

MEAC EVIDENCE & LEARNING CONFERENCE

High-Level Opening Day

Monday, 27 March, 15:00 - 18:00

Conference Room 11, United Nations Headquarters

MEETING SUMMARY

The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project is an “All of UN” collaboration that seeks to create a common evidence base around individual exits from armed groups in order to gain more robust insights into how the UN can design effective prevention efforts and support reintegration. MEAC’s work seeks to inform efforts to end conflict violence and build peace there and beyond.

The *MEAC Evidence & Learning Conference* held in March 2023 in New York marked an important milestone in advancing discussions on how to strengthen empirically based cross-sector approaches that build on existing tools and capacities to prevent and respond to conflict effectively. This multi-day conference was the culmination of four years of innovative, multi-method studies by MEAC on pathways into and out of armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin, Colombia, and Iraq. The event brought together a wide range of practitioners, member states, local experts, researchers, and impacted communities to share emerging findings about transitions out of armed groups.

This conference commenced with a [high-level opening](#) day on Monday, 27 March 2023, at UN Headquarters, where MEAC’s top-line findings were shared, and UN partners, donors, and impacted states considered their implications for action. The presentations were grouped on two substantive panels: 1) Factors that drive recruitment into armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin and implications for prevention interventions, and 2) Exit trajectories out of armed groups and implications for reintegration support. Following the opening day, MEAC held a two-day technical-level workshop to further delve into original MEAC data, showcase local expert presentations on emerging findings and connect with other related research and assessment efforts.

The full recording of the high-level opening can be viewed on the UN Web TV.



INTRODUCTORY PANEL

[15:00- 15:25]



Dr. Siobhan O'Neil (Project Lead, MEAC, UNIDIR)

Dr. Siobhan O'Neil opened with an overview of the MEAC project and how it seeks to contribute to the international community's enhanced capacity to prevent armed conflict involvement and promote full and sustained exits from armed groups through robust evidence collection and collaboration. She began by highlighting the obstacles that people face as they try to transition to civilian life and emphasized the need to understand the entire trajectory of people involved in armed groups in order to design effective prevention and reintegration programming. Dr. O'Neil highlighted the MEAC project's multi-method studies across six countries, which include surveys of tens of thousands of former armed groups associates and their unassociated peers, as well as qualitative, experimental, and participatory research. She discussed how the project aims to provide critical findings to practitioners and policymakers quickly so they can inform interventions to prevent conflict and build peace. Dr. O'Neil thanked the project's donors and partners and welcomed continued collaboration to build on the collective investment made in the MEAC project and continue to advance evidence-based policy and practice.

Dr. Cécile Aptel (Deputy Director, UNIDIR)

Dr. Cécile Aptel discussed the importance of the UN's efforts to maintain international peace and security through multilateral disarmament, state arms limitations, and managed armed group disarmament and demobilization. She highlighted that there is a lack of robust evidence about what approaches work to encourage armed groups and individual ex-combatants to lay aside their weapons. Dr. Aptel highlighted how UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (MEAC) is trying to redress this gap and is key to ensuring that UN interventions are responsive to realities on the ground. Dr. Aptel concluded by lauding those willing to invest in evidence-based policymaking and practice that can build bridges to peace.

Dr. Tshilidzi Marwala (Rector, UNU) [Video remarks]

Dr. Tshilidzi Marwala highlighted the significance of initiatives like the MEAC project in strengthening the UN's ability to prevent and respond to conflicts. The project, which started at UNU in 2018 and transitioned to its permanent home at UNIDIR in 2023, serves as a bridge builder and knowledge amplifier. Dr. Marwala emphasized the importance of multilateral, evidence-based, and coordinated responses to interconnected challenges, including the climate crisis

and global security issues. He also noted that as neutral knowledge brokers, both UNU and UNIDIR are well-positioned to bring together UN partners, member states, and experts to address these common challenges, and affirmed that UNU will stay involved in the MEAC project's impactful work.

