

Regional Approaches to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR): emerging lessons, best practices and innovations



"Conflicts are more regional in character and therefore require a more regional approach with the challenge of balancing the interests of the various states affected by the conflict."

Erastus Mwencha, Deputy-Chairperson of the African Union Commission, 4 May 2015

List of acronyms

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
AGDTOs	Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Organisations
AU	African Union
BICC	Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
CBRR	Community-Based Reintegration and Reconciliation
CCG	Contact and Coordination Group
CT	Counter-Terrorism
CVR	Community Violence Reduction
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DDRR	Disengagement, Dissociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation
DDRRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, Reinsertion and Reintegration
DDRS	DPO/OROLSI/DDR Section
DPO	Department of Peace Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FBA	Folke Bernadotte Academy
FDLR	Democratic Forces for the Defence of Rwanda
IDDRS	Integrated DDR Standards
ISG	International Support Group
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
ISWAP	Islamic State in West African Province
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LCB	Lake Chad Basin
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
LCFA	Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
M23	23 March Movement
MCRP	Multi-Sectoral Crisis Recovery Project
MDRP	Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme
MEAC	Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (UNIDIR project)
MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC
O-SESG-GL	Office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for the Great Lakes
OROLSI	Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions
PARSEBALT	Project to Support the Socio-Economic Reintegration of Vulnerable Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

List of acronyms

PBF	Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund
PDA	Peace and Development Adviser
PROLAC	Lake Chad Region Recovery and Development Project
PRR	Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
RC	UN Resident Coordinator
RECSA	Regional Centre on Small Arms in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States
RS-SRR	Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin
SMDF	Special Multi-Partner Delivery Fund
SPM	Special Political Mission
SPRR	Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
SMSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
TAC	Technical Advisory Committee
TAP	Territorial Action Plan
TDRP	Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme
TJ	Transitional Justice
ToT	Train-the-Trainer
UN	United Nations
UNIDIR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
UNOCA	United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa
UNOWAS	United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel
WAM	Weapons and Ammunition Management
WPS	Women, Peace & Security

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Executive Summary

This report explores regional approaches to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), with a focus on the Lake Chad Basin and Great Lakes regions. Commissioned by the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), it aims to understand the extent to which regional approaches can support nationally led DDR efforts and make them more effective. The report covers a wide range of efforts, including processes supporting the voluntary disengagement (individual demobilization) as well as efforts part of a peace agreement (collective demobilization schemes).

Regional approaches have gained traction in response to the transnational nature of armed groups, the porousness of borders, and the increasing complexity of post-conflict recovery in contexts without formal peace agreements. These approaches have not replaced national strategies but rather aim to complement them by fostering cross-border coordination, concerted approaches, and promoting shared political and operational frameworks.

Key findings include:

- The rationale for regional approaches lies in their ability to address cross-border dynamics and fragmentation. Where implemented with legitimacy and ownership—especially through national institutions—regional strategies have shown promise in bringing coherence, enabling dialogue, and strengthening reintegration outcomes.
- Building on interviewees' overwhelming feedback, this report makes the case that regional dynamics are first and foremost shaped by the political will of states, and structured regional mechanisms are needed to muster that political will in a coherent manner. When that is the case, regional approaches can enhance the effectiveness of DDR efforts, especially in relation to knowledge sharing and convening power.
- Lessons from practice highlight the importance of structured coordination mechanisms (not ad hoc arrangements), technical-political alignment, national ownership, and sustainability. The report underscores the risks of disjointed terminology, over-reliance on material assistance, and under-resourced reintegration support.
- Innovations and good practices such as the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG)/Ops Cell in the Great Lakes, the International Support Group (ISG) and the Special Multi-Partner Delivery Fund (SMDF) in the LCB, and training-of-trainers (ToT) models in Regional Centre on Small Arms in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States (RECSA) show how regional structures can enable knowledge sharing, capacity building, and joint political engagement.
- Regional DDR approaches and strategies are increasingly used to integrate complementary pillars like Transitional Justice (TJ), Community-Based Reintegration (CBR), Community Violence Reduction (CVR), and Weapons and Ammunition Management (WAM), often through hybrid or evolving modalities.

Introduction

Scope and purpose

The United Nations Department of Peace Operations' Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (UN DPO/OROLSI) has increasingly engaged in regional approaches to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) in recent years. This evolution is a reflection of OROLSI's expanded role as "system-wide service provider" for both missions and non-mission settings (following the 2019 Peace and Security Architecture reform). It also reflects the increasing complexity of DDR practices in the absence of peace agreements, in contexts of regional instability and cross-border armed group activity.

To document and assess some of these developments, OROLSI's DDR Section (DDRS) commissioned an independent consultant in June 2025, to analyse emerging lessons, best practices and innovative approaches. The assignment combined an extensive document review, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and the facilitation of two knowledge exchange sessions with OROLSI and external practitioners. The latter was used as a sensemaking session and helped formulate recommendations of relevance to practitioners and policymakers.

Research questions

This research was guided by top-level questions designed to examine the rationale, set-up, implementation, and outcomes of regional approaches to DDR, as well as the role of the United Nations system within them. The inquiry was structured around three main themes:

DDR regional approach, rationale and UN role:

- What was the rationale behind a given DDR regional approach? What did it seek to achieve and why?
- What was the DDR remit of the UN system and how did it complement that of other stakeholders?
- To what extent was the selected regional approach rights-based, gender-responsive and age appropriate?

Emerging lessons

- What factors contributed to the success of a given regional approach and why?
- What parts of the regional approach proved less effective and why?
- The commonalities and differences between regional approaches, and the factors explaining these patterns, if any.

Emerging best practice

- What were the most significant outcomes of a given regional DDR approach and why?
- What contributed to that success?
- What were the most innovative features of a given regional approach and why did they matter?

Introduction

It was expected that these top-level questions would entail a more in-depth review of the following considerations:

- What drove regional approaches to DDR in each of the contexts?
- To what extent did national government, regional organisations and supporting UN entities share a similar vision of the regional DDR approach?
- To what extent were governments involved, at what level (regional, national, sub-national) and to what effect?
- What UN entities were involved in supporting the design and implementation of a given regional approach and how was coordination managed?

Limitations

This consultancy was a short-term assignment of approximately one month. The analysis drew primarily on insights from United Nations staff, many of whom based at headquarters or in regional positions. These perspectives provided a valuable overview of current approaches, priorities, and challenges in DDR-related work. While the consultancy included limited direct contributions from country-level UN actors and national authorities, the findings nonetheless offer meaningful observations to inform ongoing discussions. Incorporating perspectives from those directly engaged in the design and implementation of DDR-related activities at national and subnational levels in future assessments would further enrich and complement this analysis.



Introduction

Structure of the report

The report is organised into six sections, each building toward an understanding of how regional approaches to DDR are being conceptualised and implemented across diverse settings. Section 1 outlines the rationale for pursuing regional approaches to DDR, building on both the document review and the stakeholders' feedback. Section 2 captures emerging lessons from regional approaches, some of which mirror those found in national DDR efforts, such as the importance of national ownership, political will and coordinated funding. Section 3 highlights emerging good practice and innovations in regional DDR. Section 4 outlines recommendations, while Section 5 presents two case studies that serve as a brief reference point to understanding region-specific dynamics of, and approaches to, regional DDR in the Lake Chad Basin and the Great Lakes. Annexes appear under Section 6.



