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**‘Not as my Neighbor’: How Misinformed Narratives Surrounding  
the FARC are Hindering the Social Reintegration of its  
Demobilizing Combatants**

**Sam L. Gibson, Department of Human Sciences, El Rosario University,  
Bogotá.**

samlinggibson@gmail.com

**Abstract**

With the current group-demobilization of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-FARC*, this study offers a timely exploration on the relationship between how the guerrilla group and its members are viewed and their capacity to return to society as civilians. Through a Grounded Theory qualitative approach based on interviews and focus-groups with former FARC members, as well as ex-paramilitary and wider civil society, findings show that how the group members are received back into communities hinges on dominant, national-narratives surrounding the FARC which blur the group and its former-members as terrorists and criminals. Therefore, despite a widespread desire for a negotiated end to the conflict, most Colombians are not prepared to accept what this actually entails, i.e. the reintegration of a collectively-demobilizing FARC back into society—showing reluctance towards the social integration of its excombatants, whether as co-workers or neighbors, and even less so as citizens or friends. However, the counter-narratives of the excombatants, and empirical evidence show great

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inconsistencies and falsehoods in these narratives. Moreover, the returnees' reactions to this hostile climate is often to be secretive about their past and keep a low profile with minimal social interaction whilst striving towards what they conceive as being a "normal" citizen—that is studying and/or working (termed here as the "secret-citizen" narrative). The study demonstrates that the current model—akin to reinsertion—will not lead to a fuller reintegration unless national-narratives shift significantly, and the FARC and its excombatants are at a very minimum accepted as citizens in a post-conflict society.

**Keywords:** DDR, reinsertion, reintegration, Colombia, FARC, excombatants, peacebuilding, grounded theory, peacebuilding, Duque, Uribe.

### **Introduction**

*Wanting a peace process without actually accepting us...I can't see how that would happen (interview with excombatant).*

*A few might take up politics, but most of them will use the skills they already have, taking hostages and making bombs...crime is what they know (non-excombatant focus group participant).*

Colombia has experienced a protracted civil war since the 1960s, with numerous guerrilla groups on one side advocating land redistribution and greater political inclusion, and anti-communist paramilitary groups on the other, backed by the Colombian State, wealthy landowners, and later the US. With the latter's technical and financial aid, Álvaro Uribe focused his (2002-2010) presidencies on a hardline military confrontation against the remaining rebel groups, particularly the largest—*Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia*-FARC. The succeeding president Juan Manuel Santos capitalized on Uribe's effective reversal of the FARC's military advantage, and initiated the negotiations of the current process. As part of the ensuing Peace Agreement, as of September 15, 2017, the UN has reported that the vast majority of the FARC's 7000 members have arrived at the 26 "demobilization zones" across the country and have turned over nearly all remaining weapons to the UN (UN, 2017). Following several months in these camps, the demobilized will go on to spend up to 3 years in reintegration programs.

Therefore, it would appear that Colombia is finally on the road to peace, and the first stages of a wider DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) process has begun. Defined by international and national DDR standards, as *'turning combatants into productive citizens...[who] formally acquire civilian status[...]to integrate socially and economically into society'* (UNIDDRS 2014, 1.10; Departamento Nacional de Planeación- DNP, 2008, p6).

However, as the quotes outlining this article show, the transition from "guerrilla" to "citizen" may be clear in legal terms, but is not necessarily afforded such a neat social distinction. This highlights a tension comparable to many war-to-peace transitions, which this paper will attempt to elucidate; despite a general belief in a negotiated solution (67%-Gallup poll, 2017), a war-weariness amongst the populace is also accompanied by an antipathy to the FARC. Thus, a call such as that of the President, that it is the responsibility of all Colombians *'to accept former guerrillas'* (Santos, 2015) sits at odds with a great deal of the population who see the FARC as a malign and untrustworthy group responsible for what his predecessor describes a *'decades-long narco-terrorism campaign against the Colombian people'* (Uribe, 2016).

Not only are parts of these narratives surrounding the FARC at a group level inaccurate, but also they extend to its individuals, and as this paper demonstrates, its ex-members. Moreover, how society perceives the demobilizing group has the potential to determine if the group are accepted and allowed to participate in their new host-communities. In short, to dictate very terms of citizenship for excombatants in a post-conflict society.

### **War-to-peace transitions and DDR**

Following any conflict, the disarmament and demobilization of an armed group consists of a transcendental achievement towards peace. However, it is only the beginning of the reintegration stage, which is widely recognized as being the most challenging and complex part of DDR processes worldwide (Kingma, 1997; Bowd & Özerdem, 2012; Muggah, 2009). During armed conflicts, excombatants often perpetrate violent acts against the civilian population-possibly ranging from rape, mutilation, kidnappings, pillaging, and murder. Such hostilities can be highly divisive, and result in social rifts, the erosion of trust and enduring alienation. With the cessation of hostilities and the demobilization of the fighters, society must deal with these challenges in order to be able to live together once again (CCDDR 2009, p45; Nilsson 2008, p19). For groups that have deeply contested one another to coexist in these shared

post-conflict settings, a transformation in their relationship is needed to one based on the reconstitution of mutual acceptance and social inclusion (CCDDR, 2009; SIDDR, 2006).

Seeking to address this critical and complex reintegration of former-fighters, the UN Integrated Standards of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (UNIDDRS) have evolved from some 60 processes to adopt and advocate a more maximalist approach to DDR policy (Muggah, 2009). The most recent (2014) revision of this acknowledges that reintegration is *'primarily taking place in communities at the local level'* and recommends a community-based reintegration in addressing the *'social and psychological issues of identity, trust, and acceptance [which] are crucial to ensure violence prevention and lasting peace.'* Towards this, it stresses the pivotal role of the community in allowing excombatants to *'rebuild their lives and social networks'*; which involves their *'civic participation'* and *'the acceptance of excombatants by [the] community'* (UNIDDRS 2014, 4.30).

An emerging 'third-generation' of DDR researchers and practitioners have collected both qualitative and quantitative data from former-fighters themselves and their surrounding communities. From this, they contend that despite the UNIDDRS' call for greater attention (and investment) towards reintegration efforts, there exists a dissonance between DDR policy and practice, and that this reintegration component continues to be the most incomplete and neglected (for instance, Kingma, 1997). Therein, this assumption in DDR norms that communities will simply accept returning-fighters upon their status/legal change to civilian, has been criticized as flawed, even naïve, as it fails to address the challenges of reintegration (Willems 2015, p118). Notably are the effects of the image of the demobilizing group (and the stigma this can bring), and the related capacity of receptor-communities in accepting and allowing the participation of demobilizing-individuals. These deserve some explanation to better understand and contextualize the challenges of the present Colombian case.

