

Ex-combatants in South Africa: how to address their needs

Monica Bandeira

South Africa held its first democratic elections in 1994. Fourteen years later, it is clear that ex-combatants remain a vulnerable group. A limited disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process has meant that many ex-combatants continue to face serious challenges. A number of non-governmental organizations have taken up the task of addressing the psychosocial needs of this group. This paper describes their interventions and the impact on ex-combatants, as well as the challenges still facing this group. Perspectives from both ex-combatants and organizational members were gathered. The paper concludes that in order to address the psychosocial needs of South African ex-combatants the following changes are required: increased political will, more platforms for consultation, prioritizing economic empowerment, targeted psychosocial healing and recognition.

Keywords: ex-combatants, psychosocial interventions, reintegration

Countries that have experienced armed conflict then face the task of (re)building political, economic and social stability. One of the main areas of concern for these countries is the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, as comprehensive DDR programmes have been linked to long term stability (Harsch, 2005). In countries where aspects of the DDR process were poorly managed, such as South Africa, the effects are long lasting and still being felt today.

In South Africa, it is estimated there could be as many as 150 000 former combatants

(Cock, 2004). These ex-combatants represent a variety of formal and informal, military and paramilitary, formations.

Everatt & Jennings (2006) characterize the demobilization process in South Africa as 'a complete mess'. Many ex-combatants were not included and the process was further hampered by severe administration problems. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have recognized the importance of dealing with these issues.

Through work with ex-combatants, the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) has come to realize that, in order for interventions to be effective on a larger scale, policy change needs to occur. This report attempts to provide an overview of current psychosocial interventions with ex-combatants. It also highlights the needs of ex-combatants and the ways some of these have been addressed. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations.

The research

The six organizations included in this research provide primarily psychosocial assistance for ex-combatants that formerly were in the liberation forces. In total, 20 ex-combatants participated in four focus group discussions, one of which was conducted with only women. The researcher used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis for the study. Instruments with both highly structured and semi structured questions were used. This ensured some

standardization across the sample, while also allowing openness to divergent themes.

The results are discussed in two sections: the first summarizes the analysis of the interviews held with organizational members involved in work with ex-combatants, while the second reports on the analysis of the focus group discussions held with ex-combatants.

Organizational members' perspective

All the organizations said that the focus of their interventions with ex-combatants has changed over time. The most cited reasons were that they have developed broader objectives (for example, to include access to job opportunities) or have become more holistic. The activities offered to ex-combatants fell within four focus areas: psychological assistance, creating support systems, economic empowerment and advocacy.

All the interviewees said that their organizations had plans to continue working with ex-combatants in the future. The main reasons given related to ex-combatants' continuing need for healing and recognition, and the danger they may still pose to society. '(Ex-combatants feel that) "They owe me something because I went out and fought for them." And this is a group that, I think if there are no interventions to be able to help them, they could be sitting as unguarded missiles that are waiting to be ignited, which could bring instability to the country.'

According to organizational workers the most pressing challenges facing ex-combatants are: lack of skills; lack of recognition; and isolation. Both internal factors, (such as ex-combatants not being healed or being stuck in self-destructive cycles; poor self image; poor relationship skills; inability to set personal goals and plans to achieve these; not acknowledging that they are wounded;

anger; post traumatic stress symptoms; and the inability to see opportunities) and external factors (such as: lack of organization in the sector; lack of opportunities from 'government'; different stakeholders viewing ex-combatants as the sole responsibility of the Department of Defence; and the patriarchal nature of the society) were identified that prevent ex-combatants achieving their goals. When asked what interventions were needed for ex-combatants, most mentioned interventions related to economic empowerment, creating recognition, psychosocial assistance and support in strengthening the sector.

Organizational respondents described how they have attempted to engage with government in different ways and at different levels. Most of these attempts have not proved fruitful.

The ex-combatants perspective

The motivating factors ex-combatants expressed in approaching organizations for assistance included: isolation, a need for psychosocial assistance, perceived benefits and altruism.

'I don't have somebody to talk to so when you go to [organizations name removed] you are able to meet new faces and you become relieved.'

The majority of participants described the activities they participated in as focussing on intrapersonal (that is, internal processes) or interpersonal processes (processes relating to relationships with others).

A number of ex-combatants said that they gained nothing from the interventions. Some went on to explain how the interventions brought back painful memories.

However, there were those that felt they had gained something in the process. The most frequently mentioned gain was related to their ability to manage their

anger followed by: increased sense of agency (ex-combatants reported an increase in their own ability to be independent, to manage their anger, to make good choices, to cope with their situation, to forgive and forget, and to stop blaming. They also reported increase self confidence and self awareness); psychological gains (ex-combatants reported feeling relieved and gaining hope, and that it helped them with their trauma, solved their problems or improved their lives. One simply said that what they gained was *'peace'*); social gains (ex-combatants spoke of meeting new people during the interventions with whom they are still in contact. They also said that due to the interventions they are now able to rely on others for help or support); and the beginning of a journey.

