

LESSONS LEARNED EXERCISE ON DDR IN SOMALIA

Final Report Key Takeaways



ACRONYMS

CBR	Community Based Reintegration
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
CVR	Community Violence Reduction
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DDRR	Disengagement, Disassociation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
DPO	Department of Peace Operations
DRP	Defectors Rehabilitation Programme
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FMS	Federal Member State of Somalia
IDDRS	Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration Standards
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LLE	Lessons Learning Exercise
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MoIS	Ministry of Internal Security
NISA	National Intelligence and Security Agency
ONS	Office of National Security
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
OROLSI	Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions
P/CVE	Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
Tubsan	Tubsan National Centre for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
UNTMIS	United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia

CONTENTS

1 Executive Summary	4
2 Introduction	7
3 Data Collection	8
4 DDR Context	8
5 Key Findings	10
5.1 Implementation and programming	10
5.2 Strategic and technical support	16
6 DDR Needs and the UN role in Somalia post transition	19
7 Recommendations	20



Baidoa's center of hope for misled youth under construction. UN Photo / Mahamud Hassan

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and since 2024 the United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS) have held an explicit remit to support the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), and related approaches as part of its broader mandate to support the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) by providing strategic policy advice on peacebuilding and state-building. As part of the UN system, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has rolled out disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation (DDRR) programming to specifically provide rehabilitation and reintegration support for disengaged combatants and associates, in support of the National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants.

This report describes key lessons that have been developed regarding good practices in implementation. This lessons report is part of the UN approach and process to use this transition point to solidify operational and strategic learnings that have been developed across DDR and other forms of peacebuilding support.

Somalia has proved to be a complicated context and as such has provided the UN system with lessons on the implementation of good practice approaches in contexts of high fragility and ongoing non-international armed conflict. The delivery of DDR support in Somalia has taken place in a uniquely complex operating environment, marked by ongoing non-international armed conflict, insecurity, and highly constrained state capacity. Within this context, the UN's engagement was shaped not only by its mandate and comparative advantages, but also by the inherent limitations faced in coordinating and delivering support under such conditions. The FGS has primarily considered DDR as part of its military strategy to degrade Al-Shabaab, with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration, still, a more comprehensive approach to support peacebuilding is necessary. Government political engagement and buy-in are necessary, and several of the lessons highlight recommendations to strengthen this aspect.

Lessons Learned

1. National political and operational ownership is necessary

For DDR and related approaches to be effective, Somali political leadership and national institutions must both commit strategically and invest operationally. Lessons from Somalia confirm that DDR is inherently political and cannot succeed as a purely technical intervention. UN technical and policy advice had limited influence in the absence of strong FGS political will, clear national strategy, and legal frameworks. At the same time, sustainability requires Somali authorities to allocate national resources to fund DDR operations rather than relying solely on international partners. Balancing political engagement with operational investment, underpinned by transparency and accountability, is therefore essential for DDR processes to deliver durable outcomes.

2. Balancing ownership with sharing of information

Local ownership must be balanced with strengthened partnerships. While the Somali Government owns all stages of the process, the limited information the UN and international actors had regarding key aspects of the process contributed to a loss of donor confidence.

3. Livelihood support

To be consistently effective, livelihood support within DDR and related approaches needs to be grounded in an assessment of social dynamics and economic opportunities at a community level as well as individual capacities and expectations.¹ Tailoring Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to community-level opportunities will enable reintegration programmes to be designed and implemented flexibly, and remain useful to former associates during reintegration.

4. Mental Health and Psychosocial support

Psychosocial support is a fundamental aspect of rehabilitation and reintegration and should be at the core of UN efforts to support these aspects of DDR and related approaches.

5. Gender and youth considerations

The integration and focus on both gender and children in DDR approaches is essential for the process and should be maintained. Women are likely to be a marginalised group in most contexts, and likely to be de-prioritised by government partners, making the UN role in supporting them critical.

6. Centre-based and non-residential approaches

Somalia's experience shows that sustainable reintegration depends on extending formal pathways to include community engagement. Centre-based rehabilitation provides structured support, ease of access and credibility with security actors, but has proved resource-intensive and difficult to scale, while not the only option to formalise the DDR process.² At the same time, clan and family networks remain indispensable in encouraging defections and enabling reintegration, but they cannot substitute for structured, legally anchored DDR processes. Thus, centre-based solutions may not necessarily be the default pathway, especially in contexts where the partner state cannot fund them and DDR/DDRR models that are non-residential, legally anchored,

¹ The assessment should also take climate change into consideration, in a context of heightened competition over depleted natural resources, and farmers-herders' tensions.

² United Nations, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) & Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Organizations (AGDTO): Whitepaper", p.6-7.

and with a community-based approach, offer a scalable, yet formalised, alternative to this approach.

7. Lack of shared conceptual understanding of DDR

The lack of a shared understanding of the New UN Approach to DDR resulted in lost potential for the use and impact of DDR-related tools and approaches as a means to address the root causes of conflict and support sustainable peace.