### **Image of former groups and social acceptance**

Interestingly, excombatants from illegally armed groups have reported marked differences between the perceived image of their former-group and how they are accepted by receptor-communities—even in the same conflicts. For instance, former members of the CDF (Civil Defense Forces) in Sierra Leone and the IRA (Irish Republican Army) in Northern Ireland reported a greater social

acceptance, which receiving communities have cited as being due to the role in supporting the government in “defending communities” and “bringing peace” in Sierra Leone (Humphreys & Weinstein 2004, p26), whilst the struggle of the IRA was seen by many as “political” in nature (Mitchell 2008, p4). Conversely, some community members viewed former-paramilitaries in Northern Ireland as “warlords”, the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) and AFRC (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council) as “dangerous” in Sierra Leone, with the former-members reporting lower levels of community acceptance than that of the aforementioned adversaries who enjoyed greater perceived legitimacy (Mitchell 2008, p12; interview with Konyima, 2015 in Gibson 2016; Themner 2013, p327).

### **Excombatant narratives and stigma**

The actions and behaviors, and image of the former-group, especially when negative, has profound implications on how its former-members are viewed, and consequently received into host communities. McMullin (2013) argues that excombatants are generally portrayed through “resentment” or “threat” narratives. The former is underpinned by the notion that, due to perceived violent actions committed during and after conflict, targeted programmatic aid to demobilized-fighters is often seen as “rewarding the perpetrators of violence.” The targeting of aid directly to excombatants is generally considered to be justified and necessary in helping excombatants stay away from violence (Kingma & BICC 2001, p14). Despite this, in many instances, considering the limited resources of countries emerging from war, the demobilized usually end up in the most impoverished localities with high levels of crime and unemployment. This negatively affects the communities’ capacity and willingness to absorb excombatants because returning-fighters are competing for (often scarce) resources (UNHCR 2003, p11-12). As a result, DDR programmatic help directed at former-fighters is seen as being diverted from other deserving groups, and from communities themselves. Indeed, IDPs often outnumber excombatants in such communities which adds to the resentment narrative, as Kingma observes in the case of Mozambique (1997, p6).

The threat narrative, on the other hand, is premised on the assumption that the group’s violent actions or criminality during the conflict will be continued by its *ex*-members within receiving-communities. Despite the fact that following demobilization, excombatants returning to criminality or violence is ‘*a relatively rare phenomenon*’ (Themner 2013, p296; see also Weinstein &

Humphreys 2004, p39). Despite these factual flaws, such narratives are often pervasive and often result in unfounded or exaggerated stereotypes. To name a few examples, excombatants being viewed as “violent bandits”, and therefore something to fear and not trust (in Uganda- JRP 2008, p5), and reject socially (in Sierra Leone- Bolten, 2012), or even to threaten or physically attack (in Liberia- Pugel 2006, p48).

### **Importance of community acceptance**

These community attitudes towards excombatants resonate in the daily challenges experienced by many of the former-fighters themselves. In contrast to the “threat” narrative, excombatants themselves note that their role in the community and communities’ attitudes towards the former-fighters are a key means to reintegration. From individual and cross-country studies into ongoing DDR processes, former-fighters have consistently reported that social acceptance is an often lacking (yet necessary) part in their reintegration. This leads Bowd & Özerdem to conclude that reintegration hinges on the ‘*degree to which receiving communities are willing and able to accept excombatants and the efforts they expend in making this a realistic possibility*’ (2013, p459). One striking finding across these distinct processes is that excombatants report that the stigma and resulting discrimination, and even threats and violence from the host-communities, are an impediment to their acceptance (CCDDR 2009, p57; Hazen 2005, p5; Kingma, 1997).

A lack of social acceptance, and the heightened insecurity this generates, negatively affects the relationship between the excombatants and their communities, in varied ways. Alongside acceptance, Pugel (2006) and Bolten (2012) found community participation to be a (albeit lacking) priority to former-fighters in Liberia and Sierra Leone, respectively. Whilst Clubb (2014) and Nussio & Kaplan (2013) found, in turn, a positive and negative correlation between the participation of former IRA and Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia-AUC members. Moreover, they found greater community participation pushed down recidivism levels with the IRA, and vice versa with the AUC—again with the variable of community acceptance.

### **Integrating into new communities**

The image of the demobilizing group has another critical effect on reintegration, effecting whether or not the excombatants return to their communities-of-origin at the end of a conflict. In part due to the image and actions during the conflict of their former-group (in several of the above-cited

cases), individuals from groups whose actions during the conflict were deemed as predatory, and thus less legitimate, were less likely to feel safe enough to return “home” (for instance only 34% of RUF fighters in Sierra Leone). In contrast, those factions with a “cleaner” war record, or seen as “defending communities” and/or “democracy” were more likely to return, and be accepted socially and participate more (75% of CDF fighters in the same conflict felt safe enough to return home, with corresponding higher levels of acceptance and participation compared to groups with more negative images- Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004, p31; 39; 40).

Thus, this mistrust, fear, and even social rejection of excombatants is exacerbated by the fact that often fighters are moving to new communities following demobilization. Therefore, whether true or not, negative group images, stereotypes, and the challenges of being in new communities often lead to the rejection of excombatants and less engagement with their host-communities. Considering the abovementioned determinants of reintegration as being “mutual acceptance” and “social inclusion”, this does not constitute reintegration. It should come as no surprise then, that Escolar de Cultura de Paz’s review of ongoing DDR programs globally concluded that *‘no DDR process in the last few years has produced optimal results’* (2009, p10).

DDR efforts in Colombia are emblematic of these shortfalls, and thus deserve further exploration to frame the context (and challenges) of this research.

### **DDR (and its shortcomings) in Colombia**

The seemingly perpetual hostilities in Colombia have also seen numerous efforts towards DDR processes, characterized by Theidon (2009) as *‘Colombia’s serial search for peace.’* The most notable of these processes have been two collective efforts (M-19 or 19<sup>th</sup> of April Movement insurgent-group in the early 1990s, and the AUC in 2003) and the current individual demobilization process of FARC members. As a result of these processes, Colombia has developed a substantive DDR policy that both borrows from and contributes to the understandings and practice of DDR (as underscored by the Cartagena Contribution to DDR (2009)), similarly stressing the importance, and risks of an incomplete reintegration, and aiming to *‘promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts, civil participation and trust between the demobilized, the communities and local authorities’* (Colombian Reintegration Agency-ACR 2009, p19). Therefore, its focus has increasingly been on the social inclusion of excombatants through a community-level reconciliatory approach to

reintegration, which offers former-fighters a monthly stipend, psychological support, healthcare, as well as vocational and educational training (DNP, 2008), with community interventions carried out in 59 municipalities between 2007-2009 (ACR, 2009).

