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# Community Perspectives on Return and Reintegration in Cameroon and Chad

CHITRA NAGARAJAN · FRANCESCA BATAULT · DR REMADJI HOINATHY

DR CÉLESTIN DELANGA · DR DOUVAGAÏ

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This report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.


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# Key Findings

- The way former associates of Boko Haram groups arrived in communities affected their reception. Community members were more at ease when they had passed through government facilities as such processes gave community members a sense of security in that former associates had been screened for potential dangers. However, the extent of such screenings was not always clear or consistent. Additionally, former associates, disproportionately women and girls, who did not pass through government facilities were generally perceived as having higher health and nutrition needs which communities needed to support.

- Information and outreach to community members was key in easing fear and fostering good relations. In research locations where government officials and community leaders informed people about the arrival of former associates, relations were more positive. However, the quality of such interventions varied significantly between locations and depended on the initiative taken by local leaders. Similarly, public knowledge on reintegration differed, with women, displaced people, and religious and ethnic minorities not always included in these sensitization sessions.

- Reception to former associates differed across communities, with some levels of fear and stigma, particularly towards ex-associates seen to have joined voluntarily. However, community-led reintegration efforts could yield positive results, with community members often supporting ex-associates with clothes, food, and shelter and inviting them to take part in community discussions.

- Assistance upon return (or lack thereof) affected community cohesion and reintegration prospects. While assistance had previously been forthcoming, this assistance had now largely stopped or was greatly reduced. This shift negatively affected former associates who had no resources to help them withstand crises and added to the financial burden on community members who felt compelled to help them.

- Former associates faced challenges in restarting and maintaining livelihoods due to the combined impacts of climate change, security conditions, deteriorating economic conditions, and aid withdrawal. They struggled to earn sufficient income to cover their basic needs and were often reliant on the goodwill and generosity of family members. Women ex-associates faced challenges in restarting livelihoods given difficulties in accessing credit, land, and tools, and as they had smaller social networks to support them in finding work.

# Background

## About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project benefits from generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); the Government of Norway; Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); UNICEF; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience in the Lake Chad Basin; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

## About This Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses of their political or practical implications for the United Nations and its partners.

## About This Report

This report details how former associates of Boko Haram groups and their communities of return in Cameroon and Chad perceive and assess the return and reintegration process. Findings are informed by a two-step research process which consisted of a series of interviews and Mora and Igawa Mémé in Cameroon and in Baga Sola, Bol, Magar, and Kousseri 1 in Chad. Interviews were followed by association- and gender-segregated group discussions with the same respondents where initial findings were discussed, and recommendations co-created.

This report seeks to enhance knowledge about return and reintegration and provide recommendations from communities affected to make reintegration programming more effective, accountable and fit for purpose.

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# Introduction

Across the Lake Chad Basin, people have been exiting Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), groups often known collectively as Boko Haram, for a number of years.[1] To understand how communities viewed and received them, and the reintegration journeys of former associates themselves, MEAC conducted a series of interviews and group discussions in Mora and Igawa Mémé in Cameroon and in Baga Sola, Bol, Magar, and Kousseri 1 in Chad.[2] Interviews were followed by group discussions with these same respondents (segmented by gender and association) to bring together participants to discuss initial research findings and generate recommendations for building on successes and addressing gaps in the return process. This Findings Report presents the collective assessment of communities, ex-associates, and researchers on what has worked well with the reintegration process and what needs improvement.

# Findings

## I. How ex-associates arrived in communities affected their reception

In both Cameroon and Chad, having ex-associates pass through government (including military) facilities put the minds of some community members at ease. Releases facilitated by the military gave some community members a sense of security as they believed the military's involvement meant former associates had been 'screened' for potential danger before reintegration, even if the extent of such screenings was not always clear or consistent. Generally, communities believed that men and boys ex-associates posed greater risk to them

[1] The authors recognize that Boko Haram is sometimes considered a derogatory name, falsely presumes there is one cohesive group, and is not the name used by the different groups themselves. However, recognizing that the name Boko Haram is often used by local populations as an umbrella name – although this varies by geography and interaction – this report will use the term to encompass all groups. When reference is made to a specific group, this will be clearly indicated, and the names Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) will be used.

