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Expanding the Reach of the Special Forces with a Gender-Mixed Deep Development Capability (DDC): Identifying Challenges and Lessons Learned

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Driven by the need to adapt to a changing security environment, the Belgian Special Forces Group has developed a new gender-mixed capability in 2020, including female soldiers in the operational detachment of the unit for the first time. This brief examines the development and implementation of the project and identifies challenges for future similar capacities. It points to the need for clarification of tasks and employment conditions, while attracting male candidates is necessary to maintain the 'mixed' character of the capability. In conclusion it argues that overall, efforts to avoid gender instrumentalization have been successful and the creation of the capability is a first step in the direction to diversify the composition of the Special Forces, a step that is necessary to remain relevant in a complex security context.

INTRODUCTION

The need to adapt military forces to new hybrid threats evolving from complex security environments has grown more acute during the past decade. In Gray Zones where irregular population-centered conflicts may thrive, understanding the needs and grievances of the local population are pre-requisites for the success of any military operation.¹ Driven by these security imperatives, the Belgian Special Forces Group (SF Gp) developed a new mixed capacity in 2020, termed Deep Development Capability (DDC), including women in the operational detachment of the Belgian Special Forces for the first time. The primary aim of the capability is to gain a deeper understanding of the human environment in which different military operations take place, achieve effects, and thereby improve mission success.

The DDC is a pilot project for the SF Gp, which has been developed over several years before the actual recruitment and selection started in 2019.² At the end of 2020 the first DDC education cycle

was completed and three female soldiers integrated the SF Gp while three others were included in a pooling system. One male operator also followed the DDC specialization course. Drawing on observation and extensive interviews with key actors, including six of the seven DDC members, the Human Domain Advisor (HUDAD) and other SF Gp members³ over the past year, the aim of this policy brief is double. A first objective is to provide an increased understanding of the project, its development and implementation. A second aim is to identify challenges and provide recommendations for developments of similar gender-mixed capabilities both more widely within the Belgian Defense, and in other militaries.

The brief points to the need to clarify the tasks and employment conditions for the DDC members while reforming the pooling system and either widening the recruitment pool beyond the SF Gp, or conduct extensive internal strategic communication to render the positions more attractive to male candidates. Efforts to avoid gender instrumentalization, whereby an “added burden” is placed on women linked to gender stereotypes,⁴ appear however to have been successful. This is partly due to the fact that the mixed capability’s core tasks are varied, and partly because the adequate training is provided for each task required, thereby avoiding any assumptions on innate capacities based on gender. It is up to SF Gp’s leaders and members to uphold such standards in the future, regardless of external or internal pressure to do the contrary.

In conclusion, while there are still lessons to be learned, this pilot project has resulted in a much-needed capability for the Special Forces to operate in a complex security environment, while demonstrating the importance of diversity for broader access and more comprehensive analyses.

TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DDC CONCEPT

The Belgian defense is facing difficulties to recruit and to retain military personnel, a problem that is exacerbated by the fact that 40% of the military’s current officers will reach retirement age in the next five years.⁵ The SF Gp is not immune to this problem, yet while the new capacity will open the door for a hitherto unexploited pool of recruitment as female military staff are selected,¹ the main reason for this project is not to be found in numbers, but in the need for getting a broader capacity. In particular, as one DDC member explains: “there is a need for a capacity that can provide a deeper understanding of the human environment and identify opportunities and threats, as a type of ‘consultancy’ for the mission”.⁶

Such a capacity is clearly best served by a mixed team including both male and female members, which are able to reach out and access the whole population. Early ideas about a Deep Development Team (DDT) in the SF Gp unit envisioned these teams to be made up of 2-4 individuals with strong analytical and networking skills, including both military members from the SF Gp and the Intelligence service, as well as a civilian from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,⁷ yet these ideas later evolved into two concepts with different gender compositions: the DDT and an all-female unit: Female Support Teams (FEMST), drawing on US experiences of Female Engagement Teams (FET) deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸ The FEMST was expected to work together with the DDT, consisting of male operators. While the DDT was supposed to move in the nexus of influence operations, special operations and intelligence, clarifying the famous gray zone, the FEMST were to complement all-male teams, by providing access to women and children and thereby improve

situational awareness,⁹ which in gender-segregated and patriarchal societies, can be difficult for all-male units.

Such a narrow use of female soldiers has however received increased criticism as it fails to take into account the fact that gender is not the only factor important when connecting with local populations, race, nationality or age, may play more important roles in some contexts, while the uniform may hide or override gender identities in others.¹⁰ It also risks reinforcing gender stereotypes, portraying women as “naturally” able to connect to women and children, while narrowing down the spectrum of tasks that they are allowed to do.¹¹ Internal discussions within the SF Gp finally led to the decision to merge the two capacities, FEMST and DDT, and thereby move away from the narrow focus for the FEMST and the two gender segregated units, to a broader, mixed capacity: the DDC.

