THE FARC’S COLLECTIVE REINCORPORATION PROJECT: ITS IMPACT ON COLOMBIA’S DDR

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Introduction

The government of Colombia and the biggest guerrilla group in the country, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army, FARC), signed a final peace agreement on November 24, 2016. This accord put an end to the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere (over fifty years); however, as the past two years have shown, this has not meant the end of violence. Many international observers have heralded the Colombian peace process as an incredible success, and in many ways, it has been. The negotiations between the administration of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC are one of the few recent examples of an armed actor’s successful demobilization resulting from track-one diplomacy. The peace process almost immediately translated into a significant reduction in violence; the homicide rate in 2017, for example, was the lowest it had been in forty-two years, and many regions, for decades beleaguered by war, have gotten a respite from kidnappings, combat, and restrictions on mobility, among other things.

The process, however, has been plagued since the beginning by problems stemming from the strong polarization surrounding the terms of reincorporation for FARC ex-combatants, and the lack of will and/or capacity of the Colombian state and the FARC to implement many of the agreed commitments. This policy paper examines the state of the reincorporation of FARC’s ex-combatants in the almost two and a half years that have passed since the guerrilla

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3 Traditionally, both in Colombia and internationally, the R in DDR stands for reintegration. The FARC, however, has insisted on using the term reincorporation, rather than reintegration, to differentiate it from previous exercises—in particular the Ralito agreement with the paramilitary. For the purposes of this paper, we use the two words interchangeably, but we acknowledge the FARC’s wish to refer to their process exclusively with the term reincorporation.
We argue that the FARC’s leadership, learning from past DDR experiences in Colombia, decided to prioritize a process that maintained ex-combatants as collectivities to avoid the fate that other armed groups faced after transitioning to civilian life: losing much of the space they had occupied in the national and local political sphere. The decision to push for a collective reincorporation, however, has proved to be a significant obstacle to the successful transition of ex-combatants into civilian life. This paper examines some of the reasons behind the difficulties of the implementation of this model: from the strong opposition of the Colombian government, to structural and physical conditions in the areas where FARC ex-combatants are living. While it is perhaps too early to deem the collective reincorporation process a failure, this paper concludes that safeguarding the implementation of this part of the peace agreement requires urgent focus in order to overcome the obstacles discussed below.

4 For this policy note, we only focus on the reintegration of ex-combatants and do not devote our attention to the demobilization and disarmament processes, which were successfully finalized by June 2017.
6 Much of this paper is based on interviews with FARC members, government officials, members of civil society, and representatives of the international community conducted over the phone and in person in Bogotá in March, April, and May of 2019. We promised those we interviewed they would remain anonymous.
Previous DDR Experiences in Colombia

While the first two stages of DDR, demobilization and disarmament, took place effectively and within the timeline established by the agreement, the reincorporation process of the demobilized FARC in Colombia has been extremely slow and difficult. This is particularly worrisome considering that the country has significant experience in this field: more than 60,000 ex-combatants from other groups had been reinserted into civilian life prior to the peace process with the FARC.²

The Colombian state has a long history of leading DDR processes, going back to the 1980s when the governments of Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) and Virgilio Barco Vargas (1986-1990) signed peace agreements with several guerrilla movements. During the first administration of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2006), the right-wing paramilitary militias engaged in a process of disarmament that resulted in almost 32,000 soldiers starting DDR processes led by the state. Simultaneously, around 22,000 individual combatants from different armed actors deserted their organizations and voluntarily approached the Colombian authorities for help returning to civilian life.³

In all of these cases, the Colombian government designed an individual reintegration route, with the ex-combatant as an individual at the center of the process.⁴

The FARC’s Secretariat, however, was adamant about wanting to conduct the reincorporation of its rank and file differently. Rather than transit through the established route that the Colombian state had relied on for individual reinsertion into civilian life, they wanted to anchor the reincorporation process around the establishment of communities of FARC ex-combatants, which would engage in economic enterprises in the geographic areas where they gathered to begin the demobilization and disarmament process. The logic behind this was simple: while previous DDR processes had shown that the individual route had (relative) success in facilitating the reentry of ex-combatants into licit economic and communal life, it had adversely affected the political reintegration of the armed group as a collectivity. In the words of a member of the FARC Secretariat: “previous DDR models were a process of surrender to the State. The kind of reincorporation we wanted has FARC members as subjects that transform the context; as actors of peace.”⁵

