MEAC Findings Report 22

Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

CONTENTS

KEY FINDINGS

- Participation in social and political activities reduces the likelihood of children being associated with Boko Haram in some countries but has the inverse effect on affiliation with community security actors (CSAs), suggesting these activities are being co-opted or targeted for recruitment.

- When armed groups exert territorial control, it increases a child's interaction with armed actors. Across the region, there are higher rates of Boko Haram association among children that experienced occupation. Occupation also increases children's likelihood of affiliating with CSA groups.

- In several countries, although formal education reduces the likelihood of association with Boko Haram, it increases the likelihood of children becoming affiliated with CSAs. In Nigeria and Cameroon, being an almajiri increases the likelihood that children will become associated with Boko Haram and CSAs.

- Armed groups are more likely to make recruitment promises to children than adults. Promises go beyond economic incentives to include safety, a sense of belonging, and assistance with marriage.

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 and 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 and accompanying case studies are supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and is being run in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; 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 quantitative and qualitative research carried out in multiple locations across the Lake Chad Region from May 2021 to June 2022. The report draws heavily from a multi-year, multi-method study underway in Nigeria,[1] including from:

- A 3,273-person baseline survey with ex-associates of different factions of Boko Haram such as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), ex-affiliates of various CSAs (e.g., Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), vigilante groups, and members of surrounding or receiving communities in Borno State (including from Maiduguri, Konduga, and Jere). The data used in this report represents the baseline survey responses from May 2021 to early June 2022. The baseline survey continues today in Nigeria in order to cover the recent mass defections from Boko Haram.

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[1] The study in Nigeria is implemented with Mobukar Consultancy.

- An ongoing midline survey which to date includes 1,280 respondents who were part of the baseline sample, predominantly comprised of former Boko Haram associates, former and current CSA affiliates, and those who were matched with them in community-based reintegration programmes. Some of those matched individuals appear to have been selected because they were thought to be vulnerable; for others it was less clear if they were chosen due to specific eligibility criteria or if their involvement was an effort to ensure non-associated community members also benefited from reintegration programming. The data used in this report represents the midline survey which started in January 2022 and was completed in early August 2022.

- A series of 21 focus groups conducted in Maiduguri, Borno State, in both March and September 2022, with current and former affiliates of CSAs, as well as former associates of Boko Haram, and non-associated community members.

This report also draws from an assessment study MEAC ran in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience for the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and its local government and civil society partners, as well as its implementing partners Mobukar Consultancy (Nigeria) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). It included:[2]

- A 516-person survey in Niger with ex-associates of Boko Haram, ex-affiliates of CSAs, and non-associated community members across the Diffa Region (March-April 2022).
- A 998-person survey in Chad with ex-associates of Boko Haram, ex-affiliates of CSAs, and non-associated community members in the Lac and Hadjer-Lamis Regions (March 2022).
- An 807-person survey in Cameroon with ex-associates of Boko Haram, ex-affiliates of CSAs, and non-associated community members across the Far North and North Regions (March 2022).

Community samples were designed to be representative of the areas they were pulled from, within certain security and ethical parameters (e.g., no children younger than 12). For example, in the communities targeted for surveys, enumerator teams randomly selected households and within them, men, women, and children to interview. Women and girls were only interviewed by female enumerators. Occasionally, through this randomized approach, ex-associates from Boko Haram and ex-affiliates from CSAs like the CJTF, the comité(s) de vigilance (et de sécurité) (COVI/COVIS), and vigilante groups, were identified. Most ex-affiliates and those individuals who had previously been with Boko Haram or one of its factions, however, were identified through the transit or rehabilitation centres where they reside, through UN-supported programmes, or through local leaders who had been involved in their return to the community, resulting in a sample of convenience.

The research took place in an active conflict and the security situation was often precarious and fluid, impacting survey rollout and decisions to visit certain communities. In addition, many of the targeted areas were isolated, especially in the islands of Lake Chad, which made access logistically challenging. Data collection was particularly challenging in Niger, where in addition to the challenges of identifying a mobile and disbursed ex-associate population, there was also frustration with the

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[2] A portion of the work in Nigeria was also undertaken as part of this partnership.

very idea of sitting through a survey interview, which some felt was unlikely to improve their difficult living conditions.

This MEAC findings report aims to contribute evidence to enable a better understanding of the current dynamics of child recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin, in order to strengthen, not only efforts to prevent children's involvement with armed actors, but also interventions that support them after they leave armed groups and re-enter civilian life. Findings highlight a range of social, civic, and family-based factors related to recruitment which may be of use when designing prevention and reintegration strategies for children in the Lake Chad Basin region.

Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin Region

Global Overview: Child Recruitment

Although children do not start conflicts, they are rarely able to escape their devastating effects. Childhoods are robbed by the consequences of war, subjected to extreme violence, family separation, the loss of education, and potentially long-lasting trauma, which may be felt long after the guns of war have fallen silent. According to the Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, a total of 22,645 grave violations were committed against children in 2021.[3] These violations included killing and maiming, denial of humanitarian access, sexual violence, abduction, destruction of schools and hospitals, and the recruitment of children. Whilst 6,310 cases of child use and recruitment were recorded in the Secretary-General's report, it is likely that the actual figure is far higher.[4] The reasons why children become associated with armed groups vary, with association often being the culmination of a series of interconnected and overlapping risk factors. These factors, both contextual and individual, are of importance when attempting to understand the trajectories of children into armed groups.

Prior research by UNU-CPR, including the 2018 volume *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*,[5] highlights that whilst there is an array of grey literature on child recruitment, there are few methodologically robust studies on the subject. Although the grey literature can provide useful information, particularly given that this is often the result of direct interactions with children in conflict settings, findings and explanations for child recruitment tend to be based on anecdotal evidence, thus requiring further research and investigation to substantiate claims.

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[3] United Nations Security Council, "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," United Nations, 11 July 2022, S/2022/493.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

When considering why children join armed groups, factors exist at the structural, social, and individual levels. To begin, it should be noted that without the presence of conflict or armed groups willing to recruit children, children would not be able to participate in conflicts in the first place. As such, the presence of conflict and armed groups are necessary conditions for recruitment. As victims of conflict, it should also be acknowledged that children's decision-making is constrained by the circumstances in which they find themselves. In attempting to understand why children join armed groups, it is, therefore, necessary to understand that any decision a child makes to join a group exists along a spectrum of coercion.

Beyond these key requirements, other structural factors related to the presence of conflict and armed groups may increase the likelihood of child involvement. For children living in a conflict setting where insecurity is rife, involvement in armed groups may be seen as necessary for survival.[6] Growing up surrounded by violence and fighting may normalize these behaviours and desensitize individuals from the implications of such actions.[7] Furthermore, being raised in an environment of conflict may lead to violence being presented as a legitimate strategy for children to seek revenge, gain status, or voice grievances.[8]

Societal cleavages and grievances – such as anger towards the government or inter-ethnic conflicts – may act as a catalyst, with armed groups exploiting these pre-existing grievances for their own gains (e.g., for recruitment). Through the "weaponization of societal conflicts and inter-community relations," armed groups present themselves as a tool through which these grievances can be resolved.[9] It has been argued that co-opting ethnicity and targeting religious and hyper-local social organizations enable armed actors to overcome recruitment problems and access large potential recruitment pools.[10]

Those living under the control of armed groups are governed by the rules and norms of the occupying armed group rather than the state. These groups often become de facto authorities, with control over territories and the lives of those living within them. As noted in earlier research, "when it assumes control over other state functions, an armed group is no longer outside the norms of the society but comes to enjoy enhanced social standing. Fighters become role models for children just at the time when other role models are absent (e.g., teachers due to closed schools)."[11] When living under armed group control, children may be left with little agency and few viable options other than to enlist or at least cooperate with the armed group.[12]

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[6] Salvador Santino Jr., Fulo Regilme, and Elisabetta Spoldi, "Children in Armed Conflict: A Human Rights Crisis in Somalia," *Global Jurist,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (March, 2021).
[7] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), *When the Music Stops: The Impact of Terrorism on Malian Youth* (Turin: UNICRI, 2020).
[8] Salvador Santino Jr., Fulo Regilme, and Elisabetta Spoldi, "Children in Armed Conflict: A Human Rights Crisis in Somalia," *Global Jurist,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (March, 2021).
[9] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), *When the Music Stops: The Impact of Terrorism on Malian Youth* (Turin: UNICRI, 2020).
[10] Tim C. Wegenast and Matthias Basedau, "Ethnic fractionalization, natural resources and armed conflict," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (November 2014).
[11] Siobhan O'Neil, "Trajectories of Children into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups," in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* eds. Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018), 48.
[12] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), *When the Music Stops: The Impact of Terrorism on Malian Youth* (Turin: UNICRI, 2020).

Factors influencing child recruitment are also present at the social level. Within the literature on child involvement in armed conflict, families are often presented as playing a central role – capable of both preventing and facilitating child recruitment. Families may act as a push factor, facilitating their child's involvement in an armed group for various reasons. This may result from coercion, a prior family association with the group, or because the recruitment generates additional income.[13] In some cases, children are recruited as a direct result of their parent's involvement. For example, in Syria, ISIL required the mandatory enlistment of all foreign fighters' sons – with those who did not do so 'voluntarily' being forcibly recruited.[14] Family dynamics and the presence of violence and abuse may also act as a pull factor in child recruitment, with children joining armed groups to escape abuse in the home.[15]

Separation from family – be it due to displacement or having been orphaned – is also argued to increase a child's risk factor.[16] One such reason why unaccompanied children may be at heightened risk is the argument that families can act as a source of resilience, protecting children from potential recruitment. Interviews with families who lived under ISIL control reported that parental influence was the main reason why children did not join ISIL, despite recruitment attempts.[17] Parents were suggested to be vital in preventing children from socializing with recruiters. However, it should be noted that parental intervention may be limited by fears of potential reprisals by the armed group or by alternate means of socialization and attachment between children and their recruiters.[18]

For instance, alongside family, community and peer networks also act as social factors potentially leading to child recruitment. Armed groups may embed themselves in local communities, using community outreach or the provision of services to establish themselves in a positive manner.[19] Alternatively, groups may exert pressure on communities, forcing community leaders to provide recruits in exchange for security or the avoidance of conflict.[20] Previous research by UNU-CPR highlights the influence that peers can have on young people's behaviour, with peer networks serving as a source of pressure or encouragement for armed group recruitment.[21] For children living in communities where other members have joined armed groups, seeing their peers earning money or having improved living standards and security due to their association may also encourage

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[13] Flora Khoo and William J. Brown, "Innocence killed: Role of propaganda videos in the recruitment of children of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," *The Journal of International Communication*, Vol. 27, No.1 (February, 2021); Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers* (New York: Combatting Terrorism Center, 2017); The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Lessons Learnt and Good Practices on Prevention of Recruitment and Use, Release and Reintegration,* (2020).

