

Technical Education for the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: One Pathway, Different Trajectories

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Problem Statement and Background

Lasting peace after a conflict depends, to a large extent, on the successful reintegration of ex-combatants into society. As defined by the United Nations (UN), ex-combatants are people who, after having been a member of a national army or an irregular military organization, decide to lay down their weapons in participation with Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reincorporation (DDR) processes (UN 2006). Technical and vocational education and training (TVET), is considered a key means to prepare ex-combatants to participate in the labor market and to assume new social roles (UN 2006) because TVET offers a general education and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, and knowledge relating to occupations in socio-economic sectors (ILO-UNESCO 2002). As an essential part of promoting development and preventing recidivism, international organizations and governments around the world include TVET in DDR processes (UN 2014).

Some studies have found that when technical programs are accompanied by financial resources, ex-combatants shift to legal activities and are less prone to re-armament (Blattman and Annan 2016). However, despite efforts to implement TVET, in general, programs have not had expected results in facilitating ex-combatants' reintegration (Blattman and Ralston 2015; Humphrey and Weinstein 2004). Previous studies have identified program design (Johnson et al. 2007), implementation (McMullin 2013), and post-conflict environments (Porto, Parsons, and Alden 2007) as factors limiting TVET's effectiveness.

However, in these studies, the experiences and perspectives of ex-combatants have remained unexplored. As a result, little is known about individual-level factors that influence ex-combatants' decisions to engage in TVET, their perceptions about the programs, and how access to TVET influences their trajectories when reintegrating into society. This information is critical to understanding whether this group finds access to TVET useful, and how to shape programs to respond to ex-combatants needs and capabilities (Billett 2006). This study seeks to address this gap. Centered on the voices of ex-combatants in Colombia who graduated from technical programs, this research will illuminate the different meanings they attribute to their education, how these meanings influence decision-making and behaviors (Hall 2003) and will investigate how reintegration relates with educational experiences. The following central question guides this study: What meaning does access to technical education have for ex-combatants who graduated from a technical and vocational (TVET) institution in Colombia as part of their reintegration process? This research seeks to identify the perceptions, assumptions, and expectations that ex-combatants have regarding participation and persistence in the educational process, and how accessing education influenced their reintegration. This study is a response to the growing need to put ex-combatants at the center of research to better understand their diverse perspectives, challenges, and trajectories as a way to identify how to improve programs (Torjesen 2013).

Colombia was selected for this research because its civil war has been the lengthiest armed conflict in the western hemisphere (CNMH 2013). Over the last 15 years, the government has demobilized more than 60,000 ex-combatants

from guerrilla and self-defense militias (ARN 2018). The Colombian reintegration policy includes education, and establishes TVET as a condition to receive grants for microbusiness (CONPES 3554 2008).

Methodology

A qualitative in-depth interview design guides this research. This study is part of a broader project involving Colombian ex-combatants across two levels of TVET programs, including technical courses and vocational entrepreneurship courses. In Colombia, one-year technical programs focus on skills training in specific productive sectors and require a high school diploma. By contrast, entrepreneurship education taught through complementary courses that last 40-80 hours do not require a high school diploma (SENA 2015). This study draws on data from a purposeful sub-sample of 10 ex-combatants who have graduated from technical postsecondary education programs. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years and included women and men from different armed groups. Interviews were semi-structured. The first interview included a background section that asked about ex-combatants' reasons for reintegration. In the meaning of education section, questions focused on ex-combatants' perceptions and feelings about their education, their motivations to study, expectations toward the future, and the value they find in training. The second interview explored emerging topics from the previous interviews and particular issues that needed clarification or a deeper understanding. Therefore, the protocol had some shared questions for all participants, and some questions specific for each interviewee. Questions were asked regarding whether courses met ex-combatants' expectations, about their experiences as adult students, and on factors from the educational process that motivated them to study. Other questions focused on how they overcame challenges to finish TVET programs and connections between their educational experiences and reintegration.

The interviews were analyzed in a three-stage process that includes two-cycle coding and identification of themes (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014). In the first cycle of coding, each interview was analyzed separately to identify emerging codes. In the second cycle, interviews were compared and contrasted to identify emergent codes and categories. In the third step, main themes were identified and contrasted with theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Preliminary Findings and Relevance

Preliminary findings show that psychosocial aspirations, more than economic aspirations, motivate ex-combatants to study and reintegrate. While participants were concerned by employment and decent wages, their primary motivations for education were to be respected and recognized, to set an example for their children, to experience a moral transformation, and to develop autonomy. These personal motivations and the hope for a better future were the main reasons to study, to stay in civilian life, and in some cases, to reject offers to re-join criminal organizations. These findings show that TVET's assumptions that ex-combatants are only motivated by material factors such as money and employment are too reductionist. These findings mirror other research that has found that disengaged youth want to achieve social inclusion and overcome marginalization (Mercy Corps 2015).

This research highlights the voices and interests of TVET stakeholders, who are often left out of policy and programmatic discussions. This knowledge is critical to understanding how to better align TVET programs with ex-combatants' expectations, and how to help them achieve their aspirations. A more holistic education that includes channels for economic participation, but also strategies to achieve ex-combatants' personal hopes and desires could facilitate the challenging task of reintegration.

Contributions to Comparative and International Higher Education

TVET programs are the most common educational option for demobilized youth in conflict-affected countries (Ralston 2014). These programs have the potential to rehabilitate ex-combatants, open pathways to legal work, and deter them from crime and violence (Blattman and Annan 2016). Participation in TVET programs can also help to develop capabilities and feelings of inclusion in the community. Therefore, exploring what motivates ex-combatants to enroll and finish TVET programs is of utmost importance.

Scholars identified the need to include participatory research strategies to narrowing the gap between ex-combatants' individual needs and institutional processes to develop more sustainable and effective educational programs (Lopes-Cardozo and Scotto 2017; Novelli and Lopes-Cardozo 2008). This research, which sought to better understand ex-combatants' perspectives and motivations for pursuing educational programs, is the first step toward more inclusive research in which ex-combatants will be part of research projects' designs and execution.

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