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Home Is Where the Heart Is: Identity, Return and the Toleka Bicycle Taxi Union in Congo's Equateur

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Since the end of the 2006 post-war transition, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the international community have struggled to design, finance and implement a host of national and regional disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. The weak capacity of implementing institutions, widespread corruption, funding gaps, Western-driven processes and a misdiagnosis of local needs have all been raised as core reasons behind failures. Little is known about how processes of ex-combatant return shape and reshape public authority, where former combatants return to, how they negotiate and experience 'return' and how viable ways of life are successfully constituted post return. While many ex-combatants in the DRC continue to be re-recruited into militia groups, one group that has reintegrated successfully is the Toleka—a several-thousand-strong group of ex-combatants who returned (or remained) in the provincial capital of Mbandaka (Equateur province). The Toleka formed a bicycle-taxi organization and unionized its membership, providing protections and collective-bargaining authority to the group, while providing a public good. It also helped to reshape identities, produce a sense of civilian solidarity and provide a bridging function from life in the military. This article looks at how this organization was formed, how the former fighters identified and capitalized on a local need and the conditions that allowed them to successfully unionize and protect their rights as they re-entered civilian life. Based on extensive fieldwork and interviews, this article seeks to understand a case of 'successful' return in a region with few such successes.

Keywords: DDR, return, demobilization, reintegration, DRC, Democratic Republic of the Congo, taxi union, ex-combatant

Ces ex-combattants, ce sont des éternels insatisfaits (''These ex-combatants, they are the eternally unsatisfied'', authors' interview with the president of Les Aiglons, an implementing non-governmental organization (NGO) of DDR programmes in the DRC, Gemena, February 2015).

Introduction

Every day in towns outside of the megacity of Kinshasa, thousands of young men on colourful bicycles can be seen riding around town, transporting passengers, livestock and burlap sacks of foodstuffs (sometimes all three at the same time) strapped on the back of their bicycles. Life in the run-down city of Mbandaka, the provincial capital of Congo's north-western province of Equateur, is driven, literally, by these bicycle taxis. The *Toleka* (or the *Tolekistes*), as they are known, are, hands down, some of the hardest-working people in town. Yesterday, they were the rank and file of various armed groups. Today, they are the engine that runs the city.

The greater Equateur province[1] gave us President Mobutu, Jean-Pierre Bemba and many of the country's political elite during the Mobutu years. During the second Congo war (1998–2003), the province was divided between the Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo (MLC) rebel group in the north and Kabila's government forces, which occupied Mbandaka, in the south. What the city lacks in roads and other public-transport infrastructure it makes up for in numbers of ex-combatants. Estimated in the thousands, ex-combatants in Mbandaka are drawn from the former and current national armies: Mobutu's Forces Armées Zaïroises (FAZ), Laurent Desire Kabila's Forces Armées du Congo (FAC), Joseph Kabila's Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC), Jean-Pierre Bemba's former MLC rebel group and various other smaller militia groups from the first and second Congo wars. While many were raised or mobilized in Equateur, many were not. The one thing that unites many of them is a collective rejection of an ex-combatant identity, a return to civilian life in Mbandaka and membership now in another group—a bicycle transportation syndicate called the Toleka Bicycle Taxi Union. Toleka is both a noun and a verb. It means 'Let's Go!' in Lingala, though sometimes it is translated as 'Let us pass!'. It is also a noun, as it refers to a group collectively identified as 'the' Toleka, or a *Tolekiste*.

While ex-combatants in the DRC continue to be marginalized or re-recruited into militia groups, one group that has avoided the temptation to remobilize thus far is the Toleka—a several-thousand-strong group of ex-combatants who returned (or remained) in Mbandaka. The Toleka formed a bicycle-taxi organization and unionized its membership, providing protections and collective-bargaining authority to the group, while at the same time providing a public good. However, after nearly 13 years of civilian life, and

growing hardship and financial difficulty, the nostalgia for their combatant past is returning.

This article looks at how this organization was formed, how these ex-combatants identified and capitalized on a local need and the conditions that allowed them to successfully unionize and protect their rights as they re-entered civilian life. Based on extensive fieldwork and interviews, it seeks to understand a case of 'successful' return in a region with few such successes. We use the term *return* instead of *reintegration* or *reinsertion*—terms more commonly used in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) literature—to emphasize the dynamic process in which individual fighters experience the transition to civilian life. But also to recognize that ex-combatants become 'returnees' with new experiences and identities. Our research thus challenges the commonly held perception in much of the DDR literature that return is focused on the geographic location where individuals are mobilized. Return is often understood by practitioners and scholars alike as home-coming or repatriation—a return to the homeland—although, as is the case with the Tolekistes, displaced populations and former fighters often resettle elsewhere (Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018).

We make three arguments. First, ex-combatants 'return' to where they have support systems. These support systems may be a spouse and children, or fellow fighters. Ex-combatants do not necessarily return to where they grew up, or were recruited from or to their province or town of origin. Second, it is these social support structures and the solidarity provided by fellow ex-fighters through, in this case, the bicycle-taxi union, that provide the best chance of social integration after war. Conventional approaches to the DDR programming of providing vocational training and material kits to ex-combatants are insufficient to sustain them in civilian life, and they often fail. Third, our research shows that a strong, locally owned support and reintegration network like the Toleka union can only be as successful as the conditions around it will permit. If the nature of public authority remains fundamentally the same as it was when they were mobilized, and ex-fighters return to the same modes of corrupt, exclusionary or predatory governance that created the conditions that permitted them to pick up arms in the first place, integration will fail in the long term.

