WORKSHOP REPORT
MEDIATING THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF
NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

UN

Workshop Report

Mediating the Political Transformation of Non-State Armed Groups

Berlin, December 7, 2021

Abstract

On December 7, 2021, the Berghof Foundation and UN DPO Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Section jointly conducted an expert workshop on the topic of 'mediating political reintegration'. In this workshop, selected experts and practitioners from the political transformation, DDR, and mediation fields exchanged ideas about past approaches, lessons learned, and future possibilities for the successful political transformation of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) as part of mediated peace processes. The workshop constitutes a contribution to the operationalization of the Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) module 2.20 "Politics of DDR." This workshop report summarizes the content and outcomes of these discussions.

Background and Objectives of the Expert Workshop

On December 7, 2021, the Berghof Foundation and UN DPO DDR Section jointly conducted an expert workshop in Berlin on the topic of 'mediating political reintegration.' The workshop brought together distinguished experts and practitioners from the complementary fields of peace mediation, DDR, and political transformation to exchange ideas about past approaches, lessons learned, and future possibilities for the successful political transformation of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) as part of mediated peace processes. The attendees included mediation officials and policy-makers from the UN, EU and its member states, senior experts from conflict resolution INGOs and political foundations, seasoned DDR practitioners combining HQ and field experience, and leading academic scholars.

The workshop, sponsored by the German Federal Foreign Office through a cooperation with the Bonn International Center for Conflict Studies, constitutes a contribution to the operationalization of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) module 2.20 "Politics of DDR." While the module covers several dimensions of DDR, the specific focus of the workshop was the intersection of DDR processes and the reintegration of armed groups and/or their elements into the political sphere of their country, through their transformation into political parties or other non-violent political entities by means of mediated peace/political agreements.

While there are numerous international and government programs supporting other elements of DDR, such as socio-economic reinsertion and security sector integration, informed by many years of experience and professional training, political transformation has received much less attention by DDR actors and peace-building agencies, and it usually takes place in an ad hoc and uncoordinated fashion.

One particular aim was to evaluate the added value of the international community's engagement to support and facilitate such transformations, both during and after peace processes.

The understanding of political transformation in a specific context determines the type of peace agreement and DDR program provisions that should be developed in order to support such processes. A profound knowledge of the historical and political context of an armed conflict, the conflict drivers, and the claims of the conflicting parties is needed in order to assess how a NSAG and its combatants can be transformed into actors who express their political claims through non-violent means. Contextualized analysis is also needed to determine the optimal type of support for the transition from armed to unarmed pursuit of political claims.

