Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal

A participatory action research project with ex-PLA fighters in Nepal

Simon Robins, Ram Kumar Bhandari and the ex-PLA research group

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About the Authors

The research of this project was led by Simon Robins and Ram Kumar Bhandari in collaboration with a team of 12 ex-PLA peer researchers who collected the data and led efforts to mobilise other ex-fighters and to drive action that advanced their collective interests. The ex-PLA research team consisted of:

Prem Bayak
Prem is from Kailali and served 11 years in the PLA. He was injured in 2005 and paralysed from the waist down. He continued in PLA, stayed in the cantonment until 2012 and was a Battalion Commander when he left. He established an organisation in Kailali for disability rights, is active in social activism, community networking and coordinates the ex-PLA National Network.

Shanti Kandel
Shanti is from Kalikot, now based in Kailali, and served in the PLA for 7 years. She left cantonment in 2009 as a company commander to run a household.

Nahkul Sanjyal
Nahkul is from Kalikot, served 10 years in the PLA, and now lives in Surkhet. He was with the health department of the PLA, and a Battalion commander when he left. He is now active in social work and peace activism, and has completed his Masters degree in political science.

Kamala Shahi
Kamala is from Dailekh and served 8 years in the PLA. She was with the health department, and was a company commander when left the cantonment to enter health assistant training. She now works in a hospital as a health professional.

Sabin Pokhrel
Sabin is from Salyan, and served 12 years in the PLA, and was Brigade Vice-Commander when he left the cantonment. He is now based in Dang and a political activist.

Dipendra Pun
Dipendra is from Rolpa and served 12 years in PLA. He is now based in Dang and runs his own business.

Bikram Sundas
Bikram is from Lalitpur, served 11 years in the PLA, and was company commander when left. He lives in Chitwan and is active in both politics and peace activism in the district.

Ramkrishna Mahat
Ramkrishna is from Dolakha, served 11 years in PLA, and was company commander when left. He now lives in Chitwan and is involved in his own business and peace activism.

Anita Limbu
Anita is from Dhankuta, served 5 years in PLA and was discharged from the cantonment in 2010. She is now associated with the Discharged PLA association.
Lenin Bista
Lenin is from Kavre, served 7 years in the PLA and was discharged in 2010. He is now based in Kathmandu and leads the national Discharged PLA association.

Mani Kumar Sampang Rai
Manikumar is from Bhojpur, served 4 years in the PLA, and is now based in Jhapa. He was injured during the People’s War, suffering facial disfigurement. He later joined the Maoist cultural troupe of and did not join the cantonment after the CPA. He is now active in politics and a Central Committee member of CPN (Revolutionary Maoist).

Gangamaya Ban
Gangamaya is from Solukhumbu, served 3 years in the PLA and now lives in Sunsari. She was involved in the women’s wing of the Maoist Party, and was injured during the Bhojpur attack in the eastern region in 2005. She did not join the cantonments after the CPA and is now doing her MA and interested in social activism.

Simon Robins PhD is a humanitarian practitioner and researcher with an interest in transitional justice, humanitarian protection and human rights. He is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York in the UK, and has worked with victims of conflict in Nepal since he took charge of the Nepalgunj sub-delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2005. He has researched and written widely on issues related to victims of conflict and transitional justice, in Nepal and elsewhere.

Ram Kumar Bhandari is a human rights defender and researcher with an interest in nonviolent conflict, transitional justice and conflict transformation. He has led the struggle to secure justice for victims of Nepal’s conflict for over a decade and is the founder of the Committee for Social Justice, President of NEFAD and General Secretary of the Conflict Victims’ Common Platform. He is the recipient of a Global Justice makers Fellowship, 2009. His father was detained and disappeared by state security forces in 2001 and his family remains without news of him. He completed a Masters in Sociology from Nepal and a Masters in Human Rights and Democratisation at the European Inter-University Centre, Venice, Italy and the University of Hamburg, Germany.
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Figure 1 The research team at the initial training in Dang.
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1. Executive Summary

Introduction

When Nepal’s conflict ended in 2006 those who were a part of the Maoist armed forces, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), were placed in cantonments where they stayed for more than 5 years, becoming a political bargaining chip in a peace process conducted over their heads by leading politicians. The conclusion in 2012 of this slow process was the dissolution of the PLA, and the demobilisation of its cadres. In the years combatants were in the cantonments many thousands had independently ‘reintegrated’ themselves, leaving to homes old and new. Over 4,000 others were ‘disqualified’ by a UN verification process, most as a result of being recruited as minors, and these were demobilised in 2010. As the cantonments were closed, some 1,400 of the PLA chose to join the Nepal Army, their erstwhile enemies, while the majority decided to accept significant cash payments and accept ‘voluntary retirement’.

While the global language of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) was always rejected by the Maoists, in practice that is what was attempted for PLA cadres. The effort here is to focus on reintegration, the process of assimilating former combatants into the life of civilian communities. Reintegration is understood as having economic, political and social components, ensuring that ex-fighters have a livelihood, are a part of decision making processes, and can again become a part of communities. This study has sought to evaluate the successes and failures of efforts to integrate those who fought with the PLA, from the perspective of ex-combatants themselves. Beyond that, as an action research project, it seeks to create space for the ex-PLA to be catalysts for peace through an attempt to mobilise ex-combatant youth to advance non-violent conflict resolution. The aims of the project are to:

- Evaluate the success of the reintegration process, as perceived by ex-combatants;
- Understand the challenges faced by ex-combatants in the communities in which they live;
- Engage with groups of ex-combatants in their communities – and mobilise such groups where they do not already exist – in order to both create a support structure for ex-fighters, and to create a forum for dialogue.

Methodology

Whilst the cadres of the PLA were at the centre of Nepal’s peace process, and indeed constituted one of its most contested elements, those who were demobilised and apparently ‘reintegrated’ have not since been heard from. This research exercise sought to evaluate the process of demobilisation from the perspective of those who were its objects. As such, the project represents one of very few efforts to take a participatory and ethnographic approach to the post-conflict lives of ex-combatants and to understand how a DDR process is perceived by those it impacts most.

The project was envisaged as a Participatory Action Research exercise, in which ex-combatants are themselves trained and supported to collect data as peer researchers. This had two goals: first to ensure that those collecting data enjoyed the full trust of respondents, and second so that the process of knowledge generation could serve ex-combatants themselves. It was intended that the project could serve to both understand and advance the integration of ex-PLA into civilian society and investigate what role ex-PLA could play within the communities in which they now live, as peacebuilders. Initial meetings with ex-combatant researchers saw them articulate their priorities in terms of the creation of an Ex-PLA National Network that could mobilise ex-PLA in their home

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districts and give them national voice and representation. The project embraced this aim as an effort to further political reintegration.

Pairs of ex-PLA peer researchers were recruited in each of six districts of Nepal, and were trained in qualitative research methods. Peer researchers collaboratively prepared a semi-structured instrument with which to make interviews with ex-PLA identified through a mapping process in their district. A total of 241 interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. The interviewees were broadly representative of ex-combatants in terms of how they left the PLA (independently, disqualified, retired, with the exception of those integrated into the Nepal Army, who were not met. 44% of interviewees were women.

The resulting data were analysed both by textual coding to yield quantitative elements, and through the selection of verbatim quotations that were ordered and selected to provide low inference indicators. Analysis was performed independently by the lead researchers, with results discussed throughout the process with peer researchers.

Alongside the data collection process, a mobilisation effort was led by the 12 peer researchers. This began in their home districts, where they met informally with groups of ex-PLA contacts and was extended through efforts to systematically engage as many ex-combatants in a district as possible. Where there was sufficient interest regional groups were formed, and ultimately the first national meeting of the Ex-PLA National Network held in Kailali in February 2015.

Results of the study

The study took place in 2014-15, several years after demobilisation and at a point in time when the sustainability of the livelihood and other strategies ex-combatants had chosen was becoming clear.

Social reintegration

Most ex-PLA had left lives of rural poverty and saw the Maoist movement as a route to challenging poverty and social exclusion in their communities. As a result, few were willing to return to their original homes, due both to a lack of opportunities, because their political engagement had built far greater expectations, and because in many cases they faced extreme stigma. Only a quarter of those met had returned to their home communities, while most had either moved to urban areas of to ‘new communities’ in which there was a significant presence of ex-PLA or other Maoist supporters. As such, reintegration is a misnomer and ex-PLA are mostly seeking either the anonymity of the city, or communities where their past and politics will be understo.

The stigmatisation that ex-PLA experience has a range of motivations, including having been labelled as ‘disqualified’, being linked to the behaviour of Maoist cadres during the conflict, and having left their community with great ambition and returning with no discernible social or political change having occurred and having failed to satisfy their own personal ambitions. Women faced very particular challenges, with marriages made within the Maoist movement, often inter-caste or inter-ethnic, frowned upon by families and communities. More than this, ex-PLA women, having lived with nominal equality have to return to traditional expectations of a woman’s domestic role in a rural area. Those disqualified as ‘unqualified minors’ were labelled in Nepali as ayogya, meaning unqualified, a label which was strongly stigmatising. For simply practical reasons those having a disability or medical needs often chose to live in the plains and close to medical facilities.

All of these elements drove ex-PLA to seek urban environments, where their background could be hidden, or the welcome of friends and comrades in ‘new

2 Kathmandu, Kailali, Surkhet, Dang, Sunsari (also including Jhapa and eastern mountain districts), and Chitwan.
communities\(^3\), where their history was welcomed. This reframes social integration, as being less concerned with reconciling communities and incomers as supporting the vulnerable wherever they may find themselves. It also demonstrates that in many ways the ex-PLA, largely from poor and remote areas, are reproducing the migration and settlement patterns of young Nepalese before them, including in seeking work in the Gulf.

**Economic integration**

PLA cadres had largely been recruited as young teenagers and as a result had missed years of education and opportunities to develop livelihood. The economic opportunities available to ex-PLA will vary according to the elements of the reintegration package from which they benefitted. Around half of ex-combatants received significant payments (NRs. 500 – 800,000) on taking voluntary retirement. More than many others the disqualified lacked any education or work experience – since they had spent much of their young lives in the Maoist movement: they potentially received elements of vocational training but little financial support. Those who left the cantonments independently, or never entered them, received nothing at all.

Some of those who had received payments used this as capital to buy land, a house or start a small business, while others reported that they spent most of it on medical treatment. The vocational training received in the cantonments was perceived as being of such poor quality it was useless. The most common source (40%) of livelihood was a small business. 20% of ex-PLA were working on either their own or rented land, while 14% were doing daily labour, the latter indicating that a significant fraction was among the poorest of Nepalese. 17% received support from a spouse working abroad, or in the Nepal Army, while 10% claimed to have no source of livelihood.

It is perhaps remarkable that so many ex-combatants have apparently achieved a level of livelihood comparable to other Nepalese, despite the huge challenges they faced. However, whilst the ex-PLA may be no poorer than their typical neighbour, their perception of the sacrifice they have made, and their resulting expectations translate into extreme resentment at their present condition.

**Political reintegration**

For the ex-PLA to be effectively integrated, they must see the Nepali state as theirs, as much any other citizen does. This will be difficult given both the personal histories of ex-combatants, often including experience of the marginalisation of their community, and the highly centralised nature of Nepal’s polity. The demobilisation process itself reflected this, with rank and file combatants having no agency at all, with no consultation over any element of the process.

For the ex-PLA the process of demobilisation is widely seen as a surrender and great ‘humiliation’ by the leaders of the UCPN(M), not least the denial of what was considered ‘honourable’ integration in to the Nepal Army. While the response of a minority has been to abandon politics, most ex-PLA have affirmed their commitment to what they fought for and joined one of the radical Maoist factions that have split from the mainstream party. While three-quarters of ex-PLA could foresee the future use of arms for political means, this was always seen as subject to Party discipline. As such, any future security threat from ex-PLA is currently constrained by the presence of chains of command. This challenges one of the key aims of DDR which is to break the chains of command of rebel armies - in the Nepal context they currently represent a check on potential violence, with only the small numbers who are involved in ethnic activism or criminality posing any current threat. Ex-PLA additionally sought non-party ways to represent themselves and this led the mobilisation element of the project (see below).

\(^3\) An example is that of Kohalpur, near Nepalgunj (see p. 50).
An important part of the politics around the PLA is how their contribution to Nepal’s history is remembered. Ex-combatants seek that the state acknowledges their role, and that of their dead comrades, as positive, reflecting that narratives around the history of the conflict remain highly contested.

**Mobilising ex-PLA as change actors**

Ex-PLA have been trying to mobilise independent of traditional Party structures and this project has explicitly supported such efforts. The Discharged PLA is a longstanding Kathmandu-based group of the disqualified that took part in this research, and has seen its advocacy renewed with a rights-based approach to child combatants and greater activities following its association with the research project. The broader mobilisation of this project to create the Ex-PLA National Network began from the pairs of researchers conducting research in the six districts of the study and existing links between ex-combatants. Networks at the district level, that meet approximately monthly, were built up seeking to create a model for a regional and national structure than can serve to represent all ex-PLA. District groups seek to play a role as peace actors in their local communities, advancing their agenda through dialogue, direct meetings and the media. The first national assembly of ex-PLA representatives was held in Kailali in February 2015 and led to the adoption of the ‘Kailali Declaration’ (see p.64) as a common national document and a summary of the Network’s goals.

The activities of the district groups include both internal dialogue to provide solidarity and support to ex-combatants, and community dialogue that brings ex-PLA, community members and local officials together to resolve difference and build reconciliation, including at Local Peace Committee meetings. The aim at both local and national levels is for the ex-PLA Network to be an actor to which those seeking to hear from ex-PLA can go and that can play a role in peacebuilding and creating a new post-conflict role for ex-combatants driving positive, peaceful change. The Network is relatively new and still developing, but already faces resource constraints that challenge its sustainability.

**Conclusions**

The empirical data collected here confirm that the process of demobilising the PLA was one led by the political imperatives of the leaders of dominant political parties, rather than the interests of the nation or ex-combatants themselves. As a result, there was largely no process of reintegration for ex-PLA leaving cantonments beyond cash payments. Almost half of those initially in the cantonment – and probably a greater fraction of those who had been associated in any way with the PLA – were not addressed in any way by the demobilisation. The greatest challenge to the process was and is the large gap between the expectations of ex-PLA and what they received on demobilisation.

The formal structure of the Ex-PLA National Network will enable any actor to engage with ex-combatants and their representatives, and in turn for ex-PLA to have a local and national voice. This can permit civil society and others to support initiatives to allow dialogue between ex-combatants and community members, and for the authorities to see the ex-PLA National Network as a legitimate representative of the ex-PLA and to include them wherever their presence can aid peacebuilding and the national interest.

Nepal is still seeking to deal with its violent past, not least through a long stalled and highly flawed transitional justice process. However, the principle lens though which the past is seen remains one of victims and perpetrators: since the ex-PLA see themselves as neither, they are marginalised from this. It is important that either dedicated processes are created to address the issues of ex-combatants or existing mechanisms – such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - seek to ensure that ex-PLA are not side-lined from them. Beyond this, there remains a need for ex-combatants and Nepalese more broadly to engage with their past, through non-institutional truth-telling processes: the experiences of the ex-PLA will be crucial to these.
2. **Introduction: Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Nepal’s Maoist Combatants**

This report describes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study conducted with former Maoist combatants in Nepal. It seeks to make a contribution both by creating greater understanding about the demobilisation and reintegration process of an armed rebel group that has received little academic study, and through using an innovative research approach that sees ex-combatants as collaborators in the research, rather than objects of it. This is also an opportunity to challenge the common view in Nepal that the process was a success simply because little has been heard from the ex-People’s Liberation Army (PLA) since demobilisation. The project seeks to create knowledge about the nature and perception of the demobilisation process, but also to have a social impact that is positive for both ex-combatants and peace in Nepal.

This often identifies ex-combatants by activities they ceased many years ago, rather than the situation in which they find themselves today. It does so by taking an innovative approach, encouraging ex-combatants to define their own needs and explain their circumstances in their own words – from the years of conflict through the peace process and demobilisation up to the present day. The project approaches ex-combatant youth as actors with complex needs and demands shaped by their experiences of poverty and stigmatisation since the war as well as their experience of the war itself. The project represents one of few efforts to take a participatory research approach to the post-conflict lives of ex-combatants and to understand how a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process is perceived by those it impacts most. In addition to providing a forum for ex-combatants, the project aims to challenge often enduring stigmatization of ex-combatants and create a space through which ex-PLA can represent themselves. More than this it seeks to challenge an approach in which rank and file ex-fighters had little agency, never having been consulted about the form the process should take.⁴

Following the end of Nepal’s insurgency, the process of re-integration of ex-combatants of the Maoist PLA was celebrated nationally and internationally as one of the big successes of the peace process. However, surprisingly little is known of the lives and whereabouts of those demobilised. While many are reported to have returned to traditional rural livelihoods, the familiar structure of Maoist politics continues to have a strong appeal and a considerable number of ex-fighters are said to have exchanged the mainstream Maoist party for one of two new radical factions, both of which are currently outside the established political process. Others are understood to have joined criminal gangs operating in Nepal’s urban areas, or one of the many ethnically defined political and armed groups that are increasingly defining Nepal’s fractious politics. In light of this, the project seeks to understand and document their experiences, in order to develop community-based approaches to support their return to civilian life, including the peaceful resolution of potential tensions between ex-combatants and communities.

Global best practices on the process of DDR stress the importance for reintegration of those emerging from armed rebel movements to include a political, economic and social dimension. Nepal’s reintegration process appears limited in this regard; it has mainly seen payments made to those discharged with little other action. This project interrogates the impact of this process, seeking to understand the continuing needs of both ex-combatants and the communities receiving them. However, it seeks to do this not in the state-centred way in which DDR is most often understood – as means of managing a security threat – but by conducting an ethnography of ex-combatants that seeks to understand the challenges of their everyday lives. A participatory action research approach is taken, such that ex-combatants are themselves mobilised as researchers.

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⁴ Whilst the senior commanders of the PLA had the opportunity to influence the form the DDR process took, ordinary fighters played no role in this.
This project constitutes both a research exercise, to understand how effective the reintegration of ex-combatants has been, and a programme to see ex-combatants not only as a potential source of insecurity, but as actors who can build peace in their communities. Ex-combatants have been mapped in 6 districts of Nepal and brought together to serve both as a means for investigators to understand their experience of reintegration following demobilisation, and a platform to mobilise ex-combatants as peacemakers in their communities and to advance their own interests. In each district ex-combatants have been trained in qualitative research methods in such a way that they can interview their peers, constituting the first large-scale study of ex-combatants since their mass discharge.

Nepal’s conflict and peace process

Nepal’s Maoist insurgency was driven by a legacy of centuries of feudalism in a Hindu kingdom built on a codified framework of social, economic and political exclusion that marginalised indigenous people, lower castes and women. The vast majority of the nation’s almost 30 million people live in rural areas, where feudal social relations impact upon livelihoods: almost one third of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. The first democratic elections were held in 1991, following a popularly supported but elite led ‘People’s Movement’. Whilst the changes brought about by democracy helped trigger the conflict, its roots were in endemic economic and social inequality. In 1996 a small party from among Nepal’s fractious Marxist left, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN-M], declared a ‘People’s War’ against the newly democratic regime. The insurgency grew rapidly from its initial base in the hills of the impoverished Mid-west with the Maoists conducting military operations throughout the country. They propounded a politics that explicitly encompassed an end to exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, caste and gender and as a result a significant fraction of their cadres, both political and military, were drawn from these marginalised groups.

Maoist armed forces were organised into a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) shortly after the conflict started, with PLA tactics modelled on the Chinese precedent of the armed masses from the countryside besieging the cities. In practice a PLA that consisted of around 20,000 troops at the insurgency’s height achieved its substantial military success through being highly mobile in moving large distances to confront the Royal Nepali Army in strength. By the end of the conflict the CPN-M claimed to control 80% of the territory of Nepal, but was unable to hold any of the headquarters of the 72 districts. The PLA were supplemented by militia, mostly poorly armed younger cadres, who policed their home villages and sustained ‘People’s Governments’ seeking to constitute an alternative administration, and infrastructure that included ‘People’s Courts’ and schools.

The conflict came to an end in April 2006, with a second ‘People’s Movement’ uniting the Maoists and the constitutional parties against a king who had seized absolute power. As part of the peace process the monarchy has been abolished and following successive elections to a constituent assembly the Maoists have gone from being the largest party in the legislature to a rump minority following the elections of 2013 as the Party has split, with left factions rejecting the accommodation with electoral democracy. The PLA moved into UN supervised cantonments in 2006, with their weapons in containers to which both PLA commanders and UN monitors had keys. The tortuous political negotiations that followed the peace deal centred on the issue of the PLA. The CPN-M,\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Soon after the signing of the CPA, the CPN-M merged with smaller parties to become the Unified CPN-M (UCPN-M), while a left faction that split later reclaimed the original name.
who became the largest party in the Constituent Assembly in 2008, saw the PLA as insurance against their marginalisation in the face of perceived resistance from traditional elites and political parties. The other parties in turn saw the existence of the PLA as proof that the Maoists could return to violence if their political demands were not met, and insisted that the state could not have two armies. Over a period of almost 6 years PLA fighters remained in cantonments. Over time CPN(M) demands over treatment of their troops were diluted, to the point where they ultimately accepted the dissolution of the PLA in 2012. Whilst a small minority joined the renamed but essentially unreformed Nepal Army – against which they had fought – most fighters received cash payments and returned to civilian life.