Our understanding of public authority starts from Christian Lund's (2006) definition, for whom it is an 'instance of power which seeks at least a minimum of voluntary compliance and thus is legitimated in some way'. The growing body of work on public authority focuses on how authority actually works. Public authority is thus neither necessarily ascribed to the state nor expected to take a certain form. Rather, it is a particularly advantageous position of power that imbues different actors with legitimacy and enables them to govern *people*, *territory* and *resources* (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014; Hoffmann *et al*. 2016; Schouten 2016). It is also not something that magically emanates from the state, but rather is *produced* through the interface between different authorities' practices of governance and peoples'

responses to them. 'Public authority' thus is an open-ended and context-dependent process in which a multitude of actors alternately compete and co-operate with each other. In other words, public authority emerges through concrete political struggles.

We also integrate into our framework of analysis the role of non-state actors in producing local political orders and carrying out governance functions that are traditionally located with states. In the DRC, public authority is constantly contested and negotiated by multiple actors across various scales. These actors can be from local state government, customary authorities, civil society, religious institutions or the private sector. The nature of the competition over public authority shapes how governance is delivered and experienced, and thus conditions the success of security interventions like DDR.

Return thus matters as much in terms of *what* former fighters return to as it does *where* they return to geographically. So, while 'DDR programs aim to change the way ex-combatants and civilians view governance processes' (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis 2010: 16), they also need to transform governance, not just how it is viewed. This is not to privilege a structuralist approach to integration. But return and its sustainability have focused largely on individual agency. It has focused on structures of authority only in so far as what material incentives these structures can offer to facilitate the process of return.

Taxi Unions and the Associational Life of Former Fighters

The practice of ex-combatant communities organizing taxi unions in African contexts is not unique. In Sierra Leone, Peters (2007: 20) argues that motor-bike ex-combatant associations laid the foundations for a 'post-war modality of solidarity based on craft unionism'. Furthermore, it is not just that these ex-combatants were given jobs and employment, but that there was a sense of public service and an institutional organization to protect them from abuse. Solidarity of the armed group was replaced by a solidarity around a common profession. There was a boom in the taxi business in the post-war period, as many young people impacted by conflict sought to build new livelihoods in urban environments. Büürge (2011: 70) in particular has written about the *in-betweenness* that the bike-riding business promotes between ex-combatants/citizens, merging people with different histories and trajectories, 'thereby contributing to what is often called *reintegration*'. Berg (2014) shows how, in Sierra Leone, this in-betweenness manifests itself in the civilian policing function of bike-taxi unions in the absence of effective (or due to the predation of) state security services and thus contributes to local security provision and to order-making.

Yet, in the same Sierra Leonean context, the bicycle taxi was seen as a profession of last resort—a survival strategy for ex-combatants who could not find 'proper jobs' elsewhere. Menzel (2011: 99) observed that, in fact, it

cements their lower-class status and leads to a circumstance called *ex-combatization* in which it 'socially marks bike riders as former fighters, with all the negative or even fearful connotations that come with this perception'.

In contrast to West Africa, very little has been written on the development of taxi associations in Congo, despite their visible presence in urban centres across the country. An association in Bunia was highlighted in a World Bank assessment of the Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program (TDRP) that the Bank ran from 2009 to 2015. The Association des Chauffeurs du Congo/ Moto-Ituri was set up at around the same time as the Tolekistes of Mbandaka and included ex-combatants from all the Ituri militias, as well as a number of deserters from the FARDC. Instead of bicycles, they use Chinese motorcycles, due to their low costs and superior load-carrying capacity (even though they break down frequently). Indeed, this is not a phenomenon limited to Congo. The last two decades have seen an unprecedented increase in the commercial use of motorcycle taxis across all of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in rural areas and smaller urban areas outside capitals where the availability of public and private transport has been very limited (Olvera *et al.* 2016; Lagace 2018). However, unlike the Toleka, the DDR kit did little for the Ituri association, as only a few motorcycles were provided by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) (after hearing of the popularity of moto taxis with ex-combatants), and their distribution simply caused disputes between those who felt they deserved the new bikes. The report concludes by highlighting the importance and demand for mechanics in these urban post-war areas and many ex-combatants wished that this craft and training were on offer as one of the TDRP's reintegration support options.

Methodology

This article is based on interviews from fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2018 in and around Mbandaka, the capital of Equateur province, and a semi-structured questionnaire deployed in July and August 2018 by the authors and their partners at the University of Kinshasa and University of Mbandaka. In addition to interviews from earlier field trips that informed much of the rich description of the daily life of the Toleka, this article draws its concluding observations from a dataset we developed from the 100 ex-combatant questionnaire respondents from Mbandaka. The questionnaire covered 13 different categories and took approximately one hour and 15 minutes to complete with each respondent.

The overarching research questions for the study were as follows, and developed in consultation with our research partners in DRC and in the Politics of Return project:

- What is 'effective'/'successful' reintegration?
  - Lack of remobilisation?
  - Security?

