Can the Rebel Body Function without its Visible Heads? The Role of Mid-Level Commanders in Peacebuilding

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Abstract

Mid-level commanders are commonly considered the visible heads of the rebel body: as leaders of combat operations, they are often targeted in counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations. While their role during conflict has been theorized extensively, only recent scholarship has focused on mid-level commanders in post-conflict transitions. Specifically, it is not clear how mid-level commanders function within a collectivity of ex-combatants to create divergent peacebuilding results on the subnational level. This paper argues that transitions from conflict involve fraying of wartime bonds and rebel command-and-control structures, which is counterproductive to peace when rebels demobilize collectively. In peacetime and in the absence of wartime command, social groups formed through military logic – such as ex-combatant collectivities – struggle to redefine individual roles. Mid-level commanders, responsible for shaping intergroup bonds during conflict, are essential for redefining and allocating ex-combatant roles in peacetime, as well as inspiring a shared peaceful vision. Through representing a rebel group’s peacetime vision, mid-level commanders are also crucial for redefining rebel-civilian relations once conflict formally ends. Against the common practice of breaking rebel wartime command-and-control structure during demobilization, this paper argues that ex-combatant groups can demobilize and reintegrate more successfully if they maintain their wartime cohesion under the leadership of commanders and are provided the necessary tools for building sustainable post-conflict livelihoods. To support the argument, the paper provides original qualitative and quantitative evidence from the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), demonstrating that ex-combatant collectivities led by their mid-level commanders were more successful in maintaining cohesion and creating sustainable collective livelihoods in the post-conflict period.

Keywords: mid-level commanders; field commanders; demobilization and reintegration; peacebuilding; DDR; FARC
Introduction

In the demobilization and reintegration camp of Agua Bonita in Colombia’s province of Caquetá, about 200 FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) ex-combatants created an autonomous hamlet in the fertile grounds between the Andes and the Amazon. The camp was part of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program following Colombia’s 2016 peace agreement with the FARC and is a success story in collective demobilization and reintegration. Instead of re-integrating with civilian communities, ex-combatants of the FARC’s Eastern bloc have created an autonomous community with a sustainable collective economy.1 They grew pineapple, yucca, plantains, and bananas and farmed fish for both consumption and sale. Ex-combatant social and economic activity was overseen by mid-level commanders of the FARC,2 who during the five-decade conflict led warfronts of the Eastern Bloc. Two-hundred miles West of Agua Bonita, the camp of La Elvira in the province of Cauca has had it differently: out of the approximately 250 ex-combatants of the Southern and Western blocs that started the DDR program in January 2017, only about 100 remained by summer 2019. No mid-level commanders were present in the camp to oversee the demobilization and reintegration program. Due to collective action problems and security issues, ex-combatants were not able to sustain collective economic projects and left the collective reintegration program.

1 The rebel group FARC – People’s Army (FARC-EP) constituted seven main operation regions or ‘blocs’ (bloque): Caribbean, Middle Magdalena, Western, Eastern, Central, Southern, and Northwestern. A bloc was composed of 500 to 5,000 combatants and corresponded roughly to a battalion or brigade in conventional state militaries.

2 Throughout this paper, for the sake of simplicity, I use the term ‘mid-level commander’ instead of ‘former mid-level commander’. The latter is the appropriate term, since FARC fronts ceased to exist with the group’s disarmament following the 2016 peace agreement. The paper intends to elaborate on the process through which the rebel military logic and structure informed the post-conflict demobilization and reintegration process of its combatants.
Agua Bonita and La Elvira are two of the twenty-four demobilization and reintegration camps built for Colombia’s DDR program with the FARC. The camps are referred to as Territorial Spaces of Training and Reincorporation (ETCR in Spanish). Some of the twenty-four ETCR started demobilization with their wartime commanders; others had to manage their post-conflict collectivities without wartime leadership. These collective initiatives in demobilization and reintegration have shown great variation across Colombia: some turned into economically sustainable villages, while others were abandoned by ex-combatants. What role do mid-level commanders play in demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants? Do ex-combatant populations demobilize differently with or without their wartime commander? To answer these questions, this paper offers a subnational analysis of DDR with the FARC, contrasting demobilization and reintegration camps with and without mid-level commanders.

The paper argues that transitions from conflict involve fraying of wartime bonds and rebel command-and-control structures, which is counterproductive to peace when rebels demobilize collectively. In peacetime and in the absence of wartime command, social groups formed through military logic – such as ex-combatant collectivities – struggle to redefine individual roles. Mid-level commanders, responsible for shaping intergroup bonds during conflict, are essential for redefining and allocating ex-combatant roles in peacetime, as well as inspiring a shared peaceful vision. Through representing a rebel group’s peacetime vision, mid-level commanders are also crucial for redefining rebel-civilian relations once conflict formally ends. Against the common

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3 Demobilization and reintegration camps are also referred to as cantons in the DDR literature. In Colombia, they are called Territorial Spaces of Training and Reincorporation (Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación). The FARC employs the term ‘reincorporation’ for its ex-combatants since the peace agreement did not envision ‘reintegration’ of its combatants within civilian communities, at least in the first thirty months of cantonment. In this paper, I use the term ‘demobilization and reintegration’, which is the more common term in the DDR literature and is used for individual-oriented and collective programs (Sharif 2019).
practice of breaking rebel wartime command-and-control structure to create the conditions for peace, this paper argues that collective demobilization and reintegration necessitates the preservation of wartime cohesion. In the presence of similar domestic and international support, collective demobilization and reintegration camps are more successful in retaining ex-combatants and building viable economic projects when they are led by wartime commanders. To support the argument, the paper provides original qualitative and quantitative evidence from the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), demonstrating that ex-combatant collectivities led by their mid-level commanders were more successful in maintaining cohesion and creating sustainable collective livelihoods in the post-conflict period.

Mid-level commanders are commonly considered the rebel body’s visible heads. As leaders of combat operations, they are often targeted in counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations. Also referred to as middle managers (Daly 2014), field commanders (Martin 2021), or local commanders (Eccarius-Kelly 2012; Piccolino 2018), mid-level commanders exert control over troops, territory, and civilian populations. They have detailed knowledge of regions where they operate, oversee intelligence collection, and plan unit operations (FIP 2010). Their social capital is considered crucial for maintaining a stable command-and-control structure during rebellion, linking top rebel leaders to combatants. While their role during conflict has been theorized extensively (Weinstein 2006; Wood 2009; Rosenau et al. 2014; Staniland 2014; Arjona 2016), only recent scholarship has focused on mid-level commanders in post-conflict transitions (Themnér 2012; Daly 2014; Barter 2015; Piccolino 2018; Themnér 2019; Gutiérrez D. 2020; Martin 2021). Specifically, it is not clear how mid-level commanders function within a collectivity of ex-combatants to create divergent peacebuilding results on the subnational level. This paper
aims to fill this gap by offering a subnational analysis of DDR, identifying the role of mid-level commanders in demobilization and reintegration.