The FARC guerrilla group was a highly hierarchical organization, with strong control over its rank and file.⁶ They imagined that a reintegration process that moored its men and women to specific geographic areas would produce a smooth transition from a military organization to a civilian one, guaranteeing the continuation of the esprit de corps and internal obedience that existed during the war. Additionally, the creation of these geographic anchors would also consolidate the political expression of the FARC by acting as local centers of power—contributing to the FARC’s idea of transforming territorial spaces that they once controlled through arms into clusters of political support.

Individual Reintegration

The DDR processes for the leftist guerrillas that demobilized in the 1990s, as well as the larger, more comprehensive efforts destined to reintegrate the right-wing paramilitaries of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) at the beginning of the 2000s, differ significantly from the reincorporation route imagined by the FARC.

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⁵ International Organization for Migration staffer, Skype interview by author, February 2019.
⁶ FARC Secretariat member, interview by author, Bogotá, March 22, 2019.
⁷ Unlike other guerrilla groups in Colombia, such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN).
In the case of the leftist guerrillas, the focus was on transitioning from an armed organization into a political party—a transformation that mostly placed emphasis on the national political arena and did not focus on the local communities. Between 1989 and 1994, five guerrilla groups demobilized: the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19), the Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame (MAQL), the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT), and the Corriente de Renovación Socialista (CRS)—comprising a total of approximately 5,000 combatants. At that time, the Colombian state did not have a standardized route for DDR, and each group negotiated different terms for their reintegration.

In the case of the paramilitary groups of the AUC, the attempt to completely disarticulate these organizations resulted in the creation of a sophisticated and comprehensive route for individual reintegration, which is the model the Colombian government has aimed to follow ever since. In the early 2000s, negotiations with the AUC paramilitary forces resulted in the demobilization of 33,000 ex-combatants who needed to be reintegrated. The scale of the process was unprecedented in Colombia: eight times as many ex-combatants as those involved in the processes from the early 1990s required political, social, and economic reintegration.

During the paramilitary process, the Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización (Reincorporation and Normalization Agency, ARN)—formerly known as the Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (Colombian Reintegration Agency, ACR)—designed the steps of a reintegration process for ex-combatants that lasts six and a half years and is still used today. The focus of this process is on the development of citizen skills and competencies as the demobilized population returns to civilian life. The reintegration route is composed of a series of steps taken by each person to reintegrate fully into social and economic life, in an agreed-upon work plan between the ARN and the person undergoing the reintegration process. This route includes eight dimensions: personal, productive, family, habitat, health, educational, citizenship, and security. The personal dimension prioritizes mental health and the building of social, interpersonal, and group relationships that can help provide a support and safety net to ex-combatants. The productive dimension involves developing the necessary skills to establish the means to generate sustainable incomes within a legal framework. The family dimension builds on the personal dimension by incorporating the ex-combatant’s nuclear family into the process to help build a family support system. The dimension focusing on habitat stresses the importance of maintaining a stable home with decent living conditions, with the aim of supporting ex-combatants’ transition from living in the mountains to living in rural or urban settings. The health dimension focuses on establishing healthy habits that counteract the impact partaking in an armed conflict had on the individual’s physical, mental, and social health. Finally, the focus on education encourages ex-combatants to pursue the education levels that will allow them to be productive members of society. In addition to the process with the AUC paramilitary forces, the Colombian state used this individual DDR route to respond to the 22,000 individually demobilized combatants from the FARC and ELN who deserted the groups after 2002.

**Toward a Collective Reintegration**

The Havana discussions addressed the specific details of DDR relatively late in the process: the parties did not start discussing the terms of the return of ex-combatants until August 3, 2016—four years after the public phase of the negotiations had begun, and a month before the first version of the completed agreement was signed. By then, public opinion in Colombia was demanding a conclusion to negotiations that had already

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14 Ibid., 44.
16 The Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (ACR) changed its name to Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización (ARN) in May 2017.
lasted longer than most people had expected, and the process concluded quickly, without having defined all the needed details. Thus, the specifics of the reintegration process for the FARC were left fairly vague.

