

Research Brief: The Strengths-Based Approach to Formerly Armed Actor (Re)Integration

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Policies and programmes intended to facilitate the (re)integration of formerly armed actors (FAAs)¹ into their receiving communities often start with the premise that it is necessary to undo the identities that they have developed within armed groups. This presumption is problematic for at least two reasons: first, it idealises a hypothetical conflict-independent civilian identity to which FAAs return while ignoring the fact that their pasts inform their post-armed group experience – not least because violence often persists in their environments. (For example, some communities may value FAA militarised capabilities when it comes time to protect the community from external threats.) Second, it oversimplifies the range of experiences and identities that FAAs have developed during their time in the armed group, only some of which may prove counterproductive to their lives following group exit.

Given that **(re)integration policies and programmes cannot simply unmake and refabricate FAAs as “new” citizens**, it becomes imperative that the methods used instead incorporate approaches to address the complexities and continuities of life following participation in armed groups. Towards this end, this month’s Research Brief argues for a **strength-based approach to (re)integration** that views FAAs’ prior involvements in armed groups as **potential sources of support and expertise instead of immediately pathologising or conceptually discounting them**.

The idea of a strengths-based approach comes from the field of resiliency theory. It focuses on strengths rather than deficits, healthy development despite risk exposure, and the assets and resources that might be leveraged to support such development rather than risk factors.

The challenges FAAs face in their transitions are legion and include gaps in education and labour, heightened potential for engaging in anti-social behaviour, shocks to gender-specific role expectations in society, and a host of different forms and sources of trauma, among many others. However, habits, routines, and in-group social connections originating from their time in the armed group can serve as a vital source of stability and psychological comfort in the (re)integration process. Despite the obvious complications they pose for (re)integration, continuities from the past can also be productively converted into opportunities of the present. In light of this, a strengths-based approach seeks to pragmatically use and develop the positive by-products

emerging from past experiences to advance the broader goal of sustainable (re)integration.

Strengths that FAAs may accumulate in armed groups lie, for instance, **in skills and knowledge like applied technical/manual expertise, organisation, management or leadership capabilities**: e.g., applying knowledge and practices learned as a drug dealer to start a successful tortilla-making business. Of course, not every transfer of armed group-built capacities is compatible with the overarching goal of (re)integration and peacebuilding: e.g., an FAA using violence against rent defaulters to run a real estate business. While the former individual established a sustainable economic pathway for himself, the latter was subject to retaliatory attacks on his property and suspicion by the community.

Besides skills and knowledge, **the socialisation within armed groups also represents an overlooked (re)integration asset**. Often conceptualised as inherently destructive and anti-social, these relationships can be instead a source of cooperation, mutual trust, recognition, and participation exceeding what would have otherwise been possible. The potentials of this are most clearly evidenced among female FAAs in some settings. Women in armed group may carry out critical military duties that defy their traditional reduction to mere victims and passive bystanders during conflicts. This participation could signify their only pathway into challenging the laws and social norms that explicitly prevent their engagement in certain societal and professional spheres. The agency manifested in women’s temporarily elevated status and leverage inside armed groups may translate, if properly addressed, into greater gender empowerment in the face of patriarchal structures in (re)integration contexts.

In summary, (re)integration policy and programme designers will benefit from recognising that conventional assumptions about an artificial, “clean” civilian identity that must be reimposed do not match the experiences, perceptions and behaviours of most FAAs. Pathologising the ramifications of armed group membership outright denies the nuances in significance that this chapter in their lives bear. After all, **(re)integration is a learning process that cannot erase the past and, in fact, only exists in relation to it**.

The strength-based approach to (re)integration presented here recognises the inevitable continuities of experience and facilitates identification of the **skills, assets, and resources** that may be leveraged in fruitful ways, as visualised by the following graphic. Based on this, policymakers, programme designers, and participants alike will be better equipped to use the full potential of past experiences to positively impact FAAs as members of receiving families and communities.

¹ Formerly Armed Actors (FAAs) include those individuals who engaged in the production of violence through the exercise of membership to a group of

some kind – e.g., former members of militias, gangs, criminal organisations, guerrillas, insurgents, and state militaries, among others.

The Strengths-Based Approach to FAA (Re)Integration

This graphic guides a strengths-based assessment of FAAs-in-context, which **complements existing risk assessments** in the design phase of (re)integration programmes and policies. More than just "risk factors", FAAs may also embody **psychosocial assets and practical skills** from the armed group that external actors designing (re)integration interventions should **draw upon and develop**. Additionally, implementation dynamics occur **in dialogue with family, community, state and (civil) society**, which share specific norms and values that impact attitudes towards (re)integration. Understanding these influences and the way in which they can both promote and obstruct interventions is equally vital for successful programme and policy design.

