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THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SOCIAL REINTEGRATION: INSIGHTS FROM COLOMBIAN EX-COMBATANTS

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ABSTRACT

Reintegration programs for ex-combatants around the globe promote their technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The aim is to help them develop skills, assume new social roles, and gain community acceptance, yet the experiences and perceptions of the ex-combatants who participate in these programs have been little explored. Thus, it is not known whether this group finds access to TVET useful in building new social networks, which is a critical factor in preventing further violence and achieving social cohesion. This in-depth interview study with female and male ex-combatants from Medellín, Colombia, who are at various stages of TVET engagement examined their perceptions of whether and how TVET contributed to their social reintegration. The findings illustrate that some forms of TVET promoted psychosocial recovery and helped to build social bonds, whereas other types reinforced isolation and segregation. This study also found that the TVET programs overlooked the ex-combatants' limitations on socializing that were imposed by their violent environments and feelings of stigmatization. These findings suggest a need to complement education programs for economic development with approaches that help develop social bonds and trust between ex-combatants and their communities.

INTRODUCTION

A major challenge to achieving stabilization in postconflict contexts and fragile states is the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian society. In disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes, reintegration is the phase in which ex-combatants should acquire civilian status, secure sustainable employment and a steady income (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2006), and gain community acceptance (Bowd and Özerdem 2013). This long-term process, which is critical to sustainable peacebuilding, is the most difficult part of DDR (Humphreys and Weinstein 2005).

International development agencies and governments use technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs to rehabilitate ex-combatants and reintegrate them into civilian life. Support for these programs is based on three main assumptions: first, that employment programs will address the grievances that were the root causes of a conflict; second, that having a legal livelihood will reduce ex-combatants' incentive to re-engage in violence and crime (Blattman and Ralston 2015; Simpson 2018); and, third, that ex-combatants will interact with different social groups in their education institutions and workplaces and that this contact will foster mutual understanding and examination of stereotypes, which will help build trust (International Labour Organization et al. 2016). However, rigorous evidence that supports these assumptions is rare (Blattman and Annan 2016).

There is little agreement about the conceptual definition of social reintegration. Various empirical studies have interpreted it as reconciliation (Theidon 2007), economic reintegration (Özerdem 2012), ex-combatants' involvement in community organizations (Kaplan and Nussio 2015), and families' and neighbors' acceptance of ex-combatants (Pugel 2007). In this study, we define social reintegration as the process by which ex-combatants establish networks of trust and collaboration with civilians (Putnam 2001). Social reintegration is the primary pillar of economic and political reintegration, as building bonds with community members may enable ex-combatants to feel accepted, envision a positive future, engage in civilian activities, and reduce their risk of re-engaging with an armed group (Özerdem 2012; Nussio 2011). Therefore, understanding how ex-combatants establish ties with actors at education institutions, in the workplace, and in their neighborhoods, and the consequences of these social interactions, is critical. However, little is known about whether ex-combatants find access to TVET programs useful in building new social networks and why, despite TVET implementation efforts,

the programs have not produced the expected results in terms of facilitating reintegration (Humphreys and Weinstein 2005).

Extending Torjesen's (2013) theory of ex-combatant reintegration based on stakeholders' perspectives and trajectories, this in-depth interview study, which is focused on ex-combatants' voices and experiences, examines the perceived effects of TVET interventions on their socialization. The question this study seeks to answer is, What role, if any, does participation in TVET as an institution play in developing ex-combatants' new social bonds and networks to facilitate their reintegration? The bottom-up approach of this study, which often is missing in the policy-centered DDR literature, helps clarify the drivers and obstacles of ex-combatants' social reintegration and enables education program developers to respond more effectively to participants' needs.

This focus on the social sphere of TVET brings a new perspective to education for reintegration, in that studies about education's potential to contribute to socialization, peacebuilding, political participation, and reconciliation following conflict have focused primarily on schools (Bellino, Paulson, and Anderson Worden 2017; Loader et al. 2018), whereas studies of TVET have evaluated whether the programs increase participants' employment and raise their income (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2007). This study offers a more holistic approach by exploring TVET's potential to promote social cohesion in divided societies.

In this paper, we first provide a brief review of the literature linking DDR with TVET and social reintegration. We next give the background of DDR in Colombia, with a focus on Medellín, and go on to describe our research design and data. We then offer a three-part presentation of our results at the individual, programmatic, and macro levels. In the paper's fifth section, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and the implications for education programs seeking to successfully reintegrate ex-combatants into society, in Colombia and beyond.

REINTEGRATION, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

DDR, and the role TVET plays in it, has evolved over time. First-generation DDR focused on disarming active combatants and discharging them from the armed forces (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2006). Poverty was considered the prime incentive for youth to join armed groups, so in exchange for laying down their arms, ex-combatants

were provided with a modest income or employment opportunities, vocational training, and microbusiness grants (IOM 2019). Assuming that employment programs promote economic self-sufficiency (Ralston 2014), DDR programmers offered TVET to ex-combatants, their aim being that providing a legal livelihood would reduce ex-combatants' grievances and incentives to re-engage in violence and crime (Blattman and Ralston 2015). First-generation DDR usually excluded the women who provided support to the military as cooks or sexual partners, but did not carry arms. However, critics of this approach showed that these women required assistance because, upon their return from war, they were more ostracized than the men, and many needed specialized reintegration assistance after suffering gender-based violence (Annan and Brier 2010).