**Political Reincorporation**

The agreement included terms for the FARC’s transition from an armed group to a political party with national representation and the basis for the socioeconomic reincorporation of its bases. The political reincorporation stage has two dimensions: the creation of a national political party and the strengthening of the local presence of the FARC. During the Havana negotiations, it was clear the FARC would only agree to disarm if they had some assurance that they would have an immediate role in national politics. The final agreement, thus, stated that the FARC would have ten seats guaranteed in Congress for the next two congressional periods, regardless of how many votes they got: five in the Senate and five in the House of Representatives. The peace agreement also included sixteen seats in Congress for new districts created in those regions of the country most affected by war. This reform did not pass in the first congressional debate regulating the peace agreement, however, and is under discussion in the current term.

In September 2016, the FARC convened in Yarí, Meta, for their tenth general conference and the last meeting of the entire organization before transitioning to a political party.18 There, the Secretariat turned to the rank and file to approve in plenary what ninety commandants had decided in Havana a few weeks before: that they would fully disarm before starting the reintegration process (something that was not a foregone conclusion for all FARC members during the peace negotiations), and that they would focus on building the political party that would continue their struggle but through legal means: the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force, FARC).

In August 2017, the FARC gathered in Bogotá for what they called the foundational congress of the new party, where those present approved the party statutes, which delineate the FARC’s internal organization and structure. During the congress, it became evident that the party would have to go to great lengths to form a cohesive organization that incorporated the three major sectors that it needed to represent: the ex-combatants; the militias (the urban component of the guerrilla group, which were affiliated with the FARC but were not part of military fronts); and the so-called Bolivarian Movement, a clandestine organization of sympathizers formed in 1993, which was formally constituted as a political arm of the FARC in 2000.19 From the beginning, there have been tensions concerning how to harmonize those three structures within the new partisan organization. Militia members, many of whom have been active within universities, expected to have a prominent role in the new party, something that has generated resentment among the ex-combatants.

While membership to the FARC party is not obligatory, most ex-combatants are members, and as such they belong to a commune, the basic organizational structure of the FARC, including when it was an armed group. The communes are formed by at least five members, and they are organized based on the geographical location of its members, as well as their socioeconomic activities. By continuing the commune structure, the FARC wanted to replicate the daily dynamics they had as an army and hoped that the party would become the glue that kept the movement cohesive during the postconflict period. In the words of one of the FARC members interviewed, “we were looking for a life of militancy.”20

So far, the FARC has focused on strengthening the membership of ex-combatants, the militias, and members of the Bolivarian Movement, as well as their families, in the party. Not much effort has been placed on widening the social network of groups that might sympathize with the FARC’s cause, although they have seen the adherence of actors that had abandoned political

20 Interview with FARC member; Bogotá, May 2019.
activism and now see the FARC as representative of their ideological stance, such as old members of the Communist Party and unions. How broad a party the FARC becomes, and particularly how effectively they become the voice of constituencies who have always felt marginalized by the Colombian party system, will be essential in deciding whether, just like the M-19 and other leftist parties that were born of armed struggle, they will lose much of the relevance they had on the national political stage as they join the electoral realm.

The FARC faces a number of challenges to becoming a local power actor in some regions. Nationally, arguably the biggest obstacle has come from within the FARC itself: the decision of Iván Márquez, a member of the Secretariat, to not take his seat in Congress in protest of the detention of FARC leader Jesús Santrich, who is accused of drug trafficking, has inserted a high level of ambiguity into the process. Marquez's whereabouts have been unknown for almost a year now, and he refused to participate in his session at the transitional justice court, called the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). This decision made evident a lack of internal cohesion within the FARC, as well as strong divisions among the Secretariat members, something that has had a ripple effect among the bases. This political uncertainty has been compounded by the polarizing debate over the JEP in Congress, aggravated by President Iván Duque's decision to veto some of the articles of the transitional justice law. Both the FARC's leadership and the Duque administration have tried to pacify the fears of ex-combatants regarding the implications of this legal uncertainty on their individual situations, but it is hard to gauge the impact this has had on the reincorporation process overall, particularly given the difficulties that the socioeconomic reincorporation process faces.