[2] This included 32 people (16 women and 16 men) in Cameroon in October 2024 and 38 people (17 women and 21 men) Chad in September 2024. Respondents included primarily people who had exited Boko Haram and other community members including leaders, and some government officials.

than their female counterparts, but they were also wary of women ex-associates, particularly in Cameroon. Here, communities knew that women formerly associated with JAS had supported and committed violence. Yet, due to gendered assumptions, policies, and practices that saw women largely as victims, women were more likely to go directly to communities without military scrutiny and government support, and communities more likely to view them with suspicion, particularly if they were thought to still have allegiance to JAS.

To various extents, government facilities addressed the immediate needs of the ex-associates who passed through them. While many ex-associates, particularly in Chad,[3] were more positive about the healthcare, food, water, and shelter provided in government facilities, ex-associates in Cameroon largely characterized conditions in the Meri centre as poor. Moreover, government facilities in both countries tended to be designed with the men in mind, with women and children viewed in terms of their relationship with their husbands and fathers, and thus little attention was paid to their specific needs. As a result, in both Cameroon and Chad, girls and women who returned without husbands or fathers bypassed formal support and tended to go to directly to communities together with their children. In both contexts, when ex-associates left or bypassed the facilities altogether, the burden to care for them fell on communities, which were often already struggling. Community members noted how recent waves of ex-associates who came without having passed via Meri in Cameroon or the military in Chad tended to have injuries and greater health and nutrition needs which they needed to support. Moreover, many ex-associates of all genders had chosen to leave Meri in search of job prospects outside but often struggled, further adding to the economic responsibilities of family, friends, and neighbours who felt duty-bound to help them.

## II. Information and outreach to community members prior to and after the arrival of ex-associates were vital to easing fears and supporting good relations

When government officials and community leaders informed people in the communities about the impending returns and followed up with community members after the arrival of ex-associates, relations were more positive. These conversations gave people the space to air concerns, ask questions and sensitized them on the need for acceptance and social cohesion as a path towards peace in the region. In Igawa Mémé in Cameroon, ex-associates already living in communities were also involved in supporting others who returned and community sensitization. These sessions gave space for ex-associates to share their experiences and allowed the development of a shared narrative among community members which was positive but could mean those with contrasting opinions felt pressure to conform and had no space to voice what they thought.

[3] In Chad, the Baga Sola centre was initially only used for screening purposes and is no longer operational. In recent years, former associates have been held in temporary transit centres in Bol.

However, the quality of reintegration-related interventions varied significantly between locations, affecting relations. Community outreach and involvement in reintegration efforts varied significantly between communities based on the approach taken by local leaders. Levels of public knowledge on reintegration differed, with women, displaced people, and religious and ethnic minorities in some areas not always included in sensitization sessions. As a result, they had greater levels of apprehension, particularly because - within the limited samples used for this study - these respondents reported high rates of victimization. In Kousseri 1 and Magar in Chad, specific women-only sessions were held to enable women, often constrained to speak in mixed-gender sessions by patriarchal gender norms, to share their thoughts but this practice depended on the disposition of community leaders and was not consistent across all communities.

## III. Assistance after arrival in the community (and its absence) affected lived realities, community cohesion, and reintegration prospects

Assistance upon return had previously benefitted ex-associates as well as displaced people, and host communities. The provision of food, shelter, and non-food items to all helped meet basic needs but also ensured that communities saw benefits to hosting ex-associates (and displaced people more broadly), crediting the assistance of humanitarian actors to their presence. Further, it meant community members were better able to help those in need, with respondents describing how they had been able to diversify livelihoods with the money saved and use the resulting increased incomes to provide ex-associates with food, jobs, or money to start businesses.

This aid, however, had largely stopped or was greatly reduced in the region in recent years, which made it particularly challenging to navigate extreme weather events linked to climate change that affected land-based livelihoods. These factors disproportionately affected ex-associates, who had no resources to help them during crises, and added to the financial burden of others in the community who felt compelled to support them.[4] Community members shared how climate shocks, the withdrawal of aid, and the need to provide ex-associates with food and other necessities had eaten into their own savings, meaning they were no longer able to buy goods to engage in trade, with their lower resulting incomes reducing their ability to help and increasing frustration with the continued dependence of ex-associates on them. Where humanitarian assistance was still present, respondents spoke of how some people, including ex-associates were not included in distribution lists because they came to the community later on. They suspected government officials of diverting funds meant for their reintegration, and

[4] For more, see: Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Remadji Hoinathy, Célestin Dalanga and Douvagaï, "Climate, Insecurity and Displacement: Triple Barriers to the Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Associates", *Findings Report 42*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2025.

while the research team found no evidence of this diversion, this perception affected community attitudes towards the government.