8. A comprehensive national DDR strategy, legal framework, and coordination are essential

The need for a more coherent national DDR strategy and clear legal framework has limited donor engagement, hindered funding, and constrained the UN's ability to provide coordinated and targeted support. At the same time, fragmented ministerial responsibilities led to siloed approaches and weak alignment between strategy, policy, and programmes. A whole-of-government DDR strategy – anchored in political leadership, legal frameworks, and formal joint UN–government review mechanisms – is critical to build coherence, strengthen coordination across institutions, and provide donors and partners with confidence in supporting Somali-led DDR.

9. Strengthening social cohesion

While there are no substitutes for a comprehensive DDR process, structured support to rehabilitation and reintegration can play a critical role in strengthening social cohesion and community trust in post-conflict contexts. In Somalia, DDR efforts that prioritise social reintegration will benefit from more and earlier involvement from non-security FGS ministries. They may include community violence reduction (CVR) and other DDR-related tools and approaches.

10. Climate change

Programming should take into account the influence of climate-related shocks such as floods, droughts, displacements, and food insecurity on both recruitment into and disengagement from armed groups. Integrating climate and environmental analysis into DDR design may help ensure that reintegration efforts are more sustainable and responsive to the lived realities of affected communities.



Female disengaged combatant practices her tailoring skills at a transition centre in Baidoa, Somalia, on November 3, 2015. Former disengaged fighters are being rehabilitated and undergoing a series of vocational training skills. UN Photo / Abdi Dagane

2 INTRODUCTION

Reintegration support was delivered through safe spaces operated by civil society organizations (CSOs), the development of processes for DDR, and support to the policy development and functions of the ministries tasked with the responsibility for DDR: firstly the National Defectors Rehabilitation Programme (DRP)³ under the Federal Ministry of Internal Security (MoIS), and currently the Tubsan National Centre for P/CVE (Tubsan) within the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).

With DDR functions transitioning from UNTMIS to the FGS and UNCT by 31 October 2025 and the experience of IOM in Somalia, UNTMIS, the Department of Peace Operations (DPO)'s Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) and IOM are

³ Initially named the National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants in Somalia.

collaborating to learn from their DDR support. The review examined the Somali National DRP from 2013 to 2025, focusing on various stakeholders, UNTMIS/UNSOM support.

3 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for the lessons process involved two primary sources of information, a comprehensive review of documentation related to the target projects, and then validation and elaboration of this evidence base through targeted interviews with key informants.

The primary interview data collection was done during a one-week field mission to Somalia. Data was collected in Mogadishu, supplemented with interviews with key informants globally, in Geneva, Nairobi and in FMS of Somalia. Both remote and in-person interviews with key stakeholders included UNSOM/UNTMIS, IOM, UNICEF, donors, CSOs, Accept International, independent researchers, and various representatives from the Somali government including the Tubsan Centre, MoIS, ONS, and the NISA.

4 DDR CONTEXT

In response to defections from Al-Shabaab in Somalia, the FGS and UN partners developed the “National Programme on the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants”, called the National Defectors Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) in 2012. The DRP was managed by the MoIS /DRP Secretariat from 2012 until 2024, and aimed to rehabilitate and reintegrate identified low-risk Al-Shabaab defectors into communities. In January 2024, responsibility for the National Programme transferred to the Tubsan National Centre for P/CVE (referred to as Tubsan), under the OPM.

The National Defector Rehabilitation Programme was comprised of the following five pillars:

- Outreach: This involves communications campaigns designed to encourage exits from Al-Shabaab by targeting group members and associates either directly or through their personal contacts.
- Reception: This covers how disengaging Al-Shabaab members and associates should be treated by the security and other agencies that receive them, i.e., ensuring human rights compliance, suitable processing, and so on.
- Screening: The third phase involves screening former Al-Shabaab members and associates, with only those deemed to be ‘low risk’ (as described in more detail below) being eligible for the subsequent two phases.
- Rehabilitation: The rehabilitation services provided for ‘low risk’ former Al-Shabaab members and associates, with these including technical and vocational training, livelihoods assistance, psychosocial support, basic literacy and numeracy training, and basic, civics and religious education.

- Reintegration: The final stage addresses the reintegration of these former members and associates, focusing on the beneficiaries and the communities into which they return.

Somalia's DDR intervention was designed to support long-term stability by reintegrating former combatants into civilian society and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict. The DRP explicitly targeted socio-economic reintegration and aimed to mitigate grievances that often fuel extremist recruitment.⁴ The 2016 revised DRP detailed a national approach to address these challenges holistically, focusing on tailored reintegration packages that combined economic support with community reconciliation efforts.⁵

DDR in Somalia was considered an example of 3rd generation DDR in the context of an ongoing non-international armed conflict and counter violent extremist operations.⁶ UN DDR policies and practices have shifted significantly over time, moving away from a focus on post-conflict scenarios and comprehensive peace agreements toward a more expansive approach that spans along the entire peace continuum. This evolution is captured in the updated Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), introduced in 2019, which include a range of new "DDR-related tools". These tools cover areas such as "pre-DDR, transitional weapons and ammunition management (WAM), CVR, initiatives to prevent individuals from joining armed groups designated as terrorist organizations, DDR support to mediation, and DDR support to transitional security arrangements",⁷ and programmes for those leaving armed groups labelled and/or designated as terrorist organizations by specific states.⁸

