

DDR Innovations from the Colombian Peace Process with the FARC-EP

After more than 50 years of armed conflict, the government of Colombia and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) signed a peace agreement in Havana in 2016, enabling the FARC-EP's transition to legality and mainstream politics. During the talks, the parties formed a Technical Sub-Commission to work out the conditions for the FARC-EP to lay down its weapons and reincorporate its members into civilian life. Ultimately, 13,016 combatants (91% of registered FARC-EP members) demobilised and 8,994 weapons were collected, in addition to thousands of rounds of ammunition, explosives, mines and other munitions.

The peace deal established 26 Local Transitional Zones for Normalisation (*Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización*) as guaranteed safe zones for combatant demobilisation. A tripartite monitoring and verification mechanism – consisting of government actors, FARC-EP members and United Nations officials – oversaw the collection, storage, removal and disposal of munitions within six months of the safe zones' formation. The National Council for Reincorporation, comprising government and FARC-EP representatives, continues to administer the demobilisation process and the socioeconomic reintegration of combatants.

Based on the insights of insiders to the process, this brief paper highlights practice-relevant lessons and innovations in DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) that emerged in the Havana peace talks and the implementation process. It draws on the more detailed findings in IFIT's comprehensive Spanish-language book, [*Lecciones del fin del conflicto en Colombia*](#).

1. Customising by Looking Inward: Previous DDR Processes as a Primary Reference

DDR programmes are not new to Colombia. The one agreed with the FARC-EP constitutes the third major undertaking of its kind in Colombia since the 1980s; the previous DDR programmes were the result of negotiations with other guerrilla groups and with paramilitaries. This depth of experience gave the state a high level of pre-existing institutional capacity and trained personnel. It also allowed the negotiating parties to draw upon local references, lessons and concepts regarding the design, opportunities and risks of a new DDR process. Although the parties also took international experiences into account in the negotiation process, the Technical Sub-Commission focused primarily on evaluating and adapting previous national processes to negotiate a model tailored to the distinct needs of the FARC-EP and the prevailing realities of the conflict.

2. Negotiating between Peers: Combatants in the Lead

Instead of relying on civilian representatives, the Technical Sub-Commission consisted primarily of active and former combatants from both sides of the armed conflict, namely military and police officials and guerrilla commanders. These individuals had the battle expertise and credibility to negotiate the technical details, while bringing a healthy dose of realism to the proceedings. After decades of conflict – and three unsuccessful peace talks with the FARC-EP in previous years – this peer-to-peer approach helped to generate a higher level of interpersonal trust during the DDR component of the talks. For the guerrillas, it built a baseline confidence toward the actors who would eventually guarantee their personal safety. On top of this, because the military has long enjoyed high popularity in Colombia, its participation gave the overall process added legitimacy in the eyes of the public, while disincentivising potential actions by opposition spoilers in response to the sensitive security questions on the agenda.

3. Staying on Point: The Primacy of Core Principles and Mechanisms

Because the Technical Sub-Commission's discussions occurred in the mid-to-late stages of the peace talks, the parties faced pressure to move quickly. Focusing on determining the principles and timelines guiding the overall DDR process, including the mechanisms that would ensure implementation such as the safe zones and the tripartite verification mechanism, they created a detailed annex of rules and procedures. Anticipating that many aspects would require adjustments on the go, the parties wisely empowered the implementation body with sufficient latitude to calibrate and interpret the annex flexibly (see point 10 below). This approach brought necessary structure and focus to the DDR negotiations, while allowing for adaptability during implementation.

4. Accommodating Labels: Leaving a Place for Legitimacy

During the negotiations, the FARC-EP sought a DDR formula that avoided any distortion of its political identity or perception that it had been militarily defeated. Instead of 'disarmament' (*desarme*), the guerrillas preferred the term 'laying down' (*dejación*) of weapons, meant to signify their voluntary decision to transition from an armed militant group to an

unarmed political party. To its credit, the government, which was concerned more with DDR mechanisms and successful implementation than with terminology, recognised that the proposed framing would help the FARC-EP leadership maintain legitimacy in the eyes of its rank and file. It would also encourage organisational buy-in to the demobilisation process and promote a combined sense of dignity, ownership and personal accountability among FARC-EP commanders. This outlook helped the FARC-EP come to view itself as a co-protagonist in DDR – so much so that guerrilla leader Timochenko was ultimately able to hand over a complete list of combatants (see point 11 below). At the same time, by ensuring an adequate level of precision in the negotiated DDR text, the government helped offset any urge by the armed forces to pursue terminological squabbles.

