signalling transitions to civilian life.

- **Stigma and Discrimination:** In various contexts, ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals report feeling stigmatized and discriminated against after their involvement in the conflict. Social ostracization can have implications for feelings of self-worth and personal relationships, but there are also important economic, educational, and physical health implications that stem from social, service, and market exclusion. Feeling stigmatized or discriminated against may also impact an ex-combatant or formerly associated individual's broader social well-being (e.g., their ability to trust their community or contribute to the public good).
- **Norms of inter-communal trust and acceptance:** Conflict exits do not occur in a vacuum. An individual's reintegration into a community is contingent on her/his ability to understand the community's norms of trust and acceptance. The level of acceptance of ex-combatants into their communities, and their formation of new ties, can be contingent on their adoption of societal norms around trust and collaboration. A wide range of studies have measured these social norms by recording behaviour in experimental games of decision-making and strategic interactions. In addition to survey questions that can be designed to capture individuals' understanding of, and respect for, communal norms, experimental tools enable less biased measures of levels of trust, willingness to contribute to public goods, collaboration, and eagerness to incur costly punishment.<sup>31</sup> Some of these measures are closely related to outcomes and conditions that fall under the supporting conditions section that follows later in the

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<sup>29</sup> H. Johnson, and A. Thompson, “The Development and Maintenance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Civilian Adult Survivors of War Trauma and Torture: A Review,” *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28 (1) 2008: 36-47; Christophe Pierre Bayer, Fionna Klasen, and Hubertus Adam, “Association of Trauma and PTSD Symptoms with Openness to Reconciliation and Feelings of Revenge among Former Ugandan and Congolese Child Soldiers,” *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 298 (5) 2007: 555-59.

<sup>30</sup> The MEAC case study in Iraq found that social networks can help potential defectors (and would-be returnees in Iraq) obtain accurate information regarding return conditions, establish connections with key stakeholders involved in facilitating their return (e.g., sponsors), and receive support for their reintegration efforts.

<sup>31</sup> Michal Bauer, Christopher Blattman, Julie Chytilova, Joseph Henrich, Edward Miguel, and Tamar Mitts, “Can War Foster Cooperation,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30 (3):249-274, 2016; Michael Gilligan, Benjamin Pasquale, and Cyrus Samii, “Civil War and Social Cohesion: Lab-in-the-field Evidence from Nepal,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 2014; Alexandra Hartman and Benjamin Morse, “Violence, Empathy and Altruism: Evidence from the Ivorian Refugee Crisis in Liberia,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 1-25, 2018; and Maarten J. Voors, Eleonora E. M. Nillesen, Philip Verwimp, and Erwin H. Bulte, “Violent Conflict and Behavior: A Field Experiment in Burundi,” *American Economic Review*, 102 (2):941-964, 2012.

framework as they have to do with knowledge and adherence to rules, laws, services, and customs for dispute resolution, which in turn have implications for inter-communal trust.

## Psychological Well-being

Practitioners and academics alike have recognized that individuals involved with armed conflict are often exposed to significant levels of violence, including sexual violence, difficult living conditions, and other psychologically trying situations. Some field studies - and practitioner experience across contexts - suggest that, as a result, those associated with violent conflict are often traumatized, which can make it difficult for individuals to function and live a “normal” life upon exit.<sup>32</sup> As such, psychological well-being, daily functioning, developing coping skills, and having resilience systems to provide support are seen as important in sustaining conflict exits.

- **Daily Functioning and Psychological Disorders:** As previously mentioned, the trying circumstances of conflict (e.g., exposure to violence, forced recruitment, and rape) may generate trauma in ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals. This trauma may result in conditions such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and inadequate emotional regulation capacities, which may, in turn, significantly hamper an individual’s ability to function in daily life and remain out of conflict. Clinical tests are typically used to measure ex-combatant psychological well-being, which may speak to their capacity to successfully reintegrate (e.g., one well-regarded and long-used (in other settings) screening instrument is the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (HSCL), which measures symptoms of anxiety and depression). These indices are advantageous in that they allow comparisons across contexts, but they often may not be as relevant across all contexts. Moreover, there may be limited utility in focusing on some psychological disorder scales in contexts where ex-combatants, ex-affiliated individuals and huge swaths of the general population have been exposed to trauma and extensive violence. It is thus important to employ these types of scales – where contextually relevant and/or alongside other contextually-specific gauges – in concert with well-tested batteries of questions on daily functioning. This also helps focus the study on outcomes and conditions of central interest: while it is important to know if someone has been traumatized, it is more central to know if their experience has made it difficult for them to get out of bed in the morning, form healthy relationships, and support themselves.
- **Daily Stressors:** In earlier research on individuals who had been involved in conflict, there was often an over-emphasis on an individual’s conflict experience to the detriment of understanding the pervasive stressors and challenges these individuals faced after

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<sup>32</sup> Blattman et. al., “Reducing Crime and Violence.”

they had disassociated from an armed group/force. Several recent studies suggest that daily stressors – unmet basic needs and hardships - can be as, if not more important, in predicting distress<sup>33</sup> and poor mental health outcomes<sup>34</sup> than conflict trauma exposure. Some daily stressors are conflict-related (e.g., threats from their former armed group). Daily stressors can impact the ability of an ex-combatant to access support and/or make reintegration progress.<sup>35</sup>

- **Empowerment and Optimism about the Future:** Formerly associated individuals, particularly those who were not in combatant roles and/or may not have experienced violence, may not suffer from the previously mentioned psychological disorders. However, the difficulties posed by conflict may still negatively impact their feelings of self-worth, sense of empowerment, and optimism about the future – which may, in turn, influence their ability and willingness to reintegrate into their community or pursue other economic or social opportunities. <sup>36</sup> Measures such as the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale provide a battery of hypothetical questions meant to gauge an individual’s resilience in the face of adversity.<sup>37</sup>

## Political/Civic Engagement

It has long been thought that those pursuing violent conflict to advance political or civic objectives were - in part - doing so because other non-violent avenues for pursuing change were not open to them. Some individuals leave violent conflict because they no longer believe in the cause for which they were fighting, but many more leave for other reasons - disagreements with leadership, hardship, injury, loved ones’ appeals, and/or their group/force being defeated or entering into negotiations.<sup>38</sup> Many still believe in the cause that they once fought and/or sacrificed for. As such, for conflict exits to be sustainable, it is thought that ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals may need avenues of political expression and influence over political/civic decisions that affect them to reduce the appeal of pursuing political goals through violence. It is important to note that the possibilities for political engagement may

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<sup>33</sup> L.A. Rasmussen, Nguyen, J. Wilkinson, S. Vundla, S. Raghavan, K.E. Miller, “Rates and Impact of Trauma and Current Stressors Among Darfuri Refugees in Eastern Chad”, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 80, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> E. A. Newnham, R. M. Pearson, A. Stein, & T. S. Betancourt, “Youth Mental Health After Civil War: The Importance of Daily Stressors”, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 206, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> The MEAC study in Colombia found that some participants in the differential assistance process for criminal and FARC dissident groups lived in constant fear of being found by their former group and did not leave their houses, which in turn, made it impossible for them to make new friends/build social networks outside of their family.