Second-generation DDR acknowledges that, while a central focus, ex-combatants' economic reintegration is not sufficient for them to achieve success. Therefore, DDR's current community-based reintegration perspective focuses on rebuilding the social bonds between receptive communities and ex-combatants. In order to promote broad development and dispel the idea that ex-fighters are rewarded while their victims are left behind, TVET programs target both ex-combatants and communities affected by conflict (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2014). These programs expect that ex-combatants will interact with different social groups in TVET institutions and workplaces, and that this contact and dialogue will foster trust (International Labour Organization et al. 2016). Second-generation DDR also targets female ex-combatants (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2014), which is in part the result of pressure from the UN Women, Peace, and Security resolution that encourages all those involved in DDR to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants, and to identify women as constructive agents of peace, security, and postconflict reconstruction (UN Women 2017).

Following social capital theory, according to which participation in civic life builds a foundation of cooperation and trust among citizens (Putnam 2001), this study identifies whether ex-combatants' interactions with peers, teachers, and the staff of the *Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización* (Agency for Reintegration and Normalization, or ARN) at TVET institutions promote or limit their new social connections. It also examines whether going through TVET programs facilitates ex-combatants' participation in the job market and in their communities, which would enable them to participate as members of civil society. The study of bonding between ex-combatants and civilians helps

to identify whether education programs facilitate the development of networks based on agreed-to norms and/or establish the collaborative relationships that are the driving force in rebuilding the social fabric.

THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

Colombia is a middle-income country where more than 80 percent of the population resides in cities (World Bank 2017a). It is one of the oldest democracies in Latin America, but poverty and inequality limit development opportunities for large segments of the population (World Bank 2017b). Socioeconomic disparities and political exclusion are the root causes of a long-running conflict. At present, Colombia is simultaneously a host to conflict, transitional, and postconflict conditions.

Colombia's civil war is the longest-running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere. Fifty years of conflict have resulted in more than 220,000 deaths, 25,000 disappearances, 5-6 million people internally displaced by the violence, and numerous human rights violations by guerrilla and paramilitary groups alike. Unarmed civilians suffer most of the casualties. In the 1950s, Marxist guerrilla groups such as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC), and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN) emerged to fight for agrarian reform and against an exclusive political system. Both groups are financed through extortion, kidnapping, and trade in drugs. In the 1980s, regional elites, multinational actors, and powerful landowning drug dealers formed the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC)—commonly referred to as the paramilitary because of the support it received from government armed forces—a counterinsurgent military organization (CNMH 2013a).

Demobilization and Reintegration in Colombia

Over the last 20 years, the Colombian government has demobilized more than 70,000 ex-combatants from guerrilla and self-defense militia groups (ARN 2019a). The first collective demobilization began in 2003, following peace negotiations between the AUC and the government, during which 30,000 soldiers were demobilized. Among them, 1,911 (6%) were women (CNMH 2013b). The second collective demobilization took place in 2016, after a peace agreement between FARC and the government led 12,000 guerrilla fighters to give up their arms,

including 2,303 (23%) women (ARN 2019a) who had provided logistical support, including serving as spies, nurses, cooks, and partners to the male combatants. Another 20,000 fighters, mostly from guerrilla groups, demobilized simultaneously, including 4,495 (18.6%) women (CNMH 2013b). In those cases, individuals or small groups chose to desert in exchange for government benefits, which was an important counterinsurgency strategy from 2002 to 2016 (Kaplan and Nussio 2015). After being demobilized, some ex-combatants experienced harassment, displacement, and murder as reprisals for having belonged to an armed group (MAPP-OEA 2019). Between 2003 and 2012, 3,003 (5%) ex-combatants were killed after being demobilized (Nussio 2018), and 234 were killed after the 2016 peace agreement with FARC (Ardila Arias 2020). In general, Colombian citizens distrust ex-combatants and believe they continue to perpetuate violence after being demobilized (Nussio 2018).

Local authorities in Medellín have worked for more than 30 years to implement innovative and structured reintegration programs (Rozema 2008). From 2003 to 2006, Medellín and the capital city Bogotá were centers of reintegration and points of convergence for a heterogeneous population of paramilitary and guerrilla combatants from urban and rural backgrounds who had demobilized both individually and collectively (ODDR 2013). In 2019, local authorities were reintegrating more than 300 FARC ex-combatants (Francisco Cardona, personal communication, October 20, 2019). In Medellín, reintegration coexists with the rearmament of illegal armed groups and a high concentration of criminal groups. In the early 2000s, half of the AUC members who demobilized kept their arms for personal protection or to continue with illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and extortion (Rozema 2008). Today, criminal gangs govern the majority of the poor and middle-income neighborhoods in Medellín to varying degrees. There are roughly 350 local youth gangs that are managed and controlled by larger organizations. These gangs resolve disputes, police their neighborhoods, manage markets, tax businesses, monopolize local illegal markets (Blattman et al. 2020), and create alliances as needed (Moncada 2016). This reorganization of illegal groups poses a security threat to ex-combatants and creates conditions favorable to recidivism (Kaplan and Nussio 2016).