I am in the process of healing. As I am in the process of healing. . . I know that I will be well to my neighbour and another person. I cannot say that I am 100% right or say that I can face life. I am still in the process, I am trying to face life and bring back my humanity and my manhood.

Some ex-combatants say they continue to benefit from participating in the activities offered by organizations. They reported feeling more confident and not feeling so alone. Some felt that the interventions created a basis for healing, while others report the ongoing use of mediation, anger management and life skills.

In confrontations, I am able to walk away to calm myself down and come back and tell the person that I was not happy with the way they treated me, instead of starting a fight.

Ex-combatants raised a number of concerns relating to the lack of post activity support or follow-up from organizations. The greatest problems unsolved by the interventions were financial difficulties and unemployment. This was expressed as the need for money or housing.

I feel nothing helps despite being counselled because of hunger, and hunger makes you feel angry you are not working. . . As the Zulu's idiom says "hunger makes you angry". When you are always hungry and someone comes to you, you automatically feel angry because you are hungry. . .'

Almost all of the ex-combatants interviewed felt that organizations should continue to work with them. Some felt that the organizations involved need to change the way in which this happens. Suggestions that follow-up be added, or that ex-combatants should direct the interventions themselves, were made.

Basic needs for employment, housing, financial assistance and access to health care were the most pressing challenges faced by ex-combatants. One of the consequences of these challenges is that they feel they have no other option but to turn to crime.

I told them that in 2010, in June, I will be still not working. I will still live the life that I am living. Expect that the tourist, which they say they will send to [name removed] stadium, that their dollars and euros, I will rob them with a petrol bomb. And the one who don't want to do that, to cooperate to what I am telling him to do, I will burn him.

According to the ex-combatants, the most frequently mentioned reasons for not achieving their goals were the combined lack of access to jobs and money.

Ex-combatants felt that government should be addressing most of their basic needs; monitoring organizations providing services to ex-combatants and addressing corruption in relation to pensions. They reported having made numerous attempts to engage the government in addressing their needs, but most have proven to be unsuccessful, or have resulted in empty promises.

The research included a woman's only group as a way of looking at differences, or similarities, to the male ex-combatants and in order to give women a more prominent

voice. Through the analysis, however, it was found that the female participants did not produce themes that contrasted highly with what their male counterparts presented. There were a few themes that women focused on more than male ex-combatants. These warrant further investigation and include their concern about: the welfare of their children, other ex-combatants and domestic violence and prostitution.

To be honest, we never enjoyed our youth. Some of us have lost our parents in exile, on the other hand we were harassed by the security police... At the end of the day, once one becomes a teenager like myself, you get married and never get to enjoy your youth. So how are you going to be a good mother or good parent when you never had that? The mind is full with things that are not right. The other day my friend said you can take the guerrilla out of the bush but you cannot take the bush out of a guerrilla. So I think... what happened during the apartheid years is still haunting us, it is part and parcel of our lives. . . .and now we are giving birth to children, how are we going to raise those children because now we have mixed emotions inside ourselves. We are not healed, that's why domestic violence is so rife?

Discussion and recommendations

Political responsibility or political will Government in general, and relevant government departments in particular, need to recognize the importance of assisting ex-combatants and to develop the political will to do so. Both organizations and the Veterans Associations (VAs) should be more assertive in their attempts to engage the government, in order to increase political will and responsibility. Although the government needs to be aware of the potential for destabilization that this group presents, it should also recognize what ex-combatants could contribute to the country and society.

Strengthening the sector: platforms for consultation and discussion A major concern emerging from this research is the lack of platforms for consultation and discussion between all the stakeholders. A stronger sector would bring benefits to all involved. If a platform (working group/committee) were created around specific goals (such as psychosocial healing or economic empowerment) that included representatives from all VAs and other relevant organizations, it could be more effective. Agreement between the VAs and the other organizations could give them a more powerful position to engage with the government.

Economic empowerment The need for economic empowerment of this group is clearly one of the main challenges faced by ex-combatants in South Africa today.

Organizations and ex-combatants view the relationship between economic empowerment and psychosocial healing differently. As shown in Diagram 1, for many ex-combatants only after they are economically empowered can psychosocial healing occur. For organizational members, on the other hand, in order for ex-combatants to be economically empowered, psychosocial healing needs to happen first.