<sup>36</sup> R. H. Pietrzak, D. C. Johnson, M. B. Goldstein, J. C. Malley, and S. M. Southwick, “Psychological Resilience and Postdeployment Social Support Protect Against Traumatic Stress and Depressive Symptoms in Soldiers Returning from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom”, *Depression, Anxiety*, 26: 745-751, 2009; A. D. Ong, A. J. Zautra, M. C. Reid, “Psychological Resilience Predicts Decreases in Pain Catastrophizing through Positive Emotions”, *Psychology and Aging*, 25 (3): 516-523, 2010; Christopher Blattman, “From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda”, *American Political Science Review*, 61(4):836–851, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> G. Windle, K. Bennet, & J. Noyes, (2011), A methodological review of resilience measurement scales. Health and Quality of Life Outcomes (8): 2-18; A.L. Duckworth, C. Peterson, M.D. Matthews, & D.R. Kelly, “Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9, 1087-1101, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36(2), 2013.

vary immensely depending on the political landscape. As such, an individual's enfranchisement, political rights, and opportunities for civic engagement are relevant to the extent that they are a reflection of society at large. It is also important to avoid a narrow focus on opportunities to vote (and/or votes cast) in national elections, but rather take a more varied and dynamic approach to try to capture the various opportunities for civic and political participation at the local, municipal, and regional levels (including, participating in protests, volunteering, running for office, and engagement with a range of organizations such as unions or religious or youth groups).

- **Local governance:** Despite the national political circumstances, it is often the case that local governance exists to address the immediate concerns of community members. It is useful to understand how ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals interact with existing local institutions and the extent to which they participate in them. A useful set of indicators of an individual's involvement in local governance could be the number of village meetings attended or the number of times an individual has contacted her/his representative. In addition, a good measure of an individual's relationships to formal authorities (as well as the legitimacy and clarity over who sets the rules that govern society) might be indicators of civic awareness (e.g., asking hypothetical questions regarding whom she/he would contact to solve a dispute, to address an economic concern, to express security needs, etc.).
- **Civic virtues and political agency:** Whether ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals come to possess civic virtues that are necessary for inclusion and participation in a peaceful society is of great interest. These include altruism, trust, tolerance, and willingness to contribute to the public good. These attributes can be measured with behavioural activities as well as with standard survey questions. Furthermore, resorting to violence as a political strategy indicates that individuals view peaceful political change as ineffective. To make a return to conflict less likely, it is important that ex-combatants understand and feel welcome to pursue political and civic change through peaceful channels. For those who utilize these outlets and eschew violence, it is also important to understand why. This line of inquiry – trying to understand the sources of restraint, not just the factors that contribute to violence – provides important insights for practitioners who try to bolster protective factors.

## Supporting Conditions (Rule of Law, Services, and Security)

Beyond the individual, multi-dimensional well-being metrics outlined above it is important to collect additional information on the environment into which individuals are returning and their

experience therein. It is hard to imagine that ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals can sustain their exits from armed conflict if it continues to rage around them.<sup>39</sup> Insecurity is likely to drive people back into armed groups and armed forces to ensure protection and basic needs coverage. Likewise, without the norms and institutions that create predictability and mediums for peacefully navigating economic and social relations (e.g., criminality, dispute resolution), it might be difficult to initiate and sustain an exit from armed conflict. This is not to say that the rule of law must be established in a formal, state-down sense. It is indeed possible that local governance or traditional mechanisms and societal norms could sufficiently create the needed predictability and avenues for adjudication that likely influence the space for armed groups to operate and support them. As such, the following conditions seek to measure both the individual's experiences with and perceptions of security and clear rules and mechanisms for navigating economic and social relations, as well as her/his involvement in illicit activity. These individual-level responses can be compared to macro-level data and community perceptions, values, and experiences to determine if an individual ex-combatant or formerly associated individual is operating in contrast to the rules and norms of their society, or in concert with them. It is also important to note that these outcomes and conditions help speak more broadly to the presence of - and perhaps interaction with - the state (or a governance structure more broadly).

- **Non-conflict-related Violence:** The framework has already laid out a series of minimum desirable outcomes associated with conflict transitions, all of which focus on desistance and disengagement from *conflict-related* violence and the norms, identities, and relationships that facilitate it. It is also important to understand an individual's broader relationship with violence, and any impact it may have on the sustainability of her/his conflict exit. This might include both interpersonal violence (e.g., spousal abuse) or criminal violence (dealt with broadly below). Any information on these types of violence must be compared to community involvement and norms around their legitimacy and use.
- **Illicit Activity:** Beyond political violence and involvement with a former armed group/force, engagement in illicit activities is an outcome of interest to the extent that successful reintegration and conflict transition hinges on living within the bounds of the law or in accordance with societal norms. Previous research has relied on explicit questions regarding the current involvement in illicit activities, both related and

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<sup>39</sup> Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (eds.), [Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict](#), (UNU: New York, 2018), p. 247.



unrelated to previous combatant experience.<sup>40</sup> A caveat worth considering is criminal violence or illicit activities may be a less informative outcome for assessing an individual's exit success in contexts where illicit activities and criminal violence are the norm. Indeed, becoming involved in an illicit market upon exiting a conflict may seem like an anti-social activity that could jeopardize social reintegration, but in many contexts, it could signal the exact opposite if the entire community relies on and is involved in the illicit activity. As such it is necessary to collect information on community involvement and views about illicit activity. Police records - in some contexts - may be the most reliable source of this data, although they may be difficult to obtain.

- **Security:** More than any other structural factor, insecurity and violence are likely to impact an individual's (and community's) prospects for successfully and sustainably exiting armed conflict.<sup>41</sup> It is essential that any assessment effort seek to capture not only objective data on the security situation an individual respondent finds themselves in, but also subjective data on perceptions of their personal security and that of their community at large.
- **Services/Support:** Relatedly, it is important to gauge a respondent's perception of state reach beyond its military presence. Research has shown that other aspects of state governance can be key to conflict onset and resolution (e.g., dispute resolution mechanisms).<sup>42</sup> Perceptions of state reach are important because even if courts, hospitals, and schools exist, they are not always physically or financially accessible, nor are they necessarily seen as unbiased. Information on state institutions, services, and support can help contextualize the progress – or lack thereof – that individuals make transitioning away from conflict.

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Blattman, Alexandra Hartman, and Robert Blair, "How to Promote Order and Property Rights under Weak Rule of Law? An Experiment in Changing Dispute Resolution Behavior through Community Education," *American Political Science Review*, 108(1):100–120, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Morten Bøås and Anne Hatløy "Getting in, getting out': militia membership and prospects for re-integration in post-war Liberia," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 46 (1), 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

# Objectives and Approaches for Studying Conflict Exits and Assessing Interventions Meant to Support Them

## Objectives

Traditionally, little has been done to systematically study individuals leaving armed conflict, nor have there been regular, rigorous assessments of the impact of programming intended to support their transition away from conflict and reintegration back into mainstream society. This has both tactical and strategic ramifications: For practitioners, the lack of rigorous assessment data makes it difficult to maximize the efficacy of existing programmes or design new ones. Moreover, without this evidence, it is impossible to demonstrate the utility of reintegration interventions and justify the use of funds to management and donors. These challenges compound at the strategic level, making it difficult for policymakers to craft effective policies, mandates, and resource allocations to respond to conflicts and build peace.

