



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

In countries emerging from conflict, the reintegration of ex-combatants into society is a challenging task—for the nation, aid organizations, and, most of all, the former fighters themselves. This report stems from a survey conducted by CHF International, in collaboration with the National Ex-combatant Peacebuilding Initiative, involving more than 1,400 ex-combatants from the fourteen-year civil war in Liberia. The respondents give their views on how well they are assimilating into peacetime society: the challenges, their hopes and dreams, and what, if anything, might prompt them to take up arms once more.

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SPECIAL REPORT 211

SEPTEMBER 2008

CONTENTS

Background	2
Opinions about Return to Combat	3
Poverty, Unemployment, and Lack of Benefits	3
Family and Community Acceptance	4
Gender Factors	5
Psychological and Emotional Factors	6
Conclusion and Recommendations	7

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Would You Fight Again?

Understanding Liberian Ex-Combatant Reintegration

Summary

- **The potential for renewed fighting is closely linked to poverty and hardship.** Liberian ex-combatants most commonly cited reasons for considering a return to combat include poverty and economic disadvantage, followed by a lack of jobs, benefits, or training.
- **Unemployment plays a role in the potential return to combat, especially for those who were previously employed.** As expected, a greater percentage of unemployed than employed respondents can envision returning to war. However, one population that is significantly more likely to return to combat is ex-combatants who held a job before the war but are now unemployed.
- **Problems in gaining acceptance by family and community are also closely linked to willingness to consider fighting again.** Respondents who have had difficulty reintegrating into their home communities and who perceive bias against ex-combatants seem more inclined to return to combat.
- **Women may be especially prone to fight again to find relief from poverty.** There were comparatively few women fighters and, therefore, relatively few women in the sample, but results suggest that women, particularly those without families, might be more likely than men to fight if it becomes financially necessary.
- **Tribal tensions still exist and could lead to outbreaks of violence.** There are still feelings, especially among members of certain ethnic groups, that ex-combatants from their tribe are not accorded full citizen status by members of other tribes.

Introduction

One of the frequently used tools in the post-conflict toolbox to prevent ex-combatants from returning to conflict is “demobilization, disarmament, rehabilitation, and reintegration” (DDRR) programming, supported by the international community. But frequent recidivism and the failure of ex-combatants in many post-conflict societies to become

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productive citizens is leading to efforts to better understand the motives and the psychosocial dynamics that affect ex-combatants’ decisions following the end of a conflict—especially decisions concerning a possible return to violence. While most studies of DDRR programs focus on tallying participants and gauging the effectiveness of vocational training, few have focused on how the ex-combatants themselves see their own reintegration, their future, and the issues that could compel them to rejoin a fighting faction. Thus, there has been minimal understanding of how ex-combatants’ personal characteristics and experiences during and after conflict affect their choices and attitudes toward reintegrating into society or resuming violent activities.

The authors led an initiative to listen to ex-combatants in war-ravaged Lofa County, Liberia, and in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia, to identify the key factors affecting their choice of whether to build a life as a civilian or explore taking up arms again. CHF International, a U.S.-based international development organization, received a grant from the United States Institute of Peace to examine reintegration dynamics in Lofa County and later extended the research to Monrovia. The research, based on a survey administered to more than 1,400 ex-combatants, builds on recent efforts by others to hear the opinions of combatants and ex-combatants.¹ While the research encompassed multiple aspects of ex-combatants’ economic and social reintegration,² the focus here narrows to a single subject: the likelihood and potential causes of ex-combatants’ return to combat.

Background

Three factors led to the focus on Lofa County. First, this was the scene of much fighting in both phases of Liberia’s civil war, especially the second phase (1997–2003). Although meaningful statistics on combat deaths are impossible to come by, it is widely recognized that Lofa was among the counties suffering the most casualties. The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel movement traces much of its heritage to Lofa, and many of its recruits came from there. The Government of Liberia (GoL) forces, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and several smaller rebel movements also recruited many fighters in Lofa. Residents tell of massacres in their communities that resulted in thousands of fatalities.