- Livelihoods and employment opportunities?
- Lack of discrimination?
- Conflict resolution mechanisms?
- Are any of these factors replicable?

- What are the effects of location of return on 'effectiveness'/'success' of ex-combatants' reintegration?
  - Where did ex-combatants 'return' (go) following demobilisation?
  - Is there a link between modes of mobilisation/recruitment and locations of 'return'?
  - What happened to them when they returned (existence and forms of assistance)?
  - What does 'return' mean to them?

- Is there a link between 'return' and 'remobilisation'?

Secondary Research Questions

- Is there a link between mental health and 'effective'/'successful' reintegration or remobilisation?
- Is there a link between social capital and 'effective'/'successful' reintegration or remobilisation?

Throughout this study, it is our aim to speak to these questions and see how these apply to the ex-combatant community in Mbandaka.

The Three Congo Wars

Over the last two decades, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has witnessed an extraordinary number of attempts by regional and international actors to resolve the largest conflict that Africa has seen since independence. The conflict, however, persists, at an enormous cost. The most that these attempts have achieved are several partially respected ceasefire agreements. They have failed to end the violence now focused on eastern DRC or to re-establish central government authority throughout the country.

The recent conflict in the Congo is best understood as three interlocking wars (Carayannis 2003). While the Congo wars trace their roots to the Rwanda genocide of 1994, the first war began in September 1996 as an invasion by a coalition of neighbouring states of what was then Zaire and resulted in replacing President Mobutu with Laurent Kabila in May 1997. The second broke out in August 1998 when a similar configuration of neighbouring states, some of which had been Kabila's patrons in the first war, broke with him and attempted a similar ouster, but without their earlier success. It ended with the signing of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement in July 1999 by the Kabila government and the two rebel groups fighting it

(the MLC and the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD)), the result of a stalemate in the war and considerable external pressure.

In both the first and second wars, neighbouring states established local proxy movements in an attempt to put a local stamp on their activities. However, the bulk of Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL; Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre) fighting forces in the first war were foreign (mostly Rwandan), while, in the second war, this was less so. During the second war, the MLC rebel group fighting Kabila consisted largely of Congolese trained by Ugandan officers, while the Rwandan-backed rebel group, the RCD, was largely integrated with Rwandan troops and commanders. When the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement was signed, three rival Congolese rebel groups—the MLC and the RCD (at the time split between two factions, RCD-Goma and RCD-K/ML)—controlled two-thirds of the DRC's territory.[2] Laurent Kabila's government in Kinshasa, which had itself taken power by force two years earlier, controlled the remaining third, including Mbandaka and the southern half of *le grand Equateur*. Since the signing of the Lusaka agreement, there was relatively little violence or combat along the ceasefire lines between Kinshasa-controlled and rebel-controlled regions.

In June 2003, following a national dialogue and a series of regional agreements, the DRC swore in a Government of National Unity consisting of leaders representing almost every local actor in the wars. This transition culminated in a United Nations-supported national election in 2006 that narrowly elected Joseph Kabila president after two hotly contested rounds of voting (Carayannis 2008; Weiss 2016). The withdrawal of most foreign troops during the 2003–06 transition following agreements brokered in Pretoria created a power vacuum in rebel-held territories and a third 'war' began behind United Nations-monitored ceasefire lines in the eastern DRC. This war was fought between ever smaller groups—foreign and domestic—that have since become significant actors in the violence and illicit economic activities in that region.

DDR, Reintegration and Return in the Congo

Since the end of the 2006 post-war transition, the DRC and international actors have struggled to design, finance and implement a host of national and regional DDR programmes. The weak capacity of implementing institutions, widespread corruption, funding gaps, Western-driven and overly technical processes and a misdiagnosis of local needs have all been raised as core reasons behind these failures. But, while technical aspects of 'disarmament' and 'demobilization' have been analysed at length in the DRC and elsewhere (Molloy 2017), there is a surprising paucity of academic literature about the risks faced, and threats posed, by returning combatants. Little is known about how processes of ex-combatant return shape and reshape public

authority, public life and collective consciousness in Congo, where former combatants return to, how they negotiate and experience 'return', and how viable ways of life are successfully constituted post return.

Congo's first national DDR plan was launched in the district of Ituri in September 2004 (Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo 2004), due to the urgent need to deal with a wave of voluntary demobilization. It lasted until 2007. The disarmament and community reinsertion programme was designed for all militias that had not been signatories to the Sun City Agreement of April 2002. In the same year, the national DDR programme, the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (CONADER), became functional. The World Bank (2013b) oversaw multi-donor support for this process, managing the Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program with a budget of just over $200 million. This was part of the process of security sector reform, at the heart of which was the formation of a new national army and police made up of the belligerents who had signed the Sun City Agreement in 2002.