1. Rationale for regional approaches to DDR

1.1. An evolving context

Over the past decade, armed conflict has evolved in ways that challenge conventional approaches to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR).¹ Conflicts today often involve a broad spectrum of non-state armed actors—including but not limited to insurgencies, transnational criminal networks, violent extremist organisations, and self-defence militias. These actors frequently operate across multiple levels: local, national, regional, and even international, as armed groups forge cross-border alliances and exploit transnational networks and value chains for their own benefit. Beyond collective processes based on peace agreements, DDR processes have increasingly supported voluntary disengagement from armed groups and the rehabilitation and reintegration of former members.

Against this backdrop, national DDR frameworks are often ill-equipped to address the full spectrum of security threats that now extend beyond borders. Regional dimensions—such as the cross-border movement of combatants, weapons,² illicit goods and resources—undermine the effectiveness of DDR efforts that remain confined to single-state solutions.³ The increasing use of foreign fighters and mercenaries raises even further challenges to national DDR efforts.

Climate change has intensified the regional dynamics of conflict, particularly in fragile environments like the Sahel. Desertification, soil erosion, and drought have depleted natural resources, often driving herders to stray from traditional migratory routes into farming areas in search of pasture. At the regional level, conflict further complicates pastoralist mobility, forcing herders into sometimes contested zones, where they may become entangled in violence, and may be co-opted into armed groups or illicit networks.⁴ As a result, tensions have heightened between nomadic and sedentary communities across regions such as the Sahel, West and Central Africa. Competition for resources has spiked, and worsened identity-based stigma and mutual distrust.

The above trends underscore the transnational nature of armed violence and highlight the extent to which regional conflict dynamics effectively challenge the traditional state-centric models of security governance. In this context, it is becoming increasingly important to involve actors at local, country, regional and global level in the design and implementation of adequate conflict management and resolution responses, DDR included. This will call for strengthened partnerships across the UN system, as well as with regional and sub-regional bodies. In addition to current efforts with the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), regional DDR engagement started with the African Union and the League of Arab States (LAS).

1. Source, most interviews held in July 2025. This section mostly focuses on points raised during interviews realised in July 2025. For a more thorough and systematic contextual review, see Breitung, C., & Richards, J. (2022). The Evolving Nature of DDR: Study on Engaging Armed Groups Across the Peace Continuum. BICC, p.37.

https://bicc.de/Publikationen/DPO_Study_Evolving_Nature_DDR_Sept_Low_Res_fa.pdf-dr1749

2. For more insight on regional weapons proliferation dynamics, see UN DPO, UNODA (2022), Weapons and Ammunition Dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin: A study by the United Nations Department of Peace Operations and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, in partnership with the Lake Chad Basin Commission.

<https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Weapons-and-Ammunition-Dynamics-in-the-Lake-Chad-Basin-FINAL.pdf>

3. Source, stakeholder interviews No 24 and 25, June 2025.

4. The nexus between regional DDR and climate change was mentioned a few times and most specifically discussed during stakeholder interview No 22, June 2025.

1. Rationale for regional approaches to DDR

1.2. Defining what constitutes “regional”

Interviews realised as part of this assignment illustrate the need for a common definition of what constitutes regional approaches to DDR. They acknowledge that countries differ in terms of their national capacities, legal frameworks and systems, political regime, levels of political support on DDR matters, UN presence and access to resources. These realities profoundly challenge harmonisation efforts across a given region, but also create opportunities for coordination at the regional level.

Mostly, stakeholders consulted for this assignment call for a definition that distinguishes true regional approaches from multi-country efforts that may not be sufficiently coordinated or integrated. The following working definition builds on their feedback.

Definition

A regional approach to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) refers to the design and implementation of DDR strategies, policies, and operations that are planned and coordinated across two or more countries within a specific geographical region, in response to conflict dynamics and armed group activity that transcend national borders. These approaches ideally involve i) regional political and security cooperation, ii) joint or harmonised programming (including on rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation), iii) mechanisms for knowledge and information-sharing. This three-pronged approach earns from being anchored in, and operationalised through, iv) a dedicated regional body, mechanism or organisation (e.g., CCG, LCBC, RECSA), and supported by v) joint military operations and/or intelligence-sharing.⁵ Last but not least, this approach acknowledges vi) the primacy of national sovereignty, where states hold the prerogative to define their legal, institutional and strategic frameworks, while pursuing the benefits of coordination at the regional level.



5. This ideal definition focuses on the five key elements that featured most prominently in stakeholders' feedback. In relation to military and intelligence, interviewees gave the examples of the MNJTF (joint military operations), and the CCG (for regional intelligence sharing).

1. Rationale for regional approaches to DDR

Rationale

This definition captures three key features that distinguish regional DDR from purely national efforts:⁶

1. **Political cooperation as a critical enabler:** The effectiveness of DDR depends heavily on the political will and coordination between neighbouring states. As demonstrated in the Great Lakes region, when political relations improve (e.g., between the DRC and Rwanda), regional DDR and repatriation efforts become more effective.⁷
2. **Regional DDR augments but does not replace national ownership:** Rather, it reflects a complementary strategy that aligns national DDR plans with broader regional objectives and operational realities. This may take the form of joint planning, regional reintegration funds, coordinated repatriation protocols, cross-border information sharing, or regional SOPs. Several stakeholders emphasised that regional DDR is less about homogenisation and more about coordination and alignment where appropriate, respecting national sovereignty while enhancing effectiveness through collective engagement.⁸
3. **Aligned rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation programming:** harmonising reintegration policies is not a pre-requirement for effective regional DDR, but alignment of approaches and protocols will be key to avoid uneven treatments across neighbouring countries, which may incentivise ex-combatants to seek reintegration in countries with weaker vetting processes or more generous reintegration packages.⁹

In essence, a regional approach to DDR is “not simply multi-country programming,” it needs to be “a coordinated, strategic response to a regionalised conflict ecosystem”.¹⁰

In addition, the definition of DDR itself has also broadened in scope

Against this backdrop, DDR policies and approaches have evolved to reflect the shift in practice from a focus on post-conflict contexts and comprehensive peace agreements, to a broader understanding of DDR encompassing both mission and non-mission settings across the peace continuum.¹¹

6. According to most interviewees, June 2025.

7. A point discussed at length in stakeholder interviews No 3, 4, 9, 10 and 13, June 2025.

8. Ibid., as well as stakeholder interviews 12 and 14, June 2025.

9. Point touched upon in most interviews, and at length in stakeholder interviews No 7, 8, 10, 12 14, June 2025.

10. Source, stakeholder interview No 9, June 2025.

11. Under the new paradigm, DDR is part of the United Nations (UN) system’s multidimensional approach that contributes to the entire peace continuum, from prevention, conflict resolution and peacekeeping, to peacebuilding and development.