Education for Reintegration

In keeping with first-generation DDR (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2006), the 2008 Colombian reintegration policy defines reintegration as the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. The policy

provides a comprehensive framework for reintegration that includes accelerated education, vocational training, grants to start microbusinesses, psychosocial support, health care, and a monthly stipend conditioned on ex-combatants' participation in reintegration activities (CONPES 3554 2008).

To address the ex-combatants' poor job skills, eradicate intergenerational poverty, and close the equity gaps that were at the heart of the conflict, TVET seeks to provide opportunities for economic empowerment. However, in keeping with second-generation DDR, the Colombian reintegration policy also recognizes that community reintegration is necessary to overcome stigmatization and achieve reconciliation. To build trust, TVET programs are designed to blend ex-combatants from different armed groups in entrepreneurship courses, and to blend ex-combatants with the general population in technical and technological programs. To prepare ex-combatants to respect the norms of working environments, TVET programs train them in discipline, teamwork, professional clothing, and respect for authority and company rules. The reintegration process requires ex-combatants to participate in 80 hours of social service postgraduation in areas such as sports and cultural events, restoration of public spaces, and the implementation of community projects, after which they are eligible to receive credit to start a microbusiness (CONPES 3554 2008). Since 2010, the Colombian reintegration policy has included a gender perspective aimed at transforming identities rooted in violence, and which responds to the interests and needs of female ex-combatants (CNMH 2013b). Female and male ex-combatants have equal access to TVET programs and the same amount of microcredit, and they study in the same institutions.

The Colombian government selected the *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (National Training Service, or SENA), a publicly accredited institution with a 60-year history of training people in different industries, to be the main institution overseeing ex-combatants' training (CONPES 3554 2008). SENA offers two-year technological programs, one-year technical postsecondary education programs, and short-term complementary trainings (40-80 hours). The technological programs combine skills training with theoretical foundations, whereas the technical programs focus on skills training in specific productive sectors. Both have as a prerequisite a high school diploma. The short-term complementary training, which does not require a high school diploma, focuses on entrepreneurship education (SENA 2015). To stimulate self-employment and increase participants' earning potential, the policy includes a microcredit support of $2,600 after they graduate from any program.

Since 2006, the ARN, previously called the Colombian Agency for Reintegration, has managed, implemented, coordinated, and evaluated the plans and programs for reintegrating all demobilized fighters, including the TVET programs. ARN delivers its services at 33 centers throughout the country and employs "reintegrators" as case managers (40-100 cases per reintegrator). ARN reintegrators are responsible for monitoring ex-combatants' compliance and supporting each of them during the reintegration process, which lasts up to seven years (ARN 2019b). Colombia's budget for DDR comes from the government and international donors, including the European Union, Norway, USAID, UNICEF, and the Inter-American Development Bank (ECP 2008).

In Colombia, TVET programs aim to create economic empowerment, social inclusion, and reconciliation. However, there are contradictions within the programs. For example, the programs focus mainly on individual processes but expect to contribute to collective social cohesion. Moreover, community-based reintegration efforts have not increased trust between communities and demobilized people (Kaplan and Nussio 2015), and despite claiming to offer gender-equal opportunities, the reintegration policy depicts women in traditional roles, such as caregivers. These circumstances raise the question of how ex-combatants perceive their social reintegration through the education process.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This paper is based on an in-depth qualitative interview study that helped to illuminate the educational experiences of ex-combatants and how they believe TVET has contributed to their social reincorporation.

Sample

This study used a purposive sample of 20 participants living in Medellín (Bryman 2012). We used a maximum variation sampling strategy to represent ex-combatants' diversity and capture their multiple perspectives about educational experiences. We selected 17 interviewees with assistance from ARN staff members. The remaining three were identified through a snowball approach. Ten participants were currently enrolled in TVET programs and were taking complementary entrepreneurship courses. Ten were recent graduates (within one year) of TVET programs. Among them, six had completed 400 hours of complementary courses (between five and ten short-term entrepreneurship courses), and four had completed technical programs. The sampling procedure

created variations in terms of program type, previous armed group affiliation, stage of reintegration, family status, and job situation. All interviewees but one had demobilized individually. All were young adults between 18 and 35 years old (60% female). Most had less than a complete primary school education and thus received accelerated education through the program. Although the broader population of FARC ex-combatants is 77 percent male (CONPES 3931 2018), this study oversampled female participants to determine whether they face particular challenges and, if so, whether these challenges give them a different perspective on the role education played in their reintegration.

Procedures

Before each interview began, the participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the research and their rights as research participants. Interviews were semistructured and conducted in Spanish, the native language of the interviewees. Each ex-combatant was interviewed twice. In the first interview, ex-combatants were asked about their experiences in the TVET institution, whether they experienced the institution as a community, and whether participation in TVET had helped them develop new social supports and networks at the school, in their workplace, and in their neighborhood. In the second interview, particular topics were explored in more detail. The 40 interviews were conducted between October 2018 and April 2019 at two ARN locations in Medellín.