[14] Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment," ICCT Research Paper (The Hague: ICCT, 2018).

[15] Wenche Hauge, ""Nobody listens to us" Minors in DDR processes – The Gender Dimension," PRIO Paper (Oslo: PRIO, 2021).

[16] The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups* (2020).

[17] Flora Khoo and William J. Brown, "Innocence killed: Role of propaganda videos in the recruitment of children of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," *The Journal of International Communication*, Vol 27, No.1 (February, 2021)

[18] Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment," ICCT Research Paper (The Hague: ICCT, 2018).

[19] James Morris and Tristan Dunning, "Rearing Cubs of the Caliphate: An Examination of Child Soldier Recruitment by Da'esh," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 32, No. 7 (July, 2018).

[20] The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Lessons Learnt and Good Practices on Prevention of Recruitment and Use, Release and Reintegration* (2020).

[21] Rebecca Littman, *Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out Of Non-State Armed Groups* (New York: United Nations University, 2017).

recruitment.[22] This exposure to the potential material gains and physical safety afforded by joining an armed group is linked to the many individual factors that can lead to recruitment, including experiences of poverty, economic deprivation, and survival.

For some children, the material incentives to join an armed group can be as mundane as food, access to healthcare, or other basic necessities. Armed groups – such as Boko Haram or ISIL – reportedly distribute food and promise more if children enlist, exploiting the impoverished conditions and hunger that many children endure.[23] Joining an armed group could, therefore, be viewed as one of the few options for children to escape poverty and ensure survival, with promises of shelter, food, and employment acting as motivation.[24] Alternatives may be limited, especially if children cannot access employment or education.[25]

In much of the grey literature, education is presented as key to preventing recruitment, given its potential to provide alternative employment routes for children and to instil hope for the future.[26] Furthermore, schools provide structure to children's lives, prevent idleness, and provide informal monitoring and safeguarding functions.[27] However, attention should also be paid to the way in which education may instead act as a pull factor, if schools or educational facilities are controlled or influenced by armed groups and used for the purpose of indoctrination and recruitment.[28] The use of schools or religious institutions to promote certain ideologies or disseminate propaganda may influence a child's decision to join an armed group.[29] Nevertheless, despite the attention often paid to this topic, interviews with young people in Mali suggest that religion or ideology was not a main factor in recruitment, but rather something that could gain importance after joining the armed group.[30] This was also confirmed by the findings presented in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict,*[31] which demonstrated that religious ideology played a less influential role than was often assumed, and when it did appear to play a role, was one of several factors at play. This research demonstrated, across several case studies (Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria), that children and young people often have positive and prosocial motivations for joining armed

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[22] Salvador Santino Jr., Fulo Regilme, and Elisabetta Spoldi, "Children in Armed Conflict: A Human Rights Crisis in Somalia," *Global Jurist,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (March, 2021).

[23] Flora Khoo and William J. Brown, "Innocence killed: Role of propaganda videos in the recruitment of children of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," *The Journal of International Communication*, Vol 27, No.1 (February, 2021); Human Rights Watch, *"They Didn't Know if I was Alive of Dead" Military Detention of Children for Suspected Boko Haram Involvement in Northeast Nigeria* (2019).

[24] Salvador Santino Jr., Fulo Regilme, and Elisabetta Spoldi, "Children in Armed Conflict: A Human Rights Crisis in Somalia," *Global Jurist,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (March, 2021).

[25] World Vision International, *No Choice: It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers* (2019).

[26] Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies and The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, "No Education, No Protection: What school closures under COVID-19 mean for children and young people in crisis-affected contexts," Evidence Paper (New York: INEE, 2021).

[27] Ibid.

[28] Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment," ICCT Research Paper (The Hague: ICCT, 2018); James Morris and Tristan Dunning, "Rearing Cubs of the Caliphate: An Examination of Child Soldier Recruitment by Da'esh," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 32, No.7 (July, 2018).

[29] Flora Khoo and William J. Brown, "Innocence killed: Role of propaganda videos in the recruitment of children of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," *The Journal of International Communication*, Vol. 27, No.1 (February, 2021).

[30] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), *When the Music Stops: The Impact of Terrorism on Malian Youth* (Turin: UNICRI, 2020).

[31] Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, and Kabba Williams, "The Road to a Better Future," in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* eds. Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

groups. As highlighted in this section, this can include a desire or need for tangible advantages such as food or financial incentives, but also protecting one's family and community, or looking for a sense of belonging and group bonding.

As outlined above, a range of factors can influence whether a child is recruited into an armed group or not. However, all cases of child recruitment are not the same, and contextual differences – such as the region in which recruitment takes place, or the armed group involved in recruitment – may determine which factors influence a child's trajectory into an armed group. The following section provides an overview of child recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin, to help contextualize this report's findings.

Overview: Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin

In Nigeria, the insurgency led by Boko Haram, also known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), has impacted the country for 13 years. Following the execution of Boko Haram's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009 by Nigerian police officials, the conflict escalated and in May 2013 the International Criminal Court (ICC) designated it a non-international armed conflict.[32] Whilst Boko Haram's operations were originally focused on the North East of Nigeria, the armed group's presence eventually spread across the wider Lake Chad Basin to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The porous borders and topography of the Lake Chad Basin have made this region an ideal location for Boko Haram's activities.[33]

The recruitment and use of children by Boko Haram is believed to have begun at the start of the conflict in 2009.[34] In the following decade, UNICEF reported that an estimated 8,000 children had been recruited by Boko Haram,[35] although true figures are likely to be higher. Reports of mass abductions, attacks on schools, forced marriage, and use of child soldiers highlight the numerous grave violations that have been committed against children by Boko Haram.[36] Surveys conducted by MEAC show that children are indeed vulnerable to being abducted. In Nigeria, 38 per cent of respondents who were abducted by Boko Haram were minors at the time. Whilst some children were recruited by force, interviews with former associates suggest that others joined due to economic need, peer networks, or encouragement by religious teachers.[37] Even when children have agency in their recruitment, it often occurs along a continuum of coercion, in which their ability to make choices is heavily constrained and their options run from sub-optimal to awful.

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[32] Amnesty International, "*We Dried Our Tears" Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria's Conflict* (London: Amnesty International, 2020).

[33] Youssoufou Hamaou Daouda, "Poverty and living conditions with Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: the case of southeastern Niger," *Review of African Political Economy,* Vol. 47, No. 163 (March, 2020).

[34] UNODC, "UNODC steps up effort to protect child victims and witnesses in terrorism-related proceedings in Nigeria," Press Release, 2 February 2022.

[35] UNICEF, "UNICEF calls for end to recruitment and use of child soldiers," Press Release, 14 February 2022; UNODC, "UNODC holds consultation in Abuja on the treatment of children affected by Terrorist Groups," Press Release, 7 July 2019.

[36] Amnesty International, "*We Dried Our Tears" Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria's Conflict* (London: Amnesty International, 2020).

[37] Ibid., and Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *"Who Will Care for Us?" Grave Violations against Children in Northeastern Nigeria* (2014).

Within the organization, children may be used as combatants, porters, domestic servants, suicide bombers, or for marriage.[38] It should be mentioned that child recruitment is not exclusive to Boko Haram, with evidence confirming that the CJTF – formed in mid-2013 to combat the threat of Boko Haram – and similar self-defence militias also recruit and use children.[39] Indeed, the CJTF was listed in the Secretary-General's Annual Report for Children and Armed Conflict for 2015 for recruiting and using children in its ranks.[40] A separate findings report also highlights stories of respondents, including children, who became associated with different CSAs in the North East of Nigeria, both forcibly and 'voluntarily.'[41]

Despite the widespread use of children by armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin, research on the topic has been lacking and little academic literature exists.[42] Instead, previous evidence and findings have largely derived from grey literature. Interviews have been conducted with children subjected to grave violations, civilians impacted by the conflict, humanitarian workers, and state officials as part of reports by NGOs such as Amnesty International and Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.[43] These findings highlight the various trajectories into armed groups, roles within these groups, and experiences upon exiting. Of the literature that exists, the focus has been on Nigeria, and there has been little attention to the broader region. This report seeks to address this gap and provide a regional approach to the issue of child recruitment. Attention to regional variations in recruitment patterns is important as it enables policymakers and practitioners to design targeted prevention efforts and ensure a localized approach is adopted as part of a regionally coordinated response.

Findings

This report is based on survey data collected by a series of MEAC project studies in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. As part of its efforts to understand transitions away from conflict, MEAC collects information on the trajectories of children and young people into armed groups, and their experiences within, and exits from, these groups. Children and young people who had no association or affiliation with an armed group (hereafter referred to as "non-associated")[44] were also interviewed, providing an opportunity to explore comparisons between different populations and more fully investigate the factors influencing armed group involvement.

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[38] Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *"Who Will Care for Us?" Grave Violations against Children in Northeastern Nigeria* (2014).
[39] Ibid.
[40] United Nations Security Council, "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," United Nations, 20 April 2016, S/2016/360.
[41] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report* 18 (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
[42] Hakeem Onapajo, "Children in Boko Haram Conflict: The Neglected Facet of a Decade of Terror in Nigeria," *African Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June, 2020).
[43] Amnesty International, *"We Dried Our Tears"*; Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *"Who Will Care for Us?"*
[44] In this report, 'non-associated children/peers' refers to those respondents who have reported they were never associated or affiliated with an armed group (e.g., Boko Haram and/or CSAs).