**Socioeconomic Reincorporation**

The Havana agreement established some basic parameters for the reincorporation of the FARC ex-combatants, including the creation of twenty-three Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización (Transitory County Normalization Zones, ZVTN) and eight camps called Puntos Transitorios de Normalización (Transitory Normalization Points, PTN). These are the areas where FARC combatants were to be concentrated during the cease-fire and where they were to turn in their weapons in a process led by the United Nations. The ZVTN were chosen with several characteristics in mind: they had to be away from urban centers, to protect civilian populations; they needed to be remote, both to guarantee security to FARC members concentrated there and to allow the verifying mechanism to monitor the armed actors to ensure they remained in these areas; and they had to be far from areas with illicit economies, to avoid FARC members being tempted to abandon the DDR process. At the time, the Santos administration stated that the zones should also not coincide with indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities, be close to national borders, or coincide with national parks. Some of those conditions, however, were ignored when defining the specific spaces where the ZVTN would be, as the government had to identify lands that fulfilled all those characteristics, were idle, and had owners who were willing to rent the land for this purpose.

In the end, most the ZVTN were located in regions where the FARC had a historical presence. This was done to both respond to security concerns—historically, thousands of ex-combatants have been murdered in Colombia after they have returned to civilian life, and the FARC understandably feared for their safety—and also because the FARC envisioned their return to these territories as the beginning of the consolidation of their presence in these regions as a political force.

In January 2017, Colombia witnessed thousands of men and women, guarded by the national army, walk through mountains and jungles to reach the twenty-three ZVTN. They arrived in encampments in various stages of construction; some had the minimum comforts required for the combatants to start the next stage of the peace process, while others did not have any infrastructure at all—not even potable water. The process of disarmament and demobilization of the FARC took place in these twenty-three ZVTN between February and June 2017, when all the weapons owned by the FARC were turned in to the UN Mission in Colombia.22

21 Details of this debate can be found here: https://adamisacson.com/big-jep-vote-today-in-colombias-senate/

of reinsertion and reincorporation of the ex-combatants were decided by the Consejo Nacional de Reincorporación (National Council for Reincorporation, CNR), which brought together representatives from the national government—the ARN and the Alta Consejería para el Posconflicto (High Commissioner for the Postconflict)—and two representatives from the FARC. It was decided that each ex-combatant would receive a one-off normalization allowance of two million pesos (US$600), as well as 90 percent of the minimum basic income for up to twenty-four months. In addition, ex-combatants were to receive eight million pesos (US$2,400) to implement a productive project, which could be used individually or as part of a collective. Ex-combatants would also receive social security for up to twenty-four months as long as they were not engaged in remunerated activities. These financial benefits were accompanied by social programs to support the transition into civilian life, including formal education and work training, among others.23

An important point in the DDR process is the decision, taken by the parties of the CNR, that as of August 1, 2017 the ZVTN would become what are now called Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (Territorial Spaces for Capacitation and Reincorporation, ETCR),24 which would extend the presence of the FARC in these zones for at least two more years. This transition was not contemplated in the Havana agreement, but it soon became clear that it would be impossible to fulfill all the tasks related to reincorporation in the stated timeline. The FARC’s Secretariat also pushed for this extension to help them consolidate the model of collective reincorporation they were pushing in the CNR.

In 2017, the National University of Colombia conducted the first census of all FARC members, which showed that 66 percent of FARC members had peasant origins and that the majority wanted to start agricultural-based productive projects. Also of note is that 30 percent of FARC membership identifies as an ethnic minority (indigenous or Afro-Colombian), and the great majority (77 percent) did not own a home they could return to.25

This census helped shape the FARC’s proposals on the methods for economic reincorporation, an issue that quickly became a priority for those involved in implementing the DDR process. There was a clear logic behind this prioritization: the absence of economic engagement among ex-combatants is a growing threat to the peace process overall. As time passes, and thousands of men and women remain without a concrete way to make a living, the chance they will join networks of illicit economies, or join the ranks of those who have abandoned the process and returned to the mountains, grows. The idea of communal economic projects also responds to the FARC’s underlying conception of reincorporation: their push for a collective process was a bet on the ability of their men and women to retain their character as a collectivity.