Positionality

The lead author, who conducted the interviews, is Colombian and a native Spanish speaker. Being an insider facilitated her ability to establish contacts in ARN and SENA and to gain interviewees' acceptance, and it enhanced her understanding of participants' narratives and cultural idiosyncrasies. However, in conducting this research, she was also an outsider. Her position as an educated person living in the United States made her aware of the social divisions between her and the ex-combatants, which created a power imbalance. However, being perceived as a foreigner also helped her build trust, because the participants assumed she was not connected to an armed group or the government.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and then translated into English. NVivo was used to assist in the analysis of data. The focus was on participants' experiences with TVET and the networks of trust and cooperation they had established by

interacting with different social groups. Data were analyzed in a three-stage process: first, analyzing each interview separately to identify emerging codes and categories; second, comparing and contrasting interviews to identify emergent codes and categories; and third, identifying the most significant themes in those categories (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). After completing this analysis process, the researchers used member checking to ensure the credibility of the analysis. The first author conducted a focus group with the participants to validate the analysis, at which she presented the themes identified and a selection of quotes from the interviews, which she discussed with the participants.

FINDINGS

Three central themes about TVET and social reintegration emerged from the data analysis process: TVET institutions as transitional places, the limited new social networks and supports formed, and the structural constraints on social reintegration. We discuss these themes in the following sections.

TVET Institutions as Transitional Places for Psychosocial Recovery, Establishing Normalcy, and Learning to Relate to Others

After defecting from their armed groups, the interviewees lost the benefits they had provided, including status, support networks, social recognition, a sense of collective identity and purpose, and social bonds with people of similar rank. As defectors, they became traitors to their former compatriots, and therefore targets for retaliation. Moving from the jungle or an isolated rural area to a large city was also disorienting. Far from their rural communities and families, they arrived in an urban environment where they did not know where to settle or how to move, behave, dress, or talk. Both male and female ex-combatants described the beginning of their reintegration as a difficult time characterized by economic struggles, anxieties, and fear of being killed or imprisoned. They also felt angry and irritable, distrustful of all people, and ill-prepared to interact with strangers. For them, access to and participation in TVET, particularly the interactions with a support team of ARN mentors, counselors, and teachers, contributed to their psychosocial recovery. One female ex-combatant expressed the importance of that support: "People from the technical team are the only ones who take us out of that blinded world we had, and [help us overcome] that shyness, that fear. For me, the technical team was the most important thing when I left that life; otherwise, I would be locked in a house." Like her, 17 other ex-combatants felt

that the ARN support, psychological services, and education, as a package, were critical to overcoming fears, starting trusting relationships with people from state institutions, and adapting. This process required deconstructing their mistrust of the state, which they had been taught by high-ranking members of their illegal armed groups.

Twelve ex-combatants described ARN mentors as trustworthy people who offered guidance in defining goals, navigating institutional requirements, understanding the benefits of education, and staying motivated. They also described their mentors as being supportive in finding employment opportunities and overcoming personal challenges. All the ex-combatants said counselors helped them address and overcome the fear, anxiety, and distrust that were obstacles to establishing new social links. Psychological interventions helped participants adjust to new social roles and start transforming their mentality from soldier to civilian. As one female ex-combatant noted, "After four and a half years without studying, picking up a pencil again and being among people again was too much. The psychologist had to help me a lot because when I went out, I could not stand people . . . I was too nervous. I heard people and I thought everybody was going to kill me." For ex-combatants like this woman, who had cut her bonds to the outside world for years, re-establishing the capacity to relate to strangers required psychosocial support.

Sixteen interviewees depicted their teachers as kind, close, patient, supportive, and helpful. They had entered the TVET institutions afraid of being judged because of their pasts and wary of being treated impatiently for being poorly educated adults. They instead found respectful teachers who were willing to teach them and treat them well. One male ex-combatant currently in training stated, "Teachers are very tolerant and look for strategies to be heard and to make students learn something. I have not had any teacher who was rude or impolite. All are very good teachers." These interactions allowed the ex-combatants to move from a fighter identity to a student identity, and to gain confidence in their ability to learn. Male ex-combatants valued the fact that teachers treated them equally and fairly and with respect. Female ex-combatants developed strong ties with teachers who gave them the advice and emotional support they needed to persist in the education process, were flexible about homework deadlines when the women had problems, and allowed them to bring their babies to class. These teachers' attitudes enabled students to develop feelings of trust, admiration, and affection.

Male and female ex-combatants also perceived the TVET institution as a transitional place where they could establish a sense of normalcy and learn new norms. For them, reintegration meant a change in mindset—they had to forget the past, adapt to new rules, adopt urban manners, and find their place in society through employment. Attending TVET programs created routines that helped the interviewees occupy their minds and establish a sense of normalcy. One young male ex-combatant, who was studying and working in the garment industry, said:

> [When I am] studying, I do not think of anything because I do not have time . . . I think I have a homework I have to do, I think that on Sunday I have to study, I think on Tuesday I have to come here [the TVET institution], that in the month I have an appointment with the psychologist who sees me. Thousands of things, so you do not feel the temptation, . . . I do not think about silly things such as going back there [to the armed group].