1. Rationale for regional approaches to DDR

This evolution has been reflected in the revised Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), launched in 2019, that now also feature DDR-related tools such as “pre-DDR, transitional Weapons and Ammunition Management (WAM), Community Violence Reduction (CVR), initiatives to prevent individuals from joining armed groups designated as terrorist organizations, DDR support to mediation, and DDR support to transitional security arrangements”.¹² In addition, DDR practitioners may also increasingly support states that promote individual voluntarily exits from armed groups, in contrast to previous DDR processes based on peace agreements and collective demobilization schemes. This may take place in contexts of violent extremism, where the terminology has expanded to Disengagement, Dissociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation (DDRR), to account for the broad spectrum of motivations and circumstances under which individuals may join or separate from an armed group.¹³



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

13. For more background and definitions, see International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2021. Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: Eligibility Conditions and Practices. IOM. Geneva.

2. Emerging Lessons

2.1. Political cooperation between neighbouring countries is key

The primacy of political cooperation – The level of political cooperation between neighbouring states is a key condition for the success of regional DDR approaches. When such cooperation is strong, regional DDR mechanisms are more likely to succeed, whereas “when it is weak, things falter and shut down”.¹⁴

Regional political agreements and security dynamics heavily influenced DDRRR processes in the Great Lakes. The Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (1999) and subsequent accords like the Pretoria Accord (2002), and the Nairobi Communiqué (2007), were pivotal in shaping the DDRRR landscape. These agreements facilitated the withdrawal of foreign troops and created frameworks for disarming and repatriating foreign combatants. However, the implementation of these agreements often faced challenges due to shifting alliances and political interests among regional actors.

The UN missions in DRC (MONUC and then MONUSCO) had strong DDRRR mandates from the security council, but were only able to act within the DRC and had limited means of ensuring regional cooperation. They heavily depended on good relations with neighbouring countries to operate, and fluctuating relations between the DRC and Rwanda, for instance, directly influenced the effectiveness of DDRRR efforts. At times of cooperation, repatriation of ex-combatants and joint operations against armed groups accelerated, whereas at times of tension, proxy support to non-state armed actors resumed, significantly undermining DDR objectives.¹⁵

Example from the Great Lakes

The periods of 2003–04 and 2009–12 marked times of good relations between Rwanda and DRC, when combined political and military pressure, alongside DDRRR support, contributed to a marked reduction in FDLR numbers and disrupted their command and control, as well as capacity to regenerate.

During such windows of opportunity, DDRRR operations were scaled up to i) get closer to FDLR units, ii) intensify sensitisation campaigns, and iii) implement targeted interventions aimed at persuading commanders to disengage.

14. Source, stakeholder interview No 12, June 2025.

15. Stakeholder interviews No 4 and 13, June 2025.

2. Emerging Lessons

In the Great Lakes region, political buy-in between governments has repeatedly served as a catalyst for operational progress in DDRRR. Mechanisms such as the Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM) and the CCG played a critical role fostering coherence and facilitating dialogue in a structured manner at the regional level, with support from UN and AU representatives.

Regional DDR is inherently political – Much like “traditional” DDR, regional DDR efforts are never purely technical exercises, they are deeply embedded in political realities that shape both their feasibility and impact. Unlike nationally confined DDR processes, however, regional DDR approaches require coordinated political will among multiple sovereign states,¹⁶ each with its own interests, threat perceptions, and policy constraints. This makes the success of regional DDR even more fundamentally contingent upon effective political dialogue and negotiation across borders.

In this context, political leverage – exercised through bilateral agreements, regional oversight bodies, and the involvement of United Nations Special Envoys – “is not just supportive, but foundational”.¹⁷ It creates the space within which technical DDR interventions can be designed and implemented.

One of the most consistently successful features of regional DDR approaches in the Lake Chad Basin, the Great Lakes region and East Africa has been their ability to acknowledge and embed the primacy of political cooperation into the architecture of regional engagement. Rather than treating DDR as a purely technical or programmatic exercise, these regions have established deliberate mechanisms to channel political will, reinforce intergovernmental dialogue, and elevate issues to the highest levels of regional diplomacy.

Examples include the joint UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) mechanism mandated by [UN SC Resolution 2349 \(2017\)](#), which marked the first dedicated UN resolution on the Lake Chad Basin, uniquely framing the crisis as regional, and not just a set of country-specific crises.¹⁸ The said resolution brought together the political influence of UNOWAS and UNOCA in support of DDRR and regional approaches in LCB countries. This dual-headed political arrangement has been crucial in conducting coherent and repeated high-level advocacy across the four LCB countries. Importantly, these SRSGs sit on the RS-SRR Steering Committee, ensuring that political engagement is directly linked to strategic decision-making and implementation oversight. Such a UN Resolution served to enshrine political cooperation in dedicated policy instruments and mandates.

16. Several interviewees drew a distinction between political alignment and coordinated political will. They see the earlier as ideal but unlikely to occur, whether they deem “coordinated political will” better reflects the reality of coordination among countries who share common policy interests momentarily or on a very specific agenda (in this case, the perception of a given armed group as a common enemy). Source, multiple interviewees, June 2025.

17. Source, stakeholder interview No 25, June 2025.

18. The UN SC had previously passed regionally scoped resolutions, but they were usually tied to a single crisis spill over (e.g., Libya in 2011 and Mali in 2012) or issue specific (e.g., WPS, piracy off Somalia).

2. Emerging Lessons

Likewise, for WAM efforts, technical capacity is not enough to build capabilities at the regional level. In RECSA countries, the Nairobi protocol (2004) mandates RECSA to lead WAM and small arms control efforts across the region. This regional framework is what enables partners (e.g., UN, BICC) to complement train-the-trainer (ToT) approaches and regional advisory services with engagement with regional decision-making bodies, such as the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of small arms national focal points, and feed into reporting to the Council of Ministers, RECSA's top governance structure, to help promote strategic alignment at the regional level.¹⁹

2.2. The importance of leveraging organisational comparative advantages

In both the Lake Chad Basin and the Great Lakes, regional DDR approaches rely on multi-stakeholder engagement. The World Bank's Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (MDRP, 2002–09) and its successor, the Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (TDRP, 2009–15) stand out as rare and compelling examples of how a single institution with extremely strong financial leverage and experience in coordination and technical assistance, can mobilise exceptional resources (US\$ 500 million for MDRP initially) to kickstart and roll out multiple DDR programmes in a coordinated and timely manner across the Great Lakes region.

While some may view the MDRP as a model of a truly regional DDR approach,²⁰ it is unclear that it can serve as a blueprint of future DDR interventions in an international landscape characterised by fragmented multilateralism, the de-prioritisation of official development assistance (ODA) and a shift away from large-scale programming towards more targeted and risk-adverse interventions.

Against this backdrop, DDR needs across a specific region far exceed what a single organisation can deliver in terms of political leverage, technical expertise, analytical capabilities, operational and coordination support. The effectiveness of regional DDR efforts, hence, depends on the ability of a broad range of external partners to coordinate and work in good intelligence.

The LCB offers an interesting set-up that seeks to match external organisations' roles with their institutional strengths and anchor DDR within a broader regional political framework. This has not been without challenges, but external actors' engagement at the regional level, is mostly structured as follows:

- The UN's contribution to the LCB regional set-up spans political, technical and funding spheres.

