Research Brief:
Disengagement as a Social Network Enterprise

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Modern wars may be productively conceptualised as "network enterprises" in that they occur within complex structures of local and regional governance. 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 can serve as a powerful "pull factor" into the group. The term is not only suitable to describe modern armed conflict mobilisation patterns, but also the defection pathways of formerly armed actors (FAAs). Research conducted by the Trust After Betrayal project has found that FAAs experience defection as a relational process shaped by the different nodes in the individual defector's network and actors at multiple levels of society. This Research Brief thus presents a framework for **thinking about disengagement and defection as a social network enterprise** in order to better support holistic analysis of FAA trajectories in context.

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 defection 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 work to dissolve FAA networks with still-active NSAG members and other FAAs. Without denying the fact that 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 defection and its sequelae can contribute to virtuous cycles of recruitment out of NSAGs for those friends and family members who remain.

Thinking of disengagement and defection as a social network enterprise highlights **the importance of relationships to informing individual decisions to defect and the subsequent physical, social, and institutional logistics required to support those decisions** since such 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 defected 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 programmes for these individuals. Social networks can also provide the necessary support for those who wish to defect outside of formal institutional programs.
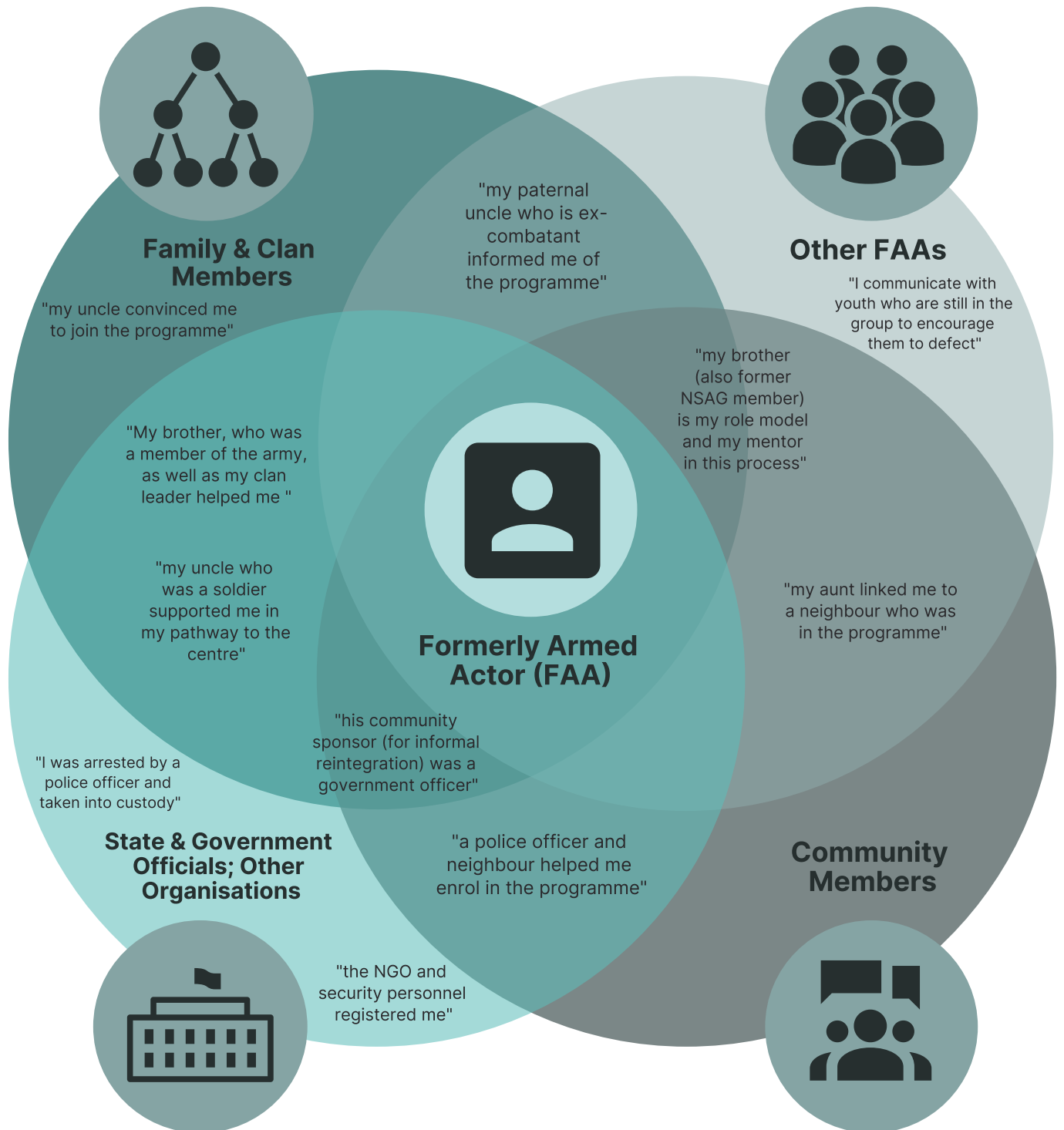
The roles that different individuals and actors play in the social network enterprise of disengagement and defection can be multiple, overlapping, and sometimes inconsistent. Role manifestations will depend to a great degree on local norms, values, and behavioural expectations for FAAs, as well as the 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 ways in which social networks ought to be leveraged globally. It is imperative to first understand how these networks function. Additionally, analysing disengagement and defection as a social network enterprise supports a more holistic analysis that better represents the episodic, only partially predictable, and non-linear process that is the lived experience of FAAs. Many pathways exist – some more winding than others – between NSAG participation and life in a receiving community. Conventional assumptions underlying disengagement and defection program and policy design have tended to eschew meaningful consideration and even engagement with the wide swathe of implicated actors.

Understanding the entrepreneurial power of social networks for FAAs will support better program and policy design. Beginning contextual analysis with an assessment through this lens will facilitate 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 exercise care dismissing them as irrelevant to program design.

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

Disengagement and Defection as a **Social Network Enterprise**

Family & Clan Members

"my uncle convinced me to join the programme"

"my paternal uncle who is ex-combatant informed me of the programme"

Other FAAs

"I communicate with youth who are still in the group to encourage them to defect"

"My brother, who was a member of the army, as well as my clan leader helped me "

"my brother (also former NSAG member) is my role model and my mentor in this process"

"my uncle who was a soldier supported me in my pathway to the centre"

Formerly Armed Actor (FAA)

"my aunt linked me to a neighbour who was in the programme"

"I was arrested by a police officer and taken into custody"

"his community sponsor (for informal reintegration) was a government officer"

State & Government Officials; Other Organisations

"a police officer and neighbour helped me enrol in the programme"

Community Members

"the NGO and security personnel registered me"

Source: Author analysis of original interview data