Given that this report explores the factors facilitating ***child*** recruitment, the focus is on those respondents who were under the age of 18 at the time of their involvement in an armed group.[45] This report uses data from all respondents who were recruited as children (aged below 18 years) and those non-associated respondents who were under the age of 25 at the time the survey was completed, and thus were members of the same peer group. Although some respondents had aged out of the child classification by the time they were surveyed, the questions were focused on their experiences as children (thus, the report often uses the shorthand 'children' for the population examined herein). The sample consists of 779 associated respondents across the Lake Chad Basin who were under the age of 18 when first recruited by an armed group. Of this sample, 560 respondents were associated with Boko Haram or one of its factions (such as the JAS faction previously led by Abubakar Shekau, or the ISWAP faction led by Abu Musab Al-Barnawi), and 216 respondents were affiliated with CSAs (such as the CJTF, COVI/COVIS, Yan Gora, or Hunters and Charmers). Since this report refers to the recruitment of children by both Boko Haram and/or CSAs, the following terms are used to differentiate between these different types of armed groups. Those who were linked to Boko Haram, or one of its factions, are referred to as 'ex-associates,' whilst 'ex-affiliates' is used to describe those who were with CSAs. This phrasing is used only to provide clarity when reading the report and is ***not*** designed to suggest that these populations are fundamentally different categories of analysis. This terminology is not intended to suggest varying degrees of 'voluntariness,' agency, or hierarchy within the group during an individual's time with an armed group.

The following section is informed both by the data collected as part of the MEAC project and wider literature on how and why children become associated with armed groups. The findings attempt to address existing theories and debates on the role of economic factors, the impact of social and political engagement, the role of family and wider social networks, the effect of education, and the importance of proximity to armed groups. To do this, this section compares the lives of respondents associated with Boko Haram or one of its factions, respondents affiliated with a CSA, and their peers who were never part of an armed group. By asking similar questions to associated, affiliated, and non-associated respondents during the period before conflict involvement (or before the conflict arrived in one's community), MEAC can isolate differences across these populations during that time frame. This approach allows for a unique comparison of differences in these populations and may provide some insights into what types of factors influence armed group involvement in the region. It must be noted that it is essential to consider the impact forced recruitment has on trajectories into armed groups in the region when analysing the impact of economic, social, political/civic, and other factors that increase the vulnerability of association. Where possible, the regression analyses presented in this report control for abduction to ensure that the impact of other social or individual factors are properly isolated.

To investigate the impact of pre-involvement factors on association with armed groups, a logistic regression model was run to analyse the impact of various social, political, and economic factors on

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[45] For the purposes of this publication, a child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to "any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to … fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities." See, UNICEF, *The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, (2007), p.7. The authors recognize, however, that the international norm for defining childhood up to the age of 18 might not reflect local perceptions, which in turn can impact factors that contribute to child soldiering.

the likelihood of ending up with an armed group. Due to a lack of sufficient data, modelling was only possible for survey data from Nigeria. The below findings report on statistically significant results from this modelling. In addition, summary statistics from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria are included to highlight patterns and trends across the wider Lake Chad Basin.

Economic Factors Influencing Association with Boko Haram

Poverty is often attributed as a key driver of child recruitment. When children struggle to afford basic necessities and have no other access to income, enlisting in an armed group may appear to be their best option for survival. Reports of Boko Haram offering food, money, and material goods to individuals who chose to enlist suggest that the group exploits poor economic conditions for recruitment.[46] Using the data collected in the MEAC surveys, it is possible to investigate the strength of this relationship between economic well-being and recruitment.

In order to test the hypothesis that poor economic well-being increases the likelihood of association, an index of economic well-being was created using the Nigeria survey data. Metrics on income, food security, and family land assets prior to conflict onset/association were used to rank economic well-being into two categories: low and high economic well-being. Regression analysis suggests that in Nigeria, having had a high level of economic well-being before the conflict is linked to a slightly higher probability of association with Boko Haram (by approximately 7 per cent) compared to children who were classified as having a low economic well-being level. The effect size was the same for boys and girls. The economic well-being index was not found to be statistically significant in predicting Boko Haram association in Cameroon and Chad. In Niger, it was found to have a significant effect and in the opposite direction than in Nigeria. In Niger, boys who had low economic well-being index scores were found to be significantly more likely to become associated with Boko Haram, by approximately 30 percentage points.

In Nigeria, it is helpful to probe what is going on behind the economic index analysis. The only individual economic variables that were found to be statistically significant on their own were income and having dependents. Children who reported they were earning money before recruitment/conflict onset were 8–9 percentage points more likely to become associated with Boko Haram. Respondents were asked: "At that time, did you do something that was giving you money?" This referred to the time period right before their recruitment (for former associates), or before the conflict impacted their community (for non-associated children). For children who said 'yes' to this question, it may have meant they were not in school and/or were engaged in economic activities that brought them in closer contact with the armed group. Research shows that child labour is often exacerbated by armed conflict,[47] and is key to understanding pathways into armed groups. When child labour is accepted and common, armed groups are likely to recruit children into their ranks.[48] In Nigeria, with

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[46] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Debriefing statement on its mission to Chad, 16 – 23 April 2018," 25 April 2018; International Crisis Group, "Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency," *Africa Report 245* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017).

[47] International Labour Office, *Global estimates of child labour: Results and trends, 2012-2016,* (Geneva: ILO, 2017)

[48] Scott Gates and Simon Reich, "Introduction," in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States* eds. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 7.

20 per cent of the world's out-of-school children and about a third of its child population engaged in some form of child labour,[49] it is not surprising to uncover patterns of child recruitment.

The analysis also found that when children were responsible for other people, their likelihood of association with Boko Haram increased. The more dependents that children reported having in the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period, the more likely they were to ultimately become involved with Boko Haram or one of its factions. The increase per additional dependent is between 1.5 and 1.7 percentage points both for boys and girls. It should be noted that this variable was not included in the low to high economic well-being index. Moreover, based on the way the questions were asked in Nigeria,[50] it is currently not possible to control for abduction and therefore not possible to see if income-generating activities are how children come into contact with the group and ended up in its ranks. Further study is required to better isolate the impact of income and other economic variables on child recruitment in Nigeria.

For children with dependents, or anyone with economic needs, the qualitative research with young people in Nigeria highlights how the prospect of monetary promises from Boko Haram could be attractive. When asked in an open-ended question about how they first became associated with Boko Haram, one male respondent who was aged 16 at the time of recruitment explained that "Boko Haram promised us that we will get materialistic things like motorcycles, bicycles, money, and livestock. These lured us into the group, but we never received any of these promises."[51] Another respondent, who was aged 13 when he first joined Boko Haram recounted that whilst studying in a sangaya [Islamic school] "the group [Boko Haram] started visiting us frequently and started to offer us money to join them, and we did. They gave us 300,000[52] for a start and promised us more in the future. I left 200,000 with my family and packed my belongings and moved to Sambisa."[53] It is important to note that some of the respondents who said they were receiving money in this period could have been referring to the money Boko Haram gave them in their effort to recruit them into the group. Therefore, although larger trends cannot be found in the data, for some individuals, economic incentives do appear to have been a factor in their decision to join Boko Haram.

A similar regression analysis, but this time one that controlled for abduction, found mixed results across Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. In Chad, none of the economic well-being metrics were statistically significant for explaining Boko Haram association. In Cameroon, whether a child's family-owned land in the pre-recruitment/conflict period was found to increase the probability of association with Boko Haram by 15-18 percentage points. This analysis held abduction constant, suggesting that it was not children being snatched from the fields per se that was driving this result. Rather, family land ownership may signal living in agrarian areas where Boko Haram exerted control, enhancing interactions with the group and its recruitment efforts. In Niger, food insecurity appears

[49] Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Situation Analysis of Children in Nigeria: Ensuring equitable and sustainable realization of child rights in Nigeria*, (2022), 17

[50] Only respondents who were associated with Boko Haram were asked in the baseline survey if they were abducted by the group, and non-associated respondents will be asked this question during a later survey, as it is indeed possible that they could have experienced abduction by Boko Haram but not consider themselves associated with the group. Therefore, it is not possible to control for abduction across respondents at this time in Nigeria. In Cameroon, Chad, and Niger the question was asked of everyone at the same time.

[51] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

[52] 300,000 Nigerian naira at the time when the respondent joined Boko Haram (in 2014) would translate to about USD 1,600, which is more than what an average yearly salary would have been in Borno State at the time.

[53] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

to drastically increase the likelihood that children will become involved with Boko Haram or one of its factions. Food insecure boys were 40 percentage points more likely to be involved with the group than boys who said they had sufficient food.

Economic Factors Influencing Affiliation with Community Security Actors (CSAs)

Regression analysis of the data from Nigeria examining affiliation with CSAs, indicated a more expected relationship between economic well-being and child recruitment. If a child reported poor economic well-being prior to recruitment, they had a slightly higher likelihood of affiliation (2 and 8 percentage points for girls and boys, respectively).[54] Food insecurity was also linked to a higher probability of affiliation with CSAs. Boys who reported not having enough food pre-recruitment were 17 percentage points more likely to be a member of the CJTF, Yan Gora, or Hunters and Charmers, compared to those who had sufficient food pre-conflict onset. For girls, food insecurity increased the likelihood of CSA affiliation by 5 percentage points.[55] For those experiencing food insecurity, it is possible that the attraction of joining a CSA included the possibility of having basic needs covered. Indeed, 21 per cent of children affiliated with a CSA reported that they were offered money, food, medical assistance, and other basic needs in exchange for joining the group. There are indications that being responsible for the basic needs of others also drives involvement in CSAs – as it was found to do with Boko Haram. In Nigeria, as the number of dependents increases for children, so too does the likelihood of association, by about 2 percentage points for boys, and 0.4 points for girls, per dependent.

These findings correlate with data from across the wider Lake Chad Basin region, where children affiliated with CSAs reported lower levels of food security in comparison to those associated with Boko Haram. As seen in Figure 1, of CSA-affiliated children, 35 per cent reported not having enough food to eat at the time the conflict began. In contrast, only 20 per cent of children associated with Boko Haram were recorded as having insufficient food.

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[54] Gender was statistically significant in this model.
[55] Gender was statistically significant in this model.