Through within-case process tracing of a sample of six demobilization and reintegration camps in Colombia, the paper finds that mid-level commanders impact demobilization and reintegration in four ways: (1) maintaining group cohesion by acting as conduits between former rebel leaders and ex-combatants; (2) providing confidence in the DDR program by reducing the security dilemma among ex-combatants; (3) facilitating economic reintegration by planning and managing collective economic projects; and (4) developing relations with civilian communities. The paper further establishes quantitatively that, within the universe of demobilization and reintegration camps, those led by a mid-level commander performed better on a variety of social and economic attributes. The paper’s findings are based on discontinuous field research in Colombia during five years of the DDR program (January 2017 – January 2022), including interviews with 125 FARC ex-combatants and former commanders.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the role of mid-level commanders both as spoilers and contributors to peace, as well as their crucial position within the FARC’s decentralized structure. Second, it elaborates the paper’s methodology and data collection. Third, it shows the impact of commander leadership on ETCR retention rates and, through within-case process tracing, identifies two mechanisms through which mid-level commanders played a vital role in ex-combatant political and social reintegration. The fourth section demonstrates the impact of commander leadership on ETCR’s economic viability and identifies two mechanisms through which mid-level commanders impacted ex-combatant economic reintegration. Before concluding, the paper addresses alternative explanations that could drive variation among demobilization and reintegration camps.
Mid-Level Commanders: Status, Function, and Purpose

While some studies have identified wartime commanders as spoilers (Zyck 2009; Themnér 2011; Daly 2014), other analysis has demonstrated their effective role in post-conflict peacebuilding (Ouaiss and Rowayheb 2017; Shesterinina 2020; Sharif 2022). Commanders are crucial for sustaining wartime bonds among ex-combatants and capitalizing on them once conflict formally ends. Themnér (2015) finds that ex-combatant networks are more likely to remobilize when former mid-level commanders lose their privileged roles as wartime brokers of resources and information. Wartime bonds among commanders and combatants can help with DDR, generating employment or social goods, such as friendship and a sense of belonging (Reno 2010, de Vries and Wiegink 2011; Themnér 2011, Persson 2012; Sharif 2018). Humphreys and Weinstein (2007) find that being delinked from war factions is negatively correlated with being employed and ex-combatants’ confidence in democracy. Sharif (2022) finds that FARC ex-combatants led by their wartime commander had more favourable attitudes towards the DDR program and reported having fewer incentives for rearming. Similarly, Zyck (2009) demonstrates that DDR provisions of assistance to individual ex-combatants – as an attempt to break the wartime bonds between combatants and commanders – resulted in discontent and social and economic fragmentation. In multiple other DDR programs, providing cash payments or economic assistance to individual ex-combatants has proven ineffective for ex-combatant development, employment, or reintegration (Berdal 1996; Bertrand and Pauwels 2000; Lundin et al. 2000; Knight and Özerdem 2004).

Wartime bonds among combatants in organizationally tight groups often survive the war (Themnér 2011; 2013). Nussio and Oppenheim (2014) report that 64% of former FARC ex-combatants and 71% of former paramilitaries were still in contact with ex-combatants of their respective groups after they demobilized. These bonds are sometimes strong enough for fighters
to sacrifice their lives for one another in the name of brotherhood (Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, and Swann 2014). The focus on wartime bonds is warranted: rebel groups dedicate the bulk of their time and resources to bolstering their organizational structure (Bakker, Raab, and Milward 2012; Parkinson 2013; Staniland 2014; Sharif 2021a), building both primary and secondary group cohesion (Henderson 1985; Wood 2009). Mid-level commanders are crucial for building both primary and secondary group cohesion during conflict. Training and socialization to the small group (primary group cohesion) takes place in smaller units, such as cells, platoons, or sections, which are headed by mid-level commanders (Kenny 2010). Mid-level commanders maintain secondary group cohesion through linking combatants ideologically with rebel leaders (Sharif 2022).

Prior studies have identified mid-level commanders as social leaders of ex-combatant communities, playing a vital role in peacebuilding (Daly 2016; Themnér 2019; Themnér and Karlén 2020; Martin 2022; Sharif 2022). They also play a role in redefining civilian-combatant relations after conflict. Many qualitative and quantitative studies have detailed the complexity of such relations (Borzello 2009; Corbin 2008; Knight 2008; Mergelsberg 2012; Kaplan and Nussio 2018; Martin 2021; Martin, Piccolino, and Speight 2021). Economic ties, for instance, need to be reconfigured, since demobilized rebel groups cannot continue their wartime rapport with civilian communities, which is often characterized by taxation, control, extraction, or governance (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016). Janzen (2014) shows being united helps ex-combatants connect and forge relationships with neighbouring civilian communities. In establishing redefined, legal, post-war rapport with civilians, commanders play a crucial role: commander–community ties impact commanders’ ability to sustain peace or return to violence (Martin 2021). Since civilian communities interact with rebel commanders during the war, they are more likely to accept
commanders as representatives of ex-combatants. Documenting the FARC’s indigenous ex-combatants’ struggle to reintegrate, Santamaría and Hernández (2020) report that civilian indigenous communities only communicated with FARC commanders and refused to speak to individual ex-combatants from the camps.

This paper contributes to the literature on post-conflict rebel cohesion by analyzing the impact of mid-level commanders in Colombia’s collective demobilization and reintegration program with the FARC. In peace negotiations with the Colombian government, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) only agreed to a ‘collective’ demobilization and reintegration of its combatants, which would avoid fragmentation of its wartime organization after disarmament. The FARC-EP’s central authority, the Secretariat, negotiated a peace agreement with the government of Colombia that included assembling combatants in camps for a long-term demobilization and reintegration program (initially for thirty months). To maintain its command-and-control structure, the Secretariat delegated many of the mid-level commanders to the camps as leaders of the demobilization and reintegration (Nussio and Quishpe 2019). This was partly because the FARC understood the role of mid-level commanders in maintaining group cohesion and partly due to the need for commanders to maintain their status after conflict.

4 The FARC changed its name to Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo, FARC-EP) following the Seventh Guerilla Conference in 1982. Henceforth in this paper, I refer to the FARC rebel group as FARC-EP and reserve FARC to refer to the group and its former combatants following the 2016 peace agreement with the government of Colombia.

5 The FARC-EP had materialized a classic guerilla organizational structure, inspired by the Marxist-Leninist approach to warfare (Leech 2011). Throughout five decades of conflict, it managed to maintain its tight command-and-control structure, despite engaging in criminal activities, such as narco-trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion (Arango 2016; Villamizar 2017).