All combatants from armed groups and the national army were channelled through orientation centres where CONADER, along with international military partners, oversaw the demobilization process (Government of DRC 2004: para. 92). Some of the key groups included the ex-Forces Armées Zaïroises (Ex-FAZ) and ex-Forces Armées Congolaises (Ex-FAC) from the national army and rebel combatants from the MLC and RCD rebel movement. This first programme relied heavily on commanders of armed groups to identify each combatant authorized to enter the orientation centres (*ibid.*: para. 65). For those who chose to go back to their communities, the reinsertion process was broken down into two phases. First, CONADER provided ex-combatants with assistance to cover transport costs and subsistence during a transitional period (*ibid.*: para. 98). Upon departing from the orientation centres, ex-combatants received $300, a bicycle and then $50 a month for a period of a year (World Bank 2013b). In order to address delays and allegations of corruption, CONADER provided biometric ID cards and introduced the use of cell phones to make payments to ex-combatants. During the following socio-economic phase, CONADER's official role was to offer information and follow-up to the demobilized combatants, while national and international NGOs were made responsible for supporting the reintegration of both children and combatants. Four special protects focused on child soldiers resulted in the removal of 30,000 children from armed groups (Kolln 2011: 11).

The DDR programme experienced numerous shortcomings and flaws, many having to do directly with the commission itself. CONADER was plagued by problems of capacity, communication and financial management (Kolln 2011: 12). The programme focused largely in reinsertion rather than reintegration[3] and ignored the social and security conditions of the DRC (Conoir 2012; Vogel and Musamba 2016). Several analysts (US Department of State 2007; Kolln 2011), backed up by an official World

Bank (2005) investigation, reported widespread corruption and inefficiency, forcing CONADER to shut down a year before its four-year mandate was over. In part, these failings stemmed from the political nature of the commission: recruitment for senior CONADER positions adhered to quotas for former belligerents provided through the terms of the peace deal, who had little interest or will to conduct a transparent process and were more interested in positioning themselves for the 2006 elections (Kolln 2011: 13). The World Bank, however, also bears responsibility for the failings, as it failed to set up adequate financial oversight. A US State Department cable (2007) describes the consequences of these flaws, three years after the programme began:

> Due to management failures, however, many ex-combatants have yet to receive the promised benefits. Many of the 'kits' were never purchased and never delivered to claimants. Social reinsertion efforts and livelihood training have been minimal, and have reportedly only reached a fraction of ex-combatants.

Logistical problems further marred the work of CONADER. Support that did reach ex-combatants often did not take into account the realities in reintegration areas, such as the local climate or the economic opportunities. The commission had little presence outside of the provincial capitals and was unable to truly follow up and monitor the reintegration of ex-combatants. Before mobile-phone transfers were implemented, ex-combatants had to travel great distances to receive their monthly reintegration financial support. In 2007, the World Bank claimed that two-thirds of all ex-combatants achieved basic self-subsistence upon returning to their communities. However, the survey employed to reach this conclusion was later criticized by statistical evaluators, who claimed the study was extremely limited (Kolln 2011: 10). Independent evaluations, such as Peace Direct, concluded that only 58 per cent of ex-combatants actually received any reintegration support at all (Kolln 2011: 4). The failures of such DDR programmes are not limited to Congo and the reasons for their failure have been widely documented in a number of contexts (Muggah and Krause 2009; Bowd and Özerdem 2013; McMullin 2013; World Bank 2013b; Rhea 2016; Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018).

Nonetheless, not all of the failings can be blamed on CONADER or the World Bank. The DDR process was hindered by two major contextual factors outside of its control. First, reintegration efforts were undermined by the absence of economic opportunities, especially in rural areas. Combatants were reinserted into economically stagnant communities, with few prospects for sustaining themselves and their families (Marriage 2007: 297). Second, demobilization took place in the context of renewed violent escalation centred on Laurent Nkunda's National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) insurgency. This meant that ex-combatants were often returning to

communities where renewed recruitment was taking place, and in which armed groups placed a premium on the military skills of former soldiers.

By September 2006, CONADER's poor financial management and corruption had exhausted nearly its entire budget, even though over 60,000 combatants had yet to undergo demobilization. As a result, the commission was forced to close the orientation centres and establish mobile units to process the remaining ex-combatants (Boshoff 2007). A 2007 World Bank audit eventually led to the closing of CONADER.

Since this period, the DRC has seen two additional national DDR programmes launched. While there have been some improvements in the development of reintegration programming and activities better aligned with ex-combatant and communal needs (including the development of UN community violence-reduction activities), the DRC government and international donors have yet to establish a programme that has succeeded in reducing non-state armed group activity. The most recent plan, finalized in July 2014 (Ministry of National Defense and Former Combatants 2014), looked much better on paper, but the rollout dashed much of its initial promise. A major starvation tragedy in Kotakoli camp in Nord Ubangui province was exposed in October 2014, when over 100 ex-combatants and their dependents died of disease and malnutrition awaiting the next stage of the programme (HRW 2014). Additionally, violent incidents and protests over living conditions at reinsertion camps in Kitona and Kamina, the lack of sustainable reintegration programmes and insufficient funding from reluctant donors have limited the success of DDR III (OIOS 2018).

The Toleka and the Politics of Return

The Toleka association in Mbandaka was formed soon after the peace accords of 2002 as ex-combatants participated in DDR programmes or 'melted into the population'.[4] They began to set up some of the collective structures that were familiar to them from their time in various different armed groups. Instead of diving into the chaotic civilian landscape of post-war Congo as individuals, they decided to follow the famous idiom that there is greater strength in numbers. With their abundance of bicycles from the CONADER programme, and given the absence of transportation options in the community, a bicycle-taxi union filled a major need and provided a public service. Road conditions to this day are very poor in the city of Mbandaka (outside the official roads between the airport and the institutions of provincial power), so the vast majority of the community walks or hitches a ride with the Tolekistes.