Figure 1 – "At that time [before you were with Boko Haram/CSA], did you get enough food to eat?" (**Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria**)
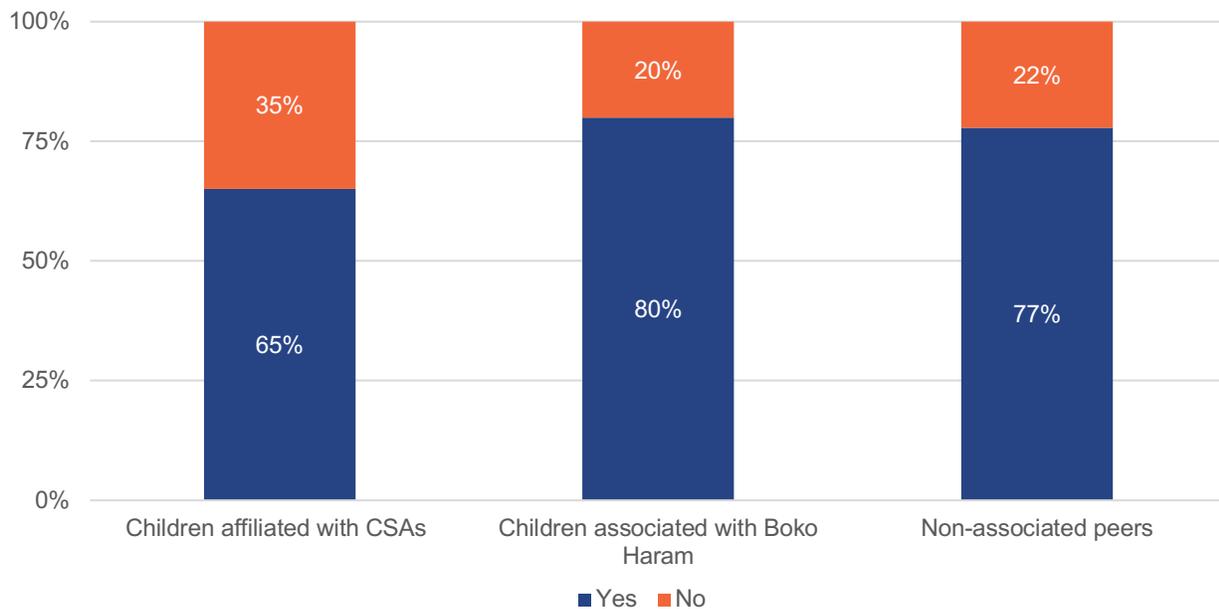
Social and Political Engagement Factors Influencing Association with Boko Haram

Literature on political violence suggests that individuals may pick up arms or turn to violent means when they feel that existing political channels are ineffective, or when they are unhappy with the current political situation.[56] Alongside political factors influencing participation in violence, there is also some discussion around the role that social factors may have. In particular, isolation and the desire for a sense of belonging are sometimes listed as potentially increasing the vulnerability of children to armed group association.[57] By measuring involvement in social organizations and civic participation in the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period, the MEAC study is able to investigate the relationships between social and political engagement and armed group association.

In Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria, using the same approach applied to the economic factors above, regression modelling found that the relationships between participation in political activities and social organizations and Boko Haram association were not statistically significant.[58] In Niger, however, it appears that engaging in political activities (e.g., campaigning), had a protective effect. Those boys who said they were politically and civically engaged were 35 percentage points less likely to end up associated with Boko Haram than their apolitical peers.[59] This is interesting given

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[56] Karin Dyrstad and Solveig Hillesund, "Explaining Support for Political Violence: Grievance and Perceived Opportunity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol 64, No.9 (March, 2020).

[57] Joining an armed group and becoming a child soldier provides a sense of identity in that they now belong to a community, however misguided. See, World Vision International, "Plight of the child soldier: facts, foundations and how to help," 2 October 2020, https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/child-soldiers-facts-and-how-to-help; Alpaslan Ozerdem and Sukanya Podder, *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration,* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 92.

[58] Note it was not possible to control for abduction in Nigeria as it was in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

[59] Gender was statistically significant in this model, but the effect of political and civic engagement was lower (approximately a 3 per cent lower likelihood of involvement in Boko Haram and its factions). Given that the number of associated girls in the Niger sample was small, this finding should be viewed with caution.

that political activity in the region is extremely low (for all age groups). Given that the voting age in Niger is 18, and voting was the only common political activity across the region, the young people who answered this question affirmatively appear exceptionally engaged. It has been argued that having legal channels to pursue political change is key to preventing political violence,[60] and this may indeed be what is going on for young people in Niger.

Figure 2 – "At that time [before you were with Boko Haram/CSA], did you do any of these activities?" (Nigeria)
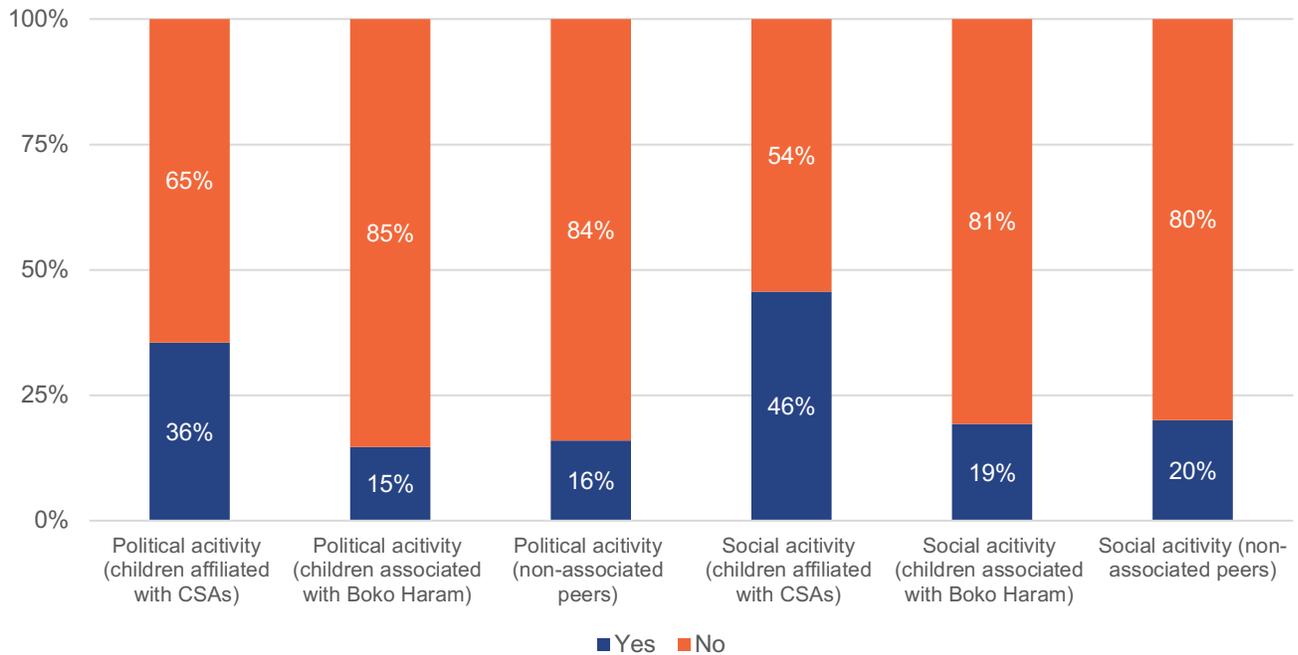
There are a number of reasons why engagement in social organizations could reduce the probability of Boko Haram association – from preventing idleness and providing young people with a community and support network to generating feelings of purpose and belonging – all of which could serve to enhance resilience to armed group recruitment campaigns. Yet, across all four countries, involvement in social organizations was not found to be statistically relevant in predicting Boko Haram association.

Social and Political Engagement Factors Influencing CSA Affiliation

Regression analysis using data from Nigeria suggested that engaging in political activities and social organizations increased the probability of affiliation with CSAs (CJTF, Yan Gora, Hunters and Charmers). Being involved in social organizations (e.g., youth groups) was shown to increase the probability of child affiliation with CSAs in Nigeria by 7 and 15 percentage points (for girls and boys, respectively). Engagement in civic and political activities also increased the probability of affiliation with CSAs by 6 percentage points for girls and 13 percentage points for boys.[61] Of CSA-affiliated

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[60] For example, see Seung-Whan Choi, "Fighting Terrorism through the Rule of Law?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 6 (2010).
[61] Gender was statistically significant in this model.

children that reported engaging in social activities across the Lake Chad Basin, the most popular was being part of a religious group or taking part in a sports club (both 13 per cent), followed closely by a school group (12 per cent).

While engaging in social and political life is often thought of as helping enhance resilience to armed group recruitment, in this case, such engagement has a decidedly different effect. This may be explained by the fact that social organizations and civic activities are often embedded within the local community, as are the CSAs that mobilize from it. Therefore, engaging in such organizations and activities may increase children's exposure to CSAs. In addition, being socially and politically active within their local community may reinforce the desire to protect that community, and thus increase interest in joining a CSA. As evident in some of the open-ended responses, involvement in and desire to protect one's community, is a key reason as to why some children say they joined these groups. One male respondent explained that he joined the Hunters and Charmers aged 16 years old because "my community leaders advised all the youth from my community to join the Hunters, so as to protect our community from Boko Haram."[62] Other respondents also cited this feeling of responsibility and investment in their local community as the reason for joining a CSA.[63]

Figure 3 – "At that time [before you were with Boko Haram/CSA or before the conflict came to your community], did you regularly take part in activities with any of the following kinds of groups? Please select all that apply." (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)[64]
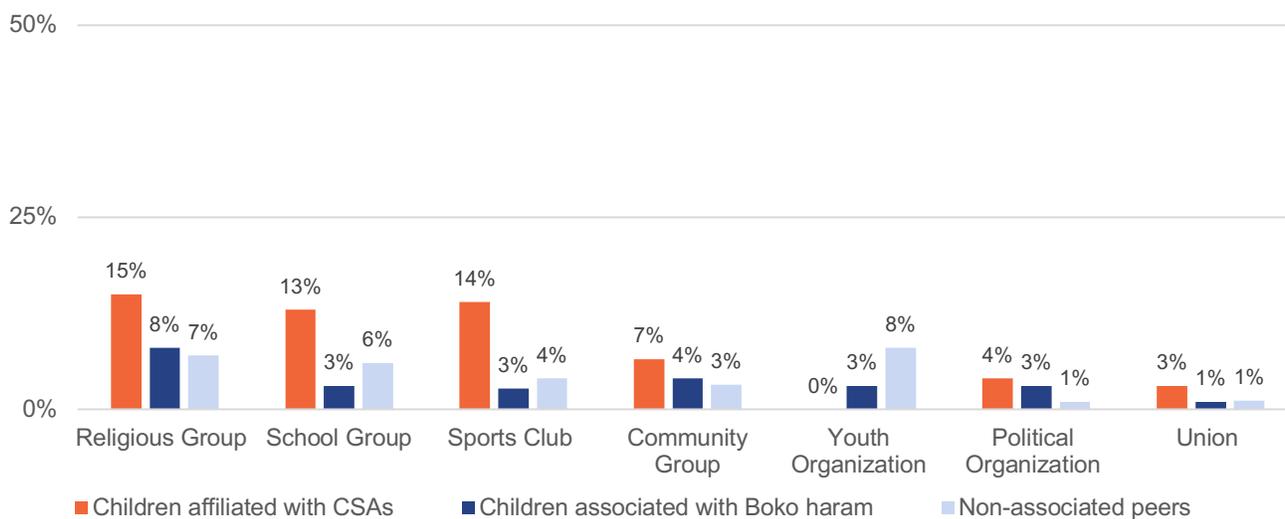
Given the small sample of CSA-affiliated children in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, regression analysis was not possible, but summary statistics around the potential impact of social and political