5. Tailoring for Individuals: Recognition of Different Combatants' Needs

The government recognised that the FARC-EP was made up of diverse combatants with different needs, including prisoners, unarmed militias, non-nationals, women and minors. In agreeing to a collective DDR process, special provisions were agreed in respect of these specific categories of individual combatants. For example, FARC-EP child combatants were released from its ranks in special safe zones and recognised as victims, with the Presidential Council for Human Rights assuming responsibility for the restoration of their rights until the age of majority, when they joined the main reintegration process. This flexible and tailored approach to disarmament and demobilisation incentivised combatants to lay down their arms, although the subsequent standardisation of reintegration for all types of combatants may have undone some of the gains and increased the risk of recidivism. A degree of inattention to the specific importance and expectations of middle-rank commanders compounded the problem.

6. Adjusting for Speed: DDR Timelines versus Combatant Pedagogy

The laying down of arms by the FARC-EP occurred quickly – it was effectively over within a period of six months in 2017. The speed of implementation avoided potential complications, such as the guerrillas fragmenting into separate groups or the demobilisation process becoming enmeshed with national elections due to take place in 2018. Yet, it left FARC-EP commanders little time to prepare combatants mentally for the experience of demobilisation, and the state insufficient time to build the housing, infrastructure and services needed in the safe zones. This led some FARC-EP combatants to reject or abandon the process and others to face considerable personal challenges in reintegrating into civilian life. The lesson is that pedagogy for rank-and-file combatants (and their families) about the logic of the overall peace deal and the anticipated complexities of reintegration has to begin early, so that it does not undercut the critical imperative of speed in DDR. At the same time, pedagogy has its limits in contexts such as Colombia, where the independent prospect of gains from activities such as drug trafficking may pull combatants away from DDR.

7. Using a Chronogram: The Value of Sequential Unlocking Mechanisms

The parties agreed on a DDR process that integrated a wide array of incentives and conditionalities, with each stage requiring certain actions or benchmarks to be met in order to proceed to the next stage (with the exception of long-term undertakings such as rural reform). For example, the government had to provide security guarantees and create safe zones for the guerrillas to lay down their arms; and the FARC-EP had to relocate and complete the tripartite verification process in the safe zones in order to acquire a new legal status. Laid out in a chronogram, sequential unlocking mechanisms gave the parties a structure to work within and a sense of momentum and progress, while allowing for emerging developments and needs within each stage of the process (such as accelerating the passage of legislation to allow FARC-EP members to create their own political party or have seats in Congress). This approach also helped to ensure the parties' informed consent, as well as incentivising compliance. Meanwhile, the principles of simultaneity and integration (both anchored in the 2012 *Acuerdo General* that set out the formal agenda and rules for the Havana talks) prevented the FARC-EP from using any delay on the government's side as an excuse for slowing down the DDR process.

8. Addressing Past Abuses: Incentives for Participation in Transitional Justice

A unique aspect of the FARC-EP demobilisation process is that combatants interested in accessing the benefits of reincorporation or becoming eligible for legal leniency were obliged to sign a written pledge of participation in the transitional justice programme that the parties agreed in the peace talks. In particular, they had to promise to contribute to truth-telling and reparations and to commit to non-recidivism, in the knowledge that failures of compliance could result in the revocation of their DDR benefits. Such an approach is normally considered unviable, as it is typically presumed that DDR depends on sweeping legal forgiveness for rank-and-file combatants, or indeed for everyone, at the moment of demobilisation. The Colombian case shows other possibilities.

9. Conferring Rights: Legal Status as a Commitment Mechanism

The peace agreement included legal 'normalisation' as an incentive for DDR, not only for the FARC-EP as an organisation but also for individual combatants. The verification process included a mechanism for *cedulación* (civil registration) through which combatants were entered into the national registry, received identification cards and gained access to public services – many of them for the first time. Combined with a physical certificate of conditional amnesty (albeit late in materialising), the restoration of ordinary citizenship served as evidence of transition and a signifier of belonging and protection in the country. Importantly, it also allowed for meaningful monitoring of DDR compliance and progress in perpetuity.

10. Involving Third Parties: International Actors and Procedural Legitimacy

Informed by the DDR process in Nepal, the Colombia government and FARC-EP representatives on the Technical Sub-Commission reached consensus on the establishment of a tripartite monitoring and verification mechanism in the safe zones for the period of the laying down of arms. The mechanism encompassed the participation not only of government and guerrilla representatives, but also the United Nations. The latter's presence as an experienced and impartial implementation partner helped to reassure combatants, reduce distrust between the principal conflict actors and ensure the fluidity of the verification protocols. Ultimately, the FARC-EP's weapons were melted down and used to construct three peace monuments.

11. Ensuring Accuracy: The Importance of Effective Data Management

The DDR process agreed between the parties in Havana placed a premium on thorough data collection and management. By registering every combatant in detail and collecting and counting every weapon rigorously, the tripartite verification mechanism ensured that the process yielded accurate figures. The government also created an inter-agency committee to corroborate the information about each combatant in relation to available state information. The reliability of the resulting data from both of these processes was important not only for refuting public misinformation about levels of non-compliance or defection, but also for preventing and detecting any fraudulent claims (eg, by members of other non-state armed groups) and tracking the DDR process' impact over the long term.

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