A major complication for DDR in Somalia has been the lack of a legal framework under which it can be conducted. Somalia's legal code remained based on its 1962 penal code, making compliance with international human rights standards complex.⁹ The legal framework under which the DDR should have been implemented, was not passed into legislation. The agreement between the Somali Government and international donors for the low-risk defectors programme was not approved by parliament. More commonly, amnesty declarations and peace processes occurred through informal frameworks or ad-hoc declarations, and did not have a formal structure describing accountability or systems of governance.¹⁰

Efforts to address the conflict dynamics in Somalia have also had to contend with increased conflict drivers like climate change, which exacerbate the current conflict dynamics.¹¹ Climate change has contributed to an increasing lack of essential resources for communities like water and fertile land, which has increased the displacement of people and impacted on economic livelihoods.

⁴ Somalia - Socio-Economic Reintegration of Ex-Combatants and Youth at Risk Project APRV.

⁵ Somali DDR National Programme (Revised), 2016.

⁶ Altier, "Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: Lessons from over 30 years of DDR, 2021.

⁷ More details can be found in the definition of DDR-related tools appears in the UN Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), IDDRS module 2.10.

⁸ Al-Shabaab has been designated as a terrorist organization by many entities including the USA, the UK and the EU.

⁹ Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Punishment: Somalia Case Study", 2018.

¹⁰ For a detailed case study on matters of disengagement and transitional justice in Somalia, see Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Punishment: Somalia Case Study", 2018.

¹¹ Ahmed et al, "The Nexus of Climate Change, Food Insecurity, and Conflict in Somalia", 2024.



Former disengaged combatants take lessons at a transition centre in Baidoa, Somalia, on November 3, 2015. Former disengaged fighters are being rehabilitate and undergoing a series of vocational training skills. UN Photo / Abdi Dagane

5 KEY FINDINGS

The findings section is structured around two conceptual levels of analysis. Firstly, it addresses key lessons that have been developed regarding good practices in implementation and programming. These cover key programme aspects such as how to ensure a high level of national ownership and investment into DDR, the management of long-term support, and a number of key lessons regarding better outcomes for the individuals and communities that are involved in and benefit from DDR.

The second level of analysis of findings is at the level of strategic and technical support. This covers the divergent expectations regarding what DDR was attempting to achieve in Somalia, national political ownership and strategic alignment and coordination efforts.

5.1 Implementation and programming

5.1.1 National Ownership Strengthens DDR Implementation

The work of the UN in Somalia speaks to the importance and complexity of building a strong level of national ownership into programmes from the start. The government centres supported by IOM outside of Mogadishu pursued local ownership operationally,

aiming to secure tangible local government investment into the centres. By contrast, the Serendi rehabilitation centre in Mogadishu sought to foster local ownership by directly funding and supporting the DRP – the national government body responsible for managing the centre - due to the limited budgetary allocation from the FGS. The Serendi centre was entirely funded by the programme and employed significantly more staff, driving up running costs.¹²

While both approaches clearly considered and attempted to build local ownership over the rehabilitation centres and process, the more operational approach appears to have been more successful in the Somalia context. Avoiding paying for FMS staff resulted in greater levels of local ownership and a more consistent relationship with the Somali state in managing the centre and programme.¹³ The programme did provide government staff with capacity development, including finance and monitoring training, which was highly valued. While the centres remained beyond what Somali resources could sustain independently, their per-person operating costs remained lower than those of the Serendi centre.

***Lesson 1:** For DDR and related approaches to be effective, Somali political leadership and national institutions must both commit strategically and invest operationally. Lessons from Somalia confirm that DDR is inherently political and cannot succeed as a purely technical intervention. UN technical and policy advice had limited influence in the absence of strong FGS political will, clear national strategy, and legal frameworks. At the same time, sustainability requires Somali authorities to allocate national resources to fund DDR operations rather than relying solely on international partners. Balancing political engagement with operational investment, underpinned by transparency and accountability, is therefore essential for DDR processes to deliver durable outcomes.*

The Screening Process

On the other hand, national ownership of the screening process was total, and exclusive. In terms of screening, what is seen as best practice is the combination of three processes that serve a combined objective of justice, security and reintegration: i) an assessment of the extent to which a given individual has committed reprehensible acts, if charges are pending, if a judicial process is needed to establish one's responsibility for previous wrongdoings, if transitional justice approaches may be warranted in a given environment, if alternatives to prosecution exist, if jail time is to be served; ii) a forward-looking individual risk assessment, based on clear evidence of past crimes, of the extent to which a given individual may present a risk to others or may be at risk him/herself, and iii) an individual needs assessment that feeds into engagement with rehabilitation interventions and is meant to support successful reintegration down the line.

¹² Stakeholder interviews, Mogadishu and online, 2025.

