

## Decentralised and Community-Driven Formerly Armed Actor Reintegration

Lina María Arango and Jonathan Röders

Decentralising the planning and implementation of reintegration programs for formerly armed actors (FAAs) at the local and community levels is widely regarded as a crucial factor for sustainability and success in international policy and practice. It offers the chance to develop more accountable, context-specific, conflict-sensitive and needs-aligned programmes while also demonstrating resilience against risk factors like weak central governance and local environmental threats. Unlike disarmament and demobilisation, [reintegration cannot be centrally enforced](#) but happens from the bottom up in conflict-affected regions and municipalities. This Research Brief provides comparative insights into the benefits and risks associated with decentralised and community-driven reintegration programmes and includes a case study on the model implemented in Colombia.

Existing literature emphasises the importance of [centrally coordinating multi-sector programmes](#), ideally through a single agency, while implementing them in a decentralized manner. This ensures that efforts are streamlined, and funds are allocated more efficiently. It also improves governance and service delivery by promoting responsive, accountable, and trusted leadership among governmental and non-governmental organisations at the local level. This approach is grounded in the belief that local officials, due to their [proximity to and understanding of local conditions](#), are best suited to exercise certain fiscal and administrative powers underlying FAA reintegration programmes and other post-conflict development policies. Furthermore, decentralisation efforts are linked to [powerful opportunities for organisational effectiveness](#) that enhance the development of underprivileged, remote, and underserved areas — an objective often consciously aligned with the goals of reintegration policies. Additionally, decentralisation can lead to [more agile programming responses](#) to challenges such as social tensions or environmental shocks. It may also increase budget flexibility and reduce dependence on centralised decision-making and bureaucracies, being crucial in situations where statehood is unstable, or capacity is limited.

Decentralisation extends beyond organizational devolution to [local ownership over reintegration programming](#): arguably, the target populations of interventions, i.e. FAAs and their communities, are most knowledgeable to mobilise the grassroots practices and resources necessary to sustainably solve local reintegration and peacebuilding challenges. They are [ideally positioned to articulate](#) what successful reintegration trajectories require and participate in co-creating delivery mechanisms. Local leadership is also needed to facilitate collective action, sometimes based on traditional mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms, that bridges FAA-community divides and restores social cohesion. A decentralized approach thus foregrounds community-driven agency through [participatory programme planning](#) that leverages local customs and social capital, potentially rendering interventions more contextually compatible, trusted and accepted.

Ukraine offers an example of how [decentralisation reforms by the state](#) have been implemented in the spirit of reducing territorial inequalities and a community-oriented focus, ultimately benefitting its veterans reintegration agenda. The reforms that granted increased autonomy to provinces, particularly municipalities, have reportedly improved their administrative, human resource, and fiscal capabilities, as well as the quality of municipal services and [public trust in local authorities](#). In this context, Ukrainian civil society organisations that support veterans' reintegration through legal aid, educational opportunities, employment and physical and psychological rehabilitation, among other services, have benefited from stronger work relationships and coordination with local governments, which they find to be much [more responsive and easier to engage with](#) than central authorities. This decentralized, localised arrangement [enhances the social integration of veterans](#) and their involvement in decision-making processes, for example, by

partnering with local community organisations and participating in roundtable discussions with local governments.

Sierra Leone's [post-conflict decentralisation](#) has similarly enhanced governance efficiency, accountability, and civic participation, thereby boosting social capital, fostering social inclusion, and alleviating grievances among FAAs and civilians that could have fuelled renewed conflict. The ministries responsible for the process trained councillors and communities on addressing governance and development challenges in reconciliation settings. Local councils thus helped reduce animosity towards former combatants by organising community cohesion sessions and enforcing by-laws for peaceful coexistence. Additionally, decentralisation created leadership opportunities for grassroots figures, boosting volunteerism and commitment to national and community improvement. Comparable community-driven expansions of local democratic spaces under decentralisation conducive to reconciliation and FAA reintegration have been observed during the peace transitions in Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland.

The Northern Irish case demonstrates how successful decentralised reintegration is commonly a [combination of top-down and bottom-up peacebuilding strategies](#). The top-down approaches, stemming from the Good Friday Agreement, aimed to address the structural causes of conflict through major political and institutional reforms. In contrast, the bottom-up strategies were implemented through grassroots, community-based initiatives across societal sectors, promoting conflict transformation at the local level.

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) [efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa](#) exemplify how decentral reintegration programming can be integrated with broader territorial development goals, reflecting a mutual interest between FAAs and civilians. In the Republic of Congo, UNDP focused on rebuilding community infrastructure with high labour participation from FAAs, including tasks like bridge and road reconstruction. In Liberia, UNDP consolidated peace and local governance by creating 'District Development Committees', which helped communities identify needs and implement their own recovery projects. In the Central African Republic, the UNDP supported reintegration by [issuing vouchers to FAAs](#), which were exchanged for development funding upon redemption, linking community financial support to the resettlement of former combatants.