6 During conflict, mid-level commanders maintained privileged positions within the rebel group’s organizational structure (Eccarius-Kelly 2012). A commander led a front (frente), constituting 30 to 1,000
In 2016, after five decades of conflict, the FARC-EP started participating in the DDR program, moving its 66 fronts into disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration camps.\textsuperscript{7} Not all camps, however, had a commander present in them. Many of the fronts had lost their commanders in military operations against FARC-EP, especially during Plan Colombia (2000-2015).\textsuperscript{8} Commanders of some other fronts had either refused to join the peace process or later defected to FARC-EP dissidents (Gutiérrez D. 2020). Variation in the presence of mid-level commanders in the ETCR was partly the result of FARC’s post-conflict challenges in maintaining its presence on the national level in the form of a political party and sustaining the resistance in the countryside. After disarmament, FARC faced a shortage of military commanders who could play leadership roles in the party. Many commanders left the ETCR for Bogota at the beginning of DDR to occupy the ten congressional seats allocated to the FARC party or serve at the party’s headquarters.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, some camps started the demobilization and reintegration process without the presence of a mid-level commander. Figure 1 shows how FARC’s seven blocs were sent into camps (ETCR) for demobilization and reintegration.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Figure 1. Allocation of FARC fronts to demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR)}

\textsuperscript{7} The FARC prefers using ‘laying down of arms’ (\textit{dejación de armas}) instead of ‘disarmament’, implying that the group has not ‘disarmed’ politically and socially; it has only laid down its arms to continue the social-political fight without arms. A few FARC fronts formed a dissident group and refused to disarm.

\textsuperscript{8} With military assistance by the United States during Plan Colombia, the Colombian military gained special training and equipment for targeting FARC-EP’s top leaders and commanders.

\textsuperscript{9} Interview with FARC Congressman Carlos Antonio Lozada (August 2019)

\textsuperscript{10} Various ETCR included individual ex-combatants from different fronts than is shown in Figure 1. The figure also excludes mobile columns of FARC-EP.
As mentioned in the Introduction, after thirty months of DDR (January 2017-August 2019), some camps showed high retention rates and had developed viable economic projects, while others had experienced a gradual reduction in their ex-combatant population. This paper will show that mid-level commander leadership significantly impacted a camp’s retention rate and economic viability. Ex-combatants of the FARC I interviewed repeatedly mentioned their commander’s essential role in keeping ex-combatants together and creating livelihoods for them. Abelardo Caicedo Colorado, alias Solís Almeida, the founder and commander of FARC-EP’s Front 19 negotiated on behalf of ex-combatants to buy the land on which the demobilization and reintegration camp was built to give ex-combatants a stable future. He explained:

We are collectively buying the 20 acres of land the ETCR is built on for 150 million pesos (USD 45,731). No ex-combatant alone can afford this. Each ex-combatant is going to contribute 1 million pesos (USD 304) to the collective land that is going to be their future stable home. The initiative for all our economic endeavours came from us within the ETCR.

The rest of this paper identifies the specific ways through which mid-level commanders led demobilization and reintegration camps and why their leadership led to significant differences between the camps’ retention rate and economic viability. The next section elaborates on the paper’s methodology and data collection process.

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11 The Colombian government, on recommendations by the UN Mission and other agencies involved in the reincorporation process, extended the initial thirty-month period for demobilization and reintegration. This paper, however, only takes the first thirty months into account, since the analysis is not impacted by external factors to DDR, such as the Covid pandemic. The paper is investigating the ex-combatants propensity to stay within the DDR program during the period officially allocated to demobilization and reintegration – thirty months.

12 Ex-combatants were given thirty months in the camps to work on land rented by the government from various landowners. Ex-combatants in ETCR without a commander reported concern for their future once the ETCR lease ended and the government stopped paying their monthly allowances. In the absence of guarantees for the future, financial insecurity translated into disillusionment with DDR and the peace process.

13 Interview with the author, ETCR Tierra Grata (August 2019)
Research Design

The paper employs a mixed methods approach to answering two related questions. What role do mid-level commanders play in collective demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants? Do ex-combatant populations demobilize differently with or without their wartime commander? The mixed-methods approach in this paper includes a cross-camp comparative analysis, as well as within-case process tracing of camp dynamics. While the quantitative comparative analysis aims at elucidating the general trends in collective DDR, within-case process tracing identifies the mechanisms through which mid-level commanders influenced demobilization and reintegration. Within-case process tracing, also known as causal process observations, is a method of research inquiry used to make inferential claims about processes and mechanisms impacting change in an outcome of interest (Brady and Collier 2010; Arjona 2016). The next two sections trace the process through which mid-level commanders impacted ex-combatants’ (1) collective social and political reintegration and (2) collective economic reintegration. In each section, I first present a comparative quantitative analysis of the total population of FARC demobilization and reintegration camps, capturing social and economic dynamics of the camps. I then identify the mechanisms through which mid-level commanders impacted collective social and economic reintegration.

For the comparative cross-camp analysis, data were gathered on the population of demobilization and reintegration camps. These include the camps’ (1) retention rates, (2) economic

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14 Considering the low number of observations on the camp level (N = 24), I did not base the arguments in this paper on the quantitative analysis of the ETCR data. Although the twenty-four ETCR in this analysis represent the ETCR population, the low number of observations does not allow conducting multivariate regressions on the data. The quantitative analysis, although robust, simply substantiates the arguments developed through extensive qualitative research with ex-combatants, former mid-level commanders, and FARC party leaders.
viability, (3) government funding, and (4) international assistance. Data on ETCR retention rates were shared with the author by Colombia’s Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización, ARN), the national agency set up by the Colombian Presidency in 2017 to manage the DDR program with the FARC. The data on economic viability, governmental funding, and international assistance for cooperatives were shared with the author by the UN Political Mission in Colombia. For the comparative analysis, the twenty-four camps were divided into two subsets: those led by a mid-level commander (14 camps) and those without (10 camps).

Within-case process tracing was done with information gathered through discontinuous field research in Colombia during the peace process with the FARC (January 2017 – January 2022). Data gathering included interviews with 125 FARC ex-combatants and mid-level commanders in six demobilization and reintegration camps, as well as with former members of the FARC Secretariat, FARC members of Congress, FARC party officials, and officials at the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. Interviews with ex-combatants and mid-level commanders took place in six ETCR in various geographic regions, as Figure 2 demonstrates. One ETCR was selected each from the northern, southern, eastern, and western regions, and two ETCR from the central region. These regions correspond to FARC’s Caribbean, South, Oriental, Occidental, and Central blocs. The interviews took place in provinces of Caquetá (ETCR Agua Bonita), Cauca (ETCR La Elvira), Tolima (ETCR La Fila and El Oso), Cesar (ETCR Tierra Grata), and Meta (ETCR Yarí). The author engaged in participant observation of the DDR program starting with the formation of the ETCR in January 2017. Interviews in five ETCR took place
between May 2019 and August 2019. Interviews in ETCR Yarí were done in January 2022. By this time, the ETCR had been relocated from the province of Meta to Caquetá due to various issues discussed in the next section. Table 1 provides an overview of the camps where interviews took place, including the total number of ex-combatants present in the camp at the beginning of the peace process (2017) and after thirty months of DDR (2019), as well as the number of ex-combatants and former commanders interviewed.