¹³ To a certain extent this was not a planned effect, but resulted from a focus on Mogadishu based capacity in the FGS.

Of the three processes, the UN is only involved in the third. The first two processes are the prerogative of national authorities. The UN can provide advice as to their compliance with international counter-terrorism law, human rights law and international humanitarian law obligations as well as national legal and policy frameworks. While the UN advised NISA to define the characteristics of an appropriate screening process, there was a lack of information on how NISA implemented and managed that process.¹⁴

***Lesson 2:** Local ownership must be balanced with sharing of information and established protocols . While the Somali Government owns all stages of the process, the minimal information from UN and international actors had regarding key aspects of the process contributed to a loss of donor confidence.*

5.1.2 Managing the DDR Process

The variety of approaches and length of implementation of DDR in Somalia have provided several useful insights into how management decisions and difficulties can impact on outcomes. The significant value and impact of coordination efforts, especially involving donors, and the significant utility of embedding and resourcing learning focused systems and approaches into DDR.

Donor Coordination

An important aspect of overall management of DDR was the level of coordination between donors who were investing into this area.

Improvements in coordination were not without issues. Additional UN and donor engagement for coordination was needed. This was partly constrained by the split location of partners between Mogadishu and Nairobi, which limited opportunities for regular coordination meetings and reduced the depth of technical engagement, as well as the need for improvement in UN agencies coordination. DDR funding of programmes was classified and managed under very different modalities by different donors, which led to different strategic focuses and priority outcomes. Nevertheless, between 2023/24, quarterly MoIS-IOM-Donor meetings were held to track and discuss progress against the approved transitional benchmarks. These meetings were conducted in a hybrid format, alternating between Mogadishu and Nairobi, and contributing to additional coordination.

Transition in coordination was also challenging to manage, as the expectations set with FGS partners during the more fragmented initial implementation were difficult to adjust and undermined the continuation of the programme.

Monitoring and Learning

One key strength of the approaches adopted in Somalia was the inclusion of robust learning focused approaches to monitoring. Both the Adam Smith International's Serendi programme and the centres supported by IOM outside of Mogadishu benefited

¹⁴ Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Punishment: Somalia Case Study", 2018.

from significant efforts to measure their specific effects on rehabilitation and reintegration, and broader high-quality investigations of the nature, mechanisms and pathways of DDR in Somalia.¹⁵ These significantly improved the extent to which lessons from Somalia could be developed and used by future programming.

There were two key limitations on the utility of these learning investments. Firstly, the data was limited and only focused on the rehabilitation and reintegration component of DDR and related approaches. Screening processes, however, were not part of the UN-supported interventions, and the lack of reliable information on that aspect generated strategic questions regarding who was in the programme and why, which in turn strongly influenced assessment of the outcomes of participation. Secondly the dissemination of research findings was slow and uneven, which limited the extent to which it influenced programming, reflection and adaptive learning.

5.1.3 Needs of defectors

One area in which DDR in Somalia has demonstrated implementing lessons relates to meeting the needs of defectors so that they can reintegrate back into society. The Somalia DDR process demonstrates the centrality of a strong livelihood focus on successful reintegration, the core role of psychosocial support in assisting the transition, the importance of community gatekeepers in reintegration, and the value in including vulnerable groups like women and children in formal DDR processes.

Economic Livelihoods

In Somalia a lack of economic opportunities is a common factor of joining Al-Shabaab, and lack of economic options is a major issue for defectors.¹⁶ This reality informed the structure of IOM's DDDR programming, and TVET constituted a major component of the rehabilitation process. TVET was highly valued by participants, even if its success in supporting defectors to achieve adequate incomes has been mixed.¹⁷

***Lesson 3:** To be consistently effective, livelihood support within the Defector Rehabilitation Programme needs to be grounded in an assessment of social dynamics and economic opportunities at a community level as well as individual capacities and expectations. Tailoring TVET to community-level opportunities will enable reintegration programmes to be designed and implemented flexibly and remain useful to defectors during reintegration.*

The Role of the Community

The centrality of family and clan to Somali community was recognised by IOM's DDDR programmes, and reintegration efforts involving key social gatekeepers such as clan elders and family members were found to be more successful. Family members and clan

¹⁵ For example: Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Punishment: Somalia Case Study", 2018; Khalil et al, "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia", 2019.

¹⁶ Khalil, Brown, Chant, Olowo and Wood, "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia", 2019.

¹⁷ Khalil, Brown, Chant, Olowo and Wood, "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia", 2019.; Khalil & Zeuthen, "Evaluation of IOM's Support to Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programming in Somalia", 2024.

elders have been identified by defectors as the most important actors in the defection pathway.¹⁸

The programme's investment into psychosocial support was validated by the significant improvements in the beneficiaries self-reported well-being levels.

Lesson 4: Psychosocial support is a fundamental aspect of rehabilitation and reintegration and should be at the core of UN efforts to support these aspects of DDR.