This framework seeks to address these challenges by providing practitioners and policymakers working on interventions and policies to support conflict exits with a blueprint to inform M&E practices and the creation of robust impact assessments and learning systems that will help them:

- Gather and use empirical evidence to improve the efficacy of ongoing programming and design new interventions,
- Ensure accountability and improve progress and process performance (e.g., better meet existing M&E, impact assessment, and donor reporting requirements),
- Effectively communicate the impact and importance of programming to different audiences, and,
- Contribute to the international community's understanding of what it means to sustainably exit armed conflict, how to address related challenges, and which types of interventions support conflict exits and transitions, and thus, enable more effective mandating, policymaking, and resource allocation.

# The Characteristics of Rigorous Assessment

Achieving these objectives requires developing a rich, diversified, comparable, and rigorously tested evidence base on individual conflict exits and the impact of programmatic support meant to assist them. A robust assessment plan capable of delivering this must have several key features:

- **Mixed Methods:** A mixed methods approach is one that incorporates different approaches to research and addresses a research question from different angles to develop a rich and diversified evidence base. Combining<sup>43</sup> different quantitative (e.g., large-scale surveys, experimental) and qualitative (e.g., semi-structured in-person interviews, focus groups) research methods can enhance the rigour and dimensions of an assessment, help address contextual challenges (i.e., use alternate methods when others are not possible); lead to more confident conclusions (i.e., when getting converging results from different methodological approaches); and/or uncover a greater diversity of perspectives. Moreover, including participatory research methodologies can ensure buy-in with key populations of interest, and elevate the perspective and voices of those impacted directly by armed conflict and/or undergoing the various transitions being studied. Utilizing a mixed methods approach also provides practitioners with a variety of communications and storytelling options for messaging the importance and impact of their work to management, partners, and donors. Whereas one audience may find a statistical analysis of the extent to which a jobs programme enhanced ex-combatants' economic prospects particularly compelling, audio of an interview with a beneficiary describing the sense of purpose and dignity they derive from their apprenticeship may strike a chord with another.<sup>44</sup>
- **Level of Analysis – Individual Level:** To understand the lived experience of ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals and the multitude of pathways into and out of armed conflict, it is important that assessments largely (although not exclusively) gather individual-level data. Depending on capacity and access, national-level data –

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<sup>43</sup> There are different ways to combine research methods. Different research techniques can be employed simultaneously (e.g., run a large-scale survey of randomly selected households while simultaneously doing a small number of in-depth interviews with heads of households). The different sets of results can be compared to determine if they reinforce, further illuminate, or perhaps, contradict each other. Different research techniques could also be used sequentially (e.g., in-depth interviews with heads of households are used to inform the questions and metrics used in the large-scale survey). In such cases, the results of one aspect of the study are used to inform another aspect of the study.

<sup>44</sup> To be clear, different research methods (and their findings) should support each other - ideally in approach and with regard to findings. For example, qualitative research can be used to try to make better sense of patterns identified in large scale quantitative work. On the occasion that the qualitative study drew a different conclusion than that of a quantitative study, however, attempts should be made to come to a more refined understanding that resolves the differences between them. There should not be a selective use of more favourable research findings on such occasions.

for example, monthly defection rates by armed groups – may provide context given the topic of study, but it won't provide the insights necessary to answer the research questions at hand.

- **Meso Level – Family and Community Level Factors:** Conflict exits do not occur in a vacuum. It is a two-way street between ex-combatants/formerly associated individuals and their families and the communities they are a part of and/or live amongst. An individual's reintegration progress is likely impacted by factors like the degree to which their community is enmeshed with an armed group and/or the reception they receive from the community. As such it is essential to understand the socioecological environment in which an ex-combatant or formerly associated individual exits armed conflict. Earlier research and practitioner experience suggest that family support and acceptance can be essential in an ex-combatant's or formerly associated individual's reintegration into the larger community and their economic well-being.<sup>45</sup>

It is important to recognize that the concept of community can mean very different things to different people and in different contexts. At its most basic, a community is a group of people who interact due to proximity (geographic or virtual) and share values or practices. An individual can belong to more than one community at a time, and it need not be geographically defined. Indeed, with the advent of online networks, and many young people living significant portions of their lives online, virtual communities are increasingly important by themselves, and as an amplification effect for real life ones.

Regardless of the community(s) of import for a particular individual, community-level outcomes and conditions can – in some cases – be measured in the same way and perhaps even with the same survey question you might use for individual ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals. In some cases, alternate versions of the same questions or entirely different research approaches may be more effective (e.g., focus groups or community observation as compared to survey questionnaires).

- **Macro Level – Structural Factors:** Conditions at a societal or national level also impact transitions to civilian life. For example, if an individual leaves an armed group, but the conflict continues and an armed group controls the territory where they settle, it may be very difficult to cut off all ties to armed actors. This is especially true when

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<sup>45</sup> Gomes Porto, Imogen Parsons, and Chris Alden, "From Soldiers to Citizens: The Social, Economic, and Political Reintegration of UNITA Ex-combatants", *ISS Monograph Series*, 130. 2007, p. 95.

the economy is controlled by armed groups. Other macroeconomic factors can influence the transitions of ex-combatants. If the economy is depressed and there is high unemployment, the prospects for economic reintegration are undermined for all ex-combatants and ex-associates. Other societal level factors that can influence transitions to civilian life – and thus that require study and data collection - include social norms around violence, labour, gender, and childhood; state presence and structure; trust in government institutions; conflict history and dynamics; victimization experiences;<sup>46</sup> and legal frameworks, among others. One of the macro-level factors that was not originally included in this framework was climate change. The beta studies in the Lake Chad Basin, Iraq, and Colombia, however, highlighted a growing connection between climate change and the recruitment of armed groups, facilitated by various intermediary factors such as displacement, disputes over dwindling natural resources, and loss of livelihoods. As such it must be noted that it may be necessary to measure structural factors that indirectly contribute to conflict and impact the prospects for peacebuilding. In addition to micro- and meso-level data, such macro level factors must be understood to contextualize an individual's transition progress against the history, orientation, norms, and response of the communities in question (both communities of origin and of return).

- **Respondent Sensitive:** It is necessary to recognize that assessment tools may need to be adapted for and/or sensitive to different demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status). In some cases, this means that specific tools need to be developed for certain sub-populations. This is particularly true for children, where child-specific interview templates and protocols are necessary to ensure assessment is in line with child protection best practices and appropriate for a child's stage of development and attention span. In other cases, questions need to be adjusted to ensure there is no bias toward one sub-group or another. It is particularly important to ensure that questions are gender sensitive. For example, often inquiries on ex-combatants and individuals formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups carry assumptions that the respondent is both male and played a military function. Such lines of questioning would inevitably fail to capture important information from women and girls about the factors that led to their involvement, their experience and roles in the group/force, and the factors that facilitated their exit.