The conflict has left a legacy of some 17,000 dead, while the Constitution writing long perceived as the principle remaining task of the peace process culminated in the promulgation in September 2015 of a new Constitution. This remains however hugely contested, not least among the indigenous janajati and long marginalized Madhesi communities whose empowerment was at the heart of Maoist demands. The mainstream Maoist party is largely perceived to have compromised both its ideology and traditional rural orientation with its leaders benefitting from access to the financial and social benefits of a highly corrupt political system. One result of this was the rout of the mainstream Maoists in the 2013 election to the Constituent Assembly, encouraging many in the Party and among ex-PLA fighters, to join the critique of the peace process from two left factions that now constitute separate parties.

**International practice in the reintegration of ex-combatants**

Globally, the treatment of arms carriers and others associated with rebel armies on the signing of peace agreements has been conceptualised as Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR). DDR programmes are a tool to secure sustainable peace following violent conflict and a key component of conflict resolution. In Nepal, the language of DDR was always rejected by the Maoists on the grounds that they had not lost the war, and contrasted with a need for Security Sector Reform (SSR) through the integration of a large fraction of PLA fighters into the official armed forces. In practice, what ultimately unfolded was the disarmament and demobilization of the PLA, with essentially no reform to the security sector in general or the Nepal Army in particular, beyond its renaming from the Royal Nepal Army and the creation of the National Development and Security Directorate.

The social reintegration of ex-combatants can facilitate the reconciliation process, both through and as conflict transformation and peacebuilding. The reintegration step of a DDR process is the most complex, because – in contrast to disarmament and demobilisation – it is ongoing and must take place in the communities to which ex-combatants return. The global practice of reintegration of ex-combatants has however been seen largely as a challenge of managing a group who can pose potential threats to a fragile peace, rather than understanding and addressing their needs and those of communities receiving them. Those being demobilised typically have little agency in any process and consultation is often minimal: ex-combatants are recipients of ‘packages’ that seek primarily to minimise the security threat they pose. Whilst a DDR programme can also seek to support social acceptance of ex-fighters and as such be a part of reconciliation efforts, in Nepal as in many other contexts this was not prioritised.

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8 As reported by the Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction on March 29, 2011, using figures compiled by an official task force responsible for ascertaining the loss of life and property during the conflict (see report by the Nepal Monitor at http://www.nepalmonitor.com/2011/07/recording_nepal_conf.html).
10 These are the CPN-M, led by Mohan Baidhya (aka Kiran), and the CPNM, led by Netra Bikram Chand, (aka Biplav).
11 This is a new Directorate of the NA into which ex-PLA were integrated and where they constitute one third of all troops.
Reintegration is “the process whereby former combatants [...] are assimilated into the social and economic life of (civilian) communities”. Reintegration is understood as having economic, political and social components, ensuring that ex-fighters have a livelihood, are a part of decision making processes, and can again become a part of communities. In the Nepali context it is interesting to note the extent to which the three elements of reintegration reflect exactly the challenges that led young people, particularly those from excluded communities, to join the Maoists during the People’s War. Poverty and a lack of development, poor governance and the neglect of rural populations by the authorities, and massive social exclusion drove the conflict and fed recruitment to the PLA: the conditions for political and economic reintegration of ex-combatants overlap with broader challenges for the nation.

Social reintegration demands the repair of relations between combatants and families and communities potentially transformed by the conflict. It demands that ex-fighters adjust their expectations and potentially status, and communities accept that returnees may appear to have been rewarded for their violence. Community stigmatisation is common, and amplified by ex-combatants potentially suffering from trauma linked to the violence in which they participated. In some contexts communities have been incentivised to accept ex-combatants with development projects and other assistance. Reintegration of women ex-combatants is complicated by the expectation that they return to traditional roles and that marriages made during conflict are often not acknowledged by the community: stigmatisation for women often arises simply because fighting is perceived as a masculine activity. Also vulnerable are those recruited as minors, with years of education lost to war and a particular susceptibility to the trauma of armed conflict. It is however important to understand in the Nepali context that whilst ex-combatants were recruited as minors almost all are now adults (see Figure 7) with their own agendas - political and others - moulded by their experience, This study suggests that most ex-PLA perceive themselves not as victims but very much as agents of change. The disabled present additional challenges to reintegration, often being in need of medical assistance and rehabilitation, and having less access to livelihood.

Social reintegration demands the acceptance of ex-combatants on the part of the community and a resultant transformation of the military identity of the ex-combatant. Effective social reintegration of ex-combatants has significant potential for social cohesion and economic prosperity, with ex-combatants potentially becoming catalysts for peacebuilding.

Nepal’s conflict was characterised by the high levels of discipline seen in the Maoist movement, in which rigid hierarchies and effective command and control structures articulated the top-down centralism of a classic Marxist Party. The implications for ex-combatants and their integration is that - as long as ex-fighters choose to subject themselves to Party discipline – a return to conflict can only happen when the Party leadership makes such a decision. As such, the threats to peace in Nepal from the ex-PLA come from individuals and groups who no longer organise as part of formal Party structures, who may be mobilised to advance an ethnic agenda for example, or from more organised splits from the mainstream Party with more radical agendas. It will be seen that a central narrative that emerges from the experience of Maoist ex-combatants in this study is the importance of the relationship between an ex-fighter and the various Maoist parties that now exist.

**Political history**

By the time of the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) in November 2006, Maoist armed forces were estimated to contain of the order 10,000 regular armed members of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and 20-25,000 members of local

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Beyond the armed forces of the PLA, militia drawn from youth maintained Maoist control at the village level, and lacked significant numbers of firearms. Cultural troupes travelled widely disseminating political messages. Maoist combatants and cadres more generally had been recruited largely from rural areas and with strong representation from traditionally marginalised communities, such as the indigenous (janajati) and lower castes (Dalits).14 Around 40% of PLA fighters were reported to be women, although this figure seems to have come largely from Maoist claims; of those Maoist combatants verified by UNMIN 20% were women, still a remarkable number in a society such as that of Nepal. This demonstrates how in a highly patriarchal and exclusive society the Maoists were successful in mobilising the marginalised, although most commanders and political leaders were higher caste men. Whilst from the data collected here the vast majority of recruitment appears to have been voluntary, during the conflict many reports were received of recruitment under threat. It was also clear that recruits included many under 18 and in some cases far younger.

The end of the conflict, as the PLA moved into cantonments following the ceasefire of May 2006, was accompanied by a massive recruitment campaign by the CPN(M) to increase numbers. With the promise of a route to a career in the state army this was highly popular with youth from poor communities. Following the peace process, the CPN(M) refounded the Young Communist League (YCL) as an unarmed grassroots youth movement, which became the movement’s strong arm on the ground. This included both PLA and militia members, and notably was seen as a Party organization to which important PLA cadres could move to maintain their activity outside the cantonments.

The CPA dictated that the Maoist army (the term “PLA” was not used) would be confined to temporary cantonments, “verified” and monitored by the UN. The Interim Council of Ministers would then “supervise, integrate and rehabilitate the Maoist combatants”.15 The December 2006 Agreement on the Monitoring and Management of Arms and Armies that followed sets out conditions for both the PLA and Nepal Army regarding restriction of activity and movement, monitoring of weapons, cantonments and barracks, clearing of minefields, and the role in supervising this process of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN). The language of the peace process was seen in the mandate of UNMIN concerning combatants, defined as the management of “arms and armies”. The PLA was seen – by the CPN(M) at least – as not having been disarmed, since on moving to the cantonments their weapons were sealed in containers to which UNMIN inspectors had keys, and UNMIN managed a similar number of weapons of the RNA, as a demonstration of reciprocity. In practice, whilst Maoist combatants were effectively if not definitively disarmed, they remained very much mobilized and engaged with the Maoist movement, and political and military education continued in the cantonments. Once the PLA was in the cantonments, the future of the two armies became the centre of political contestation over the nature of the peace process. The process of what was to become demobilisation in all but name was tortuously slow, with the CPN(M) anxious not to lose the bargaining power of an effective army and the threat of returning to war, and other political forces fearing that the PLA could usurp the democracy to which the CPN(M) had apparently committed themselves. The political inertia around the broader peace process, driven by a lack of trust between the CPN(M) and the other political parties prevented significant progress on the issue of Maoist combatants for many years.


14 According to the UN data, nearly 90 percent of the combatants are of hill origin; among those of Terai origin, the indigenous Tharu dominate.

17

Whilst this study is concerned with reintegration in the sense of ex-combatants being integrated back into civilian society, this language has rarely been used in Nepal. Rather, integration is seen to refer to the inclusion of ex-PLA fighters in the Nepal Army (NA), a core issue over which no agreement could be reached for many years. Similarly, the language of rehabilitation and reintegration is rejected by the CPN(M) and by many ex-combatants: since they perceive to have done nothing wrong, there is no reason for rehabilitation, and since they have always been 'with the people' there is no need for reintegration. As a result the language of demobilisation and disarmament and of DDR was rarely used in Nepal.

Timeline of the demobilisation process

At the initial registration of combatants in the cantonments in 2007, 32,250 Maoist combatants were registered. When UNMIN made the verification of combatants to determine eligibility for integration, 8,638 of those present for registration were absent. The departure of these presumed combatants has been called 'self-integration': their fate and destination remain largely unknown, although some have been met for this study. There are also likely to be a significant number of PLA fighters who left during the war and before the CPA was signed, or before the registration process – these have not been enumerated.16

The UNMIN verification process sought to ensure that all combatants in the cantonments were recruited as adults (i.e. born after 25th May 1988) and before the signing of the ceasefire on 25th May 2006. 23,610 went through the verification process, of which 19,602 were verified and thus deemed part of what agreements called the “Maoist army”. Those who failed the verification process were disqualified, and in Nepali were labelled ayogya, literally unqualified, either because they were deemed to have been recruited as minors or after the cut-off date. It became clear over time that for those so labelled, this status was highly stigmatising as they were considered – not least by their families and communities – to have failed at the first step of a process that was perceived as culminating in recruitment to the NA. Of the 4,008 persons disqualified, 2,073 were minors at the time of the peace agreement and 1,035 were late recruits; 30% of them were young women.17 Once the stigmatising nature of the label ayogya had been understood by the UN, they began to use the more technical term ‘verified minors and late recruits’ (VMLR) and have continued to use this through their programming with those discharged early. This group was however not formally discharged from the cantonments until 2010, due to continued wrangling between the CPN(M) and other parties as a part of the continuing and disputed peace process. While 2,400 of the disqualified were formally discharged in February 2010, 1,615 of this group did not appear for the ceremony, including a large fraction of women among them those recently married and others who were pregnant. Those discharged at this time received cash payments from both the CPN(M) and the UN, totalling NRs 22,000, around US$285.

The only significant effort at ex-combatant reintegration targeted this group of 4,000, through a dedicated UN programme, the Interagency Rehabilitation Programme (UNIRP). Following initial obstacles, including those of the CPN(M) discouraging those discharged to engage with UNIRP, UNIRP claims to have been contacted by 90% of the disqualified.18 They report the delivery of the following services:

- 45% of the disqualified were provided with psychosocial counselling, including family and community interventions;

16 But several of such ex-fighters were met during this study and are discussed here.


18 UNIRP Newsletter, December 2013.
- 2,234 disqualified (56% of all those discharged, of whom more than a third are women) enrolled in one of the UNIRP support packages and received career counselling and training;
- 71.5% of those who graduated from UNIRP education and vocational training programmes are now employed, corresponding to 32% of those disqualified.

Quantitatively, the UNIRP appears to have been a limited success: this study will probe the qualitative nature of its impact on ex-combatants as one element of reintegration to which ex-fighters were exposed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration and verification process</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of registered ex-combatants</td>
<td>32,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of ex-combatants verified by UNMIN</td>
<td>19,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absentees, automatically considered as disqualified</td>
<td>8,640</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disqualified combatants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under the age of 18 as of 25 May 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late recruits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total disqualified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome of categorisation process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of ex-combatants absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of ex-combatants present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead, suspended and deserters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of ex-combatants selected/opting for integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of ex-combatants opting for voluntary retirement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Numerical accounting for ex-Maoist combatants and how they left the PLA.

Since the discharge of the disqualified in early 2010, the process of integration into the NA or of reintegration back into civilian life for the remaining 19,600 in the cantonments (of whom 20% were women) was held hostage by continuing deadlock over the peace process. Only as progress was made towards a definitive political settlement was it possible for demobilisation to be advanced. In November 2011 a 7-point agreement was signed by the UCPN(M), committing to the integration of a maximum of 6,500 PLA fighters into the NA. As the political process accelerated to a conclusion, and the commitment of the UCPN(M) leadership to the democratic process appeared confirmed, the cantonments and the PLA ceased being a bargaining chip: ex-combatants were no longer perceived as bringing value to the UCPN(M)’s political struggle. In April 2012, ex-combatants were invited to choose between integration into the Nepal Army or voluntary retirement: ultimately some 3,200 chose integration into the NA, with 16,000 receiving payments of between NR500,000 and 900,000 ($6,200 – 9,300), depending on their rank, and leaving the cantonments. As the NA took control

19 By this point the CPN(M) had evolved, through mergers, into the Unified CPN(M), and will thus be labelled UCPN(M), to distinguish it from other Maoist factions, which kept the name CPN-M.

of the cantonments and of PLA weapons however ultimately only 1,421 were actually integrated,\textsuperscript{21} and in October 2012, the cantonments were closed.

\textsuperscript{21} http://nepaltimes.com/article/nation/Nation-the-price,678
3. Research approach and methodology

The project seeks to understand the limits and potential of efforts in Nepal to reintegrate Maoist ex-combatants into communities and create space for them to be catalysts for peace. It constitutes a research exercise to evaluate the successes and failures of efforts to integrate those who fought with the PLA and an attempt to mobilise ex-combatant youth to advance non-violent conflict resolution.

Young people fought the People’s War on both sides and have a major role to play in both building peace and preventing future conflict. Following the end of the conflict, disaffected youth remained active in politics and are targets for recruitment by both armed groups with a political agenda and criminal gangs. After their demobilisation from the PLA some ex-fighters returned home to rural communities, while others moved to urban centres where they often became involved in politics or business, both of which have significant criminal fringes. This project sought to work with ex-combatants, both through existing organisations and by bringing ex-fighters together in local, regional and national level forums, to understand how they perceive the DDR process and the extent of their economic, political and social integration. The project represents one of very few efforts to take a participatory and ethnographic approach to the post-conflict lives of ex-combatants and to understand how a DDR process is perceived by those it impacts most. In addition to providing a forum for ex-combatants to share and discuss, the project aims to also create community dialogues for ex-combatants to share their problems with community members and leaders and vice versa. Through discussion the hope is to challenge often enduring stigmatization of ex-combatants. The project aims to demonstrate in a few districts a modality that can be replicated elsewhere, as well as supporting the creation of district, regional and national structures that can represent the ex-PLA.

This action research project challenges the dominant approach to demobilisation, which often identifies ex-combatants by activities they ceased many years ago, rather than the situation in which they find themselves today. It does so by taking an innovative approach, encouraging ex-combatant youth to define their own needs and explain their circumstances in their own words – from the last years of conflict through the peace process up to the present day. The project approaches ex-combatant youth as actors with complex needs and demands shaped by their experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation since the war, as well as their experience of the war itself. This understanding is then used to support ex-combatants to address the remaining divisions in their communities.

Aims and impacts of the project

The timing of this research has allowed access to the bulk of ex-combatants when the initial cushion of their rehabilitation payment has dissipated, and they are facing the long-term implications of their situation, socially, economically and politically. The project targeted all those who have spent significant time with Maoist armed forces, whether voluntarily departed soon after (or even before) the CPA, disqualified and discharged in 2010, or ‘rehabilitated’ in 2012. The aims of the project are to:

- Evaluate the success of the reintegration process, economically and socially, as perceived by ex-combatants;
- Understand the challenges faced by ex-combatants in the communities in which they live;
- Engage with groups of ex-combatants in their communities – and mobilise such groups where they do not already exist – in order to both create a support structure for ex-fighters, and to create a forum through which dialogue with the community can take place;
Methodology: Participatory Action Research with ex-combatants

In development, participatory approaches have become increasingly orthodox, aiming to generate understanding from the viewpoint of those most affected and develop local responses to development needs. Participatory research focuses on a process of sequential reflection and action, carried out with and by local people rather than on them, in which local knowledge and perspectives are not only acknowledged but form the basis for the research. Participatory research aims to shift power from researcher to subject and in its deeper form involves the researcher and the researched working together in a process of mutual learning. Participatory Action Research (PAR) allows the researcher to be a facilitator, rather than a director by:

- Contributing to the practical concerns of people in the immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

And engaging in:

- A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes…It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

Action research offers the potential for social scientists to catalyse change by working in collaboration with marginalised constituencies, rejecting the testing of hypotheses in favour of a research approach that works within a specific social situation, driven by the following elements:

- a collaborative process between researchers and people in the situation
- a process of critical inquiry;
- a focus on social practice; and
- a deliberate process of reflective learning.

PAR rejects the liberal value of neutrality in social research and aims to explicitly advance the goals of a particular community that has a voice in how that research is conducted. A participatory approach resonates with goals of democratisation, challenging peacebuilding practice that remains highly undemocratic by imbuing knowledge production with a politics that represents the interests of those groups driving the research, catalysing an emancipatory approach to addressing legacies of violence. Beyond its efforts to ‘decolonise’ research methodologies, PAR seeks to mobilise citizens around processes to advance peace and ensure that agency lies with the researched. As a result predictability of research outputs is sacrificed for social impact, in terms of attitudinal change and the perceptions of participants, emphasising that PAR is a social process with social goals beyond knowledge production:

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25 Rappaport, supra n. 23.
PAR is a philosophy and style of work to promote people’s empowerment. [This includes] the formation of new people’s organizations if none suitable exist or the strengthening of existing popular organizations and promotion of a self-reliant, assertive culture within them.28

Participatory approaches can change the power dynamics around peace research and dramatically improve the quality of that research. PAR permits the perspective of a particular group, defined by victimhood, ethnicity or any other criterion, to be understood; it challenges the use of externally driven proxy indicators after violence which may be irrelevant for the concerned community. Whilst the centrality of non-experts in PAR challenges ideas of rigor in social research, it has become clear in many contexts that post-conflict approaches that are methodologically robust, actually are often wrong in understanding the views of populations.29

This study aims not just to understand the perspectives of ex-combatants but also to produce knowledge that can serve them and their communities. It seeks to challenge approaches to integration that have emerged from unrepresentative political elites that marginalise the views of those most affected.

The ex-combatant project in Nepal
The project sought to understand how effective the reintegration of ex-combatants has been, and to see ex-combatants not only as a potential source of insecurity, but as actors who can build peace in their communities. Pairs of ex-combatants in 6 districts were trained in qualitative research methods such that they could collaboratively prepare a questionnaire and interview their peers to allow the needs and challenges of ex-combatants to be shared. The local groups of ex-combatants, collected around the peer researchers, also served as a vehicle to engage with the community. Local ex-combatants’ groups serve as both a frame for the participatory research process and a structure in which ex-fighters can be mobilised as actors to play a role in addressing the issues which alienate them from their communities.

The conduct of research by peers of respondents is crucial to ensuring both access and the building of trust essential to effective research of issues that are often sensitive. All elements of the integration of ex-combatants, including the economic, political and social, and the potential impact that has on their engagement in future conflict, has been investigated. Areas of research interest include the identities of ex-combatants: do they continue to define themselves as combatants, or as Maoist activists, or has reintegration challenged this? The aim is to understand what issues ex-combatants themselves see as most important in facilitating or obstructing their entry back into civilian life.

It is clear that the technical quality of research that can be done by such peer researchers cannot compete with that of professional researchers. In particular, some excellent work with ex-combatants has been done using ethnographic methodologies, often by anthropologists.30 However, the perspective gained by using ex-combatants allows a qualitatively different approach to the questions asked of respondents to be taken, and allows the knowledge gained to be used by ex-fighters themselves.

Initially, selected ex-combatants were invited to come together and the project introduced at meetings that sought to determine ex-combatants’ interest in the project in

terms of their own goals, and these integrated into it. This led very quickly to the prioritising of a national mobilisation of ex-PLA fighters, perhaps the clearest priority of those met, through which they would seek to gain a national voice and a route to political influence. Whilst all those in the initial meetings shared the challenges – most notably their lack of effective livelihood – they believed that the route to addressing this was through representation and voice. They also saw the knowledge production goals of the project as valuable in terms of demonstrating the current condition of ex-combatants, and thus supporting advocacy to address their needs.

In each chosen district, two ex-combatants were selected and trained in qualitative research techniques, including an emphasis on research ethics, ensuring that peer researchers understand their responsibilities to their colleagues. An advantage of such peer research is that networks of ex-fighters link respondents, providing a framework of trust among ex-comrades on the basis of which frank interviews can be conducted. The training included the participatory development of a semi-structured research instrument to be used to interview ex-combatants, hence the term peer researchers. Ex-combatants then travelled within their district (or districts) meeting other ex-combatants and conducting semi-structured interviews to understand their general situation, perceptions of the DDR process, the extent of their integration, and broader needs and demands.

**The peer researchers**

The project was implemented with ex-PLA peer researchers recruited from 6 districts of Nepal, as shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 2 Map of Nepal showing districts in which the research was performed.](image-url)

These comprise:

- Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital, where many ex-combatants who have not returned to their communities live;
- In the Mid and Far Western regions – the heartland of the Maoist insurgency – Kailali [7th division], Surkhet [6th division] and Dang [5th division]. Kailali and Surkhet also hosted the cantonments for their respective regions around which ex-
PLA communities grew. Both regions host large numbers of janajati communities who were recruited into the Maoist movement as well as the poorest and most isolated districts in the country;

- Sunsari and Jhapa in the Eastern region, which also hosted a cantonment (1st and 2nd Divisions), and contains a large fraction of people from the highly marginalised Madhesi community, of Indian origin, and also allowed access to the Eastern mountain districts containing janajati communities who were both active in the Maoist movement and more recently in ethnic activism.