This not only relates to the optimal type of transformation pathway in a given context, but also to the nature of the political claims expressed by the armed group. Claims are political when they relate to access to – and the exercise of – power, legitimacy, representation, and participation in state governance (at the national or sub-national level). More radical manifestations of political claims are those related to self-governance, autonomy, federation, and – at the very extreme – independence. Nevertheless, the degree to which armed groups are in a position to clearly define and express their political aspirations and claims varies between cases. As such, the preparedness of an armed group to enter the non-violent political realm shapes the way in which external actors can support this transformation. The vital starting point for this approach is the recognition that NSAGs do not undergo processes of transformation from military to political strategies, but from armed politics to unarmed politics.
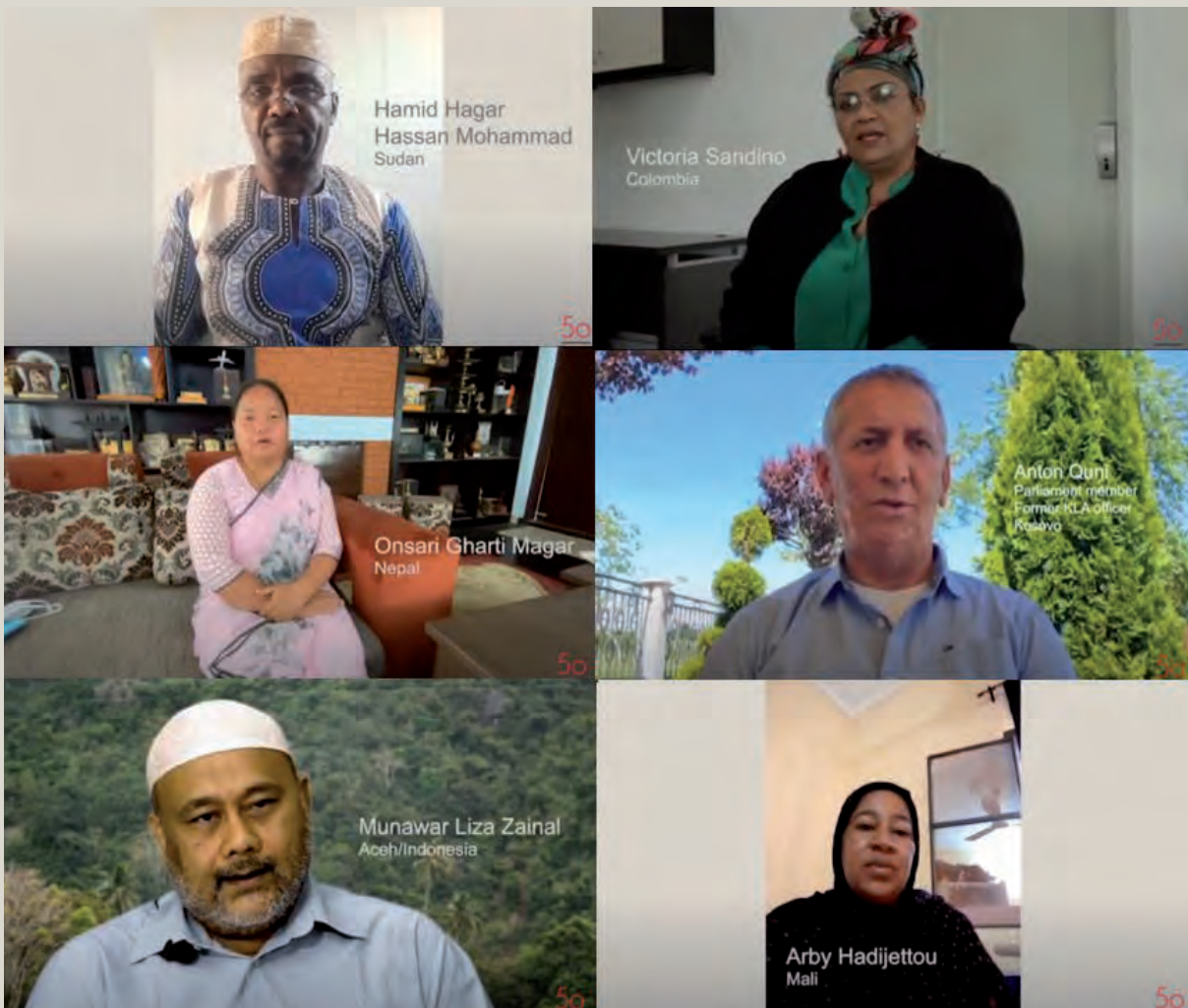
Political Transformation: A definition

The term 'political transformation' is used in this report to refer to a collective or individual process of NSAGs and their members transitioning from armed to peaceful politics. For a collective transformation to be deemed successful, the NSAG should have dismantled its wartime structure and formed a new entity enabling its members to express political claims and to influence the democratic political system either directly (as elected politicians or civil servants) or indirectly (e.g. as civil society activists). Alternatively, former combatants may also undergo successful transformations individually, by renouncing armed activities and subsequently taking up positions in an existing political party, in legislative and executive bodies, or in more informal spaces influencing political governance, such as civil society organizations, social movements, ex-combatant associations, think tanks, and interest groups. Although this workshop focused on political transformation in contexts of peace processes, it can also take place in the absence of negotiated political agreements. Finally, it is worth noting that the term 'transformation' was preferred over 'reintegration,' as the latter would imply that NSAGs and their members have previous (i.e. pre-war) experience in political participation, which is not always the case.

The workshop was structured around five sessions offering distinct professional perspectives. In two panels, political transformation experts and mediators offered insights on the conditions, past approaches, and challenges to their work on the political transformation of NSAGs. A third panel focused on concrete best practices and lessons learned by practitioners and diplomats, both from the field (e.g. DRC, Philippines, Libya) and from policy headquarters. The second part of the day was dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the country cases of Colombia and Mali. While the workshop shed light on different positions and entry points among DDR, mediation, and political transformation experts and practitioners in relation to the transformation of NSAGs, it also showcased points of contact, convergence, and overlaps between the different perspectives of these three communities, offering a rare space for inter-professional exchange.