Women and Children

The approach adopted by the UN was grounded in a family focused and inclusive concept of DDR, and as such balanced support between male former combatants, the women who were involved with Al-Shabaab, and the children who had been raised in Al-Shabaab controlled areas and education systems. There is clear evidence that women suffer specific and unique difficulties in leaving Al-Shabaab, and that they had fewer options to be supported in this process.¹⁹

The importance of the UN prioritisation of gender is significant, as it was done in a context where Somali priorities were clearly on different populations. The FGS strongly prioritised male defectors, as this aligned with their primary focus on DDR as a tool of degrading Al-Shabaab.

Lesson 5: The integration and focus on both gender and children in DDR approaches is demonstrably correct and should be maintained. Women are likely to be a marginalised group in most contexts, and likely to be de-prioritised by government partners, making the UN role in supporting them critical.

5.1.4 Pathways of defection and reintegration

With the conflict ongoing, the approach to DDR in Somalia requires pragmatic pathways for managing defectors, and the approach needs to be one which could be maintained by the FGS and FMSs.

Use of alternative pathways of defection and reintegration

While the National Programme provides a formal state-recognized pathway for disengagement, in practice most individuals defect through alternative routes mediated by family, clan elders, or local leaders.²⁰ These informal pathways are often the first point of contact for defectors and play a decisive role in determining whether and how individuals subsequently engage with the formal programme.

Even when the centres were functioning, most defections occurred outside of formal programmes, through informal clan or family facilitated channels.²¹ Informal pathways however come with risks, and the lack of screening translates into a lack of legal clarity, accountability, and structured support. Communities themselves showed mixed preferences.

¹⁸ Mcfee & Bajwa, "The Road Home", 2022.

¹⁹ Stern, "The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab", 2019.

²⁰ McFee & Bajwa, "The Road Home", 2022.

²¹ McFee & Bajwa, "The Road Home", 2022.

Reintegration

Over time, the balance of programming in Somalia has shifted from a reliance on centre-based rehabilitation to greater emphasis on reintegration, individually and community focused.

Evaluations found that this model is both more cost-effective and more sustainable than residential centres, while also more adaptable to local contexts.²²

Lesson 6: *Somalia's experience shows that sustainable reintegration depends on combining formal pathways with community engagement. Center Based pathways provide structured support, ease of access and credibility with security actors, but have proved resource-intensive and difficult to scale.²³ Informal clan and family networks remain indispensable in encouraging defections and enabling access, but they cannot substitute for structured, legally anchored DDR processes. Centre-based solutions may not necessarily be the default pathway that international assistance promotes, especially in contexts where the partner state cannot fund them. Non-residential, legally anchored, and with a community-based approach models of DDR, offer a scalable alternative to this approach.*

²² Khalil & Zeuthen, Evaluation of IOM's Support to Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programming in Somalia", 2024.

²³ United Nations, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) & Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Organizations (AGDTO): Whitepaper", p.6-7.



Former disengaged Al-Shabaab female combatants attend their graduation ceremony at Transition Center in Baidoa, Somalia on May 03, 2016. UN Photo / Abdikarim Mohamed

5.2 Strategic and technical support

At the level of strategic and technical support, and despite notable achievements in terms of coordinating and developing a context-responsive, multi-faceted DDR framework, the challenges included diverging views on the objectives of DDR in Somalia, outdated understandings of the DDR toolbox, and the absence of a comprehensive strategy and legal framework for DDR.

5.2.1 Variable understandings of the role of DDR tools in a conflict context

The government, and some donors on the one hand, and the UN on the other, held significantly different perceptions of the role and purpose of DDR in Somalia. For the FGS and several donors, DDR was viewed primarily through a military lens—as a means to weaken Al-Shabaab’s operational capacity and contribute to its defeat as a terrorist organization.

The second group, spearheaded by UNSOM/UNTMIS, promoted DDR in line with the updated IDDRS 2.10,²⁴ which defines DDR-related tools as modular and context-specific instruments.

It proved impossible in practice to align these visions and intents into a coherent and consistent approach that positioned and utilised DDR tools to their best advantage. The rehabilitation centres and reintegration approaches contributed positively to the rehabilitation and reintegration of defectors, but in the absence of consistent political leadership, an approved legal framework, and broader effort on reconciliation, these efforts faced hurdles for progress towards sustainable peace.²⁵

***Lesson 7:** Despite their complementarities, the lack of a shared understanding of the New UN Approach to DDR resulted in lost potential for the use of and impact of DDR-related tools and approaches as a means to address the root causes of conflict and support sustainable peace.*

5.2.2 National political ownership crucial for a comprehensive strategy for DDR as a non-military tool for peacebuilding

Prioritising DDR is consistently difficult in conflict contexts, where international and government partners tend to emphasise military responses over approaches that address political and social drivers of conflict.

UNSOM²⁶ and later UNTMIS²⁷ carried mandates to provide strategic policy advice on DDR, but their influence over FGS conceptualisation and implementation of the role of DDR remained limited. While DDR related tools offer avenues to support peacebuilding where conflict is ongoing, these tools require close alignment with the political priorities and strategies to be effective, conditions that were largely absent in Somalia.

²⁴ The definition of DDR-related tools appears in IDDRS module 2.10, p.6.