- Chitwan was the location of the central region cantonment [3rd and 4th divisions].

Ex-combatants were sampled through an initial mapping made via contacts with ex-combatants’ organisations, the (then) two Maoist parties, and victims’ groups. Peer researchers in the target districts were selected on the basis of their interest in the project, and their having a minimum level of education and their contacts/motivation to work with fellow ex-comrades. In addition to the geographical representation of the selected districts the 12 peer researchers recruited by the project were sought to ensure representation by gender, caste, ethnicity and level of disability, where possible. Finding female ex-combatants was more challenging, but an adequate – if not ideal – representation was achieved. One researcher was severely disabled, paraplegic since being wounded in the spine during a PLA engagement. He had since become a disabled rights activist and was extremely motivated to join the project. Two other researchers had been injured in ways which continued to have impacts on their lives. Peer researchers were recruited at the time of the initial split of the left faction of the Maoist party. A little more than half of those recruited were still active in politics, and a majority of these were affiliated with the left (‘Baidhya’) faction when the study began, and most of those are now with the Biplav faction.

Table 2 shows details of the ex-PLA peer researchers: 4 were women, one was severely disabled, and half of them come from excluded ethnic and caste groups that were highly active in the Maoist movement. It is worth noting that although many PLA fighters had been recruited as young teenagers, these are poorly represented among the peer researchers who are older than the typical ex-combatant (see Figure 7). This is the inevitable result of requesting a certain level of formal education, since those who joined very young lost access to a significant secondary education, an issue that has become crucial following their demobilisation (see below). Two of the peer researchers were however among those disqualified.

**The peer research**

The research process began with a three day training of peer researchers in the basics of qualitative research, including ethical approaches, sampling and qualitative interviewing. During the training, researchers developed a semi-structured research instrument that they would use to collect data. This was done using small group work to develop and then critique the elements required and then inviting the larger group to expand the initial topic guide into a set of questions that could be asked of respondents. Ex-fighters were then trained in using this instrument to undertake semi-structured interviews, including through role playing the conducting of interviews.31

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31 In fact, it was discovered that a staff member of the small hotel where the training was made had been a PLA fighter and an interview - the first of the project – was conducted with him during the training as a pilot.
Figure 3 Photos from the initial training of ex-PLA researchers in Dang, including videoing of role-played interviews (bottom right)
The ex-PLA peer researchers.

Table 2 The ex-PLA peer researchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>District of residence</th>
<th>District of origin</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity / caste</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of PLA service</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Kalikot</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Kamala Shari</td>
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<td>Solukhumbu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Chhetri</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 The ex-PLA peer researchers.32

The issues addressed in the research instrument emerged from a day of brainstorming among the group during the initial training session, with support from the lead researchers. This instrument included elements linked to:

- History in the Maoist movement and perspective on it;
- Demobilisation: circumstances and benefits received;
- Current situation: a general inquiry about needs;
- Economic situation;
- Political Issues: involvement in Maoist or other politics, attitude towards the Party;
- Emotional and social issues;
- Psychosocial issues.

Each pair of researchers committed to conducting 40 interviews, and a number of focus groups in their district. Interviews were recorded and data transcribed and translated into English for analysis by the investigators.

During the research, some peer researchers dropped out of the project, a hazard to be expected when working with non-professional researchers with other demands on their time. In Kailali one female peer researcher got married and dropped out after the first phase of the project. In Chitwan a researcher involved in business was unable to commit time for the research, and so dropped out. In Kathmandu one researcher dropped out while another did not was only partially engaged, and a replacement was recruited later.

**Sampling approach**

In the absence of comprehensive lists of ex–PLA, the sampling approach was driven by the local personal and political networks of the peer researchers. Peer researchers were asked to collect lists of ex-PLA in their district as a sampling frame, and to select from these representative individuals to interview. The lists were intended to be as

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32 Brief biographies of the peer researchers can be found on p. 3.
comprehensive as possible in order to facilitate invitations to participate in district meetings of ex-PLA as a part of the mobilisation. Ex-PLA were understood as anyone who had been a part of the PLA, including medical staff, cultural troupes and those who had left prior to the peace process. This included the wave of recruits who joined around the time of the end of the conflict, many of whom were ultimately ‘disqualified’ as Maoist combatants. Representivity in the sample ultimately interviewed was understood in terms of age, caste, ethnicity, gender and nature of engagement with the Maoist movement. There is some evidence that since peer researchers were recruited largely through networks linked to political groups, both researchers and those they interviewed were more likely to be linked to Maoist political groups than the typical ex-combatant. Whilst the use of such personal networks ensured that interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of trust, such sampling potentially biases the sample accessed. The representivity of the sample, in terms of how they left the PLA is seen Table 7: this appears to show that the sample very well represents what is known about the departure of cadres from the Maoist army.

A total of 241 interviews with ex-PLA were recorded and transcribed. A further 100 ex-fighters were met in focus groups. A little over half of all those met were women, over-representing them relative to the female fraction in the PLA, but permitting an understanding of issues facing women in particular and some of the gender implications of demobilisation and reintegration. Table 3 summarises the ex-PLA cadres who were interviewed for the study. It can be seen that many of the PLA were recruited from the most marginalized sections of society. This has implications for the ability of ex-combatants to reintegrate into society, social and economically.

The vast majority of the sample was married, mostly to other veterans of the Maoist movement and the People’s War. More than half were married within the movement, often married by Party officials in militarised ceremonies, in most cases during the years in the cantonments. Many of these marriages are inter-caste and/or inter-ethnic, reflecting the Maoist commitment to challenging caste and ethnic discrimination, with often dramatic impacts for couples when they left the cantonments. 83% of those interviewed had children, very often born while fighters were in the cantonments and as a result having significant implications for women’s ability to be a part of cantonment life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Ethnicity / caste</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Brahmin / Chhetri</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Hill janajati</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dalit</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Madeshi</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tharu</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married within Party</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-caste / inter-ethnic marriage</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Summary of the composition of the sample of ex-PLA fighters.

33 Interviewees did not explicitly ask this question to all interviewees, and so this should be considered a lower limited to the fraction of such marriages.
The age profile of the interviewees reveals how young many were when they joined the Maoist movement or the PLA. In most cases they initially joined the civilian party apparatus and only later the PLA itself. Motivations for joining the movement are discussed in Section 0.

Where the ex-PLA are living is crucial to understanding reintegration and what community means for ex-combatants. Interviewees came from 54 of Nepal’s 72 districts, despite having been met (and mostly now living) in the target districts of the study. Error! Reference source not found. shows in which district the ex-combatants met for
the study are currently living, including both districts where interviews were made and – in a few cases – others, where ex-combatants were met by peer researchers while they were travelling, while Table 5 shows the district of origin of those met.

This shows the strength of Maoist recruitment in their Mid-Western heartlands and the dominance of cadres from hill areas. It also demonstrates how the Maoist movement and the cantonment and demobilisation process have contributed to internal migration and paralleled longstanding processes of movement from poorer rural hill areas to the Terai and urban centres.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chitwan</th>
<th>42</th>
<th>Banke</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dang</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Dhading</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunsari</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Jhapa</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surkhet</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Lalitpur</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathmandu</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Dailekh, Kalikot, Makwanpur, Panchthar</td>
<td>1 each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kailali</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorkha</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morang</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 District of current residence of ex-PLA interviewed for the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Far West</th>
<th>Mid West</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Eastern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accham</td>
<td>Jajarkot</td>
<td>Tanahu</td>
<td>Chitwan</td>
<td>Okhladunga</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bajhang</td>
<td>Jumla</td>
<td>Parbat</td>
<td>Sindhulpuchowk</td>
<td>Bhojpur</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bajura</td>
<td>Dang</td>
<td>Gorkha</td>
<td>Sindhuli</td>
<td>Dhankuta</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kanchanpur</td>
<td>Kalikot</td>
<td>Baglung</td>
<td>Sarlahi</td>
<td>Panchthar</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kailali</td>
<td>Pyuthan</td>
<td>Dhading</td>
<td>Kathmandu</td>
<td>Khotang</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Doti</td>
<td>Rolpa</td>
<td>Gulmi</td>
<td>Makwanpur</td>
<td>Therathum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rukum</td>
<td>Kaski</td>
<td>Ramechap</td>
<td>Tapeljung</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salyan</td>
<td>Lamjung</td>
<td>Rautahat</td>
<td>Morang</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mugu</td>
<td>Palpa</td>
<td>Dolakha</td>
<td>Sankwasabha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surkhet</td>
<td>Syangja</td>
<td>Nuwakot</td>
<td>Solokhumbu</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humla</td>
<td>Kavre</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sunsari</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dailekh</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ilam</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Khotang</td>
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</table>

Table 5 District of origin of ex-PLA interviewed for the study, by Development Region
4. From People’s Warrior to Ex-combatant

Histories in the Maoist movement
To understand the journey that combatants have made from home communities to where they now live, one must understand what prompted them to join the Maoist movement. By far the commonest reason for these young and often very young (see Figure 6) people to become involved in Maoist politics was direct experience of oppression based on caste, ethnicity or gender, that resonated with the message of the People’s War:

I mentioned earlier that I belong to a Dalit community. I have closely observed the discrimination in society against Dalits and the poor. They are restricted from being equal with the higher class and rich people. Also, I’ve closely watched the discrimination in the home from being a daughter. Our society greatly differentiates between a son and a daughter. So, I always felt the need to break the chains of such disparities in society. (KAT18)

Others had a negative experience at the hands of the security forces, or had seen family members killed:

I was facing a lot of disparities between male and female in my village. There was huge gap and discrimination. I have seen a lot of sisters being raped. I wanted to change this situation. I dreamt of a better world for women. That is why I joined the Party in search of such a world. There was the compulsion and it was my voluntary decision to join the party. The Royal Nepal Army would come to our school and harass us. It was unsafe to be in the village as a girl. That is why we were forced to join the Party and go underground. It was my school days when I joined the Party. (SUR17)

I was a school student. At that time, there used to be massive oppression in the villages of Rukum and Rolpa. People lived a very fearful life. One day, when I was ready to go to school, policemen came to the house. I was severely beaten for no reason. They arrested me and took me into custody. Later, they released me on a date to be present. For some time, I started visiting the police on the dates demanded and also attended school. My brothers had been actively involved in the Party as full-time activists. Their involvement in the Party also risked my life. Thus, sensing probable threat, I discontinued my education and was involved in the Party thereafter. (KAT11)

My father and brother were killed in an incident of mass murder at Dhaku on January 13, 2000 (2056/9/29). It was the primary reason inspiring me to join the Maoists. Local people had gone to observe a programme organized by the Maoists; that time APF randomly fired from a helicopter onto local people even the shopkeepers who sold goods during the program were killed. 9 people were killed and 25-30 people were injured, they tortured local people for afterwards. No one was allowed to go to the incident spot; they even did not allow family members to bring back dead bodies. The whole village was in tears, many dead, injured and tortured. Thus I joined the Maoists to fight back against injustice. (KAI33)

In other cases people joined the movement due to simple poverty: “My family was poor and we were many in number, my parents did not have the capacity even to send us to school. So, I joined the Maoists because of poverty.” (KAI21) This resonates with those recruited to the PLA as the cantonments were established, where the prospect of a route to a career in the state army, offering a stable salary, seemed assured to many.
A handful of ex-PLA admitted they didn’t know what they were doing when they joined, often feeling subject to pressure from friends, and only understanding the ideology later. Only one of the interviewees admitted that his recruitment was not voluntary:

I was forcefully taken to join the Maoists while I was studying in class 8. I was later returned home in Poush 2059 (December 2002) but they again came in Chaitra 2060 (March 2004) saying that they will take another family member if I did not join. Thus I joined myself rather than sending other family members. (KAT07)

Most cadres joined the movement locally, working with civilian Party structures in their home communities, in some cases being involved with militia working in villages that would have some contact with weapons. They would then graduate either to full-time work with the Party or join the PLA and be sent away as required.

Experience of the conflict

A minority of ex-fighters met (18%) had not been involved in battle, notably those who joined the movement at the time of the creation of cantonments when massive recruitment was underway. However, not only had most seen action, but 72% had been involved in more than 3 engagements. For many fighters, the experience of fighting in the People’s War was the most intense and stimulating of their lives. Fighters forged the greatest of friendships, lived in the spirit of solidarity with comrades in the hardest of times, and saw some die in front of them in battle. Whilst many told stories of the war and of the excitement and the value of what they were doing, these were accompanied by histories of injury, which was often disabling. 38% of fighters interviewed had themselves been injured, sometime in ways that transformed their lives. Additionally, some cadres had been arrested and spent long periods in detention, including suffering torture in the custody of the security forces.

Fighters’ lives were almost entirely contained within the movement, with limited social contact with family and their own community. They became truly integrated and socialised within the PLA and the broader Maoist movement, and this was further reinforced by the many years most spent in the cantonments. Many of the PLA met and married their potential spouses either during the War or while living in the cantonments. In a majority of cases these marriages were made under the authority of the Party, and often encapsulated the radical social perspectives of the Maoists that remain taboo in most communities (see Table 3), most notably inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriage. This had dramatic implications for the future social integration of ex-combatants and the decisions demobilised fighters would make about where to make their post-conflict lives.

Perspectives on the People’s War

Perspectives on the People’s War, and ex-combatants experience of it, varied. Most believed that what they had fought for was right and important, and that they had achieved something through their struggle:

I feel extremely proud for being a participant activist in the People’s War. The People’s war has brought various changes in the traditional societies of Nepal. We managed to establish a Republic in the nation. The slogans of inclusive representation have been widely practiced. It has aroused awareness amongst the minority, oppressed and marginalized peoples. Although the major issues of People’s War could not be completely fulfilled, we had been able to bring various reformatons in the state. I feel proud that I contributed something for my nation. (KAT15)

I do not have any regret. By joining the Maoist party, PLA; I learned discipline, gained courage. I am proud of it. What I did was right. I am happy. (JHA05)
The regrets that ex-fighters had did not concern what they had done as a part of the PLA, but rather the opportunities they had missed by spending a significant fraction of their youth bearing arms, rather than studying or learning a trade: “If I would not have been involved in the People’s war probably, I would be settled in a government job.” (KAI12), an ironic comment given that the PLA were fighting government.

If I had not been in the PLA, I would have studied better. Life would have been managed differently. I am in this condition because of joining PLA, it cannot be hidden. If there was no Maoist party, no PLA, I would not be in this condition. (KAI06)

A large number of ex-fighters also had regrets about the political direction the movement took following the signing of the peace agreement, seeing what they perceived as the political betrayal of the post-war years as devaluing their efforts and the memory of those who died and were disabled in the war. Many blamed the Party leadership for the failures both politically and in terms of the current economic condition of the ex-PLA:

We had fought for the people, for the proletarian class. People used to love us very much. But now we are forced to return to our previous condition as our hopes and expectations have been shattered. Now I think if burying 13,000 friends was a mistake? We were deceived. (JHA13)

Yes I regret [joining the Maoists]. 10-12 productive years of my life was spent in war for the Party. I am unsatisfied about it. I feel extreme sadness remembering it. I am enraged remembering the leaders’ activities. (KAI01)

The Maoist party has progressed just because of PLA but many friends are disabled and injured and living very difficult lives in the village. I am disappointed by this fact. There were many people actively involved in the Party in past but now only leaders’ relatives are active due to nepotism in the Party. […] I joined the Party when I was studying in class 7. I could not study well so I could not get good grades. Thus I could not study good subject. In college also, I was busy in party work and could not go college regularly. Now the Party has forgotten us and we do not get good jobs because we have no competitive grades in education. The Party has darkened the futures of many youth like me. (KAT05)

Regrets are also articulated in terms of the political failure of the Maoist project and linked to the perception that senior cadres have joined a corrupt political elite, while forgetting the rank and file who fought the war that gained them the influence they have.

I fought for parity among people, to uplift the poor, but later the situation changed gradually during the peace process. A disparity appeared between us too. One class was exploited as a prisoner and a few people earned for themselves. They lived a luxurious life. We are betrayed: I am disappointed that our objectives have not been fulfilled. (CHI07)

It seems clear that these regrets, in terms of both the failure to achieve the goals of the People’s War and the loss of potentially valuable and productive years of their youth, lead to ex-PLA investing emotionally in the benefits offered in reintegration. To some extent it seems that the very high expectations of the process emerge as an effort to compensate for the failures and losses of their years fighting.

**Cantonment life**

For fighters who had been highly mobile and supported (if not always voluntarily) by local people whose interests the PLA believed they were fighting for, life in the cantonments was a dramatic change. “We felt like goats tied in shed. We were totally
separated from people; we could not work for people; we were not free. It felt like jail.” (DAN24) “While staying in the cantonment, we were kept like broiler chickens. I felt like [it was] jail to finish us.” (JHA07) In addition, in the early days of the cantonments, conditions were very basic, only later offering accommodation that was comfortable. More than this, the situation in the cantonments was seen as a retreat from politics: ex-fighters described cantonment life as “deprived of politics” (JHA13), another that “we stayed away from politics” (JHA20). For an army whose entire reason to exist was political, this demonstrated how the time in the cantonments saw a retreat from both politics and an engagement with ordinary Nepalese.

Time in the cantonments was characterised for most as a waste of their time, with no political role, no significant investment in skills or training that could serve them as civilians (see below), and only military and ideological training to occupy them.

If we could have learnt some kind of skill and have got some solid government help then our standard of living would have increased by now. In terms of reading and writing also we have comments: if they had provided us a conducive environment for study then even in the 4 to 5 years period we would have got ample learning and achievement. We took those 5 years as a total waste of time, just a time pass. There was not even a flexible system to let us make visits home. Those who go for foreign employment generally earn 5 to 6 lakhs [NRs. 5-600,000] within 3 years, but our 5 year stay turned out to be futile, doing nothing. No achievement at all! (SUR09)

Many ex-combatants discussed how their time in the cantonment saw changes in the hierarchies of the PLA, with commanders seen as seeking financial opportunities through corruption and increasingly distanced from the rank and file.

Commanders had changed in the cantonment; they were no longer like parents as during people’s war. They became self-centred and earning for themselves. They even took away office materials like sofas and computers as personal property while leaving the cantonment, but a naive member did not even carry a pen home. (KAI30)

Vocational training

One of the principle routes to prepare fighters for a life as a civilian was vocational training given in the cantonments. As one ex-fighter pointed out (above) the 5 years fighters were in cantonments offered plenty of time to gain additional qualifications. Many took this opportunity to advance their schooling, including a large number who studied for and passed the SLC exams and others, while in the cantonments. The vocational training provided however was considered far less valuable, largely because many could not access it: less than half of ex-combatants said they undertook any vocational training while in the cantonment (see Table 6). Rather few are now using these skills (see Table 9).

Many of the comments around the training concerned alleged corrupt practices of both NGOs offering the training and commanders administering it, with impacts on the quality of what was delivered.

It seemed like the training programmes were only focused for the allowance, dinner and lunch of NGO members. Thus, I didn't felt like involving myself in those trainings. (KAT22)

I took computer training for a week; it was useless. They took money for the full training period. (CHI10)

It is always beneficial for someone to get involved in any skill enhancement trainings. But whatever training proposals had come in our name were not practiced in reality. These were for the benefit of only a few people to fill up
their pockets. They were not conducted effectively. It was made only a medium to receive grants and donations from various donor agencies. […] We would have appreciated and participated in those trainings had they been conducted with a positive approach. (KAT23)

Cantonment training was made as income source for organizations and commanders. We should have been given vocational training which could have made our living easier. (CHI06)

Some denied there was any useful training: “It is just external gossip. There was no useful skills or development programmes conducted inside the cantonment for the PLA.” (KAT13). Others found the training simply inappropriate.

They did not provide rational training. How can an injured person take technical training? What is the use of beautician training for a revolutionary woman? (CHI08)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocational training</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language training</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 Vocational training undertaken by PLA in the cantonments.

**Injuries and disability**

Almost 22% of the sample is disabled in some way: 15% moderately, e.g. missing an eye, or with compromised mobility, while 7% are severely disabled, e.g. missing a limb, paralysed, or forced to use a colostomy bag. The implications of this for the broader ex-PLA community, if representative, would be that of the almost 20,000 combatants recognised by the UNMIN certification, almost 3,000 are disabled in some way and 1200 are severely disabled. A number of interviewees discussed the challenges they faced gaining adequate access to health care and support given limited financial capacity. Some were being treated for medical problems in the cantonment, but having left now find themselves unable to afford or access appropriate treatment.

Yes, I have a spinal injury. I am disabled. I was injured in 2005 (2062) in the Taulihawa campaign. I was treated at that time and am still undergoing treatment. I am bearing all expenses myself. Government has not helped. (DAN28)

I have around 12 bullets in the left half of my body. I have lost 4 teeth […] I was hit by bullets while commanding in first assault in all attacks. Most of the treatment is done by myself, some by the Party. I am unable to remove bullets because of the high cost. (JHA25)

In some cases treatment costs have taken much of what the voluntary retired received on leaving the cantonments, and many have had to stop their treatment due to lack of finances.