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<sup>46</sup> Measured through different indicators: physical injury (to oneself or family); destruction of property (to oneself); beatings, torture, and killings (to oneself or family), sexual assault (oneself), and displacement (oneself).

- **Conflict Analysis:** It is not sufficient to only contextualize individual progress against the norms and activities of communities of origin and communities of return. Individual exit processes cannot be understood in a vacuum and have to be studied in the context of a wider conflict analysis. It is thus necessary to understand an individual's progress against the actions and norms espoused by their former armed group(s) and/or armed force(s) and others previously or currently involved in conflict. For example, leaving an armed group that continues to fight raises a number of issues for an individual who exits (e.g., legal status, threat of retribution) that are unlikely to exist if a group's leadership agrees to stand down as part of a peace process. Likewise, the positions, policies, and activities of other key stakeholders, including state and international actors, are also required to contextualize progress to conflict exit at the individual level.
- **Sampling:** Assessments need to examine a representative sample of all the people exiting armed groups and armed forces in a given context. This would include individuals who played different roles (e.g., support, leadership), were involved for different reasons (e.g., forcibly recruited, exhibited some agency in their joining), and/or represented different sub-groups (e.g., age, sex). It would also include those who receive some sort of exit, reintegration, or rehabilitation support (and maybe more easily known to practitioners and researchers), and those who do not. Sampling is both technically difficult and potentially impacted by ethical and logistical considerations that will be addressed in the section that follows.
- **Longitudinal:** Given that conflict exit, transition, and reintegration processes are unlikely to be sudden, singular events, it is important to study individuals leaving armed conflict at regular intervals over a longer period of time. While a single interview will provide interesting perspectives, it only gives a snapshot of an individual's experience, and that snapshot may be misleading if an individual's exit from armed conflict is not linear, but rather irregular and full of fits and starts. Rather than trying to guess a single point in time to capture the results of such processes, a longitudinal approach will allow us to study them dynamically over time with repeated measures of outcomes. Having longitudinal data (i.e., collected over an extended period of time) greatly increases the types of uses and measurement accuracy. Rather than have a snapshot of someone's progress, longitudinal data collection lets us assemble a movie that tracks the arc of their transition. There is more detail below, but briefly, longitudinal data allow us to assess conditions at various points over time, use that information to offer guidance on possible modifications to ongoing or soon-to-be-launched programmes, and then track the potential impact of such programmes. Such a longitudinal approach to

assessment could build on Colombia's experience conducting repeated assessments of ex-FARC members receiving reintegration and reincorporation support.

- **Comparable Yet Flexible:** Although some elements of exiting conflict may be unique to the individual, there are also likely to be commonalities across individuals and contexts. For example, while there are certainly differences in the structural and social factors that influence youth involvement in armed conflict in South Sudan as compared to Colombia, there still may be some commonalities given their stage of human development. The potential for commonalities, combined with the reality that interventions are rarely tailor-made for the local context, makes it necessary to improve the comparability of assessments across contexts. Yet, it is also essential to ensure that any approach to assessment is flexible enough to capture contextual specificities and individual experiences. To that end, this framework promotes the use of a set of core minimum outcomes related to an individual's use of, and relationship with, conflict violence that can be used across contexts. Using these outcomes across contexts will help generate more comparable data and support cross-context, cross-programme analyses.

Simultaneously, this Framework operates from the assumption that many other outcomes will need to be contextualized. Most importantly, while this Framework puts forward a converging vision of "successful" conflict transitions that can be employed across UN programmes, it is quite likely that that vision may not fully align with what "success" looks like to some ex-combatants, formerly associated individuals, and their families and communities. Core outcomes and explanatory variables of interest must be adapted to local contexts to ensure their relevance (e.g., economic indicators for nomadic vs. sedentary communities) and employed alongside more universal measures. The ultimate goal is to capture contextualized outcomes and indicators alongside the more standardized index to allow for both context-specific insights and cross-context comparability.

- **Simple, Efficient, and Integrated into the Programming Cycle:** To ensure the access and resources necessary and the continued utility of the proposed approach, the research methods laid out in this framework must be simple and fully integrated into the programming cycle from the start. To ensure that practitioners who have little dedicated resources or bandwidth are able to implement aspects of the proposed approach, any M&E or impact assessment activity must be simple and not time or resource-intensive. That said, assessments should be tested with beneficiaries and/or

communities in order to ensure that they are easily understood and tailored to the context and experiences of the populations of interest. To maximize the utility of this enhanced approach to assessment, the resulting data should be fed back into programme planning and management decision-making continuously over the lifetime of a programme (and perhaps beyond). This could take several forms: for example, integrate baseline questions into existing screening processes and use the aggregate data to inform programme implementation. This effort to work aspects of impact assessment into the programming cycle must be balanced, however, with efforts to limit bias and ensure the rigour of the resulting analysis (which may require outside involvement at certain stages).

# Research and Learning around Conflict Exits and Transition Processes

To think about how these principles will inform specific assessment and research design choices, it is important to come back to the research questions defined at the outset of the framework:

- A. What constitutes successful transitions away from armed conflict?**
- B. What conditions/factors help support and sustain transitions away from armed conflict?**

To design a rigorous study of conflict exits and transitions, this framework proposes an innovative approach that prioritizes quantitative methods that involve collecting individual-level data, from a proper sample of ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals, at frequent intervals over an extended period of time. Gathering a smaller battery of transition measures frequently – particularly when aided by technology – can be less onerous on practitioners and respondents and provides more fine-grained detail of an ex-combatant or formerly associated individual's trajectory out of armed conflict than periodic extensive examination. Furthermore, new techniques that leverage correlations between responses make it possible to glean large amounts of information from frequent responses on a wide array of measures. This type of data system is described in greater detail in the Data Collection and Data Integration sections that follow.



For the above-mentioned techniques to produce valid data, a relatively large sample representative of the entire population of interest is needed, which may not be possible in all cases. This is particularly challenging with regard to self-demobilized individuals and individuals who are ineligible for support, and thus who may not be easily identified by researchers and practitioners (and/or there may be security or ethical considerations in trying to identify and engage with them). In cases where only a small sample of non-programme-affiliated ex-combatants/formerly associated individuals can be identified and is accessible to researchers and practitioners, it may be useful to use qualitative methods (i.e., semi-structured or unstructured interviews) to gain insights into their experiences and reasons for avoiding, or the impact of being ineligible for, support. With this approach, findings are not necessarily representative of the broader population's experience, nor is the sample likely to be large enough or selected in a manner that allows it to serve as a control group<sup>47</sup> for an assessment of programming. Yet, this approach may still be useful in highlighting, in great detail, some individual trajectories out of conflict and reintegration experiences that could inform subsequent research efforts (e.g., large-scale surveys of ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals). The population of individuals awaiting support (e.g., DDR, stabilization interventions, community reintegration programming) may provide a larger sample – and potentially a short-term control group – from which to analyse the impact of an intervention (addressed in more detail below).