Ciudadelas de Paz:
The FARC as Local Power

The FARC leadership envisioned their presence in the ETCR, anchored around the ZVTN, as the scenario for two transformations: on the one hand, the transition of their armed territorial control over these regions to a consolidation of their political authority; and, on the other hand, the development of these areas into what during the negotiating process the FARC called ciudadelas de paz—spaces where they would create an alternative development model that would serve as an example to the country of a successful solidarity economy. According to a high-ranking member of the FARC, a successful collective reintegration depends on three conditions: 1) there needs to be physical cohesion of the FARC community: ex-combatants must remain living in physical closeness to maintain the esprit de corps that has characterized the group for decades; 2) this communal living must be connected to a territory that the group can use to develop productive projects and where the ex-combatants can put down roots, which means there needs to be some legal guarantee that the group can remain there long

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term; and 3) there need to be strong links built between the ex-combatants and the local community.

The institutional figure designed by the FARC as the anchor of the collective reintegration is the national cooperative Ecomún (Economías Sociales del Común, the People’s Social Economies). This cooperative is the legal entity authorized by the Constitutional Court to receive, administer, and execute all the resources destined for the FARC’s reincorporation (both through individual and collective paths). Besides Ecomún, there are 105 local cooperatives created in the different ETCR throughout the country, which have more than 3,000 affiliated ex-combatants. Ecomún, then, is the umbrella organization responsible for coordinating the entire cooperative system, while local cooperatives are created in the ETCR to develop specific productive projects.

Two and a half years after the FARC concentrated their troops in the ZVTN, the collective reincorporation process continues to face significant challenges. To date, the CNR has only approved twenty-two collective projects and twenty-nine individual projects. As the UN Secretary-General reports, “The Agency for Reintegration and Normalization has approved 162 individual projects benefiting 1,592 former FARC-EP members. Funding for 9 collective projects and 133 individual projects has been disbursed.”

A serious issue is that these spaces still do not have adequate levels of services, security, and economic activity. According to the Secretary-General’s report to the Security Council in December 2018, six territorial areas for training and reintegration have satisfactory conditions, twelve areas have less than satisfactory conditions or face moderate levels of risk, and six are assessed as inadequate. This, combined with the absence of economic projects, has meant that around 50 percent of the ex-combatants have left these ETCR. There is little official information on what has happened with these men and women; because it is perfectly legal for them to freely move around the country, no organization is tracking their whereabouts. Analysts at organizations like InSight Crime have speculated that around 2,500 ex-combatants have abandoned the peace process altogether (around 15 percent of the total group), while others have moved to encampments in less remote areas, returning at will/need to the ETCR. Others have gone back to their families or migrated to urban areas in search of employment and new lives.

Interviews conducted in the process of writing this paper show that, while both parties acknowledge the serious problems facing the reincorporation process, there is a stark contrast in the explanations of why the process has been so difficult. The FARC, on the one hand, argues that the state has systematically, and purposefully, sabotaged the collective reintegration process because they know doing so will politically weaken the demobilized organization. State representatives, on the other hand, blame the complications of collective reintegration on difficulties getting the FARC to comply with the bureaucratic steps necessary to initiate many of these processes. Furthermore, they argue that the Secretariat has not understood the essentially individual nature of the process of disarmament and return to civilian life.

The disagreement between the FARC and the government on the reincorporation route started during the Santos administration. People familiar with the discussions that took place within the CNR during the previous government refer to very heated fights between the then head of the ARN, Joshua Mitrotti, and the FARC representatives, Pastor Alape and Jairo Quintero. In this venue, Mitrotti argued repeatedly that the ARN’s existing infrastructure and methodology had proven effective in facilitating the reintegration of individual ex-combatants, and stated that the Colombian state did not have a...