Moreover, when aid was available, it often did not fully take into account the gendered needs and realities of ex-associates. Most reintegration support tended to be for those who passed through government programmes, who were predominately men. With women judged to be low risk, they often spent little time in government facilities or bypassed them altogether and returned directly to communities, as described above. Despite their food, medical, psychological, and livelihoods needs, they received little government assistance. Although, in Cameroon, women's associations provided support in some communities, they did not have the resources to give the same range of support as the state. An area highlighted as a particular gap by women ex-associates and other community members was government inaction with regards to girls and women who had been abducted and forced into marriages and the extent to which they were able to separate from these 'husbands.' They felt that little was done to help these women and girls rebuild relationships with their families and come to terms with the gender-based violence to which they had been subjected.[5] Conversely, there were also few interventions for older boys and men, many of whom had been forced to fight, to shift attitudes and deal with the psychosocial impacts of these experiences. Some community members noted how some men and boys ex-associates tended to be more prone towards anger and making threats in response to disputes, a dynamic that contributes to heightening tensions and fear.

Support for ex-associates affected their perceptions of the government and the reintegration process. Some ex-associates said the government had not kept the promises it had made to encourage their exit, with men tending to be more negative about the aid received than women, indicative of the lower expectations that women often had linked to gender norms. In Chad, government support for ex-associates varied depending on when they exited the bush, with those who left more recently given more government support, including in the form of money to help them reestablish livelihoods. One explanation for this shift was that recent waves of ex-associates included people who had spent more time in the bush, were considered 'hardened,' and therefore needed interventions to prevent their return to the bush as opposed to earlier waves who had been less engaged in violence and were seen as less likely to cause problems. However, in instances where the government, including security forces, were seen to have shown respect and provided useful support to enable reintegration, ex-associates said that doing so had shifted previous grievances that they had held against the state and positively changed how they viewed and trusted the government.

[5] For more, see Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "From Survival to Struggle: Women and Girls' Experiences with and After Boko Haram," *Findings Report 39*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

## IV. Communities saw wide divergence in the reception of ex-associates, but it was notable that community-led reintegration efforts could yield positive results over time

Respondents generally spoke of positive relations and community solidarity for ex-associates. In the communities of focus for this research, almost all ex-associates lived in places where they had family and friends and both they and others shared their joy at being reunited after time apart. While assistance tended to be most forthcoming from relatives, they shared how they had also received clothes, food, land for farming, housing, help to build shelter, and money to access healthcare from others in the community. Marriage between ex-associates and others in the community was seen as a particular sign of acceptance and integration. Ex-associates also shared their happiness at being invited to take part in community discussions, decision-making, and savings and loans groups. Shared communal suffering, for example how flooding had affected harvest, could also build relations: awareness that everyone was affected by flooding forged solidarity in Chadian communities examined in this study.

This positivity was not always present, with some ex-associates and other community members sharing their unease. Respondents said it had been initially difficult to live together, and that residual levels of stigma and fear remained, particularly of ex-associates who were seen to have joined Boko Haram groups voluntarily (as opposed to having been abducted). In addition, those who had been involved in violence, and who had exited Boko Haram groups in later waves, were viewed more suspiciously. Particularly in Cameroon, where levels of violence against civilians, perpetrated by JAS, were higher, some community respondents were unable to differentiate between active and former associates. Little interaction with former associates, and the perception that they were unjustly receiving more assistance also hindered positive relations. Some community members believed some ex-associates had not changed their way of thinking and still saw them as *kirdi*[6] so they did not even accept their greetings. Former associates could also become angry if their former group was criticized. Some community members noted that incidences of sexual violence and theft had recently increased and were unsure as to whether to attribute this dynamic to the arrival of ex-associates. They also shared instances where some ex-associates had spoken openly of the violence they had perpetrated while in the bush, which left them unsure as to the extent that they had moved on from such attitudes and behaviour. Some community members worried that ex-associates were spying on communities and passing on intelligence to enable attacks. Additionally, language differences between ex-associates who had been displaced from their homes along the border with Nigeria and host communities made interactions more difficult and contributed to distance and miscommunication.

[6] A term, seen as derogatory, which is mostly used to describe non-Muslims, but which JAS also uses to include Muslims who do not follow their interpretation of Islam.