Since we have daily hand to mouth problem, how can I think of treatment? […] I honestly don't have any idea on that [state funding of treatment]. Some time ago, I had gone to Bir Hospital for a check-up of my foot. They told me that the nerve on my leg is broken and the joint of bone is detached. So, they
suggested and referred me to go for immediate operation. But due to the lack of resources, I could not make a treatment of the wound. (KAT18)

As such, there is an intimate link between the poverty many ex-PLA find themselves in and the injuries and disability they have sustained.

A number of those met had been tortured while in state custody and discussed the physical challenges that have resulted.

I cannot explain to you right now what brutal torture I went through. I even fear to recall those horrible days I spent in prison, but they will never be erased from my mind as long as I live. The police personnel used to pull me into the toilets and harass me. Because of the physical torture at that time, my kidneys were severely affected. (KAT17, a female ex-combatant)

Much less discussed were potential emotional and mental impacts of combat, mentioned by only a few ex-fighters;

Yes, I become aggressive and feel isolated time and again over the last six months and later I realised why I was aggressive. I think this is because of bits of gun-fire in my head. (KAI16)

I have a problem in my head since the cantonment period. I have constant headaches and have to take medicine. The doctor says that it is due to excessive worries. I cannot sleep. It is not because of thinking; it is my sickness. (KAI35)

While rather few ex-combatants explicitly discussed mental problems, over 40% mentioned that they had sleep problems:

I remember friends and the war when alone. I dream of fighting war, making plans, preparing for campaigns etc. I cannot sleep well. I drink alcohol in extreme tension. It provides relief. I used to drink to some extent during the People’s War. (DAN07)

I dream that I am fighting war, of martyred friends and being chased by the enemy with a helicopter. I cannot sleep. (DAN13)

One cannot make diagnoses of ex-PLA on this basis, and peer researchers certainly lacked the capacity to do so. It does however seem likely that some fraction of ex-combatants are suffering from mental problems such as post-traumatic stress, that are impacting their capacity to function. It appears no effort has been made to identify such problems, either in the cantonments or following demobilisation, and ex-fighters are now dependent upon a Nepali mental health infrastructure that barely exists should they need support.

**Demobilisation**

If we had to be integrated then it should have been done in six months. What was the need of taking 6 years? We could have mixed up with society in that time. I feel like a child leaning social culture. (CHI04)

The overwhelming relationship of ex-PLA to the demobilisation process was one of alienation: fighters did not understand what was happening, or why. At no point were the rank and file of the PLA consulted about the process (even as commanders were consulted), or how integration post-demobilisation could best be achieved. It was well summed up by one of the peer researchers during the initial research training. During a discussion of DDR and Security Sector Reform (SSR), and when ex-combatants’ views were being sought on what they had wanted in terms of demobilisation, one said: “This
is what should have been done before demobilisation.” The process was always considered primarily a political process, determined by the wishes of senior political figures, and in which the PLA fighters themselves had no agency: “There was a chain of command; we were not allowed to put our view.” (KAI07) This study permits a retrospective look at what greater consultation could have achieved and what other processes can do to avoid the mistakes made in Nepal. It is unable however to challenge the understanding that such processes will always have political imperatives that are likely to override both the wishes of combatants and the evidence base from global experience of demobilisation.

While most ex-combatants spent many years in the cantonments a minority had either never entered them or left early. Some had joined the PLA early in the conflict and left before the peace agreement was signed, while others left when they became mothers. Some 7% of those met left the cantonment on Party orders to join the Young Communist League (YCL). Such cadres, often despite long service, were never considered as part of the process of demobilisation and received no payment or other support.

**Leaving the cantonments**

There were several ways that fighters left the cantonments:

- Those who were disqualified by the UNMIN process eventually left the cantonments in 2010, having received modest cash payments, but promised a range of benefits that many failed to access (see below);
- Others had left the cantonments earlier, due to requests from the Party to work with the YCL, or as a result of injury, illness or having children;
- Those who stayed in the cantonments until the general demobilisation in 2012 had a choice between:
  - Voluntary retirement, including a cash payment;
  - Integration into the Nepal Army;
  - Rehabilitation, consisting of a package of education, training, and vocational opportunities.

Data claim that only six PLA chose the latter option, but it seems likely that for various reasons, many were not even made aware of this.\(^{34}\) As such, in practice those demobilised when the cantonments were closed had to choose between integration into the NA, or retirement with a cash payment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of departure</th>
<th>Total no.</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% in sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demobilised</td>
<td>15,624</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated into NA</td>
<td>1,421</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disqualified</td>
<td>4,009</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left independently</td>
<td>11,096(^{35})</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7 Route of departure from cantonments for all ex-PLA and for this sample.*\(^{36}\)

---

35 This comprises 8,640 who were absent during verification, and 2,456 who were absent during categorisation, (see Table 1).
36 This excludes those who never entered the cantonments or left the PLA before the CPA. Who constitute the remaining fraction of the sample of this study.
The total numbers in each category (where known) and the fractions among ex-combatants met in this study are summarised in Table 7.

One of the most common terms used to describe the feeling ex-combatants had when they left the cantonments is that of being “empty-handed”. This reflects both that they face substantial economic challenges and that the political goals for which they made such great sacrifices have not been achieved. This is one of the drivers of the perceived stigmatisation in their home communities: they left with the intention of changing their nation, or at least of finding a stable livelihood in the Nepal Army, and have achieved neither. To come home impoverished and humiliated – particularly for the ayogya for whom integration in to the army was often the main reason for joining the Maoists – is untenable.

I think I have returned empty handed. It’s not about money; it is about our objectives, honesty and dignity. (CHI01)

At this time of inflation, 10 lakhs can do nothing. I feel that it would be better to return empty handed. We have returned empty handed. (KAI06)

This latter quotation demonstrates the very high expectations of ex-PLA. 10 lakhs, one million rupees, is a very significant sum of money for almost all Nepalese: for this ex-fighter to dismiss it demonstrates the challenges of a reintegration process that could satisfy such individuals.

Integration

While in the language of DDR, integration (or more usually reintegration) refers to ex-combatants returning to civilian life and communities, around the PLA integration always referred to integration into the national security forces. The initial understanding of both Maoist leaders and PLA cadres was that the position of strength the CPN-M found itself in on the signing of the CPA would naturally lead to the integration of the PLA and the erstwhile Royal Nepal Army into a new force that would serve a ‘new’ Nepal. In 2006, as the PLA moved into the cantonments, long-term fighters were relishing the prospect of a comfortable career in the state army, while young people from around the country enthusiastically sought to join the PLA in order to gain the same opportunity. It is the dashing of this expectation that explains the bitterness felt towards the integration process.

The most common narrative from ex-PLA fighters was that which sought to contrast integration – understood as the assimilation of all those in cantonments into the Nepal Army – with recruitment, where Maoist fighters were given the opportunity to satisfy the normal criteria to join the NA. As a result all the disabled and seriously injured were excluded from consideration, as were women with children.

I wanted to be integrated in Nepal Army but they said that the mothers of small child are not allowed to go to army. Since my child was born by Caesarean, they said those who have gone through surgery and have got wounded cannot go to Army. That is why I was not selected for integration. (SUR03)

Because fighters who had potentially fought with the PLA for many years, and were true combat veterans, were treated as if they were civilians from the street, the process was branded ‘dishonourable’ by many ex-fighters interviewed. Similarly the fact that such veterans of the People’s War were forced to meet a range of criteria to ensure they satisfied regulations, summarised for many the indignity of the process, as well as the challenge of recruitment at a level lower than that held in the PLA.

I did not think it appropriate to go for integration. PLA were excluded setting criteria for education, age, height, chest etc. I had worked as a commander; I
did not want to go as soldier. The integration was made as a recruitment process; I did not want to join that insulting process. (DAN12)

Some used the contrast between integration and recruitment to indicate the dominance of a DDR process, over an SSR approach: the NA remains substantially unreformed, despite the presence of ex-PLA in it. This resonates with demands from ex-PLA that the NA be ‘democratised’.

So, the DDR process was a model of dissolving the Maoist army rather than integrating them in the mainstream army. (SUR06)

Ex-combatants linked the perceived failures of the integration process to the political failures of the Maoist leadership, repeatedly using words like ‘surrender’ to describe the leadership’s acceptance of the approach that ultimately led to the integration into the NA of only 1,400 ex-PLA fighters. It was the ‘disrespectful integration’ that discouraged so many ex-PLA from pursuing integration into the NA:

We had demanded respectful integration of all PLA into the national army in discussions regarding the subject. […] An environment to hand over our weapons in a respectful way should have been created. How integration has been done disrespectfully will create tremendous in-party struggle in the near future. It is hard to imagine the vengeance amongst the soldiers who fought against each other earlier. […] My real interest wasn’t to go in the army. But if the party was able to create a condition of respectful integration and if the party leadership had ordered that, I might have gone in integration. I could not have joined an army that had killed my own life partner. It would have been a moral problem to do that. (JHA14)

What happened in the name of army integration was, they compelled the comrades to surrender. This was not a dignified process because both the armies were equal in battle. So, this integration process might be okay for those who only wished to get a job but for us it was a deception. (SUR06)

I had the feeling that the Party was surrendering to the state by giving up all its weapons. I did not like that. They demolished the PLA in the name of integration. The people’s army was humiliated in this process. (SUR19)

**Disqualification**

The exclusion of those who were recruited as minors or after the cut-off date was the cruelest for those so disqualified. The political foot dragging around the process meant that such individuals – overwhelmingly young people, recruited when under 18 in 2006 – had spent more than 3 years in the cantonments by the time they left. The use of the word Nepali word _ayogya_ to describe the disqualified was universally understood as meaning they were ‘unfit’ or ‘incapable’:

I left because I was made ‘incapable’. I feel sad for being made incapable; we had fought People’s War, faced difficulties and also stayed in jail. I was
involved for 7 years and my husband for 11 years. Now no one is helping us. I even felt angry for being excluded as incapable. But what can I do? They told me that I made mistake during conversation. (JHA30)

The stigma attached to the ayogya label continues to anguish the disqualified, and one of their principle demands is that this be revisited, despite a state and a political establishment that has moved on. Those disqualified included fighters who had been injured in combat, even allegedly some who were in hospital when certification was ongoing. What most perturbs ex-fighters is the threat this poses to the solidarity that defines their identity as PLA:

None should have been insulted by making them incapable. All friends have worked hard with blood and sweat, have lost their family. Such friends were insulted with ‘capable and incapable’ distinction. (JHA15)

An additional impact of disqualification was the loss of the substantial financial benefits that those taking ‘voluntary retirement’ received, of NRs. 500,000 ($5000) and up. The UN mission’s efforts to support those who were largely perceived as vulnerable youth with counselling and vocational training were resisted by the UCPN-M which advised the ayogya against participating in the IRP.

I received no monetary support. Some agencies outside had offered training but I did not participate because our party leaders and instructed us not to take any such training. I knew about the training but the party had clearly instructed us not to participate. (KAT01)

This study faces challenges in drawing conclusions about the perceptions and performance of efforts to reintegrate the disqualified, since they constitute less than 5% of all those who entered the cantonments which translates to rather few individuals in the sample of interviewees.

Voluntary retirement

More than 18,000 of the almost 20,000 certified combatants in the cantonments ultimately chose voluntary retirement after the disappointments of the integration process. The benefit of this to ex-fighters was a significant payment, but this was itself often seen as a part of the ‘selling’ of the PLA and a flawed integration process.

It will be better if they had given good jobs. Every man's life isn't worth 5 lakhs. Money is a mean to spend life, it is not comparable to the money. If the integration was honourable, I would go to the Nepal Army. I will go if they would give me the post for my qualification and ability. (SUR01)

I received 5 lakhs given by the government. That was wrong. It is like exchanging potato with meat. We had fought for change, not for the 5/7 lakhs. At last, all ways are closed, so we took the money. (SUR07)

Payments varied from NRs. 5 – 800,000, depending on the rank of the concerned fighter, and this hierarchy was alarming for some, challenging as it does the social justice message of the Maoist movement.

I was unsatisfied with the provision of giving money; it created differences between friends; some were given 5 lakhs, some 7 lakhs, some 8 lakhs and friends who went in YCL received nothing. (KAI07)

Such payments did however represent the only significant effort at economic and social reintegration for fighters and the implications – and limitations - of these will be discussed.
Needs of ex-fighters

The needs of the ex-PLA emerged clearly from interviews, and the economic dominated these, as shown in Table 8. Economic issues and livelihood are considered important by almost all, and education – seen as a route to livelihood – sought by 37%. Issues of treatment for medical problems of social stigma were also mentioned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs of ex-PLA</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical treatment</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address stigma and treatment in society</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 Needs of ex-fighters, as expressed in interviews.

These priorities were echoed in the statement ex-fighters made:

The major problem that the former PLA workers/activists are facing is undoubtedly the economic problem. [...] The state should open the doors of income generating areas to former PLA workers/activists and give sufficient technical trainings to enhance their skill. (KAT23)

I haven't understood but government should have looked after us. They should have helped with children’s education, looking after the disabled and injured ex-PLA. I'm not the only one who is injured, there are many PLA who are in need of help. The situation is not under control. None of the organizations or government is there for them. (SUR04)

There was an emphasis on support being given to the injured and disabled, including provision of medical treatment where required:

I want these injured and disabled people to be supported. In travel fares, they should have a reservation, they should be given a separate identity card for disabled. Then it can be better to understand the problems of injured and disabled. It would better if the organizations related to disability and even government discuss among each other and bring out effective programs to help such people. (SUR04)

Reservation or affirmative action for PLA veterans was also requested: “Yes we also want the reservation proportionately and inclusively in every political, social and economic affair.” (SUR18) Ex-fighters also linked their needs to those of the families of their comrades who were martyred and disappeared, and the need for their children to receive educational support.

All of these needs will be discussed in the following sections in the context of the reintegration of the ex-PLA, socially economically and politically.
Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal
5. Economic and social reintegration of the ex-PLA

Most PLA have spent nearly a decade in war and they have not learned life skills. There is a problem because they have to learn all these skills now. (KAI131)

Reintegration is understood as “the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income […] essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, taking place in communities at the local level.” DDR programmes understand reintegration as including external assistance – such as cash, housing, land, food, vocational training, education etc. - to help ex-combatants sustain themselves economically and gain social and political acceptance. Reintegration is an intrinsic part of peacebuilding efforts, and can complement other activities in seeking to ensure that ex-combatants achieve peaceful and sustainable livelihoods.

In Nepal, most PLA fighters had left lives of rural poverty and saw the Maoist movement as a route to both challenging poverty and social exclusion in their communities, and to giving themselves opportunities beyond subsistence farming or migration to work in India or the Gulf. As such, given the expectations of ex-fighters, the challenge of reintegration is not to return ex-combatants to the poverty they were fleeing but to ideally provide alternatives to the conditions that ignited the conflict. This embraces the contradiction that the social and economic situation in their home communities is largely unchanged: ensuring ex-PLA livelihoods will not address the youth who constitute the fighters of a potential future conflict.

Reintegration is itself a misnomer for many of the PLA who have spent their entire adulthood, and in some cases half their lives, within the Maoist movement. Most of the ex-combatants whose voices are reflected here have not gone ‘home’ after demobilisation, but sought to make new lives, often in new communities that are defined by the influence of the movement and the relationships they made while a part of it. Here, we discuss the challenges ex-combatants face as they seek to rebuild their lives as civilians, and reflect on how policy – including payments and other support offered to them – aids or hinders their reintegration economically and socially.

Firstly, the major challenge which the former PLA are facing is economic management. Secondly, the former PLA are having difficulty to get adjusted in society. One portion of PLA activists has flown to other countries in search of a job, while the other portion of PLA are struggling in their own country. Some have been able to get small or low paid jobs while many are still unemployed. (KAT15)

The only thing I learnt during my youth was to fight and play with a gun. Here in society it is very difficult since I have very limited skills to sustain myself. Nobody gave us the life skill training before we came to society. We are like orphans now. Nobody is looking after us; neither the government nor our own party. (SUR17)

The situation in which ex-combatants find themselves varies according to the choices they have made since demobilisation. Some have left for work abroad, and were not met for this study, and have no immediate social integration issues. For most others they see the need to earn a livelihood as the most pressing issue, very often combined with challenges in what might be called ‘social integration’ – finding a place where they are welcomed as part of family and community.

37 UN Secretary General (2005), note to the General Assembly, A/C.5/59/31.
Economic reintegration
The most immediate need of ex-combatants was to acclimatise to civilian life, after many years institutionalised in a political-military structure. The economic independence demanded by civilian life was a shock to ex-PLA who were often poorly prepared for it.

The PLA [cadres] now had to begin everything from zero for their management. They have neither property inherited from their forefathers nor are they able to gain property on their own. They don’t have skills and qualifications either. Many PLA activists are unemployed and some have even flown to other countries in search of jobs. (KAT11)

Most ex-PLA were aware that their education and employability had been severely compromised by their time in the Maoist movement.

I’m facing economic problems not because I was a PLA member but because of war. I joined war at a young age and my entire career making process was replaced by the war. [...] Either I would have a degree or would have joined an occupation professionally. But I was involved in People’s War for 10 years and when peace process was started I left the PLA by my own choice. During the whole of this period, I have missed my career building process and because of that it is difficult for us to be rehabilitated again in the same society. (KAI17)

I carried a gun at the time I should have studied. At the time to work in society; we spoke the language of revolution. Income generating time was spent in cantonment. (JHA13)

Whilst few interviewees mentioned any economic benefits on demobilisation of a past in the ex-PLA, those who had spent time in the movement and in cantonments benefit from a range of contacts that can be potentially useful in finding employment and making contacts for business. This emphasises the hard to quantify value of solidarity and comradeship that many of the ex-PLA feel towards their old colleagues.

Demobilisation payments
The only significant economic elements of reintegration were the substantial payments all demobilised combatants received and the limited vocational training (see above). All those taking voluntary retirement received between NRs. 500,000 and 800,000 ($5000 - $8000), with those of higher rank receiving a greater amount. Of the two dozen ex-fighters who were asked what they did with this money, half bought land while 70% bought a house; almost 20% said that they had to spend much of the money on medical treatment as a result of their combat role.

We both (me and my wife) got 5 lakhs each on voluntary retirement. I started business and bought land. I bought 1 kattha38 land for constructing house. I am living there by making a simple house. (KAI02)

The purchasing of land and property with the demobilisation payments demonstrates that ex-combatants do indeed use such resources appropriately. There was however significant complaint about the limited size of payments given the challenges they faced:

What I feel is the 6 lakhs rupees, which we got at departure, is like a thorn in our life. The land in Surkhet, where we are living, costs 3 to 5 lakhs per [square] metre. With this money, we cannot even purchase 2 meters land. For starting a new business, this money is like sand in water. We cannot compete with the established business persons. (SUR06)

38 In Nepal, 1 kattha = 130.2 m².
I was hit by bullets in the leg and head. I have to take medicine regularly, I cannot walk normally. But I have no money for better treatment; it would be better if the government takes our issues seriously. I have gone to many hospitals in Nepal and India but the bullet in the leg has not been removed. I have spent 5 lakhs on treatment and 5 lakhs on land and building a house - me and my wife had received 5 lakhs each in voluntary retirement. (KAI29)

Given that the quality of the vocational training in cantonments was considered so poor, only one interviewee considered that she had benefitted from it: “I have taken 3 months tailoring training. After the completion of the training I started a shop and now I’m earning from here to live my life. [...] I earn 10 to 12 thousand per month.” (KAI21)

The minority of those in the cantonment who were disqualified did not benefit from significant payments, but were rather offered vocational training and counselling that many declined. Around three-quarters of the disqualified have accessed training, counselling or both - and as such have received far more of a DDR programme than other ex-combatants. Given that this study met with rather few of the disqualified, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions. However, the limited evidence from this study, that is echoed by those who claim to represent the, is that economically and socially the disqualified are poorly integrated.

Livelihood

Ex-PLAs were asked how they earned their livelihood and the answers are summarised in Table 9.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Livelihood</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small business</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily labour</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working own land</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse works (inc. abroad)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving pension</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working rented land</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse in Nepal Army</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 Current livelihood of ex-combatants.

The rural origins of most ex-fighters are belied by the fact that so few are working the land as their parents did. This is a natural result of the ex-PLA choosing to live not in the communities in which they grew up, but in urban areas and ‘new’ communities close to others involved with the Maoist movement. As a result, a large fraction are running businesses, such as small shops, to make a living:

I am involved in poultry business. It is sufficient for general household expenses. I have invested around 2.5 lakhs to set poultry with capability of around 500 chickens in a lot; profit depends on season. I earn 15 to 20 thousand monthly. (KAI02)

Money from the cantonment was used up in building my house. I cannot start a business because I have no money for investment. I am sustaining myself by running a small hotel. The income is hardly sufficient to eat twice a day and educate the children. (KAI06)
Only 24% are working their own land, mostly in cases where the money received as a result of taking voluntary retirement was invested in land. That a significant fraction of ex-PLAs remain among the poorest of Nepalese is demonstrated by the fact that one in four is working in daily labour, typically either working on the land of others for a daily wage or in construction. This contrasts with 10% of all Nepalese who are absolutely landless and 30% who are partly dependent upon daily labour. Whilst the ex-PLA in rural areas may be no poorer than their typical neighbour, their perception of the sacrifice they have made, and the resulting expectations translate into extreme resentment at their present condition.

A full 10% of the sample said they had no source of livelihood. More than 17% of those met were dependent upon the salary of a spouse (most but not all men), including both those integrated into the Nepal Army and those working abroad and sending remittances.