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clear path for implementing a collective version of this process. The government also argued that the FARC did not have a comprehensive vision or plan for how collective reintegration would work. While the government eventually accepted that there would have to be a mix of individual and collective reincorporation, observers noted that very few collective projects received approval for disbursement of funds from the Ministry of Post conflict in the first years of implementation. In fact, discontent with the way in which the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund was managed by the government resulted in the ambassadors from Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland sending a letter to President Santos demanding increased transparency and efficiency.30

Given the urgency of creating economic activities for the ex-combatants—both to fill their lives with a productive occupation and to generate income once the government subsidy ends—the attention of many involved in the implementation of DDR has focused on the design of what is known in Colombia as productive projects. These projects would be designed to take place in the ETCR and would involve subgroups of the ex-combatants living in, or near, those spaces. One of the main obstacles for the development of these economic projects, however, is that the characteristics that made the ZVTN ideal for the disarmament process make them particularly inconvenient for the development of economic enterprises. These zones are remote, there are often no roads that connect them to markets, many lack the minimum services needed, and some are not apt for agricultural production.

Another obstacle has been—unsurprisingly—the FARC’s lack of technical capacity to design sustainable projects. According to the government, it is the FARC’s responsibility to present the proposals for these projects, which would then need to be approved for financing. This process, however, is full of difficulties: from banks refusing to open accounts for the FARC’s cooperatives, to the weak commitment of some FARC members to invest their money in the projects. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international community stakeholders, as well as universities and private sector actors, have stepped in to provide the technical assistance so direly needed, but this has not been sufficient to speed the process to where it should be.

Interviews on this particular issue were very telling regarding the difficulties of the process: FARC members accuse the government (and, to some extent, international partners) of being inflexible and not having the will to push through the red tape to give the process the necessary support at a crucial moment when the ex-combatants need to be reassured that they will have a future. Furthermore, the FARC argues that the individual reintegration process is based on an interventionist (what they refer to as asistencialista) model that would make the ex-combatants dependent on the state, while the collective route is a sustainable economic model. While it is ironic that a self-proclaimed Marxist group would be wary of a nanny state, this argument is probably a strategy to guarantee that the FARC’s future does not depend on the political winds of the moment. Staff at the ARN, on the other hand, worry that prioritizing speed over thoroughness in the planning of the economic projects would backfire: if these projects are not sustainable at least in the medium term, it would mean that FARC members might end up wasting the start-up money they receive, leaving them in debt. They argue, reasonably, that the eagerness to get these projects going is clouding the judgment of some ex-combatants regarding the difficulties of building projects that will survive the test of time.

Another necessity for the collective reincorporation process to succeed is access to land. The lands where the ETCR are located are leased until August 15, 2019, which is also the date when the monthly stipends that FARC members receive will end. According to the UN Secretary-General’s 2018 report,

The National Reintegration Council authorized the National Land Agency to acquire six plots for productive projects in July 2018; only one has been purchased in the territorial area for training and reintegration of Colinas, San José del Guaviare. The legal channels, including access to landownership as established in Decree No. 756 of 4 May 2018, have been defined and need to be effectively utilized.31

If the question of access to land for ex-combatants, as well as internally displaced people (IDPs) and other victims, is not promptly discussed in Congress and viable alternatives are not put in place, there will be imminent danger not only for DDR but for the peace process as a whole.

The FARC’s conception of collective reincorporation not only clashes with the established DDR routes created by the Colombian state, but has also shed light on radical differences in the ways the FARC and the government envision the role of individuals in the postconflict stage. Historically, the state has focused on giving ex-combatants the education and opportunities necessary to enter the workforce: many M-19 members, for example, received support to buy taxis. While for the ARN, and many international organizations, these are successful cases of economic reintegration, several of the FARC leaders interviewed for this paper scoffed at that possibility for their rank and file: “you think we went to war to end up with a crappy job, cleaning bathrooms for a living? That is not what we signed a peace agreement for,” one said. Furthermore, functionaries of the ARN complained about the difficulties they had in convincing the FARC that what they call psychosocial accompaniment is essential: their experience with previous ex-combatants has shown that many suffer from PSTD and indicates that returning to regular family and community dynamics is hard for many of them. For the FARC, however, the collective reincorporation model would behave as a buffer in this transition by keeping their collective practices in place.

Beyond the economic reintegration of its ex-combatants, the FARC has invested interests in consolidating local power in those regions where the group has had a historical presence. Thus, the concentration of FARC members in the ETCR provides an important opportunity to build political relationships with these communities without the mediation of weapons. In the words of one FARC leader, “we are not engaging in demobilization; on the contrary, we are aiming to mobilize society with us.”