19. Source, stakeholder interview No 6, June 2025.

20. Source, stakeholder interviews No 3 and 9, June 2025.

2. Emerging Lessons

The joint SRSB mechanism plays a key role at the political level (see above), and is complemented by technical support and programming on the part of agencies and programmes which coordinate their activities as part of a cluster mechanism. Linkages with Resident Coordinators (RCs) and Peace and Development Advisers (PDAs) remain, however, unequal.

- Three regional funding mechanisms exist in support of the LCB's regional approach (which includes DDR interventions).

Two major funds are operated by the World Bank (PROLAC/MCRP) and the African Development Bank (PARSEBALT). In addition, a new funding mechanism was set up in 2024, the UNDP managed Special Multi-Partner Delivery Fund (SMDF), which will focus on the financing of joint proposals and integrated efforts on the part of the UN, including in support of DDR.

- Deliberate engagement with a broad range of research institutions and policy think tanks.

These have come to play a critical role generating evidence and learning to try and inform policy choices at the regional and national levels. Actors such as the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), the UNIDIR Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project, and GIST Research, have all contributed analytical inputs across a broad range of topics.²¹ Their involvement has been systematically built into the work of the LCBC and the LCB-related fora (see section 3.1. below).

21. Source, stakeholder interviews No 3 and 9, June 2025.



2. Emerging Lessons

2.3. A regional DDR strategy serves important functions but is not a prerequisite for a regional approach to a DDR problem set

A regional strategy can provide coherence and vision but is “not a prerequisite for regional action”,²² and regional strategies can become overly complex, slow-moving, or detached from national realities if not grounded in local ownership. The 2024 strategic review of the LCB Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RS-SRR) is a good illustration of this consideration. It found that the first phase of the RS-SRR proved useful along the following lines:

- It contributed to greater coherence between international and national efforts to address the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin;
- It supported the mobilisation of resources in alignment with regional priorities;
- It provided a structured dialogue platform for key constituents (most notably the Governors themselves); and
- It enabled knowledge and evidence sharing among all four countries.

This being said, the 2024 strategic review also found that “conceptual level misalignment” prevailed on DDRRR (despite being the most resourced effort under the regional strategy) and the international focus on Screening and Prosecution was “not in line with national aspirations and practices among each of the four LCB countries”.²³

Several interviewees underline that the most critical feature of the regional DDR approach in the LCB countries is the deliberate approach to policy design and dialogue facilitation across three levels of intervention, subnational, national and regional. This effort has been crucial to develop a sense of joint ownership among all countries, and that ownership is, in turn, key to the legitimacy of the process.

In the Great Lakes, in contrast, DDRRR efforts have proceeded without a singular overarching strategy, driven instead by coordinated repatriation frameworks and intergovernmental security cooperation.²⁴

Example from the LCB

“There are so many strategies... CT strategies in some countries, DDR strategies in most, Transitional Justice, PVE strategies and so on. At least now in LCB countries, they’re doing Ops plans, the TAPs. This is significant and adds tremendous value. And makes things much more practical.”

Quote from stakeholder interview No 14, June 2025

22. Source, stakeholder interview No 10, June 2025.

23. Source, GIST Research (2024), Strategic review of the Regional strategy for the stabilisation, recovery and resilience of the Boko-Haram affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin, p.22. Unpublished. Copy on file with the author.

24. Source, stakeholder interviews No 3, 4 and 12, June 2025.

2. Emerging Lessons

2.4. Need to build on existing institutions with political legitimacy and credibility

Regional DDR is most effective when anchored in institutions perceived as legitimate by member states. When individuals and institutions involved in such efforts have clear national mandates, it provides assurances to national political leaders, as well as international partners.²⁵

The LCBC has played a central role in anchoring the regional strategy in local and political legitimacy. As an intergovernmental body with statutory authority, the LCBC enjoys credibility among member states that predates its involvement in matters of stabilisation and DDR. Evidence available suggests that the LCB's prior credibility and legitimacy has been key in enabling the organisation to broaden the scope of its regional mandate, including but not limited to:

- Take ownership over the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RS-SRR), including its design, review, and revision (most recently adopted by its Council of Ministers in February 2025);
- Convene relevant actors at the regional level, including the Governors' Forum, seemingly the regional strategy's most visible and politically influential mechanism for subnational engagement and cross-border dialogue;²⁶
- Facilitate technical work in support of DDR and broader stabilisation work, including but not limited to i) endorsing joint policy documents, ii) facilitating structured dialogue across technical, political, and subnational levels, iii) holding regional events to present regional, national and subnational actors with the latest evidence to inform their policy choices.

This consideration has led to a very different setup in the Great Lakes region. There, consultations initiated by the office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes (O-SESG-GL) identified National heads of intelligence services as the most credible (hence, suitable) entry point on DDR matters, in light of their direct access to Heads of States, who retained ultimate political leverage. With this in mind, the O-SESG-GL brought Heads of intelligence from five countries (Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda) to formally set up a regional CCG in 2019, which became the main regional DDR coordination body to this date.

What the LCBC and the CCG have in common is their political convening power at the regional level, and the capacity to broker sensitive discussions among national and subnational authorities, and hence bring a measure of regional coherence to DDR (and other) undertakings.

25. Source, stakeholder interview No 10, June 2025.

26. According to multiple stakeholder interviewees and findings from the RS-SRR 2024 review.

2. Emerging Lessons

2.5. Lack of UN coherence remains a challenge for regional approaches

Part of the challenge lies in the United Nations' architecture. Peacekeeping missions (funded through assessed budgets), Special Political Missions (under the regular budget), and UN agencies in non-mission settings (relying largely on voluntary donor funding) all have distinct planning cycles, mandates, and reporting lines. These bureaucratic, budgetary and funding divides have often resulted in a lack of coherence, particularly in the early stages of DDR engagement (including at the regional level). As a result, most respondents wonder if the UN system, as currently configured, is equipped to implement effective regional DDR approaches. Its architecture remains often anchored in country-based mandates, policy and planning frameworks,²⁷ funding models, and institutional arrangements.

In addition, “many within the UN system and beyond continue to think of DDR as national programs supported by peacekeeping operations”,²⁸ and they appear insufficiently aware of how DDR has evolved in the past few years, to integrate matters of disengagement from designated organisations, Community Violence Reduction initiatives and/or Weapons and Ammunition Management (WAM) for instance (see the section on the broadening of scope on p.18 above).

Lack of a common UN approach to dealing with designated armed groups

In the Great Lakes, the O-SESG-GL was widely credited with bringing coherence to the UN's approach to DDR, and its leadership helped align political engagement with technical efforts on DDR, fostering a unified posture.

In contrast, one of the most persistent challenges undermining the effectiveness of UN-supported regional DDR efforts in the Lake Chad Basin is the conceptual and operational fragmentation between proponents of DDR approaches and those advancing Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (SPRR) models—particularly in contexts involving groups designated as terrorist organisations.