They selected a leadership committee and set up an official association and a governance structure to manage the association's growing membership. The secretariat of the Toleka includes a president and vice president, and other ex-combatants were appointed to handle the finances and membership rolls. Presidents serve for five years, though elections can be called before then if

the membership is unhappy with the leadership. Everyone in the association can vote in union elections. Ex-combatants can join as taxi drivers or mechanics to assist with the bike repair, as bikes often have flat tires or twisted frames from the rough terrain. Drivers are required to take a week's' training on the rules of the road. According to Ileli Iponde, the president of the association, the number of Toleka members in 2014 stood at 7,877 in Mbandaka alone.[5] Mbandaka has an estimated population of 1 million people, which means that there is approximately one bicycle taxi for every 100 people in town. The union also fields 200 enforcers, or *agents de discipline* (agents of discipline). These are considered the toughest of the former fighters and are deployed around town to make sure that the Tolekistes follow the rules of the road and can manage any disputes that may arise—both between the Tolekistes and the community, but also between the Tolekistes themselves. So, in effect, the association polices itself.

A mutually beneficial arrangement was set up between the leadership and its members. The taxi drivers would contribute a portion of their profits to the association and the association would provide legitimacy with the community, a regulated transportation market and protection in cases of dispute. The association also provides some minor health assistance. The greatest medical benefit, according to some Tolekistes, is the association's occasional distribution of Preparation-H, a valuable anti-haemorrhoid ointment.[6] The union will also take up a collection from among the association to cover the funeral costs of a taxi driver in the event of a death. Another benefit of membership is free rides around town.

When they started, the Toleka charged 50 Congolese francs per trip. Today, trips cost about 500 francs, depending on the distance. There is a fee of 1,000 francs to become a member, and members are then required to pay 3,000 francs in monthly union dues. Ten per cent of the dues are set aside to pay the union leadership (who do not drive taxis) and the rest goes towards covering the costs of members' benefits. It costs 2,000 francs a day to rent a bike, though the vast majority own their own bicycles. Taxi drivers also have to pay 3,000 francs a year in income tax to the mayor's office and have to carry a card that shows they have paid up their taxes or get fined (or harassed) if stopped by the police. The union is highly gendered, with men making up all of the drivers, though the wives of the Tolekistes run the union's infirmary, from which they draw a modest income.

As for legitimacy, the Toleka assign their members numbers and licence plates to reassure the community that there is some accountability. The leadership also determines a range of prices that the driver can demand in and around town (thus establishing an expectation for the customer) and comes to the drivers' defence in the event of any disputes, injuries and claims for restitution. In the case of accidents, they will hire a lawyer to represent the union member. The leadership also intervenes in the lives of their members to help them adjust to civilian life, breaks up fights between them and mediates their interactions with local communities. This functions much like prison-to-

work programmes in the United States aimed at reducing recidivism by forming a bridge into civilian life. The union leadership uses its collective strength to bargain with the local state authorities, present the group's grievances and advocate on behalf of individual cases—as with labour unions worldwide.

There was some greater accommodation for the Toleka in the early days, as the authorities were well aware of the possible threat that a large group of ex-combatants could present if they felt taken advantage of and abused. Yet, as the years have passed, this fear of the ex-combatant community waned and the Toleka have become easy scapegoats for local criminality like the Kuluna (urban street gangs) and predatory security forces, both of which rob civilians in the cover of night and then blame the Toleka. The 'unreformed' ex-combatant is also useful target when crimes are committed by a member of an important political family.[7] The Toleka leadership struggles with these types of cases, as the power imbalance in the judicial system towards the state is often too strong to overcome. The Toleka are also used by politicians during electoral campaigns and by businessmen to advertise products, at a rate of $5 per Tolekiste, with 10 per cent of the total reverting to the association. During a number of electoral campaigns, even in an opposition stronghold like Mbandaka, the Tolekistes have exhibited some political agency and flexibility, and astute business acumen. They will gladly take the funds, and wear and distribute the t-shirts representing one candidate during one week and, once his/her competitor arrives a few days later, switch t-shirts and spread the word for candidate #2. These sort of ad-hoc financial schemes speak to their ingenuity, but also to the economic hardship they face in providing for themselves and their families on a daily basis.

Unemployment is rampant across the province (as it is across the country), with most people working in the informal economy, and insecurity is pervasive. Circulation at night is rare, given the absence of electricity in the city and roving bands of Kuluna and predatory military men. A common refrain is that the province is rich but badly managed. The province has gone for long stretches without a functioning provincial government. People have come to call the corruption of the provincial assembly 'Operation Retour' (also common in other provinces in Congo (see Calderón and Englebert 2019) and in the army (see ICG 2006))—Kinshasa sends funds to the provincial government allegedly for development projects in Equateur, and the provincial authorities send the funds back to Kinshasa to line the pockets of government officials there. Anyone who refuses to send the money risks being accused by Kinshasa of fraud and corruption.

