

CHAPTER 3

LEARNING FROM SIERRA LEONE

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The war that lasted almost eleven years began when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) attacked Sierra Leone from neighbouring Liberia in 1991. What followed was more than a decade of bloodshed, realignment of political forces, brutalization of civilians and gross violations of human rights. In 1997 a military coup led by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) overthrew President Tejan Kabbah, suspended the constitution and joined ranks with the RUF.¹ In 1998 the West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, forced the military junta to flee the capital, Freetown, and returned President Kabbah to office.

The war between the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF was to last another four years. The RUF still had territorial control over the north and east of the country. The RUF attacked and briefly took control of Freetown in 1999 and later took United Nations (UN) peacekeepers hostage. These actions prompted swift action from the international community, especially Britain, which sent troops that forced the RUF to abandon Freetown. The rebels and the government finally signed a third peace agreement in 2001, which, among other provisions, facilitated the disarmament and demobilization of rebel and government militia forces.

The war in Sierra Leone was declared over in January 2002 and the country was also declared disarmed during the same period. Subsequently Sierra Leone held elections that saw President Tejan Kabbah returned into office through a democratic process.

Much has been written about the UN mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). Critics have viewed the mission as a success and a model for robust and successful mandate that moved from peacekeeping to sustainable peace building. The UNAMSIL mission has been credited with a successful disarmament and demobilization programme, with the reintegration process ongoing. Although there are many challenges facing Sierra Leone in terms of long-term stability and recovery there are important lessons to be learned regarding the role of UN peace operations in a transition from war to peace.

For all the focus on the process of disarmament and demobilization and the links between these and the political dynamics of negotiating peace, there been little attention paid to the technical aspects of the disarmament process in Sierra Leone. This chapter aims to focus on these aspects of disarmament. This technical side includes planning, timing, identification of lead agencies, donor funding, categories of people to be disarmed, types of weapons to be collected, actors and methods of destruction, and decisions on cantonment areas, as well as community weapons collection programmes.

This chapter submits that there has been little attention paid to the entire planning process involved in the design of UN disarmament programmes. Most focus has been on the linkages between disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and the political dynamics of negotiating peace. For example, in the case of Sierra Leone, it was the breakthrough on some aspects of the post-war political dispensation that impacted directly on progress with disarmament. As important as this is there is also a need to focus on the planning side of disarmament in order to propose a possible framework that attempts to lay out some basic issues that need attention and focus during these early stages of the process.

Such planning includes mobilization of funds, deciding on a 'targeted' versus 'enlarged' programme, selection of cantonment sites and provision of basic services such as water and sanitation, collection, storage and disposal of weapons and transport to reintegration centres for those ex-combatants who join the DDR process. These activities involve complex planning processes, bargaining and commitment from all the actors involved.

Disarmament in the Sierra Leone peace process

The February 1996 talks between the RUF and the government of Sierra Leone as well as the more comprehensive subsequent peace agreements, the July 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, the November 2000 Abuja Ceasefire Agreement, the May 2001 Abuja Ceasefire Review Agreement (Abuja II), all emphasized the crucial need for sustained DDR of ex-combatants from both sides of the conflict. This was seen as a necessary condition for the continuation of peace in the country. The need for DDR formed an integral component of the peace process from the initial stages. More significantly, these agreements made explicit mention of groups such as women and child soldiers. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration also formed a key part of the mandate of UNAMSIL.

Lomé Peace Agreement

Concluded in July 1999 between the government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and the RUF the Lomé Peace Agreement made provision for:

- Cessation of hostilities;
- Power sharing between the GoSL and the RUF;
- General amnesty for all war-related atrocities and war crimes;
- Encampment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants;
- Restructuring of armed forces;
- UNAMSIL monitoring of ceasefire;
- Mechanisms and structures for promotion of human rights, humanitarian relief and post-war reconstruction; and
- Specific guidelines for the DDR of women and children, especially child soldiers.²

However, although the Lomé Agreement was in place, resumption of hostilities between the belligerent parties continued until the signing of *The Abuja Ceasefire Agreement* on 10 November 2000. This agreement was aimed at recreating momentum and put in place a renewed legal basis for the application of the Lomé Agreement. Abuja II provided for:

- Declaration of a ceasefire to be supervised by UNAMSIL;
- Deployment of UNAMSIL troops throughout the country;
- Restoring the authority of the GoSL throughout the territory;
- Facilitating the free movement of goods and persons, especially the unhindered movement of humanitarian relief staff, refugees, returnees and IDPs (internally displaced persons); and
- Resumption of the DDR programme.³

Clearly it was Abuja II that provided the breakthrough in the peace process by reviewing progress made on implementation and agreeing on mechanisms for moving the entire process forward, including DDR. In addition, UNAMSIL was given an explicit disarmament mandate within the context of the previous peace agreements between the RUF and the GoSL.