There is no doubt that both are important and the relationship between the two is complex. The question is: can these two be dealt with separately or independently from each other?¹

Organizational members may argue that this is not their area of expertise and continue to focus exclusively on psychosocial interventions. The difficulty, however, is that they are often the only ones attempting to assist this group and this raises some ethical challenges. It would seem that the organizations have a number of options available to them (which are not mutually exclusive) when confronting the

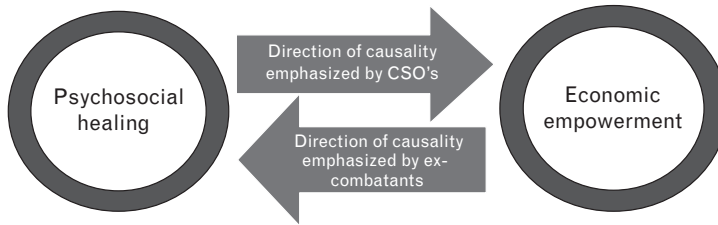


Diagram 1: Emphasis placed on psychosocial healing vs. economic empowerment.

issue of economic empowerment, namely they could:

- (a) Continue to focus exclusively on psychosocial interventions but would then need to narrow their target group and become more selective in their recruitment.
- (b) Develop interventions aimed at economic empowerment that are accompanied by psychosocial support. Organizations would then need to develop the expertise within their organization, or through partnerships, to ensure success of such interventions.
- (c) Along with ex-combatants, engage in lobbying and advocacy with government and the private sector to assist with economic empowerment of ex-combatants.

One suggestion could be to combine options (a) and (c), whereby organizations continue to focus on their areas of expertise while at the same time lobby and advocate for economic empowerment opportunities to be created by government and the private sector. All role players: ex-combatants, VAs, government and NGOs should come together to develop an effective economic empowerment strategy for ex-combatants.

Psychosocial healing The continued need for psychosocial healing for ex-combatants is recognized by both ex-combatants and organizational members. For ex-combatants areas of concern include: suicide; trauma; depression; lack of hope; anger; alcohol abuse; and relationship problems. Organizational members, identify similar psychosocial difficulties such as: unresolved trauma, issues of masculinity; poor self-esteem; difficulties with trust; substance abuse; anger; relationship difficulties; and communication difficulties.

South African organizations need to seek to amalgamate their years of experience with current, researched knowledge in interaction with ex-combatants to best inform their interventions. For ex-combatants, an increased awareness of the impact of psychosocial difficulties is needed. The government can play a major role in terms of reaching more ex-combatants in need of assistance.

Recognition Both organizational members and ex-combatants feel that not enough has been done to recognize the important role ex-combatants have played in the history of South Africa. Many feel that this continues to affect them today and that recognition will facilitate the psychosocial healing of this group. Although ex-combatants place

emphasis on economic recognition, both highlight the psychosocial benefits of social and political recognition.

Recognition strategies would need to occur through consultation with all stakeholders but is something that does not, necessarily, require a great deal of resources and could be achieved relatively quickly.

Conclusion

Although more information needs to be captured and shared, a wealth of knowledge and experience in the psychosocial needs and care of South African ex-combatants is available. South African ex-combatants also hold a great deal of insight and constructive ideas when it comes to addressing their own needs. More consultation and collaborative lobbying could lead to more positive results in this sector. It is clear that ex-combatants have a great deal to contribute to society if they are provided with the opportunities to do so.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank Craig Higson-Smith for his continuous support and supervision throughout the process of the research.

References

Cock, J. (2004). Rethinking Militarism in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Crisis States Program: Working Paper Series No 1.

Retrieved May 2, 2007, from <http://www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/WP43.pdf>.

Everatt, D, & Jennings, R. (2006). *Only Useful Until Democracy?: Reintegrating ex-combatants in South Africa (and lessons from Zimbabwe and Kosovo)*. Johannesburg: Atlantic Philanthropies.

Harsch, E. 2005. Reintegration of ex-combatants. When war ends: transforming Africa's fighters into builders. Retrieved May 4, 2007, from <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol19no3/193combatant.html>.

¹ This matter has been discussed in *Intervention*. See Williamson, J. and Robinson, M. (2006) Psychosocial interventions, or integrated programming for wellbeing? *Intervention*, 4 (1), 4–25; or Salih, M and Galappatti, A. (2006) Integrating a psychosocial perspective into poverty reduction: the case of a resettlement project in northern Sri Lanka. *Intervention*, 4 (2), 127–146.

Monica Bandeira is a Community Counselling Psychologist working as a Senior Researcher in the Trauma and Transition Programme of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, South Africa.
Tel.: +2711 403 5102;
email: mbandeira@csvr.org.za
Post: P.O. Box 6595, Halfway House, 1685, South Africa