Attitudes and behaviour, however, could shift over time. In some communities where relations had been tense initially, ex-associates and other community members discussed how government and NGO support as well as actions by local leaders, women's groups, other influential individuals in the community, and ex-associates themselves had helped to shift interactions over time. Psychological support from NGOs and counsel and care by other community members had helped ex-associates deal with their experience and perpetration of atrocities and process initial anger, frustration, and trauma. Matters had significantly improved due to the passage of time, observations of ex-associates' good behaviour, acts of community support, and acknowledgement of shared suffering in the face of current economic, extreme weather, and security conditions.

## V. Ex-associates faced specific challenges restarting and maintaining livelihoods, which negatively impacted their economic and social status and meant they continued to be dependent on others

Climate change, security conditions, economic realities, and aid withdrawal affected the material realities of everyone in the community. In each research location, respondents said the economic situation had regressed compared to how it had been a few years ago. While rainfall unpredictability and extreme weather events had affected land-based livelihoods, insecurity limited climate adaptation strategies, such as migration to nearby areas with more fertile lands. Price increases meant food was now unaffordable. Past interventions, for example allocation of land around polders in Magar in Chad, supported some people to cope with these impacts, but the reduction of humanitarian assistance affected basic needs and left many with little capital to pursue new adaptation strategies or livelihood diversification as described above. This situation was exacerbated by heavy rains that led to the flooding of farmlands and, in September and October 2024 when the research was conducted most respondents, particularly in Chad, expected little to no harvest.[7] This rain had also destroyed shelters, particularly those belonging to ex-associates and displaced people who had constructed them from basic and unsustainable materials found in the bush (e.g., straw, sticks and mud). These events not only affected the ability of people to meet their basic needs but also meant they often did not have the money to travel to access education and healthcare in other areas, as these services were either unavailable in their communities or seen to be of poor quality.

Ex-associates found it particularly difficult to earn sufficient incomes to cover their basic needs. Coming from the bush empty-handed, they were in a different situation from people who had never left the community and displaced people who had been able to bring their animals, clothes, goods, tools, and household items with them. As many of them had been displaced or had returned to find their land degraded, flooded, or used by others and their animals, goods, and tools sold, or destroyed, they worked as day labourers for others. Not only was this work

[7] While Cameroon had also been affected by flooding, the research team did not conduct interviews in the areas worst affected.

financially precarious, but ex-associates also spoke about being the last to be hired. In particular, older ex-associates said they struggled to be able to do physical labour due to health conditions and lower energy and relied on their children, if they were present, to provide for them. Some ex-associates were able to hire land to farm themselves but had to pay higher rates than others and felt extorted and frustrated by this differential treatment. Moreover, many ex-associates had difficulty accessing credit to buy or rent land, attending school, or crossing military checkpoints for work, due to their lack of identity cards, which they had been forced to destroy when joining Boko Haram groups.[8] These dynamics meant that ex-associates said that they often did not have enough food to eat as well as affected their access to education, health, and other services, marriage prospects, and household relations. As a result of these difficulties, they were reliant on the goodwill and support of family members, which was especially problematic for displaced ex-associates whose relatives, often displaced themselves, were also struggling.

Gender influenced livelihood prospects for ex-associates. Women ex-associates faced challenges accessing finance, land, and tools, and had smaller social networks to turn to for help finding work. They were often passed over in favour of men by those looking for day labourers and had less work experience due to their time in the bush where they were blocked from pursuing income generating activities. While men (who were more likely to have identity cards (even if at low rates) or were more often able to pay bribes at checkpoints than women) were more able to migrate in search of livelihood prospects, women were often unable to do so. As a result, they stayed behind in communities to find ways to provide for elders and children, particularly as their husbands were not always able to send money to support households. Some husbands, still following the gender ideology of Boko Haram groups, also restricted women's mobility outside the home and income generating activities. Women ex-associates, who lived in the communities of their husbands, where they did not usually have strong social networks particularly struggled. Lastly, while men tended to be engaged in more types of economic activities with higher incomes, women were seen to work more hours, including in financially precarious activities, and be forced to engage in exchange sex for money.