**C. Specifically, what family- and community-level conditions support or are associated with successful individual transitions away from armed conflict?**

Recognizing that the sustainability of conflict exits is impacted by the conditions, norms, and orientation of communities of origin and communities of return,<sup>48</sup> a similar data gathering system for assessing communities' relationships with conflict over time and the context into which ex-combatants/formerly associated individuals reintegrate. By taking frequent measures from a subset of community members to determine attitudes towards the conflict and groups and forces fighting it, and their willingness to accept ex-combatants/formerly associated individuals into the community, it is possible to contextualize the progress (or lack thereof) that individuals are making. It is also necessary to measure the community members' attitudes toward interpersonal violence, gender roles, expectations of children, levels of tolerance, trust, norms of fairness, and so on to make a valid comparison with ex-combatants/formerly associated individuals.

**D. Specifically, what interventions aid or bolster an individual and/or community's transition away from conflict?**

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<sup>47</sup> A control group allows for a comparison that clarifies the effect of an intervention.

<sup>48</sup> National or structural-level data (e.g., national unemployment rates) may also be useful in contextualizing that change, but the central focus of the framework is studying individuals and their communities.

To effectively assess the impact of support interventions, it is necessary to understand that trajectories out of conflict and reintegration back into ‘mainstream’ society are individual-level processes, which may happen with or without support (although perhaps less quickly and fully). Assessing programmatic impact must prioritize the same principles outlined above – individual-level data, large representative sample, and regular measurements over time – with the added requirement of some degree of randomization to isolate the impact of the intervention in question and help control for external factors beyond the beneficiary or practitioner’s control (e.g., security situation, economic conditions). To answer the crucial question that practitioners, policymakers, and donors are most concerned with, namely “what is the impact of a particular intervention?” randomization along with sufficient sample sizes are essential to isolate the impact of a programme or policy.

## Contextualizing Individual Progress and Controlling for External Factors

The intuition behind randomization is fairly straightforward. In an ideal hypothetical world, one would like to know what would have happened to a programme beneficiary if she/he had not attended the program. In other words, when measuring the impact of a programme (or other intervention) on a given individual, one would like to make a counterfactual comparison. This is of course impossible given that no individual can both be a programme recipient and exist in an alternate universe in which she/he is not participating in the programme simultaneously.<sup>49</sup> Fortunately, by randomizing who attends the program one can at least ensure that - in aggregate - the group of individuals who attend the program is equivalent to those who do not attend. Thus, in a randomized study, the control group serves as an adequate counterfactual.<sup>50</sup>

This assessment requirement is often interpreted as running counter to humanitarian practices. Indeed, it is unethical to deny ex-combatants and formerly associated individuals in need of help said support in an effort to create a robust control group. There are, however, ethical, and methodologically-sound compromises that ensure potential beneficiaries are not denied needed services while addressing research design requirements necessary to draw valid conclusions about the efficacy of programming and other interventions. There are a few possible ways to go about implementing such an approach, and they can be employed alone or in different combinations (see Figure 1).

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<sup>49</sup> It is not possible to create this counterfactual by studying beneficiaries before they participate in a programme. Studies often compare an individual before attending the program and after attending the program in order to measure program impact. Although seemingly intuitive, this approach has important flaws and may provide misleading results. This is especially a problem in post-conflict contexts, where economies are generally susceptible and states tend to be weak, so a number of factors could make individuals worse off (better off) across time, making it appear as though the program had a negative effect (positive effect) when in fact the effect captured may be driven by this general downward (upward) trend.

<sup>50</sup> This benefit of randomization is contingent on having a large enough sample.

- The first is a randomized rollout. Few programmes are ever rolled out simultaneously to all populations in need at the same time, and it is possible for beneficiaries awaiting services to serve as short-term control groups while they are awaiting access to programmes. There is an added benefit of this approach: some evidence from field research studies suggests that random assignment – when clearly articulated and transparent - is seen as a fairer allocation of programme access or goods than other less transparent rollout schemes.<sup>51</sup>
- The second approach is randomly allocating small add-on programmes on top of the standard suite of activities offered to participants. By randomly overlaying an additional programming component for some participants, it is possible to assess the impact of the add-on programme. For example, if there was an interest in understanding whether adding a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) component to an economic and social reintegration programme was worth the additional cost, randomly selecting a smaller set of programme beneficiaries to receive a CBT pilot programme in addition to the existing programming suite would allow for an estimate of the additional effect of CBT.<sup>52</sup> The advantage of this approach is that it sheds light on the impact of a specific feature of a programme that could be scaled up for all beneficiaries if it is demonstrated to be effective. However, the disadvantage of this approach is that it only provides an assessment of the add-on pilot and not of the programming suite at large. Likewise, if there is some evidence that an element of a programme may not be effective, it is possible to randomly remove that activity for a subset of beneficiaries to determine its efficacy and understand whether there is a compelling reason to maintain that particular activity.
- A third approach would be to randomly assign half the programme beneficiaries to one activity or type of programme and the other half to another activity or type of programme (e.g., job training programme vs. equivalent cash transfer to start a business). This approach allows for the direct comparison of two interventions and is well-suited for situations where it is unclear how best to allocate programming resources.

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<sup>51</sup> Clara Delavallade, *How to Randomize? Presentation for the Abul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)*.

<sup>52</sup> Blattman et al., “Reducing Crime and Violence.”

**Figure 1**

Year	Quarter	Events and activities			
1	1	Exit from armed group			
1	2	Harmonized data			
1	3	On-boarding group A		Group B on wait list	
1	4				
2	1				
2	2	Harmonized data			
2	3	Pilot program 1	Pilot program 2	On-boarding group B	
2	4				
3	1				
3	2	Harmonized data			
3	3	Pilot program 3	Pilot program 4	Pilot program 5	Pilot program 6
3	4				
4	1				
4	2	Harmonized data			

In the past, programme assessments, when they are done at all, have often taken the approach of comparing a baseline assessment to an end-of-programme assessment. This approach provides a vantage – albeit a limited one – of a programme’s impact. Such an approach, however, limits our understanding of how individuals may be responding to a programme *over time*. In the case where programme effects are weak in the short term but may have a cumulative effect over time, the two snapshots approach is unlikely to fully capture the magnitude and type of its effect. This framework seeks to advance an innovative approach of collecting data from a subset of individuals at relatively frequent intervals throughout their conflict exit and transition process using the data system described in the following section, and thus provide a more dynamic picture of intervention impact.

Applying this type of approach will enhance the dimensionality and level of rigour that has often been missing from programme evaluations. Ultimately, this approach will allow practitioners and researchers alike to answer – with confidence – enduring questions about the impact of various interventions intended to bolster and promote successful and sustainable conflict exits.

While the focus thus far has been on quantitative assessment, it is essential that such approaches are employed alongside qualitative methods. Qualitative program assessments in the form of interviews, focus groups, ethnographic work and the like are important for providing context and specific details regarding individuals’ personal experiences prior to, during and after receiving support. They are also helpful in communicating the lived experiences of ex-combatants, formerly associated individuals, their families, and communities.