While not all former fighters participated in the CONADER's DDR programmes—in fact, many merely self-demobilized—ex-combatants in this region of Congo came to be known popularly as the 'ex-CONADERs'—a label that carries with it a social stigma that these are hardened, unreformed members of society that should be feared and kept at arm's length. As in Sierra Leone, the bicycle taxi is seen as a profession of last resort, a survival strategy for ex-combatants, who are largely marginalized. For this reason,

while people in the community know who is an ex-combatant,[8] the Tolekistes—most of whom went through the DDR programmes run by CONADER—do not publically identify as 'ex-CONADERs'. It is only during interviews that they will acknowledge that they are former fighters. They shun the ex-CONADER label and the stigma that comes with it, and instead have adopted a separate identity—that of being Tolekistes.

It is now used widely across the region to refer to bicycle taxis and taxi men (they are exclusively young men), including in Swahili-speaking areas. The term has even been popularized in Congolese music and has earned itself a Twitter hashtag. It is an attempt to reshape a collective identity from *ex-combatant* or *ex-CONADER* to *Tolekiste* and reclaim a place within their community of return. In some ways, this is similar to the integration of gang culture into rap and hip-hop (Toop 1991; Mitchell 2001; Durand 2002; Ntarangwi 2009; Charry 2012), as the growing popular use of the term among young, pro-democracy Congolese activists and artists in recent years has further 'normalized' and legitimized the Tolekistes.

Observations from the 2018 Dataset of Semi-structured Interviews Conducted in Mbandaka

Most (87 per cent) of the ex-combatant community we interviewed demobilized between 2005 and 2006, during Congo's first national DDR programme. Over half (56 per cent) came from government forces (FAZ), while the rest demobilized from a variety of other groups, including the MLC and AFDL (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo—led by Former Congolese President Laurent-Désiré Kabila, May 1997–January 2001). An overwhelming majority of respondents (95 per cent) and all of the Toleka subset participated in a DDR programme, though not everyone received a bicycle in their DDR kit. Of the Toleka subset, about two thirds (66.66 per cent) received a bicycle, which suggests that participation in the Toleka taxi union is not contingent on receiving a bicycle from a DDR programme.

Where Do Ex-combatants Return to?

In our investigation, only 37 per cent of respondents returned to the area in which they were mobilized. In fact, most remained where they demobilized. The general assumption that combatants would automatically return to where they lived when they joined the armed group does not hold in this case. The presence of family was the most important factor cited in determining why the ex-combatant stayed in Mbandaka. Of those who were mobilized elsewhere and thus not from Mbandaka, there was little desire to 'return home'. Having a familial connection in Mbandaka, a support network of ex-combatant comrades and some revenue-generating opportunities in an urban environment were the principal motivating factors to remain where they demobilized. However, when asked about their social network and whom

the Toleka trust and turn to when making tough decisions, friends and neighbours were the top two responses. Therefore, while family might be the primary reason for return, it is their broader support network and fellow ex-combatants that they lean on in life's most difficult moments.

The average time spent in the armed group or army for the whole dataset of ex-combatants interviewed for this study was 13 years, 11 years just for the Toleka subset. Over 30 per cent mobilized more than once. Given the length of mobilization, it is possible that their community of origin transformed during their long absence. Or, alternatively, the push factors (lack of economic opportunity, local insecurity, etc.) that encouraged their mobilization have not been resolved (all said that they mobilized 'voluntarily'). Both scenarios point to the need to reconsider the common DDR practice that ex-combatants should be returned to where they lived before they joined the army or militia group, and instead suggest that DDR practitioners design programmes than can be tailored to an individual's assessment of their available support system and available economic opportunities.

The Lack of Alignment between DDR Training and Current Work

Although the bicycles provided by CONADER kits did provide a part of the impetus for the establishment of the Toleka, respondents still expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction on how the programme was managed, the poor training they received and issues with the distribution of their 'reintegration kit'. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents noted that the DDR training they received does not correspond with their current work. As the starkest example, 22 ex-combatants were trained in livestock farming and yet not a single respondent uses these skills in their current work.

While the CONADER programme was completed years ago and members of the ex-combatant community might have moved on to other occupational opportunities, this finding does speak to the general conclusion that the training provided to the ex-combatant community corresponds with the needs of the community. Generic training categories were created and the ex-combatants interviewed were primarily trained in agriculture, carpentry, breeding and construction/mechanics. In Mbandaka, the training support received was deemed insufficient by the former fighters and did not translate into an asset for their reintegration. The bike, in itself, however, was an important resource for mobility in Mbandaka, but it took the local ingenuity of the Toleka leadership to transform it into a cooperative association and a public service for the city.

Economic Hardship

The existence by young former fighters in much of sub-Saharan Africa is often marked by marginalization, economic difficulties and precariousness (Honwana and De Boeck 2005: 7). During the summer of 2018, only 24 per cent of the Toleka respondents felt they had sufficient income to support

their dependents, as compared to only 18 per cent of the other ex-combatants interviewed. This small percentage corresponds with the general state of poverty felt throughout Mbandaka and Equateur province. The World Bank's latest *Country Assistance Strategy* (2013a: 215) rated Equateur as one of the three poorest provinces in the country, with over 85 per cent of the population living under the $1.25-a-day poverty line (compared to 71 per cent for the country). Economic growth has been limited since the end of the first Congo war, and political bickering rather than improvements in policy have been the norm in the provincial assembly. In fact, the province has shown to have one of the more dysfunctional provincial governments in the country, with frequent shutdowns of the provincial assemblies and reappointments of governors and provincial leadership.