Other community members, seeing the suffering of ex-associates, felt compelled to offer them food, land, tools, and other items, even if they did not have the means to do so. They noted how the livelihoods prospects of ex-associates were limited and that, in some cases, they struggled to be able to feed and clothe themselves. In every community, respondents spoke about how ex-associates' incomplete economic reintegration had increased their own burdens. They had given ex-associates and displaced people land for shelter and farming, reducing what was available to them for their economic activities, which was a notable sacrifice given current

[8] Some ex-associates interviewed had applied for identity cards or been registered as part of government efforts but, at the time of interview, very few had received them. While government officials had tried to provide alternative forms of identification as a stop-gap solution, this documentation identified the carrier as an ex-associate, so respondents were reluctant to use them.

hardships in the region. Moreover, with an ethos that the community needs to support everyone living in it, they shared what they had with displaced people and ex-associates, depleting their savings and eroding their resilience to withstand current and future shocks.

## VI. Security dynamics influenced the socio-economic reintegration and acceptance of ex-associates

In Mora and Igawa Mémé in Cameroon and in Baga Sola, Bol, Magar, and Kousseri 1 in Chad, ex-associates and other community members alike mostly felt safe in their communities, noting that they could engage in economic and social activities freely. They spoke about being able to sleep at night and feeling at peace. They linked increased security to military action as well as exits from Boko Haram groups, which reduced the numbers of people active in them, and led to the participation of former associates in community security groups such as the *Comités de Vigilance et de Sécurité* (COVIs).

For ex-associates, life in the community was very different from the fear and lack of control they had previously felt while in Boko Haram groups. The control leaders exerted on them, their inability to express unhappiness or opposition to leaders' dictates and being blocked from interacting with family members contrasted with their current freedom to move where they wished, to engage in economic activities, to meet family and friends, and to talk and exchange ideas more openly. Men, particularly in Cameroon, spoke of no longer being forced to perpetrate criminality and violence against civilian communities.[9]

Ex-associates, however, contrasted this situation inside their communities with insecurity outside them, particularly along the Cameroon-Nigeria border and on the islands of Lake Chad. Many respondents, including ex-associates who had initially returned to their home villages after exiting the groups, had subsequently left these areas due to the possibility of abduction and sexual violence (for women) and murder (for men). Yet, these areas had more livelihood prospects due to greater land availability and fertility, access to water, and demand for labourers compared to safer places with higher population density. As a result, respondents said they had to choose between struggling with no income in areas of relative safety or putting their lives at risk in locations with more economic prospects, but which had presence of Boko Haram groups. Indeed, ex-associates, seen by former comrades as traitors and thought to pass on details of operations to security forces, were at higher risk of violence from both JAS and ISWAP. In Chad where ISWAP, who are less likely to target civilians than JAS, was more dominant, many unassociated older boys and men were more likely to go further afield to pursue livelihoods. In Cameroon, ex-associates were also at risk but everyone regardless of former association faced violence from JAS. In both countries, women worried for men's safety

[9] For other MEAC research on this subject, please see Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "From Survival to Struggle: Women and Girls' Experiences with and After Boko Haram," *Findings Report 39*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

and, concerned about how to feed their families, went to farmlands and collected firewood to earn incomes despite the danger of abduction and sexual violence. Respondents wanted their governments to ensure security in these areas so they could pursue livelihoods and return home.

# Policy Recommendations

Respondents in communities that had experienced the return of ex-associates – and the ex-associates themselves – had the following recommendations for government and other actors on how they could improve the return process and reintegration support:

- **Provide more information and conduct more outreach in communities before and after the arrival of ex-associates**, with particular focus on engagement with women, displaced people, and ethnic and religious minorities in the recipient communities;
- **Rather than focus on ex-associates alone in providing aid, as doing so will create or entrench grievances, ensure support is provided equitably in the community**, for example through matching programmes and tailored to the differing needs of the recipients;
- **Build peace and social cohesion via community dialogues and other programmes or fora** that facilitate interactions between returnees and recipient community members, including around livelihoods;
- **Provide development and livelihoods assistance to these conflict-affected areas that have experienced historical under-development.** This support should be designed to help communities become more resilient to climate impacts and meet basic needs, especially food, shelter, education, and healthcare as their livelihoods shift to become more sustainable;
- **Be more responsive to gendered realities** by increasing support to survivors of gender-based violence, helping ex-associates to shift away from the gender ideology of Boko Haram groups, and addressing gendered challenges to starting and sustaining livelihoods; and
- **Widen the zone of safety and security in the region** to enable the resumption of livelihood activities by providing identity documents for those, including ex-associates, who do not have them and working with security forces to secure areas for farming, fishing, and grazing.

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