

Disengagement as a Social Network

Enterprise

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Modern wars may be conceptualised as "network enterprises" in that they occur within complex structures of local and regional governance (Duffield, 2002). Within the context of these wars, networks play a fundamental role in the dynamics behind entering and leaving non-state armed groups (NSAGs). They can stimulate the recruitment of new combatants into NSAGs since kinship and friendship networks serve as a decisive "pull factor" into the group (Oppenheim et al. 2015). The term "network enterprise" is not only suitable to describe modern armed conflict mobilisation patterns but also the disengagement pathways of formerly armed actors (FAAs). Research conducted by the Trust after Betrayal project has found that FAAs experience disengagement as a relational process shaped by the different nodes in the respective individual's network and actors at multiple levels of society. This Research Brief thus presents a framework for thinking about disengagement as a social network enterprise in order to better support holistic, context-sensitive analyses of FAA trajectories.

This enterprise materialises as a confluence of interests and influences by family, clan, and community members, fellow FAAs and still-active NSAG members, and government, security, development, humanitarian, and (I)NGO officials and professionals. The number of actors involved in this social network and the strength of their leverage within it varies across conflict settings and, more importantly, individual cases. Therefore, the nature of each disengagement process represents a relational dialogue between FAA interests and dispositions and the socioeconomic and political dynamics within which they find themselves. One point of particular contention is the extent to which policy and programme support should dissolve FAA networks with still-active NSAG members and other FAAs. As a matter of fact, there are very real circumstances under which such network maintenance can contribute to the re-emergence of violence. Trust after Betrayal has found, however, that positive experiences with both disengagement and its sequelae can contribute to virtuous cycles of recruitment out of NSAGs for those friends and family members who remain.

Thinking of disengagement as a social network enterprise **highlights the importance of relationships to informing individual decisions to leave an NSAG and the subsequent physical, social, and institutional logistics required to support those decisions.** Namely, these decisions are not made in a vacuum, nor is it always possible to enact them alone. Across a variety of contexts, Trust after Betrayal researchers have found that already disengaged family members and friends have been cited as first points of contact, influential sources of counsel, and facilitators for the physical journey from where the

individual lives with the NSAG to the community in which they will commence their reintegration processes.

In some contexts, **an FAA's social network may be the original source of information on the very existence of state- and other organisationally and institutionally sponsored programs for these individuals. Social networks can also provide the necessary support for those who wish to disengage outside formal institutional programs.**