Of the ex-combatant community interviewed for this study, 70 per cent now believe that they were better off (in terms of food/clothing/housing and possessions) during their time with their armed group and 60 per cent feel that other civilians are performing better than the ex-combatant community in Mbandaka. But, while they feel that they are worse off than other civilians, 40 per cent feel better off and 40 per cent feel the same compared to other ex-combatants. Without deeper studies on the particular circumstance of each individual, it is difficult to confirm whether these views are factually accurate, but this strong perception has begun to raise questions for many in the ex-combatant community that perhaps they should end their 13- to 14-year-long experiment with civilian life.

These results are consistent with earlier interviews that we conducted with mostly former army soldiers in Mbandaka in 2014. These felt abandoned, not 'valorized' like army veterans in South Africa and Angola (their examples), and complained that there is no work to be had. The association of the so-called ex-CONADERs consists of 25 chapters of 25 members each, or about 1,750 national army veterans in Mbandaka.

Social Networks and Trust

The Toleka have established an impressive system of trust to support their collective efforts as a transport association. Every single Toleka respondent expressed 'a lot' (91 per cent) or 'some' confidence (9 per cent) in their other union colleagues. This was the only category for which there was such a uniform show of support, although support for the Catholic Church was nearly as strong (97 per cent). As Peters (2007: 16) has noted: 'combat provided fighters with a dense nexus of new connections, and ideas about social solidarity, that serve as a counter-balance to the pull of patrimonialism.' On the low end of the trust spectrum, the least-trusted actor for the Toleka and other ex-combatants in the community were the police and national government leaders. Given other national surveys[9] that indicate a similar mistrust in the security services and political elite of all stripes, this finding is not all that surprising.

A large majority (83 per cent) of all respondents said that they were accepted by their family after they demobilized. Of the small number (17 per cent) who indicated that their families did not accept them back, the reasons were overwhelmingly related to the ex-combatant's financial capacity. Their families did not accept them because they were unemployed or because they could no longer help the family financially. A slightly smaller number of respondents (74 per cent) felt that they were accepted back by their communities. One participant said that his community is not aware that he is alive and he prefers it that way. And another replied that his community accepted him back but was disappointed. Most also felt accepted by the communities they chose to 'return' to. What is particularly interesting is that most respondents (and all of the Tolekistes) do not participate in activities within their community. In other words, there is no positive correlation between participation in community activities and community acceptance. However, in other cases, such as Colombia, Kaplan and Nussio (2015), argue that participatory communities are better receptors of ex-combatants and prevent the need for self-organization in a union such as the Toleka in Mbandaka.

While most said that they had heard about DDR programmes through their military command and hierarchy and their social network, the vast majority of respondents (70 per cent) said they were no longer in touch with active combatants since demobilizing and today receive no support from any active combatants. For the Tolekiste subset, none of them remains in contact with active combatants. Of those who elaborated on this, responses revealed a deep mistrust between active and demobilized combatants. Some respondents went so far as to call the national army the enemy and complained that soldiers do not like them, accuse them of dereliction of duty, stigmatize them and treat them like dogs. Instead, respondents rely on close-knit social connections (friends, family, neighbours and other ex-combatants) for advice, to socialize and to confide in.

Potential for a Return to Arms/remobilization

When asked whether they would consider joining the army or armed group again, nearly four out of five of the respondents (79 per cent) indicated yes. This result indicates the sustained financial hardship of this group without an end in sight and an extreme frustration with the governing elite. From our interviews, we gleaned that this possible remobilization is not a failure of the Toleka association, but simply a recognition that a strong, locally owned reintegration arrangement like the Toleka can only be as successful as the conditions around it.

The political context also greatly informs these results. Unlike parts of the eastern DRC, the greater Equateur region saw fewer armed groups and the principal rebel movement during the second Congo war, the MLC, became a major opposition political party, giving its supporters other avenues of grievance articulation. Mbandaka has since been an opposition stronghold to the

Kabila government even though the city was under Kinshasa's control during the second war, and even though much of the military and political leadership in the province has been appointed by former-President Kabila or pushed through the provincial assembly. The results of our questionnaire reveal a great deal of political apathy and fear of retribution. When asked whether they have attended a political rally in the last 12 months, a few responses were telling:

> Je suis en colère de ce que le gouvernement m'a abandonné. Pourquoi partir en réunion politique? [I am angry that the government has abandoned me. Why go to a political meeting?] (Participant 45).

> Non, parce que je n'ai pas quelqu'un pour me défendre en cas de problème [No, because I do not have someone to defend me in case of a problem] (Participant 44).

However, a few months later, during the December 2018 electoral process, they were able to voice their discontent with current leadership. In the leaked Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI; Independent National Electoral Commission) presidential results of December 2018 (86 per cent of the total votes cast), only 1.79 per cent of Mbandaka city residents voted for Kabila's FCC (Common Front for Congo) candidate, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary.[10] Out of all of the rationales provided for why an individual considered remobilization, no one spoke of returning to arms in support for the government and only two respondents spoke of patriotic motivations. This is in sharp contrast to the reasons the ex-combatant community in Mbandaka gave for their initial mobilization when patriotism was the number one answer (at 24 per cent of all respondents). That said, remobilization requires someone to organize it—a 'remobilizer' (Themnér 2011). The consideration to pick up arms may simply be motivated by the power it affords for predation and as a means to improve their economic situation. In fact, 70 per cent of respondents said they were better off economically when they were in the military or armed group.