The relationship between the FARC and the communities where they once had territorial control is a complex issue that deserves a more detailed analysis than we have space for here. According to a member of the FARC Secretariat, “we arrived to the peace process because of the communities”33, which had encouraged them to renounce the armed struggle. He went on to describe an almost symbiotic relationship between the FARC and the local communities, and the need to take advantage of that link to develop a new dynamic that would support collective economic and political processes. Furthermore, he argued that the FARC should use the collective practices that already exist in many rural communities (the minga, convite, and colectivos, for example) to overcome the lack of state planning. Other FARC members interviewed had a more somber description of their relationship with the communities and acknowledged surprise at the dismal electoral results in the elections of March 2018, when they got only around 80,000 votes.34

In any case, the FARC had hoped that the cohesive implementation of the peace process (particularly point one on agrarian reform) would bring development and state presence to regions that desperately needed it, and thereby would also bring the organization political yields. The almost absolute lack

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32 Interview with member of the FARC leadership; Bogotá, May 2019.
33 Interview with a member of the FARC’s Secretariat; Bogotá, May 2019.
35 The peace agreement called for the creation of development programs with a territorial focus known as Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET). The PDET were seen as instrumental for the development of the first point of the peace agreement, that of integrated rural reform. This part of the agreement aimed to encourage a structural transformation of conditions in rural areas, which were seen as a central reason for the armed struggle. The Havana table chose sixteen territories affected by conflict and poverty, where the state had a minimal presence, and developed the idea of PDET as an instrument of both reconciliation and development. The FARC knew that to occupy the political space it hoped to, it needed to build alliances with the local populations of those areas where they had historically been present. The PDET would bring the state to these regions, where it had been historically absent, as a result of the peace process, something that the FARC could use to their political advantage. Space limitations prevent us from going into a detailed analysis of how the participatory process of the PDET took place, and a proper evaluation of this process has yet to be done, but interviews with FARC members and analysts indicate that the rapid effect of the PDET that some were hoping for did not take place, and this has come at a political cost for the FARC in these territories.
of implementation of point one, however, as well as the slow implementation of other mechanisms that could bring state institutions into long-forgotten areas—such as the development programs with a territorial focus—have hindered this process. Furthermore, the opposite has occurred in certain areas: because the ETCR have provided services that are exclusively for the ex-combatants, tensions between the local populations have flourished. In the words of one FARC member, “they see us as new elites that benefit from access to things they have not had before.”

Evidently, one of the most serious consequences of the failure to successfully reincorporate FARC ex-combatants is that they might reengage in violence and reenter violent armed groups. This is a particularly big challenge in Colombia, considering the number of illegal groups still operating in the country, and the transferability of the skills of a guerrilla or paramilitary fighter to existing criminal structures. The Colombian state has faced this same dilemma during previous demobilization processes, and it has caused security problems and has often put into question the effectiveness of the government’s reintegration programs. Studies have shown that ex-combatants are more likely to return to illicit activities if they are former paramilitary members rather than former guerrilla fighters. In addition, the motivations for which they joined the group and the time spent in the group are important factors. In the past, the rate of recidivism into organized illegal armed groups (other guerrilla or organized paramilitary groups) appeared to be somewhat negligible—around 1 percent; today, however, the rate of ex-combatants turning to criminal activity averages around 20 percent.

In the context of current reincorporation efforts, one of the principal challenges is that, at the start of the DDR process, dissident factions of the FARC announced that they would not be part of the process and would continue the armed struggle. These factions threaten to increase recidivism, by making it even easier for FARC ex-combatants to return to the armed struggle. At the start of the process, the government estimated that about 5 to 7 percent of ex-combatants would abandon the process (about 600 men and women). By the end of 2017, however, the number of estimated ex-combatants who had abandoned the reintegration process was about 1,400, more than double what the government had anticipated.

The numbers on desertion, dissidence, and the whereabouts of FARC ex-combatants are contested, and prominent organizations like Fundación Paz y Reconciliación and InSight Crime disagree on the magnitude of the problem. What is important, however, is that research on previous reintegration processes has shown that efforts to facilitate social, economic, and political reincorporation are a pivotal part of a successful return to civilian life, and if the government hopes to minimize recidivism, it will need to push the reincorporation process forward.

