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The process of Disarmament-
Demobilization-Reintegration (DDR)
in Mali: a journey full of pitfalls

Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman
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ANNE SAVEY - MARC-ANDRÉ BOISVERT

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INTRODUCTION

The process of DDR, the central provision of the peace agreement, has been signed in May and June 2015 between the Mali Government and the two signatory coalitions.¹ It aims to disarm the armed groups, by integrating the ex-fighters into the official Malian security and defense forces or by facilitating their return to civilian life.

While the DDR was due to start 60 days after the signing of the Agreement, namely in September 2015, it is three years later that it effectively begins, since the "launching" ceremony only took place on November 6th of 2018.

Moreover, the start has been eventful, since the ex-fighters delayed its effective commencement² by several hours, demanding additional guarantees.

This episode has once again illustrated the repeated blockages of the DDR process in Mali, which in fact begins without a clear timetable for the next steps.

The present text aims to assess an overview on the DDR process in Mali, in order to understand the reasons of its accumulated delays and to introduce the obstacles that remain to be overcome.

¹ The agreement, signed in 2015 between the government, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), and the Platform of Movements on June 14, 2014 in Algiers (Plateforme), aims to the reconciliation and the construction of a sustainable peace to put a definitive end to the conflict that began in 2012 in northern Mali. It provides reform and reconciliation measures in four areas: Politico-institutional; Defense and Security; Socio-economic development; Justice, Reconciliation and humanitarian issues. In addition to the DDR process, the Agreement, concerning the area of Defense and Security, includes a "commitment [of the parties] to combat terrorism", the implementation of an inclusive security sector reform (SSR) and the creation of a police force, three aspects related to DDR and largely left fallow.

² Baba Hamed, "Au Lancement officiel du programme DDR, les ex-rebelles posent leurs conditions, 7 Novembre 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/659488/politique/mali-au-lancement-officiel-du-programme-ddr-les-ex-rebelles-posent-leurs-conditions/>.

I – DDR in the peace process

The DDR issue has come up since the beginning of the peace negotiations. The preliminary Agreements of Ouagadougou in 2013³ do mention the DDR, but they forget to define its terms and conditions, only announcing later negotiations on the subject. The Algiers Peace agreement of 2015⁴ introduces measures in view of a real disarmament and redeployment of the Forces of Defense and Security (FDS) in north Mali, offering a calendar and a list of measures. Between 2015 and 2018, while some advancement had been recorded in the preparation of the support structures and the implementation of the DDR, central questions were still neglected and the evolving situation on the ground posed new challenges.

2 – Structure establishment and confidence-building measures

Although the DDR operations did not start until 2018, the structures, however, have been ready for a long time. The National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) has been established: appointment of a national coordinator supported by vice-coordinators from armed movements, establishment of regional structures and offices⁵, and the appointment and training of staff, along with the elaboration of the chosen strategy. Eight cantonment sites were built in the northern regions. At the same time, financial partners mobilized US\$ 21 million through a Trust Fund⁶, administered by the MINUSMA.

Simultaneously, the "confidence-building measures" foreseen in the Agreement, as preconditions for DDR, were negotiated between the parties with the support of the Mediation and International Forces deployed in Mali within the AMC (Agreement monitoring committee) framework, the TSC (Technical Safety Commission) and in the field.

³ See the text "Accords de Ouagadougou" : <https://maliactu.net/accords-de-ouagadougou-texte-integral/>

⁴ See the text "Accords d'Alger" : <https://maliactu.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ACCORD-POUR-LA-PAIX-ET-DE-RECONCILIATION-AU-MALI-1.pdf>

⁵ Five offices were planned at the beginning: Gao, Menaka, Kidal, Timbuktu and Taoudennit. As new conflicts emerge in central Mali, an office has been added for the Mopti region.

⁶ About US\$ 21 million were allocated on the basis of about 10,000 participants, including nearly US\$ 8 million for the construction of the eight cantonment sites in the north of the country in January 2018. According to MINUSMA, the remaining funds must be used to cover the costs of taking care of the fighters (health, food) as well as their demobilization fee (approximately US\$ 210 per demobilized fighter).