It also acknowledges, however, the challenges that remain in achieving reintegration; that excombatants continue to *'face barriers to their social, economic and community reintegration...[as] the great majority of demobilized possess psychosocial attributes and values which limit the possibility of social interaction; in other words, they're not prepared to live within the confines of social rules within the legal framework'* (DNP 2008, p18). Similarly, that the host communities may resent, fear, distrust and stigmatize demobilized, *'since many demobilized committed and participated in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law'* (DNP 2008, p23). Although they do recognize the *'lack of receptivity of some sectors of society'* and resentment and stigmatization towards demobilized, as a major impediment to reintegration (DNP 2008, p18), this is purportedly due to the individuals violent past and fragile state of mind.

### **FARC narratives**

These implications, furthermore, echo parts of longstanding narratives about the FARC and its former-members. Through 8 years of the "Democratic Security" policy of attempting to militarily defeat the FARC, Uribe declared the group as *'the first and most important threat'* to the nation, cultivating a securitizing discourse which de-politicized the group as *'terrorists and narco-traffickers'* (Ministry of National Defense 2007, p23; 48). In the run-up to the (non-binding) October 2016 referendum on the Peace Deal, Uribe claimed that the FARC would be granted undemocratic powers in congress and exaggerated the stipend that demobilized FARC would receive- claiming that the *'so-called peace deal will serve as a thick mantle of impunity...[thus] narco-terror is being rewarded in Colombia'* (Uribe, 2016). Despite these claims being false (with a substantive transitional justice framework as part of the deal), this terrorist-threat narrative remains pervasive and resonates with a majority of Colombians who believe the FARC to be nothing more than "delinquents" who cannot be trusted to fully demobilize (Centro de Memoria Histórica-CMH, 2012; Gallup, 2017). Indeed, the proposed Peace Deal was (narrowly) rejected, and more recently, the 2018 congressional and presidential elections saw the dominance of candidates critical of the peace-process— and indeed a president in the mould of Uribe (Iván Duque), (Daniels, 2018(a)). Despite

Congress unanimously voting to push ahead with the Deal, the referendum, and congressional and presidential elections highlighted huge divides, even ambivalence, as to how, and even if the reintegration process should happen. Despite favoring a negotiated peace with the FARC, most Colombians do not trust the group and by extension its ex-members, which has the potential to hinder any meaningful reintegration.

### **Role of community and stigma in reintegration**

The accounts of former-fighters shown through the recent third-generation of DDR research strongly contest these assumptions and conversely show that challenges to reintegration have more to do with host-communities than the former-fighters themselves. The negative images of the former groups appears to fuel resentment for the programmatic support they receive, and feelings of fear and suspicion from receiving-communities, and the resultant discrimination and stigmatization affects not only their education and employment prospects, but also their physical security (32% are victims of human rights violations, including homicide- Centro Nacional de Consultoría-CNC 2011, p50). This all amounts to a struggle to adapt to daily civilian life. Many of the challenges that excombatants report are due to, if not exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority will end up in urban centers far from their places of origin due to retributive threats from neo-paramilitary groups—70.7% according to CNC, (2011); see also UNHCR, (2015).

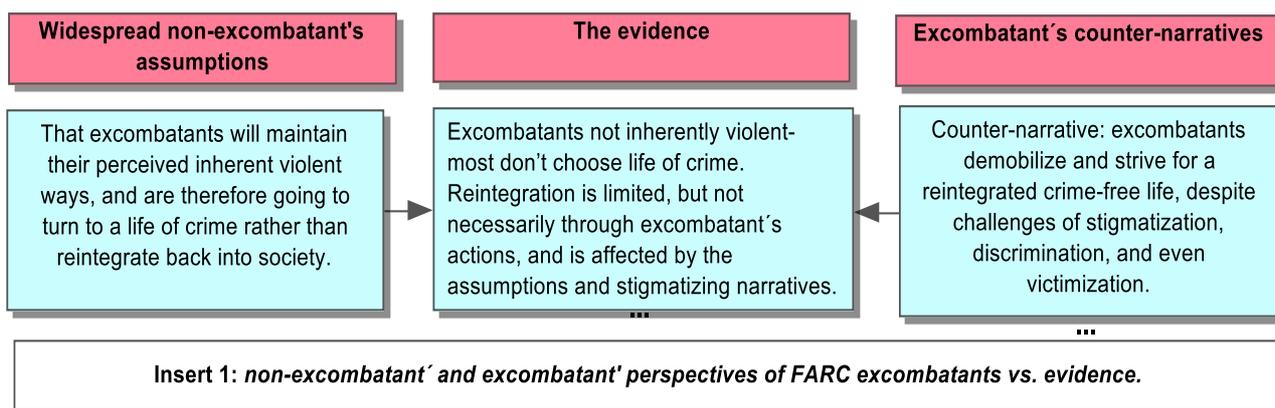
Consequences of this battery of challenges to reintegration are profound- with studies finding excombatants from various demobilized groups resorting to making efforts to publically conceal their past identities and minimizing social interaction in their host-communities (Flórez, 1997; Prieto, 2012; Nussio, 2011).

These criticisms mirror the normative and theoretical dissonances that can be seen between the international DDR standards and practices: whilst the Colombian programmatic policy has been effective in the narrow sense of rehabilitation and avoiding recidivism (“D&D”)—86% according to Nussio & Kaplan (2013)—past and current experiences of reintegration in Colombia have shown it to be incomplete as they are not ‘*facilitating social reconstruction and coexistence*’ (Theidon 2009, p11). What is potentially explanatory to this gap is the effect of the narratives surrounding former-groups in the reintegration process, and how this affects expectations of the role that former-fighters should have in a post-conflict society. Indeed, in

comparing the M-19 and AUC collective processes, Guáqueta (2007) found that the individual's former group (and the perceived legitimacy of that group) influenced the extent of reintegration, to a greater and lesser extent with the M-19 and AUC respective cases.

Despite this apparent link, however, to the knowledge of this author no research exists which systematically tests the effects of these perceptions against the various components and determinants of reintegration. This article therefore employs a qualitative Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), working principally with individually demobilized FARC members, but also ex-paramilitaries (AUC) and non-excombatant members of the public. It uses this data to explore the narratives surrounding the FARC, its members, and ex-members, and exploits these narratives to examine the relationship between how the FARC and its members are viewed and how they are received as demobilized excombatants by host-communities.

It finds these narratives are underpinned by two assumptions, firstly that the group has departed from its original ideals to the point that they constitute an illegitimate and terrorist group, and secondly that its members carry some proclivity towards violence and criminality which limits their ability to reintegrate back into society, as seen below in *Insert 1* (data from Gibson, 2016). Findings show that how the group members are received back into communities hinges on these dominant, national-narratives surrounding the FARC which blur the group and its former-members as terrorists and criminals, and that this capacity of receiving-communities to hinder reintegration is stronger than previously shown.