This tension has created a policy and programmatic divide, with different UN entities championing distinct frameworks, acronyms, and mandates. The result is a lack of shared language, which, in LCB countries, has played out most acutely around screening, reintegration, and justice processes. Divergences on the roles of security actors, transitional justice modalities, and child protection norms have diluted advocacy messages, generated confusion among national partners, and fueled competition for funding and leadership roles among UN actors. Recent attempts have been made to develop system-wide guidance in the form of a dedicated IDDRS module on armed groups designated as terrorist organisations (AGDTOs).²⁹

27. Two interviewees specifically spoke to UN strategic documents such as the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) and Common Country Assessments (CCAs) as firmly anchored in national development goals, making it difficult to incorporate cross-border DDR activities or foreign combatant reintegration needs.

28. This finding was consistent across many interviews with UN and external respondents alike. The quote itself is from the 2024 project evaluation “Strengthening and sustaining support to DDR programmes in Special Political Mission contexts and non-mission settings,” p.9, unpublished. Copy on file with the author.

29. As part of the comprehensive review of the IDDRS that began in 2017, the Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR agreed on the structure of the new IDDRS that included the development of eight new modules, including IDDRS 6.50, focusing on DDR and Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Organisations. Module 6.50 was validated conditionally in July 2021, following extensive consultations with IAWG-DDR members. More details can be found here:

https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/whitepaper_disarmament_demobilization_reintegration_and_armed_groups_designated_terrorist_organizations_final.pdf

2. Emerging Lessons

No more individually tailored reintegration schemes?

A consistent theme across the majority of interviews was concern over the lack of a shared conceptual approach within the UN system. The lack of clarity around terminology (e.g., DDR vs DRRR vs SPRR on the one hand, CVR and CBRR on the other) is widely perceived as problematic. Some see it as symptomatic of “a culture that prioritises labels over substance”,³⁰ but more importantly:

- It often distracts from what should be the starting point and foundation of (regional) programming: a joint, evidence-based analysis of the problem at hand, together with partner countries, around which national, regional and global actors can align operational responses.
- Individualised, tailored reintegration packages, once the cornerstone of sustainable DDR, have become increasingly difficult to implement. A growing political sensitivity around the perception of material support to individuals associated with terrorist organisations, combined with fragmented guidance across agencies, has made donors and DDR implementing actors more risk-averse. This realisation prompted one respondent to state that “It’s not possible to do individual support to reintegration, vocational training, life skills (...) at scale. Not anymore.”³¹

Perspectives for change?

In recent years, the UN has taken steps to adapt its approach to (regional) DDR.³² The 2019 Peace and Security Architecture Reform designated OROLSI as “a system-wide service provider” for both mission (peacekeeping and SPMs) and non-mission settings, spanning a wide spectrum from conflict prevention to sustaining peace. This reform applied to OROLSI’s DDR Section, whose portfolio has significantly grown in scope and volume as a result.³³ In addition, the 2023 UN Executive Committee Decision acknowledged the risk that fragmented approaches undermine the credibility and convening power of the UN, and mandated a review of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (PRR) practices, with the view to formulate a “one UN” framework on the matter.

Together, the 2019 reform, the 2023 decision and subsequent review mark the possibility of a shift towards greater institutional clarity on DDR roles and responsibilities within the UN system. By extension, this could foster more coherence in the UN system’s support to external actors, in relation to regional DDR endeavours.

30. Quote, stakeholder interview No 7, June 2025.

31. Quote, interview with stakeholder No 3, June 2025.

32. Broader perspective on the trajectory of UN integration and the expanding role of the UN DPO/OROLSI/DDR Section can be found respectively in United Nations (2024), Review of UN integration. Final report. Copy on file with the author. Also, UN DPO (2024), Strengthening and sustaining support to DDR programmes in Special Political Mission contexts and non-mission settings. A project evaluation.” Unpublished, copy on file with the author.

33. Source, all interviews with DDRS personnel attest to a growing and increasingly complex portfolio, up to ten Special political mission and non-mission settings over the past few years.

3. Best practice and innovation

3.1. A strong focus on evidence and knowledge sharing

A systematic approach to knowledge sharing

The LCB stands out for its deliberate engagement with a broad range of research institutions and policy think tanks, which have come to play a critical role in generating evidence on DDR-related matters. Actors such as the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), UNIDIR Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project, and GIST Research,³⁴ have contributed analytical inputs across a broad range of topics, including but not limited to contextual analysis, Women, peace and security (WPS), Weapons and ammunition management (WAM), Screening and profiling of associates. Their involvement has been systematically built into the work of the LCBC and the LCB-related fora (see below).

Crucially, these thematic and policy discussions have taken place in the field and included national and subnational stakeholders, in an effort to keep them informed and involved in shaping regional decision-making on DDR-related matters.

Intelligence sharing among states

In the Great Lakes, intelligence sharing emerged as a critical enabler of regional DDR efforts. Each state possessed significant intelligence and capabilities to influence (engagement with) foreign armed groups, particularly the FDLR and ADF. At the initiative of O-SESG-GL, five countries (Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda) agreed to the formation of a CCG which gathered the countries' Heads of Intelligence services. Unlike in the LCB, participation in the CCG was kept exclusive so that participating countries felt able to share sensitive intelligence data with other participants, in support of regional DDR objectives.³⁵ Likewise, from a UN perspective, participation was restricted to O-SESG-GL and his team (2 people) to enable continuity and trust building with CCG country participants. The intelligence shared as part of the CCG's work was essential to understand the groups' inner dynamics and encourage defections. It also placed the onus on national stakeholders themselves to drive a process facilitated by the UN.

Maximising uptake and institutional learning

The first phase of the RS-SRR benefited from strong research support, but research partners (ISS, MEAC, BICC) were uncertain as to the extent to which their inputs influenced implementation.³⁶ Future regional DDR set-ups have an opportunity to build on existing research capabilities to more systematically inform implementation decisions, in terms of building in feedback loops, developing data-based assessments and prioritizing interventions.

34. One interviewee also mentioned the International Peace Institute (IPI), the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and ACLED.

35. Source, stakeholder interview held on 16 July 2025.

36. This perspective was shared in several interviews and is in line with the findings of the RS-SRR 2024 strategic review, copy on file with the author.

3. Best practice and innovation

3.2. Structured and formal mechanisms are essential but not an end in themselves

Regional DDR architectures are in and of themselves more complex and resource-intensive than national programmes. Getting donors on board will require making a clear case about their comparative advantage, and striking the right balance between key functions of political alignment, coordination, knowledge sharing and learning.

In both the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Great Lakes, structured mechanisms – such as technical working groups, joint operational cells, clusters, governors’ forums – have become foundational enablers of collaboration. The existence of these structured platforms created the space for more flexible and informal exchanges over time. For example, the LCBC’s annual Governors’ forum enabled governors and their teams to develop a personal rapport and led to direct contacts, bypassing central-level channels. These ad hoc exchanges were only made possible through the trust and relationship built during the structured annual events.