The workshop sessions were kicked off by screening new video material showcasing interviews with former members of NSAGs in Colombia, Mali, Nepal, Aceh, Sudan, and Kosovo, which are now available to watch on YouTube and Berghof Foundation's website.

Starting with an overview of framework conditions for political reintegration, the main part of this report is structured along the trajectory that a mediated transformation process of a NSAG could take, including the peace mediation and negotiation phase and the implementation phase. This distinction was made for the purposes of this report, while recognizing that the reality of most peace(-building) processes is non-linear, as very often negotiation continues during post-agreement phases. The report concludes with a summary of key insights for future engagement on the politics of DDR.

Framework Conditions for Successful Political Transformation

In order for the international community to engage with the armed groups and support their political transformation successfully, several conditions should be met. These include the very nature of the NSAGs, their relations with state actors, as well as the international community supporting these transformations.

A primary condition for successful political transformation is to gain the **understanding of and support by state actors**, especially when dealing with intra-state armed conflicts which are predominantly triggered by disputes over power and legitimacy. Without a minimum level of support by key elites, and the incumbent government in particular, the political transformation of armed groups or its (former) combatants is an extremely difficult task to achieve.

The second precondition is related to the **intra-party dynamics** at play within NSAGs. Internal divisions, for example between pragmatists and hardliners or between the old guard and young activists, are features that need to be addressed during the transition phase. In Colombia, the ideological and strategic competition between members of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) was a major obstacle (among others) preventing the group from becoming a strong political party.

The complex dynamics and **blurred boundaries between NSAGs and state actors**, which have characterized a large number of conflicts in recent years, have further embroiled the prospects of achieving sustainable transformations. Furthermore, the assumption that a functioning state exists in the first place for NSAGs to transition into is not always correct. In weak states, NSAGs assume proto-state governance functions in providing security and basic services to the

communities. In Lebanon, Hezbollah may be characterized as a hybrid actor or as a 'state within a *non*-state.' In Libya and Mali, NSAGs have been co-opted and instrumentalized by state authorities through patronage networks or divide-and-rule strategies. By contrast, in countries where there are well-established state institutions in place, government actors and lawmakers need to recognize the benefits of integrating their (former) military opponents into the political system as a vector of sustainable peace. In fact, mutual trust between those parties – in spite of their political rivalry and deep-rooted antagonism – is a key condition for successful political transformations. In Colombia, the absence of trust between the government, the FARC, and the communities critically delayed the implementation of the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement. In Mali, mistrust among signatory parties to the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement continues to be one of the core challenges obstructing viable peace, and the resulting delays in its implementation (running five years behind schedule) have undermined their confidence in the peace process.

The **terminology** used in peace agreements needs to be tailored to the sensitivities of the different contexts. During the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, rebels perceived the concept of DDR to mean surrendering to the government. Therefore, they preferred to use the broader term 'normalization' to characterize their security transition process, including the decommissioning of their weapons overseen by an independent body, underlining the armed group's ownership of the procedure. In Colombia, the terminology of DDR was also not applied because the FARC wanted to break away from the conventional model applied to other armed actors and individual fighters who left the guerrilla group in previous years. The Havana Agreement purposely refers to a 'transition

to legality' instead of demobilization, 'putting weapons beyond use' instead of disarmament, and 'reincorporation' instead of reintegration. These sensitivities need to be considered when mediating and drafting peace agreements.

Furthermore, **normative and policy frameworks** allowing for or regulating political transformation need to be in place. These include guidelines on human rights, transitional justice, or democracy and good governance, which figure prominently in policy frameworks guiding international action (e.g. UN IDDRS, UN Guidance for Effective Mediation, European Union guidance on mediation, DDR, integrated approach, etc.). Lastly, security guarantees are essential to protect disarmed ex-combatants transitioning into political careers. The absence of such guarantees can lead to violence and may severely damage the peace process. In Colombia, almost 300 ex-combatants have been killed since the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, and several political candidates have been assassinated.

Peace Mediation and Negotiation Phase

The dynamics of peace processes play a crucial role in influencing the scope and outcomes of political transformation. Negotiators from the warring parties as well as third-party mediators can pave the way for successful transformation and post-war politics. On the contrary, important oversights or ill-conceived peace accord provisions can pose serious obstacles for effective political transformation.