# Data Sources, Collection, Integration, and Management

In order to study conflict transitions and assess the impact of the various support interventions meant to bolster them, it is necessary to collect, integrate, and manage various streams of data. The following section examines the broad categories of data that will likely be of interest in most contexts, how that data might be collected, how data streams might be integrated, and how identifying information can be anonymized, and individuals' information protected.

## Types of Data

In order to assess programme impact, a data collection system must be created that collects (and manages) individual-level and community-related quantitative data, as well as other sources of information to corroborate, enrich, and contextualize the conflict exit progress and programmatic impact.

With regard to individuals, it is necessary to collect regular rounds of quantitative data on self-reported “conflict exit” index outcomes (e.g., norms around the use of violence). Given that respondents may be hesitant to honestly report progress toward certain outcomes (e.g., refraining from political violence), the survey data routinely collected by practitioners and/or researchers, should be augmented with observational data (e.g., observations of how often fights broke out at community meetings) and data from administrative sources (e.g., violent crime or terrorist attack data). Data can also be collected from other sources, like practitioners working on defector or reintegration programmes to understand their experiences and observations from working with those transitioning out of armed groups.

### **Baseline Assessments**

Before collecting regular rounds of quantitative data – and indeed for the data to be useful – it is critical that there are rigorous baseline assessments of programme beneficiaries and control groups. The baseline assessment requires collecting most if not all, of the aforementioned outcomes associated with conflict exits and supporting conditions (outlined in the earlier sections on Key Desirable Outcome and Conditions that Support Conflict Exits) before individuals have started a programme. Subsequent assessment studies will need to evaluate these same outcomes and process midway through the programme (midline assessments) and after they have completed the programme (end-line assessments) – perhaps repeatedly

over an extended period of time - to facilitate comparison of individuals' progress during the programme and after they have completed it.

In addition to outcomes related to conflict transitions and supporting conditions that enhance their degree and permanence, a series of demographic variables including age, sex, gender, birthplace, marital status, and level of education, among others, must be collected during baseline assessments in order to control for these characteristics during the analysis. This is important for practitioners to meet their existing reporting requirements to disaggregate by age, sex, and other demographic categories. In addition to these questions, during baseline assessment, it is also important to include survey questions that gauge how an individual became associated with an armed group or force, motivating and facilitating factors to their involvement, experience in the group/force, and why and how an individual ultimately exited an armed group(s) or force(s). This information, in addition to helping contextualize conflict exit progress, can be extremely useful in designing and implementing interventions aimed at preventing recruitment by armed groups/forces.

In conjunction with these main data inputs, other sources should be collected and incorporated to further enhance the international community's understanding of intervention effectiveness, at the individual and community level. For example, if quality administrative data is collected by collaborating ministries and government offices, such as education ministry data that tracks enrolment among programme beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, it may be useful for assessing economic and social processes thought to contribute to sustainable conflict transitions.

## Data Collection

Each data source presents its own collection challenges and collection processes. For administrative data, researchers and practitioners may not have to collect it themselves, which can save time and money, but there may be suitability issues, challenges in negotiating permission and access, and data transmission frustrations (e.g., data format compatibility, manually entering data provided in hard copy). Conducting regular post-programme surveys with former beneficiaries can present a unique set of challenges, particularly with regard to the cost of routine surveys, identifying and working with an outside quality research team, and the incentives for respondents to misreport (or the lack of incentives to respond at all). In addition, to ensure that surveys provide a robust data source, a high response rate is necessary. This may be difficult to accomplish with in-person interviews, especially in insecure contexts where doing so may put the respondent and/or the enumerator at risk.

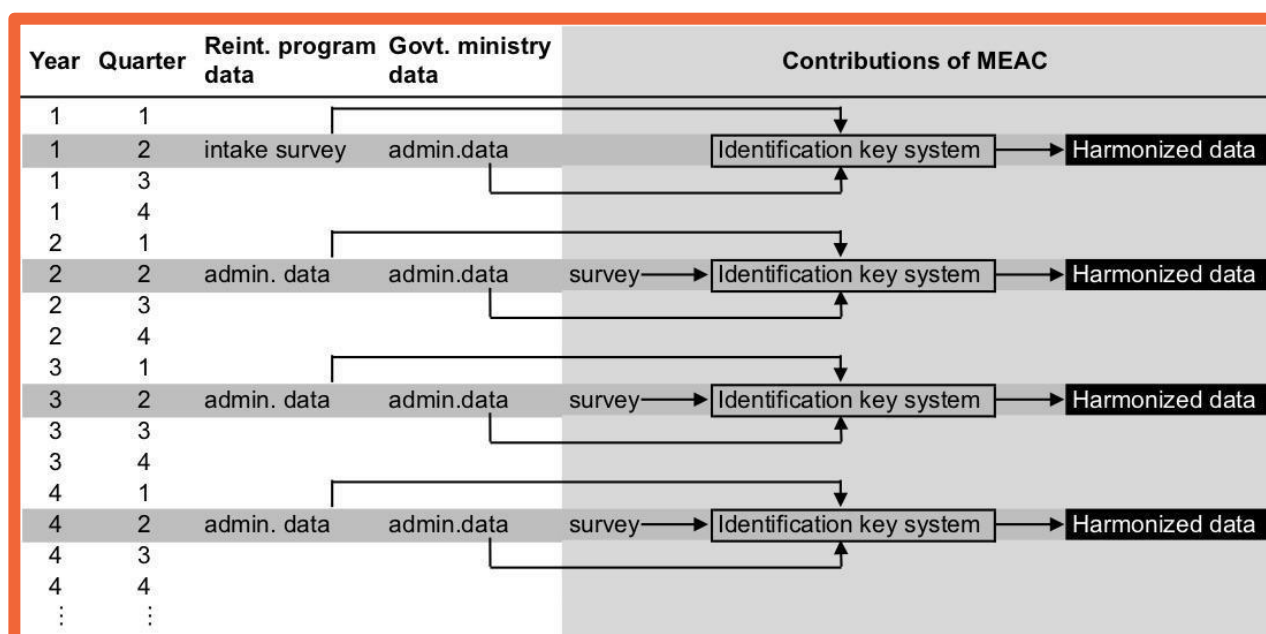
Given that interventions to support conflict exits often occur in unstable contexts with fluid security dynamics, it is important to explore alternate outreach mediums. This framework

seeks to advance the use of mobile technologies, optimize respondent incentives (in line with ethical intervention considerations), and adopt survey design strategies that promote high response rates, reduce the strain on respondents, and are cost-effective for practitioners.<sup>53</sup> Such technologies also allow for distributing participation incentives in the form of phone credits or mobile payments and such platforms could be used for service referral. Such technologies also allow for “active learning” methods that minimize the number of questions needed to obtain information on generally difficult-to-capture indicators, thus reducing the impact on respondents, with the added benefit of providing extra information protection. It must be noted that when designing data collection (or data integration efforts, per the section below), it is important to consider who will own the data and ensure there is clarity with any partners or participants in the data collection process.