While decentralisation has proven to be a key pillar of FAA reintegration and post-conflict governance in many contexts, the [empirical evidence](#) on its overall impacts remains mixed. Most evaluations of community-driven reintegration are based on qualitative case studies heavily skewed towards validation. [\(Quasi-\)experimental evaluations](#) from various countries consistently demonstrate positive impacts on service delivery, yet they show weaker evidence of short-term socioeconomic improvements and highly varied, context-specific outcomes on violence reduction, civic participation, and long-term governance enhancements. More notably, experiences with administrative devolution in post-conflict societies have highlighted significant risks, including [increased corruption, nepotism, and elite capture](#) within local institutions, sometimes involving former armed group structures. It may also [contribute to heightened conflict risk](#), for instance, when new administrative power shifts away from traditional institutions or in areas with densely concentrated ethnic groups, potentially giving rise to separatist movements. Additionally, decentralization may underfund subnational entities, [blur the lines of government responsibility](#) and feature [coordination deficiencies](#) among across government levels, particularly during intraregional crises.

The bottom line is that a decentralized approach is not a quick fix for peacebuilding and FAA reintegration; rather, its benefits and risks are subject to a multitude of conditions on the ground. Related policies and reforms necessitate [nuanced planning](#) that includes comprehensive [context and risk assessments](#), coupled with conflict-sensitive and transparency-driven implementation by states, non-governmental reintegration stakeholders and international donor streams. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that decentralization alone does not guarantee local ownership, participatory processes, or the existence of accountability mechanisms — features [deemed indispensable](#) for the sustainable FAA reintegration and community development it aims to achieve.

# Case Study: FAA Reintegration and Territorial Development in Colombia

Around two-thirds of Colombia's provinces, encompassing 80% of its total land area, consist of mainly remote rural regions, commonly referred to as the "territories". In these zones, major land inequality, limited statehood and democratic governance, and illicit rent extraction have acted as continuous drivers of Colombia's internal armed conflict. Therefore an FAA reintegration policy with a territorial inclusion and development focus has been recognised as vital for lasting peace and stability. Implementing the 2016 Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and future accords that may result from the current negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissident factions, and designated illegal armed groups under President Petro's "Total Peace" agenda require sharing fundamental responsibilities with local authorities.

In the existing policy framework, these authorities, with their budgetary and planning autonomy, are tasked with providing essential public services to enhance the quality of life for FAAs and facilitate their community integration. The shift towards a decentralised reintegration policy that specifically targets the territories began in 2006 with the establishment of the High Council for Reintegration and its 40 territorial offices, referred to as Service Centers. From 2006 to 2011, the Council worked to enshrine reintegration as a permanent state policy, focusing on the stability of services such as socio-economic support, education, healthcare, employability, and community engagement. The strategies targeted not only ex-combatants but also their families and communities, acknowledging that sustainable reintegration requires addressing the broader social environment. In 2011, the High Council transitioned to the Colombian Reintegration Agency (ACR), emphasising enhanced coordination with territorial entities.

**2003**

Creation of the centralised Program for Reintegration into Civilian Life (PRVC) by the Ministry of Interior and Justice.

**2007**

The community reintegration model begins, focusing on shared responsibility with civil society and local authorities. Families and communities are integrated into local care and reconciliation processes.

**2011**

Creation of the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR): strengthened territorial attention through coordinated local offices called "territorial groups" and service points.

**2017**

Creation of the Agency for Normalisation and Reincorporation (ARN). Start of the reintegration of the signatories of the FARC Peace Agreement.

**2020 and 2024**

ARN influences municipal and departmental development plans for the periods 2020-2023 and 2024-2027.

**2006**

Creation of the High Council for Reintegration after the completion of AUC paramilitary demobilization.

**2008**

Issuance of the National Policy for Social and Economic Reintegration (CONPES 3554) with explicit reference to community-based development and cooperation with local governments; National Care Network with 40 territorial service centres is established.

**2012**

ACR influences municipal and departmental development plans 2012 - 2015.

**2018**

Creation of the Technical Unit for Reincorporation (UTR) and CONPES 3931, providing strategic guidelines and roles for local authorities that can be used by local governments for their development plans.

Source:  
[reincorporacion.gov.co](http://reincorporacion.gov.co)

Based on the points established in the peace agreement with the FARC, which included key points on rural reform and inclusion, the ACR was converted into the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation (ARN) whose mission includes the "transformation and territorial development through community planning and strengthening of social fabric." The effective implementation of ARN policies, despite its national and centralized operation, relies on the pivotal role of local and regional governments in consolidating social policies within their jurisdictions to ensure sustainability. The ARN inserts its functions within the broader framework of decentralised governance efforts: For instance, it strengthens the 16 Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDET) covering 170 municipalities, which are home to 57% of Colombia's rural poor, by leveraging the contributions of individuals transitioning to civilian life in the construction of communal livelihoods and infrastructure.

Furthermore, the ARN closely collaborates with local governments in implementing quadrennial territorial development plans across 1103 municipalities, established since 1994. These plans serve as roadmaps for municipal and regional governance, delineating projects, budget allocations, and aligning local aspirations with national objectives. In this context, the ARN advocates for the inclusion of ex-combatants, having developed a "guide for the application of peace guidelines in the formulation of territorial development plans", detailing resource sources, entities, and measures corresponding to the 2016 Peace Agreement and the National Development Plan. The integration and involvement of FAA populations in these initiatives presents an opportunity to support their life projects, offer essential services like psychological counseling and specialised vocational training, and foster community cohesion. Ultimately, this helps mitigate the risk of renewed recruitment by armed groups, serving as a clear pathway to enhance territorial security. The territorial approach of the reintegration policy continues to challenge Colombia's government, partly due to resistance from some local leaders to work with the ex-combatant population among them, and also because of issues like corruption, recidivism, and escalating regional violence that undermine trust in the reintegration and inclusive governance process on both sides of the FAA-civilian divide.