



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY

Centre for Policy Research

MEAC Findings Report 1

Climate-driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria

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FEBRUARY 2021

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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KEY FINDINGS

- The effects of climate change are widely felt in communities across Borno State in Nigeria.
- 86 per cent of the community leaders acknowledging climatic shifts know members of their communities whose livelihoods have been negatively impacted by these changes.
- 41 per cent of respondents acknowledging climate-related difficulties farming, fishing, or herding knew people who joined Boko Haram as a result of these challenges.
- Similarly, 64 per cent knew people who joined the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) or Yan Gora because they had difficulty maintaining a living from farming, herding, or fishing.

This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR'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 Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

ISBN: 978-92-808-6525-7 © United Nations University, February 2021.

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Citation: Jessica Caus, "Climate-driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report 1* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

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 UNU-CPR’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. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland’s Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank.

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 short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected from November 2020 – February 2021 as part of an ongoing survey of community leaders in Borno State, Nigeria. It focuses on emerging findings on the impact of climate change on recruitment into the insurgency in the North East. The report will be updated as more survey data is collected, not only from community leaders, but also from community members and even former associates of Boko Haram and other armed groups.

This report provides an overview of climate-conflict links in Nigeria, followed by emerging, related findings from the MEAC community leaders survey, and ends with the examination of a few key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Climate-conflict Links in Nigeria

Overview

Greater heat, erratic rainfall, more droughts, floods, and storms – Nigeria is experiencing the full range of climate change impacts. In fact, Nigeria has been classified as a climate change ‘hot spot’,

one of the countries most exposed and vulnerable to climate change. 41 million Nigerians – a fifth of the population – live in areas with high exposure to climate risks (e.g., storm surges, flooding, droughts).¹ That said, climate change manifests in different ways across the country. The southern coastal area is increasingly affected by rising sea levels, while higher temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns are most acutely felt in the northern regions.² Aggravatingly, the North East in particular is also the region hardest hit by the Boko Haram insurgency, facing the double burden of climate risks and high levels of violence.

At the UN and beyond, there is a growing recognition of the role that climate change plays in exacerbating conflict risks, and the scholarship on climate-security is ever-growing.³ As the claim of a direct causality is quite contested and there is still much debate about the concrete interplay of climate and conflict, a common view is that climate change acts as a “risk multiplier”, contributing to existing tensions and thereby increasing the likelihood of violence.⁴ This framing helpfully captures the indirect nature of climate-conflict links and the complex interaction with other risk factors (e.g., socioeconomic dynamics), but to craft effective policies and programmes, we need to go further.⁵ Is there a more concrete causal relationship at play – does climate change drive violent conflict?

In Nigeria, and the Sahel more broadly, emerging insights about the pathways from climatic shifts to heightened conflict risks largely revolve around the impacts on agricultural livelihoods.⁶ Rising temperatures and more variable rainfall patterns increase both the risk of more extreme weather events like floods *and* the risk of more frequent and prolonged droughts. These factors (among others) aggravate the dynamics of desertification and water availability, posing increasing challenges for agricultural livelihoods and playing into existing conflict dynamics in a number of ways.⁷ For instance, climate change has caused shifts in pastoralist migratory patterns, pushing herders into areas traditionally dominated by farming communities and fueling resource competition between these two groups, which has led to dramatic levels of violence in recent years. Tensions between pastoralists and farmers have been increasingly instrumentalized by Boko Haram and other armed groups (including listed terrorist groups), which take advantage of these tensions to build alliances with and mobilize communities across the Sahel, including from North West Nigeria.⁸

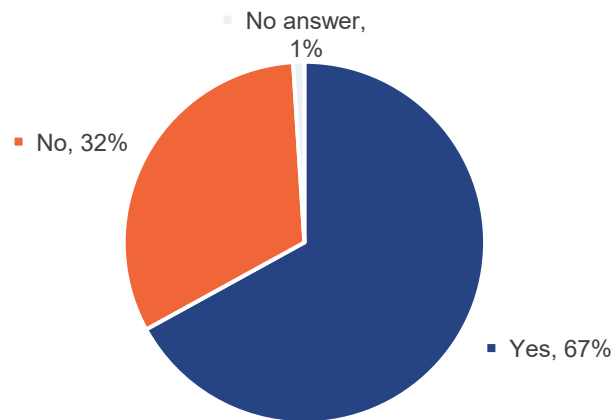
There are also reports suggesting that the negative impacts of climate change for farmers, herders, and fishers are driving recruitment into armed groups. In the Lake Chad area, for example, climate-induced livelihood losses have led to extremely vulnerable populations that are more susceptible to recruitment by Boko Haram and other groups who offer economic alternatives.⁹ Especially in areas that are highly dependent on subsistence farming, a reduction of arable land, less predictable water availability, longer and more frequent droughts, and crop destruction from floods and storms have driven communities into precarious situations without many economic alternatives.