However, as also seen in *Insert 1*, the counter-narratives of the excombatants found here, bolstered by empirical evidence, show significant inconsistencies and falsehoods in these narratives. Not only are these assumptions at best exaggerated or distorted, and at worst inaccurate and even baseless, they are largely duplicated onto its ex-members and become in part self-fulfilling. These narratives feed stigmatization which is often responded to through less engagement of excombatants with the host-community and their development of dual-identities— one public and one private. This generates differing notions and expectations of what constitutes reintegration. The former-fighters’ reactions to this hostile climate of new host-communities is often to be secretive about their past and keep a low profile with minimal social interaction whilst striving towards what they conceive as being a “normal” citizen—that is studying and/or working (termed here as the “secret-citizen” narrative). On the other hand, unlike the receptor-communities, returning-fighters generally want more than to simply coexist in their new environments, often craving to be accepted and to be given the chance to participate in their wider-communities.

The study demonstrates that the current model—akin to reinsertion—will not lead to a fuller reintegration unless national-narratives shift significantly, and the FARC and its excombatants are at a very minimum accepted as citizens in a post-conflict society.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Due to concurrent safety concerns, I was unable to carry out first-hand research with the FARC- at the time an active insurgent-group. I therefore worked initially with individually-demobilized FARC members ( $n=26$ , age 17-29), participants of one NGO in Bogotá, and all past or present members of the DDR program. Although not wholly representative, the sample did show a variation in terms of gender, age, year of demobilization, region of conflict, as well as circumstances of demobilization (e.g. voluntarily, deserted, captured etc.). These interviews were conducted between February 2015 and August 2016. Contact to the NGO was made through email, and several meetings followed in-person to discuss and arrange the interviews. Participants were requested by the NGO, and those who had the time agreed.

As the research evolved the unit of analysis extended to former-paramilitaries ( $n=4$ , age 18-22), as well as non-excombatants selected from several Universities in Bogotá ( $n=27$ , age 18-24). Alongside this were focus groups: exclusively amongst former FARC-members (3 focus groups in total with 7, 9 and 5 participants), and non-excombatant groups (3 in total with 15 and 12 participants), as well as combined members of the former-FARC and former-paramilitary members (2 in total with 6 and 8 participants).

### **Design & Procedure**

Considering this limited data set, this research does not pretend to be comprehensive nor fully representative. Indeed, this provided the main rationale for the use of a qualitative and inductive methodology for data collection and analysis—specifically one following the procedures of GTM developed by Corbin & Strauss, which provides highly valid data in which *‘representativeness of concepts, not of persons, is crucial’* (1990, p9). Following and being reflexive to the data thus allows a theoretical sensitivity as the researcher attempts to uncover often overlooked and salient insights without prejudice, critical in the highly polarized and divisive attitudes seen in countries at civil war (Corbin & Strauss 1990).

As stipulated by GTM, initial interviews were open-ended and unstructured and were framed as such to allow for the emergence, development, and testing, of codes, concepts, and categories (*open, axial, and selective coding*). Thus, the opening statement for the excombatants was, *‘I would like to hear about your experiences as an excombatant, and would like you to speak freely’*, whilst for the non-excombatant groups, *‘what are your views on the FARC and its ex-members?’* This first feedback-mechanism (*constant comparative analysis*) continued until no new categories emerged (*conceptual saturation*), indicated by a second feedback-mechanism (*theoretical sampling*), which allowed emerging concepts, categories, and core categories to inform and be tested against the selection of the subsequent interviews detailed above. Following this, focus groups involving non-excombatants and former-paramilitaries were used.

To minimize the validity drawbacks of relying on using perceptions alone—notably the “social desirability response-bias” and “Hawthorne effect”—neutrally worded and unambiguous questions and assurances of anonymity were used. Additionally, to provide a more robust depth to the emerging concepts, secondary analysis of cross-sectional and nationally representative

survey quantitative data were used to triangulate the data, as well as qualitative data to offer further understandings and differences to the concepts and findings generated through constant comparative analysis, until conceptual saturation was reached.

## **Results and analysis**

The GTM of data collection first allowed for the identification and exploration of the principle challenges to the post-conflict life from the perspectives of former-FARC combatants. This was triangulated with secondary data— informed in part by the theoretical sampling feedback loop—, which in part corroborated, offered explanation, and also revealed inconsistencies in the narratives which required and informed further data-sets.

Accordingly, considering the crux of these involved their social rejection and stigmatization, largely influenced by what they perceived as misguided-narratives of the FARC and its former-members, focus groups with non-excombatants, and later ex-paramilitaries, were used to explore such narratives and their effects, respectively, on the social integration and social relations of excombatants. For the sake of more coherent reading, these following data sets are not presented in a chronological order.

### **Perceptions of the FARC, its ex-members and their reintegration: *reinsertion* *Secondary data with the non-excombatant public***

Various cross-national surveys regarding perceptions of the FARC report the group as being responsible for more of the violence in the country than any other actor, finding common descriptors as being “plain delinquents” (82%-CMH 2012, p23; 21), with less (23%) conceiving the group as continuing to constitute as terrorists, even with the conclusion of the Peace Deal (Arco Iris, 2017). With the demobilized-FARC, prevalent views are those of suspicion (56.8% believing that former-fighters increase insecurity- Prieto, 2012), and fear (with 33.6% and 16.4% viewing them as dangerous and violent, Latin American Public Opinion Project-LAPOP, 2015). Regarding the reintegration of excombatants, Polimétrica (2016) polled over 60% of respondents as being against the demobilized having political participation, or being in a relationship with their children; 38% being unwilling to provide employment to excombatants, and 45% being against knowingly living alongside them. In terms of programmatic aspects, we also see significant opposition—with 49%

disagreeing to former-fighters receiving support through the DDR program (CMH 2012, p60).

***Primary data with the non-excombatant public***

Focus groups with non-excombatants were used to explore narratives about excombatants in the broader society, and to attempt to understand the effect of these narratives on their social integration.

In terms of the perceptions of the FARC and its members, many of the participants in the initial focus groups referred to the group as “terrorists” and “illegitimate”, and perpetrators of most of the violence in the country. Typical responses being, *‘they lost their ideals a long time ago when they started bombing civilians, kidnapping and being narco-traffickers’*, and, in response, *‘I think they’ve caused most of the blood-shedding since this.’*

Regarding excombatants, a wide variation of views was found. Although there were some moderate and even favorable views to the group and its ex-members, they were scarce, and the most typical characterizations were “criminals”, “dangerous”, “delinquents”, and something to be suspicious of and fear. They generally saw little distinction between them and their former group, often doubting any chance of meaningful rehabilitation, and assuming that they have a proclivity towards violence, which they will bring into receiving-communities. Tellingly, one respondent in a focus group of non-excombatants used the Spanish-language adage of *‘a cheetah never changes its spots.’*

When asked about the various components of reintegration— political, social, and economic, as well as DDR programmatic aspects—the negative perceptions held by the focus groups not only reverberated but also showed signs of potential stigmatization against demobilizing excombatants;

*Our congress is already corrupted enough, these criminals don’t deserve a space there.*

*Most of us don’t trust the FARC, so their demobilizing can assume some level of social rejection...definitely not as my neighbor.*