²⁵ Felbab-Brown, “The Limits of Punishment: Somalia Case Study”, 2018.

²⁶ UN Security Council Resolutions 2102 (2013), 2158 (2014) and 2592 (2021).

²⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2753 (2024).

Instead, Somali government focus remained centred on the DRP, without embedding it in a broader DDR strategy and legal framework.

***Lesson 8:** The absence of a coherent national DDR strategy and clear legal framework has limited donor engagement, hindered funding, and constrained the UN's ability to provide coordinated and targeted support. At the same time, fragmented ministerial responsibilities led to siloed approaches and weak alignment between strategy, policy, and programmes. A whole-of-government DDR strategy – anchored in political leadership, legal frameworks, and formal joint UN–government review mechanisms – is critical to build coherence, strengthen coordination across institutions, and provide donors and partners with confidence in supporting Somali-led DDR.*

5.2.3 Coherent, coordinated efforts

Going forward, the UN would gain from complementing its technical assistance with robust political economy analysis. This would help clarify what is realistically achievable at different stages of implementation and ensure that programming decisions more consistently foreground the political conditions required for DDR to meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding.

DDR is a core pillar of the national P/CVE strategy,²⁸ yet its design sidestepped tough political issues around weapons and demobilisation by defining them out of the process.

DDR for social cohesion/reintegration

The final strategic aspect of DDR is its role in supporting and strengthening the social cohesion of communities. Multiple studies have noted that involvement in Al-Shabaab causes significant social stigma and fear, even in cases where the association was not voluntary, or where it did not involve active support. While the majority of defectors do come to the rehabilitation process as a result of contact with their family or community,²⁹ the broader communities prefer a formal process of rehabilitation be conducted to show that disengagement has occurred.

Some clear positive effects exist from participation in the rehabilitation process, both economically and socially, and it does appear to reduce the number of defectors who are at risk of returning to the conflict.

The main issue for this conceptualisation is that the process remained highly securitised.

***Lesson 9:** While they are no substitutes for a comprehensive DDR process, structured support to rehabilitation and reintegration can play a critical role in strengthening social cohesion and community trust in post-conflict contexts. In Somalia, DDR efforts that prioritise social reintegration will benefit from more and earlier involvement from non-security FGS ministries.*

²⁸ Tubsan National Centre, “Somalia National Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (2024-2027)”, 2024.

²⁹ McFee & Bajwa, “The Road Home”, 2022.

Climate change has become a defining factor in Somalia's conflict dynamics and a critical enabler of Al-Shabaab's resilience. The group has increasingly exploited environmental shocks, particularly droughts, floods, and resource scarcity, to consolidate control, extend influence, and reinforce its legitimacy among vulnerable communities.

During the 2021–2023 drought, Al-Shabaab imposed taxes on herders at water points, blocked humanitarian access, and weaponized access to water and food to compel local compliance and support. By presenting itself as a governance alternative capable of managing scarce resources, it has capitalized on weak state presence in rural areas. Al-Shabaab's manipulation of natural resources and humanitarian aid during crises has entrenched its authority and dependency among affected populations, transforming survival into a mechanism of control.³⁰

Through its messaging, Al-Shabaab links environmental degradation and drought to government failure and international indifference, presenting itself as a protector of local livelihoods and justice.³¹ These narratives, combined with economic desperation and displacement have enhanced the group's recruitment potential among youth, pastoralists, and marginalized clans who perceive few viable alternatives for survival.³²

These dynamics underscore the need to integrate climate resilience into DDR programming. As highlighted in IOM's environmental peacebuilding approach, initiatives such as sustainable agriculture, water capture, afforestation, and community-based natural resource management can foster resilience and reduce the appeal of extremist groups.³³ DDR and related tools and approaches should consider promoting climate-adaptive livelihoods, engaging local governance structures, and promoting inclusive dialogue to rebuild trust and cohesion in conflict-affected areas and to provide sustainable employment while reducing the economic appeal of armed groups. By aligning reintegration with environmental rehabilitation, such as involving ex-combatants in public works or regenerative earthworks, DDR and related tools and approaches can help communities recover while addressing grievances that Al-Shabaab often exploits and thereby undermining the conditions that enable Al-Shabaab's influence. Coordination with humanitarian and adaptation actors and working in tandem with climate adaptation and disaster response funding can therefore be an important measure such that reintegration is not undermined the next time a drought or flood hits. Additionally, DDR strategic communication should counter Al-Shabaab's climate-based propaganda, for example by amplifying community-driven success stories of adaptation and cooperation.

Lesson 10: *Programming should take into account the influence of climate-related stocks such as drought, displacement, and food insecurity on both recruitment into and disengagement from armed groups. Integrating climate and environmental analysis into DDR design may help ensure that reintegration efforts are more sustainable and responsive to the lived realities of affected communities.*

³⁰ International Crisis Group, "Fighting Climate Change in Somalia's Conflict Zones", 2024.

³¹ International Crisis Group, "Mapping Conflict: Somalia's Climate Crisis and the Fight Against Al-Shabaab", 2023.