Findings

Through its work in North East Nigeria, the MEAC project found new indications of these dynamics between climate change and recruitment into armed groups. MEAC’s local research team led an extensive survey of community leaders (e.g., Bulamas, Lawans, camp leaders/chairmen, district/ward heads, and women’s leaders) predominately in the Maiduguri Metropolitan City (MMC) and Konduga areas of Borno State between November 2020 and February 2021. The 182 respondents were asked whether they have observed climatic shifts in their area; whether people in their community have experienced climate-related agricultural and economic difficulties; and if they knew anyone who joined Boko Haram or a self-defence forces like the CJTF because of such difficulties. While the survey is still underway and these results will be updated as an expected additional 100-200 community leaders are interviewed, the emerging picture from this survey provides quite striking results:

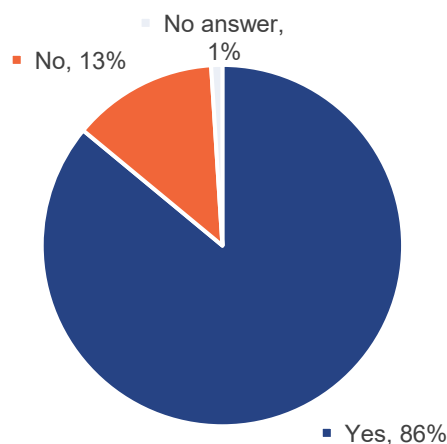
Generally speaking, a changing climate is broadly acknowledged and experienced by communities in the area. The majority of respondents (67 per cent) said they have experienced climatic shifts and changes in the rainy season, dry season, or Harmattan season (characterized by its dusty trade winds) compared to when they were younger.

Figure 1: Compared to when you were younger, do you think the rainy season, dry season or Harmattan are different in some way, such as longer, shorter, or hotter?



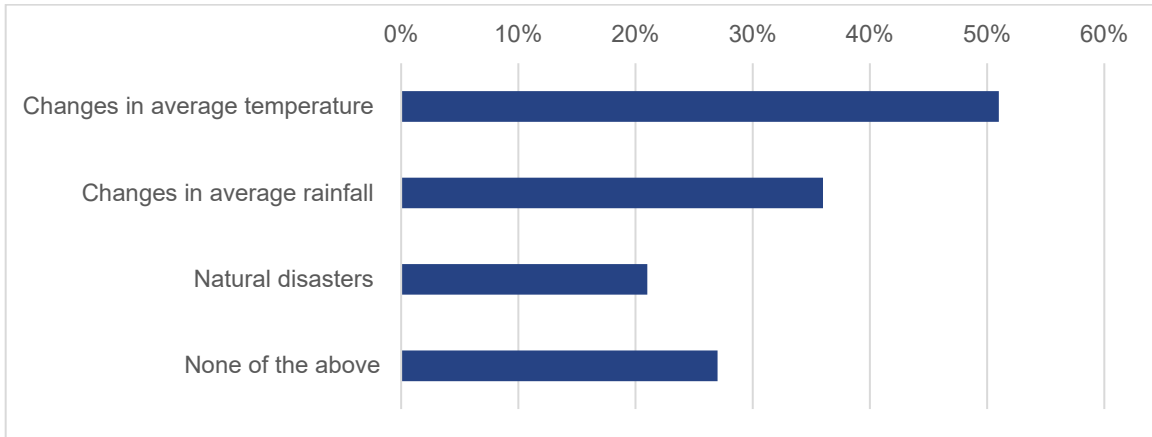
Additionally, climate change is widely identified as having negative impacts on the population in Borno State. Of the community leaders reporting climatic shifts, 86 per cent knew people whose life or income has been negatively affected by these changes.

Figure 2: Do you know anyone else or have you heard of anyone else whose life or income has been negatively affected because of these changes?



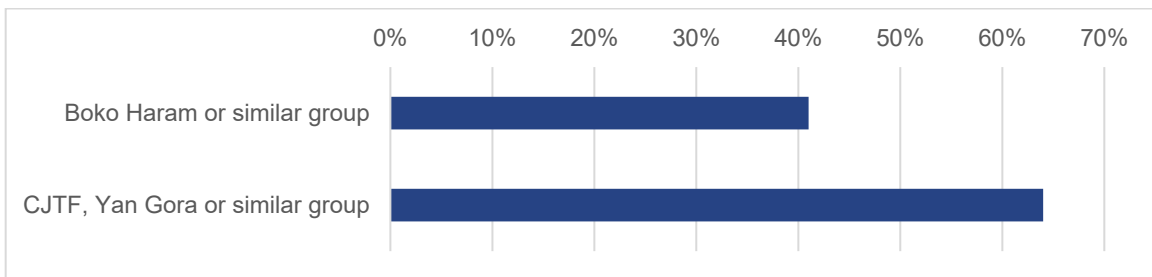
Even before the outbreak of the conflict, 73 per cent of leaders identified at least one type of climate-change related phenomena (e.g., fluctuations in average temperatures, changes in rainfall, and/or natural disasters) making it difficult to earn a living from farming, herding, or fishing in their communities. Figure 3 breaks out the different types of climate-related difficulties they cited.