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[62] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

[63] For a more in-depth exploration of MEAC findings on why people join CSAs in the North East of Nigeria, see Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report* 18 (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

[64] "Associations or groups of women or homemakers" and "other" were cut from the visual since the percentages of respondents were so low (0–1 per cent) and it was deemed necessary to enhance the readability of the visual. The axis scale of this graph is represented at 50 per cent to enhance the clarity and readability of the data.

engagement across the region were telling. There was a notable gap in political engagement between children associated with Boko Haram and children affiliated with CSAs in Nigeria, where 36 per cent of CSA-affiliated children reported partaking in at least one political or civic activity, compared to only 15 per cent of Boko Haram-associated children or non-associated children in the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period. An even greater difference could be seen with regards to social groups, where 46 per cent of CSA-affiliated children reported being engaged in social groups, compared to 19 per cent of Boko Haram-associated children and 20 per cent of their non-associated peers in the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period. Given that many social organizations and political and civic activities are integrated into the community, and CSAs themselves are embedded in the community, higher rates of engagement in social and civic life may increase children's chances of recruitment into CSAs.

It is also possible to examine the types of groups that children across all four countries engaged in. A small minority of children reported engaging in religious groups, school groups, sports clubs, and community groups. Two things stand out from Figure 3. First, children who were affiliated with CSAs are more active in social organizations than Boko Haram-associated or non-associated peers. Second, of Boko Haram-associated, CSA-affiliated, and non-associated children, participation in religious groups were some of the most reported social engagements. CSA-affiliated children were much more likely than their associated and non-associated peers to report having been involved in a religious group. This finding is interesting in light of concerns that ideological grooming by religious organizations is a prime driver of recruitment into Boko Haram in the region.

The Impact of Social Networks and Family Involvement on Boko Haram Association

When examining the trajectories of children into armed groups, family and social networks are regularly highlighted, both as potential protective factors and also important push and pull factors for recruitment. Data from these studies provides insights into how family and social networks influence the likelihood of association with armed groups in the region, and the extent to which these networks both facilitate and prevent child recruitment.

Children can first hear about Boko Haram through social and family networks. Across the four countries, 25 per cent of children who were with Boko Haram, as well as their non-associated peers, first heard about Boko Haram from their family. This figure increases to 31 per cent when focusing solely on Boko Haram-associated children. These statistics suggest that families are key to children's awareness and knowledge of the armed group. Given that children gain much of their early information on the outside world through their families, this finding is perhaps unsurprising. Beyond family, friends (15 per cent) and neighbours (14 per cent) were also shown to be important sources of information about Boko Haram, followed by the news (15 per cent). As shown in Figure 4, these sources were reported at significantly higher rates than places such as schools or mosques. It should be noted that mentioning Boko Haram to a child does not equate to encouraging them to enlist. For example, family or friends may first talk to their children about Boko Haram to warn them or to explain the ongoing conflict. However, what these statistics do show is that these networks have the potential to play a role in children's knowledge, understanding, and perception of Boko Haram.

Figure 4 – "Where did you first hear about Boko Haram?" (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)[65]
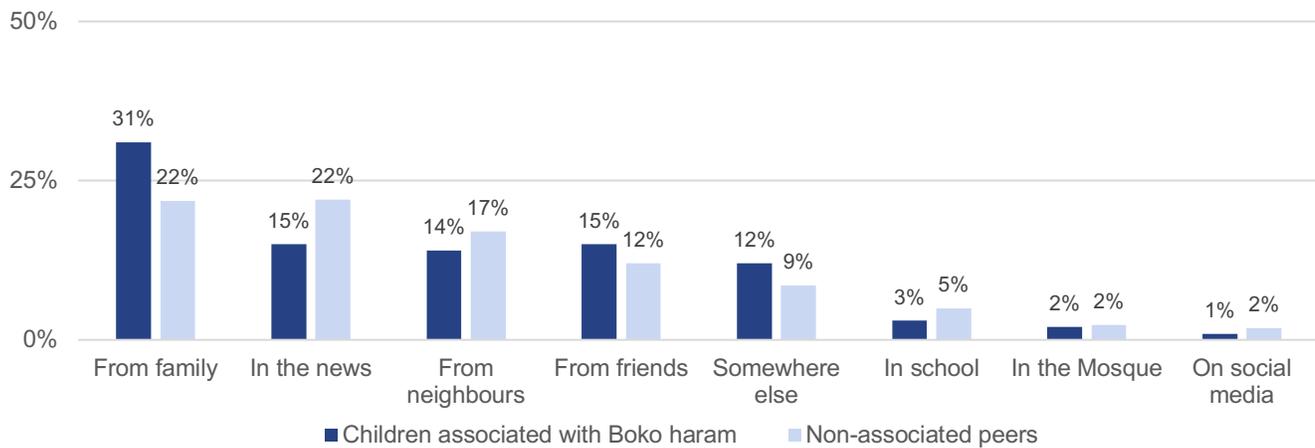
Within existing literature, being surrounded by supportive family members or friends is thought to act as a barrier to child recruitment. Having a good support system is perceived to protect children and promote resilience to violent extremism. This hypothesis was tested using MEAC survey data from Nigeria. Regression analysis demonstrated that those children who had someone who listened to them, gave them advice, or helped them to make future plans, were 19–21 percentage points less likely to be associated with Boko Haram or one of its factions. The result is similar to findings from regression analysis for all age groups in Cameroon, which found having a mentor was associated with an 18 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of association with Boko Haram.[66]

Although family and peer networks can act as a source of resilience and protect children from association, they can also facilitate recruitment. Social networks are often used by armed groups to aid recruitment, with parents, relatives, and peers acting as sources of encouragement or coerced enlistment. Especially in the case of children – where there is often an imbalance of power – personal and familial relationships may be the cause of association, rather than an individual's own willingness or desire to join. As the main caregivers, parents may act as a decisive factor in a child's involvement with armed groups. Across the region, parental association with Boko Haram has a major impact on child association.[67] In Cameroon, where it was possible to control for abduction, having a parent involved with the group led to a 50–53 percentage point increase in the probability that children would become associated themselves.[68] In Niger, parental involvement increased the probability of

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[65] "I don't remember" answers were taken out to enhance the clarity of Figure 4. They varied from 1 per cent for Boko Haram-associated children, 2 per cent for CSA-affiliated children, and 6 per cent for their non-associated peers. The axis scale of this graph is represented at 50 per cent to enhance the clarity and readability of the data.

[66] Sophie Huvé, Siobhan O'Neil, Remadji Hoinathy, and Kato Van Broeckhoven, with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, *Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from the Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

[67] Due to a difference in the way the questions were asked in Nigeria, it was not possible to run the same type of regression analysis, nor was it possible to control for abduction, as it was in the three other countries.

[68] Gender was not significant hence the similar size of the effect.

association for boys (44 percentage points) and girls (17 percentage points).[69] In Chad, parental involvement was not statistically significant, but a child's perception of the quality of their relationship with their family was. Children in Chad who said they were not close to the family in the pre-recruitment/conflict period were more likely to become associated with Boko Haram (a 43–50 percentage point increase). The results in Chad reinforce how families can both enhance children's resilience to recruitment and facilitate it (especially when they themselves are involved).

Figure 5 – "Before you were with [Boko Haram], were either of your parents ever with [Boko Haram]?"
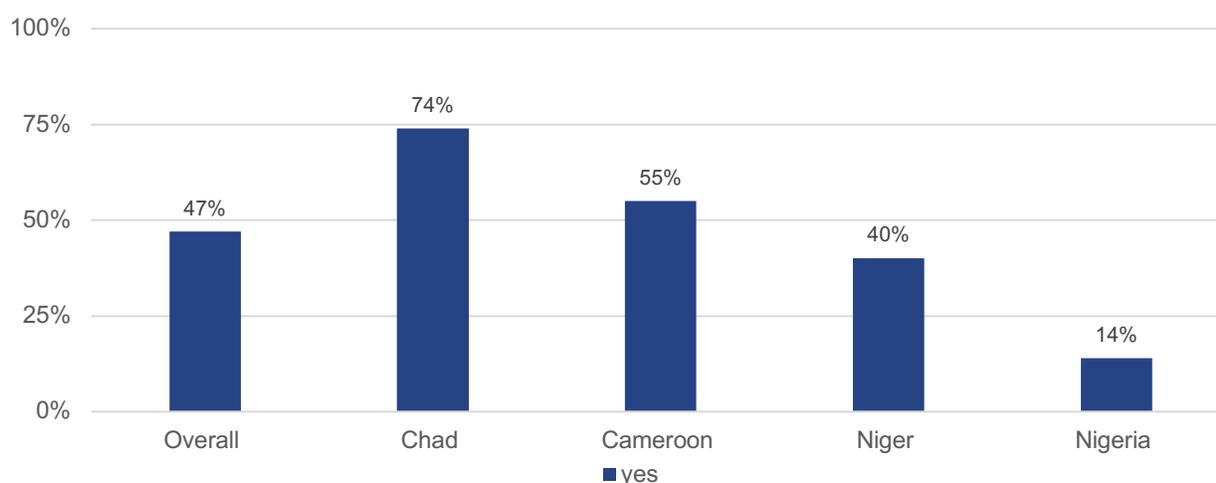
Reasons for the strong relationship between family involvement and armed group association may vary. It could be the case that whole families were recruited, therefore the association of both the parent and the child is unsurprising. If a parent or family member is already a member of Boko Haram, they may encourage or inspire a child to also join the group. As one respondent who was nine when first becoming associated with Boko Haram recounts, "my uncle was with them. He took me and my brother to join the group."[70] For young children whose caregivers are associated with the group, or for children born under Boko Haram occupation, there are no options besides association. Alternatively, familial involvement may lead to children being forced or coerced to enlist. Boys may be expected to follow in the footsteps of older male relatives. Girls may be forced by their associated parents to marry combatants – either to gain favour with Boko Haram, or for monetary reward. Therefore, whilst familial association with an armed group is strongly linked to the likelihood of a child themselves becoming involved, the various explanations for this finding may make prevention more challenging.