The new capacity incorporated thus elements from the earlier ideas: integrating male operators, having gone through the specific qualification course for SF Gp together with selected female soldiers, having completed a Special Forces Enabler course, with both groups having followed the same tailor-made DDC course. The DDC members are supposed to either be assigned to already existing units in the field or deployed independently before or during operations to perform contextual analysis of the human environment, identify opportunities and threats and ultimately achieve effects:

“They are the perfect toolbox to do certain missions and tasks...you are supposed to be able to send them in to a theater as a pre-positioned element, to lay the cards right, to investigate that complex domain, that complex

network, and then come up with a couple of proposals of: ‘in this environment, if that is what we want to achieve, this is all the options we have, and this is how we can operate in here’.¹²

In short, the new capability is supposed to be able to operate in the whole range of Special Forces’ tasks, including Military Assistance, Special Reconnaissance and Direct Action, although, playing more of an ad hoc task in the latter.

SELECTION AND TRAINING: GETTING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

In 2019 the SF Gp published the official call for candidates within the Belgian Defense,¹³ one and a half year after the article about FEMST and DDT was published in the Belgian Military Review and several years after the initial ideas about the capability circulated in the unit. Yet, even before the official recruitment process for the DDC started, members of the SF Gp contacted potential candidates informally to gain traction for the project. The subsequent call for applications evoked considerable interest from female soldiers, resulting in 33 applications for the three positions, proving not only that a significant number of women would like to join a unit with an intense deployment schedule, but also that they were ready to go through a challenging selection and a tough training program for, what from the start was thought to be just a two – possibly a three-year position with the SF Gp.

The call for candidates which specified the need for strong language competences, knowledge of geopolitics and a high physical level, led many of the candidates to prepare both physically and mentally, long before the actual selection. While most intensified their physical training efforts in the months before, some also took additional

language and communication courses, studying geopolitics extensively in their spare time.¹⁴ A first selection by the Directorate General for Human Resources (DGHR), taking into account the opinion by the candidates' superiors amongst other, left only 19 women for the two-week selection in December 2019. This drew criticism from the Defense Union who contested the way this initial selection was made, yet the DGHR maintained that it was the normal procedure.¹⁵ After the 19 candidates went through the first two weeks of selection, including both a survival week in the forest and a range of physical and analytical tests, including evaluation of socio-emotional skills and reaction to uncertainty, only nine women started the tactical enabler course in January 2020.

The whole DDC education entails a two-month tactical Enabler course, a 16-week specific Deep Development course, and another 16 weeks of Assisted Operation Deployment. After the Enabler course, only six candidates were retained, who, together with one male operator started the Deep Development course in March.¹⁶ The Enabler course, which is tailored to the demands of the Special Forces, includes traditional military training, such as marksmanship, navigation and small unit tactics and is highly challenging, both physically and mentally, proving that while some of the main tasks of the DDC will be more in the analytical domain, they should have strong military capacities and be able to work independently in a wide spectrum of mission types.

The second course, the Deep Development specialization, is tailor-made to enforce the candidates' strategic, analytical and engagement capacities, with courses both by in-house lecturers from the Defense and guest lectures by experts from the civilian world on topics such as strategy, engagement, and target group analysis.¹⁷ Most of the classes given during the

Deep Development course were however created and delivered by the SF Gp's HUDAD who also planned and prepared the entirety of the DDC training program.¹⁸

According to most of the candidates, the hardest part of the education was the constant evaluation and the absence of feedback on how you were performing:

“You always need to perform...and we don't have a lot of feedback, which is hard, because you want to position yourself in relation to the others... but that is part of the game: not knowing, but still performing at your highest level”.¹⁹

For some candidates the Enabler course was more difficult due to the high demands on physical excellence and military tactics:

“I trained almost two years for it, and I sacrificed a lot for it”.²⁰

While for others, the more analytical specialization course was harder:

“It was really intense, we had classes from 7:30 to 23:00, and your brain is about to explode. You need to learn so much, so fast”.²¹

As COVID-19 interrupted in-class lectures during the spring, it was decided to extend the training for the DDC members with an additional 16 weeks of Assisted Operational Deployment in the field to get a better understanding of how the candidates worked during operations and prove the concept of DDC.

PROVING THE UTILITY IN THE FIELD

A course certificate was given at the end of the specialized course, confirming that the candidates had successfully finished that part of the education, yet the decision to add an extra 16 weeks of operational deployment as a type of internship was accepted with mixed feelings, as the results of the selection thereby were delayed another five months. However, the possibility to demonstrate the use of the DDC in an ongoing operational environment proved to be important to gain a broader understanding for the utility of the capability, not only for members within the SF Gp, but also for members of the Belgian Defense more generally, who could see the work done in the shape of in-depth studies.