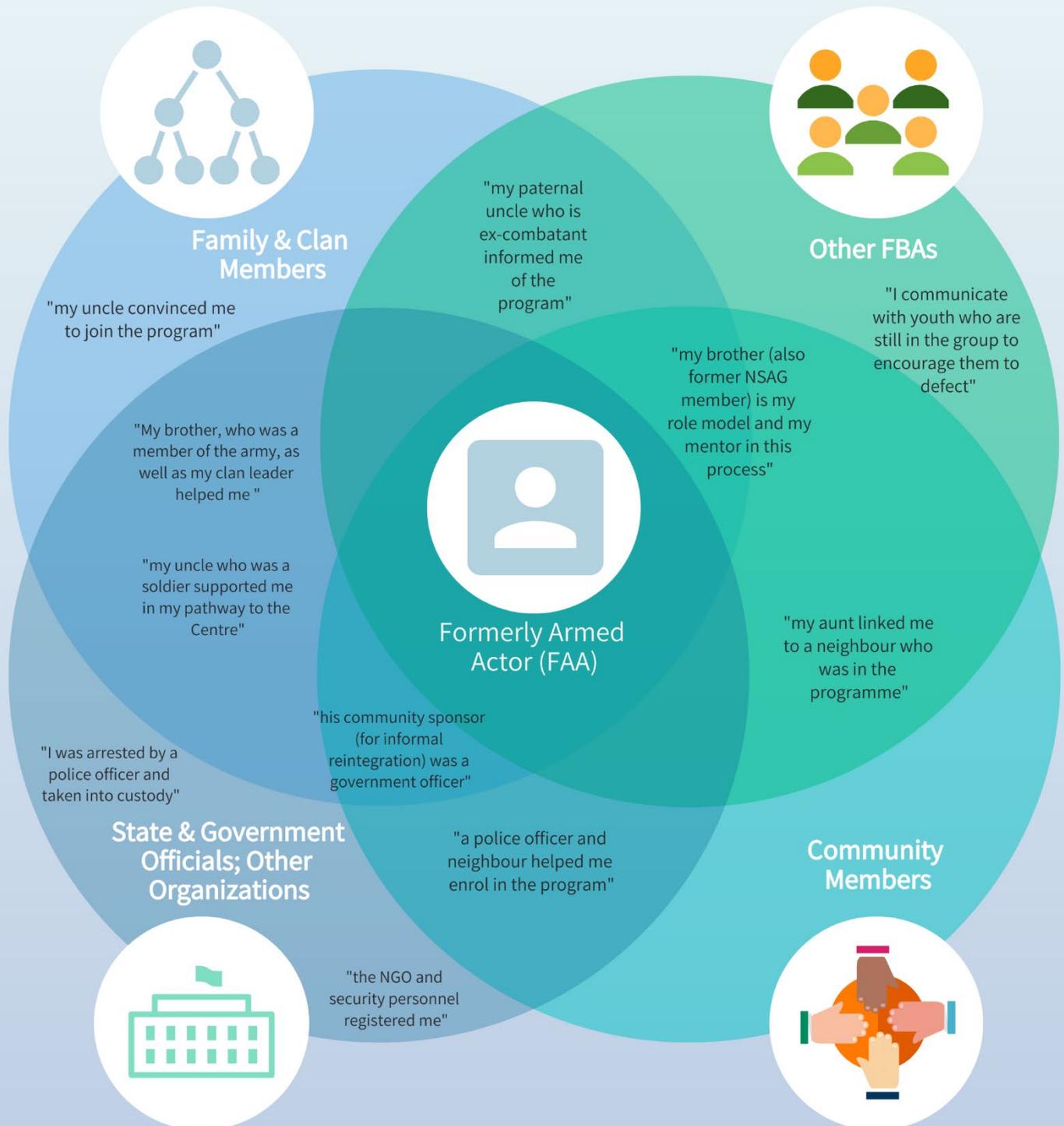
The roles that different individuals and actors play in the social network enterprise of disengagement can be multiple, overlapping, and even sometimes inconsistent. Role manifestations will depend to a great degree on local norms, values, and behavioural expectations for FAAs, as well as the qualitative nature of the relationships that connect networked individuals. For example, security personnel have a fundamentally different role within the social network enterprise than family members. However, many actors do occupy multiple roles. Thus, social network roles are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive. Family members can work for the security forces, and community leaders can also be FAAs, for example. This dynamic overlap of identity and function is an integral characteristic of it.

These qualities all point to **the need for a highly contextualised analysis of each FAA context - i.e., there are many different ways in which social networks ought to be leveraged globally. It is imperative to first understand how these networks function.** Additionally, analysing disengagement as a social network enterprise supports a more holistic approach that better represents the **episodic, only partially predictable, and non-linear process that is the lived experience of FAAs.** There exist many pathways - some more winding than others - between NSAG participation and life in a receiving community. Conventional assumptions underlying disengagement program and policy design have tended to eschew any meaningful consideration of the broad swathe of implicated actors.

Understanding the entrepreneurial power of social networks for FAAs will support better programme and policy design. Beginning contextual analysis with an assessment through this lens will support a more nuanced understanding of the multitude of crucial roles that individuals and social groups play at different levels of analysis. Furthermore, we recommend that institutional actors take seriously the relationships that play a part in these processes and are cautious with dismissing them as irrelevant to the programme design.

The next page offers several examples of how FAAs embed within multiple overlapping network relations, each playing an essential role in his or her disengagement journey.

Disengagement as a Social Network Enterprise



Source: Author analysis of original Interview Data,

References

Duffield, Mark (2002): War as a Network Enterprise: The New Security Terrain and its Implications. In *Cultural Values* 6 (1-2), pp. 153–165.

Oppenheim, Ben; Steele, Abbey; Vargas, Juan F.; Weintraub, Michael (2015): True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors. In *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59 (5), pp. 794–823.