Planning and timing

In 1996 the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) government established the Ministry of Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation. This Ministry was later turned into the National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation (NCRRR). Subsequently in 1998 the government of Sierra Leone took the initiative of designing a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme (DDRP). It was during this period that the NCRRR was reconstituted as the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR).⁴

The DDRP programme was originally designed to cater for an estimated 45,000 combatants. These combatants comprised of the members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), former Sierra Leone Army (SLA), and elements of the government militia the Civil Defence Force (CDF). The aim of the DDRP was to ensure the disarmament and demobilization of former combatants and ease their return to productive civilian life through the offering of reinsertion packages and subsequent vocational training programmes to enable speedy and easy reintegration into civilian life.

Many actors, including the World Bank played a crucial role in the design and support of the DDRP process. Other stakeholders included ECOMOG, UNOMSIL (subsequently UNAMSIL), and UN agencies, CDF, the armed forces of Sierra Leone (AFSL), NGOs, community groups and international donors. The International Contact Group on Sierra Leone adopted the DDRP framework after the UN Special Conference on Sierra Leone accepted it. Funds were pooled into the Multi-donor Trust Fund (MDTF) for Sierra Leone.

The realization that sustainable peace could only be achieved through a comprehensive programme of disarmament was not without its own challenges. Although the process had started in earnest the broader political environment at the time affected its implementation. The escalation of fighting between the government and the RUF led to periodic suspension of the DDRP programme. This military confrontation cast doubt over each party's commitment to disarmament.

There were also concerns about prospects for reintegration of former combatants into civilian life once they were disarmed. For many combatants weapons were the only way of ensuring a stake in the countries political and economic processes. The end objective of any DDR programme is to ensure

the reintegration of ex-combatants in order to allow them to conduct a normal civilian life and cease to pose a threat to the wider population.

Identification of lead agencies

The responsibility for DDR rested with the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR). President Kabbah chaired the NCDDR, which operated with an executive secretariat that was comprised of:

- Representatives from the donor community;
- Minister of Information and Broadcasting;
- Minister of Finance; Deputy Minister of Defence (who was the Civil Defence Force coordinator);
- Special Representative of the UN;
- UN Military Force Commander (UNAMSIL); and
- Head of the RUF.⁵

The objectives of DDR in Sierra Leone were to:

- Collect, register, disable and destroy all conventional weapons and munitions retrieved from combatants during the disarmament period (which was estimated at three months in the Lomé Agreement).
- Demobilize approximately 45,000 combatants of which 12 per cent were expected to be women.
- Prepare and support ex-combatants for socio-economic reintegration upon discharge from demobilization centres, for long-term security.⁶

The DDR process was premised on the assumption that UNAMSIL would provide security within the framework of its renewed mandate, the deployment of UN Military Observers (MILOBS), compliance by all parties to the relevant provisions of the Lomé Agreement and later the Abuja Agreement of May 2001, and support from the international community. Although some of

these assumptions were straightforward to implement, others involved skill and continuous diplomacy from all the stakeholders to keep the DDR process afloat.

Over the period September 1998 to January 2002, disarmament and demobilization of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone went through three phases. The process disarmed and demobilized a total of 72,490 combatants and collected a total of 42,300 weapons and 1.2 millions rounds of ammunition. This was a significantly higher number than the estimated 45,000 combatants. The three phases of disarmament can be divided as follows:

- Phase 1: September – December 1998;
- Phase II: October 1999 – April 2000;
- Interim phase: May 2000 – 17 May 2001;
- Phase III: 18 May 2001 – January 2002.⁷

It is important to note that what determined these phases and the time lapses between them was a series of political events that were related to the negotiation of peace. This illustrates the point that the disarmament process is part of the political process and should be undertaken within the broader framework of conflict resolution and peace building.

Donor funding

The mobilization of funds for the DDR programme was pooled into the MDTF for Sierra Leone. This fund included support from all the major donor countries and organizations. The World Bank played a leading role in mobilizing financial support for the disarmament process in Sierra Leone. It is important to note that local NGOs and other national stakeholders were also represented in the entire process that culminated to the endorsement of the programme by the Bank.