It is very difficult to sustain life after retirement. I have no profession, no income. It is difficult. I am earning a living from the money sent by my husband from Malaysia. (JHA20)

We have spent a very hard life for 10 years. [...] I wish I had the body I used to have at that time so that I could work and earn. I have only one skill which has nothing to do here in civilian life. I have no job at all. My husband goes to India and earns some money to pay for children's school fees and live hand to mouth. I still have belief that I can change society but the society does not accept it. Education is very expensive but income is very low. The money that I got while exiting cantonment was spent to make this hut. Now my husband is compelled to go India to earn our bread. (SUR10)

A number of the injured receive pensions of NRs.6,200 per month, but it remains unclear how such awards are made and why many injured ex-PLA are not receiving such payments.

Yes, I have received an allowance from the government as it has categorized in two levels, such as highest class and first class wounded; and government has provided livelihood allowance. Still we are provided that allowance but it is not permanent and it is not sure when it will stop because we are not given a pension card. (KAI27)

The situation of women is more difficult in many cases, combined with pressures that they return to traditional home-making roles.

The women are again occupied with their same traditional roles of looking after the house, taking care of children and serving the family. They neither have qualification nor any skill. Since they have to be dutiful towards the family, they are not able to work outside the house to add to the source of economic earning. Many of the women activists have been married to former PLA activists. Of them, some have gone in Integration [into the Nepal Army] and some who chose retirement are either abroad or are struggling here to get employed. (KAT15)

**Evaluating economic integration**

The economic integration of ex-combatants is understood to have two principle components.

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- Improving employability, typically through skills training and support to entrepreneurial activities;
- Strengthening the environment in communities receiving ex-combatants for job creation and private sector development.

For the second component, whilst some work was done in communities with reference to the return of the disqualified, since most ex-combatants did not return to their original homes, this has not helped the vast majority. In terms of employability and livelihood, it can be considered a success that in a nation with the dismal economy of Nepal, most ex-PLA have some sort of livelihood. However this would seem to be largely independent of any efforts made to support reintegration, beyond the use of the cash payments as capital to initiate a business or buy land. The bulk of ex-combatants are earning livelihoods through business for which they have received no formal training or in agriculture and unskilled daily labour. The expectations of the ex-PLA, both at the time they joined the Maoist movements – with aims of social and personal transformation – and following their apparently success in forcing a political settlement on the Nepali state, are enormous. As a result, the failure of most to have significantly changed their personal circumstances represents the greatest disappointment. This demonstrates that even where reintegration does address the needs of ex-combatants, as it largely failed to in Nepal, it must also manage expectations.

As with many politically driven elements of the peace process, economic elements of reintegration were driven by a desire to achieve a short-term goal (dissolution of the cantonments), and to satisfy the agenda of one of the leading political parties (by seeing ex-PLA given substantial cash sums), rather than in the light of the long-term needs of the nation concerning ex-fighters.

Social integration

The data indicate that in many ways the ex-PLA mirror the behaviour of others of their generation in migrating abroad to work and leaving the village to seek a better life in urban areas. However the situation of ex-fighters differs from their contemporaries as a result of the social distance from their home communities that has arisen as a direct impact of their long absence and role in the People’s War.

PLA friends have many challenges. It is very difficult to mix up in society. I am staying outside not in village. Everyone insults us saying that I had gone to do politics but returned as failed. I cannot answer everyone, thus I am staying here driving rickshaw. [...] Our life is running in hardship. I am living here as rickshaw driver leaving my birthplace. I earn NRs 400-500 daily. (JHA31)

We have a low rank in society and a negative perception. We have no qualifications, our skills to use weapons and supporting people isn’t useful today. There are many problems in society and social life; people look at us differently from others. (SUR25)

Beyond the economic motivations to live away from their places of birth, ex-fighters are driven to build new homes and lives by a range of social perceptions, and these challenge social integration. The desire to be away from one’s community of origin has several drivers, including:

- For the disqualified, being labelled as ‘incapable’ or ‘unfit’, and potentially returning home with nothing, having lost years of one’s life;
- Some in the community perceive that the Maoists behaved badly when they had effective control in many areas, and blame fighters for being a part of this.
- Having left the community with the intention of changing Nepal and challenging the many problems seen in the community and returning with no discernible political or social change having occurred;
- Having turned their back on the rural livelihoods of their peers, to return to them would represent an admission of a personal failure in joining the Maoist movement;
- Disability and need for medical care makes life in a rural community, particularly in the hills, more challenging than in an urban environment and/or in the Terai;
- Marriages made within the Maoist movement, often inter-caste or inter-ethnic, that are frowned upon by families and communities.
- For women, having lived with nominal equality with men to have to return to traditional expectations of a woman’s domestic role in a rural area can be an incentive to stay elsewhere.

There are additionally factors that pull ex-fighters towards communities where they can reconstitute the relationships they had during the conflict, and live with those who share a history and a political perspective with them.

**Tensions in home communities**

In general, the perceived stigma is a result of negative perceptions of the PLA and not of individuals, and of what ex-combatants have failed to achieve socially and economically, both in terms of their political goals and in their own lives. Many ex-fighters expressed the ambiguity of their reception, with some valuing their contribution during the conflict and others condemning it.

One part accepts us very positively; they think that whatever we did was necessary for change. Another part says that we did nothing except violence. I am accepted in my society due to my own behaviour. We changed the opinion of society gradually. My family is communist family so they have accepted me. I am safe in society. [...] They have accepted us outwardly but something is still lacking within them. (CHI09)

This quotation demonstrates how, despite the often negative perceptions of the ex-PLA as a collective, it will often be possible to overcome stigma through individual behaviour and relationships: an identity as an individual can negate collective identities. This also summarises an often problematic relationship with family:

There is dissatisfaction, bitterness against us because of past activities. It is hard to solve. We had punished some friends in the past now they take us as the enemy. [...] I have found a view that PLA [fighters] should not be provided parental share of property because we had left to die. But such a view is not everywhere. (KAI06)

Although today we are quite close to our family members, we don’t feel comfortable enough because in the past we didn’t think about them at all and became involved in war without taking any consent from the family. Although our relations with family, friends and relatives has become a bit easier, there is still some feeling of emotional detachment. (KAT23)

Some negative perceptions derive from the history of conflict and antagonism towards the Maoists generally or towards particular individuals:

Society looks at us from a bad perspective. [...] Because people said that we had threatened them, took money, ate everything, people look us negatively. (SUR02)

Society blames us that we didn’t do hard work. Maoists are a separate kind of people who deceived and exploited others. People look and understand us from a different perspective. [...] Society doesn’t accept us easily. This society won’t look on our work positively. (SUR05)
Who would like to leave the place where one is born? I would also like to stay where I was born, where my relatives and family members are staying but it was not possible to stay there. Since I was involved in the Peoples War, the villagers blame me for murders and hate me. That is why I have to stay here in the headquarters. [...] I made many enemies during the war. We have beaten many people even from our own villages. Now, they just speak with me for formality but deep in their heart they hate me. (SUR12)

In some cases this has translated into a security issue with ex-PLA feeling less safe in their communities, largely as a result of continuing tensions between political parties.

I was once beaten by Congress and UML people, who said that I was ex-PLA. They had asked for money which I had refused. They even took NRs 40,000 from me. They came into my house; 10 women came and beat my wife and I resisted by beating one woman. So I had to pay 40,000. (KAI29)

They don’t accept us easily. They just say that we are fighters and came back with nothing. Somehow they see us as criminals. The family has also not accepted us. I don’t feel safe in the community. In the beginning, UML cadres threatened to boycott us in the community. But the problem was sorted out by the meetings. (SUR19)

This reveals that dialogue in the community is seen as one way of resolving such problems. The presence of victims of the Maoists also exacerbates such tensions:

I also meet with them [victims of Maoists]. There is a feeling of complaint and bitterness. However, there isn't such a great confusion or problem among us. We are attempting to forget all those bygone days which were not in the hand of either side. (KAT13)

In society, there are people who were affected from both sides at the time of the People's War. Both affected groups have their respective problems. It is natural that the people who were affected by the Maoists will not like us. They look at us with a negative perspective. They still have a feeling of hatred towards us. (KAT21)

There is also an impression that how the ex-PLA are treated is linked to the perceptions and popularity of the Maoists as a political party. As the Party has been seen to have become corrupt, and abandoned many of the agendas that fuelled the war, so respect for ex-combatants has fallen in the community. The many disabled and injured are subject to discrimination because of both their handicap and the fact that it is a result of their participation in the People’s War.

Many ex-fighters did however emphasise how they were welcomed in their community:

There are a very few people in my village who suffered from the Maoists at the time of war. There may be some, but they are also in the headquarters. Instead there are people who had suffered from the side of the state. To be honest, I think it’s more difficult for us to settle in Kathmandu valley. We cannot openly give our identity. It’s far more comfortable in our village. (KAT20)

My village had communist influence for a long time. Even when the People’s War began there had been great influence in the whole village. There are communists in the majority in my village. So I don’t have any problem at all to go to the village. (KAT10)
Negative perceptions in communities

Individuals are also objects of scepticism precisely because the social transformation for which the PLA fought has demonstrably failed to happen:

Yesterday, dreamt of building a better society. We had also promised various dreams to people. As a result, the people had high expectations from us. They had expected development, prosperity, justice and much more from us. But today, not being able to make those dreams a reality, I feel sad and somewhat uncomfortable to go in the village. (KAT13)

Society has not been changed as we projected, we could not finish our enemies, not only at the national level, but also at the local level. Society looks down on us. I decided not to return my hometown, and continue struggling to cope with same the feudal society. We are labelled as ‘panch-lakhe’ (half-millionaire, as a result of the payments they received). (SUR22)

For the disqualified, who largely were not involved in combat but left communities for the cantonments with the aim of securing an army career, the label they carry is seen as defining stigmatization: “We were made ‘incapable’ - society denigrates us.” (JHA12)

More generally the personal failure that their return to communities ‘empty-handed’ shames ex-fighters:

These days I have no desire to go to my home place. I feel ashamed to show my face to my villagers. I was plunged into the People's War with the mission to change the nation but I had to return empty handed. I fear that they will mock me. (SUR13)

Women ex-PLA in particular are subject to additional social pressures, having challenged traditional taboos by adopting a lifestyle that is perceived as unfeminine, both in carrying arms and in spending time in proximity with men to whom they are not related. For women more than men the radical social agenda of the Maoist movement has left a highly negative legacy as traditional understandings reassert themselves in their communities. This is discussed in detail below.

Women facing traditional social norms

As in many civil conflicts, women who were mobilised as fighters under a radical and progressive social agenda have found this agenda rolled back at the conflict's end. Female ex-combatants made very strong statements about both the value of the Maoist cause in advancing women’s rights in Nepal and irreversible changes that had occurred in their communities as a result of the People’s War.

Yes there are lots of improvements. Women who were previously limited to the kitchen and the home are now free to be involved in social and national concerns. Women who were unable to speak in front of their husband now speak in public. Women are working in equality to men. (SUR03)

Previously there was an understanding among the old that a gun touched by women will not fire but women fought in the People’s War. There were 40% women in PLA. As a result of this, women’s recruitment was started into the Nepal Army. The common opinion was: women are weak so they felt uncomfortable to be under woman’s command but later this was resolved. (JHA27)

This study permits a test of the rhetoric of transformation and equality that the Maoist movement preached against continuing practice in rural areas. Most demobilised female ex-fighters perceived that there has been a return to traditional values, both in the home and in the broader community, and that they were living ambiguously, between the expectations of the community and the role they had forged for themselves in the PLA.
I have become like a village woman. I must be like other women if I live in this place. (CHI02)

I am living a traditional woman’s life. Some changes are possible but the complete change we had imagined in the past is not possible. [...] The People’s War and changes over time have made women aware. Now they are educated. The People’s War gave women confidence; we can use weapons. (CHI03)

I’m in between both. On the one hand, I can’t return to a traditional woman’s role because I have fought for liberation, and on the other hand, I can’t leave all the traditional norms and values because I’m back from the People’s War. [...] there are lots of changes in the context of women. Before the war, they were limited to the kitchen and now they have started to fly. (KAI21)

Many things have changed. Previously, women were considered as machines but now women are treated as able. But in my community there is still untouchability during menstruation. Even the Maoists are following this. There have been social changes but not cultural change. (KAI30)

Others were more negative describing a situation that had entirely regressed.

At the time of people’s war, women freely displayed their roles. When they got the opportunity to be on an equal footing with men, they proved their ability and that they are no less than men. Women can also work as efficiently as men. But after the peace process, women activists were compelled to be assigned according to the values of society. The status of women today has again reversed back as in the past. Women activists have to work for a whole day for the Party, but morning and night, they have to be dutiful towards the house and family. Women are again limited to kitchen activities. It feels like we are facing more inequality and injustice today than we used to have. (KAT10)

Social pressures were particularly negative around marriages made within the Maoist movement, with some families rejecting wives and husbands from a different caste or ethnic group. Even where families are prepared to accept such marriages, there is community pressure not to accommodate such spouses.

I live outside my birthplace. I am not staying there because of my family. The first reason is my inter-caste marriage: I am Buda and she is Chaudhary [...] Although my family has accepted her privately, they cannot accept her openly due to social pressure. I have good relations with my in-laws. (KAI05)

Since my marriage is an inter-caste marriage, I have not been able to go into my husband’s home. They have not accepted me till now due to social barriers and restrictions. Our societies still don’t quite happily accept inter-caste marriages. They are also afraid as to how the society would respond upon our marriage. They have a fear of exclusion from society. (KAT18)

An additional threat to women is that a husband will respond to such pressure by rejecting a wife, and taking another who is more acceptable to family and community. This can lead to women returning to their own homes, or being rejected by all sides of the family.

I am staying in my maternal home because my husband has married a second wife and he is abroad and his second wife is in Kathmandu. [...] I do not want to see any person from my husband’s house. They do not accept me because of dowry. My parents are poor, how can they give dowry? (CHI02)
I have seen many divorces because of inter-caste marriage; we even talk to such people not to take such action. It depends on people. Social life and war life is different. (KAI34)

At the most extreme women, often with children, are entirely abandoned as a direct result of relationships that arose from their involvement with the Maoist movement. They represent perhaps the most vulnerable of the ex-PLA and have often fled to cities and live in poverty, with a risk of becoming involved in sex work. Ex-PLA mentioned that some female ex-comrades worked in restaurants and bars with the implication that they may be drawn into such business. This study was not able to effectively access such women, largely as a result of their efforts to remain anonymous and in particular to ensure that ex-comrades from the movement do not become aware of their situation. It is hoped that the local groups of ex-PLA being formed as a result of this project will allow some ex-PLA fighters to better access and support such women.

Challenges of disability in communities

The disabled faced very particular reasons for leaving the hills, in terms of access to medical treatment and ease of travel:

I grew up in the hills. After leaving the cantonment we couldn’t return to the community because I’m wounded so I can’t adjust physically and on the other side there are not vehicle and hospital facilities as I need to take medicine regularly. Therefore we are here in Kailali. (KAI15)

This represents a huge challenge in remaining in or returning to traditional rural communities and drives the sick and disabled to urban areas and the Terai.

The ex-PLA and ‘new communities’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home community or husband’s community</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban area</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ex-PLA community</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>23</td>
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Table 10 Location where ex-PLA are living.

Table 10 shows where ex-PLA were living when they were met for this study. ‘Ex-PLA community’ is here understood as any community where there is a sufficient number of ex-combatants or broader sympathy for the Maoist movement, such that issues of stigma are less relevant (see below). The traditional approach in Nepal is for families to live in extended families with wives moving into the multi-generational families of their husbands. This has been eroded in recent years by a lack of opportunities in rural areas and resulting migration. For the ex-PLA the social and economic drivers that lead them to leave rural homes has increased this trend. Only a third of those met were living in a traditional domestic arrangement, with many choosing to live in cities, both Kathmandu and regional centres. These offer economic opportunities and the potential to maintain a degree of contact with ex-PLA comrades, as well as the anonymity that stigmatised combatants seek.

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I am not staying in my husband's house because society looks at us differently since we have stayed a long time outside the home. In a new place there will be no backbiting. Only my close friends in adjoining rooms know that I was in the PLA. I feel that I will have problems if many people know about my past. People will not understand me. (KAT02)

I have not told my new community that I am ex-PLA. I do not want to recognize myself as ex-PLA as I was discharged as disqualified. (KAT01)

The time fighters have spent in the Maoist movement has remade their social attachments, building bonds with those with whom they have endured the most extreme experience during conflict and lived for many years in cantonments. This is perhaps most demonstrated through the marriages they have made, with half married to other veterans of the PLA (see Table 3). Additionally, the highly structured life in a centralised military organisation appears to have institutionalised at least some ex-combatants in a way that makes them seek social structures that duplicate those in which they lived within the movement. “There is huge difference after returning to society. There (in the cantonment) we had to live in a group following discipline; it’s a bit different in society.” (JHA17)

Actually, we never thought about our family life, personal life and its managerial part. The revolution itself was a collective action, an organization, a family. So, we fulfilled the responsibilities accordingly, we spent the life collectively. While doing so, we never thought about private property and personal issues. From the war to the cantonment life, we practiced the commune life, the family was also managed accordingly, the Party took care of everything, and we used to rely on peoples' support: [...] On the other hand, for people like me, who were in the position of Commander or leader, we had a different status in the Party but now we have to start our life from zero. We now have to learn life skills like ploughing and other things to start a new life. For livelihood, if I had tried immediately after my SLC level education, I could get a job anywhere, but now I cannot sell my certificates. (SUR06)

One common response to the stigma ex-PLA have faced has been to become a part of communities whose identity is to some extent defined by their participation in the Maoist movement. Such communities have formed most obviously close to the cantonment sites. As the cantonments became established, family members and others moved nearby in order to be close to PLA cadres based there. When women had to leave the cantonment to have children, they often stayed close to the cantonment rather than return to their original homes. By the time the cantonments eventually closed these sites had become new communities defined by its members’ relationships to the PLA.

Similarly, communities sprang up in other areas, typically in the Terai and close to roads and major towns. These were often places that had long been a destination for migrants from the hills seeking jobs or business opportunities, emphasising that the patterns of settlement of the ex-PLA were not unique but mirrored those of other young people leaving the hills and traditional homes. An example is the town of Kohalpur, on the east-west highway in Banke district, at the junction of the main road to Nepalgunj, some 20 km away. Kohalpur grew significantly during the conflict, including an attempt by the state to create one of the few formally defined camps for those displaced by the Maoists, as the Mid-West region was badly affected by the conflict. It is relatively close to the cantonment in Kailali, as well as to the Maoist heartland of the Mid-Western hills and the metropolis of Nepalgunj itself and the nearby Indian border. Kohalpur has a substantial hospital and a number of educational establishments. It now hosts a significant ex-PLA community, some of whom were interviewed for this study. In such communities, ex-combatants expressed their freedom from the problems they faced elsewhere: “Our community has a Maoist majority, therefore my children are well treated.” (KAI35) “We all are ex-PLA friends in the community. It is fine.” (DAN24)
Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal
6. Political Reintegration of the ex-PLA

Political integration of ex-combatants in a DDR process demands that they be given the space to exercise political agency as a part of the nation and to be represented by the state and its institutions. For the ex-PLA to be effectively integrated, they must see the Nepali state as theirs, as much any other citizen does. In Nepal - a state built on a history of social exclusion – this will always be a challenge. Given the role that marginalisation played in creating the conditions for the People’s War, excluding ex-combatants politically can have potentially grave consequences. Political challenges to this process include issues of representation, equality, association and reconciliation; ex-combatants must ideally gain a sense of political inclusion and trust in the post-conflict polity and in their relationship with the security forces.

One of the greatest perceived problems with the demobilisation process was the lack of agency rank and file combatants themselves had, with no consultation over any element of the process. They were the principle objects of the process but had no role or say in how it unfolded. The process was always perceived as a political one, which in Nepal means something led by political parties and reflecting their highly centralised and undemocratic structures, and ultimately with decision making restricted to a narrow circle of senior leaders. Ironically, this style of politics was precisely what the Maoist movement was seeking to challenge, albeit through the vehicle of a party which was as centralised and undemocratic as any other in the country.

In many contexts successful demobilisation is considered to include breaking the chains of command, to degrade the structures that can permit re-mobilisation. In Nepal however, many of the ex-PLA remain both ideologically committed to the political perspective for which they fought and a part of hierarchical political structures that reflect those of the Maoist movement and PLA. Indeed, association relates to the right of ex-combatants to live ‘visible lives’ and to have a political role. Whilst this may be through one of several political parties, it can also be through the Ex-PLA National Network whose formation was one of the demands of those involved in this research project, which offers a chance to represent the needs and opinion of ex-fighters independent of party politics (see Section 7). It is anyway clear that the fact that ex-combatants actively seek, in many cases, to maintain both their links to their former comrades and their political activity, indicates that they will maintain a political identity beyond demobilisation. As such, it must be understood that this is legitimate and not necessarily something linked to security challenges and a return to conflict. It is a peculiarity of Nepal’s history and politics that the often highly disciplined political structures with which ex-combatants are involved may be the most important factor in preventing ex-fighters from being involved in armed groups and criminality linked to ethnicity or other identities.

The need for reconciliation as a part of political reintegration is seen from the comments of ex-combatants in the previous section. Whilst the memory of violence is clearly the most important component, it seems unlikely that the ongoing efforts at transitional justice in Nepal – largely centralised and remote from communities – can deliver what is needed to address the legacies of the war that still divide people. There is also no link made between the transitional justice process and ex-combatants and the issue of reintegration. Beyond the divisions of the conflict it is seen that social issues, deeply linked to perspectives of caste, ethnicity and gender, are also generating tensions, with little efforts being made to address these.