**Figure 2. Location of the six demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR) in the sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETCR</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Ex-combatants (Jan 2017)</th>
<th>Ex-combatants (June-Aug 2019)</th>
<th>Ex-combatants in sample</th>
<th>Commanders in sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yarí</td>
<td>La Macarena, Meta</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Fila</td>
<td>Icononzo, Tolima</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Oso</td>
<td>Planadas, Tolima</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agua Bonita</td>
<td>La Montañita, Caquetá</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tierra Grata</td>
<td>La Paz, Cesar</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Elvira</td>
<td>Buenos Aires, Cauca</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Impact of Mid-Level Commanders on Collective Social and Political Reintegration**

In the FARC’s collective demobilization and reintegration process, as in any collectivity of individuals, leadership was vital for maintaining a well-functioning community immediately after

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15 The Institutional Review Board had approved research design, procedures, and measures prior to interviews. The author positioned herself as an outsider, affiliated solely with an academic institution and researching the variation among ETCR. If a camp was led by a mid-level commander, the commander was interviewed first in discreet locations inside the camp. Then a snowball sampling strategy was used to interview both male and female ex-combatants individually. Face-to-face interviews with ex-combatants ranged 45-60 minutes and were performed in Spanish by the author inside participants’ homes or neutral sites in the ETCR. Participants provided informed consent and received no compensation.
the war. The FARC aimed at building distinct ‘communities of peace’ (ciudadelas de paz) in the countryside, instead of reintegrating into civilian populations (Segura and Stein 2019). While there were no distinct plans for these communities to be led by wartime military commanders indefinitely, FARC leaders assigned mid-level commanders to the demobilization and reintegration camps to ensure that ex-combatants did not abandon the collective reintegration plan during the thirty-month period of encampment, as stipulated by the 2016 Peace Agreement (January 2017 – August 2019). Maintaining ex-combatants within the ETCR was the first step in implementing the plan to socially reintegrate ex-combatants within a peaceful, post-conflict community of their peers. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the ETCR led by mid-level commanders had a 0.6 retention rate,\textsuperscript{16} while those without a commander had a 0.46 retention rate, which is a significant difference at the 0.05 level.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, in thirty months of DDR, the ETCR led by a mid-level commander managed to maintain 60 percent of their ex-combatant population, while those without a commander saw 54 percent of their population leave.\textsuperscript{18}

**Figure 3. Retention rates in demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR)**

How did mid-level commanders impact social and political reintegration of ex-combatants into nascent FARC communities, compelling ex-combatants to remain within the collective DDR

\textsuperscript{16}Retention rate captures the ratio of ex-combatants remaining in the ETCR after thirty months of DDR (mean = 0.52; min = 0.24; max = 0.88).

\textsuperscript{17}The p-value for the T-test comparing the mean retention rate of the two sets was 0.03, rejecting the alternative hypothesis that the true difference in means is equal to 0.

\textsuperscript{18}Ex-combatants that left the ETCR did not necessarily rearm or join dissident factions of FARC-EP. Following disarmament, ex-combatants were free to leave the ETCR. Incentives to leave included reuniting with family, looking for jobs outside the ETCR, joining FARC dissidents, or joining criminal groups. Camps that created a well-functioning community not only incentivized ex-combatants to stay within the camp but motivated them to bring civilian family members to live with them within the camp. There are no credible reports on the number of ex-combatants who joined FARC dissidents, FARC recidivists, or criminal bands after leaving the ETCR. It is, however, certain that ex-combatants that remained in the ETCR followed the legal DDR path delineated by the peace agreement. Interview with Carlos Antonio Lozada, FARC Congressman and leader of FARC political party (Bogota, August 2019).
program? The next two subsections explain the mechanisms through which mid-level commanders impacted the social reintegration of ex-combatants into a disarmed FARC community. Within-case process tracing of collective DDR in the camps revealed that mid-level commanders played a decisive role in ex-combatant collective reintegration through (a) maintaining secondary group cohesion, and (b) reducing post-conflict security dilemmas.

**Mechanism 1. Maintaining secondary group cohesion: mid-level commanders acted as communication pipelines between former rebel leaders and ex-combatants**

With its transformation into a political party, the FARC faced a leadership vacuum, causing fractures among former rebel leaders and individual ex-combatants in the demobilization camps. This fraying of wartime bonds increased the risk of recidivism, especially in environments where illicit economies and insecure conditions provided incentives for picking up arms again. The 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC had obligated mid-level commanders to ‘actively contribute to guaranteeing the success of the process of reincorporating the FARC-EP into civilian life in a holistic manner’ by explaining the Agreement to the group’s combatants and resolving conflict arising in the peace process (Final Agreement 2016, section 3.3). The Agreement’s call to action reflects FARC-EP’s command-and-control structure during the war: the group maintained its organizational structure through mid-level commanders and their connection with the FARC Secretariat (Arias, Herrera, and Prieto 2010). In transitioning away from conflict, former commanders acted as communication pipelines between ex-combatants in the countryside and former rebel leaders residing in Bogotá. They delineated the FARC party’s agenda to ex-combatants regularly, giving ex-combatants political agency and convincing them of their role within a bigger political project.
Tracing the DDR process in demobilization and reintegration camps revealed that mid-level commanders were crucial for maintaining secondary group cohesion after the war: in their absence, ex-combatants lacked the means to connect with FARC leaders in Bogotá and felt disconnected from the group. Since guerrilla cohesion was always ensured through command-and-control ties during the war, ex-combatants were not accustomed to other modes of communication with the now-political leaders of the FARC. Through direct communications, mid-level commanders maintained secondary group cohesion with FARC leaders, after the group had transitioned from a guerrilla to political party.

The former commander leading ETCR Tierra Grata regularly communicated to ex-combatants the FARC’s national election strategies and other major policy decisions, as well as the general direction the FARC party was taking. In response to what expectations she has of FARC leaders, an ex-combatant in ETCR Tierra Grata said she was aware of the party’s political plans and trusted national leaders: ‘FARC leaders should simply do what they need to do; they know what they need to do. They should do what they have taught us during the war. They are our only hope’. Most ex-combatants in ETCR Tierra Grata said they were hopeful for the future of the FARC party. ‘We want the party to reconcile the FARC with the rest of the country, just like we have reconciled with the communities around us’, said another ex-combatant in ETCR Tierra Grata. Through maintaining secondary group cohesion between ex-combatants and former rebel leaders, mid-level commanders gave ex-combatants a sense of political purpose. Ex-combatants saw themselves as part of a political project, whose goals were being fought for by party representatives in the capital.

19 Interview with a FARC mid-level commander in ETCR Tierra Grata (May 2019)
20 Interview with an ex-combatant in ETCR Tierra Grata (May 2019)
21 Interview with an ex-combatant in ETCR Tierra Grata (May 2019)
In contrast, ex-combatants in ETCR El Oso in the province of Tolima reported having lost their political agency in the demobilization process. By August 2019, ETCR El Oso housed 80 ex-combatants of the original 156 ex-combatants at the beginning of the DDR program (180 by some accounts). Many ex-combatants reported that others had defected to FARC-EP dissidents due to lack of opportunities in the ETCR. Jorge Enrique Corredor, alias Wilson Saavedra, was the mid-level commander responsible for the ETCR. He left the ETCR within the first few months of DDR and was later killed by members of an armed group. In the absence of a link with the party, ex-combatants felt left out and mostly expressed grievances toward national leaders. One of the ex-combatants complained, ‘FARC leaders didn't help us economically and didn't visit us. They have nothing to do with the ETCR. They're doing their own work’.\textsuperscript{22} Without a commander to communicate the FARC national agenda to ex-combatants, they felt ostracized and resentful towards FARC party leaders.