H.E. Mr. Adrian Hauri (Ambassador, Chargé d’Affaires, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations)

Ambassador Adrian Hauri began by noting that Switzerland is proud to have supported MEAC since its inception in 2018 and highlighted the importance of projects like MEAC in enhancing the UN’s capacity and efficacy to build sustainable peace, as laid out in its core mandate and charter. He detailed three reasons such initiatives are vital: first, effective interventions require understanding factors that influence armed group recruitment; second, a nuanced understanding of individuals' needs is essential to tailor programs; and third, assisting exits from armed conflict is a shared responsibility of multiple stakeholders across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Ambassador Hauri concluded his remarks by announcing that Switzerland would contribute an additional \$200,000 to support the MEAC Project in 2023 and urged other Member States to join in supporting MEAC and similar initiatives.

Ms. Alessandra Casazza (UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa Director OIC and Manager, Resilience Hub for Africa)

Ms. Alessandra Casazza discussed the importance of evidence in driving innovative responses to complex regional security challenges and supporting practitioners in the field. Beyond providing value, legitimacy, and direction to policy changes, Ms. Casazza emphasized that evidence-based approaches are essential to address multi-dimensional crises; stay ahead of the conflict curve; and support countries to anticipate, prevent, respond to, and recover from the impacts of crises and fragility. She noted UNDP’s dedication to evidence-based approaches was seen not only in its role as a MEAC partner, but also in its own investment in the UNDP Data Hub and its flagship study, [Journey to Extremism in Africa](#), which provides insights into disengagement and reintegration experiences. Ms. Casazza concluded by reaffirming UNDP’s commitment to delivering evidence-based sustainable development pathways out of conflict.

PANEL ON FACTORS THAT DRIVE RECRUITMENT INTO ARMED GROUPS IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

[15:30 –16:25]



Dr. Siobhan O’Neil (Project Lead, MEAC, UNIDIR) – Framing and Moderator

Dr. Siobhan O’Neil highlighted that the MEAC project takes a locally-contextualized and holistic approach to understanding individual conflict trajectories, including the factors that influenced association, experiences in the group, and how and why people left, as well as what their life is like after leaving. By comparing the lives of those involved with armed groups and those who have never been associated for the same pre-recruitment/pre-conflict timeframe, the project can isolate the factors that contribute to an increased probability of association. This analysis, which was presented on the panel, is particularly useful when trying to craft evidence-based prevention interventions.

H.E. Mr. Mamman Nuhu (Ambassador, Executive Secretary of Lake Chad Basin Commission/ Head of Mission of the Multinational Joint Task Force)

Ambassador Mamman Nuhu discussed the interconnectivity of crises in the Lake Chad Basin region, citing the connections between the loss of livelihoods due to climate change and population growth and the Boko Haram insurgency. He noted that in the face of the climate, humanitarian, and security crises, local populations have adapted, but that the resulting smuggling industries and cross-border farmer-herder clashes, can render youth vulnerable to recruitment by smugglers, terrorists, and other armed groups. However, Ambassador Nuhu also highlighted that the security situation has considerably improved since the peak of the insurgency in 2015 due to the sustained kinetic efforts of the MNJTF, but that weakened armed groups have increasingly turned to banditry and other criminal activities that still impact local populations. In response, Ambassador Nuhu called for regional solutions, including projects to restore self-sustenance for affected communities, and emphasized the need for coordination at the regional level to ensure unity of purpose.

H.E. Mr. Thomas Peter Zahneisen (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations)

Ambassador Zahneisen highlighted five key components of a successful project, including national and regional ownership, true partnership on the ground, capacity to scale up, donor funding resilience, and evidence-based action. He emphasized that donor funding should be long-term and predictable and that projects need to be allowed to breathe. Ambassador Zahneisen pointed out that there is a window of opportunity for peace-building efforts with the mass exits in the Lake Chad Basin and noted the need for a granular approach to peacebuilding efforts, specific to the challenges faced by each region. He also acknowledged that serious evidence comes at a cost and must be supported. Ambassador Zahneisen pledged Germany's support to the MEAC project and concluded his remarks by stressing that without evidence, discussions on how to build peace are in vain.