Second, because of this history, Lofa is currently home to many of Liberia’s ex-combatants. According to the United Nations Development Program, Lofa is the third most popular choice for resettlement among ex-combatants, behind Montserrado and Nimba Counties.³ Thus, effective reintegration takes on added importance and becomes more challenging, especially given the extent to which Lofa’s infrastructure was devastated during the war, and the county’s limited employment and industrial opportunities.

The third reason for doing the study in Lofa was one of practicality, though it also allowed for a more comprehensive survey than might have been possible elsewhere. Because CHF has been operating in Lofa County since 2003, it has developed a foundation of trust with community members. This relationship, coupled with CHF’s logistical setup, allowed the survey to involve many respondents in the time allowed by available funding.

An interesting trend emerged during the research in Lofa: many respondents referred to ex-combatants who chose to live in Monrovia with an attitude akin to sympathy or disdain. Lofa-based ex-combatants suggested that Monrovia-based ex-combatants had a different worldview from their own, and quite different perceptions of economic and social reintegration and of the factors that could compel them to rejoin a fighting faction. In an effort to further explore this divergence, the survey was extended to Monrovia.

The research was conducted in March and April 2007. A total of 1,024 valid surveys were completed in Voinjama, Zorzor, and Salayea districts of Lofa County over twenty days. Later, 398 surveys were conducted over five days in Monrovia. The enumeration team was comprised of members of the National Ex-Combatant Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI), a Liberian organization formed by ex-combatants in the late 1990s to encourage peace, trauma healing, and development. There were eight male and four female enumerators.⁴

Opinions about Return to Combat

Two of the most important questions in the survey asked respondents about their inclination to return to combat: The first, “Is life better now than it was during the war?” asked respondents to compare their overall quality of life during the war and now. This question required only a simple “better,” “worse,” or “same,” but any respondents answering “worse” were prompted to select from a list the reason their quality of life was better during war-time. This question was followed up with another: “What events might make you decide to fight again?”⁵ This question encouraged respondents to consider potential future events that would make fighting a possibility for them, and was left open-ended so that respondents could give an unprompted account of a scenario that might compel them to violence.⁶ The following analysis deals with the answers to these questions, and how these responses correlate with attitudes toward social and economic reintegration.

Most rural respondents hoped never to return to war. It is encouraging and important that 97 percent of respondents from Lofa think life is better now than when they were combatants. It is more common for urban ex-combatants to remember the war fondly: 13 percent thought life was better during the war. A full 68 percent of Lofa respondents would not consider fighting now, nor could they imagine circumstances that would lead them to fight again in the future. (Results are similar for urban ex-combatants.) When considering the possibility of returning to war, many respondents commented on the widespread destruction to their homes and communities. “Fighting brings lots of destruction,” one respondent observed, “so I’m not willing to fight again.” Others cited new priorities in their lives. “I’m a mother now, so I wouldn’t fight again,” one female former combatant said. Many ex-combatants shared plans to flee to another country, often with their family or other community members, should war resume.

However, among Lofa respondents (on whom the remaining analysis will focus), nearly a third responded that they could conceive of something that *would* lead them to fight again. While the motivating factors for taking up arms are varied and complex, it is helpful to break them down into four main categories: poverty, unemployment, and lack of benefits; family and community acceptance; women and future combat; and psychological and emotional factors. Findings within each category are discussed and analyzed below.

Poverty, Unemployment, and Lack of Benefits

Although the term “material rewards” may conjure up images of diamonds and wealth, in reality, upon joining the faction, soldiers generally expected and were given only enough money, food, and shelter to survive. It is true that joining an armed group meant that one could partake in the looting of homes and businesses that was common during the war, but luxuries were, for the most part, a privilege reserved for a group’s top leaders.

When asked the open-ended question that allowed respondents to describe the conditions under which they might fight, about 13 percent said that they might consider fighting again in the future for some sort of material benefit. Importantly, almost all said that they would do so only to ensure their survival, not to get rich. Of particular note, given the construction of this question, is that wealth was not the objective: only one ex-combatant cited money without also mentioning relief from poverty. Some respondents said they could consider fighting again if they remain jobless and continue to be denied the benefits they were promised by the DDRR program.

