

Research Brief: Challenging the “Re” in FAA Reintegration

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The theoretical and empirical work of “Trust after Betrayal” sits squarely in the field of ex-combatant reintegration studies. However, **experiences following membership in armed groups can lack a sense of familiarity, reversion, or return to something that once was.** It is therefore worth analysing Formerly Armed Actors (FAA) experiences in the light of Heraclitus’ assertion that “no man ever steps in the same river twice. For it’s not the same river, and he’s not the same man.” For this reason, “Trust after Betrayal” frames these chapters in FAA lives as *integration*. Various qualities of FAA lives trouble the “re” presumption in existing reintegration literature:

1. **Somewhere different.** In many instances, FAAs cannot return to their physical place of origin. This may occur because of outright destruction in war, or as a result of threats to their person or those they hold dear should they be found. One example is the story of a female former guerrilla fighter who escaped the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP, by its Spanish acronym). In the two days between her disappearance from the mountain and her arrival at her old home, the FARC had found and killed her husband and left pieces of him in a trash bag on her doorstep as a warning. Retaliations such as this drove many pre-2016 FARC FAAs to go to great lengths to find a place far from friends and family to settle after defecting. The push to physically relocate can come from myriad other sources: mothers reject their returning sons for killing their own, communities reject former combatants of both genders based on presumed treatments (e.g., sexual violence) and activities (e.g., killing) that occurred while within the armed group, and original group promises of retaliation against the FAA and his or her family, among others.

2. **Someone different.** Even when an FAA can return to the physical home they had left to enter the armed group, they, their families and their neighbours may have changed substantively in the intervening years – marked by both time and experiences with organised violence on all sides. For example, a civilian woman who reunited with her sister for the first time after 13 years following the Peace Accord in Colombia reflected about the anticipated challenges ahead. “She doesn’t even know how to use a cell phone,” the woman said of her long-lost sibling, “or walk right like a woman” (referring to the female FAA’s assertive stride, cultivated through years of marching among her fellow guerrilla fighters). Members of receiving communities that may bear substantive political, war-related, and behavioural grievances against FAAs may also – intentionally or otherwise – enact altered behaviours vis-à-vis these individuals that prevent substantive incorporation into everyday community life.

3. **Something that never really was.** This third basis for arguing for a shift to the terminology of integration builds upon two points: first, FAAs may return to communities to which they were never fully “integrated” to begin with – thus, rendering the “re” prefix moot. For example, ISIS explicitly targets vulnerable population groups in their international recruitment efforts, which complicates any efforts to reintegrate these individuals back into dignified lives and livelihoods without recidivism. And second, children born in rebel captivity – such as those within the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda around the turn of the century – have never known a life outside the armed group to which they might “return”.

The following policy and programme initiatives build on these arguments:

1. To improve the reintegration of former combatants into receiving communities, it is necessary to **shift from the term “reintegration” to “integration”**. This alteration is more than semantic; it requires considering the dynamic nature of the context, the ever-unfolding nature of human experience, and the temporalities of FAA integration from the earliest stages of program and policy design.