Similarly, ETCR Yarí in the province of Meta lost its mid-level commander, Olivio Iván Merchán, alias Loco Iván, when he joined FARC dissidents in July 2018. The mid-level commander disappeared after a meeting with the FARC party in Bogota. Before leaving the ETCR, he was in constant communication with the FARC party leaders. An ex-combatant in ETCR Yarí explained, ‘He often travelled to Bogotá to negotiate with the Senators, but on one of those trips he left and did not return’.\textsuperscript{23} Due to threats by non-state armed actors and a high desertion rate, ETCR Yarí fell into disrepair. In December 2021, the forty-three remaining ex-combatants were moved to a new ETCR in the province of Caquetá. The author visited the new ETCR Yarí in January 2022, after it had been moved from its previous location in Meta. Ex-combatants were

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)
\textsuperscript{23} Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR Yarí (January 2022)
beginning to recreate their livelihood in the new space and reported being estranged from the FARC party leaders. An ex-combatant reported, ‘We feel that they left us alone. Communication is very intermittent. They [FARC party leaders] previously contributed a lot to this process’. Once the mid-level commander left, ex-combatants in Yari not only lost their connection to group leaders, but also lost trust in the leaders as representatives of ex-combatants.

In contrast, ETCR La Fila in the province of Tolima housed 320 ex-combatants and was an epitome of economic, political, and social reintegration. The commander of Front 27 was in the ETCR at DDR onset, along with three political-military front leaders, who coordinated all the ETCR activities. After thirty months of encampment, the ETCR had remained a cohesive community of ex-combatants. An ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila explained the reason for their cohesive post-conflict community: ‘The FARC was always organized; it is now too’.24 The mid-level commanders in the ETCR reported being in touch with FARC national leaders and holding weekly meetings to delineate the party decisions to ex-combatants. If they were not part of a bigger cause, ex-combatants would perceive themselves as individuals without a political purpose: ‘We are not demobilized; we are finished if we demobilize. Our fight continues politically’.25 The sense of purpose also determined the decision to rearm. Most ex-combatants said they would only rearm under conditions of extreme insecurity to defend themselves or if the FARC leadership asked them to revert to armed conflict. ‘Rearmament would have to be declared by the FARC political and military leadership, which is not favoured right now’, explained an ex-combatant in La Fila, when asked under what conditions they would consider rearming.26

24 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila (May 2019)
25 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila (May 2019)
26 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila (May 2019)
Mechanism 2. Increasing confidence in DDR: mid-level commanders reduced ex-combatants’ security dilemma

The weeks and months following disarmament were marked with extreme uncertainty and a sense of insecurity. In demobilization and reintegration camps, mid-level commanders reduced informational asymmetries by defining the relationship between (disarmed) ex-combatants and the (armed) military and police forces. By keeping the organizational structure of the group intact, commanders left the option of collective rearmament open, reducing incentives for individual recidivism. Considering mid-level commanders’ knowledge of the terrain and security threats, ex-combatants delegated security-related decisions to their wartime commanders, reducing incentives to leave the collective demobilization and reintegration program due to security threats. Mid-level commanders also specified the code of conduct for ex-combatants within the camp and in their relations with civilians in the camp. They mediated among them in case of conflict and advocated on behalf of ex-combatants where tension arose.

Ex-combatants residing in ETCR led by a mid-level commander reported that the former commander (now the ETCR leader) spoke on their behalf with the military personnel in charge of camp security and reported security issues to camp residents. They characterized post-conflict life as one with better security, peace of mind, time with family, and connection with the world. One ex-combatant in ETCR Agua Bonita said she was happy she could now have a Facebook profile and find friends, even among Spanish speakers in the United States. She did not have any security concerns.\footnote{Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR Agua Bonita (May 2019)} ‘I want to stay in the ETCR after DDR ends. We have a community here that doesn’t exist anywhere else in the world. We trust each other. Life is easy here. Life on the outside is complicated. We have everything we need here’, said an ex-combatant in Agua Bonita when asked
about her vision of future life. In contrast, in the ETCR without a mid-level commander, ex-combatants reported that security was a matter of concern, both because of threats from outside the camp and internal tensions with civilians who had come to reside in the camps with ex-combatants.

In ETCR El Oso, without a mid-level commander, many ex-combatants expressed security concerns. An ex-combatant expressed, ‘We do not know if paramilitaries are going to descend from that hill [pointing to the hill outside the boundaries of the ETCR] and kill all of us in our sleep’. While security threats were a problem for all twenty-four demobilization and reintegration camps to varying degrees, some ex-combatant concerns related to the security dilemma of disarming as a rebel organization and losing the wartime command-and-control structure. An ex-combatant in El Oso explained that his security dilemma started when the mid-level commander left the camp:

We had a statute, regulations, and rules (statuto, reglamento y reglas) during the war, which was common for all fronts and blocs. After disarmament, we had to decide how to live together solely using our conscience. The commander of Front 21 was present at the beginning of disarmament and told everyone what their obligations were: men would work in the fields and women would attend to the ETCR. He left after a year; we then had to pick someone from among ourselves.

ETCR El Oso was divided into two different communities on top and at the bottom of a hill, lacking communal integrity. Almost half of the twenty-eight ex-combatants in El Oso the author interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the DDR program and showed little commitment to it. Some expressed enthusiasm for joining dissidents if they had access to arms. One ex-combatant

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28 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR Agua Bonita (May 2019)
29 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)
30 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)
said, ‘I want to return to arms; I never believed in the peace process. I didn't think a right-wing government would ever comply with the demands of a left-wing movement’.  

In contrast, most ex-combatants in ETCR led by mid-level commanders reported a disinclination towards rearming. They reported feeling secure and having a sense of community, as well as a vision for a common future. ‘I don’t ever want the civil war to return to this country. The days of fighting with arms are over. We need to fight for land, justice, peace, and other issues now’, said an ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila about their future. The sense of security created through living and working among other ex-combatants contributed to aversion for rearming. ‘I don’t want to return to arms. Life was hard as a combatant. I hated losing friends and family in combat. We have better security now. No one wants violence to be repeated’, said an ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila. Through maintaining ex-combatant cohesion, former mid-level commanders reduced ex-combatants’ security dilemma associated with disarming in the face of a former armed adversary – the state – and in the presence of non-state armed groups targeting ex-combatants. Thus, ex-combatants in those ETCR led by a mid-level commander reported wanting to stay within the DDR program and continuing life as a collective.