Because the promise of rewards for joining factions plays a large role in the conventional wisdom about why people, young men in particular, join fighting factions, we asked respondents if anyone from the faction had promised them that they would receive something after the war. Thirty-one percent of respondents were promised some sort of reward. The most common promise was for cash (62 percent of promises involved a cash component), and the second most common promise was for educational opportuni-

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ties for either the combatant or the combatant's family. Respondents also report being promised jobs, homes, and positions in government or the army. These promises were rarely if ever kept—the war devastated the Liberian economy and educational system and, unlike other conflicts, resulted in no clear winner with an ability to deliver spoils to supporters.

There is evidence, however, that these empty promises continue to hold meaning for some ex-combatants. Of 312 respondents who recalled receiving promises when they originally joined a faction, nearly 19 percent can envision fighting again to save themselves from poverty. Of the remaining 697 respondents, the rate was under 10 percent.

There are several possible interpretations of the relationship between having been promised rewards and being willing to fight in the future. One possible interpretation of this result is that some ex-combatants believe that if their faction had won the war, such promises would have been fulfilled. Another interpretation suggests that while it is most natural to assume that the promises made by the faction in the past still affect respondents' inclination to fight again, it is possible that those respondents who can envision fighting again are simply more likely, by virtue of some aspect of their personality, to have been promised something by the faction in the first place. It is also possible that those respondents who might more actively consider fighting again to improve their living situation are the same respondents who tend to remember the promise because of its importance to them in their ambition for an improved life.

If this result is just an artifact of the distribution of respondents' personality types, then, while interesting, it does not appear to have direct policy implications. If, however, promises of money or wealth—even empty ones—made by faction leaders do still have the power to lure impoverished ex-combatants back to battle, then it is all the more important that rehabilitation and reintegration programs succeed in preparing participants for economically viable careers and educating them about the economic benefits of stability and peace in their country. This includes educating ex-combatants about the rewards that come from stability, such as the potential for local economic development and increasing educational opportunities for themselves and their families.

Material rewards have the potential to be so important to recruits because there are so few ways of earning a legal income in Liberia. Seventy-two percent of respondents were unemployed at the time of the survey. The unemployed are marginally more likely to consider fighting again for economic benefit—14 percent of unemployed respondents can conceive of fighting again, compared with only 10 percent of those who are employed.

A poor country before the war, Liberia has always been characterized by high unemployment: 60 percent of respondents were unemployed before joining the faction. There is no substantial difference between the previously employed and unemployed respondents in terms of their willingness to return to war: 14 percent and 12 percent respectively.

But current unemployment does have a particularly large effect on one group of respondents: those who held a job before the war. Significantly, the population that emerges as the most inclined to fight for benefits is composed of respondents who had a job before the war but lack a job now: 19 percent of this group of 187 respondents could envision fighting for economic benefits in the future. Due to this change in employment status, these respondents have likely seen a drop in their standard of living. Perceived status is one likely explanation for this relationship. Holding a job is a mark of prestige in Liberian society. Ex-combatants who went from being productive, self-sufficient members of society to feared and respected soldiers are now experiencing a lack of perceived social status, some for the first time.

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Family and Community Acceptance

The degree of social reintegration and the perception of acceptance appear to be among the strongest indicators of a willingness to fight again. Of Lofa respondents who can

envision returning to combat, 27 percent say they have faced problems gaining acceptance from their neighbors and communities, whereas 11 percent say they have been accepted in their communities. Related to that finding, of Lofa respondents who can envision returning to combat, 21 percent say they have had difficulty being accepted by family, whereas of respondents who could not envision returning to combat, only 9 percent have faced any family-related difficulties. Among respondents who can envision returning to combat, 40 percent believe that their home communities have a negative view of ex-combatants—a view held by only 32 percent of respondents who cannot imagine combat in their futures. Importantly, those who report problems with acceptance by family or community are also more likely to be dissatisfied with their economic situation.

We used two proxies to determine whether an ex-combatant successfully reintegrated into the family and community. The first was the question “Today, do you face problems gaining acceptance from your family?” The subsequent question substitutes “neighbors and community” for “family.” While most ex-combatants have successfully reintegrated into their families and communities, a minority—nearly 20 percent—continue to have problems with some of the relationships in their lives. More than half of those respondents are having trouble getting along with *both* family and community—a sign of serious trouble with social reintegration.