*If a demobilized was in the same place I worked, how would they act?*

*They're receiving money just for having been a guerrilla—how is that fair?*

*So, think of someone who has been killing for the past 20 years, do you think they can just begin a new life driving a taxi in Bogotá? When you're a murderer you always will be.*

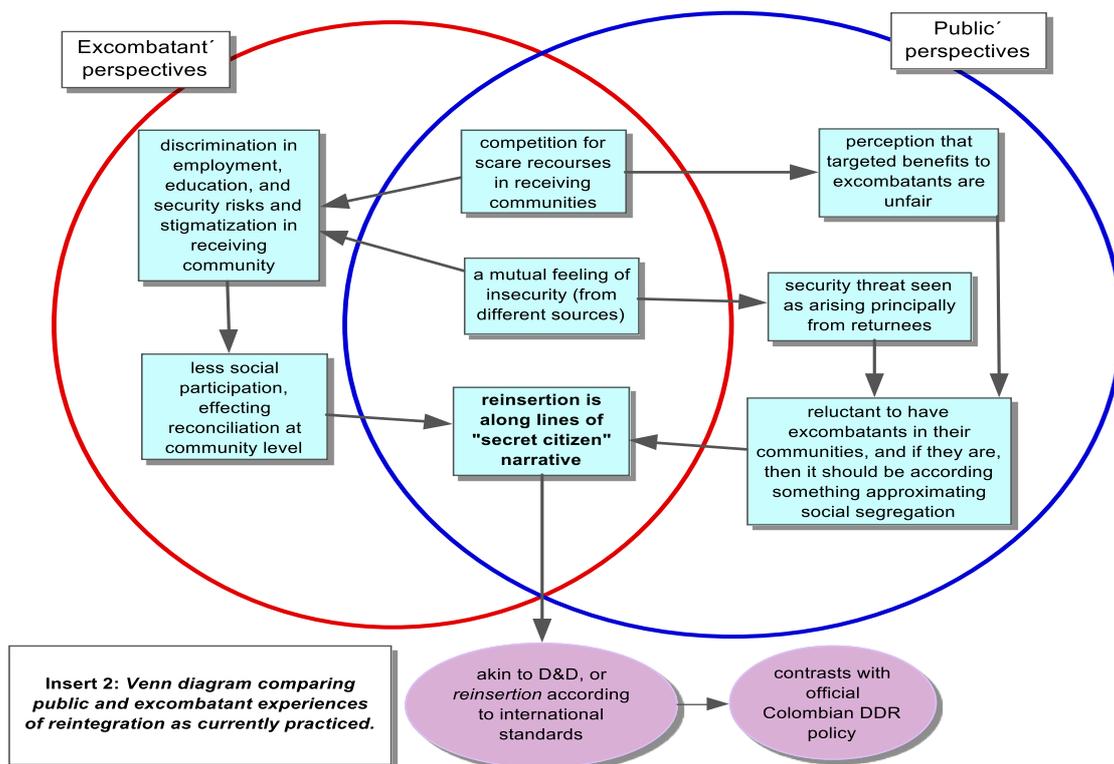
Analyzing our secondary-data provides, an albeit superficial, glance of the common attitudes surrounding the FARC and its ex-members and their reintegration. Moreover, through comparing the similarities shown between the views of the group, its members, and former-members, implies that little distinction is offered between its actual and ex-members at an individual-level, and that this effects how they are received. Although large-scale and representative, beyond establishing these general attitudes of these groups, and the similarities attitudes between them, it does little towards explaining *why* people held these views (i.e. what underpins the narratives), and does not link the views on the group and ex-members with how they are received into society.

The use of primary data went some way to fill these theoretical gaps. The attitudes of the focus groups towards the FARC and its ex-members are generally consistent with the secondary data. Indeed, the views of them as being narco-traffickers, and the principle threat to the country corroborates this, as well as chiming with the securitizing discourse of Uribe's Democratic Security policy (Ministry of National Defense 2007, p23; 48). However, another key part of said discourse, that of being terrorists, was far more prevalent in the non-excombatant focus groups than in the secondary-survey data, with 83% of participants referring in some way to the terroristic tactics used by the FARC. This suggests that such narratives are more pervasive than national surveys show. Furthermore, through the use of both primary and secondary data it appears that these narratives are underpinned by two assumptions: firstly, that the group has departed from its original ideals to the point that they constitute an illegitimate and terrorist group, and, secondly that its members carry some proclivity towards violence and criminality, which limits their ability to reintegrate back into society.

The primary data goes some way to explain why one assumption would lead to another (thus why images of FARC-members and ex-members are similar), and why this would lead to not accepting excombatants back into receiving-

communities. When the non-excombatant focus groups discussed reintegration, most reasons to not support reintegration were qualified and justified by the negative stereotypes of the assumptions regarding the guerrilla group and its former-members. As one respondent in a focus group of non-excombatants put forward, '*[T]he neighborhood is already dangerous...that can only get worse with those who have lived with conflict.*'

These data imply deep societal divisions on whether reintegration should occur, and what it should involve. Refining these views on reintegration also shows us that this opposition to reintegration is not only theoretical, but demonstrates a capacity of civil society to hinder reintegration at both community and individual levels (as seen below in *Insert 2*, data from Gibson, 2016). Moreover, the deeper examination of these attitudes provided by primary focus groups offers evidence that the narratives are being taken at face value, and that this is effecting the rejection and stigmatization of excombatants in host-communities and thus limiting the reintegration process—resembling the *reinsertion* that comes with “D&D”, rather than *reintegration*. As one of the excombatants told me, '*if all of those stories about us were true, then of course they'll [non-excombatants] be scared.*'



Following is an examination of the excombatant counter-narratives, which, with triangulation of other secondary data, highlight several inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the prevalent views of the group and its former-members, as well as some explanation towards how they respond to the wider-public's expectations of reintegration.

**Excombatants on the FARC, its ex-members and reintegration: the “secret-citizen”**

Unlike the non-excombatant public, many of the excombatants opposed and were frustrated with the essentialism that underpinned the narratives surrounding them and their former group. Many former-fighters acknowledged the violence and atrocities as well as involvement in the narco-trafficking that the FARC have been responsible for, yet felt the group received a disproportionate part of the blame vis-à-vis other armed-actors in the conflict, *'the FARC have caused a lot of pain and suffering to many people and families, I can see that'*, to which another replied, *'but so did the army, the paras [paramilitaries]...we all have blood on our hands.'* They saw a clear demarcation between being a FARC-combatant and being a FARC excombatant, *'they think that all excombatants are killers just because we were involved [in the conflict]...there's a transition, a separation that people don't see.'*

Similarly, most rejected the obstacles to reintegration that were implied in the narratives: that of continued affiliation with the FARC, and latent violent tendencies brought into host-communities. In the same focus group, another added, *'it's difficult because people judge without understanding your past...we all want to leave the conflict behind us.'* Herein was a shared deep frustration with the recidivism of some excombatants being pinned on all of them, *'that's all you see on the TV- the crimes of the FARC and the demobilized which gives us all a bad name.'*

Contrarily, typical accounts showed that challenges to reintegration were more to do with employment and education issues, the difficulties of settling into new and alien environments, security threats, and how they were received by their host-communities—all compounded by the stigmatizing labels of their past as guerrillas and present as excombatants (seen in *Insert 2* above).