Prior to any formal peace process, it is important to **engage with NSAGs** in order to gain a context-specific understanding of what their goals are and how they envision their future to look like. Often, this entails open dialogue with the combatants, from the leadership to mid-level commanders and rank and file soldiers, who may have diverging views of what they expect for themselves. As a consequence, transition programs need to be developed and adapted accordingly. Furthermore, it is wrong to assume that all NSAGs have a political agenda and that their ultimate goal is to be part of the political structures of their countries. In Libya for example, NSAGs have a very negative perception of politics, which they associate with corruption and elitism and, therefore, do not strive to transform into political parties. Many combatants are mainly interested in having economic prospects and legal guarantees, as well as in being able to return to civilian life. Some NSAGs that are not driven by a political agenda might not have a clear negotiation agenda, but early engagement with their members can help them prepare for peace talks by translating their grievances into a socio-political program. However, imposing or encouraging the political transformation of NSAGs should not be seen as a panacea, and in some cases it may result in counterproductive and harmful outcomes, both

for the personal trajectories of their members as well as the overall peacebuilding efforts in their country. Mediators ought to take these different ambitions and possibilities into account and devise appropriate political, economic, and social alternatives during the peace talks.

A well-planned and inclusive peace-building **process design** is at the core of a sustainable peace agreement. Support for the NSAGs' political transformation should be prepared for in a comprehensive manner. Political and legal training must be provided to future electoral candidates and civil servants ahead of their collective or individual (re-)conversion, and as soon as a peaceful settlement is envisaged as a viable strategic option. In Colombia, prior to the Havana Agreement, FARC's leadership offered regular sessions on the groups' ideology and political agenda in order to increase the combatants' political awareness. However, they lacked knowledge and familiarity with Colombia's political framework, after many years of living under a parallel 'rebel governance' system. As such, they were unprepared to participate in the country's elections and political life. The new party and its members only benefited from pre-assigned 10 congressional seats as established by the peace agreement and were not able to win additional seats in the subsequent elections.

Rebel-to-party transformations, at both the group and individual levels, are costly and long-term processes that require support, coaching, training, and funding throughout their various stages. Furthermore, in order for the political transformation of former combatants to be successful, **civic education** should be provided to rank and file combatants on their political rights and duties, potentially as part of the demobilization phase of DDR, prior to them taking part in the (reformed) political and social structures of their countries. For example, sessions on what being a citizen of a country entails, on the legal system in place, and on what it means to actively participate in the political system should be offered. In many cases, members of armed groups have been living outside of the social frameworks for an extended period of time

and, therefore, need to be reaccustomed to them. Lastly, individuals should be given psychological support and adequate time to undergo mental transitions. The cultural and structural shifts from combatant to politico-social actor, and from armed group to political party, take time and must not be rushed. These elements must play a substantive role in guiding the negotiations of DDR and political provisions and the timeframe for their implementation during the deliberations at the peace table.

The peace agreement developed during the mediation phase should include security guarantees for demobilizing combatants, socio-economic support for their civilian reintegration, as well as **rebel-to-party transformation provisions** when the latter is an explicit or implicit demand of the NSAG. Such provisions have been absent from the majority of the peace agreements signed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mali. During the peace process with the *Force de résistance patriotique d'Ituri* (FPRI) in the DRC, the prospect of FPRI transforming into a political party was not on the table. Mediation support actors dismissed this possibility based on the assumption that such a transformation was not a viable option for the NSAG in question and that there was already a considerable number of political parties in the country. With regards to Mali, only one reference on 'political path' is mentioned in the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement. This can be explained by the parties' capacity gaps at the time, the lack of a unified analysis by the mediation teams, as well as the local culture which does not prioritize party politics. At the individual level, many ex-combatants became active in the political life of their country, through their members' representation in transitional bodies at the local, regional, and national levels, even though they did not participate in any elections.

By contrast, the collective transformation of the FARC into a political party was a central element of the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement. It comprised elements of political participation, political opposition rights, and electoral reform. However, the agreement lacked clarity and depth with regards to the political, economic, and social

reintegration of ex-combatants. Furthermore, FARC leaders had largely overestimated their popular support in areas under their control and influence. This was clearly reflected in the number of votes they received during the 2018 elections.