Another proxy for reintegration success is whether respondents feel that ex-combatants are viewed positively by the community. The majority of respondents reported that they believe their home community’s perception of former fighters is neutral to positive: 43 percent feel that ex-combatants are viewed with acceptance, and 20 percent went so far as to say that they are respected. There is, however, some evidence of friction between ex-combatants and their communities. Negative responses, which leaned toward fear and distrust and away from anger and envy, accounted for about 35 percent of the sample.

Based on these two proxies, we can conclude that although social reintegration has been successful for the majority of respondents, some problems remain. Given the evidence, cited above, showing the relationship between poor reintegration with family and community and potential return to combat, there is cause for concern. This emphasizes the need to improve the “soft side” of DDRR programs: reconciliation processes and efforts to repair relations between ex-combatants and their families and communities.

Gender Factors

One key demographic factor above all others appears to influence the likelihood that an ex-combatant could consider fighting again for a job, benefits, or relief from poverty: gender. Of the 140 women surveyed, over 20 percent could envision fighting again for material goods. In contrast, only about 11 percent of men gave a similar response. The effect appears particularly dramatic for women without any children, although the sample size is too small to draw firm conclusions: six of the twenty-three childless women, or 26 percent, might consider rejoining an armed faction to ease their economic burden. While it is tempting to conclude that childlessness here is simply a proxy for age—meaning that those without children are relatively young and therefore more willing to consider fighting—the age of a female fighter has no correlation with her decision to join a rebel movement. It is possible that more women with children would consider rejoining but for the obligation they have to care for their families. Childless women, however, may feel that they can consider potentially riskier survival options. This result suggests the need for further research into the postwar economic challenges faced specifically by women.

That women are more likely to say they might fight again for economic reasons is surprising, since women were much less likely to have expected material benefits when they first joined the faction. Across both genders, expectation of material rewards was uncommon. Only 17 percent of the sample expected to receive food, money, or shelter

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upon joining; however, only 11 percent of women expected to receive a material benefit, compared with 18 percent of men. One intuitive explanation for the difference may be driven by the fact that women are more likely to have been coercively or forcibly recruited,⁷ but there is substantial evidence against this theory, including that those who joined voluntarily were only two percentage points more likely to expect material benefits from the faction than were those who joined under duress.

Psychological and Emotional Factors

The discussion thus far focuses on the prospect of respondents returning to war to secure some sort of tangible benefit. Envisioning a return to war for nonmaterial reasons was less common but not altogether absent: sixty-seven respondents, or 7 percent of the total sample, said they would fight again to win respect or rights for their tribe or religion. Of course, given the variation along gender lines that we have already seen, a reasonable first instinct is to search for a systematic difference between responses given by men and by women. Sample size limitations render this impossible: only six women said they would return to fight for rights, respect, or emotional benefits—too few to provide meaningful conclusions. There is, however, a clear and systematic difference between members of different tribes and, perhaps, different religions. Mandingos, who are predominantly Muslim and are still regarded by many Liberians as “outsiders” despite their having been in Liberia for roughly four centuries, are more than twice as likely to say they would consider fighting again for their tribe or religion: nearly 11 percent of the 263 Mandingos in the sample, compared with 5 percent of respondents from other tribes. Sensitivity is evident in the verbal answers of several Mandingo respondents. “If my tribe is left out of the sixteen tribes, then of course I will fight,” said one thirty-five-year-old Mandingo man. “I will fight if others continue to look at us Mandingos as foreigners,” a thirty-eight-year-old Mandingo man asserted.