These routines forced the interviewees to familiarize themselves with different places and people, find a new purpose that helped them develop a sense of belonging, and avoid being nostalgic about their former life.

Male and female participants both expressed that, through TVET, they learned to transform the aggressive behavior they had developed while with their armed group. One 30-year-old man explained: "Before [when I felt humiliated], I wanted to kill the person, whoever he was. I have resentment, anger, and I exploded with bad words, as it shouldn't be. Education has given me a way of shaping myself, and to be someone else in life." Participants said that the TVET programs taught them that to succeed in civilian life they had to control their impulses, follow orders, be humble, and work legally. However, the ex-combatants also recognized that adapting to the requirements of the hierarchical social structure was a long-term effort.

The customer-service class was particularly relevant to ex-combatants in developing prosocial behaviors. This class was offered as an elective in a short-term entrepreneurship course of study and was required in some technical programs. It taught ex-combatants about different kinds of personalities and how to deal with them, and how to respond politely and avoid conflict when interacting with clients and others in the workplace and the community. Through this course, they realized that they needed to improve their character, develop their listening capacity, and express themselves more clearly. One 30-year-old woman explained how she was able to apply the customer-service lessons in different social situations: "You need to implement customer service with the clients, but also with family and with other people that you hardly know, like you and me." The customer-service class

helped students develop prosocial dispositions, not only when making commercial transactions but also with family members. They understood that having good relationships with others required a shift in perspective from their own to that of another. They also found that, when practicing the customer-service lessons outside of class, people responded positively, which made the students feel that civilians could develop empathy for them and that they could fit into society.

SEGREGATED SHORT-TERM ENTREPRENEURSHIP COURSES: STRENGTHENING TIES WITH FORMER COMRADES BUT NOT BUILDING NEW SOCIAL NETWORKS

The short-term entrepreneurship courses were only taught to ex-combatants, did not have a prerequisite schooling level, and did not follow a specific sequence. The ex-combatants selected courses according to their interest in the topics. As a result, the classes were comprised of former fighters of diverse ages, genders, time in the reintegration process, previous armed group affiliations, and education levels.

The program design facilitated contact among former comrades and the re-establishment of networks, which helped 13 ex-combatants reintegrate into society. When fighters defected, they broke ties with their armed group; studying with close former comrades in the TVET institution made them feel safe, happy, and in a familiar environment. A female ex-combatant who was in an armed group for 11 years described these strong connections: "I will not change with them [former comrades], because they were practically like my family. Comrades that I had there and came long before or after me and I met in class—ah, what a joy! It was so good to see they left [the armed group]. I will never stop sharing with them, and that will never change." After re-establishing contact, former comrades often worked on their class activities together and established peer–mentor dynamics. Five reported meeting outside classes to have dinner, go to church, or visit each other's homes. This socialization was always linked to civilian activities and created space to talk about their shared past, new lives, and future plans. The networks provided important emotional and even economic support in facing reintegration challenges. Through these interactions, the more advanced students shared information with the newcomers, helped them to understand the processes and expectations, and to develop trust with the ARN staff.

However, friendship with close former comrades coexisted with mistrust toward other classmates who had belonged to different guerrilla groups, or even to different factions of the same group. All the ex-combatants in the training shared an overarching concern for their safety and were skeptical about some classmates' intentions. "You do not know who is who," a phrase repeated often by almost all interviewees, meant that some classmates could appear to be regular students while secretly performing counterintelligence jobs or remaining involved in illegal activities. These fears and suspicions were supported by real events, such as the assassination of one classmate at the entrance of a TVET institution some years earlier. Mistrust and distance were also the result of classmates encouraging others to rejoin armed groups, a situation mentioned by four participants. To protect themselves, the ex-combatants did not exchange phone numbers with unknown classmates, reveal their home address or meet classmates outside the TVET institution, or share details about their lives. These measures hindered their ability to develop new connections and to preserve them after finishing their courses.

Despite the programs' intentions to mix people from different armed groups in the same courses in order to foster mutual understanding and dialogue, some graduates reported that mistrust prevailed. They said that confrontations common in the past were reproduced within the TVET institution. One alumnus described how, "at the beginning, [the institution] was horrible . . . In the bathrooms, people were stabbed. Here, several groups studied together, not only FARC or paramilitary . . . I do not know if teachers believed that because they were here, they were going to like each other, but they are different groups, they have their quarrels, their pending grievances." Despite these episodes of violence, no participant mentioned having received any training on how to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Having many ex-combatants gathered in the same place also made them an easy target for re-recruitment offers from criminal organizations, which could contact students easily outside the TVET institution. One woman who had been a mid-rank commander and was invited to rejoin an armed group explained: "I told him no, I already see a future, I am earning a minimum wage and I am skinny [i.e., hungry], but I can see my daughter every day. I am not going there." Some ex-combatants, both female and male, explained that, despite having low-paid jobs, they had refused attractive economic offers because they had decided to change—they valued peace, being able to raise their children, and the opportunities available to them as civilians, such as having their own business and owning a house.

