



NATIONAL PEACE ACCORD TRUST

NPAT

Building
Healthy
Communities
in South Africa

**DRAFT DOCUMENT
PUBLIC HEARING – EX-COMBATANT TRAUMA**

BACKGROUND

Due to the peaceful nature of the transition from apartheid to democracy, South Africa is rarely understood as a post-conflict country. Consequently, the statutory programmes meant for the reintegration of former combatants (especially former members of the guerrilla forces and other paramilitary groups) into civilian society were poorly planned and badly executed. As a result of the lack of attention to the needs of former combatants, many of them face various economic and social challenges.

One of the factors that impact negatively on the social reintegration of former combatants into civilian society is the trauma experienced during armed conflict. Trauma sometimes takes the form of nightmares, paranoia, aggression, withdrawal and antisocial behaviour. To deal with these problems, former combatants often rely on drug and alcohol abuse. There are little or no services available in South Africa to deal with this problem, not only for the former combatants but the public in general.

Some former combatants over a period of time accept and adapt to new situations while others may feel overwhelmed, experiencing intense stress, causing them to manifest a range of emotional, physical, behavioural, spiritual, and psychological symptoms.

Those former combatants that adapt and cope often have no empathy or understanding for those who are not fortunate, unable to benefit from political positions or employment. How an individual responds to a traumatic situation is largely determined by his experience of the situation, the meaning the individual attaches to the event and the outside support the individual receives. The person's ability to cope with these would vary from individual to individual.

A combination of former combatants' trauma, stress, vulnerability related to extreme poverty, health problems, lack of recognition for the sacrifice, e.g. joining the military structures before they finished their schooling has the potential to produce frustration and discontentment with the present day government.

In a survey of 700 excombatants less than five percent received any kind of psycho-social support or counselling for trauma. South African former combatants could be more vulnerable to long-term psychological distress because nearly two decades have passed without seeking treatment for any manifestation of psychological distress.

Many former combatants are forced to live with their extended families because they do not have an income source or a home to live in. The Ministry of Housing has made a commitment to providing homes for former combatants but the process must

go further and include a provision whereby former combatants can form companies to build such homes.

Defining an “Excombatant”

Numerous discussions have taken place at many levels regarding who is an Excombatants. Only recently, through the ANC Conference resolutions has members of the Self Defence Units (SDUs) been included in the defined meaning of Excombatants. The Self Protection Units (SPUs) of the IFP remain excluded. Some groupings, particularly the Department of Defence include only liberation fighters who chose to join the South African Defence Force upon returning from exile, excluding the thousands who chose not to join when they returned.

Currently approximately 10,000 members can benefit from the government Safety and Security SETA (SASSETA). Most surveys place the number of Excombatants who remain unemployed and vulnerable at around 70,000. Most of the “formal” databases do not include detainees, political prisoners and less formal paramilitary groupings that fought for liberation. Excluding these groupings has been to the peril of South Africa as some have become involved in criminal activities because no other opportunities exist for them.

Some municipalities have been pro-active including all members who fought during the liberation struggle. One such project is the Ekurhuleni Demobilisation Project. Additionally the City of Johannesburg has begun an Excombatants Project. Neither of the two has a funded trauma component in the project.

Lack of Employment Opportunities for Excombatants

Former combatants want to be treated as a resource to be maximized. While they may lack certain technical skills relevant to civilian life, many of the experiences of former combatants can be converted for use in a civilian context. Many former combatants possess strong leadership experience, which includes teamwork, planning, organisational skills; self discipline and respect for a clear system of authority.

Research completed by Strategy and Tactics indicate that 75% of excombatants are unemployed. While former combatants are more likely to work in the security sector and informal sector, in the public security sector an insignificant number of police are former combatants.

“The Second Economy” as defined by Government

The Government has excluded most excombatants from the “Second Economy” opportunities because of their age. The term “Second Economy” as stated in the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA) policy document places emphasis on targeting the most vulnerable population groupings such as woman and youth at the expense of former combatants who remain excluded from skills training and income generation opportunities because of age. (Over 30). Considering the group’s high unemployment levels and the fact that research has shown the level of education amongst former combatants is higher than the general population, this should be rectified immediately.

Proposed National Structure

The establishment of the South African National Military Veterans' Association (SANMA), made up of the African National Congress' (ANC's) Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), other liberation armies, Bantustan armies and the old South African Defence Force. One of its most difficult tasks will be the re-defining of an ex-combatant. Being too narrow or too wide brings about difficulties.

For example the Department of Housing wants to be pro-active in offering excombatants housing but defining an excombatants has been the main obstacle in initiating a programme.