When reflecting on the importance of parents and family in determining the likelihood of child recruitment, consideration should also be given to orphans. Existing literature suggests that orphans may be at a heightened risk of recruitment since a lack of familial protection could mean that orphans are perceived as 'easy' recruits. Across the Lake Chad Basin, orphans make up a higher percentage

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[69] Gender was significant in this regression, but there was a small subsample of girls associated with Boko Haram in Niger which could impact the results for girls in that country.
[70] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

of associated children surveyed (8 per cent) compared to non-associated children (1 per cent). Regression analysis from Nigeria suggests that being an orphan dramatically increases a child's probability of association with Boko Harm. Children who reported that both their parents were deceased in the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period, were 43–46 percentage points more likely to become associated with Boko Haram or one of its factions. In the region – particularly in the North East of Nigeria and in Southern Niger – adoption is not a common practice. Children who are orphaned often end up in the streets or a relative's home, where they can be seen as a financial burden. Many orphans end up begging to support themselves and could feel rejected by society, which may make them more vulnerable to the promises armed groups make to cover their basic needs or provide economic and/or social benefits (e.g., a sense of community and belonging). The summary statistics highlight this vulnerability. Across the region, the percentage of Boko Haram-associated children who are orphans is much higher than in their peer group for the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period (13 to 5 per cent, respectively).

Especially when discussing orphans, it is important to highlight that parents are not the only ones who play a key role in a child's social network. In Nigeria, having a mentor was found to have a protective effect for children against Boko Haram association. Children who reported having someone "who gave you advice or assisted you in making plans for the future" in the pre-recruitment period, were 19–21 percentage points less likely to become associated with Boko Haram. It must be noted that in Nigeria, the way the survey was administered made it impossible to control for abduction, which means that this analysis cannot determine if this effect is exclusively attributed to the presence of a mentor or if mentorship is somehow related to abduction, which is actually driving the results.

The Impact of Social Networks and Family Involvement on CSA Affiliation

When looking at CSAs, more specifically the CJTF in the North East of Nigeria,[71] the relationship between the affiliation of parents and their children becomes clear. In Nigeria, 19 per cent of the CSA-affiliated children reported that one of their parents was with the CJTF before they joined, versus only 4 per cent of people who joined when they were 18 or older. Given that affiliation with groups like the CJTF was often based on community-wide dynamics, it is no surprise that children's parents were often involved before they were.[72] It is important to consider that beyond parents, children have many other relevant familial relationships that could provide pathways into armed groups. As told by a respondent who was 14 when he joined the CJTF, "seeing my brother being an active member of CJTF and doing good for our community pushed me to join CJTF."[73]

It also appears that family composition influences CSA affiliation in Nigeria. For boys and girls, having only your mother alive in the pre-recruitment/conflict onset period led to a 33 and 11

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[71] Although it is challenging to draw conclusions from the very small sample of respondents (29) who joined a different CSA as a child, the Hunters and Charmers, it is worth noting that over half of those respondents indicated having a parent who was with the Hunters and Charmers before they joined. When looking at the larger sample of adults, indeed 50 per cent say they had a parent with the group before becoming affiliated. Given that affiliation with the Hunters and Charmers is often based on ethnicity or birthright, it is logical that parental affiliation would be considerably higher for this specific group.

[72] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report* 18 (New York: United Nations University, 2022)..

[73] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

percentage point increase in the probability of association, respectively.[74] It is unclear what is driving this but given the difficulties many women face in gaining employment and earning income in the North East, female heads of households may rely on their children – particularly boys – to generate income and cover basic needs for the family, which could be facilitated through CSA employment.

Just as those closest to children – such as their friends, families, and neighbours – were the most common sources of information about Boko Haram, the same also applies to children first hearing about CSAs. As seen in Figure 6, among CSA-affiliated children, 27 per cent first heard about the group they joined from neighbours, 21 per cent learned of the group from their friends, and 20 per cent from their families. As noted above, telling a child about a CSA does not necessarily mean that the group was praised or that the child was encouraged to enlist. To investigate the nature in which children were introduced to certain groups, and whether this first source of information led to their recruitment, further research is necessary.

**Figure 6 – "Where did you first hear about [respective CSA]?" (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)[75]**
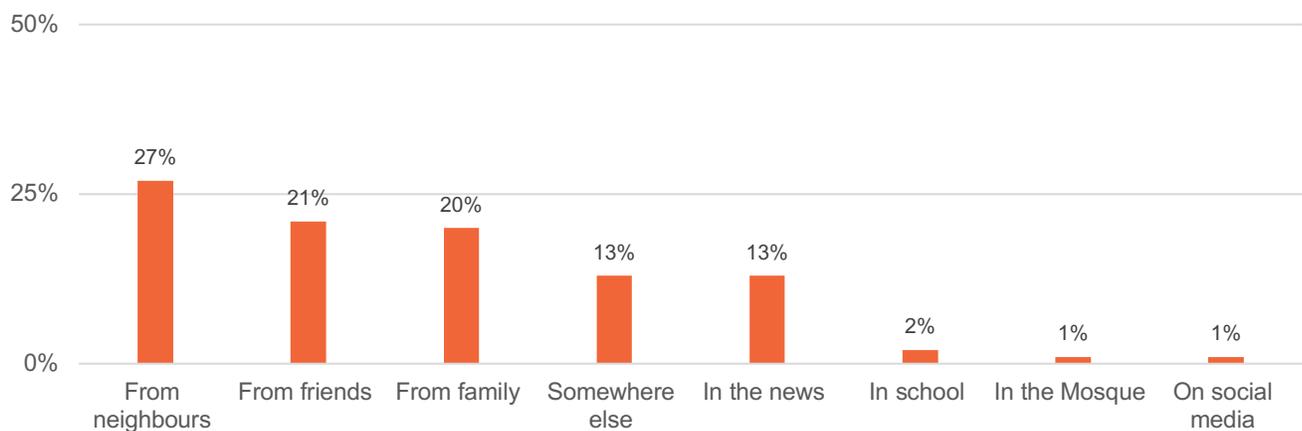
The Impact of Education on Association and/or Affiliation
Education is argued to be one of the most important tools to protect children in conflict and to prevent recruitment. Schools can act as a preventative barrier to recruitment by providing structure and security. By reducing idleness, it is believed that children will be less likely to interact with armed groups and/or turn to them to provide excitement, a sense of belonging, or to occupy their time. Furthermore, education serves to expand children's worldview, improve critical thinking skills, and inspire and motivate children, providing hope for the future and opportunities for future employment. Education may, therefore, provide children with the very things that many armed groups promise when they recruit young people.

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[74] Gender is statistically significant in this model.
[75] Responses for "Refused to answer" [0 per cent] and "I don't remember" [2 per cent] options are removed from Figure 5 for enhancing clarity. The axis scale of this graph is represented at 50 per cent to enhance readability.

Figure 7 – "Did you ever attend a school for formal education?" (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)
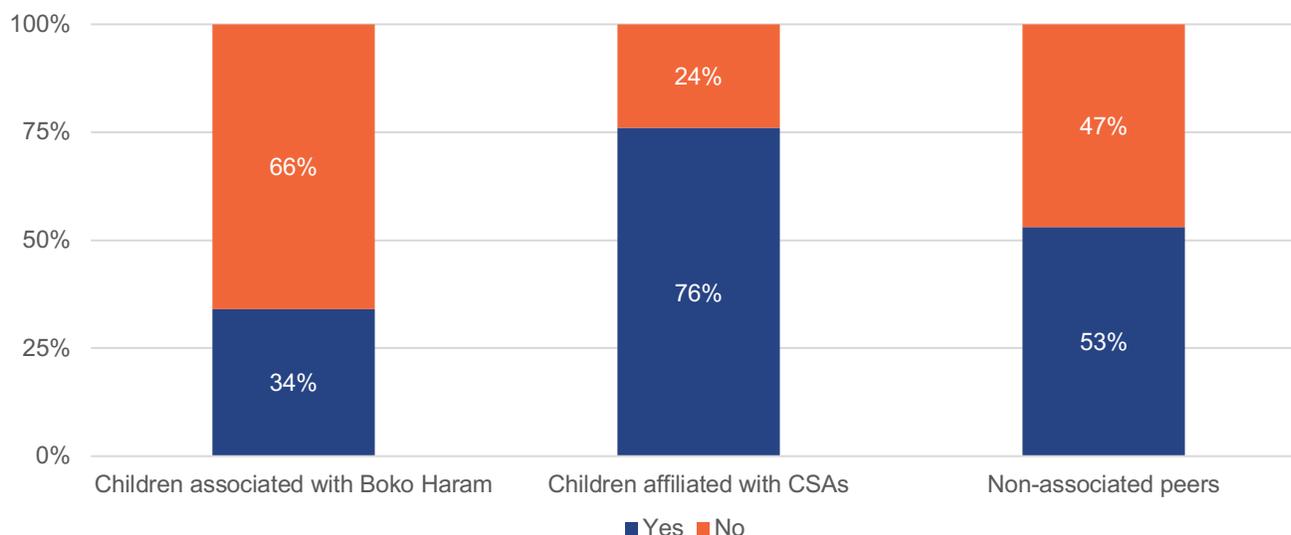
Survey data from across the region confirms that formal education can help reduce the likelihood of children being recruited by Boko Haram. In Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, regression analysis examined the impact of three types of education: formal education, religious education, and being part of the Almajiranci system. Controlling for gender and abduction, the analysis in Cameroon found that having some formal education appears to have a preventive effect and significantly reduces one's likelihood of recruitment into Boko Haram. Children in Cameroon who reported having some formal education in the pre-recruitment period were 23–24 percentage points less likely to become involved with the group. In Niger, formal education appears to have a similarly strong protective effect (24 percentage points for boys).[76] In Chad, education has a similar protective effect, but the size was smaller (5–9 percentage points). In Nigeria, however, no statistically significant relationship was found between having formal education and Boko Haram recruitment.[77]

While the findings above highlight that formal education is associated with a reduced likelihood of association, the data does not allow us to investigate some of the causal claims that are made to explain why education may help to prevent recruitment (e.g., keep children from interacting with armed groups in the street). That said, it is telling to examine the summary statistics for children who became associated with Boko Haram versus those who became involved with a CSA. First, those who ended up with Boko Haram were less likely to have formal education than children who were never active within the group. Across Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, only 34 per cent of Boko Haram-associated children reported ever having received formal education compared to 53 per cent of children who were never associated. Second, when asked if respondents were in school before

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[76] While Gender is not statistically significant in this model, the direction of the effect for girls is the same but smaller – 6 percentage points. In Niger, there were a small number of associated girls in the sample, which requires a cautious interpretation of the results for girls in this case.
[77] In Nigeria, a slightly different regression model was run, which looked only at the impact of ever having formal education on recruitment (not alongside religious education and being an almajiri, as in the other countries, due to lack of variation in one variable and missing data in another).

they became associated with Boko Haram or affiliated with a CSA, there is an interesting difference in school enrollment. As seen in Figure 8, children who became associated with Boko Haram were much less likely to have been in school right before they were recruited or abducted into the group, compared to children who ultimately became affiliated with CSAs. Across the Lake Chad Basin, less than one in three children associated with Boko Haram attended school before they became associated with the group.