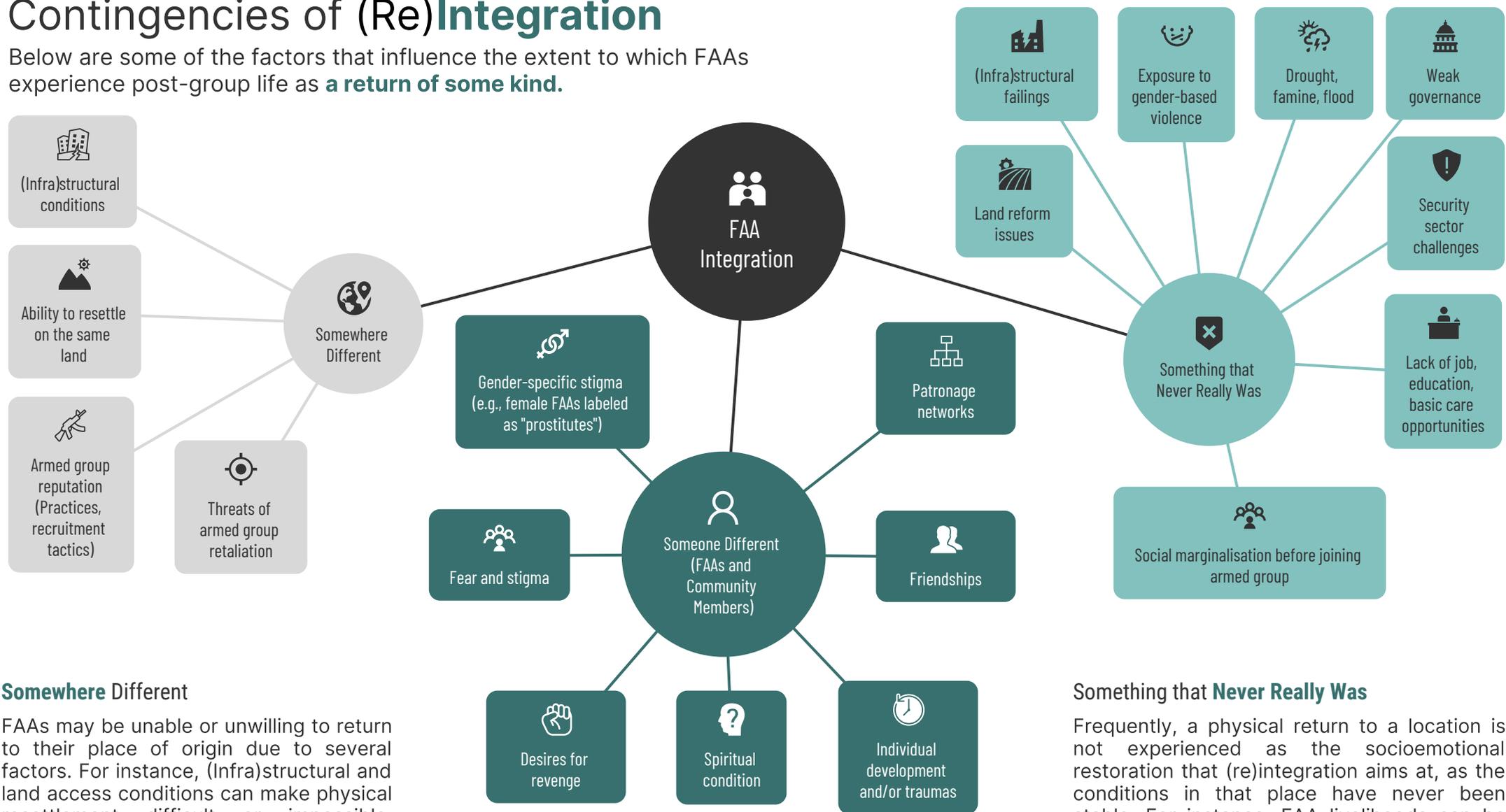
2. **Design whole-of-society approaches to FAA integration that name social cohesion as the objective.** FAAs integrate into families, communities, and societies, and all have been indelibly marked by the effects of conflict and other forms of organised violence. Fear, mistrust, and suspicion can often operate as undercurrents in everyday interactions. The challenges are transversal, and so too must be the solutions. Focusing on social cohesion (rather than FAA integration in a vacuum) convenes potentially antagonistic actor groups towards a shared benefit. This does not mean that all groups need, or even ought to “just get along.” It simply recognises the long-standing phenomenon of solutions reinforcing the problem and creates room for this recognition in rethinking alternative models. This approach requires substantive attention to work and project design, as coordinating across sectors and institutions poses unique challenges for leaders.

3. **Use a participatory approach to program and policy design, implementation, oversight and assessment.** The approach should engage FAAs and their receiving families and communities in identifying and prioritising their needs and objectives, as well as their understandings of how the world will be different if they are successful in their work. From there, cross-sector institutions can support with financial, political, and technical capital to leverage integration efforts as opportunities for community building, stabilisation, and trust-building among potentially antagonistic actors.

4. **Provide psychosocial support to all conflict-affected individuals.** The river will never be the same, nor will the (wo)man. However, the fact that all have been touched and altered by exposure to violence does not negate the need for supports moving forward. Dedicated attention to issues such as readiness for reconciliation, possibilities for forgiveness, trauma management, and other forms of healing are necessary to support the above recommended efforts to improve social cohesion.

Contingencies of (Re)Integration

Below are some of the factors that influence the extent to which FAAs experience post-group life as **a return of some kind**.



Somewhere Different

FAAs may be unable or unwilling to return to their place of origin due to several factors. For instance, (Infra)structural and land access conditions can make physical resettlement difficult or impossible. Another factor is the prospect of a safe and welcoming community reception: If, in a given location, FAAs have to fear retaliation attacks by their former armed group or social rejection because of its negative/feared reputation, returning is not a viable option.

Someone Different

Even if a physical return is possible, FAAs and their community members might no longer be the same people. The course of time and its events, especially in conflict or armed group settings, invokes major personal developments and spiritual changes. Moreover, fragile contexts may breed fear, stigma and desires for revenge that affect the behaviours of community members and FAAs alike. Lastly, these settings can foster new friendships and patronage networks accompanying them in their social and economic lives.

Something that Never Really Was

Frequently, a physical return to a location is not experienced as the socioemotional restoration that (re)integration aims at, as the conditions in that place have never been stable. For instance, FAA livelihoods can be impacted by weak governance, a lack of opportunities and natural disasters and/or their safety threatened by domestic/gender-based violence and a challenged security sector. Moreover, this return may imply reentering an environment of social marginalisation that preceded armed group membership. In some cases, these are the contexts that led an FAA to join an armed group in the first place.