The Impact of Mid-Level Commanders on Collective Economic Reintegration

In collective demobilization and reintegration, leadership is vital for creating, developing, and sustaining economic projects that provide employment opportunities for ex-combatants. Rebel groups are not governed through democratic institutions during the war. In the immediate aftermath of conflict, ex-combatants still rely on wartime command-and-control structures to

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31 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)
32 Interview with an ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila (June 2019)
33 Interview with an ex-combatant in ETCR Agua Bonita (May 2019)
reorient themselves to their new modes of living. In the case of the FARC, the ETCR led by a mid-level commander had significantly higher levels of economic viability after thirty months of DDR. By developing sustainable economic projects, ex-combatants turned the temporary demobilization and reintegration camps into permanent, self-sufficient villages. Figure 4 shows the difference in economic viability of the camps after thirty months of DDR, based on whether they were led by a mid-level commander.

Economic viability is evaluated on the ordinal scale from 0 to 3 based on the number of economic projects, the number of people involved in the projects, and their long-term sustainability (median = 2; min = 0; max = 3). For instance, ETCR El Oso’s economic viability was evaluated as 1 since the ETCR had only one cooperative for coffee cultivation. With three cooperatives, economic viability was coded as 3 for ETCR La Fila. Comparing ETCR with and without commander leadership shows that all ETCR with a mid-level commander were economically sustainable after thirty months of DDR. Moreover, only one ETCR without a mid-level commander became fully viable. The differences between two types of ETCR are significant at the 0.05 level (p-value = 0.002).

What role did mid-level commanders play in the collective reintegration process in the camps? The next subsections explain the two mechanisms through which mid-level commanders impacted economic reintegration of ex-combatants through (a) managing collective economic projects and (b) redefining economic relations with civilian communities.

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34 I compared the two ETCR sets (with and without mid-level commanders) using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test for economic viability (on the ordinal scale) and a T-test for government funding and international support (both on the interval scale). The p-value of the Wilcoxon signed rank test is 0.002, which is less than the significance level alpha = 0.05. We can conclude with 95% certainty that the median score for economic viability in ETCR led by a mid-level commander is significantly different from those without wartime leadership.
Figure 4. Economic Viability of demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR)

Mechanism 1. Facilitating the economy of demobilization and reintegration camps: mid-level commanders assigned roles and managed collective economic projects

Maintaining a unified ex-combatant community required developing collective economic projects to employ ex-combatants in. FARC ex-combatants received a one-time allowance of two million pesos (USD 600) at the beginning of the DDR program, which some of them invested in collective cooperatives in the ETCR. In addition, they monthly received the equivalent of 90 percent of the minimum basic income in Colombia, initially planned for thirty months. Once approved by the government, each ex-combatant could also receive eight million pesos (USD 2,400) to implement a productive project individually or as part of a collective. Planning and developing economic projects involved collective action problems and a great degree of uncertainty about their future. Mid-level commanders in the ETCR mitigated ex-combatants’ financial management dilemmas: the commander was the focal point for planning viable economic projects and defining individual roles within the collective projects. ETCR La Fila, for instance, functioned through three cooperatives owned and run by ex-combatants: visitor services (hostel, restaurant, grocery store), beer brewery, and a clothes-making workshop. Financial gains from cooperatives were distributed among those that initially invested in them.

In the interviews I conducted in ETCR with viable economic projects, ex-combatants repeatedly attributed their economic success to their ability to function as a well-organized group with an effective leader. They described themselves as a community of wartime peers with a commander who often played the father role for the family. An ex-combatant in ETCR La Fila explained, ‘There was nothing on this land when we came here. We built all these houses and
planted yucca, bananas, and fruits’. Mid-level commanders in the ETCR delegated functions and responsibilities to ex-combatants, giving some leadership positions for social and economic activities. Mid-level commander’s leadership was crucial for the sustainability of collective economic projects. Without this leadership role, economic projects fell apart, despite the ETCR receiving funding and support from the government and international organizations.

The crucial role of commanders can especially be highlighted by the adverse impact of their departure on the ETCR. When alias Loco Iván left ETCR Yarí to join the dissidents in 2018, ex-combatants scrambled to fill his role with elected leaders from the camp, but collective action problems prevented cooperatives to continue functioning. When ex-combatants left the former site of ETCR Yarí in Meta and moved to a new location in Caquetá, they only took the livestock with them, despite the ETCR having started with multiple collective economic projects. One ex-combatant described the status of the former site as such:

Yarí no longer exists; only rubble remains. There were productive projects that we built with the Government and UNDP. The clothing business was stalled; the community store was stalled; the cane milling was over; the shoe store project had the machines and the material but no place to put it.\(^{35}\)

Similarly, ETCR El Oso lacked a mid-level commander. It was run by a group of seven elected individuals and had one cooperative for coffee cultivation. The cooperative started with some ex-combatants taking classes in coffee cultivation. The University of Ibague also helped with legally establishing the coffee brand and packet design. Civilian leaders of coffee growers gave ex-combatants premium coffee grains to cultivate. The coffee was sold in Gaitania, Planadas, and in the coffee fairs in Ibague. Despite their success in one cooperative, ex-combatants reported grievances regarding the channelling of all the economic activity towards coffee production:

\(^{35}\) Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR Yarí (January 2022)
Representatives of ex-combatants were supposed to direct each of the cooperatives. But, after Wilson left, there was one person making decisions about both coffee and the potential ecotourism project. We were interested in a rafting project, but the ETCR leader wouldn’t allow it. All the energy went towards coffee.\textsuperscript{36}

Others voiced concerns about the new ETCR leaders for not being able to manage resources properly. By August 2019, most ex-combatants worked on coffee plantations outside the ETCR because there wasn’t enough work for everyone inside the ETCR and the economic projects hadn’t started yet. Most ex-combatants linked economic hardships with lack of proper direction in the camp, especially with the changes in the leadership. ‘We are still waiting for a pisciculture project that was never implemented. Projects failed because the leaders failed. I don’t know why Wilson [the mid-level commander] left but, if he hadn’t, we would be much more advanced by now, even more than the ETCR in Icononzo [ETCR La Fila]’.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Mechanism 2. Recreating economic networks with civilian: mid-level commanders established legal economic ties between the camp and civilian communities}

In the first stages of collective demobilization and reintegration, ex-combatant groups needed to redefine their rapport with civilians, especially because economic sustainability of the demobilization and reintegration camps depended to a great extent on ex-combatant relations with the neighbouring civilian communities. The FARC had originally selected ETCR locations based on the rebel group’s territorial control during conflict: for strategic reasons, the FARC envisioned demobilization in areas with civilian populations sympathetic to the FARC’s cause.\textsuperscript{38} Regardless of civilian support for the peace process, new relations had to be defined with neighbouring civilian communities once combatants were grouped within camps. Following disarmament, FARC mid-

\textsuperscript{36} Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)
\textsuperscript{37} Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)
\textsuperscript{38} Interview with FARC Congressman Carlos Antonio Lozada (Bogota, August 2019)
level commanders saw as their first task negotiating new relations with neighbouring civilian communities. Mid-level commanders in ETCR La Fila, for instance, negotiated selling La Roja (the handcrafted beer brewed in the ETCR) at stores in the nearby municipality of Planadas. In return, they employed civilians in the ETCR for a variety of jobs. A mid-level commander in ETCR La Fila explained that, in his talks with civilian community leaders, he had to first explain what the FARC’s plans were during demobilization and reintegration, as well as how they would benefit the neighbouring civilian communities:

Our presence is beneficial for civilians. Some civilians are working for us in the [ETCR] restaurant; some others are babysitters or work in our coffee plantations. We pay them for transportation of our products. The taxi driver who brought you [the author] here benefitted from the ETCR. We had to make it clear to them at first. We had to explain to them what our vision for the ETCR was and how it was going to benefit them.39 Civilians in Planadas who sold the beer remarked that they were at first sceptical about the FARC’s presence near their town. However, they met with a group of delegates from the ETCR, who explained the FARC’s post-conflict plan, including how ex-combatants were planning on contributing to the region’s economy. Further research needs to investigate the tangible impact of ETCR on the economic conditions of civilian communities in their vicinity. This work can only go as far as claiming that mid-level commanders, as visible heads of the rebel group, had the authority to speak with civilian communities on behalf of the ex-combatant body, ensuring them of FARC’s peaceful intentions in the region.