The political lives of ex-combatants

PLA fighters were fighting a political war, and - as has been seen – were highly driven by a desire to see greater social justice in their nation. The many years most spent in the

Maoist movement formalised and deepened their political commitment, creating activists whose political perspectives and interest in political work is unlikely to dissipate as a result of demobilisation. Politics has shaped the lives of ex-fighters to the extent that only a minority are able to abandon it. The one phenomenon that was able to shake ex-fighters’ commitment to the ideals of the People’s War was the feeling of betrayal engendered both by the dissolution of the PLA and the perception that Maoist leaders were more interested in the corrupt opportunities offered by access to governance than carrying forward their agenda. Cynicism towards the traditional Maoist leadership was plentiful:

The leaders, especially Prachanda and Baburam, coached us one thing during the war and now, they deceived us. They themselves escaped far from what our goal was. Because of this deception, I sometimes feel that there are some problems in it. But, what we had understood and for what we fought was absolutely right and I never regret on that. For the deception of the leaders, time will pay them back in future. My inner feeling on my affiliations in the party and every activity in the past is very positive. The main problem lies within the leaders. They deceived us when we were very near to the success, it was a peak hour. (SUR06)

No. I do not want to talk about politics now. I do not want to interact with any party or leader. Especially, I do not want to listen to Maoist. They left us in this critical situation. They did not even help in my treatment. (DAN20)

Leaders have forgotten ideology, people, PLA. They have not understood the miserable situation of PLA. They are lost in their own luxury. I feel enraged that they have forgotten the disabled and the martyrs. (KAI06)

In a minority of cases this did lead to an abandonment of political engagement:

[The] Party has not contacted me and neither have I contacted them. There is no necessity to join politics when leaders have left ideology. I am not interested in politics now. (KAT03)

Formally I am not [involved with a party]. We are here in the corner. Nobody comes to us. If somebody comes, we feel that the party is still alive. I think our party has forgotten us. It really arise a sense of humiliation and hurts me. […] But the party has betrayed the PLA fighters. Nobody has come to meet us since I am out of the cantonment. You are the first person who came here looking for me. (SUR16)

Despite the strength of these feelings, over 80% of ex-combatants still believed in the ideals for which they had fought. The typical response to disillusion with the leadership had been to ally themselves with the Baidhya-led CPN-M that had split from the UCPN(M). While 37% of the sample were aligned with the mainstream UCPN(M), 22% were affiliated with the CPN-M, and 40% were unaffiliated.43 In total, a little over half (55%) of ex-fighters were politically active in one of the Maoist parties.

In some cases it is precisely the commitment to act on ex-PLA issues that has driven people to join the CPN-M, demonstrating that – for some at least – ‘ex-PLA’ is their dominant political identity:

I am involved in the CPN-Maoist party. I have joined CPN-Maoist because of its strategy to address problems of injured/disabled and PLA. (DAN10)

43 Interviews were made before the Biplav led split that had created a third party, the CPNM. It appears that a majority of politically active ex-PLA are now with the Biplav faction.
Ex-PLA and future security challenges

At the time of writing Nepal has again been in and out of political crisis, this time prompted by contestation over federalism and the constitution, a major plank of the Maoist agenda during the People’s War. Street violence and a number of deaths due to police action have occurred around demonstrations protesting the recently promulgated constitution that is considered to have failed to consider the demands of a range of ethnic groups, most notably the Madhesis. There has also been violence by regionally based groups protesting the redrawing of the boundaries of what will become federal states. This constitution writing process had the consent of the mainstream UCPN(M), which has been reduced to a small opposition in the legislature, but beyond that Maoist politics no longer sits centre stage in Nepal. As such, it is tempting to believe that the moment has passed when radical leftists could use armed violence to challenge the Nepali state. However, as long as the drivers of the People’s War, in the form of poverty, exclusion and inequality, remain, there is a potential for political violence, even if not conducted by former PLA. The emerging fault lines in Nepal’s polity are identity-based rather than ideological, but the most serious previous ethnic armed movement in Nepal – that of the Madhesis in the years following the end of the People’s War – had its roots in the PLA. Similarly, recent ethnically motivated violence in the Terai has been blamed on ex-PLA fighters.\(^4^4\)

Future political violence

It is interesting to consider the views of ex-PLA concerning political change and their perspectives on future political violence. When asked if they thought there would be political violence in the future in Nepal, 70% answered positively.

If the state remains silent on the people’s day-to-day problems, if the government does not address ex-combatant properly political violence is possible in the future. (KAI08)

As long as oppressing and oppressed classes exist, there is a probability of political violence. On the other hand, only political contract is done not the political solution, CPN-M is still apart from peace process which was a power in People’s war. Thus, if the regional problems are not addressed, if the common people don’t have easy access on basic needs and if the political issues are underestimated, political violence is inevitable. (KAI12)

Violence is engendered by disparity, injustice and poverty. Anyone can start a revolution in future. I am old, maybe my sons will pick up arms. (CHI03)

Some ex-PLA explicitly linked the ‘humiliation’ of the PLA to a future conflict:

I think there will be another violent war because the basic problems of the people have not been addressed yet. I am ready to carry a gun if the problems persist for long. […] I have no peace inside. I am feeling humiliated and abandoned. If the state and society remain reluctant towards the injured and the martyrs of the Peoples’ War, I feel sometimes to start another Peoples’ War. (SUR15)

A number of those asked suggested that a future conflict would not be ideological, but ethnic:

I think there remains such probability if this situation persists but not at this time. There will be racial war. (JHA31)

Ex-PLA were asked if they would carry arms again in a future conflict: 76% said they would, while a further 11% said that this would depend on whether it was ‘correct’ to do so or not, demonstrating an overwhelming willingness to return to political violence, but making this contingent upon a respected leadership making that decision.

Definitely, there will be revolution because the objectives of people’s war were not fulfilled. I am ready to raise weapons for the correct ideals. […] I want peace but I am ready to raise weapons if necessary. (CHI01)

I will definitely join as full timer if the Party plans People’s War or revolution. I will work in favour of completing it. I am ready to lead or participate as a member. If the leadership comes with new plan overcoming the past weakness and assurance to complete the revolution, I think even the new youth will join, not only us. (JHA13)

A minority rejected the use of arms to advance political goals:

I would not carry a weapon again because I have realized that problems cannot be solved only by using weapons and killing someone. There are alternatives. (CHI09)

I do not think violent politics will work now. We cannot change society by using weapons. People do not want to bear the pain we faced during the People’s War. (DAN02)

Remembering the PLA and the People’s War
Many of the issues that drive stigmatisation of ex-combatants in communities are linked to memories of the conflict, or memories of the promises made by the Maoists during the War. As such, how the war is remembered and how the role of the PLA is understood are crucial in determining how ex-combatants are perceived. In Nepal there remains no consensus about the political impact of the conflict, with the political space still polarised between those who reference the language of ‘People’s War’ and those who use the conflict-era state language of Maoist ‘terrorism’. The draft constitution of 2015 demonstrates this ambiguity, referencing “the glorious history of historical peoples’ movements and armed struggles” in an effort to include not only the Maoist conflict but earlier armed movements for democracy, alongside the People’s Movements of 1990 and 2006, which are celebrated across the political spectrum. That memory is political demonstrates the importance of memory to the political reintegration of the ex-PLA, emphasizing that a shared understanding of the past demands a reconciling of divergent perspectives. As such, memory is both an input to and the result of peacebuilding activities.

A history of the PLA
Almost all ex-combatants believe that while the ultimate goals of the People’s War have not been met, the PLA played a crucial role in removing the king and in advancing Nepal’s democracy. Many gave examples of dramatic changes seen in terms of reducing discrimination on the basis of caste, gender and ethnicity, as well as improvements in the representation of minorities. This is a narrative about the People’s War sustained by those engaged in the Maoist movement but contested by others. This represents an example of how social perceptions of ex-combatants are inextricably linked to memory of the conflict and, in turn, that how the conflict is remembered is politically mediated.

Ex-combatants saw that their stigmatization could only be countered by an effort to ensure that their sacrifice and achievements (as they understood them) were widely disseminated:
Our sacrifices can be documented only through struggle. I want our history to be included in the school curriculum so that they can know about us, about our sacrifice to establish democracy. (CHI07)

The fight and sacrifice of the PLA must be documented in history. I want the next generation to know that change had been brought by their parents’ struggle. Thus, the history of the PLA and its contributions should never be erased. The PLA should be remembered for their great role in social transformation and political change. Change was possible due to the PLA. (DAN14)

This demand of memory also resonates with what has become a minor industry of memoirs of the People’s War published in Nepali in recent years by a very wide range of ex-combatants, from senior commanders to ordinary soldiers. However, the danger of such partial history is precisely that it fails to bridge the divides of the conflict, being acknowledged only by those who share the politics of such authors. Others saw that only by making such a history official would it be widely recognised, and this resonates with what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is trying to do in writing a history of the conflict that is seen as accurate by all sides:

A single person cannot keep history. Government, parties, the Human Rights Commission, and everyone should work to keep our history. (CHI08)

This raises question as to the role of the TRC, if any, in writing a history of the PLA. It can be assumed that any history of the conflict that emerges from the work of the Commission will implicitly, if not explicitly, contain a history of the parties to that conflict.

It is worth noting however that discourses of transitional justice are concerned with victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. Ex-PLA fighters did not consider that they were in either category. Whilst many were recruited as minors, and have shown the impact on their lives of their time in the PLA, almost all rejected characterisation as a ‘victim’ and the passivity that implies, but rather saw themselves as volunteering to perform a duty for the nation, affirming their agency. An effort was made to understand if ex-combatants were aware of any rights violations in which they had been engaged or that they had witnessed, but in most cases there was an understandable reluctance to discuss specifics. Where ex-combatants did discuss past violations, they articulated that most had been committed by state forces, but did often use terms like ‘mistake’ to address potential violations by PLA cadres. In a few interviews ex-PLA mentioned both the fear of a case being filed against them for activities during the conflict and of actual cases being filed.

Given an understanding that they and their comrades had only committed minor ‘mistakes’, some expressed the opinion that such issues must be addressed by ‘reconciliation’ (and implicitly, impunity):

There were lots of incidents during the war. Both sides were responsible for that situation and minor mistakes. The minor incidents during the war should be directed towards reconciliation. But the atrocities on the basis of personal interests should be investigated and culprits should be punished. (SUR13)

**Honouring the memory of ex-PLA**

From acknowledging the role of the PLA it followed naturally for ex-fighters that honouring the memory of the PLA meant treating veterans well. There were various routes suggested to doing this, including:

- Collecting comprehensive data of all ex-combatants, including those who were not in the cantonments;
- A committee to write the history of the PLA;
- ‘Certificates of honour’ and dedicated identity cards to be issued to ex-PLA by the state;
- Insertion into the new Constitution of references to ‘People’s War’ and PLA.45

There were also demands for monuments to be constructed, and a museum of the history of the PLA to be established.

The PLA should be remembered for their great role in social transformation and political change. At least one PLA barrack should have been kept as it is without changing name that can be developed as observatory. The history should be protected. (KAI07)

One of the cantonments should be developed as a museum of the People’s War. The Party and the government should respect and provide support to war veterans, who led the struggle for change, we should develop some education materials for the schools where our children and other can learn from their veterans’ history, we have to glorify our past struggle and should not forget it. (SUR24)

45 The research was conducted prior to the finalization and promulgation of the Constitution.
7. EX-COMBATANTS AS PEACEBUILDERS: MOBILISING EX-PLA

There have been previous efforts to mobilise the ex-PLA to represent themselves and campaign for their interests. Most notably the UCPN(M) has created affiliated organisations of former PLA fighters. This is however considered inactive by ex-combatants, with limited activities largely restricted to Kathmandu, due to a lack of trust in the Party leadership following the perceived dissolution of the PLA against the wishes of most ex-fighters.

Given that mobilisation of ex-combatants was a demand of participating ex-PLA, here the history of such mobilisation and the status of that linked to this project are discussed. Mobilisation is one route to political integration and offers to the authorities and civil society access to ex-combatants that is otherwise impossible.

The Discharged Peoples’ Liberation Army

In response to their discharge from the cantonments in early 2010 and their dissatisfaction with the reintegration opportunities on offer, those young ex-combatants who had been disqualified realized that they must establish their own representative association to raise their voices. As a result, a group of young leaders formed a central struggle committee of Discharged PLA Nepal in 2012 to lead and represent their members at the national level. Whilst this effort preceded this research project, the project has since worked closely with the group and has sought to play a positive role in supporting their activism.

The central struggle committee has brought hundreds of the disqualified together and has coordinated and mobilised members through the organisation of a series of protests demanding the withdrawal of the term ‘disqualified’, to restore their dignity and provide a support package for all those disqualified. They have used non-violent strategies to create pressure on the authorities, political parties and donors, including through street protests, a torch rally, strikes, and the submission of memoranda to the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, several Prime Ministers, UN offices and the UCPN(M). At the peak of their mobilisation in 2012, whilst the UCPN(M) was leading the government, the struggle committee demonstrated and locked (gherea) the UCPN(M) party headquarters in Kathmandu for 56 days. Finally, the UCPN(M) leadership in coordination with the government – notably the Minister of Peace and Reconstruction (MoPR) - offered a dialogue to end the demonstration with a deal. The MoPR provided support to cover the transportation and food for the struggle committee, and additionally the cabinet made a decision to provide NRs. 200,000 (US$2,000) to each disqualified PLA to support their livelihood. This demonstrates the potential immediate benefits to the ex-PLA of such mobilisation and direct action. Shortly afterwards, the Maoist party split, and the struggle committee also saw their members divided, with a majority ultimately going to the Middle East to work, demonstrating the continuing priority of young ex-PLA to seek a decent livelihood. As a result, the mobilization gradually reduced and became remote from the national debate.

The struggle committee has more recently been reformed and reactivated. Members were contacted during this research project and links renewed. The project has initiated a reflection on the continuing needs of the disqualified and also aided mobilisation. The Committee now has 51 members representing different regions and advocating independently for the interests of the disqualified. The secretariat members meet in Kathmandu on an almost monthly basis to discuss and share their problems, needs and

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46 Gherao, meaning "encirclement," is a word originally from Hindi. It denotes a tactic used by labour activists and union leaders in South Asia where a group of people surround a politician or a government building until their demands are met.
challenges, working outside any political party structure or ideology. Whilst this is the only route to forging an independent voice that is not dependent upon party priorities, it is a challenging task for former combatants who have been deprived of education and remain with severe livelihood challenges. They have received almost no support from civil society or others, demonstrating the continued stigma that ex-PLA suffer, even when organised into non-political solidarity organisations.\textsuperscript{47} They have organised national dialogues and interactions with media, civil society organisations, political parties and government agencies in an effort to address their demands, and have submitted their key demands to a range of local and international actors. The Discharged PLA Nepal have also made the step to understanding their struggle as a rights issue, defining their members as ex-child soldiers, and advocating for their rights as victims of rights violations and for punishment of perpetrators of those violations according to international norms. This represents an impressive evolution from a campaign based on resentment of their unfair treatment on demobilisation to one that is rights-based and acknowledges their identity as victims of rights violations as underage combatants.

**Key demands**

The key demands of the Discharged PLA (taken from their memorandum) are:

1. The government to abandon the term ‘disqualified’ without delay and honour the discharged ex-PLA as republican fighters for their role in the struggle for change;
2. The authorities to treat the 4,009 discharged PLA as other PLA members and address their demands in a sustainable way;
3. The government and concerned parties to take responsibility for the abuse of rights of the child around child recruitment
4. To ensure child rights, justice must be based on domestic and international principles, and state and rebel parties must be held accountable;
5. Since ex-child soldiers have been deprived of the fundamental human right to education, the government of Nepal to address youth combatants’ practical concerns based on a social and economic package based on principles of social justice;
6. The Government to release unconditionally all discharged PLA who have been detained;\textsuperscript{48}
7. The Government to provide medical treatment, psychosocial counselling and special support schemes to the injured, mentally ill and traumatised, and disabled members of the discharged PLA.

**Activities and impact**

The discharged PLA held 10 meetings in the last year, including small group meetings and larger meetings of committee members, as well as meetings in some districts. They are in contact with 600 discharged ex-PLA, and run a Facebook page and maintain regular communication with their members. They are also in contact with the discharged now working in the Middle East and India, and are active through media and social media in the diaspora. The secretariat members often meet informally and update their members with the aim of supporting and linking them to job opportunities. Most secretariat and central struggle committee members work as tempo drivers, security guards, petrol pump attendants, private drivers or in schools. Regular meetings, interactions and contacts have helped reduce stigma and frustrations, as well as offering mutual support, including with livelihood opportunities, and information sharing.

\textsuperscript{47} GIZ has supported additional training for discharged PLA, but this has not been seen to have a huge positive impact.

\textsuperscript{48} This is linked not to conflict era crimes, but an alleged campaign of harassment by the authorities, associated with membership of the Discharged PLA. Several members of the group remain in custody at the time of writing.
The Association has organised two large meetings in Kathmandu in February 2016, featuring the attendance of the Deputy Prime Minister, the former Minister of Peace and Reconstruction, Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare, and also made public their key demands through the media. Their presence is very visible through regular dialogues, meetings, interaction and social media, and is beginning to gain solidarity from the Nepali conflict victims’ movement and human rights communities.

In the recent phase of action, they have also met and raised their concerns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which however has no explicit mandate to address children in the process. It is hoped however that the discharged PLA can be a focal point for work that the TRC must do with disqualified PLA as a crucial constituency of those who have been subject to rights violations during the conflict. They have discussed issues with both the TRC and Peace Ministry to ensure their role in the peace process, and to seek to contribute to community reconciliation and peacebuilding at local and national levels.

**Mobilisation as a part of the research project**

Beginning from the pairs of researchers conducting research in the six districts of the study and existing links between ex-combatants, networks at the district level were built up seeking to create a model for a regional and national structure than can serve to represent all ex-PLA. The members of the ex-PLA research group shared experiences of the research, and reviewed their interaction and assessment of the ex-combatants’ situation at the local level. The group identified new strategies of engagement and mobilization to build local and national linkages. The peer researchers developed a plan of action, planned a series of meetings and dialogue with ex-PLA in their districts and agreed to create a local network of ex-PLA and build a national network and solidarity group to coordinate their activities, develop a self-help approach and communication strategies, around their identity as ex-PLA.

Ex-PLA have also formed an injured and disabled ex-PLA group, through a national representative meeting in Kathmandu, to organize a campaign, including others disabled during the conflict and injured members of the police force and army. A disabled UCPN(M) parliamentarian is also part of this effort.

**From district-based ex-PLA groups to a National Network**

We must come together to protect the history of the Peoples’ War and respect our sacrifices for social transformation; we are the vehicle of change and should establish our identity as change-makers in a new context. (Member of ex-PLA national network, Kailali)

Each district-based group has created a voluntary support network at district level, and is in contact with between 40 to 100 members. District groups typically meet monthly while those who live in district headquarters often meet and participate in other agencies’ district level programmes. But there are no strict rules: this remains voluntary work with all committees ad hoc and selected from those present. It represents a beginning of the network with an open structure beyond political party contacts and a loose network and common forum for all ex-combatants.

The level of organisation varies from group to group. In Surkhet for example there is a formal structure, with a 21 member regional coordination committee including Bheri and Karnali zones, and a 9 member secretariat to coordinate their activities. The

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49 The group in the east has a broader base, drawing members not only from Sunsari and Jhapa but from other districts in the hills and mountain of the Eastern region. The group in the Central region also has a broader base, not only serving Chitwan but also the other districts of Gandaki and Dhaulagiri including the 3rd and 4th division cantonment areas.
coordination committee has committed to draft a constitution and guide for its work, to give a platform for a common understanding and objectives. Similarly in the Eastern region, representatives of ex-PLA met in Ilam district and formed a coordination committee and planned for future activities, set to include:

- Ex-PLA coordination and interaction (internal dialogue);
- Advocacy strategy with other actors (community dialogue);
- Prepare a data base of ex-PLA in the region;
- Coordination/networking with other districts (national network).

In Kathmandu, the Discharged PLA Association (see above) takes the lead and has prioritised:

- Developing an advocacy strategy (lobby work with government and non-government agencies);
- Seeking training in computer skills, languages, networking, proposal writing, public communication, social work and small enterprises etc;
- Youth mobilization and nonviolent struggles.

Kailali is one of the most active groups, acting as a civil society organization, and known as a peace actor in the region. The Kailali group has separately organised meetings of ex-PLA commanders and rank and file (due to a lack of trust of commanders by ordinary ex-PLA),50 with the peer researchers and lead researchers playing a mediating and facilitating role. Members said that the meeting was the first of its kind in which the ex-PLA have come together after their cantonment life, and agreed to develop their own network and formed a coordination committee. They also discussed transitional justice and the truth commission’s impact on the ex-PLA, and suggested they need their own organization with a strong identity to support and protect their rights.

At the district committee level there is no connection with political parties, but their members have affiliations with different Maoist parties (UCPN(M), Baidhya and Biplav factions) and some with none. The ex-PLA groups work entirely on a voluntary basis: whilst some limited resources for travel and other expenses were made available by the research project, this has now ceased and the network is without any external funding. Members help each other on the basis of need and to develop mutual support, including to find jobs, and to link to schools and health support for members and their children.

The role of the district groups varies according to local priorities. In all areas however, the groups perceive themselves as seeking to play a role as peace actors in their local communities. All local mobilisation and activism is driven by non-violent action, advancing their agenda through dialogue, direct meetings and the media.