Given that Liberia’s war was driven largely by status conflicts between tribes, it is no surprise that many who participated in the fighting did so with the expectation that they would reap nonmaterial rewards, such as revenge, respect, or power for themselves or their ethnic group. Thirty-one percent of the entire sample had expected some kind of nonmaterial benefit from fighting when they first joined a faction. Revenge was the most common nonmaterial motivation to fight: 60 percent of those who anticipated any emotional benefit mentioned the expectation of revenge. Only slightly less common a motivator than revenge was power, which over half the 315 respondents who expected an emotional payoff cited as an anticipated benefit to fighting. By far the least common emotional benefit was excitement: only 15 percent thought that fighting in the war would be exciting, and this expectation varies negatively with the age of the fighter.⁸

These findings demonstrate that reconciliation work in Lofa County needs to address the conflict between Mandingos and other tribes in the area, particularly Lormas, head-on. While only about one in ten Mandingo ex-combatants surveyed volunteered that they might fight again for tribal recognition in the future, the open-ended responses make it clear that the Mandingos who feel marginalized have a very specific complaint: they feel that they are not treated as proper citizens of Liberia, especially compared with Lormas. Clearly, this ethnic tension still exists in Lofa County. Given the potential for this tension to lead to violence, it should be specifically addressed in peacebuilding programs in the region. It is likely that other counties also have their own specific tribal conflicts; these should be researched and aggressively dealt with.

Survey findings also show revenge to be a significant motivator for participation in violence. Again, knowing the prominent role that vengeance plays, reconciliation programs can and should take a more direct role in teaching ex-combatants productive ways to deal with feelings of anger and rage, and techniques to deal with the trauma that comes with the death or suffering of a loved one. Indeed, other findings from this

study⁹ demonstrate that rehabilitation and reintegration programs need to take a more active role in dealing with postwar trauma.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Data analyzed here come largely from Lofa County, with a smaller sample from Monrovia. Such a limited geographic scope dictates caution concerning broad generalizations about Liberia as a whole or about ex-combatants in other countries. But because these respondents span a broad range of ages and tribes and fought for a range of factions over the course of the fourteen-year civil war, it seems likely that they are to some degree representative of ex-combatants elsewhere in the country and, possibly, in neighboring countries such as Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. (Indeed, in all likelihood, some of the ex-combatants included in the survey also fought in wars in those countries.)

The research confirms some of the conventional wisdom concerning poverty, lack of economic opportunity, dissatisfaction with post-conflict life, and the inclination to take up arms again. As one would expect, the poverty that many ex-combatants endure does create dissatisfaction and is related to willingness to consider a return to combat. But it is also important to note that the findings suggest that the great majority of ex-combatants are motivated to avoid war and, at this stage, indicate that no circumstances could induce them to return to war. The findings do not paint a picture of a society with a critical mass of malcontents who have learned to use guns and will continue to use guns and violence as part of their strategy for creating income.¹⁰

Findings from this survey led to four policy and programmatic recommendations:

- Most rehabilitation and reintegration programming places immediate emphasis on skills training and only secondary emphasis on job creation. This order of operations is intuitive but perhaps misguided. If the ex-combatants significantly at risk of returning to conflict are the ones who are skilled but not employed, as evidence cited above suggests, a push for immediate, state-supported job creation may be the best way to reduce the risk of impoverished, idle ex-combatants slipping back into violence.¹¹ In most post-conflict contexts, to reach critical mass, such programs require significant financial (and often managerial) support from the international community.
- The findings point to the need for a strong focus on the dynamics of acceptance of ex-combatants and for programming focusing on ex-combatants' expectations of how they will be received by their families and communities. Interviews indicate that in most cases, there was a clear evolution of expectations and attitudes. This process began immediately after the end of the war, with a sharp initial contrast between ex-combatants' expectations and reality: some ex-combatants initially expected prestige and appreciation, but their communities sometimes blamed them for the communities' suffering. By the time of the survey, most ex-combatants had come to terms with how their communities perceived them, and many families and communities had offered some level of forgiveness and acceptance. The dynamics of successful acceptance deserve further study in order to develop a clearer understanding of the process and facilitate earlier and more focused programming geared toward accelerating acceptance, healing, and successful reintegration. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs are increasingly cognizant of this issue, but few pay attention to social and family reintegration at a level commensurate with its importance as indicated here.
- Tensions between tribes still exist. Though comparatively few respondents suggested that they might consider taking up arms to defend their tribe or religion, tribal conflict has the potential to cause or contribute to small-scale violence and hinder reconstruction and development. These issues should be dealt with head-on in DDDR programming, through peacebuilding activities that deal with conflict resolution, acceptance of different religions, and cooperation between tribes.