In communicating with neighbouring civilian communities, mid-level commanders also created opportunities that would not have otherwise existed. The mid-level commander in ETCR Tierra Grata was the main interlocutor with the two universities in proximity of the ETCR – Universidad Nacional de Colombia de La Paz and Universidad Popular del Cesar – whose students

39 Interview with a FARC mid-level commander in ETCR La Fila (May 2019)
and faculty helped ex-combatants in the ETCR’s economic projects.\textsuperscript{40} The mid-level commander explained the process of reaching out to civilians to start economic projects for the ETCR:

The first collective project we had [in the ETCR] was a bakery, funded by a Catholic foundation in Italy. We then reached out to tourism operations in Manaure and Valledupar to start our own tourism project. We now collaborate with them. They advertise for us and we give them a cut. There is no difference among the ETCR in terms of support from the FARC higher-up leaders. Success is all about initiatives starting here [within the ETCR]. The distribution of resources happens at the local level, not from Bogota.\textsuperscript{41}

The Tierra Grata Ecotours was developed as a collective tourism project led by the mid-level commander and with collaboration with neighbouring civilian communities. Ex-combatants that are part of the cooperative take visitors on a drive through the mountains of Cesar to Cerro Pintado (the Painted Hill) on the border with Venezuela, give them the opportunity to have their passports stamped in Venezuela, and offer them expert knowledge of the region’s flora and fauna, which had remained unexplored due to the FARC-EP’s presence in the region during the civil war. ‘The presence of the FARC has helped shine light on this area as a tourist destination’, said an ex-combatant in ETCR Tierra Grata, reflecting on the impact of the ETCR on the municipalities in Northeastern Cesar.\textsuperscript{42}

The collective eco-tourism projects developed in the ETCR have been a major source of income for ex-combatants (McClanahan, Sanchez Parra; Brisman 2019; Sánchez Supelano 2019; Van Broeck, Guasca and Vanneste 2019). They required a great deal of coordination with neighbouring civilian communities for transportation of tourists and advertising, activities initiated and overseen by mid-level commanders. The commanders were known by civilian community leaders and enterprises because of FARC’s activity during the war. They also had legitimacy to

\textsuperscript{40} Interview with a FARC mid-level commander in ETCR Tierra Grata (May 2019)
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR Tierra Grata (May 2019)
speak on behalf of ex-combatants regarding collective economic projects. These projects were backed by cooperatives consisting of fifty to sixty ex-combatant members. Ex-combatants in ETCR El Oso complained of having lacked the necessary resources for starting an ecotourism cooperative. ‘We wanted to have tourists come here and explore the region. But when Wilson [the ETCR’s mid-level commander] left, we didn’t know how to start the project’.  

**Other Plausible Explanations**

**Preferential treatment of ETCR by the government or international organizations**

It is plausible that the variation among the ETCR in retention rate and economic viability was the result of preferential treatment by the government or international organizations. I thus compared the ETCR on the amount of government funding they received for collective economic projects, as well as financial support from international organizations. Measures for ETCR government funding and international support are interval variables capturing the cumulative governmental funding (mean = USD 111,482; min = 0; max = USD 729,268) and international assistance (mean = USD 51,243; min = 0; max = USD 177,118) for ex-combatant collective projects in each ETCR during the first 30 months of DDR (January 2017-August 2019).

Despite the two sets’ significant differences in economic viability, the ETCR were not significantly different in the amount of governmental funding and international assistance they received. Figure 5 demonstrates that the two types of ETCR did not differ in financial support received by government and international organizations. In thirty months of DDR, the ETCR led

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43 Interview with a FARC ex-combatant in ETCR El Oso (August 2019)

44 The p-value for the T-test comparing the two sets on government funding was 0.975, failing to reject the alternative hypothesis that the true difference in means is equal to 0. The p-value for the T-test comparing the two sets on international support was 0.643, failing to reject the alternative hypothesis that the true difference in means is equal to 0.
by mid-level commanders received an average of USD 112,682 in government funding and USD 57,990 in international support, while those without a mid-level commander received about USD 110,631 from the government and USD 46,423 from international organizations, which is not a significant difference at the 0.05 level. Thus, through maintaining ex-combatant organization in collective economic projects, as well as engaging with neighbouring civilian communities, mid-level commanders made economic projects viable. In camps where such leadership, organization, and rapport did not exist, economic projects fell apart despite international and government support. Due to the low number of observations, I did not base the arguments in this paper on quantitative analysis but used camp-level data to test the impact of mid-level commanders on social and economic outcomes of FARC demobilization and reintegration camps.

Figure 5. Impact of Mid-Level Commander on ETCR Financial Support

ETCR’s dissimilar internal and external dynamics

Variation in retention rate and economic viability among the ETCR could have been caused by institutional, political, or security issues outside the camps. The choice for ETCR location was incidental to economic or institutional strength of the municipalities and was made on security grounds. Both the government and the FARC agreed that the camps be built far away from urban centres and in close proximity to open spaces with natural barriers to allow ex-combatants to escape in case of an attack on the camp (Final Agreement 2016). Prior research has shown that extreme insecurity in municipalities hosting the camps had a negative impact on the camps economic viability, while institutional and political factors seemed to have had no effect on either retention rate or economic viability (Sharif 2021b). Indeed, two of the out-of-sample ETCR – El

45 Interview with José Lisandro Lascarro, ‘Pastor Alape,’ a member of the FARC-EP Secretariat and the head of FARC’s ex-combatant reintegration program (Bogotá, August 2019)
Estrecho and Caño el Indio – were led by mid-level commanders but only achieved low economic viability. El Estrecho and Caño el Indio faced extreme insecurity with ex-combatants targeted by FARC-EP dissidents and other armed groups. In these two ETCR, the functionality of commanders was negatively mediated by extreme insecurity.