³² UNHCR, "As drought compounds security woes, Somalis flee to Ethiopia", 2023.

³³ IOM, "Environmental Peacebuilding framework", 2023.

6 DDR NEEDS AND THE UN ROLE IN SOMALIA POST TRANSITION

The following section provides an assessment of how the above lessons constrain and guide potential priorities for support post transition from UNTMIS.

The most obvious and grounded context is the ongoing need for rehabilitation and reintegration support. This is justified in practice by the sensible goal of supporting Somali communities to maintain coherence and avoid further disintegration due to unresolved issues around defectors. The evidence from UN implemented support so far is that there are clear individual gains in terms of social cohesion, and reintegration with room for strengthening various components.³⁴

However, there is no indication that the current focus on DDR as defined by the Somali national P/CVE strategy will contribute significantly to conflict resolution at the national- or sub-national levels. The lessons from UN implementation since 2013 do not support or provide evidence that a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration can meaningfully contribute to P/CVE or peacebuilding, in the absence of broader contributions including peace negotiations, prevention of recruitment, building community resilience and provision of basic services, such as security.

The current trend to mobilize community defence forces, utilising their strength and effectiveness in operations against Al-Shabaab, has contributed to a further decentralisation of the control over weapons and more mobilisation of non-state armed forces. Critically there is no evidence of an overall improvement in trust between the various conflict groups that would allow for disarmament and demobilisation.

Given the limits of what is possible for the UN entities within Somalia, the pathway with the most potential is to attempt to support regional and global level strategic policy responses that encourage the government and international donors to improve the extent to which they conceptualise and implement DDR and related approaches. To do this would require a stronger focus on the overall political and strategic role of DDR as a key component of addressing conflict drivers and mitigating the threats posed by armed groups. This could be driven by UN HQ strategic assessments, but these would need to be frank in identifying and evaluating country level approaches to implement key technical stages of DDR, where this undermines the core role of DDR in peace support.

In terms of how the more operational lessons influence UN support, there are several aspects that should be considered where programmes address defectors. Most defectors will use informal pathways, but informal defectors face significant negative consequences. This is an aspect of a broader issue of lack of trust in state capacity and provision of security, and more familiarity with the traditional clan and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. UN development support to policing and justice systems could do more to reflect and strengthen how the state justice and policing approaches work in partnership and alignment with non-state dispute resolution, which

³⁴ Khalil & Zeuthen, Evaluation of IOM's Support to Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programming in Somalia, 2024.

could contribute to more state security acceptance of defectors pathways that involve a strong level of community support and acceptance.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

One: Clear common UN messaging and guidance on dealing with voluntary defections from violent extremist armed groups

The UN should promote clear, coherent, and consistent messaging on the role of DDR in conflict contexts. Field experience, including Somalia, shows that divergent understandings of DDR—whether framed narrowly as an extension of counterinsurgency or more broadly as a peacebuilding instrument—have hindered coordination and undermined trust among national and international actors. The revised IDDRS, particularly section 2.10, already establishes DDR-related tools as modular, context-specific, and applicable in ongoing conflicts as well as post-agreement settings. Yet this flexibility seems insufficiently understood or inconsistently communicated.

The UN system can provide practical guidance and messaging templates that explain DDR's modularity and relevance in conflict environments, distinguishing clearly between DDR, P/CVE, counterterrorism, and transitional justice.

Two: Establish a national DDR framework with legal clarity for pathways

The FGS should prioritise the development of a comprehensive national DDR framework, underpinned by legal clarity on pathways for disengagement, disassociation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. At present, the absence of a coherent strategy, a clear legal basis, and a national communication approach has limited DDR's impact in Somalia. Anchoring DDR in a legally grounded, whole-of-government framework, may enable the Somali government to reduce fragmentation in its efforts, build public trust, and create conditions for renewed donor support.

Three: Leverage donors' financial and political commitments

Donors should combine predictable, multi-year funding for non-military aspects of DDR and related approaches with more deliberate use of their political influence to incentivise Somali ownership. By linking financial support to progress on a national DDR framework, budget allocations, and legal clarity, donors can help shift incentives for the FGS to assume greater responsibility. Donor coordination should also emphasise common political messaging to avoid fragmented signals that undermine Somali and international confidence in DDR.

Four: Scale up community-based reintegration and non-residential rehabilitation

Implementation entities such as IOM, UNICEF, and national partners should expand community-anchored and non-residential rehabilitation and reintegration models as a scalable complement to centre-based approaches. This would lower costs, strengthen clan and family involvement, explore more viable reintegration outcomes, and allow programmes to remain viable in contexts where state funding for formal centres is limited.



Former Al-Shabaab combatants attend their graduation ceremony at the Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Center in Baidoa on August 09, 2016. UN Photo / Abdikarim Mohamed

Five: Put MHPSS support at the core

Across all actors, MHPSS support should be treated as a core component of DDR and related approaches, not an add-on. Investing in Somali social work capacity, services for provision of MHPSS specialized services, trauma healing, and partnerships with religious and community leaders would deepen the reintegration process and address stigma, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustainable return to civilian life.

