

BICC International Conference

“Between concepts and reality: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict?”

11 / 12 November 2021, online via Zoom

How can the international community best support national, regional and local actors to encourage combatants to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life? Do the concepts underlying such interventions match the often messy reality encountered on the ground? In many contemporary violent conflicts, neat distinctions between war and peace or combatant and civilian fail to capture complex local dynamics. The notion of an easy and straightforward transition from ‘dangerous combatant’ to ‘peaceful civilian’ rarely translates into everyday experiences. While concepts informing established peacebuilding and peacekeeping processes have certainly been adapted to fit current circumstances, several academics and practitioners are asking whether they indeed go far enough. Do discussions surrounding disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) on the international level pay sufficient attention to local voices and needs? Is there, maybe, a need to pose some very fundamental questions? What, for example, is an ‘ex-combatant’ anyway? And does it make sense if concepts frame them first and foremost in terms of a security risk?

The BICC Annual Conference 2021 asks whether there is a need for fresh thinking in engaging (former) combatants. It brings together international academics in peace and conflict studies, policymakers and practitioners from directly relevant and related fields. Moreover, it aims to give a voice to those who have directly experienced programmes of the international community dealing with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflicts.

The first panel sets the tone of the conference by inviting scholars who have conducted extensive field research on the subject and practitioners with first-hand knowledge to reflect upon successes and failures from past interventions. What lessons can be learnt from the past when re-thinking approaches to engaging armed groups? Which assumptions have turned out to be unfounded? To what effect? And what kind of approaches worked, perhaps surprisingly so?

The initial panel is followed by two consecutive breakout sessions. The first focuses on different pathways armed groups might pursue in transition phases and the specific challenges associated with them. This includes the integration of former combatants in the economic sector or the security sector. In other cases, armed groups may also refashion themselves as (unarmed) political parties. The second breakout session asks whether valuable insights for engaging armed groups might be gained from looking into related yet thus far distinct fields of practice. What lessons can be learnt when reflecting on the reintegration of refugees and internally displaced persons. As disarmament and reintegration processes are increasingly relevant in contexts where armed groups are designated as terrorist organisations, practitioners may equally benefit from knowledge exchange with actors involved in reintegrating foreign fighters in other contexts. Moreover, it is increasingly recognised that when engaging armed groups, wider efforts in community violence reduction and weapons and ammunition management need to be taken into account.

The final panel collects the main insights from the breakout groups and asks where we should go from here. Are concepts like disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) still useful nomenclature for the challenges ahead?

Conference programme

11 November 2021

- 13.15–13.45 Online registration
- 13.45–14.00 Welcome by *Professor Dr Conrad Schetter*, Director of BICC
- 14.00–14.15 Welcome by *Dr Mark Speich*, the State Secretary for Federal and European Affairs and International Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
- 14.15–14.45 Introduction to the conference: *Milena Berks, Dr Claudia Breitung, Dr Joanne Richards, Dr Marc von Boemcken* (conference team BICC)
- 14.45–15.00 Video-input: “Experiences of former combatants from on the ground”
- 15.00–16.15 **First Panel: Between concepts and reality: How to deal with armed groups in transition phases of violent conflict?**
Chair: Dr Joanne Richards
Panellists:
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 Yvan Guichaoua, University of Kent
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 Randolph Rhea, Folke Bernadotte Academy
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 Sergiusz Sidorowicz, DPO
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 Sidi Zahabi, Malian DDR Commission
Chat contributions
- 16.15–16.30 **Poll 1**
- 16.30–16.45 Coffee break
- 16.45–18.00 **Specific challenges: Where do armed groups go? (3 parallel sessions)**
Breakout group 1: Incorporating armed groups into the security sector (DRC, Mali, South Sudan)
Chair: *Gaho Burihabwa*, DPO
Inputs:
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 Judith Verweijen, University of Sheffield
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 Flora McCrone, independent consultant
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 Guillaume Lacaille, Security Sector Reform (SSR) Senior Consultant (associated with DCAF)
Breakout group 2: From armed group to political party (Colombia, Northern Ireland)
Chair: *Véronique Dudouet*, Berghof Foundation
Inputs:
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 Nikkie Wiegink, Utrecht University
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 Andres Stapper Segrera, Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization
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 Corinna Hauswedell, Conflict Analysis and Dialogue (CoAD)
 Paul Nolan, Consultant, Belfast
Breakout group 3: Integrating former combatants in the civilian business sector
Chair: *David de Beer*, Consultant
Inputs:
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 Glaucia Boyer, UNDP
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 Tarila Marclint Ebiede, Vesalius College Brussels
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 Juan Valenzuela, Compañía Nacional de Chocolates S.A.S.
- 18.00–18.30 **5-minute presentations from each session, Q&A / Closing 1st day**

12 November 2021

- 14.00–14.15 Online registration
- 14.15–14.30 Welcome by the *conference team*; **Poll 2**
- 14.30–14.45 Video-input: “Experiences of former combatants from on the ground”
- 14.45–16.15 **Wider contexts: Experiences from related fields (3 parallel sessions)**
- Breakout group 1: Experiences from reintegrating refugees and internally displaced persons**
- Chair: *Elizabeth Ferris* (ISIM Research Professor at Georgetown and a non-resident senior fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution)
- \ *Zeynep Mencütek*, BICC
 - \ *Irma Specht*, Transition International
 - \ *Representative of ECHO* (t.b.c)
- Breakout group 2: Experiences from countering and “deradicalising” violent extremists**
- Chair: *Alina Neitzert*, BICC
- Inputs:
- \ *Sofien Ben Achour*, Search for Common Ground
 - \ *Arthur Boutellis*, independent consultant
 - \ *Kaan Orhon*, Grüner Vogel e.V.
- Breakout group 3: Experiences from programs in community violence reduction and weapons and ammunition management**
- Chair: *Simon Yazgi*, UNIDIR
- Inputs:
- \ *Nikhil Acharya*, BICC
 - \ *Himayu Shiotani*, Conflict Armament Research
 - \ *Srinivas Kumar*, UNDP
- 16.15–16.45 **5-minute presentations from each session, Q&A**
- Moderator: *Conference team*
- 16.45–17.00 Coffee break
- 17.00–17.15 Video-input: “Experiences of former combatants from on the ground”
- 17.15–18.30 **Final Panel: Main insights and outlook**
- Chair: *Nuria Grigoriadis*, BICC
- Inputs:
- \ *Kees Kingma*, Consultant
 - \ *Jaremev McMullin*, University of St. Andrews
 - \ *Lina Imran*, African Union
 - \ *Representative of German Federal Foreign Office* (t.b.c.)
- Chat contributions
- Reflection by the conference team
- End of conference