## Data Integration

It is not enough to simply collect data from various sources – these various data streams must be systematically integrated. Figure 2 displays the elements of the proposed data system. It shows how beneficiary-specific information and administrative data from government ministries could be culled at regular intervals and combined with additional special surveys conducted as part of the MEAC pilot. This approach allows outcome indicators to be harmonized.<sup>54</sup>

Figure 2



<sup>54</sup> The timing of having harmonized indicators at the second quarter of each year is merely notional---the regularity and precise timing will depend on practicalities.

Figure 2: Illustration of the data system, highlighting different potential data sources and their integration using an identification key system, and the ultimate production by MEAC of regular harmonized data.

## Interoperability

Recognizing, managing, and utilizing data as a *shared strategic asset* is integral to learning and coordination across programmes and programming agencies. By merging formerly distinct datasets and collecting interoperable data (and sharing it) across programmes, it is possible to reduce redundancies, enhance learning, and facilitate more strategic decision-making. Thus, it is not just collecting better data and integrating it to support a single programme but shifting to a stance of openness and integration across programmes and contexts by default,<sup>55</sup> that will allow for significant advances to be made in evidence-based prevention and reintegration efforts.

## Protection

Linking data reduces the data collection burden on practitioners and researchers. Yet in order to link data collected from different sources, it is necessary to find a mechanism to connect disparate data points referring to a single individual across sources while ensuring privacy protection. To effectively and safely link data, a system of identification keys that link across sources but remain secure enough so that no single individual can be identified is necessary.

# Research Ethics

Ethical principles and practices must be embedded in and inform all impact assessment (and related M&E) activities:

## Sensitivity to Conflict and Security Risks

In conflict settings, practitioners, assessment researchers, and programme beneficiaries face an array of risks due to insecurity, uncertainty, and a lack of service capacity. It is important to proactively identify and work to mitigate such risks:

- **Identify Risks** – Evaluate the potential sources of risks for beneficiaries (e.g., targeting by armed actors, stigma), their communities, practitioners, and researchers. Where

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<sup>55</sup> See for instance, OCHA's [Humanitarian Data Exchange](#) (HDX), an open platform for sharing data across crises and organizations; DPO's [Comprehensive Performance Assessment System](#) (CPAS) collate data and analysis from multiple sources to assess the impact and performance of UN peacekeeping missions; IOM's, [Counselling and Referral Service \(ICRS\)](#), is an integrated registration system and database platform.



appropriate, talk to local partners, NGOs, and CSOs to learn about the risks they have identified.

- **Take Steps to Mitigate Risk** – While it can be difficult to eliminate risk completely, there are important steps that can be taken to mitigate risks to participants and their communities, practitioners, and researchers. Ensure that all researchers and enumerators are trained in research ethics and etiquette, and monitor data collection to ensure that they closely follow the research plan and related protocols. Ensure participants are informed about the research processes, provide clear information on options for feedback or complaints by participants, and adapt research methods as appropriate based on that feedback. Researchers and practitioners, should conduct ongoing situational awareness and engage security personnel to make informed decisions about assessment outreach locations and approaches and consider alternative approaches to protect enumerators.
- **Context-specific Considerations** – Any research and data collection activities must be sensitive and respectful of the local context and culture. Listen to research participants, communities, and local researchers about their interpretations of risk and adapt assessment outreach accordingly.
- **Be Careful not to Re-traumatize Respondents** – Researchers need to be properly vetted and trained to be aware of the risks of overwhelming respondents by asking them to recall certain events and actions. There should be protocols in place and researchers need to be trained in how to respond should an interviewee become distressed. Before research begins, the referral services available to the beneficiaries and their communities need to be confirmed and researchers and enumerators need to be trained on how to refer respondents in need of help.
- **Be Careful not to Judge Respondents** – Given the subject matter at hand, it is important that researchers and enumerators are respectful to respondents and create a non-judgemental, safe space for them to share their experiences, even when they are difficult to hear.

## Informed, Consensual, and Voluntary

All respondents must give informed and explicit consent before participating in data-gathering activities. Research participants must understand the purpose of the research, the content of the exercise, and their rights. For children, this may require consent from a guardian.

- **Consent Requires an Understanding of Purpose** – The purpose of research and data collection should be explained to the respondents and, where appropriate, the

community. This includes taking into account cultural norms (including regarding age and gender) and other context-specific factors when crafting consent procedures. For example, where there are low literacy levels, a written information sheet and consent form can be replaced with a presentation of the information sheet followed by an oral consent process. Additionally, in contexts where respondents may not want a paper trail of their participation, oral consent may be allowed.

- **Renegotiable** – Consent is not a one-off activity, and, especially in volatile research contexts, consent must be periodically confirmed, and participants should be reminded that they can stop their participation at any point.
- **Ensuring Appropriate Communication of Findings** – If safe and when appropriate, research findings and updates should be communicated in an understandable format to research participants and their communities. Some evidence suggests that communicating findings has the added benefit of bolstering respondent participation and buy-in for assessments.

## Prisoners

Traditionally, the UN has provided exit support interventions that were voluntary in nature (e.g., DDR, community reintegration programming), but it is feasible that UN practitioners may be asked to provide or consult on various conflict exit support interventions that take place in involuntary settings (e.g., prison, detention camps). Given the more expansive approach to conflict exits adopted by this project and given the United Nations' growing focus on rehabilitation for former combatants in prison settings (particularly for those formerly associated with listed terrorist groups), it is necessary to raise several unique ethical considerations when doing assessments in such circumstances.

When engaging in assessments or conducting data collection in a prison or detention setting, many of the conditions for ethical research - voluntary participation, potential for basic services and support referral, and privacy - may not be optimal or exist at all. Most importantly, conducting assessments in prison settings may carry additional risks (e.g., to a participant's physical well-being, legal implications) that may outweigh the benefits of certain approaches to assessment. Several ethical factors<sup>56</sup> should be considered when working in prison settings:

- **Restricted Privacy and Confidentiality** – Researchers must be aware that prisoners may not be able to participate anonymously in a confined prison setting. This could undermine a researcher's capacity to ensure a subject's anonymity and related data are protected, which could have legal or personal security implications. Beyond ethical concerns, such conditions would likely elicit dishonest responses and result in less reliable data.

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<sup>56</sup> Lawrence O., Gostin, Vanchieri Cori, and Pope Andrew, eds., *Ethical Considerations for Research Involving Prisoners*, (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2007).

- **Involuntariness, Higher Risks of Coercion and the Difficulty of Determining Autonomy** – It is more challenging to determine if a prisoner/detainee participates in a study freely or is being forced or coerced into participating (e.g., the only way to get certain services or support).
- **Lack of Support and Referral Services** – Prisoners might not have access to adequate health and psychological services despite needs that may arise during interviews.
- **Unrealistic Expectations** – Researchers have to make sure that the aim of the research and the process are clear and transparent to avoid any unrealistic expectations about what the research can offer, the timeline and audience of the research,<sup>57</sup> and the options for follow-up interactions.