Dr. Remadji Hoinathy (Senior Researcher, Institute for Security Studies)

Research Presentation: Factors that Increase the Probability of Boko Haram Association in the Lake Chad Basin Region

Dr. Hoinathy presented findings from surveys in 70 communities across Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria with more than 11,000 respondents and a series of focus groups with both former armed groups associates and their non-affiliated peers. He noted that research shows that engagement with Boko Haram is usually the result of a combination of factors. MEAC’s study found that for many people, coercion played a role in their recruitment. In addition, in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger, having a poor economic situation increased the likelihood of involvement with Boko Haram by 12-20 per cent percentage points (controlling for age, gender, and abduction. Relatedly, ex-combatants (16 per cent of former Boko Haram associates and 18 per cent of former CSA members in Nigeria) have reported climate-change-related livelihood challenges were among the reasons for their involvement with armed groups. Having a family member in Boko Haram was associated with a much higher likelihood of involvement across all four countries in the region. For example, in Cameroon, those who had family members in the group were 16 percentage points more likely to be associated themselves than those without associated family members. Dr. Hoinathy provided key recommendations based on these findings, including developing cross-sectoral policies and practices, particularly those sensitive to climate change, and including family, social, and peer networks as potential intermediaries in prevention and reintegration interventions.

Ms. Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu (MEAC Nigeria Researcher, UNIDIR)

Research Presentation: Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin Region

Ms. Badu highlighted that since the start of the conflict, children have been recruited by Boko Haram and armed community security actors in the Lake Chad Basin. She shared some of the personal stories that children who have

been with an armed group had shared with her and emphasized the difficulties faced by children living in conflict zones. Key findings from MEAC's study on child recruitment found that proximity to armed groups increases the likelihood of children's association with them. Family and social networks play a significant role in child recruitment—It is notable, for instance, that 19% of CSA-affiliated children had a parent with the group. Meanwhile, children without parental care were often vulnerable to becoming associated with Boko Haram (Girls and boys who are orphans were 43 and 46 per cent more likely to become associated). Ms. Badu explained that the study showed that formal education has a protective effect against child recruitment by Boko Haram, but it also appeared to increase the chances of affiliation with community security actors, which may signify how community mobilization efforts can target schools. Ms. Badu closed her presentation by outlining several recommendations based on the study, including understanding the complexities of children's options in conflict settings, involving the family unit in prevention efforts, and improving access to safe education.

Mr. Sanjay Wijesekera, (Director, Programme Group, UNICEF) – Discussant

Mr. Sanjay Wijesekera thanked MEAC for its partnership and for supporting UNICEF's efforts to prevent and respond to children's involvement with armed groups. He noted that findings from MEAC's research highlight the complexity behind the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, with no single factor being the determinative issue for association. He noted the importance of understanding the context, including family and community influences, on children's association, and emphasized that the quality of relationships and economic prospects of parents play a significant role in the security of children. Despite these sobering findings, Mr. Wijesekera sees hope in the research, which, although heartbreaking, at least provides a way forward for improving the UN's programmatic response. He concluded his remarks by calling for greater efforts to bring this type of learning into programmatic discussions and to refine the design and targeting of the UN response as a result.

INTERVENTIONS FROM THE FLOOR I [16:25- 16:40]

Representative from the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations highlighted their collaboration with the MEAC project in Nigeria and Colombia. The representative also agreed with Ambassador Nuhu's remarks that the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin requires a comprehensive regional approach and highlighted the need for legal frameworks and partnerships with local leaders around DDR initiatives.

Representative from Watchlist identified armed group-level dynamics that contribute to armed groups' recruitment and use of children, including the groups' lack of knowledge and disregard for international law, challenges verifying the age of children, and pressure to quickly regroup after losing members. The representative emphasized that armed groups are influenced by the conflict settings they operate in, including by the nature and actions of their opponents and local communities. Any strategy to address child recruitment must consider these factors in addition to individual level and structural level factors that influence the recruitment and use of children.

PANEL ON EXIT TRAJECTORIES OUT OF ARMED GROUPS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

[16:45 –17:40]



Dr. Siobhan O’Neil (Project Lead, MEAC, UNIDIR) – Moderator

Dr. O’Neil opened the panel on exit trajectories out of armed groups by observing that efforts to transition people out of armed conflict are often built on the assumption that exiting an armed group is an event, when in reality, it is a process. She emphasized that reintegration is a two-way street, and it is important to understand the lived experience of individuals exiting an armed group and laying aside weapons – transitions that are likely full of fits and starts – in order to craft interventions that are effective. Dr. O’Neil also acknowledged that successful reintegration does not rest on the shoulders of ex-combatants and ex-associates alone, but also on the communities receiving them and the policies and programmes that frame their exit.