Lastly, peace agreements should include a **broader transformative agenda** that benefits both NSAGs and marginalized groups, such as electoral reforms, structural changes to the political system (e.g. decentralization efforts), and accountability mechanisms for incumbent power-holders. By combining targeted measures facilitating the political transformation of NSAGs with inclusive provisions opening up the political system, drafters of peace accords can best prevent winner-take-all majorities and ensure a more meaningful political pluralism.

These insights are confirmed by new research from the Rebel-to-Party dataset,[1] which was presented during the workshop. It shows that political transformation following peace agreements is a global phenomenon, occurring in conflicts over both government power and territory. Between 1975 and 2018, peace accords were signed by 122 NSAGs. Among these, 47 (38.5%) established political parties and participated in their country's party system.

A large number of these 47 NSAGs that turned into political parties were signatories to peace accords that included specific provisions to facilitate their political transformation.

Number of rebel-to-party transformations
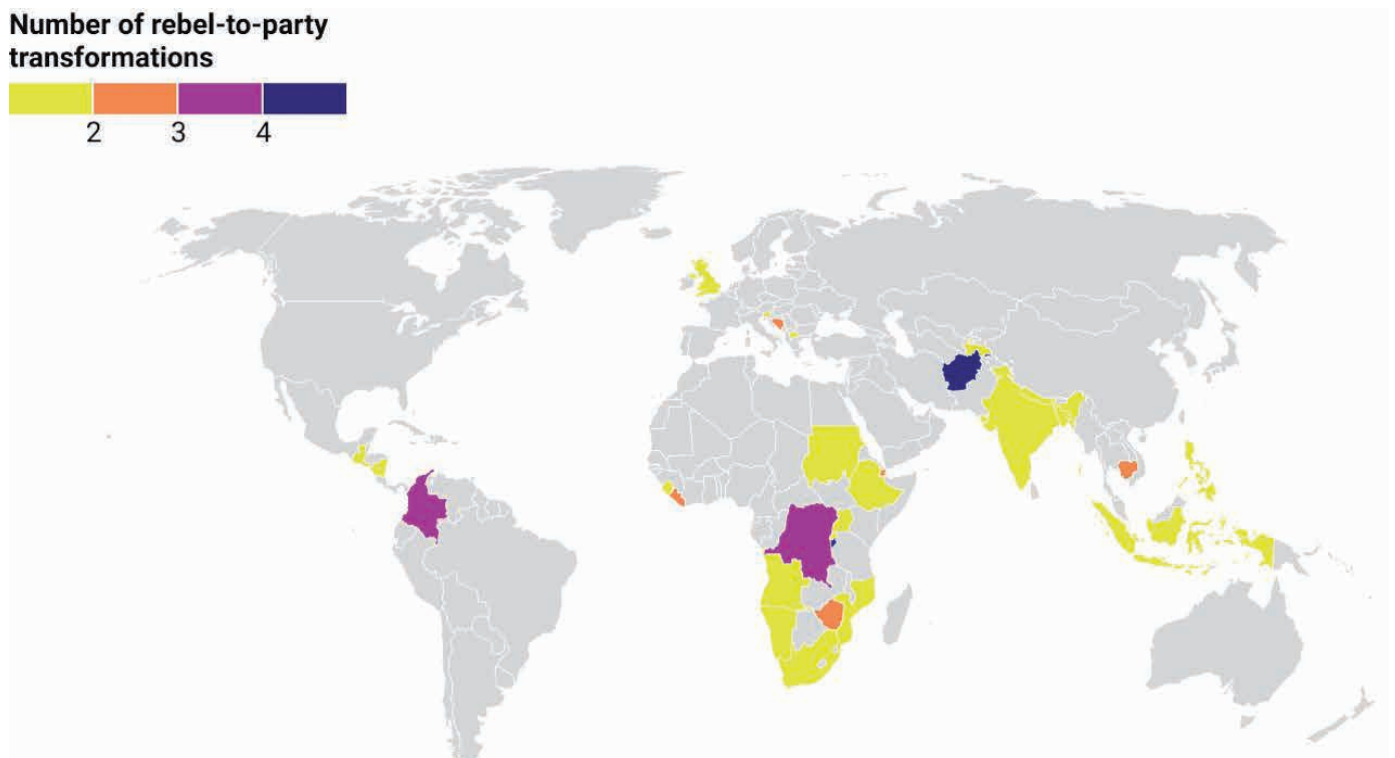
Source: Rebel-to-Party Dataset v.2

1   See Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Luís Martínez Lorenzo (2022, forthcoming). Peace agreements and rebel-to-party transformations. Research Brief, Folke Bernadotte Academy.