“Nothing for Us Without Us” is the motto of Excombatants

A great deal of mistrust exists amongst Excombatants. The stories of people coming to them (including high ranking Excombatants within Excombatants structures), getting their names, their signatures, promising jobs and opportunities, the wait for news, never to hear again about the opportunity, is a common story that adds to the frustrations they face.

Were Excombatants demobilized properly?

When conflict ends and peace looks like it's on the horizon most countries in conflict begin by demobilizing the soldiers. In fact there is a UN Protocol to be followed. Due to the peaceful nature of the transition from apartheid to democracy South Africa was never understood as a post-conflict country. Soldiers quietly returned to the country and were told to wait. Some have been waiting for over 15 years.

How come so many segments of the population have never heard about ex-combatants one may ask, especially since there were so many opportunities during the Peace Accord processes to discuss the demobilization and re-integration of soldiers?

Ask an ex-combatant and they will tell you they were told “hold tight, don't give up all the arms, hold some back and wait.” 80,000 former combatants are still waiting for word about the rewards of the struggle. As a result most suffer from social stigmatization in the very communities they fought to protect, abject poverty and the long term effects of trauma because a legitimate re-integration process never took place.

Public Hearings without sustainable psycho-social support for excombatants

To have public hearings regarding the trauma suffered by excombatants would be extremely painful and difficult for the participants. For importantly the question must be begged, “Why is there little or no support for excombatants?”

Notably six organisations work with excombatants within South Africa. Experience has shown the most successful interactions with Excombatants are by trained support staff who are themselves Excombatants. On the positive side, the ex-combatant has the necessary credibility with those he/she serves. The challenge of this scenario is that the Excombatants support staff needs sustainable counseling, debriefing and on going training that are not necessarily available.

Who should take responsibility for the psycho-social support of Excombatants?

There are those who believe the Department of Defence (DOD) should take on the responsibility of psycho-social support of Excombatants. History has shown this not to be effective. If Excombatants have not sought this support from the DOD in the last 15 to 25 years, why would they do so now? Would it not be more appropriate to support reintegration and rehabilitation of Excombatants at the local municipal level, particularly where there is a large concentration? What about the family members who also suffered?

Additionally the DOD could decide to limit access to services to only those who are listed as "official" Military Veterans. A further exclusion from services could cause additional tension amongst those who consider themselves to be Excombatants and are recognised for their service at the local government level.

Since the Department of Social Development already is the lead department in Victim Empowerment, it remains a strong possibility that they should take the lead in providing psycho-social support to Excombatants. Many organisations exist nationwide to provide victim support, but it is rarely appropriate for an Excombatants to seek out support at a child, youth or women centred service. This factor supports the need for specifically trained Excombatants to provide the service.

Local Municipalities have positions available in many departments that could be taken up to support this effort. The position of Social Auxiliary Worker (SAW) is a noted government approved position that can be budgeted for in many departments. Proof of this is present day advertisements in many municipalities for such positions. Presently the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) seeks to train thousands of SAW nationwide. Unfortunately, those trained would be inappropriate to serve Excombatants because of their age (18 to 30) and lack of understanding.

How does South Africa extend existing services for Excombatants throughout?

Many Excombatants have benefited from services offered by NGOs and CBOs. These services exist because international donors have seen the value of supporting such initiatives. However, these donors have told the NGOs and CBOs that the financial support will be ending because they are doing the work of the South African Government.

The experience of serving Excombatants has provided challenges and opportunities. Services that exist come through valued, tested programmes that with the support of the South African Government can be integrated into the training of Excombatant support staff.

What could Excombatants services look like in a community should Parliament Hearings take place?

Community support could include training locally faith based ministers to understand the circumstances and trauma experienced by the Excombatants, enabling them to serve this segment of the population more effectively.

Social workers could be trained to serve more effectively.

Locally based NGOs could be identified and trained to expand their services to this grouping.

Excombatants within a community could be identified and trained as Military Veterans Rehabilitation Facilitators (MVRF) or Social Auxiliary Workers. Their training could include many of the services presently being offered by NGOs and CBOs. Organisations offering the training could provide the quality assurance, debriefing, monitoring and on-going support to ensure a quality service is offered to the Excombatants. The MVRF could be multi-tasked having assessment, interviewing, referral, basic counseling, group support, lobbying, advocacy, awareness campaigning and report writing skills. Legitimate documentation would enable government to plan and implement programmes more effectively.

The fact that the ANC Conference Resolutions identified Excombatants as beneficiaries of government benefits and programming can be a good first step to solid interventions for rehabilitation of Excombatants.

A window of opportunity exists now. To miss this opportunity and ignore the good will and patience of Excombatants would be to the peril of this country.