Figure 8 – "At that time [before you were with Boko Haram/CSA], were you in school?" (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)
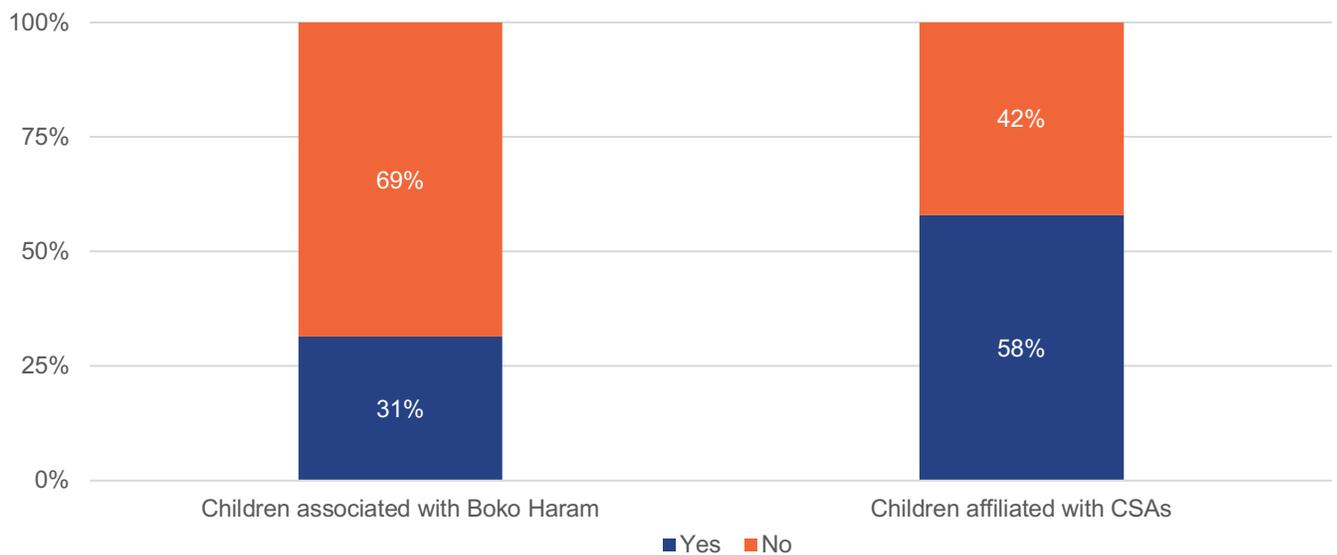
Survey data from Nigeria offer some insight into the relationship between education and CSA recruitment. Whereas having formal education decreased the likelihood of Boko Haram association for young people across much of the region, in Nigeria it increased the probability of CSA affiliation. In Nigeria, having some formal education led to a 27 percentage point increase in the likelihood of CSA affiliation for boys. Gender was statistically significant, and while the relationship was the same, the size of the effect for girls was smaller, by approximately 5 percentage points. Like the analysis on social organizations and political activities, this may suggest that local schools are sites of recruitment.

In addition, in places where communities are mobilizing security groups, there is the potential that schools are the locations where young people come together and where the influence of their peers is strongest, thereby concentrating and compounding the social dynamics of CSA mobilization. As one respondent who was 13 when he became associated with the CJTF plainly stated, "In school, my friend advised me to join the group."[78] It is also possible that something else is behind this relationship. Furthermore, this study does not account for education quality, which could also be

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[78] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

impacting the results. Given the poor conditions in schools – particularly in rural locations in the North East[79] – this is an area worth examining further.

Whilst formal education appears to impact the likelihood of armed group association in different ways across the region, it is also important to explore the influence of religious education on armed group association. Data from across all four countries shows no clear pattern between child recruitment into Boko Haram and religious education. This is likely because religious education is widespread across the region. Overall, most respondents reported having some religious education (91 per cent), with the differences between Boko Haram-associated children (88 per cent), CSA-affiliated children (97 per cent) and non-associated peers (91 per cent) minimal. Although religious education is sometimes suggested as a route to "radicalization" and, consequently, armed group association, these statistics do not appear to support these claims.

In the context of the Lake Chad Basin, one particular type of religious education that requires additional examination is Almajiranci. Under the Almajiranci system, parents relinquish responsibility for their children and send them long distances to Sangayas (Islamic schools) to receive Islamic education from teachers called *Malams*. In addition to studying the Quran, almajiri (boys) and almajira (girls) often partake in the practice of alms begging to support themselves and their instructors. Children do not receive any secular education and typically live in poor conditions. The vast majority of almajirai come from rural areas and tend to have grown up in poverty. MEAC's surveys gathered accounts of how the Almajiranci system – particularly the influence of instructors – impacted some children's trajectories into Boko Haram.[80] One boy who was aged 10 when he first joined the group noted that "our teachers at the *Sangaya* slowly introduced us,"[81] whilst another respondent explained that "we did not know that our *Malam* or teacher was a member of the Boko Haram group…he said we should escort him to another village where he wants to farm. Unbeknown to us he took us to a village occupied by the group. That was how we ended up with them."[82] These accounts highlight the ways in which almajirai may be vulnerable to recruitment at the hands of their teachers and in the absence of parental or familial supervision and guidance.

The MEAC survey data corroborate these concerns. In Cameroon, being an almajiri drastically increased a child's likelihood of Boko Haram association by 22 percentage points. In Nigeria, similar results were found using a slightly different model which looked only at the impact of being an almajiri on recruitment (not alongside formal and religious education, as in the other countries, due to lack of variation in one variable and missing data for another). In Nigeria, being an almajiri increased a child's likelihood of association with Boko Haram by 20–21 percentage points. Interestingly, similar analysis found a relationship between being an almajiri and affiliation with CSAs in Nigeria. Boys in Nigeria who had been part of the Almajiranci system were 15 percentage points more likely to end

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[79] Aid for Rural Education Access Initiative, "Negligence of Quality Primary Education in Rural Africa: The Nigerian Case Study," 7 October 2015, https://areai4africa.wordpress.com/2015/10/07/negligence-of-quality-primary-education-in-rural-africa-the-nigerian-case-study-volume-1/.

[80] It has been argued that almajiris are encouraged to join by instructors or left vulnerable by the Almajiranci system that often forces them to beg in the streets and offers little supervision or support. On the latter point, see Iro Aghedo and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms: The Almajiri Phenomenon and Internal Security in Northern Nigeria," *The Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2013).

[81] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

[82] Ibid.

up with a CSA. For girls the effect was smaller (6 percentage points).[83] Although concern around the Almajiranci system has often focused on the content of the education or the sympathies of the teachers, which it has been argued promote recruitment into Boko Haram, these results highlight that it may be the inherent vulnerability of children in this system that renders them susceptible to recruitment.

The Impact of Proximity and Presence on Boko Haram Recruitment

Cradled By Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict highlighted the rather obvious, but underemphasized point, that for children to join armed groups, there must be armed groups around that are willing to recruit them.[84] The MEAC survey made it possible to try to measure the extent to which armed group proximity and presence impacts the recruitment of children. Using survey data, it is possible to examine relationships between child recruitment and various factors associated with the proximity and presence of armed groups. Of particular interest is the impact of community occupation by Boko Haram, when the armed group is physically close to the population, and the extent to which service provision by Boko Haram may influence association.

Figure 9 – "Did Boko Haram or another group like this ever occupy your community?" (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)
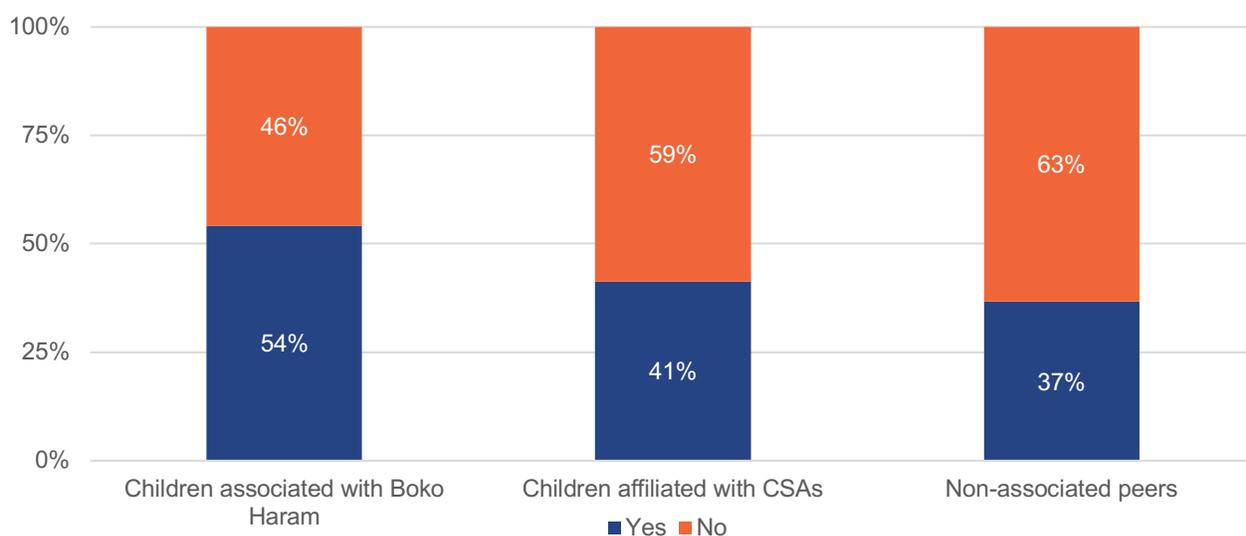
Of all respondents across the Lake Chad Basin, 47 per cent reported that their communities had been occupied by Boko Haram at one time. As seen in Figure 9, and as was expected, across the region there were higher rates of Boko Haram association among children that experienced occupation. Regression analysis reinforces the impact of occupation on child recruitment. In Nigeria, children whose community had been occupied by Boko Haram were 26–29 percentage points more likely to become associated with the group than children whose community had not been occupied.