Short-term courses designed to help people develop self-employment and microenterprises at home did not facilitate their development of new social networks beyond the TVET institution or help them find support within the broader population. The courses instead reinforced the isolation and marginalization the reintegration program aimed to ameliorate, a situation that affected women more than men.

Female ex-combatants put high value on their families and made decisions accordingly. Participants explained that motherhood was forbidden in the guerrilla groups, and women fighters who had escaped a forced abortion had their babies taken away from them. Other women defected when they became pregnant. Thus, eight out of the twelve women interviewees started families after demobilizing, often with former combatants. Some couples had been in a relationship since they were fighters, but divorces were common after they left their armed groups. Female ex-combatants stated that their family was their primary social contact, and their strongest bonds were with their children. Ten of the twelve women interviewed had decided to take short-term entrepreneurship courses because it was convenient to have a business at home and simultaneously take care of their children. However, this meant that the women had to handle domestic chores and child care while also running a business. Staying at home limited their development of social support beyond close family members, as one of the women explained: "I do not leave my house often. I take care of my children [and] their school. I spend my days at home. I only go out if I have to." The women's isolation was the result of many factors, including fear, mistrust of neighbors, the belief that a good and respectable woman should stay at home, unemployment (often while waiting to receive the government microcredit to start their business), and poverty. In some cases, domestic violence worsened their seclusion.

The women's isolation contrasted with the men's situation. All five men taking short-term courses and one graduate socialized and worked outside the home as janitors and construction workers. In their workplaces, they developed relationships of cooperation and trust with their coworkers and supervisors, and they moved around the city, learned new norms and skills, and earned salaries. While women expected the entrepreneurship project to be their sole source of income, men expected the entrepreneurship project to be a side source of income and hired others to manage the businesses while they continued working their jobs. Women and men had access to the same TVET programs and entrepreneurship opportunities, but gender-stereotypical labor divisions and cultural contexts had different effects on their development of new social networks.

Inclusive Technical Programs: Developing New Social Networks without Social Mobility

The ex-combatants who pursued technical programs attended specialized TVET centers. These courses were open to the general population, required a high school diploma to enroll, lasted one year, included an internship period, and had cohort structures. The two women and two men who had completed their technical education at SENA interacted with people from civil society who had different experiences than those of war, higher education levels than the average ex-combatant, and broader social networks. Exposure to these different backgrounds gave them new perspectives and facilitated trust with their classmates. A female ex-combatant graduate of a technical program in business management who had opened her own store said, "I still talk with classmates. Yesterday I met and talked to one. She does not know about my [past] life. [I keep the links] because they are people that I could need to work. I already know her; I know she is respectful, responsible." Participants began relying on their classmates after realizing they were not involved in illegal activities and did not present a risk for them. Those interactions also facilitated network-building.

Each ex-combatant participating in the technical programs was the only demobilized person in their cohort; only the program director and the teacher knew their status. This situation allowed them to hide their pasts, avoid discrimination, and assume new identities. When asked about his relationships with classmates, a male ex-combatant who had finished the technical program in motorcycle mechanics said, "I was normal, we hung out, we played football, we met to do homework." For him, being normal meant behaving like a regular citizen. Having the opportunity to meet, to party, and to talk made him feel part of a group. This interaction with peers outside class contrasts with the restricted interpersonal relationships of students in the short-term courses.

The technical and technological programs offered safer spaces than the short-term courses. None of the four ex-combatants interviewed mentioned receiving proposals from classmates to join armed groups or any threats. However, they were cautious and selective in their interactions with classmates and kept their pasts a secret. One male ex-combatant who had established ties with a classmate in the technical program explained: "There [in the armed group] we had to fight for survival, we had to be together . . . I really knew who we were. By contrast, here I do not know who is who, that's the big difference." By meeting new people, he was stepping outside the group of comrades familiar to him and building new social skills, but trust was incipient.

The technical programs required a six-month internship at a company, which served as a bridge to the job market and helped the ex-combatants understand and adjust to social norms. As one interviewee noted, "[Working in] the company shapes you. As human beings, we are rebels, and we want to do all that we want. However, when you start working in a company you learn that there are norms, rules, schedules, restrictions." Lawful employment reduced the incentive to rebel. Moreover, during their internships, the four students developed new social networks with their coworkers and supervisors. After completing the program, these networks opened doors to job opportunities and helped them find employment, which enabled them to provide for their families, develop self-confidence, and gain a sense of social belonging. However, their employment and living conditions were very fluid. At the time they were interviewed, two ex-combatants who had completed the program were again unemployed and struggling to meet their basic needs.