### **Education and work**

Most respondents reported difficulties in attaining the education and employment that they considered adequate, which some blamed the DDR program in its failure to provide appropriate training to make up for their rural and conflict-based background. As one pointed out, *'in a job interview, of course you can't tell the boss that the experience you have is knowing how to use a gun.'* As a result, many did not feel economically reintegrated, *'we had so many workshops [during the reintegration program] on setting up our own business, but those projects failed...I eventually found work as a streetcleaner trying to earn enough for food for me and my daughter.'*

With a few exceptions, they reported having either no employment, or any jobs found were generally in the informal sector, often as taxi drivers, security guards, cleaners—found previously with both demobilized-paramilitaries (Nussio, 2011) and ex-guerrillas (Anaya, 2007).

### **New urban lives**

Studying Balkans and western African DDR processes, Hazen notes that armed-groups consist of a “war family”, that is, a *'support network [which] provides a sense of identity and purpose, but it also provides security and access to basic goods'* (2005, p5). These are often lost in DDR processes as noted in these two accounts of excombatants;

*When I arrived to Bogotá it was very hard, even crossing the roads terrified me, I'd never seen so many cars... We're campesinos and don't know how to find the right bus, let alone pay bills, get healthcare, and support a family.*

*The FARC was like my family...we got clothes, medicine, a place to sleep, and enough food and supported each other in good and bad times. This support disappears when you arrive to such a big city and I had a hard time in adapting...in fact, I tried to go back [to the guerrillas].*

As these accounts indicate, reintegration is further complicated as the demobilized are leaving the social and material support systems of the armed-group. As Anaya points out, they are therefore passing from a *'collectivistic rural-military life to an individualistic urban life as civilians'* (2007, p185). Many reported fear of retribution to them or their families and consequently many were unwilling or unable to return to their typically rural home-communities (and the social support networks there). Two reported trying to return home,

but for reasons of community or family rejection, even danger, they had returned to Bogotá,

*I wanted to get to know my family [she left when she was 11, returning at 22], but they didn't want to know me. My brother being in the [regular] military had a big part in this.*

*I didn't have any childhood at home as I was brought up by the FARC...when I went back, most of the community were indifferent, but some were angry because I didn't have the ways of thinking, stories, songs and other customs and I didn't feel part of my [indigenous] tribe anymore.*

Conversely, Nussio & Kaplan (2013) found that when security risks permitted former-guerrillas to return to their rural homes they participated more in those communities, rather than when they moved to new and alien cities where they felt more threatened and lost familiar social networks.

### **Security issues**

Settling into new cities is often compounded by the fact that demobilized are usually housed in parts of the cities—whether in Bogotá, Medellín or Cali—which are for the most part slums with a high presence of neo-paramilitary groups, poverty, violence and unemployment (Colombia IDP 2004, p70; Brooking Institute 2011, p58). As one respondent from Soacha—the locality which has amongst the highest concentrations of demobilized as well as IDPs in the country (Prieto, 2012; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2004)—put it, *'When I get home and lock the door and then I can relax a bit...there you can't even go out at night and I never let her [the daughter] out to play.'*

The dynamic of host-communities with such low socio-economic levels fuels the resentment for DDR benefits even more. These are generally the same areas where IDPs and other victims of the conflict end up (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2004), which further limits the communities' capacity to economically support or absorb the excombatants. *'We're all in this same situation with the same needs: water, rent and a job,'* as one excombatant told me. Moreover, the already high levels of mistrust and suspicion of those areas, coupled with the perception of excombatants as a threat, hinders the interactions needed for any meaningful reintegration (Prieto, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, in such environments excombatants felt insecurity to be a primary concern. However, unlike many non-excombatant community members, the source of these threats was not considered to be other excombatants, rather from neo-paramilitary groups in retribution for being a guerrilla, or from refusing to be coerced into joining such criminal organizations. Contrary to their assumed life of crime, the vast majority rejected violence as a means to solve problems—whether social or economic. As one recounted, *‘the temptations of working with these gangs are always there...they pay well and can provide safety to your family, but you have to be strong and remember why you left the conflict.’* Others linked their insecurity with the possibility of recidivism, *‘if the state protects us with a more rigorous [peace] process other criminal groups won’t be created.’*

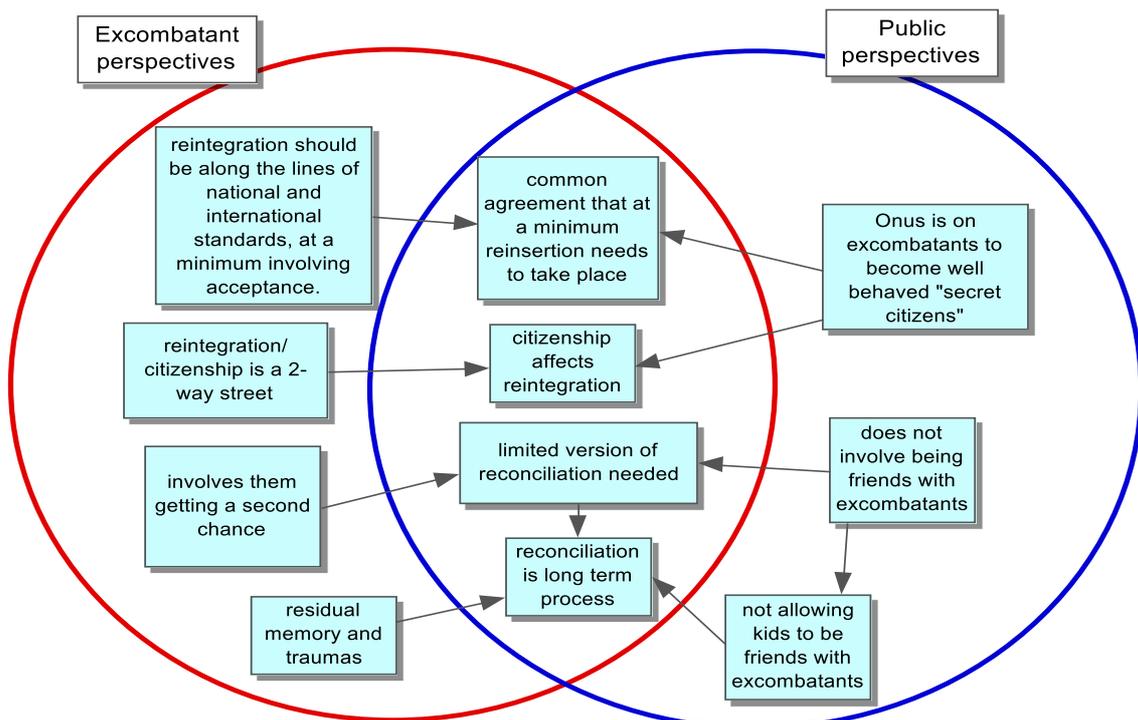
These accounts resonate with data in large-scale quantitative surveys. Prieto (2012), for example, found that in receiving communities, 11% of non-excombatant members had received threats, compared to 76.5% of demobilized. Furthermore, these threats are often not hollow, with national police statistics from 2003-2009 finding that 3-4% of demobilized were murdered, leading to the logical conclusion of the same report that, *‘the protection mechanisms [offered by the state] have not been effective* (CNRR 2010, p265-268). Tellingly, Nussio & Kaplan (2010) found that the lesser threats and lesser stigma attached to ex-paramilitary compared to ex-FARC resulted in higher levels of community participation in the former group.