Six: Integrate climate-sensitive approaches

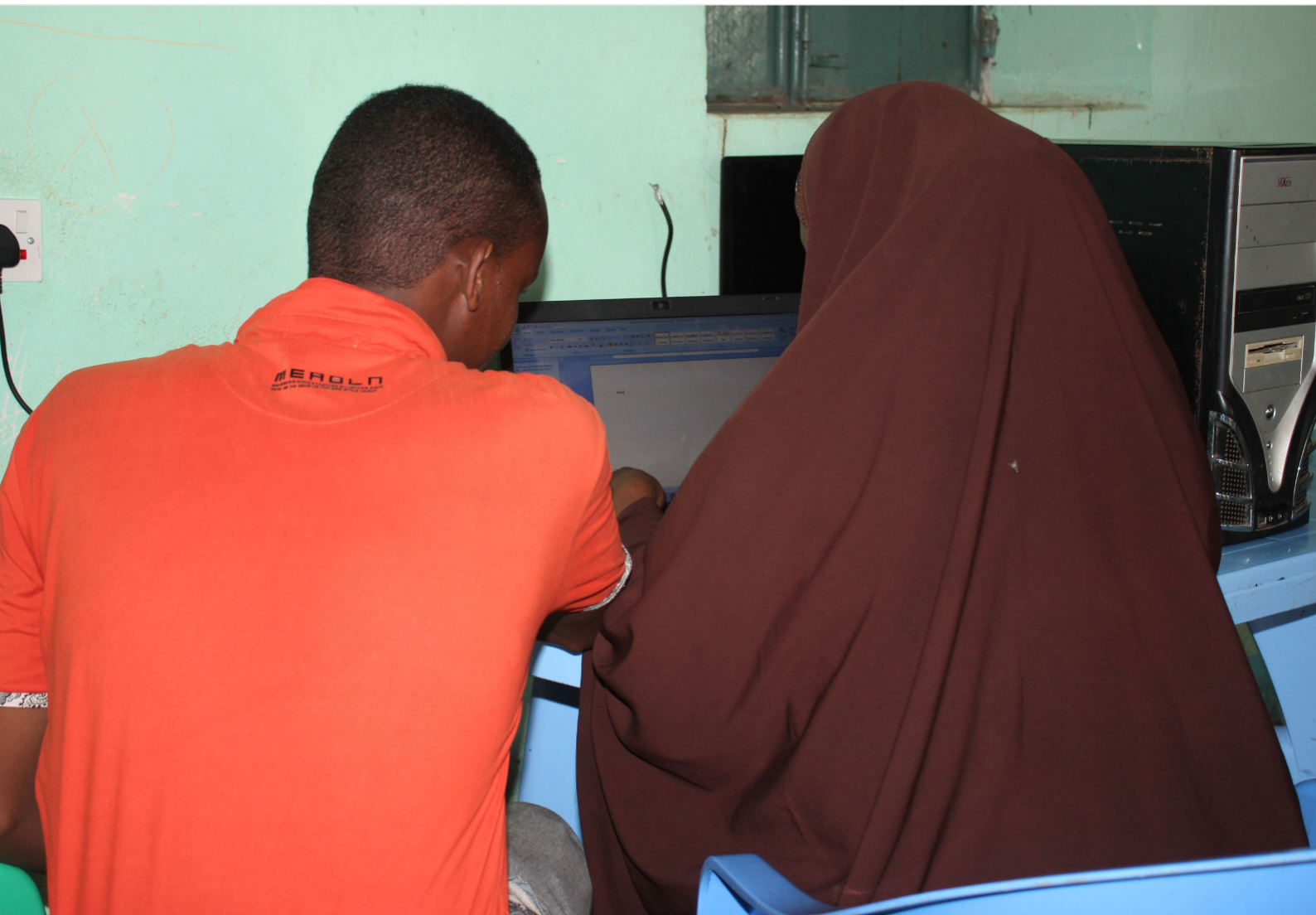
Both the FGS and international partners should integrate climate and environmental considerations into DDR planning. Factoring in drought, displacement, and resource competition when designing reintegration packages—such as support for climate-resilient livelihoods—would ensure that DDR outcomes are more responsive to the drivers of conflict in Somalia.

Seven: Gender should remain a focus of UN DDR support

Finally, all DDR processes should include and reinforce the importance of women as a key group for DDR processes. The experience in Somalia demonstrates the value in doing so, and the role of UN entities in advocating for and expanding coverage to include women is one of the standout successes of the DDR work done. Resistance to this focus from national partners is predictable, so the UN role in promoting and including this is vital in ensuring it occurs.

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Former disengaged combatant learns computer lessons at a transition centre in Baidoa, Somalia, on November 3, 2015. Former disengaged fighters are being rehabilitated and undergoing a series of vocational training skills. UN Photo / Abdi Dagane.



Former Al-Shabaab combatants attend their graduation ceremony at the Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Center in Baidoa on August 09, 2016. UN Photo / Abdikarim Mohamed

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