Access to technical programs helped ex-combatants build new social networks, but because of the high school diploma requirement, only four of the twenty interviewees had enrolled in these programs. Two of these participants believed a technical diploma was not enough to climb up through the country's social stratification. One of these participants expressed her frustration with the training she received: "They should help us to go to the university and not distract us with a technical program . . . What I learned helped me a lot in terms of the work I am doing now, but talking about what will happen in the future, if people have a high school diploma, the program should help them to go to college right away." The program promotes the idea that having a technical diploma, a job, and social networks will allow ex-combatants to advance their careers and have a comfortable life. In practice, however, the opportunities available to ex-combatants were limited, due to high unemployment, low wages, and a lack of information and support after graduation from SENA to help graduates navigate the application process to higher education institutions. These unmet expectations after completing the training created frustration.

WHEN TVET IS NOT ENOUGH:
VIOLENT CONTEXTS AND SOCIAL STIGMA

When ex-combatants moved to Medellín, they settled in low-income neighborhoods controlled by gangs. The organized criminals were the authority, and they controlled illegal and legal markets. One woman said, "Where I live is very dangerous. There, if you have a problem you cannot talk to the police, you

have to talk to 'the boys' [gang members] who supposedly rule the neighborhood. The problem will always be fixed with them, not with the police." The presence of local gangs put ex-combatants at risk of attack or forced recruitment. To protect themselves, they hid their pasts, avoided contact with neighbors, and did not participate in social groups.

Contrary to reintegration policies and programs that expect communities to be more receptive to ex-combatants who go through educational processes (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2014), 13 ex-combatants felt that going through TVET had not helped them gain social acceptance and had not reduced their stigmatization. These ex-combatants believed that, no matter what they did, people would continue to see them as dangerous, unreliable, and violent, despite their belief that their behaviors had changed. One ex-combatant said, "When there were job fairs, I went and took my CV, but one day I felt rejected because right there they said, 'Ah, are you from the ARN? We will call you later.'" They never did call her, and the ex-combatant subsequently decided to become an entrepreneur.

Ex-combatants also perceived social stigma in their daily lives. They overheard conversations on mass transit and listened to media broadcasts in which they were depicted as killers, kidnappers, and terrorists. As one female ex-combatant noted, "Many times traveling in the subway or on the bus, I have heard people giving opinions, talking. They depict us [ex-guerrilla fighters] as the worst, and I say, 'Oh my God, if they knew that we are people like them!'" Three participants expressed their frustration after being rejected by civilians because they felt people did not recognize their efforts to change and were denying them the opportunity to build a new life. However, not all participants thought the stigmatization was undeserved. Four recognized the suffering the armed groups they had belonged to had caused. Others noted that, after ARN's efforts to raise awareness among employers about the positive impact they could generate by giving ex-combatants jobs, the private sector had started to give them some job opportunities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study reveals that, from the perspectives of the ex-combatants we interviewed, access to and participation in TVET creates opportunities for individuals to experience psychosocial recovery and to adapt to society. These ex-combatants' experiences show that different TVET programs have different socialization effects, and that these programs have the potential to enhance, but also to undermine,

the configuration of their new social networks and social bonds. The study also indicates the limitations of TVET in promoting social cohesion within violent and stigmatizing environments.

This study has some limitations. First, the relatively small sample limited the implications that are applicable to policy and practice. It also limited our ability to generalize our findings, even to the specific programs attended and the broader experiences of the participants in Medellín, Colombia. However, the study provides contextualized knowledge of these ex-combatants' lives, their environments, and their limited opportunities for social participation, all of which are critical to understanding the development, implementation, and impact of specific DDR education programs. It also provides insights into how these programs could prepare ex-combatants more effectively to overcome their challenges and acknowledges the limitations of education. Second, the purposive sample is not representative of the broader population of ex-combatants. However, the experiences of demobilized individuals who moved to the city could illustrate the challenges faced by FARC ex-combatants who are currently reintegrating. Third, 19 of the 20 interviewees had demobilized individually, and some aspects of their social reintegration experience may be different from the one ex-combatant who was part of a collective demobilization. Fourth, practical restrictions on accessing the population could have introduced bias into the sample. Only a few of the ex-combatants had finished a TVET program, and the graduates were difficult to reach. ARN staff members may have recommended the most committed participants, and the ex-combatants who were finishing the training could be especially resilient individuals. However, the experiences of the ex-combatants who persisted in the reintegration process provide unique and valuable information on the role education played in their social reintegration.

At the individual level, our analysis found that going through the TVET program and receiving support from a network of reintegrators, counselors, and teachers contributed to the ex-combatants' healing and their ability to build trust with new people, transformed their mindsets and behaviors, and eased their adaptation to civilian and urban life. This finding is consistent with reintegration policies that recognize the importance of holistic assistance to facilitate reincorporation (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2006), and with empirical studies that have shown that education institutions can be protective places that facilitate ex-combatants' psychosocial adjustment, and that psychosocial support and individual factors, such as a desire to have a different life, can help youth exposed to violence overcome the challenges of reintegration and resume a positive life trajectory (Zuilkowski et al. 2016).

At the programmatic level, our analysis of the ex-combatants' experiences attending different TVET institutions revealed that entrepreneurship education programs in which only ex-combatants participated actually reinforced their social exclusion instead of facilitating their ability to establish new social networks. In contrast, technical programs with diverse student populations encouraged the ex-combatants to develop new social bonds and gave them feelings of social belonging. These findings are consistent with policymakers' and scholars' calls to reduce segregated education in divided societies as a way to address mistrust and increase social cohesion (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Loader et al. 2018).