### **Secret-citizens**

Due to the stigmas discussed above, when their past-identities had been found out, many demobilized reported accounts of discrimination, rejection, and even threats in places of work (*‘I had a small shop setup and everything, but when the locals found out my past business suffered’*), study (*‘when they found out that I’d been part of the guerrilla, they didn’t renew my next enrollment’*), and host-communities (*‘I don’t know how, but when they [the local community] found out my past identity, I panicked because maybe the paramilitaries would find out...how could we stay? I didn’t feel safe for my son...we moved again’*). As the latter quote shows, some excombatants responded to these unmaskings by relocating—often for safety concerns.

These varied yet common experiences of the challenges described above led many to adopt what is termed here the “secret-citizen” narrative. The first (“secret”) part—to dissociate from the stigma of “FARC” and “excombatant”

through being publically secretive about their past and keeping a low profile with minimal social-interaction, *'because nobody knows who is listening and looking,'* and *'[T]here's an expectation from society, that when you leave the conflict you have to forget your past, forget your identify as an excombatant.'* Combining this with the second ("citizen") part— "fitting in" with what they conceived as being a "normal" citizen, that is studying and/or working—was deemed as the best means to coexist with relative safety within society. As one noted, *'I think that if we study and work, we can be a good citizen.'* However, the same respondent continued lamentingly, *'[B]ut even with this we can't be citizens if we're not accepted...reintegration means giving us the chance to be here and to be involved with our neighbors.'* As this respondent's frustrations show, the public's minimalist notion of reintegration contrasts with how the former-fighters consider reintegration *should* be; involving reciprocal and reconciliatory aspects such as trust and acceptance, the ability to participate, and overall that the receiving-communities also have a role to play within this broader notion of reintegration—as deemed as necessary in the previously discussed DDR standards and literature (see *Insert 3*, data from Gibson, 2016).



**Insert 3: Venn diagram comparing public and excombatant experiences of reintegration as it should be practiced**

The lived experiences of many former-fighters generally conformed to a minimalist-approach to reintegration, largely stipulated by the expectations of receiving-communities. As a result, demobilized participate less and limit their hopes for their relationships with local “civilians” to simply “getting along with each other.” This secrecy inherent in the narrative resulted in many former-fighters having few, if any, friendships with “civilians”, and interestingly, those who did generally did so ‘*without telling my history.*’ This dual identity, however comes with additional problems, as noted in the responses from a focus group of mixed former-paramilitary and former-FARC members;

*Sometimes we have to lie because if we don't the community could reject us.*

*Sometimes you have to use armor...a false identity; a lot of relationships with “civilians” fail because of that.*

*If you can't tell people about your life as an excombatant, it's difficulty to have a trusting relationship.*

Whilst several of the excombatants had in the past or present tried to avoid socializing with other excombatants, many—particularly younger members—only felt safe enough to have relationships, intimate or otherwise, with other former-fighters, including between former “enemies”, i.e. between ex-guerrilla and ex-paramilitaries. Frequent explanations for this were, ‘*you can feel safer*’, ‘*be more accepted*’, ‘*speak freely about the past*’, and ‘*support each other emotionally*’ (focus group of ex-paramilitary and ex-FARC members). However, these intra-group relations contrasted with the reintegration ideals of those same excombatants. In the same focus group, for instance, one respondent contended that, ‘*having a partner that's not necessarily a demobilized, that's part of reintegration into society.*’ Although negative reactions to being “found out” were the norm, several, when they had been open about their past and chanced the security risks, recounted positive experiences of acceptance, even embracement, through their participation as members of the community. One respondent, reported that, ‘*I'm part of the committee board now and this satisfies me because I feel like a citizen and I can be useful in the community.*’ Another noted, ‘*[A]t work [as a Nurse], I'm sometime times honest and use stories about my difficult past [in the conflict] to encourage really ill patients in their tough situations...this often helps them and makes me feel like I'm somehow contributing to society.*’

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## **Discussion: identity, citizenship, and narratives**

Although data sets for the excombatants and non-excombatants used here are clearly not nationally or demographically representative, or large in size, they did allow for the identification and exploration of the principle challenges to the post-conflict life of former FARC combatants. As the challenges identified involved how they were perceived and treated by the non-excombatant public, focus groups with these groups were conducted, which corroborated much of the negative images and challenges to reintegration asserted by the former-combatants. Additionally, the triangulation through secondary data helped to further highlight and explain the inconsistencies and pervasiveness in the narratives of the FARC and its former-members.

Interpreting these results, this study finds that much of society's rejection of FARC excombatants appears to hinge on how the group and its present and former-members are perceived. A widespread desire for peace paradoxically lies alongside the fact that many Colombians are not inclined to accept what this actually involves, i.e. a collectively-demobilizing guerrilla group returning back into society—showing reluctance towards the social reintegration of its excombatants—whether as co-workers or neighbors, and even less so as citizens or friends. The demobilized reactions to this (secret-citizenship) are secondary findings, and have been touched upon in prior research. In terms of the “secret” component, studies have found excombatants from various demobilized groups resorting to making efforts to publically conceal their past identities (with some removing all links from other excombatants as part of this) and minimizing social interaction in their host communities with non-excombatant members (Nussio & Kaplan, 2013, 2011; Flórez, 1997; Prieto, 2012; Hazen, 2005), with Podder finding a strong correlation between social rejection and public anonymity in Liberia (2012). With the “citizenship” part, Bolten (2012) observes Sierra Leonean former-fighters attempting to conform to what society deems “normal”, and Nussio (2011) reports a tendency by some ex-paramilitaries to *‘dedicating oneself to family, education and work’* (p. 590).