There is a national coordination committee, and 6 regional committees representing all former 7 cantonment sites: Jhapa, Chitwan, Dang, Surkhet, Kailali and Kathmandu. The national coordinator makes contact and maintains communication with the 6 regional coordinators and they in turn share their message with their district committee members, to whom they have direct links.

50 Following these separate meetings the gap between both ex-commanders and rank and file, as well as those between different Maoist factions, were successfully bridged, such that the Kailali group could organise a representative assembly in a coordinated way.
Ex-PLA (People's Liberation Army) Nepal National Network

Kailali Declaration

With special evaluation of the historical role played by the People's Liberation Army in the critical period of our history for progressive transformation of Nepali society, and for the social, economic, cultural and political change that was led by the then CPN (Maoist), and with an objective to protecting and promoting the glorious history by establishing the historicity of the sacrifice and contribution made in the fight for changes in the past, we hereby declare, through the representative assembly of the ex PLA members scattered across the country from the East to the West held on 2015 February 24 and 25, the formation of this Ex People's Liberation Army Nepal National Network with commitment to remain struggling for nationality, people's rule and people's livelihood in order to march forward in the campaign of social transformation as pioneers/messengers of the peaceful transformation by establishing contact, coordination, collaboration and mutual cooperation among the members of the ex-PLA members.

Our demands:

1. Let all the ex PLA members martyred during the ‘People's War’ be declared as National Martyrs.
2. Let the ex PLA members be granted a national letter of appreciation by honouring their sacrificial history for making Nepal a Federal Republic.
3. Let all the false charges against the ex PLAs be immediately repealed.
4. Expressing disapproval of not honestly implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2006), the political agreements and commitments made in relation to the dignified and fair integration process of the PLA, we draw the attention of the Government of Nepal, political parties and the United Nations and strongly demand that the process be reviewed.
5. Let the injured and disabled ex PLA members be provided with medical treatment and lifetime pensions. Likewise, we demand that all the children of the ex PLAs should be provided free and special scholarship packages in the education including for the higher education.
6. Let the unemployed ex PLA members be guaranteed of employment. Likewise, we also urge the Government and the concerned stakeholders to play a supportive role in properly utilizing the skill and capacity of the ex PLA in the national building.
7. Let there be framed a participatory national policy including by consulting with the national network in order to organize the national level memorialization activities and the socialization of the contribution and sacrifice made by the PLA in the transformation of Nepali society.
8. National parks and historical national museum should be constructed in memory of PLA in order to memorialize the history of the bravery of the ex PLAs and the history of People's War.
9. The status of the citizens disappeared by the state during the People's War and People's Movement should be made public, the martyrs should be respected and the injured and disabled should be provided with immediate medical treatment facilities.
10. By highly respecting the historical role, sacrifice and contribution of the women members of the PLA, the continuing gender discrimination should addressed.
11. The PLA members be accorded, with special respect, relief packages, and training, education and employment be guaranteed for them.
12. A national rehabilitation centre targeting the ex PLAs be formed by insuring the health of all the members of the ex PLAs.
13. For the assistance of the ex PLA members and their families, ex PLA welfare fund be established.
The first national assembly of ex-PLA representatives from all seven cantonment sites was held in Kailali in 24-25 February 2015, supported by the research project. This was very productive according to participants and led to the adoption of the ‘Kailali Declaration’ (see box) as a common national document and a summary of the Network’s goals. The meeting also adopted an ex-PLA history paper to remember and honour their struggles during the Peoples’ War: this articulates the importance of memory to the ex-PLA movement. The Kailali Declaration represents the first formal articulation of the demands of ex-PLA following the mobilisation facilitated by this project. It is clear that this represents a compilation of the claims of ex-Maoist combatants, rooted in their perspective of the conflict and reflecting the political positions most still hold, even if they are no longer politically active. The research project does not endorse these, but sees its role as supporting the PLA in advancing their own agenda, given that they remain entirely marginalised from the discussion of transition and the peace process despite their centrality to it. The role of Participatory Action Research is to work with a particular group and seek not to impose the agenda or politics of the researchers, but to advance whatever the aims of that target group are. This also coincides with a fundamental assumption of the project that effective integration of the ex-PLA – socially, economically and politically - is most likely to advance Nepal’s transition and peace process more broadly.

The major achievement of the national meeting was the formation of the ‘Ex-PLA National Network’ as a loose network to maintain contact between their members across Nepal and sustain their agenda to address common interests. However, at present the ability of ex-PLA groups at both local level and the National Network are highly constrained in their activities due to resource constraints. They do however use their platform as a space to share their problems and feelings through phone, Facebook, text message and regular informal meetings. The 21 members of the national committee of the National Network are in regular contact, and sharing their updates and information with their sub-committees in all seven regions and in the six districts where the research was conducted.

Activities of the Ex-PLA National Network

Do you think you can take responsibility, if provided, for establishing peace? Yes, I can in my community. Only the Maoists can do it because they have faced violence. (KAI07)

Community building and peace-making have been a part of discussion both within the network and in engagement with broader communities. Ex-combatants are a part of society in a changed context, and have shown they are able to act in a range of roles - as local politicians, active community members, advocates and activists. Ex-PLA network members are involved in Local Peace Committees, civil society campaigns, NGO Federation activities, school management committees, local forest user groups, youth clubs, trade unions, farmers associations, the inter-party women’s alliance, local media groups, etc. Female ex-combatants are additionally active in mothers’ groups and women’s associations. Such community activities are all part of local processes to advance peace and reconciliation, and ex-PLA in the network are known as community actors transformed from fighters to actors advancing peace.

Reconciliation and peacebuilding

Among the many challenges communities face in integrating the ex-PLA is an addressing of the tension discussed here between ex-PLA combatants and families who became their victims during the conflict. Whilst state forces were responsible for a greater number of rights violations than the Maoists, the latter are present in communities as individuals and as a political organisation, in a way that the army is not. Peacebuilding at a local level demands reconciling the differences arising from the legacies of the war.
Whilst a study such as this, that engages directly with only one side in the conflict, cannot represent routes to such reconciliation, it is useful to understand how ex-PLA perceive such a process and their role in it.

Ex-fighters discussed the Local Peace Committee (LPC) as a place where such reconciliation could occur:

I get to meet the people who were affected both from the state as well as from the Maoists. Just after the peace process, there was a kind of bitter relation with them. But with the expense of time, everyone has been taking the activities of people's war lightly/normally. We unite and stand together in the Peace Committee. Thus, the relation is slowly and gradually becoming stable. (KAT27)

LPCs do however reflect the fact of governance at all levels in Nepal in that they contain only political representatives. Where conflicts in communities occur along party political lines, this can be useful, but when they go beyond or transcend the parties LPCs are not useful. This is one motivation for seeking to create an organisation of the ex-PLA, such that at local, regional and national level they can be represented, even where they are not involved in political parties.

**Memory, truth-telling and education**

Reconciliation is to some extent dependent upon understanding the contradictory memories and perspectives in the past that define Nepal today. The role and legacy of the People's War is at the heart of such conflicts over memory, and the ex-PLA in turn are principle actors in this contestation.

The ex-PLA have been a centre of production of history of the War, and member of the Network expressed a willingness to work on writing their personal narratives, histories and memories of the conflict. They discussed existing memoirs written by members and potential projects that could be developed on memory work. A driving theme of this interest is a perception of a lack of local or national recognition of their positive role in the past, so they emphasized the need to develop educational materials to inform a new generation. They would like to create pressure to develop a conflict-related curriculum that would inform those who did not live through the conflict about the nation's past. Ex-PLA believed that at least students in Maoist-run schools could read and remember their history of 'resistance and People's power', through the memoirs of the ex-PLA. This clearly links to larger challenges about how to educate young people about the conflict in an even handed way that both represents the divergent narratives around it, and potentially seeks to reconcile these.

Network members were also active during discussions of the transitional justice process and during the visit of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) visit to district LPCs. However ex-combatants are sceptical of the TRC process – at least partly as a result that they are perceived as a potential threat to ex-PLA in the light of their actions during the conflict. This demonstrates the importance of the identity as an ex-combatant, despite efforts of ex-PLA to consider themselves as members of the community. The TRC and Disappearance Commission are also however seen as potentially advancing ex-PLA agendas, as ex-combatants have also raised the concerns around their disappeared and martyred comrades as well as about other victims of the conflict. Families of ex-PLA who have been victims of violations, some of whom are active in victims groups and family associations, are a part of network groups at the district level. Many ex-PLA feel that recognition of the martyred and disappeared is part of the same struggle as that for acknowledgement of their own role.

51 The Maoist affiliated Martyrs' Foundation runs 5 Martyrs' Memorial Residential School in 5 regions in Doli, Dang, Pokhara, Dolakha and Sunsari districts where more than 1400 students, the relatives of the disappeared, martyrs and disabled ex-PLA, are studying.
It seems clear that national institutional mechanisms of transitional justice, such as the TRC, offer little hope of contributing towards reconciliation at the community level and more particularly have no orientation at all towards ex-combatants. It is unclear in what capacity, if any, the TRC will have contact with ex-PLA. There seems a clear need that the TRC should engage with ex-PLA, not least to discuss with ex-minor combatants violations of which they were victims. It is hoped that the Ex-PLA National Network can be a conduit for contact between the TRC and ex-combatants. Beyond this it is likely that there is a need for local, informal processes that permit both truth-telling and dialogue – including both ex-PLA and others - that can advance reconciliation. This has begun, led by the Ex-PLA National Network and there is now a foundation for practice that can act as an example to advancing such grassroots reconciliation: this is discussed further below.

**Internal dialogue**

Internal dialogue within the network and communication between ex-PLA has offered moral support and solidarity to ex-combatants. By sharing the feelings and stigmas that they all experience but that they cannot share outside their group, the interaction has helped to reduce the impact of social stigma. The groups allow ex-PLA a space in which they can share and reconstruct meanings that are important to them, away from a social world that seems not to understand their experience. Discussions mostly focused on preserving the history of the PLA and their perception of the positive contribution the PLA made to social transformation, as well as discussing their identity as ex-PLA and more practical issues of sustaining their livelihood. Peer to peer exchange and sharing have increased their ability to cope with an often difficult situation, and given them new strength for their new circumstances. Members also developed mutual support and better understanding of the challenges to cope in a new environment that helped strengthen psychological and personal strength in a group. A challenge for the future is to reach out to the most isolated ex-PLA who are most in need of such support and solidarity.

**Community dialogue**

We want an integration plan. I don’t want to be denoted as former PLA. I want to be together with society. Some INGO brought projects for integration but they also denote us as former PLA. Those separate us from the general public and make us feel alienated. (SUR13)

Ex-combatants members of district groups in Jhapa, Dang, Chitwan, Kailali, Surkhet and Kathmandu have attended various community dialogues related to local issues to interact with other actors. They have also made other contacts and are working with other active agencies to seek solidarity and support in efforts at community dialogue. This has both raised ex-PLA agendas at the district level and provided a route to the addressing of stigma and issues that divide ex-combatants and communities. The goal is to develop an environment of social interaction at the community and district level that can help ex-PLA to be a part of social and political processes.

Network members have engaged with other local actors including political parties, District Development Committees, municipalities, local police offices, Chief District Officers, Local Peace Committees and relevant NGOs. They have received financial support from DDCs and VDCs on occasion, and ex-combatants have reported that they have increased access to local media, civil society, local authorities and political party leaders as a result of developing their own network. In the absence of a party agenda or being subject to political control, ex-PLA have their own forum to represent their issues and advance their identity as ex-fighters. Such forums and dialogue with other actors has allowed them to raise their voices collectively and to establish their agenda locally. As a result, some ex-PLA network members have been involved as local dialogue facilitators and peace advocates in the district, attending meetings of the Local Peace Committee,
and contributing to its role as a multi-stakeholder forum. The meetings and dialogue have helped ex-PLA to reduce stigma and alienation from communities, as ex-combatants and community members have engaged with each other. A woman ex-combatant in Kailali said:

I never attended such meeting after I left the cantonment. We had no space to speak in the Party meeting except around a political agenda. We never discussed about practical approaches and challenges that we face every day. After the party split I stayed silent and passive, but felt psychologically ill and didn’t find a place to share my feelings. Now I feel relief that I found members with similar experiences and stories that make me smile, reflecting on those memories from the battle field. It helped me reduce the stigma I faced, feeling that I am not alone and isolated. The community should listen to our stories and recognise our contribution to change. I would like to continue sharing and to continue such meetings with our members.

They need to further advance the organisation of their forum at the local level and providing an effective platform for network members.

The local groups and national network are active both individually and collectively in raising their issues through advocacy. This is an essential component of their local mobilisation and activism through non-violent action, advancing their agenda through dialogue, direct meetings and the media. Ex-PLA have demanded jobs, training, rehabilitation, education, health support and monthly allowances for the disabled.

**Sustaining the network**

The network has not been able to offer material support to its members, but has developed access to media, to local funds, and to local authorities and political parties. If however enjoys no NGO, INGO or donor support. The majority of ex-PLA members of the network are illiterate and lack technical or professional skills: as a result they have little access to the NGO and development sectors.

To ensure that the network is sustainable beyond the research project (which has now finished) demands both that the continued engagement of ex-PLA be assured and that resources are made available to enable both meetings and action, of the sort discussed above. Without follow-up activities it will be a challenge to build the network. A more fundamental problem is that the economic empowerment of the ex-PLA is a precondition for participation and sustaining their mobilisation, and this is likely to demand that future activities include those that can lead to livelihood opportunities or income generation, such as small business support, grants and skill training for ex-combatants. It will also be necessary to continue outreach to ensure a many ex-PLA as possible can participate - including those least accessible and most vulnerable.
8. THE EX-PLA: CHALLENGES OF REINTEGRATION AND WAYS FORWARD

In conclusion, we seek to summarise the results of the study and make recommendations that relate to what the Nepalese authorities, and others, can do today, as well as to the broader lessons that can be learnt from the process of reintegration in Nepal for the global practice of DDR and policy towards ex-combatants.

PLA reintegration: An evaluation

This study offers the opportunity to evaluate the reintegration of ex-PLA fighters from the perspective of ex-fighters themselves. It is concerned not with adherence to any externally defined template, but is entirely driven by the satisfaction or otherwise of fighters with their current situation, with reference to social, economic and political integration, but according to the priorities of those interviewed here. The breadth and depth of the approach taken here also allows a critical perspective to be taken on how the process of reintegration was approached. In particular it permits a clearer vision of how many of the approaches taken around treatment of ex-fighters during the peace process were driven either by the narrow interests of political leaders (on both sides of the conflict) or by a global approach to DDR shaped more by recent experience in Africa than by the particular complexities of Nepal. It also demonstrates the gap between the very high expectations of ex-PLA and how they have actually benefitted from approaches to reintegration since they left the cantonments. A point that emerges in every engagement with both the data of this study and with ex-PLA themselves is that the lack of consultation with rank and file ex-combatants has ensured that this gap remains. Whilst the mobilisation of ex-PLA that has begun has created both a voice for ex-combatants and representation with which authorities and others can engage, this is unlikely at this stage to be able to compensate for a process that was imposed upon them.

Not just ex-combatants

Taking an action research approach, led by peers of those interviewed, permits ex-combatants to challenge the labels by which they are typically defined, in both the communities from which they come and in the discourse and debate around the DDR and peace processes. This study permits a long view – reviewing not only the three years between demobilisation for those who took ‘voluntary retirement’ and data collection, but also the years in the cantonments and indeed the often long histories within the Maoist movement. This permits individuals to be seen not only as ‘ex-PLA’ but as individuals with unique histories and experience that mediate their expectations and perspectives. Labelling ex-combatants as such risks generalising and neglecting the many other identities most carry. Those met in this study – and indeed the peer researchers who carried out the data collection – are not only ex-PLA, but are men and women, activists, commanders, parents and children. All these identities contribute to their perception of their past and needs for the future. More than this we have seen how ex-combatants demonstrate agency over their identity, some choosing to discard their status as ex-PLA when they move to a new location and to not share their past with new neighbours. Many others still see themselves as largely defined by their relationship to the Maoist movement, committed to a politics in which they have been immersed for many years and linking the historic armed struggle to ongoing and future political battles. Identity also defines perspectives on the traditional outlook of DDR processes, driven by a need to prevent ex-combatants from presenting a security threat in the future. We have seen that whilst most ex-PLA would indeed be prepared to take up arms again in pursuit of political goals, they frame potential struggles around a centralised Party structure. As such, it is largely broader political developments that will drive such a potential threat and not the individual decisions of ex-combatants. Recent political violence in Nepal has been driven not by Maoist ideology, but rather by ethnicity and a
desire to challenge perceived exclusion (including as instilled the new Constitution). As such, the identities around which future armed violence will coalesce are much more likely to be defined by ethnicity than by those forged during the People’s War.

The politics of reintegration

It has long been clear that the way the reintegration process was approached was driven almost entirely by politics, rather than the needs of ex-combatants or even the broader nation. In practice there was essentially no reintegration process. The UCPN(M) sought that demobilisation occurred in a way that both satisfied their cadre’s demands and allowed for the possibility that cash could flow from the process to the Party. The other parties sought that the PLA be dissolved as quickly as possible. This led to a process that consisted almost entirely of significant cash payments to demobilising PLA. Large cash payments also incentivised the PLA to accept what was clearly the dissolution of the Maoist army despite the many promises previously made to them by their leaders, and facilitated the closure of the cantonments.

Integration into the Nepal Army, that had been the goal of many in the cantonments, was also undermined by political constraints and a perception of ex-PLA that this was ‘dishonourable’, based not – as understood by fighters - on a right won by participation in the long conflict, but simply giving them the opportunity to apply to join the NA as regular recruits.

Never mentioned by respondents in this study was the third option that emerged from the November 2011 agreement, in addition to a cash payment or integration into the Nepal Army, namely a reintegration package. This option was labelled ‘rehabilitation’ and consisted of a package of education, training, and vocational opportunities, supervised by the Relief and Rehabilitation Unit of the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction. This included more than 25 different options for education, training, and skill development, with the value of the package exceeding most of the cash payments made, varying from NRs. 6 - 900,000. Despite this only 6 of more than 17,000 demobilising PLA were reported to have chosen this option.52 The reasons for this include the fact that the UCPN(M) was strongly advocating that ex-combatants take the cash option, and the experience in the cantonments of vocational training, which was perceived as being largely without value (see Section 0) and offered no guarantees of employment at the end. No counseling or support around making a choice in the process was offered to ex-combatants, and it remains possible that this option was actually not made available to many in the cantonments.

The politics of the process drove an approach in which the short-term management of the perceived problem of the existence of the cantonments and of the PLA within them had to be solved. As such, a route was found to remove them as readily as possible without a great deal of attention being paid to the issue of their reintegration and future lives. Whilst the traditional security fear of ex-combatants catalysing future conflict has not transpired, the true victims of a process that was hurried and driven by short-term apolitical priorities have been the ex-PLA themselves.

Political constraints that kept disqualified ex-PLA, largely recruited as minors, in the cantonments for years after their disqualification frustrated efforts to provide a route to protection and rehabilitation of some of the most potentially vulnerable of ex-combatants. Whilst the programmes put in place by Nepalese and international agencies were able to access those minors who either never entered the cantonments or left independently, this study has not been able to evaluate their performance. The disqualified who have been accessed in this study report some of the greatest challenges

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in entering civilian life, having missed out on much of their education, and opportunities to establish a livelihood. They remain angry and alienated.

**Vulnerability vs. agency**

High global visibility given to ‘child soldiers’ has seen a large amount of international attention focussed on the issue of minor combatants and emphasising the vulnerability of such individuals. This led to the issue being addressed in the CPA through the demand that “children who have already been affected shall be rescued immediately and adequate provisions shall be made for their rehabilitation.” The language of ‘rescue’ reflects both the fact of vulnerability and the denial of such individuals having any agency in their current situation, reflecting a tension that defined their treatment throughout the demobilisation process. On the establishment of the cantonments there was an initial expectation that all minors would be very quickly ‘released’ and as such large amounts of donor funding was received to target minors among PLA fighters. In 2007, an effort of civil society, both national and international, established a Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG) working group under the auspices of UNICEF, to supervise the expected imminent reintegration of the 2,973 disqualified minors who had been identified in the cantonments by the UN. In practice, most of these individuals did not leave the cantonments until February 2010, when 2,400 were demobilised, by which time many were over 18 years of age.

Disqualified ex-PLA interviewed in this study constituted 13% of the total sample, equal to their representation (12%) among all those in the cantonments, corresponding to around two dozen individuals. Given that the total number met is low it is difficult to draw firm conclusions in evaluating the performance of the DDR programme in targeting such individuals. It does however permit a broadening of the lens to understand that fully 55% of the ex-PLA fighters interviewed for the study were recruited to the PLA while under 18 (see Figure 6), whilst only those under 18 at the time of the signing of the CPA were assigned the status of child combatants and disqualified. Given that by the time they left the cantonments most of the disqualified were also adults, it suggests that focussing on this group as a separate category – and even identifying them as such – is not useful in reintegration terms. On the contrary, the status of *ayogya* has been one of the most problematic elements for the disqualified, feeding their stigmatisation. Since a majority of those met for this study were recruited as minors, the general conclusions can be seen as contributing to an understanding of the impact of conflict on - and needs of - minor ex-combatants.