Even more so, when it comes to intelligence sharing, informality is not desirable. Sharing sensitive security information demands a minimum level of accountability, discretion, national control and institutional anchoring, which a framework like the Great Lakes CCG and Ops Cell provide. A notable example is the 2020 4th meeting of intelligence chiefs. Held in Burundi, it marked the first time a Rwandan official (in this case, Rwanda’s head of intelligence) had travelled to the country since 2015. This marked a breakthrough in political engagement between two historically tense neighbours, an outcome made possible by the trusted format and regularity of the regional mechanism.

Both cases exemplify how much time is needed to invest in key relationships with national decision makers³⁷ and develop the trust and political will necessary for cross-border dialogue and cooperation. The process itself contributes to confidence-building and lays the foundation for deeper policy convergence. As such, regional coordination must be viewed as a long-term investment, where progress, as incremental and slow as it may be, reflects meaningful advances in a complex and sensitive environment. In both cases, structured mechanisms do more than facilitate coordination or knowledge-sharing, they enable future direct exchanges between participants at political and/or decision-making level.³⁸

37. Source, stakeholder interview No 8, June 2025.

38. In the LCB, political cooperation at the regional level was sometimes complicated when sub-regional agendas diverged from national priorities, especially in the case of Nigeria, where effective participation at the regional level requires bringing in both national federal line ministries, as well as governors. For the Great Lakes, one interviewee also noted how regional collaboration enabled to leverage member states’ national expertise with the wider CCG, e.g., Rwanda on DDR and Burundi in relation to its Weapons and Ammunition Management.

3. Best practice and innovation

They need, however, to not be over-engineered, but rather to adapt as the need arises, to retain their relevance. The 2024 RS-SRR strategic review, for instance, explicitly recommended streamlining the regional architecture along three clusters, in order to simplify management and increase focus.

Example from the LCB

“The most useful feature [in the LCB]? The Governors’ forum. That’s the real innovation, bringing subnational powerbrokers at the regional level.”

Quote, stakeholder interview No 5

3.3. Multi-country reintegration funding instruments to enable timely roll-out

Pooled funding is key

A common constraint for regional DDR implementation has been the lack of harmonised funding frameworks. Uncoordinated financial pipelines have typically enabled fragmentation and created perverse incentives for competition between national and international actors.³⁹

Recent innovation in the form of the 2024 regional Special Multi-Partner Delivery Fund (SMDF) in the LCB seeks to address this. Established by UNDP, the Fund has been designed with intentional constraints so that only joint or cross UN agency proposals are eligible. This setup explicitly incentivises inter-agency coordination and deters duplication of efforts, which is key for inter-agency coherence in regional DDR.⁴⁰

But synchronicity is better

Meanwhile, the World Bank’s Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) and its successor, the Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program (TDRP), offer deeper institutional lessons. These mechanisms, active across seven DRC-neighbouring countries between 2003 and 2014, were the largest DDR financing efforts ever undertaken. Of equal importance, they were a rare case where pooled funding truly aligned national reintegration processes. The MDRP/TDRP were firmly anchored in national DDR commissions and executed through Project Management units (PMUs) housed in line ministries, with technical and fiduciary oversight from the Bank.

Selected interviewees described the MDRP/TDRP as the “gold standard for regional DDR”,⁴¹ which not only funded but brought national programmes in synch, allowing each to follow its own sequencing while aligning milestones regionally. This synchronicity was deemed a critical condition for regional alignment.

39. Multiple interviewees provided similar feedback and spoke at length to the competition for resources under the first phase of the RS-SRR.

40. It should be noted that selected interviewees specifically view pooled funding as “complicated” and requiring strong UN political steer at both HQ and the regional level, in addition to robust donor alignment.

41. Quote from stakeholder interview No 9, June 2025. Sentiment echoed by several respondents who took part in consultations undertaken under this consultancy.

3. Best practice and innovation

3.4. Donors can play a decisive political role in shaping regional DDR approaches

Positive examples from the LCB speak to the catalytic effect donors can play when they go beyond their expected funding role to act as active shapers of strategy. In this regard, interviewees mentioned the UK's push for Transitional Justice (TJ) as having created the momentum for a regional TJ study that “shifted the policy landscape” in the LCB region.⁴² Crucially, the International Support Group (ISG) – co-chaired by Germany and the United Kingdom – was seen as a key mechanism that provided both political and financial backing to encourage the UN system to work in a more coordinated manner, in support of DDR and broader outcomes. Available evidence speaks to the opportunity for donors to emulate the precedent set by the ISG, to not only provide resources but take on a more strategic and political role in other regional DDR efforts.

3.5. Expanding the regional logic to WAM and CVR

Regional approaches to DDR have also evolved to address broader issues of Weapons and Ammunition Management (WAM)⁴³ as well as Community Violence Reduction (CVR). This shift reflects the practical limits of national-level interventions in this line of work, as well as a deeper rethinking of what regional DDR infrastructure approaches can be leveraged for.

A notable example of this transition is the BICC-supported WAM programme,⁴⁴ originally launched in the Horn of Africa and now operating across Africa through regional partnerships with RECSA, ECOWAS, and the African Union Commission. What began in 2012–13 as a targeted effort to support national commissions on small arms control has grown into a “regionally embedded advisory and capacity support initiative”.⁴⁵ Among others, it enabled RECSA, covering 15 countries, to adopt a regional action plan on WAM in DDR settings in late 2024, presenting WAM as a collective security issue and key to successful DDR. In the Great Lakes, regional structures like the CCG have developed technical sub-working groups on DDRRR and are exploring a dedicated sub-working group on WAM.

In the Lake Chad Basin, CVR and Community-Based Reintegration and Reconciliation (CBRR) are increasingly becoming “pragmatic alternatives to individual-based reintegration”,⁴⁶ especially where legal constraints, screening hurdles, or political resistance make personalised support unlikely. This shift may come with trade-offs, as it risks overlooking the specific needs of individuals, especially women and children.

42. Quote from stakeholder interview No 25, June 2025.

43. For more analysis, see, for instance, UN DPO, UNODA (2022), Weapons and Ammunition Dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin: A study by the United Nations Department of Peace Operations and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, in partnership with the Lake Chad Basin Commission.

<https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Weapons-and-Ammunition-Dynamics-in-the-Lake-Chad-Basin-FINAL.pdf>

44. Source, interview No 20, June 2025.

45. Source, stakeholder interview No 6, June 2025.

46. Quote, stakeholder interview No 8, June 2025.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (for the UN system) – Enhance conceptual clarity and system-wide coherence

Rationale: feedback from practitioners indicated that the terminology and frameworks, notably in dealing with groups designated as terrorist organisations, remain confusing and unevenly understood. As several KIIs noted, the terminology, concepts and framework are designed as part of UN processes, and nuances are often lost on partner countries – including subnational stakeholders – who still equate DDR with its “first generation” model tied to peace agreements. This lack of system-wide clarity hampers coordination and risks alienating partners who need accessible, practical guidance. It also bears the risk that regional and national approaches are not clearly aligned.

Approach: the UN system would benefit from consolidating and simplifying its own conceptual framework in regard to DDR and DDR-related tools. In addition to the ample body of knowledge captured in the IDDRS modules, the UN system would benefit from a concise, accessible primer for both UN actors and external partners, and tailored briefings that support partner understanding of DDR-related tools. Consistently framing DDR as a flexible roadmap – designed to be adapted to the political, security and social dynamics at subnational, national and regional levels – would help ensure approaches remain context-specific and responsive to evolving needs.