Mr. Eoghan McSwiney (Political Coordinator and Spokesperson, Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations)

Mr. Eoghan McSwiney expressed Ireland’s pride in supporting the MEAC project, which helps the UN understand the drivers of armed group involvement and how to promote disarmament and disengagement through evidence-based analysis. He noted that peace is not made in faraway conference rooms but on the ground and emphasized the importance of regional engagement and tailored support services for individuals transitioning out of armed groups. Mr. McSwiney referenced the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Peace Agreement, which taught important lessons on power sharing, peace, and reconciliation, and reaffirmed Ireland’s commitment to resolving differences democratically. He also highlighted the critical role of regional organizations like the EU and the importance of civil society in Ireland’s conflict resolution, lessons likely applicable to other contexts.

Mr. Rodrigo Amaya (Political Coordinator, Permanent Mission of Colombia to the United Nations)

Mr. Rodrigo Amaya Piñeros noted that both Ireland and Colombia provide important benchmarks for successful peace processes. In this regard, he emphasized the importance of well-thought-out, long-term DDR policies for sustainable peace, like Colombia’s all-of-government approach to assist ex-combatants transition to civilian life. He also highlighted the need for data collection and policy review to incorporate former combatants into society without

discrimination. Mr. Piñeros pointed to two examples that proved the value of evidence-based decisions: Colombia's National Reincorporation Policy and the National Reincorporation Registry, which collected data on former combatants, including their interests and needs. Mr. Piñeros concluded his remarks by stressing the importance of data collection and welcomed the results of the MEAC Project research.

Ms. Ángela Liliana Olaya Castro (Researcher, CORE and MEAC, UNIDIR)

Research Presentation: How to Reintegrate Ex-associates from Active Armed Groups in Colombia

Ms. Olaya began by providing a brief overview of the history of Colombian reintegration, reincorporation, and defector programmes. The latter – often referred to as the “differential assistance process for criminal groups,” covers the defectors from ELN, FARC dissident groups, and other criminal groups in the country who were not part of the 2016 peace agreement (or another negotiated settlement). She discussed the findings of MEAC's survey and interviews with participants in the differential assistance process, many of whom face a series of challenges in their transition, including security threats, legal uncertainty, and the lure of reconnecting with active armed groups and other criminal elements. Many ex-combatants participating in the process have been threatened by armed actors during their transition (60% of respondents) or invited to rejoin an armed group since they entered the process (50%). As a result, those threatened often change their place of residence, impacting their participation in the process. There is also a lack of clarity across agencies about the status of the defectors in the differential assistance process, which can contribute to mixed messages and unmet expectations for participants, discouraging people from staying in the process. In light of these findings, Ms. Olaya noted the importance of addressing legal uncertainty, protecting defectors from armed group retribution, strengthening service provision to reduce the draw of illegal outside options, and building on lessons learned from past reintegration-related programming.

Mr. Mohammed Bukar (Nigeria Field Research Coordinator, MEAC, UNIDIR)

Research Presentation: Exit Trajectories out of Armed Groups and Implications for Reintegration Support

Mr. Bukar presented findings on reintegration after armed conflict involvement based on several surveys and a number of focus groups with ex-Boko Haram associates and ex-community security providers in northern Nigeria. He began by providing an overview of the various exit pathways out of Boko Haram, including Operation Safe Corridor, the Sulhu Programme, the Borno Model, and informal, self-reintegration. In terms of exit expectations, 67% of respondents believed it possible to leave Boko Haram while involved with the group, but a significant minority of Boko Haram members (27%) believed the military would kill them after exiting. Only 1% of respondents believed they would receive some reintegration support. Interestingly, fewer CJTF affiliates believed it was possible to leave than Boko Haram associates. Being with an armed group can have lasting effects on those exiting. Mr. Bukar noted that in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, having been with Boko Haram was also associated with a 9-18% percentage point increase in the likelihood that the respondent would admit to experiencing anxiety, PTSD, and depression. On a positive note, community acceptance of returning former Boko Haram associates in northeastern Nigeria is relatively high. When people are confronted with community members or family members coming back, they are even more likely to accept them back, than when posed hypothetical questions on returns. The key policy reflections highlighted by Mr. Bukar included the priority of basic needs support and focusing on economic and social reintegration to ensure permanent exit. He noted that ongoing conflict and the continued presence of armed groups will impact whether exits are permanent, but there is hope for reconciliation as community acceptance is currently high.