In addition to external issues, internal camp dynamics could have generated the variation among ETCR in terms of retention rate and economic viability. Previous research has emphasized the importance of group identity in the DDR process (Hauge 2008). One can expect that more homogenous camps performed better in social, political, and economic terms. The data gathered for this research was agnostic to ex-combatants’ racial, ethnic, or indigenous identification. While FARC-EP emphasized Marxist ideals of equality among races and ethnicities during the war, it is possible to think of racial or ethnic heterogeneity contributing to or hindering economic and social progress in the camps. Furthermore, while this paper does not study the role of women in the demobilization and reintegration program, one can assume that women’s contributions were crucial in determining the fate of the camps. 28.9% of interviewees for this research were female ex-combatants, which is representative of the proportion of female ex-combatants in the collective DDR program (23%). The author observed similar role assignments to male and female ex-combatants across the six camps in the sample. However, the complex mechanisms dictating gender roles in the camp and their impact on the DDR program requires further study.

Another factor that could have potentially contributed to the variation among ETCR is personal traits of the commander or their leadership style. It is hard to quantify traits such as charisma and compare camps based on how charismatic their commanders were. Prior research has mostly relied on age, gender, experience, and education level to determine leadership effectiveness. For this research, it is hard to identify variation among commanders in terms of the
said characteristics: most ETCR commanders were middle-aged males with ample experience leading FARC-EP fronts. Observing the commander-combatant dynamics in the ETCR, the author concluded that it wasn’t ‘good’ or ‘bad’ leadership that drove the ETCR in different directions. Rather, commanders impacted the camps’ retention rates and economic viability through the four mechanisms identified in the previous sections. As mentioned above, the rebel command is not elected democratically during the war. In the immediate aftermath of war, ex-combatants still rely on wartime command-and-control structures to reorient themselves to their new modes of living. This research demonstrates that wartime commanders of the FARC had a significantly positive impact on the collective demobilization and reintegration of the group’s combatants by preserving the social capital and cohesion built during the war.

**Conclusion**

This paper started by asking metaphorically whether the rebel body could function without its visible heads. It answers that question by presenting the complexities of ex-combatant life in the immediate aftermath of war, suggesting that groups of ex-combatants benefit from the leadership of their wartime commanders in navigating their post-conflict social and economic reintegration. The findings in the paper suggest that maintaining wartime bonds, through the leadership of mid-level commanders, can contribute to peacebuilding. Especially in peace processes involving rebel groups with primary and secondary group cohesion, mid-level commanders can play a crucial role in leveraging wartime bonds for more successful demobilization and reintegration.

By highlighting the role of mid-level commanders, the paper warns against conventional practices by international organizations in the aftermath of conflict: disbanding rebel groups, dispatching ex-combatants to their ‘homes’, and offering civilians communities and ex-combatants economic incentives for reintegration (United Nations 2006; de Vries and Wiegink 2011; Muggah
Community-oriented and participatory reintegration programs, which aim at creating bonds between individual ex-combatants and civilian groups (Kaplan and Nussio 2018, Veale et al. 2013; Schuberth 2017), are important for peacebuilding; nevertheless, they are at times impossible due to social stigmas that ex-combatant carry into post-conflict times (Pickering 2006; Bowd and Özerdem 2013). Wartime command-and-control structures, as well as the social capital built during wartime, can help orient ex-combatant collectivities in the first stages of peacebuilding. This applies to DDR programs that define an individual pathway for ex-combatants to demobilize and reintegrate into civilian communities. In such programs, ex-combatants might not be physically assembled in canton sites but are in communication and perceive of themselves as belonging to an ex-combatant community (Themnér 2011; 2013; Nussio and Oppenheim 2014; Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, and Swann 2014; Sharif 2018).

Previous DDR programs, for instance in Nepal, have involved long cantonment periods without attempting to convert the cantons into permanent living areas. Future DDR programs, however, will undoubtedly attempt to follow Colombia’s model. This model differs mainly in the rebel group’s intent in turning demobilization camps into permanent communities in the countryside. Even in DDR programs with long cantonment periods, ex-combatants were eventually expected to leave the camps and start life as civilians on the outside, specifically because cantonment reinforces fraternal links among ex-combatants (Knight and Özerdem 2004). The FARC not only did not attempt to close the cantons (the ETCR), but also envisioned keeping its former combatants together and maintaining the cantons as permanent sites of

46 Long cantonments have usually been a sign of malfunctioning DDR programs, which had not materialized a phase of the program to allow ex-combatants to leave the camp. (See Bryden and Scherrer, 2012, for the DDR program with the Front for the Central African People in the Central African Republic; United Nations, 2010, for the program with the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist in Nepal; Colletta, Kostner, and Wiederhofer, 1996, for the Development Brigade in Namibia).
resistance on the countryside (Segura and Stein 2019). Mid-level commanders, the visible heads of the rebel body during conflict, were crucial during peacetime in repurposing rebel organizational structure for the purpose of demobilizing and reintegrating ex-combatants. Future peace processes, especially with cohesive rebel groups, should focus on translating wartime bonds and leadership structures into the building blocks of state-sanctioned and peaceful ex-combatant collectivities.

This paper has highlighted the positive role that mid-level commanders play in peacebuilding, especially in the immediate aftermath of conflict. This conclusion does not undermine the fact that mid-level commanders can also be a determining factor for a country’s reversion to conflict. Martin (2021) calls commanders’ local ties a double-edged sword: commanders greatly improve ex-combatant livelihoods but also challenge the government. Themnér (2015) refers to networks of former rebel groups as being dialectical in nature – either reinforcing or undermining peace. In all studies that show the destructive power of mid-level commanders in the post-conflict life of society, it is exogenous factors that cause a commander’s decision to rearm. Post-conflict cohesion of ex-combatants per se does not cause rearmament but factors associated with the post-conflict political and economic governance of the country. Themnér (2015), for instance, shows that ex-combatant networks in Liberia were most likely to be remobilized when mid-level commanders lost their privileged roles as wartime brokers, which came as a result of shifts in the country’s political landscape. Themnér (2015) suggests that governing elites employ mid-level commanders as peacetime brokers of patronage, providing them with the necessary resources to help ex-combatants in their network without having to engage in warfare. In the case of Colombia, many of the FARC’s mid-level commanders have participated in mayoral and gubernatorial elections, representing ex-combatant communities. Ensuring that
they receive equal support as other candidates should be the Colombian governments’ priority.

Building positive peace involves addressing grievances that led to conflict in the first instance and stopping new grievances from developing among a population that acquired what is perceived as negative social capital because of the war.

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Ethics Approval
The research with human subjects for this paper was approved by the University Integrated Institutional Review Board (IRB #2018-1590) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Data Availability Statement
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from Sally Sharif (www.sallysharif.com). The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions, i.e., containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

References


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Tables and Figures

**Figure 1. Allocation of FARC fronts to demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR)**
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Figure 2. Location of the six demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR) in the sample

FARC demobilization and reintegration camps in the sample

1: ETCR Yarí  2: ETCR La Fila  3: ETCR El Oso
4: ETCR Agua Bonita  5: ETCR Tierra Grata  6: ETCR La Elvira
Figure 3. Retention rates in demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR)

Figure 4. Economic Viability of demobilization and reintegration camps (ETCR)
Figure 5. Impact of Mid-Level Commander on ETCR Financial Support