Deployed in teams of two for periods ranging between four to six weeks, the DDC members joined the ongoing Operation New Nero (ONN),²² in Niger during the second half of 2020. Whereas each team was expected to support the work on the ground more generally, they were also given specific tasks to perform during their respective period in theater. These included perception studies of the local population regarding the Belgian Military presence, in-depth surveys of the situation of the partner force and analysis and recommendations regarding existing projects underway within the mission.²³

The deployment to a current operation made it thus possible to both evaluate the candidates' capacities to function together with other SF Gp members in an external environment, while producing useful analyses for the mission. Whereas these deployments contributed to clarify some of the uncertainty about the actual use and function of the DDC, which has provoked different visions from members both within and outside of the SF Gp, it remains one of the challenges that needs to be addressed, along with

the pooling system and how to make the teams "mixed".

IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES: DIVERGENT IDEAS OF THE ROLES AND TASKS OF THE DDC

The fact that the development of the DDC has involved several different people at different times, has to some extent contributed to a confusion over exactly what role the DDC should have, who should be part of it, what tasks it should perform, and for how long the members of the DDC should stay in the unit:

"There are lot of different visions of the DDC even within the unit, whereas one person told us we would do this, another told us we would do that... everyone has another view, another perspective..."²⁴

Dissecting these challenges, a first problem relates to defining the tasks that the DDC should perform, and thereby also its training and function. For while the current members of the DDC have been given a broad education with a strong focus on analytical and strategic capacity, there have been discussions about using the female members for additional tasks that do not pertain to the initial description of the DDC concept, but where there is a need for female militaries. This entails tasks such as bodyguard (DAS: Détachement d'Agents de Sécurité) duties for female politicians or other VIP such as female ambassadors.

While it is clear that there might be an increasing operational need for female militaries for these tasks, as the number of female ministers and ambassadors grows, they do not pertain to the DDC training or the DDC concept. Hence, whereas some members of the SF Gp see these tasks, and the training that goes with them, as part of the package when you sign up to be a part of

the unit, others maintain that the DDC members are not supposed to engage in that type of missions. This confusion regarding the exact role and the tasks of the DDC is problematic, as there is a risk that the female members will be used for these tasks only because they happen to be women. As there appears to be an operational need for more women in the unit to perform these tasks, a possible solution would be for DDC members to occasionally fill these gaps, while the SF Gp recruits more women for these additional tasks. However, this should not be institutionalized to avoid recruiting more women.

POOLING SYSTEM

How long the DDC members are to be integrated in the SF Gp has been another point of discussion. Whereas the idea from the start was to recruit three candidates for two years with three in a pooling system, this has now been extended to three years, possibly longer, reflecting thoughts from the DDC members:

“It would be a waste of time and a waste of the year we just had to only do the job for two years and then go back to our old unit”.²⁵

Yet, while there is a logic to this time span in the sense that some of the candidates are officers and as such need to rotate position every two/three years according to the Belgian military career system, it also means that there is an enormous investment from both organizers and candidates in a one-year education program, only to reap the benefits of it during a bare two years, and that for only three of six competent candidates, as three are supposed to be in a pooling system.

The pooling system came up as a solution to keep the three candidates that were not selected for the unit available for temporary operations and replacement when need be. However, already

before the start of the DDC’s education program, there were several question marks regarding its logic and feasibility. Firstly, because of the seemingly costly exercise of letting six candidates follow a one-year tailor-made course, only to let three go back to their units afterwards. Secondly, because of the difficulty and feasibility of belonging to two units at the same time:

“I don’t have the time to combine two jobs... you can’t just say to your unit that you are going away for three months with the SF Gp and then come back”.²⁶

Most candidates also voiced concern over losing track of what is happening if you are not integrated with the rest of the team:

“the DDC is a full-time job. If you are not keeping track of what is happening, you are losing the feeling of everything...you can’t combine two jobs and keep two bosses happy”.²⁷

When asking staff in the SF Gp about the decision to only keep three of the candidates, although six actually completed and passed the whole recruitment and training, the answer is that they would ideally keep all six, yet only three positions for this capability were opened by Human Resources. Uncertainty regarding how many candidates would actually complete the course led to a larger number of individuals having terminated the selection and training. Making sure that the successful candidates are not put in difficult positions where they are standing with one foot in each unit should however be a priority when drawing lessons and improving the current process, not only for concern of the individuals affected by the decisions, but also in order to retain and recruit more candidates in coming years

MIXED TEAMS WITHOUT MALE MEMBERS?