In the DDR literature, the effects of former armed group members re-establishing ties is debated. While some policies warn against the risk of preserving hierarchical structures and ties among ex-combatants, which could increase the risk of recidivism (UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2006), empirical research has shown that bonds developed during war could in fact contribute to social rehabilitation (De Vries and Wiegink 2011). This study revealed that re-establishing ties with former close comrades was constructive for the ex-combatants we interviewed, as it provided support and collaboration in their transition to civilian life. We also found that, when they perceived that their former comrades wanted them to re-engage in illegal activities, they cut ties. Their decision to keep old social bonds only when they helped them adapt to civilian life was related to their desire to change. This coincides with Nussio's (2018) study, which demonstrates that, as they get older, ex-combatants become less attracted to violence and more interested in a calm family life. In Colombia, ex-combatants are generally portrayed as a security threat, but their actual participation in violent activities is negligible relative to the country's overall criminal dynamics.

In contrast to contact theory, which posits that interaction among former enemies can contribute to conflict transformation (International Labour Organization et al. 2016), this study showed that putting ex-combatants from different armed groups within the same institution did not foster respect, mutual understanding, or dialogue, and that it in fact reproduced old social divisions and led to violence. Studies have warned that contact alone is insufficient when seeking to promote reconciliation. This is because reconciliation requires addressing past truths, present tensions, and setting up systems for transitional justice, forgiveness, and psychosocial healing (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017). Others have argued that improving the ability of former enemies to coexist peacefully at education institutions requires prolonged social contact, curricula and pedagogies that foster deep engagement, and organized cooperation to achieve common goals

(Bekerman 2016). SENA teachers did not receive training on how to implement such strategies, or on how to work with ex-combatants. The only criterion for their hiring was having specific content knowledge for the course.

Male and female ex-combatants received the same entrepreneurship training, but the socialization effects were different. For men, entrepreneurship was an opportunity to increase their portfolio of work without restricting their bonds with the outside world. For women, the primary goal was to earn an income while caring for their children. This kept them isolated at home, prevented them from developing social networks that could help them feel included in their new communities, did not provide the social protection of a formal job, and they constantly faced the psychological and economic toll of job insecurity. As Annan and Brier (2010) argue, female ex-combatants experience multiple levels of gender-based violence and inequality after war. More studies are needed to understand the varied effects TVET interventions have on women and men, and the programs should introduce context-specific gender analysis to determine whether women require a different kind of assistance and how to reach them most effectively (Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon 2005).

Contrasting the experiences of ex-combatants who participated in short-term versus technical programs, we found that the technical programs helped ex-combatants build new identities, relate to other civilians, and transition smoothly into the job market. The factors that facilitated this socialization were exposure to civilians, company internships, and being able to "play double" (McFee 2016)—that is, having two different identities that they use according to their needs. Their demobilized identity enables them to access education, while the student identity causes them to hide their past to avoid social stigma. Despite the technical programs' ability to facilitate the establishment of new social networks, reconciliation did not occur within the TVET institution because people from the general population did not know they were interacting with former fighters and therefore did not have the opportunity to question the negative perceptions they may have had about ex-combatants.

At the macro level, this analysis reveals that, due to the violent environments in which ex-combatants live and their perceptions of being socially stigmatized, TVET programs alone cannot overcome their limited ability to establish social interactions. To protect themselves in these dangerous communities, ex-combatants avoid interacting with strangers, do not participate in community

organizations, and live in anonymity; these findings align with previous research (Nussio 2011). This study reveals that ex-combatants in general feel that access to TVET programs did not alter the civilian population's belief that they were dangerous and unreliable. TVET programs do not address the challenge of social reintegration, which overlooks their social contexts and leaves ex-combatants fully responsible for their own social reintegration (King 2018). TVET programs need to focus not only on ex-combatants but on the community frameworks that support and help to perpetuate the occurrence of violence (Porto, Parsons, and Alden 2007).

These findings have several implications. First, more research must be done to identify the needs, vulnerabilities, capacities, and opportunities of male and female ex-combatants in specific cultural contexts. Incorporating ex-combatants' perceptions of their reintegration experiences is essential to improving interventions. Second, this study shows the limited ability of programs focused on individual economic development to overcome social stigma and contribute to social cohesion. Following Powell and McGrath's (2014) suggestion, we argue that, beyond employability and developing skills that are useful in production processes, TVET programs to reintegrate ex-combatants should emphasize social justice and human rights, including the need for social inclusion and safety. Third, segregated TVET institutions' limitations in helping ex-combatants develop new social bonds support scholarship that states the need to implement educational programs that target both ex-combatants and the broader communities, and to use education institutions to integrate various groups, such as artistic, sports, and women's groups. Expanding the TVET curriculum to include content and activities aimed at increasing cooperation between ex-combatants and their communities could help diversify the ex-combatants' social networks, reduce prejudice in the community, encourage the development of mutual trust, and transform mentalities that perpetuate violence.

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