Although being previously examined as distinct phenomena, this study contends that these two components of the narrative should be analyzed conjointly to pinpoint and engage with the emotional-identity contradictions

of the secret-citizen that have been documented here. Past identities of returning-fighters are rejected (yet unresolved) whilst they assimilate those of “normal” citizens—that does not allow for the long-term multiple-transitions and multiple-identities involved in the shift from combatant to citizen. The tendency among excombatants to refer to non-excombatants as “civilians”—with the implication that they themselves do not yet feel included in that category—underscores this difficulty in transcending the stigmatizing label of ex-combatant. Overall, this shows that for most former-fighters this short-term reinsertion is not a ‘route to reintegration’ as contended by the government (DNP 2008, p3);

*At what point does the excombatant label go away? I work, I mother a girl single-handedly, I’m also studying...I’ve done everything to deserve a place Colombian society. What more do we need to do to be integrated and accepted?*

Therefore, this paper recommends a shift in how citizenship is considered in DDR to allow both an acceptance of the past, and the endeavor to be a “good citizen” to take place simultaneously, and concludes by considering how entrenched narratives of insurgent-groups can be aligned more closely to a historical truth, and how this is more conducive to acceptance, security, and more broadly reintegration—particularly of pertinence in post-conflict settings.

### **Narratives and counter-narratives**

Parts of the narratives surrounding the FARC are indeed merited considering their departure from their original ideals since the 1970s—with increasing attacks against civilians, extortion, narco-trafficking and illegal mineral extraction (Prieto, 2012). However, misrepresentations and mistruths can be used by the state to exclude and delegitimize out-groups (Foucault, 1972, in Gibson 2016), therefore allowing the FARC’s traits and actions at an organizational-level to become exaggerated and attributed to, firstly its individual-members, and secondly its *ex*-members—from a figure of the FARC being responsible for far less violence in the country than paramilitary groups (23% in aggregate, and around 14% in recent years), 62% of Colombians surveyed believe otherwise (Gibson, 2016). Moreover, despite the great majority of excombatants staying away from criminality, we see trust in former-fighters at less than 19% (CNC, 2011).

Looking at the collective-demobilization of the M-19 guerrilla group, Flórez (1997) contends that the group's actions during and after the Peace Deal shifted the notion of "enemy", "bandits", and "narcos" to one of gradual acceptance as both political actors and community members (p146). Similarly, the aforementioned Gallup and Ipsos surveys report a rise of around 10% in trust in the FARC over the last 3 years, which suggests that the top-down "peace discourse" of Santos, as well as the FARC's role towards implementing the Peace Deal is slowly redressing dominant images and mistruths—largely propagated by his predecessor. Moreover, if the M-19 experience is indicative, the FARC's actions as post-conflict (political *and* civilian) actors will clearly affect their acceptance at both group and individual-levels.

It remains to be seen if the planned truth commission will contribute to this process by adding this critical bottom-up aspect. Accordingly, it would be wise if it sought to follow the South African model's attempt to establish a historical truth by discerning between emotionally-driven collective-narratives and the factual through discussion, interaction and debate at community-level, which served to re-examine the totalizing social categories that existed surrounding the demobilizing group (Buikema, 2012). At present however, the crucial out-group perspectives are not serving the critical function of dialogically engaging with the unfamiliar communities who will be determining whether the demobilizing FARC integrate, or segregate. Contrarily, when the former-fighters are viewed as terrorists and criminals, their acceptance and personal safety in host-communities are far from guaranteed. Former-fighters live in constant risk (Prieto, 2012), seen in a spate of paramilitary-led excombatant killings since the signing of the Peace Deal (Daniels, 2018(b)), and evidenced here with intra-excombatant relationships. This is all the more urgent as the government's inability to protect the demobilizing-rebels, amongst other government noncompliance of the implementation of parts of the Peace Deal, has been cited as possible reasons for excombatants delaying leaving the demobilization camps to continue the reintegration process, as well as an estimated 5-15% of recent dissidence (Daniels, 2018(b)).

This leads to the second departure of this paper, two premises prevalent in DDR literature (for instance UN 2014, 4.30, p2; 10), not to mention Colombian government policy (DNP 2008, p2; 11). The first is that returning fighters are able (and willing) to return to their communities-of-origin (for instance UN 2014, 4.30; DNP 2008, p2), and the second is that views the post-conflict

preservation of wartime networks as an incomplete reintegration. In terms of the latter, this is with good reasons as it can lead to the group rearming, splintering, or engaging in other organized criminality (as the AUC experience shows too well). However, as the AUC experience also shows, as suggested by the fledgling FARC process, an incomplete DDR process increases recidivism, which for the AUC centered on (disaffected) mid-level commanders and an incomplete disarmament (Daly, 2017). Often overlooked is the potentially positive role of the social support networks that excombatants often provide to each other during the conflict. With demobilization, these “war families” need replacing, and excombatants will look for these systems of social support elsewhere (Hazen, 2005). As the rare accounts showed here, host or original-communities can provide this (in Colombia- Nussio & Kaplan, 2013, in Liberia- Podder, 2012, and in Northern Ireland- Mitchell, 2008).

However, as these accounts also show, this is often the exception to demobilization of illegal armed-groups and largely due to these negative security conditions most cannot return ‘home’. Notably, amongst others, rather than providing such support, host-communities often stigmatize and discriminate returning-fighters. Therefore, former-fighters’ identities are often hidden in public and excombatants will look elsewhere for such emotional support- often being more inclined and feeling safer to maintain relations with other excombatants. Previous processes the Balkans and western Africa (Hazen, 2005), and Colombia, with the M-19 (Söderström, 2016), have also shown this link between preserving wartime networks and a more complete reintegration. As many of these challenges to reintegration— common to many ongoing DDR processes—, and their responses to them (i.e. secret citizenship) are distinct to integration into new communities, and have therefore been largely overlooked in the literature and merit greater study and policy consideration.

These elements of negative and flawed narratives, acceptance, security, and reintegration are all interrelated; as the national top-down narratives gradually shift to one more aligned with accuracy, helped potentially by the actions of the FARC and its former-members, this will increasingly allow the critical bottom-up shift through community-level dialogue and interaction. Although rare, when these above-detailed everyday interactions of social and civic participation do occur, they often allow for the inclusion, acceptance, and the enabling of the community-level dialogical shifting of inaccurate

stereotypes that Buikema advocates. Indeed, as indicated here, when community and security factors allow, former-fighters often want to participate and contribute to a post-conflict Colombia and tackle these misguided assumptions, which have until now been silenced in the dehumanizing discourse of war;

*People just want to know how many soldiers I've killed in the conflict. How they accept us as people who left that behind them, and instead ask how we can cooperate and live together again?*

In varying degrees, all war-to-peace transitions are affected by the images and perceptions of the demobilizing groups involved, and the success or failure of reintegration often hinges on these narratives. With this in mind, and with further investigation needed, this study offers tentative lessons which have the potential to be extrapolated and considered to facilitate the complex processes of reintegration elsewhere—both in Colombia where other illegally-armed actors continue to be active across much of the country, as well as in other DDR processes around the world.

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