The call for female military members to apply for the possibility to join the SF Gp generated 33 applications from units across the Defense, yet only one male operator participated in the DDC course, rendering the ‘mixed’ aspect of the teams wanting. This operator has nevertheless since returned to his original team, which means that the DDC currently is made up of only three female members, although the capability has six positions in theory: three for women, three for men. This might not constitute an immediate problem for operations in terms of gender diversity and access to the population, given that the SF Gp operational unit is exclusively made up of men with the exception of the DDC members. Yet, just as the women taking part of the DDC are not instrumentalized as ‘naturally’ capable of connecting to local populations and do human domain analyses, but given tailor-made training to perform these capacities, future male members also need adequate education to access and connect to target groups.²⁸

It is understandable that most operators in the SF Gp, who have passed the highly demanding Q-course for the operator position do not want to leave their teams and take new courses for positions they did not apply for. Yet, it is equally clear that: “you can’t make an operator a DDC like that, you need those courses”.²⁹ Ideas within the SF Gp for how to mitigate this lack of male DDC members include recruiting former operators who already have left their teams to these positions. However, so far, there still seems to be few candidates even within this group, which would make either extensive internal strategic communication to raise the interest for these positions a possible solution, or start recruitment outside of the SF Gp. The latter option would however require three new positions within the unit, a feat which is difficult to accommodate with current human resource limits.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief has traced the evolution and analysed the implementation of a new military capability in the SF Gp. It is a topic which merits examination and analysis, not only because it reflects a deeper reflection on how to counter current threats and thereby also may give an indication on new directions within the Defense more generally, but also because it has entailed the inclusion of female soldiers in the SF Gp’s operational unit for the first time, thereby increasing diversity in its composition.

Diversity is important not only because of the visual impact it may have on target populations, which, as noted earlier, can be limited depending on whether uniforms or other military attribute hide the physical appearance or surpass other identity markers, but also because people with different background have been socialized and raised differently. They can thereby add other perspectives to analyses, thus broadening the understanding. The fact that some of the members of the DDC are females is important, not only because of the operational demands for more diversity, but also because it is opening a door into the SF Gp for female militaries who have the required capacity and want to deploy extensively. Whereas members from the SF Gp have insisted that this is not an attempt to contribute to gender equality, it will have repercussions on gender relations in the Belgian Defense more generally.

Several aspects are critical to consider in this regard. First, the fact that the SF Gp modified the initial idea of creating two gender segregated capacities with different tasks, and instead developed one mixed capacity. This is important because it means that the women are not recruited to perform gender stereotypical tasks or only represent a different sex to broaden accessibility, but rather to add a specific capacity.

Second, and related to the previous point, all members of the DDC will get adequate training to perform these tasks. There is, in other words, no assumption that women will be able to access local population because they are women, but they will receive adequate training for the tasks that they are supposed to perform, just as the male members. These aspects are critical to avoid reinforcing stereotypes in a highly gendered environment, and so far the SF Gp has managed to steer away from such stereotypes. It remains the responsibility of its leaders and members to keep it that way.

From a broader perspective, the evolution and implementation of the DDC in the SF Gp reflects a will to adapt to contemporary challenges in order to remain relevant in today's security environments. These are increasingly characterized by hybrid threats, such as subversion, disinformation and propaganda. Such threats are thriving in atmospheres of ambiguity, where conventional military responses fall short. In order to operate efficiently in such contexts, there is clearly a need for a better understanding and access to the human domain in which they take place. Creating a military capacity composed of highly skilled individuals

who are capable of analyzing, interacting and influencing with local counterparts in such an environment is an operational necessity. To be efficient in understanding a world that is made up of people whose identities are intersections of gender, age, nationality and race amongst others, it will therefore be necessary to deviate from the standard military attributes of young, strong, white, heterosexual males and recruit more broadly.³⁰ The creation of the DDC is a first step in this direction.

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FOOTNOTE

¹ Women are allowed to apply for positions as operators in the Belgian Special Forces Gp, yet so far, no woman has succeeded in joining the group, much because of the extremely difficult physical tests.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁶ Internal SF Gp document, “DDC – Pilot: Education Path”.

¹⁷ Internal SF Gp document, “Belgian Special Forces Group (BEL SF Gp) Deep Development Capability (DDC) Course – Evaluation Sheet”.

¹⁸ Interview with SF Gp HUDAD 2020.

¹⁹ Interview with DDC Member 2020.

²⁰ Interview with DDC Member 2020.

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²² For more on the mission, see Nina Wilén, “Belgian Special Forces in the Sahel: A Minimal Footprint with a Maximal Output?”, *Egmont Policy Brief*, May 2019, available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/belgian-special-forces-in-the-sahel-a-minimal-footprint-with-maximal-output/>

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