The strongest finding concerning the 4,009 disqualified ex-PLA is that the greatest impact the DDR process has had is in defining them in terms that provide a foundation for stigma and alienation. The use of the word *ayogya* to describe those who were excluded from the DDR process has had repercussions that continue even many years later, and this stigma is reinforced further – and reintegration complicated - by their being denied the cash payments that others received. What emerges strongly from the data is the strength of feeling of young ex-PLA in being defined in such terms: even though this is largely merely a semantic category, it was able to significantly reduce their self-esteem. This is best demonstrated through the fact that a significant fraction of the disqualified who were met sought that this label be revoked, a demand that would seem to have no prospect of being met.

This lack of control over their own identity precisely demonstrates how a legitimate understanding of the vulnerability of those recruited as minors that seeks to offer protection to such individuals has served to minimise their agency in many parts of their lives. There remains a tension between NGOs seeking to ‘rescue’ CAAFAG and young people, both under and over 18 years of age, who feel they have made a conscious and informed decision to join a political and military movement. This emphasises how the ex-PLA were objects not subjects of the DDR process, in contrast to their participation within the Maoist movement, where they felt very much as actors taking their future into
their own hands. This also perhaps offers an additional reason as to why almost all the ex-PLA welcomed cash payments as a principle route to reintegration; this leaves the decision as to how to use the money in their hands, rather than a bureaucrat managing a rehabilitation programme.

Vulnerability is linked to but not dependent upon age. Many of the most vulnerable were likely not met during this study, precisely because they have chosen to distance themselves from their ex-comrades as result of the situation they find themselves in. It is the lack of a community of support that increases vulnerability; those who have been rejected by family and home community, and who feel unable to maintain contact with their ex-PLA colleagues are most at risk. This will include women doing sex work, single mothers and others ostracised for breaking social taboos. The inability of the study to access such ex-fighters emphasises their marginality; it is hoped that as the association of ex-combatants develops (see Section 7), they can become a mode of support for such people.

**Not reintegrating: Finding a new home**

The greatest challenge to expectations of what actually happened when the PLA were demobilised is that there was rather little reintegration. Rather than returning home to their original communities, most ex-PLA moved either to urban areas or to ‘new’ communities, where a concentration of ex-fighters and others linked to the Maoist movement made their lives easier. One can ask, had this been understood at the time a programme was being planned, what difference would it have made? Given the overwhelming political imperatives of the process, it is likely that little would have been done differently. It does however allow for speculation. Had it been known that ex-PLA would be moving to urban areas for example, vocational training targeting such an environment could have been given. More than this, contact could have been made with businesses and other employers who could have been given incentives to give job opportunities and real world training to ex-combatants.53 Schools and training institutes in destination communities could have been supported and subsidised to provide relevant training to ex-PLA. Authorities could also have considered making opportunities in the civil service available to ex-combatants. Knowing that ex-PLA are not highly dispersed but rather concentrated in rather few areas, allows the potential for post-demobilisation follow-up that would otherwise be impossible. What emerges most clearly is that having knowledge of the destinations and intentions of demobilising ex-PLA – such as could be gained through research or consultation in the cantonments – would have given a reintegration programme significant advantages.

Another consequence of the ‘new communities’ is that where tensions arise these are not between individuals and recipient communities, but between groups of ex-PLA and longstanding residents. This makes the possibility of community dialogues, including both new and old residents, as well as local officials, particularly relevant.

**Reintegration into poverty?**

A fundamental dilemma of the reintegration process in Nepal – and indeed of similar processes elsewhere – is that ex-combatants came from communities that were desperately poor and are likely to be reintegrated into communities with a similar economic level. It has long been recognised that ensuring ex-combatants return home far richer than they left, through large payments for example, can appear to communities as rewarding them for their violence to the point where resentment threatens successful

53 In the immediate aftermath of the CPA, victims of the conflict were systematically offered jobs by some Kathmandu employers in exactly this way. Additionally, during the initial UCPN(M)-led government, civil service positions were preferentially given to victims of the conflict, where these were linked to UCPN(M). Whilst this is an example of the very negative patronage politics that is traditional in Nepal, this also serves to address broader national agendas, although in this latter case, this clearly also had a party political goal.
integration. In Nepal’s process payments were large enough to ensure a livelihood (through purchase of land or capital for a business, for example) perhaps somewhat better than was typical in the rural areas from which most ex-PLA come, and as such perhaps struck the correct balance. This however must be contrasted with the very high expectations of ex-combatants who left their homes with a view to transforming both their own condition and that of their communities and nation, and feel they have made substantial sacrifices. It is this gap between expectation and what is feasible that emerged most strongly in the data. It was clear for example, that for many ex-PLA the idea of returning home to resume the rural farming livelihood of their parents was entirely unacceptable: their expectations in life had been transformed by their time with the Maoist movement. More than this, returning to the land in their home village would appear as an admission of failure to their peers in the community. Confronting these expectations through a process of counselling, consultation and support to ex-PLA would have increased the understanding of the reintegration approach taken, but it remains likely that a gap between expectations and what could have been delivered will remain.

Ways forward: The ex-PLA as neither victims nor perpetrators

There is only a limited value in saying what could have been done in Nepal to optimise the reintegration process. Rather than addressing what might have been, an effort has been made here to learn broader lessons for processes elsewhere (see below). It is however useful to suggest what can be done now, by a range of actors, to address the residual challenges ex-combatants face and how this meshes with elements of Nepal’s political transition that are ongoing, such as the transitional justice process.

The discussion here is driven by the unique status that ex-PLA have. The majority were recruited as young teenagers and lost much of their school years and youth to both conflict and the long wait in the cantonments. Beyond this, many have experienced extreme violence, and some are likely to have suffered significant mental trauma. Despite this however almost all ex-combatants reject characterisation as victims, precisely because they believe they made their own choices and were prepared to make sacrifices to create political change. The stigma many face in both their own communities and from others is linked to perceptions of the behaviour of Maoist cadres during the conflict, and in particular where violations were committed. It is however inappropriate to class all the ex-PLA as perpetrators. While addressing ongoing impunity for violators is important for ex-PLA as for those in state forces, most understand that they fought a war that exclusively targeted state combatants and functionaries. As such, in a post-conflict period where much of public discussion is about how to treat perpetrators of violations and their victims, the ex-PLA find themselves in a third category, neither victims nor perpetrators. It is important that either dedicated processes are created to address the issues of ex-combatants or existing mechanisms – such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – must seek to ensure that ex-PLA are not marginalised from them. Here, some of the possibilities, for both institutional and non-institutional processes, are discussed.

Representing ex-PLA: The Ex-PLA National Network as a route to engaging with ex-combatants

The Ex-PLA Nepal National Network that was one of the primary demands of those involved in this project represents the first opportunity for ex-combatants to speak for themselves. Both while a part of the highly centralised Maoist movement and during the demobilisation process ex-combatants had no voice and the rank and field were not consulted about reintegration at any point. Following demobilisation, they were scattered around the country and whilst maintaining and forging contacts with their old comrades had no route to collective expression.

It is important to understand that political integration means that ex-PLA are recognised as citizens with the same rights as any other, including the right to form associations to
represent their interests. Those who have long politically opposed the Maoists should understand that ensuring a route to legitimate and peaceful political representation for ex-PLA reduces the possibility that they will feel obliged to seek other routes. The aim of the association (see Section 7) is to bring together ex-combatants at the local level (district and region) as well as at the national level to allow ex-PLA to support each other, to provide contact between communities, community leaders and ex-PLA (such as can catalyse community dialogue), and to create a platform for advocacy.

With a formal structure, the Network will enable any actor to engage with ex-combatants and their representatives. This can permit:

- Civil society and others to support initiatives to permit dialogue between ex-combatants and community members where tensions linked to the conflict remain. This research project has already seen a limited number of such dialogues and has demonstrated that they can address stigma and heal community rifts;
- The authorities to see the ex-PLA National Network as a legitimate representative of the ex-PLA and to include them wherever their presence can aid peacebuilding and the national interest. Ideally, Local Peace Committees and other district bodies, as well as national institutions, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to engage with the Network, wherever there is benefit in doing so;
- All ex-PLA to become involved in local groups of the Network to ensure the greatest representation from all elements of the ex-PLA, including women, and the disabled, and to maximise their role as nonviolent actors and change agents to transform conflict.

Memories of violent pasts and the ex-PLA

Ten years after the signing of the CPA and the end of the Maoist conflict, Nepal is coming to terms with its violent past in formal and informal ways. Most institutionally, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons are investigating the violations of the conflict with the intention of writing a national history around which a consensus can emerge as well as ensuring accountability for past crimes. Beyond such formal processes however, memories of the past are constantly being shared and interpreted throughout the country. This can be seen in the way that ex-PLA discuss their experiences of the People’s War and the time since whenever they are gathered together: this was constantly seen during the research of this project, with ex-fighters exchanging stories and anecdotes as well as political and ideological interpretations of the both the past and the present. In this way it is clear that perspectives on the past determine how the future is approached, and one challenge for Nepal is that many narratives of the past, including those marked by violence, poverty and marginalisation, fail to coincide. This is evident in the many memoirs of the People’s War that have been published by ex-PLA in which descriptions of the pain of the struggle is typically wrapped in an understanding that such sacrifice leads to social and political transformation. These are read by those sympathetic to the Maoist movement, but not by others, increasingly ensuring that different views of the past shape understandings of the present.

The ex-PLA clearly have a lot to contribute to an understanding of the conflict and to the writing of a comprehensive history of those times. As such, the Ex-PLA National Network provides a route to accessing this, both formally – through institutions such as the TRC - and informally. Informal truth-telling can build on community dialogues to write local histories of the conflict, as well as allowing ex-PLA to share stories of the hardships they have faced. There remain however great challenges in seeing the TRC and ex-PLA collaborating. The TRC – and much of civil society – appear to see ex-PLA only as potential perpetrators and not as partners in the process of truth-telling.54 and

54 Bhatta decries induction of ex-Maoist combatants in TRC sub-committee:
many ex-PLA remains suspicious of the accountability agenda of the TRC, however nominal that may appear.

The work of the ex-PLA network in a number of areas has created a precedent for community dialogues at the local level between ex-PLA and other community members. These can address tensions that exist, arising from the conflict and how it was experienced and is perceived today. Such dialogues appear to have been considered successful by both ex-PLA and others and efforts can be made to replicate these. Whilst no concrete framework for such dialogues has emerged from meetings of the Network, and understandable tensions remain between ex-PLA and victims of the Maoists, ex-combatants have shown their interest to work on real stories through informal truth telling as a highly relevant way to write history and consolidate memory in a collective fashion.

**Recommendations**

**Economic integration**

- *Civil society* to consider ex-PLA as an independent category of potential beneficiaries of livelihood and income generation programmes;

**Social integration**

- *Local authorities* in areas where large numbers of ex-PLA have settled to seek to promote inclusive community dialogues at the village, VDC and district levels, in which stigma and a lack of understanding between ex-PLA and others can be discussed and addressed;
- *National authorities* to consider formally withdrawing the description of the discharged PLA as *ayogya* (unqualified);
- *Civil society and local authorities* to consider the Ex-PLA National Network a partner in any work it does at community level around reconciliation and peacebuilding;
- *Civil society and local authorities* to consider ways in which female ex-combatants who face discrimination as a result of their gender and their engagement with the Maoist movement can challenge the disempowerment they have faced on their return. In particular, gender programmes to address the ‘rolling back’ of female empowerment seen in many communities since the end of the conflict;
- *Civil society* to seek to find routes to support ex-PLA who may be suffering mental illness or the impact of trauma as a result of their experiences during the conflict, and in particular those recruited into the PLA as minors;
- *Civil society and national and local authorities* to consider how existing and future programmes can help the thousands of ex-PLA who suffer from disability as a result of injuries received during the conflict, including considering the possibility of creating a national rehabilitation centre to support them;

**Political integration**

- *Local Peace Committees* to consider inviting ex-PLA representatives to attend meetings to ensure that their perspectives and interests are considered in any discussion that concern them;
- *National and local authorities and civil society* to acknowledge the Ex-PLA National Network as the legitimate representative of ex-PLA nationally and where possible to support them and consider them as partners in their activities;
- *National authorities* to consider ways in which the role played by PLA cadres in driving change in Nepal can be recognised. This could be – as suggested by the Network – through the distribution of a letter acknowledging their role in creating the republic, or through the consideration of the status of national martyrs to PLA who dies in the conflict;
Truth-telling and memory

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission to ensure that ex-PLA are invited to contribute to truth-telling in both public hearings and private testimony, including discussion of violations to which they were subject as minor ex-combatants;
- Civil society to promote informal truth-telling at the local level through memory work that can bring ex-PLA, victims of the Maoists and other community members together construct shared narratives of the past;
- National and local authorities to consider the creation of sites of memory that can serve as places where divergent memories of the conflict are negotiated to create common understanding for the future. These to include the perspectives of all actors involved, including the ex-PLA;
- National authorities to address the absence of discussion of the conflict from school textbooks. This to involve the broadest engagement with the range of views that exist, and to use the findings of the TRC as a basis for the development of educational materials;

Lessons for global DDR practice

Global DDR practice has evolved over recent decades from one narrowly focussed on ensuring security by managing ex-combatants who are presumed to pose a potential future threat, to ensuring that ex-combatants can be received into communities and that their social, economic and political integration is successful. The experience of recent practice and lessons that can be extracted from it have been described in detail in the United Nations’ voluminous ‘Integrated DDR Standards’, and DDR remains the largest intervention in nearly all of the UN’s ongoing large-scale peacekeeping missions. Contemporary DDR programmes comprise an ever-expanding field of interventions, including access to land, cash transfers, and employment and, as has emerged as a part of so-called ‘second generation DDR’, additional measures of trust-building and weapons-control have complemented the core of the DDR template. In comparison with such complex and sophisticated approaches, the Nepal process was – largely for the political reasons discussed above – much simpler.

The DDR field does however remain a problematic one as the widespread and fundamental assumption that DDR is causally related to violence reduction and the prevention of the resurgence of war, seems to be ‘empirically unfounded’. As was seen in Nepal for example, the departure of the PLA and Maoist governance from some areas following the establishment of the cantonments, actually led to greater insecurity as competing criminal and political gangs emerged. The PLA was in this sense a source of security, as it represented a monopoly of violence in areas where the Maoists had great influence. Much of this uncertainty in the efficacy of DDR appears to be due to the effort to find ‘recipes’ that are universal: the contextual dependence of what works in any particular post-conflict situation makes such knowledge transfer potentially problematic and this puts limits on the generality to which the lessons from Nepal’s process can be applied.

The contextual characteristics of armed groups to examine will include organizational hierarchy, codes of conduct, degree of centralization of authority, use of violence towards communities, and the modes of inclusion of new members. Perhaps the most

important element to consider in Nepal is the very high degree of centralisation and rigid command structures of the PLA and broader Maoist movement. Whilst a traditional goal of DDR is to cut lines of command and control, the high level of PLA discipline and the apparent – if often ambiguous - commitment of the Maoist leadership to the peace process and civilian politics, indicated a different aim for Nepal’s process. Chains of command within the PLA and the Maoist Party served to ensure that cadres respected the post-CPA ceasefire and avoided violence. This study indicates that even now, after demobilisation and the splitting of the Maoist party into a number of factions, discipline remains firm and cadres’ commitment to the use of political violence is conditional upon direction from a political leadership. It is this command and control, despite massive resentment of the traditional UCPN(M) leadership by ex-PLA, that has ensured an absence of violence from PLA cadres. Whilst political violence around the 2015 protests against the Constitution has been linked to ex-PLA, this was perpetrated by veterans now linked to ethnic movements rather than any centralised Marxist party.

An area for future research in Nepal is how various violent groups, including criminal gangs and ethnic militants, recruited ex-PLA and to what extent a broader and deeper process of reintegration might have prevented this. The displacement of conflict violence into criminal violence was seen in Nepal following the peace accord and remains largely unresearched. Such a project should also seek to engage with the links between organised crime and major political parties; claims have been made that Maoist politicians used PLA veterans as their ‘enforcers’ on entering Kathmandu politics, as other politicians had theirs.

**Challenging the assumptions of reintegration**

The Nepal case, and the data presented here, challenge some of the assumptions made around the reintegration of ex-combatants.59

The first reintegration assumption challenged by the Nepal ex-PLA data is that ex-combatants will return to their original homes on demobilisation. Whilst the majority were removed from their communities on recruitment, for a range of reasons many were unwilling or felt unable to return to their homes on leaving the cantonments, mostly due to stigma, but also to the lack of opportunities (see Section 0). As a result, some three-quarters of ex-PLA are living other than in their community of origin, with most either in urban areas and/or ‘new communities’ largely or partly defined by the presence of ex-combatants and other veterans of the Maoist movement. Given that social integration is premised on ‘return’ this challenges reintegration with communities in which residents are not strangers to each-other, but share long and often intimate connections as well as common social histories. This has the effect of softening the transition from combatant to civilian, since the community contains features of both life in the PLA during the conflict and that in the cantonments, and thus represents a degree of continuity for ex-combatants. Acknowledging that most combatants are not returning challenges many of the fundamental approaches of DDR – notably around the delivery of support to the communities receiving ex-combatants. Such support can still be provided, but must be premised on first understanding to which communities ex-combatants are returning, allowing the possibility of preparing communities in advance for the reception of ex-fighters. Such understandings can however drive more temporally staged and empirically driven approaches to DDR.

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The second assumption is that, since the main goal of a DDR process is to break the links of the command and control process it is primarily an individual process of integrating solitary ex-combatants into non-combatant communities. However, in two senses this is far less true in Nepal. Firstly, friendship, family relations, shared identities (particularly within the Maoist movement and with non-combatant activists), and shared experiences of hardship and marginalization can create solidarity. Secondly, in communities where ex-fighters are considered to have made a positive contribution through their role in the PLA, as in the ‘new communities’ where they potentially dominate, integration will by no means be a solitary process but a highly social and even collective one. Whilst the Nepali reintegration process was administered as addressing a group of individuals in practice it became a more collective programme simply because so many ex-PLA moved together from cantonments to their new homes, and as a result were able to provide emotional, social and material support to each other. This emphasises that a DDR process should be viewed as a continuation of the political dialogue entailed in peace talks, supporting the transformation of groups of ex-PLA into collectivities with a role and position in the post-conflict society, something the Nepali process failed to do. It has been argued that in other contexts organizations of former combatants have had important roles in political processes following armed conflict, demonstrating the importance of political integration. Ex-combatants can constitute organizations with an ‘organizational capital’ that enable the political mobilization and representation of individuals who will otherwise remain unconnected: this can be through political parties, veterans’ organizations or other elements of civil society, and is one of the more important roles envisaged for the ex-PLA National Network.

The third assumption that is challenged by the data of this study is that a lack of effective livelihood drives young ex-combatants back to taking up arms as an income generating activity. Whilst the burst of recruitment to the PLA that followed the signing of the CPA was indeed largely driven by a desire for recruits to have a route to a career in the national army, throughout most of the PLA’s existence joining up was not a lucrative option. As seen in the data, a few from very poor families saw the PLA as a career that guaranteed that they would eat and not be a burden on their parents, but rather few were motivated by the perceived material benefits of recruitment. The fallacy of this assumption in Nepal is seen in the statements of many ex-combatants who despite complaining loudly of having been reintegrated back into poverty appear to have given no thought to taking up arms in the short term. This is also of course linked to the nature of the context of contemporary Nepal, where there are rather few opportunities to join armed groups.

Less an assumption than a practice that has become one of the most prescriptive elements of reintegration programmes, the focus on vocational training that has begun to be questioned by some scholars, is also found wanting in the data of this study. It has been suggested that “vocational training persists because it is what donors are willing to fund and what implementing agencies are familiar with, and therefore involves little risk.” Whilst the very negative perception of such training expressed by ex-PLA may be due to its lack of quality in this case, it is also clear that a cash payment was considered preferable by almost all over a training programme whose ultimate outcome was uncertain. This also again demonstrates the extent to which efforts in Nepal both


failed to inform and counsel those to be demobilised, as well as offering no significant process of consultation with the recipients of planned reintegration programming.
The Committee for Social Justice (CSJ)
The Committee for Social Justice (CSJ) is a not-for-profit community based organization, that aims to advance a human rights-based movement for the disempowered and marginalized, and to promote social activism and community awareness on human rights, social justice, social change, community cohesion, conflict transformation, and sustainable peace through multi-media, arts, conflict narratives, memorialization, educational materials and social interventions. CSJ focuses on the institutionalization of local initiatives through participatory action research, and promotes grassroots movements, participatory dialogue and workshops, nonviolent strategies and social volunteerism. It seeks to develop networks with like-minded individuals and institutions at national and international level.

CSJ is a key mover and pioneer organisation in the inclusive conflict victims’ movement in Nepal, hosting the national secretariat of the National Network of Families of the Disappeared and Missing (NEFAD), and the National Victims Alliance, and a co-founder and member of the Conflict Victims’ Common Platform on Transitional Justice. CSJ was established as a community campaign group in 2006 following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and registered in 2010 as a non-government organization in Nepal (regd. No. 816/066/067) and is affiliated with the Social Welfare Council (37122). CSJ today is known as an active campaign group, advancing advocacy for victims and as a rights defender for justice and human rights.

The Centre for Applied Human Rights
The Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR) is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre at the University of York. It is a community of scholars and visiting practitioners who have a shared focus on the real world challenges of putting human rights into practice and protecting human rights defenders at risk. A focus on human rights defending and defenders shapes all the Centre’s work. The work of the Centre is international in breadth and draws on the University of York's rich tradition of rigorous and engaged scholarship in the fields of development, post-war reconstruction, public policy, public health, disability rights, gender and women’s rights, environmental issues, and refugee law.

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