The findings do not paint a picture of a society with a critical mass of malcontents who have learned to use guns and will continue to use guns and violence as part of their strategy for creating income.

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- More research needs to be done on the specific challenges faced by female ex-combatants. This survey suggests that women are more likely than men to see themselves as having fewer options to deal with economic hardships and, therefore, are more likely to return to war to provide for their basic needs.

Notes

1. Recent research in related areas was important to our framing of this study. This includes research by Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein in Sierra Leone, James Pugel in Liberia, and Eric Mvukiyehe, Cyrus Samii, and Gwendolyn Taylor in Burundi.
2. For a fuller analysis of research findings, see Gwendolyn Taylor, Richard Hill, and Jonathan Temin, "Helping Ex-combatants Help Themselves: Understanding Ex-combatant Economic Reintegration in Lofa County, Liberia," *International Development Matters* (CHF International publication), February 2008.
3. National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, Joint Implementation Unit, "DDRR Consolidated Report (Status of Disarmament & Demobilization Activities as at 11/24/2004)," <http://www.lr.undp.org>.
4. Using ex-combatants as enumerators in a survey where the respondents are ex-combatants themselves is, of course, a controversial choice. The authors recognized the possibility that respondents would be unlikely to answer honestly questions posed by someone they may perceive to have been part of an enemy faction—and perhaps equally reticent with someone who had been part of their own faction. But the authors became convinced that this approach enhanced rather than diminished the validity and accuracy of the survey, because the majority of ex-combatants would respond most honestly to questions posed by fellow ex-combatants. To maintain quality control and consistency, enumerators received a week-long training in survey methodology and protocol and were observed in the field during the survey. As the surveys show, ethnic affiliation was not a foolproof predictor of former faction; thus, survey respondents would not know with which faction their enumerator had fought. This went a long way toward addressing possible bias due to an enumerator's having fought for another faction. Moreover, honesty and trust would likely have been harder to establish if we had civilians interviewing ex-combatants, since tensions in postwar Liberia are most frequently between civilians and ex-combatants rather than between ex-combatants previously affiliated with different factions. Indeed, without NEPI's assistance, we would almost certainly not have achieved the level of randomness in the sample that we did, since it was the NEPI enumerators who helped us gain the trust of the most reluctant former fighters.
5. The respondents answering this question are describing hypothetical conditions that would make them take up arms as part of an organized force. The responses did not refer to a decision to fight or use violent criminal activity as a peacetime income strategy.
6. There are clear disadvantages to using this open-ended format. This sort of question is obviously time consuming. Moreover, it is possible that some respondents would not be able to conceive of all possible scenarios that might drive them to violence, whereas prompting with possible responses might enable them to organize their thoughts. But by leaving the question open-ended, we can hear respondents describe scenarios in their own words and in the order that they come to mind. Had we offered a list of possible scenarios from which respondents could choose, we would run the dual risk of prompting respondents, on one hand, to say they would fight for causes that they feel they *should* be willing to fight for (but might not, in fact, think are worth future violence) or, on the other hand, to neglect to mention scenarios that we had not included, for fear that those responses would in some way provoke our disapproval.
7. Fifty-seven percent of women report either being abducted or joining while their town was under attack, compared with only 47 percent of men.
8. The findings suggest that those ex-combatants who expected to receive emotional rewards when they fought are more inclined to fight again for the same reasons. Within respondents who expected emotional benefits when they first joined, nearly 10 percent can conceive of fighting again for similar reasons. Among the respondents who had not expected power, revenge, or excitement, only 5 percent reported that they might fight again for those reasons.
9. See Taylor, Hill, and Temin, "Helping Ex-combatants Help Themselves."
10. However, while only a relatively small percentage of ex-combatants can envision a return to combat, it is important to consider Liberia's recent history of small insurgent movements quickly gaining traction. For example, in 1989, Charles Taylor's NPFL movement started with fewer than 500 rebels under his command.
11. While the findings suggest the value of immediate employment programs, these programs are often unsustainable and create their own set of expectations about jobs and incomes, which can cause disappointment. Overall, creating rapid employment, providing economic stimulants that directly benefit ex-combatants, and helping ex-combatants manage their expectations about employment will be critical to reducing violence.



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