Dr. Mara Revkin (Associate Professor of Law, Duke University School of Law)

Research Presentation: Reintegration After the Islamic State— Evidence from Iraq

Dr. Revkin presented findings on the reintegration of people perceived as affiliated with the Islamic State (ISIL) in Iraq. The research draws on a perception survey conducted with UNDP in Iraq in 2022 that applied a similar approach to MEAC's surveys in the country. The populations of interest are people who may have actual or perceived family ties or may have worked for ISIL in non-combatant roles. Dr. Revkin found that the factors that influence reintegration outcomes are the individual readiness for voluntary return, economic conditions, infrastructure in areas of return, and community attitudes. Individual readiness appears to be influenced by fear of violence and rejection, positive contact with family and friends, and the need for documentation to obtain security clearances. Economic conditions and infrastructure in areas of return are important, particularly for female-headed households (who often lack access to affordable housing) and IDPs who have experienced gaps in employment. A significant majority (80%+) believe that the Iraqi government should be primarily responsible for decisions about the return of perceived ISIL-affiliated IDPs

and justice for the victims of ISIL. For example, communities have more trust in the Government's screening process (52%) than in tabriyya (38%) and kafala/sponsorship (37%). Most respondents were in favour of restorative non-carceral mechanisms (e.g., psychological rehabilitation 72%), and only a minority were in favour of prison sentences (6%). Dr. Revkin explained that the study showed that children are by far the most likely to be accepted (83%) back by communities, followed by women involuntarily married to ISIL members (79%) and young men with family members who joined (57%), a finding which has implications for reintegration and reconciliation efforts in Iraq.

Mr. António Vitorino (Director General, IOM) – Discussant

Director General António Vitorino emphasized the importance of government ownership, credibility, and flexibility in the reintegration space, with the need to bring together different tools, including social and economic recovery, community building, and mental health and psychosocial assistance. He stressed the need to view women in non-state armed groups as more than just victims and to involve them meaningfully in policy and programming. He also highlighted the importance of trust in building successful reintegration projects and underscored the need to view reintegration as a long-term process rather than a one-shot event. The Director General emphasized the importance of ongoing monitoring and support to ensure the success of reintegration programmes.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix (Under-Secretary-General, DPO) – Discussant

Given the proliferation of armed actors and the surge of violent extremism, USG Lacroix highlighted the clear necessity for evidence-based interventions that are tailored to national capacities and operational challenges and implemented across the entire peace continuum. He also highlighted the many factors that affect successful reintegration, including political dynamics, global context, stakeholder involvement, accountability, and the nature of armed groups. The USG also lauded the MEAC project for its efforts to guide the UN and national authorities to continuously adopt innovative, evidence-based approaches guided by field practices. He concluded his remarks by stressing the importance of continued support to expand the implementation and scope of the MEAC project's work.

INTERVENTIONS FROM THE FLOOR II [17:40- 18:00]

Representative from the Permanent Mission of Norway to the United Nations addressed the issue of child recruitment by armed groups, emphasizing the need to acknowledge the 'continuum of coercion' across which child recruitment occurs in order to avoid children from being re-victimized by authorities upon their exit. The representative concluded their intervention by asking how the international community can ensure that children associated with armed groups are treated as victims of grave violation and handed over to child protection personnel for reintegration, rather than being prosecuted as criminals in military courts.

Representative from the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations thanked the organizers for the event and expressed Sweden's support for evidence-based DDR interventions to build peace. The representative mentioned that Sweden has been supporting various exit interventions and is currently providing support to Ukraine, particularly in terms of capacity building and policy development. The representative noted the transferability of lessons learned from other contexts to Ukraine and noted that such learning can help prepare for the future.

Representative from CTED addressed the issue of justice and the need to uphold the rights of victims in places like Iraq and the Lake Chad region. They noted that alleged perpetrators of these crimes need to be brought to justice, and Member States must develop and implement prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration strategies for suspected terrorists in line with their obligations under international law. The representative stated that DDR processes are not accountability mechanisms for crimes committed, and perpetrators or suspected perpetrators of terrorist acts cannot participate in DDR programs until their cases are addressed. They concluded by saying that reintegration support must be provided within the relevant framework of engagement, which considers justice for victims of terrorist crimes.