Categories of people to be disarmed

The Lomé Agreement stipulated the categories of people to be disarmed. However, the challenge was to identify the lead agency that would determine the criteria for the types of combatants and what was required to qualify for inclusion in the DDR programme. Qualification criteria also included the types of weapons that were eligible under the process.

Determining who qualifies for a disarmament programme can be a difficult task. It is complex to determine the age of ex-combatants. There is a need for strict criteria in determining who qualifies to join the programme and who does not. UNAMSIL required basic information from prospective entrants, including providing information on the person's commander and asking combatants to dismantle and reassemble a weapon. UNAMSIL guidelines were also strict on what qualified as a weapon and what qualified as ammunition. However, there were instances when the RUF refused to continue with the process because they wanted hand grenades and other types of ammunition to qualify as weapons.

Types of weapons, actors and methods of weapons destruction

The type of weapons handed in included small arms and light weapons. Hunting rifles and shotguns were not included in this process but were dealt with in the subsequent government-led community arms disarmament programme undertaken with assistance from UNAMSIL. UNAMSIL was also specific that hand grenades, rocket propelled grenades and mines were categorized as ammunition and not weapons, as specified in the guidelines for the DDR programme.

The destruction of weapons was undertaken by UNAMSIL as the lead agency. However, expertise was sought from other partners, such as the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ). Destruction involved mainly cutting the weapons into smaller pieces and rendering them difficult to re-assemble in future. The remaining pieces from the destroyed weapons were turned into useful tools for peaceful use. Some 25,089 weapons were destroyed through this process.⁸

Identifying cantonment areas

The disarmament exercise was a complex and dynamic process. The process took place in different reception centres around Sierra Leone. These centres were designed to be temporary, providing shelter for a short period of time during the specific period of disarmament and demobilization, weapons collection and registration. The disarmament exercise was conducted in five stages, which included the following:

- **Assembly:** organizing the arrival of combatants and providing them with orientation about the disarmament process.

- **Interview:** the collection of personal identification, information, registration, and verification of weapons or ordinance delivered by the ex-combatants.
- **Weapons collection:** the tagging of all weapons or ordinance, and temporary disabling and storing of the weapons prior to their transportation to the final storage and disposal centres.
- **Eligibility certification:** verification and authorisation of the ex-combatants by the UN observers for their inclusion as beneficiaries of the DDR programme.
- **Transportation:** the assembly and organization of screened and disarmed combatants and their final transportation to their demobilization centres.

Special groups

The Lomé Agreement made provision for including issues related to children and youth within the peace process and established the office of children's protector. Children and youth were to be treated differently during and after the DDR process.

Article XXX of the 1999 Lomé Agreement declared that:

The Government shall accord particular attention to the issue of child soldiers. It shall, accordingly, mobilise resources, both within and from the International Community, and especially through the Office of the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, UNICEF and other agencies, to address the special needs of these children in the existing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes.⁹

The peace process represents an opportunity to negotiate a new dispensation that can chart a new way for minority groups, including their protection. The realization that the end of hostilities was imminent and that Sierra Leone had a significant number of child combatants created momentum within the donor community to channel resources towards rehabilitating and reintegrating children and youth in Sierra Leonean society. UNICEF was identified as the lead agency that dealt with children and youth, during and after the disarmament process. However, the war in Sierra Leone included a number of other groups that accompanied the fighters, including 'bush wives'. Although

in most cases accompanying groups consists of people who have been coerced into joining the combatants, in some cases female combatants joined voluntarily.¹⁰

Simultaneous disarmament

The dynamic nature of the evolution of the war in Sierra Leone resulted in certain parts of the country being more volatile than others. This resulted in a concentration of combatants in certain areas, making these regions unstable and more prone to the resurgence of violence. The NCDDR adopted a strategy of simultaneous disarmament, which was aimed at identifying priority areas that would be disarmed in parallel with others. This parallel disarmament occurred over a period of one month.

Parallel disarmament was targeted at those areas where there was a possibility that if one group was encouraged to disarm and the other not there would be potential resistance. This approach served as an important confidence building measure that moderated the mistrust between former belligerents.