The main confidence-building measure⁷ is the establishment of joint patrols between the armed groups and the Malian armed forces, all under the unified command of the Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC), whose responsibility is to restore confidence between the parties, and to secure the sites dedicated to DDR, without going through disarmament⁸. After an agreement between the parties in July 2016 on the conditions of implementation and deployment of the MOC in the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, including in particular the modalities of an "accelerated DDR" for ex-combatants who will be integrated into the MOC battalions, the first MOC was established in January 2017 in Gao. The projected number (600 men) is expanded to include "cooperative" members of non-signatory groups in addition to signatory groups and government forces⁹. The attack that took place on, January 18, 2017¹⁰ against the camp of the MOC of Gao dealt a heavy blow to its deployment and to its operating. The event brought up reconsideration of the essential security measures. Little reflections had been previously carried out on the vulnerability of the MOC to the risk of attacks¹¹. The MOCs of Timbuktu and Kidal were finally established in May 2018, after many rounds of negotiations; however, they are not very operational and are in fact a prime target for attacks¹².

⁷ These confidence-building measures, based on the 2015 criteria, focus on the situation in the north. The situation in the center was not considered at the time. Confidence-building measures also include the creation of mixed observation and verification patrols (EMOV) and joint patrols outside the MOC framework.

⁸ In each of the three MOCs, quotas will be allocated to each of the armed groups and representatives of the FAMAs. Non-signatory armed groups will also be included, with smaller quotas.

⁹ These groups are made of different elements that broke with a signatory group or took up arms after signing the agreement. They are considered as "cooperative", although their relationship to the Peace Agreement varies, depending on the time period, from hostility to a desire for inclusion. A grouping of some of these groups, the Understanding Movements Coordination (UMC), was subsequently created.

¹⁰ Gaëlle Laleix, "One year after the Gao attack, the OMC is struggling to recover" 18 January 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180118-mali-an-apres-attaque-gao-moc-peine-relever-al-mourabitoune>

¹¹ The issue of securing has also proved to be complicated on the other two sites. In Timbuktu, MOC battalions undergo repeated attacks. In Kidal, the security of the MOC depends on MINUSMA, while its members do not leave the camp.

¹² In the three cities where MOCs are deployed in 2018, only a few MOC members are active. In Gao, they conduct few patrols in the city, and the contingents have been accused of cars theft, arms theft and violence. In Timbuktu, several terrorist attacks and killings of MOC members took place. In Kidal, the elements are not yet complete and are not patrolling at the moment.

3 – The labored start of the process

The agreement on the modalities of deployment and operationalization of the MOC stipulates that armed groups must contribute in heavy weapons but they still refuse to do so¹³; the issue of care for ex-combatants (living expenses, medical expenses, uniforms, etc.) that needed to be resolved through the accelerated DDR and accelerated integration into the FAMA (Mali armed forces) of ex-combatants who are members of the MOC has not been subject to any improvement between July 2016 and March 2018. This situation illustrates the delays that have accumulated due to unfulfilled commitments or failure to enforce formalized advances on paper.

The associated deadlines also have a cost. A year and a half of delay for the deployment of the MOCs leads to other delays and blockades: a fundraising appeal had been made necessary while the MOCs went on strike in January 2018 because of the decrease in their allocations following the exhaustion of the resources¹⁴.

4 – 2018: the relaunch of the process

A roadmap signed in March 2018, after two months of negotiations between the government, the CMA [Coordination of Azawad Movements] and the Platform [Mali National Platform], sets a new two steps timetable for actions related to the peace process: actions that must be adopted or carried out before the presidential elections, and those to be implemented after the elections. This roadmap marks a relaunch of the process, while the signatory parties prepare the presidential elections and face multiple international pressures (renewal of the mandate of the Minusma, appointment of an independent observer, establishment of a UN sanctions regime, etc). These two factors call for progress, particularly on the operationalization of the MOCs, the progress of the DDR process, and the issue of securing the vote in certain northern areas by armed groups.

The roadmap projected the full deployment of the MOCs in Timbuktu and Kidal for March 2018, the registration of ex-combatants for DDR for April 2018¹⁵ and the

¹³ The CMA and the Platform argue that all heavy weapons are the personal property of combatants, including abandoned vehicles and weapons by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA). This point is still unresolved.