Rebel-to-party provisions	46.8%
Provisions on elections	74.5%
DDR provisions	68.1%
Provisions on integration in interim government	51.1%
Provisions on integration in government	48.9 %
Provisions on integration in civil service	19.1%
Provisions on power-sharing in government	38.3%
Provisions on amnesty	53.2%

Table 1: Clauses related to political transformation in peace agreements, 1975–2018.
Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) Peace Agreement Dataset v.19.1; Rebel-to-Party Dataset v.2.

Implementation Phase

The implementation phase of peace agreements – or other negotiated frameworks enabling political transformation – often receives much less attention than the preceding negotiation phase. Nonetheless, it is evident that the implementation is equally important as coming to an agreement in the first place. One obstacle to this recognition is that the implementation phase is not as easily delineated. Experiences from different contexts indicate that the implementation of provisions relating to the political transformation of NSAGs is a long-term process. Beyond the establishment of a political party, other steps need to be taken to ensure sustainable political transformation. These include attitudinal and behavioral shifts by former militants-turned-political candidates or elected representatives, demonstrating their democratic mindset. This process may unfold over several electoral cycles, and long-term accompaniment and support is important to prevent these transitions from veering off course, such as

through authoritarian backsliding by a former NSAG in government.

The development of sustainable transformation schemes takes time and necessitates **continued negotiation and mediation**, especially when peace accords are formulated as a broad framework agreement or roadmap leaving out most details to be devised in the post-agreement phase. This was the case, for example, of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement in Mali. This continuum in the peacemaking process is dependent on – and influences – mutual trust between the parties. One relevant factor in this constellation is whether the negotiators of the initial agreement are also responsible for its implementation. This can have advantages and disadvantages, depending on the level of mutual trust between the involved actors. In Colombia, a new government was elected shortly after the signing of the peace agreement. The Havana Agreement had provided guarantees for continued horizontal and vertical dialogue in the post-agreement phase, which helped consolidate communication channels with the new power-holders.

The successful political transition of armed groups is not only dependent on the provisions and plans enshrined in agreements, but also on the

political will of the government to accommodate its former armed challengers into the democratic system. Similarly, such progress is also influenced by the **preparedness of the armed group**, its internal structures, and its ability to adapt to the requirements of the country's formal political system, as well as the **public perception and acceptance** of the former combatants entering politics. Communities must be given the time to accept the ex-combatants who are integrating into the social and political landscape. For instance, the inadequate timing of the FARC's political transformation in Colombia caused the new party to be seen as untrustworthy. Members of the group were entering into politics and running for elections while still having to appear in court and face prosecution for the crimes they had committed. Failure to partake in transitional justice processes when claiming political positions can be seen as inappropriate by the population, diminishing support for the newly established political party.

In general, international organizations, foreign states, and NGOs can enhance the chances of success of political transformation through strategic and technical support to former combatants. This includes **capacity-building programs**, such as training, coaching, and peer-exchange on campaigning, fundraising, public communication, legislative processes, or intra-party democratic reforms. When designing such support, it is important to recognize the specific needs of different social groups, such as women, youth, and former prisoners. **Women** in particular are often excluded from access to international assistance due to their lower public engagement in NSAGs and in political organizations. Since the pursuit of equal rights often constitutes a mobilization factor for female militants, it is crucial for external assistance programs to take gendered needs and aspirations into account.

All of these aspects determine the success of political transformation and signify that the successful establishment of a new political entity requires a significant amount of time and cannot be judged prematurely. This is illustrated by the case of the FARC in Colombia, whose leaders first named their new party after the same initials as the guerrilla, before reorganizing under a new name (*'Comunes'*) following their severe electoral defeat. This experience illustrates the importance of establishing **long-term assistance schemes** for political transformation. The Havana Peace Agreement is technically sound with regards to disarmament and offers significant details on the first six months after the agreement, but it is extremely broad with regards to the subsequent implementation timeline. As such, FARC laid down its arms under the UN Verification Mission in the first six months after the agreement, but the initial reintegration policy was issued only 1.5 years after FARC had fully disarmed.