Conclusions

If the Toleka has been a relatively successful case of ex-combatant return, it is because of the 'absorptive capacity' of a community to accept ex-combatants, and the openings and opportunities they provide the general population (de Vries and Wiegink 2011). The taxi union has provided this opportunity. This point is also reinforced by much of the literature on DDR, which understands that improving the 'social vibrancy' of communities in post-conflict societies not only benefits the community itself, but also contributes to ex-combatant reintegration (Sharif 2018). However, most DDR approaches have failed to achieve this. The Toleka association is the means through which

these urban, marginalized young men have constituted new forms of sociality and reclaimed some popular legitimacy and constructed a new identity.

Ex-combatants in Mbandaka stayed where their families and support systems, often their demobilized cohort, were. They did not necessarily return to where they grew up or lived when they joined the military or armed group. As Peters (2007: 19) found in motorcycle-taxi associations in West Africa:

> The solidarity of combatants generated in 'fighting' has survived the war but applied to a different 'job', riding a motorbike taxi. The union is a key difference, however, since this is the means to link (through peaceful conflict management) with the wider society.

As he notes, this is not unlike what Durkheim *et al.* (1957) points to as the important role that medieval European guilds played as a basis for 'organic solidarity' (Peters 2007: 19, footnote 40). These new solidarities create the idea of home and belonging. It is not surprising, therefore, that the common DDR practice that ex-combatants should be returned to where they lived before they joined the army or militia group, and separated from their network of comrades in arms, has failed to reintegrate fighters into civilian life. DDR programmes need to consider the support systems available to demobilized fighters as well as to available economic opportunities.

Moreover, the limits to the success of the Toleka association, and the growing attraction of remobilization, are better understood in the poor-governance context of Mbandaka. Despite the many collective benefits that the association has provided, ultimately, it cannot overcome a state that is failing in its responsibility to provide for the community. DDR programming and other forms of reintegration support must be complemented with broader systemic improvements in the delivery of public services. This requires an approach that focuses on strengthening communities and improving governance, not on individuals and DDR kits. If economic conditions do not improve and ex-combatants cannot trust their local public authorities to provide justice or security, then the design of a DDR programme becomes irrelevant. This association may have reduced the impact of local-governance failures and perhaps delayed many individual decisions towards remobilization; but it has its limits.

Thus, while the taxi union thus has a mediating, bridging and solidarity function, it is not a panacea. As Olvera *et al.* (2016: 3) have observed from other contexts: 'The motorcycle taxi provides unskilled former soldiers with a source of revenue, without calming the fears of a resurgence of past violence (Peters 2007; Büürge 2011; Menzel 2011).' Regardless of where the Tolekistes lived before they joined the war effort, they all returned to the same predatory and exclusionary public authority and governance systems that they lived under when they joined the army or armed groups. We should not be surprised, therefore, that today they express a certain nostalgia for a return to life in the military.

Acknowledgements

1. In 2015, the DRC divided its 11 provinces into 26. In this decentralization process known as *découpage*, Equateur was split into five provinces: Nord-Ubangi, Sud-Ubangi, Tshoapa, Mongala and the now smaller Equateur.
2. The RCD quickly split into two movements as a result of internal disagreements: the RCD-ML (Mouvement de Libération), backed by Uganda; and the RCD-Goma, backed by Rwanda. The MLC, another anti-Kabila armed group in the second war, was established with Ugandan support in northern Equateur Province some months after the founding of the RCD. The MLC was a way for Uganda to hedge its bets against the faltering RCD-ML, which they backed.
3. During this period (2004–07), reinsertion expenditures (primarily the distribution of kits and financial support to ex-combatants) was more than double the amount spent on reintegration programming, which was supposed to support the process 'by which the demobilized go back to the social and economic practices of the community of their choice in conditions and opportunities similar to those of other community members' (Conoir 2012: 27).
4. Authors' interview with president of Mbandaka Civil Society, Stani Mowenge, June 2014.
5. Interview, Toleka Executive Committee, June 2014.
6. Interview, Toleka Executive Committee, June 2006.
7. Interview, Toleka Executive Committee, July 2018
8. Authors' interview with president of Mbandaka Civil Society, Stani Mowenge, June 2014.
9. Please see http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/research/drc for a repository of 17 different poling reports conducted by the joint initiative of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with MONUSCO Civil Affairs. National elites and security services consistency carry low trust values with the population.
10. After complying with the voter data from the leaked CENI database, in Mbandaka Ville, the results from the 35 voting locations were as follows: Martin Fayulu (49,924 or 88.47 per cent), Felix Tshisekedi (5,497 or 9.74 per cent), Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary (1.010 or 1.79 per cent). The data was downloaded from the Congo Research Group's release of the leaked data in coordination with Radio France International, *The Financial Times* and TV5 Monde. Unfortunately, for these residents, and contrary to these leaked results, on 10 January 2019, Felix Tshisekedi was named president by the country's electoral commission.

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