Conclusions

This paper argues that an essential obstacle that has hindered the effective reincorporation of FARC ex-combatants has been the insistence of the ex-guerrilla group on adopting a collective approach to the reinsertion of its members into civilian life. This proposal clashes with the established routes historically used by the Colombian state and, together with structural problems, has faced resistance from the government to facilitate this type of reintegration.

36 Interview with member of the FARC leadership; Bogotá, May 2019.
37 “Return to legality or recidivism of excombatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors,” Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, Serie Informes No. 22, June 2014, http://www.reincorporacion.gob.co/es/la-reintegracion/centro-de-documentacion/Documentos/Retorno%20al%20la%20legalidad%20o%20reincidencia%20de%20excombatientes%20en%20Colombia%20En%20ing%C3%A9s.pdf
The FARC leadership’s insistence on the collective approach, however, was not born out of stubbornness. Rather, it was dictated both by the experience of previous DDR processes in Colombia and by a clear vision for what they imagined their role to be in the postconflict environment. The FARC Secretariat was rightly concerned about the possibility that the political party created as a result of the peace process would not carry the same kind of political weight that the armed group had. A reincorporation process that focused on the individual’s road to education, employment, and other conditions that would help them successfully transition to civilian life threatened to disrupt the unity of the FARC collectivity. While this route might ease things for individual ex-combatants, it would likely mean what it had meant for guerrilla movements that demobilized in the past: their political death.

This concern led the FARC to push for the long-term concentration of their combatants in the spaces chosen for the disarmament process, which they thought would guarantee the collectivity’s maintenance of its group identity. Because these spaces are mostly in geographical areas where the FARC historically had a presence, they saw them as the ideal nucleus for the consolidation of local power, while they simultaneously secured a national presence through the seats in Congress the peace agreement assigned them. The politics of reincorporation they envisioned were based on strong relationships with the receiving communities and also, importantly, a return as a group to fill a political space.

As we have described in this paper, the political and socioeconomic reincorporation of the FARC were intended to be closely interconnected. If the ETCR became spaces where the ex-combatants could successfully develop communal projects and they were able to build the type of communities they envisioned, this would not only benefit the FARC members; they would also become an example for other sectors of the population. This success would allow the FARC to consolidate power at the local level, in regions where they once had a military presence, and become a voice for those sectors. If this were to happen simultaneously with the presence of the FARC in Congress, it would allow them to develop a model that supported both a socioeconomic project that would give ex-combatants meaningful lives, and a political project that would make the FARC a key actor at both the local and the national levels.

We have described in detail, however, the multiple and multilayered obstacles that this collective reincorporation model has faced, as well as the mutual accusations between the government and the FARC about their respective lack of will to cooperate in order to make this process feasible. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. With the DDR process moving at an excruciatingly slow pace, many in the FARC leadership appear to have abandoned this idea of collective return and are instead focusing on the more traditional political strategy of establishing a presence in major cities. Given the climate of the Duque administration, which is sending strong signals of wanting to undo important parts of the peace process, much of the FARC Secretariat is focused on building coalitions with other parties that are invested in defending the peace process.

Is this, then, the end for the experiment of collective DDR in Colombia? It seems too soon to assert that definitively, but unless some significant action is taken, it is unlikely that the original conception of the FARC’s reincorporation will materialize. The threat of recidivism should be sufficient incentive for Colombia to make an effort to ensure the success of this DDR process. While evaluations of the implementation of the peace process have noted that, compared with other international experiences, the levels of implementation of the Colombian peace agreement are not extraordinarily low, experts seem to agree that “the transformational potential of the agreement” has evaporated. The absolute lack of movement on certain points of the agreement—plus serious reverses, such as the implementation of drug policies that openly contradict the accord, as well as the assassination of both ex-combatants and social leaders—show that a holistic implementation of the ambitious agenda set in Havana is unlikely. However, there are 7,000 FARC ex-combatants, who trusted that this agreement would deliver better lives to them, their families, and their communities, who still depend on the success of the reincorporation process. Therefore, both FARC leadership and the Colombian state should prioritize the reincorporation of the rank and file, even if the political aspects of reincorporation are still being contested.
References