¹⁴ The government pledged to cover all subsistence costs for MOC members in January 2018, when donors funding had to stop. The government refused, however, to pay all the necessary sums, so, the members of the MOC had their monthly premium cut in half. A solution was finally found, financed by the donors.

¹⁵ On 14 September, the NCDDR announced that it had received and processed all the registers of combatants from the armed groups.

regrouping of ex-combatants for accelerated DDR for August 2018. None of these deadlines were met: the deployment of MOCs was effective in May, the registration of ex-combatants in September and the regrouping of ex-combatants for accelerated DDR in November. But consultations are revived and progress on certain aspects has been recorded. As of March 2018, the NCDDR multiplies the handing over of registers to the armed groups. Faced with problems in the field, members of the NCDDR, including its president, Zahabi Ould Sidi Mohamed, visit the regions to remove barriers and build effective confidence on the spot. At this time, no quota is determined for armed groups, leaving a blur on the absorption capacity for integration or demobilization.

While a World Bank study estimated that about 10,000 fighters should be disarmed, the number of registered fighters reaches 32,000¹⁶. This inflation is partly related to the NCDDR's appeasement strategy. Non-signatory groups and at least one unarmed group, Force G¹⁷, have received registers. The NCDDR has thus not ruled so far on the qualifications needed to be recognized as a fighter, accepting the registration of combatants without the verification of weapons.

On November 6th, the first stage of DDR is launched through the "accelerated DDR". This phase aims for the demobilization of 1,500 ex-combatants of the MOC, the profiling of the candidates and the registration of their weapons before their integration and provision of the MOC in accordance with the modalities established in June 2016. At the end of the accelerated DDR, the units will remain under the joint command of the MOC, but will be supported under the same conditions as FAMA members. It is uncertain if the MOC will be able to fulfill one of its initial vocations, to secure the DDR cantonment sites. In Gao, the accelerated DDR ended on November 26 with 515 registered, of which only 4 ex-combatants chose to return to civil life. The process is still ongoing in Timbuktu and Kidal.

For the moment, there is no scheduled date to start what should be the next step: calling back the "deserters" of the FAMAs. The same applies on registered DDR applicants.

¹⁶ See the World Bank Study: <http://projects.worldbank.org/P157233?lang=en>

¹⁷ Force G is an alliance of three civil society organizations that bring together youth from Gao to patrol their communities.

5 – The origins of the delays: the problems posed by the implementation of DDR

Delays in DDR are linked to the peace process and lack of concrete progress. At each stage of DDR, lack of trust between the parties leads to delays. The government is putting pressure on DDR, but constantly going back on its commitments, specifically concerning the handling of the MOC, and also delaying institutional reforms, thus undermining the trust of the signatories. For their part, the armed movements are demanding more guarantees on decentralization and northern development in return for their participation in advancing the security and confidence-building measures, using thus DDR as a bargaining chip and keeping most of the loyal fighters near them.

The deterioration of the situation on the ground has created obstacles in the way of the establishment of confidence-building measures and the DDR process. On the ground, sporadic fights between CMA and the Platform have fueled the slowness of the process and the reluctance of the groups¹⁸.

Several delays are due to the constant renegotiation of the process, especially due to the proliferation of armed groups. The presence, within DDR, of groups that do not participate in the MOC and do not recognize themselves as a part of the Platform or the AMC, create a two-tier process, in which DDR becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve lasting peace. In March 2018, these armed groups were summoned to register their members under one of the two coalitions of the signatory movements. They refused this forced affiliation, leaving doubt over their integration into a process that has been defined according to the logic of a conflict which has evolved since then, especially regarding the issue of quotas that will be designated.

The proliferation of terrorist attacks against the Malian State representatives and international forces also creates significant delays, since all have become potential targets. Safety standards for built-up cantonment sites have become obsolete regarding the new threats, resulting in additional costs and work. The whole strategy of the DDR, including the securing of the cantonment sites by the MOC therefore had to be reconsidered.