Recommendation 2 (for regional approaches) – Adopt a “form follows function” approach grounded in continuous learning

Rationale: regional DDR-related interventions need to be tailored to multiple contexts that may differ significantly in terms of political will, institutional capacity, financial resources at the national level and on the part of external partners, security dynamics, community needs and perceptions. Local and cross-border dynamics shape security and reintegration realities, and regional DDR in LCB countries has demonstrated the value of involving multiple analytical partners to better understand some of these local dynamics and generate a shared evidence base.

Approach: the regional analytical partners’ capacities for knowledge generation and sharing can be elevated into a structured system and embedded into the regional programme cycle, supporting monitoring, documenting what outcomes are being achieved, analysing what political space is available and where, and supporting timely adaptation at the regional level.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 3 (for donors) – Adopt a strategic and political role in shaping regional DDR approaches

Rationale: The experience of the Lake Chad Basin shows that donors can take a clear, strategic stance – as in the UK's push for a regional Transitional Justice study – that in turn creates the political momentum necessary for innovation and progress. Donor influence is therefore essential not just in financing DDR, but also in setting strategic priorities and ensuring collective accountability.

Approach: donors can move beyond a predominantly financial role and engage as political actors to shape regional DDR strategies and approaches. Their political and financial weight can be used to sustain momentum and alignment between UN agencies, regional organisations and national partners. With this in mind, pooled funding can be framed as a political tool, not just a financial mechanism, to support joint programming that aligns with regional DDR objectives.



5. Case Studies – LCBC and Great Lakes

5.1. Case study 1 – Regional DDR approach in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB)

Context and regional stabilisation framework

The Boko Haram crisis, affecting Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, exposed the limitations of national responses to address the regionalised nature of insecurity. It prompted the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the African Union (AU) to work together and launch a Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RS-SRR) for Boko-Haram affected areas. Importantly, the RS was anchored in a regional political framework and supported by the UN Security Council resolution 2349 (2017), and built upon a regional military contingent, the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). The Regional Strategy was designed to coordinate efforts across peace, security, humanitarian response and development, with a first phase that took place in 2018–24.⁴⁷

DDR was embedded as a key component within the broader strategy, and the RS-SRR enabled LCB countries and their partners to coalesce around a regional approach in a number of significant ways:

- A common strategic understanding and coherence, to enable a range of diverse actors (including but not limited to UN, AU, four LCB country institutions, international donors and partners) to share a common approach and align their interventions;
- A common platform for information sharing and coordination
- A set of common mechanisms to support the implementation of the Strategy

The architecture supporting the implementation of the RS-RSS, and the role of the UN system

The RS is underpinned by a multi-tiered coordination structure, designed to foster coherence across a diverse range of actors, as follows:

- A regional Secretariat (established under the LCB Commission), to coordinate implementation across national and international actors;
- A thematic cluster system to promote the coordination of sectoral interventions. The most active of the four clusters – the Security and Protection Cluster – focused on DDRRR/PRR.
- A governance mechanism, the annual Steering Committee, to provide strategic oversight at the ministerial level⁴⁸ and “operationalise the political will of all the parties”;⁴⁹
- An International Support Group (ISG) to promote donor alignment in support of the Steering Committee;
- The Governors’ Forum to localise and review strategy implementation. Over the years, the Governors’ forum became the main political platform for cross-border dialogue.⁵⁰
- Implementation plans at the subnational level (the Territory Action Plans, also known as TAPs).

47. The RS was technically a five-year strategy and was extended for one year, until August 2024.

48. The Steering Committee includes LCBC states at the ministerial level, UN SRSGs (respectively for UNOCA and UNOWAS), donors and the African Union.

49. Source, stakeholder interview No 11, June 2025.

50. Source, multiple stakeholder interview, June 2025.

5. Case Studies – LCBC and Great Lakes

At the political level, two UN Special Representatives delivered high-level advocacy and political messaging to regional and global actors, as well as within the UN system. These political influence mechanisms are also directly linked with the Steering Committee, which includes the SRSs and representatives of all the Lake Chad Basin governments.

At the technical level, several UN partners have been involved in providing technical assistance on matters of DDR policy. DDR has been the most resourced effort, including in the development of a dedicated Pillar paper on Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (SPRR). The said paper focused on a subset of the broader DDR area, and decisions were made to align language with newly adopted policies on CBRR as well as provide more guidance on Transitional Justice as a strategic objective. This evolution is expected to help balance the desire for accountability with the need for rehabilitation and reintegration that is more in line with national aspirations and practices among each of the four LCB countries.

At the operational level, UNDP and IOM were also very much involved, running stabilisation and DDR-related programmes in support of national authorities in each of the four LCB countries. In addition, UNDP set up funding mechanisms to support the implementation of the RS-SRR, including the latest Special Multi-Partner Delivery Fund (SMDF).⁵¹

Lessons and innovations in regional DDR coordination

An integrated DDR approach as part of a comprehensive, politically anchored regional stabilisation strategy – DDR was not a standalone programme, but embedded in the RS and linked to strategic objectives. The framing generated strong buy-in on the part of the LCB Commission and the four participating countries.

A strong effort to integrate data and evidence – the regional secretariat established under the LCB Commission made a dedicated effort to mobilise regional and international partners to capture available evidence and use it to inform all relevant stakeholders in their efforts to implement comprehensive DDR approaches. This included regional studies on Weapons and Ammunition Proliferation, linkages with Transitional Justice, WPS and Community-Based Reintegration.

Political cooperation and influence as key conditions of success – political buy-in was instrumental and included the active involvement of UN Special Representatives (UNOCA and UNOWAS) to provide critical advocacy at both regional and international levels, including as part of the Steering Committee.

51. It is worth noting that other funding mechanisms play a similar role, including but not limited to the World Bank (PROLAC/MCRP) and the AfDB (PARSEBALT) systems.

5. Case Studies – LCBC and Great Lakes

Challenges to regional DDR approaches

Disagreements over the framing and scope of DDRR – Disagreements over the framing and scope of DDRR within the UN system and between international and national actors have hampered the coherence and effectiveness of regional DDRR efforts in the Lake Chad Basin for a few years. The DDR vs PRR debate appeared primarily headquarters-driven and negatively affected the credibility and effectiveness of the UN as a whole at the field level, creating confusion for RCOs/UNCTs and host countries alike.⁵² In addition to persistent tensions within the UN system, national actors in Niger and Cameroon strongly rejected attempts to frame DDRR discussions in terms of Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (SPRR), and insisted on retaining the prerogative of defining applicable legal, policy and institutional frameworks in relation to DDR.

An element of donor scepticism – resourcing remains a constraint in view of the magnitude of the problem set (120 to 150,000 individuals for the Borno model) and some of the choices made by national authorities to prioritise expensive centre-based DDRR schemes. The complexity and cost of supporting DDR at the regional level place additional pressure on policymakers and practitioners to not “keep things simple” and continuously try and produce compelling narratives that demonstrate value.⁵³



52. Information corroborated across multiple interviews, especially stakeholder interviews No 5, 7, 9, 14, 25, June 2025.