A related and crucial aspect to be considered for successful implementation is the **timing and sequencing** of the implementation steps. In the Philippines, the design of the 2014 peace accord links the political dimension of the agreement to the normalization dimension, including DDR: The implementation phase is constructed as a trust game with four stages. Both parties have to fulfill their own deliverables in each stage before moving on to the next. This step-by-step process builds trust and guarantees that none of the parties has to give up leverage too early. Accordingly, a parallel implementation of the political, security, and development tracks of post-war transitions is key for a fair and sustainable outcome.
By contrast, the implementation phase of the Mali peace process has been highly imbalanced, as the government and the international community have focused all their efforts on the security components of the agreement, including the disarmament of the signatory movements, while the promised political reforms and inclusive development have so far been neglected. This has undermined the trust of NSAGs and former combatants in the viability of the peace process.

Summary of Findings

This report concludes with a list of key findings which can inform and guide future mediation and implementation processes pertaining to the political transformation of armed groups.

Early engagement: Mediation and DDR professionals have complementary roles to play in all negotiation and implementation stages of political transformation. Timely intervention, including through early engagement with all levels of memberships of NSAGs ahead of peace talks, can foster a conducive environment by preparing them psychologically, strategically, and technically for the difficult transformation to non-violent democratic politics.

Long-term perspective: Building trust between the different parties, as well as between the population and the transforming NSAGs, can be a lengthy process. It takes a significant amount of time to establish a new political party as a collective project and to gain sufficient skills and knowledge for individual ex-combatants to become politically active. Therefore, continuity, patience, and long-term planning are key for the successful transformation of armed groups.

Context sensitivity: Political systems and political cultures vary greatly. Transformation into a political party might not be expedient in each case. Non-violent political activity by former armed groups or their members can also take other forms of engagement (e.g. civil society). Furthermore, the type of involved actors is relevant for the design and success prospects of mediated transformation processes. The preparedness of armed groups and the political will of the government are as relevant as the willingness to support on the part of the international community.

Recognition of intra-party dynamics: Different factions within (former) armed groups influence their transformation trajectory. Hierarchically vs. horizontally and centrally vs. de-centrally structured groups require different transformation models. Furthermore, inter-generational dynamics can influence the preparedness to transform and should be well managed during the transition, to ensure that all members are brought onboard and 'find their place' in the new political scenario. Moreover, collective vs. individual reconversions to non-violent politics require different skillsets and approaches, with important implications for international support programs (see below).

Taking history into account: Transformation processes take place against the background of previous attempts in countries with multiple cycles of violence and peace processes. Peace agreement provisions should be designed in light of past failures and successes in each specific context.

Timing and sequencing: Effective political transformation is conditioned by carefully designed reciprocal steps by the main conflict parties, enhancing mutual trust and offering a sense of ownership between the government and the armed opposition. Following an integrated approach with regards to the implementation of political, security, and socio-economic components of DDR and state transformation (e.g. security sector reform, democratic governance) builds the basis for sound timing and sequencing. Maintaining the false dichotomies of political vs. security and negotiation vs. implementation phases can be counter-productive.

International advocacy and guidance:
International organizations (UN, EU, AU, etc.) and their individual member states should be aware of the importance and benefits of supporting political transformation. These can enable (or at the very least allow) efforts to support non-state actors to transform to non-violent political engagement at all stages. The possibility of the political transformation of armed groups – be it through dedicated provisions or conducive framework conditions – should be mainstreamed into every peace agreement. This approach can be codified in existing or new international guidelines on DDR, mediation, and democratization. Different political transformation pathways – whether collective or individual – will likely affect the type of international support that can be offered, with DDR programs being more suited for the accompaniment of individual trajectories to peaceful politics, while democracy support NGOs may have more to offer to rebel groups that have turned into political parties. Existing challenges can be most fruitfully addressed if mediation teams, DDR practitioners, and political transformation experts coordinate their interventions and work closely together throughout the negotiation and implementation processes. The operationalization of Module 2.20 of the IDDRS through dedicated policy notes and training modules can help familiarize international peace-building actors with the importance of political transformation support and offer concrete options on how to do so.