¹⁸ Fights took place in the regions of Kidal and Gao in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Meetings in Anéfis (the first in October 2015, then a second one in October 2017) allowed the cessation of hostilities, despite the questioning of the dimensions and the "gray areas" of the peace process.

6 – The challenges to come

Accelerated DDR was the easy part of the process, as it involved fighters already identified and who, for a long time, had the certainty of a possible integration.

The real challenges are actually starting now.

First, the nearly 32,000 people who, because their names appear in a register, are already included in the process, must be managed¹⁹. If the issue has been addressed by the different partners, for now, no one knows how to identify the "real" fighters. In Gao or Sévaré, several young people have already paid between 5,000 and 50,000 FCFA to be integrated into groups. Whether their registration is fraudulent or an attempt to secure their economic future, the selection process, even before joining DDR activities, will be unsatisfactory to some, despite the fact that the selection criteria had been established and made public (membership of a combatant unit of a signatory movement, experience, age limit of grades, not under judicial investigation).

Secondly, an important challenge that must be addressed is the allocation of ranks and related benefits, one of the major failures of the 1996 and 2006 DDR programs in Mali. At that time, the designation of the rank of the integrated persons had been made without transparency and in a non-inclusive way: the decisions had been taken internally and with rules judged unreliable not only for the ex-combatants, but also for their new colleagues of the armed forces. Subsequently, the integrated fighters have denounced several times discrimination in terms of career progression. The frustrations related to the career plan, including the feeling of those integrated as being marginalized, left a bitter feeling, causing the desertion of many of them during the events of 2012. These deserters, who fought with armed groups claim arrears in salary, rank award, and retirement privileges. Today, the modalities for awarding the rank of new ex-combatants remain unclear. Amongst the registered, several ex-combatants declared a rank, without this being confirmed by the armed groups or by a proven combat experience, creating thus an issue that was contentious in the MOC.

Another challenge remains the absorptive capacity of security forces. The FAMAs have begun a process of reflection, but we still do not know how the other bodies (gendarmerie, water and forest protection, customs, etc.) can include ex-combatants. The absence of defined quotas makes the issue even more complex²⁰. Integration has its

¹⁹ For the 32,000 combatants, the CNDDR listed, as of 18 September 2018: 5,943 semi-automatic pistols, 3,736 rifles, 990 machine guns, 473 pistols, 225 rockets, 490 heavy weapons, 6 122.4 mm missiles, 39 IEDs, 3,177 grenades, 201 shells, 85,790 small caliber ammunition.

²⁰ In most DDR programs, quotas are pre-established to estimate the integration capacity of the security forces. For Mali, there is none at the moment, whereas the Peace Agreement, in its article 20, simply mentions that the integration will be "on a rolling quarterly basis".

cost and it is difficult at the moment for each of these institutions to prepare themselves without having a specific number. However, beyond the budget issues, it is also necessary that the various security corps prepare a strategy to avoid the failures of the 90s. The National Pact of 1992, which led to the Flame of Peace, had denounced the politics where those integrated remained in special units dedicated to the security of the North, therefore undermining the cohesion of the integrated. Receiving institutions need to be better prepared to avoid the frustrations of the past and the inevitable tensions between former enemies. An adequate reform strategy for the security sector is needed to strengthen the cohesiveness of the combatants together, as well as clear procedures and military justice for greater transparency in the management of conflicts between future comrades.

Apart from these institutional issues, it is essential to tackle the marginalization of the ex-combatants. The northerners must find their place in a reform of the security sector (RSS), just as they need to find it in the new territorial police forces. Although there are still few northerners who are admitted to the Katiikoro Military Prytaneum, the Koulikoro School of Under-officers or the Joint Military School, only a positive discrimination policy will allow genuine integration. Similarly, the support of the demobilized fighters must continue in order to avoid, as in the experience of the 90s, the failure of their economic reintegration, leading them to migrate or to take up their arms again.

Finally, several questions remain within the Malian FDS. While trainings and partnerships continue to strengthen, there is still a crisis of confidence within the ranks, linked to the failures of the North and the internal conflicts that resulted from the coup in 2012. The tensions are still very present when it comes to the reintegration of deserters. These newly built institutions remain fragile: the success of DDR will also depend on the ability of security forces to regain momentum.