53. Source, stakeholder interview No 7, June 2025.

5. Case Studies – LCBC and Great Lakes

5.2. Case study 2 – Great Lakes region

Context and rationale

Numerous armed groups have operated in the Great Lakes region over the years, particularly in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These include but are not limited to the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF, originally from Uganda), the National Forces for Liberation of Burundi (FNL) and Red Tabara. Other groups also operate in eastern DRC, including but not limited to local Congolese militias, mostly known as “Mai Mai,” and the renewed M23.⁵⁴

In the Great Lakes, regional DDR efforts focused on the voluntary disarmament and repatriation of foreign armed groups, through a dedicated Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration (DDRRR) programme. This mandate was entrusted to the UN mission in DRC (MONUC, later renamed MONUSCO), under Security Council Resolution 1291 (2000), which tasked the mission with designing and implementing the said DDRRR programme.

DDRRR was anchored in a series of political agreements, including but not limited to the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (1999) and subsequent accords in Pretoria (2002) and Nairobi (2008), which laid the groundwork for UN and regional actors to pursue joint solutions.

MONUSCO’s DDRRR programme repatriated “over 32,000 foreign ex-combatants and their dependents, mainly ex-FDLR, to Rwanda since 2002”,⁵⁵ and demobilized an additional 14,000 Congolese nationals, some of whom were affiliated with foreign armed groups.⁵⁶

The regional architecture in support of DDRRR in the Great Lakes

The regional DDRRR approach in the Great Lakes is supported by both political and operational mechanisms as follows:

- The Peace, Security and Cooperation (PSC) Framework for the DRC and the Region was signed in 2013 as the fall of Goma (over the course of 2012) caused widespread concerns in the region. The said framework gathered eleven countries⁵⁷ and four international organisations⁵⁸ in support of a regional approach to stabilisation, that sought to renew regional cooperation and deal with “persistent violence by armed groups, both Congolese and foreign.” Crucially, it articulated DDRRR as a voluntary process, underpinned by sustained political dialogue and regional cooperation. Several mechanisms were established to help with the implementation of the PSC:

54. Details on each of these groups can be found in UN DPO/OROLSI/ DDR Section (2025), A Sisyphean Task. A Retrospective of the United Nations Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Combatants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo from 2001 to 2024. See section 2, “Managing the other armed groups”, pp 36-44.

55. Source Breitung, C., & Richards, J. (2022). The Evolving Nature of DDR: Study on Engaging Armed Groups Across the Peace Continuum. BICC, p.37.

56. Source, UN DPO/OROLSI/DDR Section (2024), A Retrospective of the United Nations Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Combatants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo from 2001 to 2024, unpublished, p.3. This publication features a detailed account of the UN Mission’s DDRRR programming in DRC for the past twenty-five years.

57. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola, Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia, Central African Republic, South Sudan.

58. The United Nations, the African Union, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

5. Case Studies – LCBC and Great Lakes

- The Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM), comprising regular meetings of Heads of State, was set up in 2013 and serves as the political anchor for the PSC Framework.
- The Contact & Coordination Group (CCG), launched in 2021, focuses specifically on Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration (DDRRR) and seeks to foster practical coordination and information-sharing around the process. It brings together security and intelligence personnel from five countries (DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania) alongside UN partners (e.g., MONUSCO, O-SESG-GL). The CCG includes Operational Cells to lead on day-to-day operational follow-up.
- The Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes (O-SESG-GL): Acting as both a political broker and technical facilitator, the SE's office worked to maintain political coherence within the UN and between regional actors. It was particularly instrumental in convening difficult trilateral arrangements.⁵⁹
- MONUSCO DDRRR Programme, active since 2002, operated solely in DRC and undertook the engagement & sensitisation, screening, disarmament, temporary accommodation, and transportation and transfer of foreign fighters at border points, in coordination with national DDR bodies.⁶⁰

Lessons and innovations in regional DDR coordination

Intelligence coordination as entry point – O-SESG-GL's strategic choice to begin coordination through national intelligence services (rather than national commissions) proved pivotal. These actors carried operational intelligence work, participated in joint contact and sensitisation missions and had direct access to heads of state. This enabled them to unlock political entanglements more efficiently than other, more traditional channels and institutions.

The O-SESG-GL was the primary mechanism for UN facilitation and provided continuity and coherence – The SE and team provided continuity, legitimacy and technical support while maintaining a small but flexible structure.⁶¹ They co-chaired the CCG with national intelligence chiefs, facilitated discussions, helped broker agreements, joined contact missions with armed groups elements in each of the countries, and coordinated with donors (e.g. PBF, France, China).

59. A point amply discussed during stakeholder interviews No 4 and 13, June 2025.

60. For a detailed account of UN DDR efforts in eastern DRC, see the internal study commissioned by UN DPO/OROLSI/ DDR Section (2025), A Sisyphean Task. A Retrospective of the United Nations Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Combatants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo from 2001 to 2024. 65 pages. Unpublished.

61. Only two staff had a dedicated DDR remit in the O-SESG-GL.

5. Case Studies – LCBC and Great Lakes

National ownership is a prerequisite for effective regional DDR coordination – The experience of the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG) in the Great Lakes region underscores the critical importance of national ownership in regional DDR processes. While the United Nations, through the Office of the Special Envoy (O-SESG-GL), played a trusted impartial facilitation role, states themselves drafted the Terms of Reference of what became the CCG, and appointed 11 out of 12 experts to operationalise the effort through a dedicated Operations Cell reporting directly to national intelligence leadership.⁶² Political oversight was secured through a dual-tiered governance model, combining annual Heads of State meetings with biannual technical-level engagement. The UN played a key catalytic and enabling role through the O-SESG-GL, but it was the credibility and consistency of nationally mandated institutions and personnel that made progress possible.⁶³

The parties' direct engagement with, and sensitisation of, armed groups combatants is key – Under the CCG framework, national experts formed account for eleven out of twelve members of the Operational Cell and carried out cross-border engagement and information campaigns, often meeting face-to-face with armed actors to explain repatriation options, security guarantees, and available reintegration support. Face-to-face interaction between security and armed groups personnel proved crucial in managing perceptions, addressing information gaps and giving armed actors a viable alternative to continued conflict. It proved key in increasing voluntary surrenders.⁶⁴

Challenges to regional DDR approaches

Recurring political volatility and mistrust:

Shifting alliances and repeated breakdowns in peace agreements (e.g., CNDP/M23 cycles) have eroded trust between states. While mechanisms like the CCG create space for engagement, regional DDR effectiveness remains largely contingent upon the quality of the collaboration between DRC and Rwanda authorities.

62. The Ops cell consisted of 12 experts, of whom one affiliated with O-SESG-GL and 11 national experts directly appointed by states.

63. An assessment in stakeholder interviews No 4, 12 and 13, June 2025.

64. Ibid.

6. Annexes

6.1. List of respondents (in alphabetical order)

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Randolph Rhea	UNDP / FBA
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6. Annexes

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