## Embed Research in Existing Programming Cycles

To the extent that it is possible, data-gathering activities for M&E and assessment should be designed at the very outset of planning for a new programme or intervention. While there are issues of bias that must be addressed, there are cost savings and efficiencies of building data collection into existing programming cycles. Doing so has several benefits, including reducing redundancy and associated costs; facilitating referral to services and support for beneficiaries; and ensuring the data informs implementation, thus improving the efficacy of interventions. Integrating assessment activities into the programming cycle also reduces the survey fatigue of and adverse impacts of such discussions on beneficiaries.

### Children

When assessing children's exits from armed conflict and the impact of programming aimed at children, research methods should be ethical and rooted in a child rights-based approach. Children should not be included in research activities if their safety is at risk, if basic services and support are unavailable, if researchers with training on and experience with interviewing children are unavailable, or if the information can be gathered elsewhere.<sup>58</sup>

Informed consent with children is sensitive and complicated given "the displacement, loss or separation from parents/caregivers and by the significant challenge of ascertaining competencies and agency of children given changing roles and exposure to extreme circumstances."<sup>59</sup> When appropriate, researchers

<sup>57</sup> Mary Bosworth, Debi Campbell, Bonita Demby, Seth M. Ferranti, and Michael Santos, "Doing Prison Research: Views from Inside", *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(2): 249–264, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Gabrielle Berman, Jason Hart, Donal O'Mathuna, Erica Mattellone, Alina Potts, Claire O'Kane, Jeremy Shusterman and Thomas Tanner, "[What We Know about Ethical Research Involving Children in Humanitarian Settings: An Overview of Principles, the Literature and Case Studies](#)," *Innocenti Working Paper* (Florence: UNICEF Office of Research, 2016), p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

should obtain caregiver consent *and* child assent for child participation in research. In the cases where caregiver consent is impractical or impossible, direct consent from children is necessary. Researchers need to be trained to determine the ability of a child to assent, and to identify non-verbal cues that might indicate that a child wants to withdraw from the research.<sup>60</sup>

As with adults, offering compensation or services in exchange for research participation can create or worsen tensions between children and/or within the community, especially in conflict settings where resources are scarce. Any compensation should be coordinated with other humanitarian actors, be fair and transparent, and expectations should be managed accordingly.<sup>61</sup>

## Confidentiality, Privacy, and Data Protection

The confidentiality of information provided by, and the privacy of, research participants must be respected and protected.

- **Culturally and Contextually Specific Approach** – as with the other issues outlined in this section, notions of privacy can vary across contexts and are influenced by factors such as culture, gender, and age. Research methodologies need to be adjusted appropriately to reflect local cultural norms and protect participants from retaliation for their participation. Likewise, gender, age, and ethnicity may need to be considered when determining which enumerators might be most effective in interacting with particular subjects or communities.
- **De-identify all Data and Records** – To protect participants; data should be scrubbed of identifying information. Researchers must be cognizant that the combination of different de-identified information points may - in combination – still lead to potential identification, and efforts must be made to manage data collection and storage accordingly.
- **Data Security** – Procedures must be in place to protect hard copies, govern the transfer and sharing of electronic files, and protect data repositories (e.g., encryption, limited access).

## Inclusive Approach and Participation

As with all aspects of the programming cycle, M&E and assessment efforts should engage programme beneficiaries and their communities at all stages to ensure the appropriateness of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

the research plans and instruments, to generate buy-in and support, and to ensure that research subjects have an active voice in decisions that impact them.

- **Non-discrimination** – As previously mentioned, when selecting participants and researchers, ensure appropriate diversity and representation.
- **Address Power Imbalance and Power Relations** – Consider the context-specific social dynamics and the impact of the relationships between respondents, researchers, enumerators, communities, children and adults, and service providers.
- **Unrealistic Expectations and Compensation** – Providing services, goods, payment, or opportunities for skills building in exchange for research participation can create tension between participants, put pressure on community relations, as well as generate unrealistic expectations. Transparent communications and consultations can help mitigate these risks.

## Context Flexibility

Applying these listed principles will not result in the same approach in each context. Indeed, the existing guidance is often too broad to capture the nuances of particular contexts and is not reflective of the specific challenges associated with doing M&E and assessments in conflict settings.<sup>62</sup> It is important to ensure that researchers are properly vetted and trained, especially when working with children; that research teams are diverse (e.g., include female researchers) and reflect local linguistic and ethnic variation; and that lessons learned from previous experiences are taken into account.

## Sexual Violence

Sexual violence<sup>63</sup> is prevalent in armed conflict settings, and survivors may be reluctant to share information about their experiences because of the sensitive nature of the information, and the “potentially harmful social, physical, psychological and/or legal consequences of disclosing their experiences”<sup>64</sup>. Several ethical and safety considerations have to be taken into

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<sup>62</sup> Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer, “Research with Children Living in Situations of Armed Conflict: Concepts, Ethics & Methods”, *RSC Working Paper*, 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Sexual violence “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.” Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, eds., *World Report on Violence and Health*, (Geneva: WHO, 2002), p. 149. Sexual violence can include: “rape and attempted rape, molestation, sexual slavery, being forced to undress or being stripped of clothing, forced marriage, and insertion of foreign objects into the genital opening or anus, forcing individuals to perform sexual acts on one another or harm one another in a sexual manner, or mutilating a person’s genitals.” Kirsten, Johnson, Jana Asher, Stephanie Rosborough, Amisha Raja, Rajesh Panjabi, Charles Beadling, and Lynn Lawry, “Association of Combatant Status and Sexual Violence with Health and Mental Health Outcomes in Post-conflict Liberia”, *JAMA*, 300(6), 2008.

<sup>64</sup> World Health Organization, *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies*, (Geneva: WHO, 2007), p. 1.

account when designing or conducting individual or community-level assessments that purposely include inquiries regarding sexual violence or might unintentionally evoke information or data collection on incidents of sexual violence.

- **Methodology, Data Source, Expertise** – Data collection on sexual violence and abuse can be traumatic for some victims and survivors. As such, in-person interview questions about sexual violence and abuse should not be undertaken if the information is available elsewhere and consent has been secured (e.g., case management files). In addition, those conducting assessments should be trained on how to conduct interviews on sensitive subjects and be well aware of participants' rights to refuse to answer questions or end an interview at any time.
- **Basic Services, Care, and Reporting** – Ensure that those engaging with potential victims are aware of the psychosocial and medical services available and have referral information available for victims. All concerns of sexual exploitation or abuse must be reported through established reporting mechanisms (although those reporting the incidents need to be sensitive to the potential that doing so may expose victims to added risk).
- **Protect Confidentiality** – Similar to other data collection on extremely sensitive issues, ensure that the confidentiality of research participants and communities can be protected and maintained.
- **Collect Data on Female, Male, and Non-binary Research Participants** – Sexual violence also affects men boys, and non-binary respondents, but many interventions and research efforts fail to ask them the same questions about sexual violence that are often posed to women and girls. Data collection on sexual violence should be inclusive and adaptive to context (including gender considerations) to ensure a complete picture of needs, obstacles to exit, and stabilization and reintegration challenges.

# MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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