Community arms collection and destruction

The formal disarmament process was declared complete by President Kabbah in January 2002. However this did not mean that all the weapons in circulation in Sierra Leone had been removed. This was due to the fact that the disarmament programme excluded hunting rifles and pistols from weapons qualifying under the programme, as they were not considered to be the weapons used by former combatants. This, and the fact that there were unknown numbers of weapons that were thought to be kept by both the CDF and remnants of the RUF, led to the recognition of the need for another process that would collect these weapons.

To meet the above challenge the government of Sierra Leone developed the Community Arms Collection and Destruction programme aimed at collecting those weapons that fell outside the scope of the UNAMSIL/NCDDR process. This process commenced on 3 February 2002. It collected 1,043 weapons in total. Although the number was largely symbolic, it was significant in the sense that it demonstrated that people did not want to encourage the storage and use of weapons in their communities.

The outcome of disarmament

Evaluating the success or failure of a disarmament process is a complex exercise, especially when concern about rearmament remains. However, a few indicators can be highlighted to provide a framework for evaluation of the disarmament programme in Sierra Leone. These indicators include the following:

- The NCDDR was able to design a programme that was suitable to the dynamics of the peace process in Sierra Leone. These included designing a 'targeted' disarmament programme to take into account the needs of different groups and categories.
- UNAMSIL provided expertise and committed resources to establish cantonment areas in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the RUF and government as well as local authorities (i.e. to determine who owns the land and handing over that infrastructure to benefit the community concerned).
- Disarming an estimated total of over 70,000 ex-combatants exceeded the estimated number of 45,000 and made a significant difference in pacifying the country.
- UNAMSIL played a major role in strengthening collaborative relations and activities with various stakeholders, including sub-contracting GTZ to manage the physical destruction of the weapons.
- UNAMSIL assisted the national government authorities in implementing a follow up disarmament programme in the form of the Community Arms Collection and Destruction Programme (CACD). This programme played a major role in sustaining momentum for community level disarmament and led to new legislation on the control of firearms for the country.

Conclusion

Although it is often difficult and complex to evaluate the success of the broader DDR process, it is possible to draw lessons from the disarmament component of the process. There has been very little focus on the processes and technical aspects of disarmament as an essential component of the larger DDR process. It is submitted here that there are various aspects of the disarmament process in Sierra Leone that illustrate the need for a well planned but flexible process.

One of the major lessons of the process was that DDR and its modalities should be an essential component of the peace process. It is at this stage that clarity should be sought as to who will be responsible for the process, who will be disarmed, how and where will different categories of participants be accommodated and for how long, and what will happen to the surrendered weapons. UNAMSIL also instituted 'simultaneous disarmament' through the paring of districts as a confidence-building measure between the RUF and CDF combatants. Any disarmament programme also faces certain obstacles and in the case of Sierra Leone this included failure to meet certain expectations from ex-combatants, such as payments to ex-combatants. However most of the problems were linked to the dynamics of the politics of negotiating peace in Sierra Leone. In February 2004, the government of Sierra Leone announced the conclusion of a five-year programme to disarm and rehabilitate more than 70,000 former combatants. The World Bank noted that Sierra Leone is being visited by neighbouring countries and those from the Great Lakes region because it is "considered as the best practice example throughout the world of a successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme".¹¹

Notes

1. For the history of the war in Sierra Leone see, I Abdullah, *Bush Path to destruction: the origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36, 2, 1998, pp. 203-235.
2. M Malan, P Rakate, A McIntyre, (eds), *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: UNAMSIL hits the home straight*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Monograph no. 68, January 2002.
3. Ibid.
4. National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR), *Reintegration of Ex-combatants: Transition from War to Peace-management of a Complex DDR Process*, Vol. 1, May 2002.
5. M Malan, S Meek, T Thusi, J Ginifer, P Coker, *Sierra Leone: Building the Road to Recovery*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Monograph no. 80, March 2003, p. 25.
6. Ibid, p. 24.
7. Ibid, p. 25.
8. P Coker, *Mopping up weapons in local communities*, *UNAMSIL Review*, United Nations, April 2002, p.9.
9. <www.sierra-leone.org/ceasefire051899.html>.

10. Some scholars have used the concept of “Children associated with armed forces” to refer to any child under 18 years of age who is part of armed force, whether or not there is an armed conflict. This definition is not limited to children who are carrying arms or have carried arms but includes those involved and affect through activities such as cooks, domestic workers, spies, decoys, couriers, guards, and those accompanying such groups other than purely as family members.
11. “No more illegal armed groups in Sierra Leone” *Mail and Guardian Online*, 5 February 2004, www.mg.co.za/Content/13.asp?ao=30676.