Figure 3: Before the conflict came to your community, from what you have heard, did people experience difficulties making a living from farming, herding or fishing because of any of the following? Please select all that apply.



These climate-related livelihood challenges were identified as having a direct impact on recruitment into the conflict in the North East. A striking 41 per cent of respondents that reported climate-related difficulties knew of individuals who joined Boko Haram or a similar group because of such difficulties; even more (64 per cent) knew of climate-related recruitment into the CJTF, Yan Gora, or other self-defence forces.

Figure 4: Do you know of anyone who joined Boko Haram or another armed group like this because of these difficulties? / Do you know of anyone who joined the CJTF, Yan Gora, or another group like this because of these difficulties?



Not only do these early indications underline the general risk that climate change poses for livelihoods; they also provide support for a more direct and specific link between climate change and the ability of Boko Haram and other groups to recruit and gain a foothold in hard-hit agricultural communities without many employment alternatives.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

These findings have various implications, not only for the North East but also for other regions in Nigeria and the Sahel more broadly.

First, a high dependency on agriculture and subsistence farming is not unique to North East Nigeria; other areas in the North West and the Middle Belt are experiencing equally drastic climate change impacts that disrupt traditional agricultural and pastoralist practices and threaten livelihoods. Further, the proliferation of small arms in the region and increasing armament of pastoralists and rural banditry groups are driving the risks – or realities – of large-scale violence beyond the North East. This combination of climate impacts and increased group mobilization means that the same dynamics that are evidently playing out in the Lake Chad area likely afflict other settings as well. This can already be seen in North West Nigeria, where Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru have increasingly been instrumentalizing the tensions between farmers and herders to recruit from rural communities and entrench themselves in the area. Such activity raises the concern that the region could become a “land bridge” that links the insurgents in the North East with armed group elements in western Niger, with dramatic spillover potential for an already fragile Sahel region.¹⁰

Second, and deriving from the previous point, it becomes clear that to mitigate recruitment (and re-recruitment) by Boko Haram and other armed groups, the prevention and conflict response efforts in North East Nigeria and beyond need to include climate-sensitive programming. It is vital that interventions seeking to counteract conflict risks or facilitate conflict transitions take the climate’s role of driving such risks into account. Responses need to include support for those whose livelihoods have been challenged or even eradicated by the impacts of climate change. This can mean enhancing jobs or skills training for people coming out of armed groups to provide economic alternatives that are less vulnerable to environmental factors, and thus reduce the likelihood of rejoining a group for want of other income opportunities. It can also mean supporting communities in their adaptation to climate stresses, building local governance and resource management capacities, and providing education and trainings on sustainable, climate-smart agricultural practices. This can help farmers, herders, and fishers increase their productivity, better adapt to environmental changes, and ease the pressures to look for opportunities elsewhere, particularly in armed groups and self-defense forces.

¹ Ashley Moran et al., *Fragility and Climate Risks. Nigeria* (Washington DC: USAID, 2019).

² Adam Day and Jessica Caus, *Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change* (New York: United Nations University, 2020).

³ For the purposes of this brief, the term climate-security captures the ways in which climate change affects the risks of violent conflict.

⁴ See, for example, Adam Day, *Climate Change and Security: Perspectives from the Field* (United Nations University: New York, 2020) and Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia, *Climate Change as Threat Multiplier: Understanding the Broader Nature of the Risk* (The Center for Climate and Security: Washington D.C., 2015).

⁵ Josh Busby, “It’s Time we Think Beyond ‘Threat Multiplier’ to Address Climate and Security,” *New Security Beat*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2020/01/its-time-threat-multiplier-address-climate-security/>.

⁶ Oli Brown, *Climate-Fragility Risk Brief: North Africa & Sahel* (Berlin: Climate Security Expert Network, 2019); Jessica Caus, “Nigeria Case Study,” *Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change* (New York: United Nations University, 2020).

⁷ Climate change is likely not an isolated factor in the loss of arable land and changes in hydrology. Some studies have suggested that population growth, expanding cities and spreading agricultural production are the dominant stressors of the Nigerian ecosystem, while climate change is better thought of as an exacerbating factor. See Adam Day and Jessica Caus, *Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change* (New York: United Nations University, 2020); USAID, *Climate Risk Profile. Nigeria* (Washington DC: USAID, 2019).

⁸ International Crisis Group, “Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem,” *Africa Report* 288 (2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

⁹ Of course, the region has longstanding legacies of marginalization and socioeconomic grievances and the conflict has only exacerbated the high unemployment and poverty levels, pointing to the cyclical nature of these dynamics. At the same time, there are increasing indications that climate change is compounding these risks. See, for example, Oli Brown, *Climate-Fragility Risk Brief: North Africa & Sahel* (Berlin: Climate Security Expert Network, 2019); Julia McQuaid et al., *The Role of Water Stress in Instability and Conflict* (Arlington: CNA, 2017); Jürgen Scheffran, Peter Michael Link, and Janpeter Schilling, “Climate and Conflict in Africa”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019).

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, “Violence in Nigeria’s North West”.

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