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[83] Gender was statistically significant in this model.
[84] Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (eds.), *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

Insights into the impact of occupation on child recruitment can also be found in open-ended survey responses. Only 12 years old when Boko Haram occupied her community, one female respondent explained that her association with the group was a direct result of this occupation: "I ended up with the group when Boko Haram members attacked our community and killed all the military…[they] took over the community for almost eight months. They became our rulers and they used to teach us religious education."[85] A male respondent, aged 17 years old when he first became associated with Boko Haram, highlighted the way in which those under Boko Haram occupation may have little choice but to enlist, stating that "when our village was attacked by Boko Haram, most people fled to Maiduguri and only a few of us stayed behind. Unfortunately, Boko Haram took over our community after the attack and one day they gathered all of us that did not flee and asked us to join them or die at their hands. I joined in fear of death."[86]

These stories outline some of the ways in which the presence of Boko Haram within a child's community may unavoidably lead to their association. Interestingly, in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, regression analysis did not find a statistical relationship between occupation and association with Boko Haram, but it did find a relationship with being abducted. Occupation, as could be expected, increases a child's chance of being abducted by Boko Haram.

In areas lacking state presence, the provision of services to communities by an armed group may engender local support (at least initially). Individuals may feel indebted or grateful to the group or view them to be better than the government that is absent, negligent, or even hostile. For some armed groups, such as Hamas or Hezbollah, before they were elected to government, the provision of social services and rebel governance was central to their strategy. Although Boko Haram is not considered to rely heavily on the provision of services as part of their group strategy, they have been known to provide some services, in particular, education. This is not necessarily merely due to there being a lack of existing educational opportunities, but more so that Boko Haram can provide their own type of 'education,' aligned to their group ideology.

Boko Haram is also known to operate courts in the communities they occupy. Across the Lake Chad Basin region, 31 per cent of respondents whose community was occupied by Boko Haram said that the group operated courts. Over a third of the respondents in the region reported receiving services from Boko Haram or one of its factions during occupation. The most common services provided were education, food, and financial loans. It is not clear whether the provision of these services influenced individuals' decisions to join Boko Haram or an affiliated faction. As such, it is difficult to make any strong conclusions regarding the impact of service provision on child recruitment by Boko Haram.

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[85] MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).
[86] Ibid.

Figure 10 – "When Boko Haram occupied your community, did they do any of the following? Please select all that apply." (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)[87]
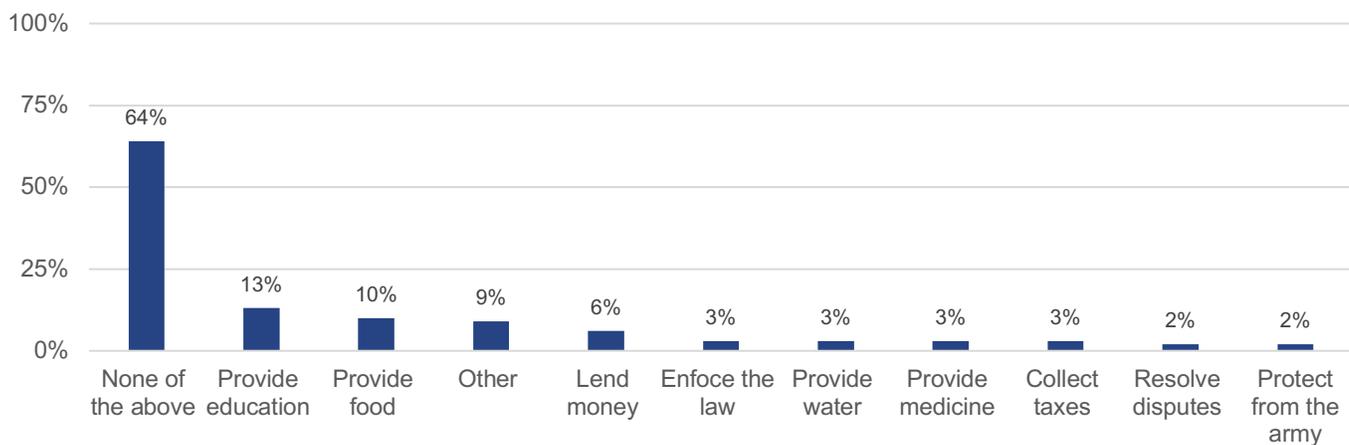
The Impact of Boko Haram Occupation on CSA Recruitment

Also, of importance to investigate is the impact that Boko Haram occupation may have on a child's affiliation with CSA groups that have mobilized or been repurposed to protect communities from Boko Haram, such as the CJTF or Yan Gora. Data analysis from the Nigeria study suggests that occupation by Boko Haram indeed increases the likelihood of a child being affiliated with a CSA. A boy living in a community that had been occupied by Boko Haram was 11 percentage points more likely to become affiliated with a CSA than a child whose community had never been occupied. The effect for girls was in the same direction, but not as large (2 per cent increase). This does not necessarily mean that the child was associated with a CSA during occupation, as it's unlikely CSAs could operate locally under such conditions. Rather, this may mean that children lived in communities that were vulnerable to Boko Haram predations and may have joined a CSA prior to – and in anticipation of – a Boko Haram attack. Alternatively, children may have joined after fleeing to a new location or after Boko Haram retreated from their community. The latter may have been particularly relevant in situations where children were pressured to join a CSA to signal that they were not with Boko Haram.[88]

Beyond recruitment, it is important to consider that the immediate proximity of armed groups puts pressure on many aspects of life. Territorial control by armed groups impacts the likelihood that children will directly interact with armed actors, while also increasing the likelihood of other negative outcomes that can have long-term repercussions. For example, during MEAC focus groups, girls described being married at the age of 10 when Boko Haram took over their village, because their parents thought that being married to other men in their community would protect them from being

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[87] Responses for "provide sanitation"' [1 per cent], "provide security" [1 per cent], "protect against COVID-19" [0 per cent] and "refused to answer" [3 per cent] have been removed from Figure 10 to enhance readability.
[88] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report* 18 (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

forcibly taken. "Most of us were around the ages of 10 or so, and we did not even know what marriage was. [...] Our parents decided to get us married to protect us from being abducted by Boko Haram."[89]

Armed Groups' Promises to Children

In addition to the factors that have been explored in this brief, it is also relevant to consider what incentives armed groups offer for joining their ranks, including those tailored to children. Indeed, the MEAC data highlights that Boko Haram offered children different incentives than adults. Figures 11 and 12 show what respondents said they were promised when first becoming associated with Boko Haram or with CSAs, disaggregated by being a child or adult at the time of becoming associated or affiliated.[90] It is important to emphasize that what respondents were promised by an armed group might not reflect why and how they became associated or affiliated. Someone could both be forced to become associated and be promised certain things, while others might have joined because of specific promises made or been compelled to join by other factors in addition to such incentives.

Figure 11 – "When you first came to be with Boko Haram, were you promised any of the following things? Please select all that apply." (Nigeria)

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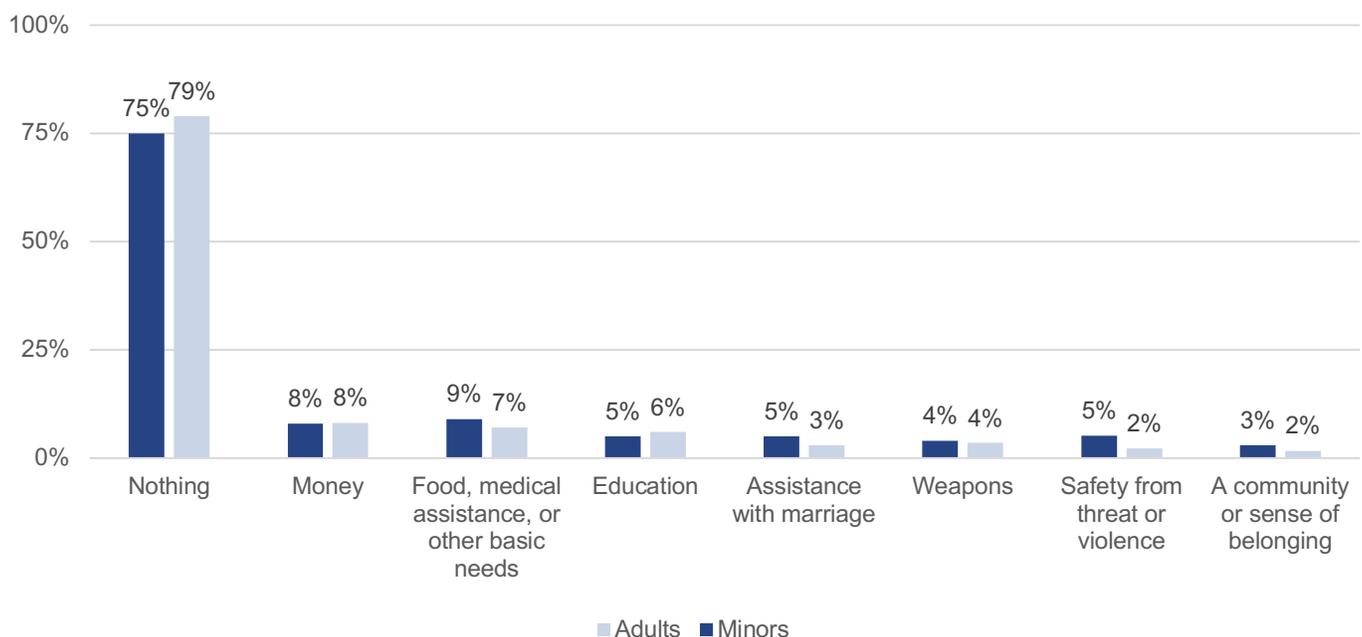
[89] MEAC, Focus Group with girls and young women formerly associated with Boko Haram, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 16 September 2022).
[90] Several options were omitted for clarity and because of low response rates, including "something else" (5 per cent for all categories), "a position of power" (1–3 per cent), and "land" (0–2 per cent).

Figure 12 – "When you first came to be with [CSA], were you promised any of the following things? Please select all that apply." (Nigeria)
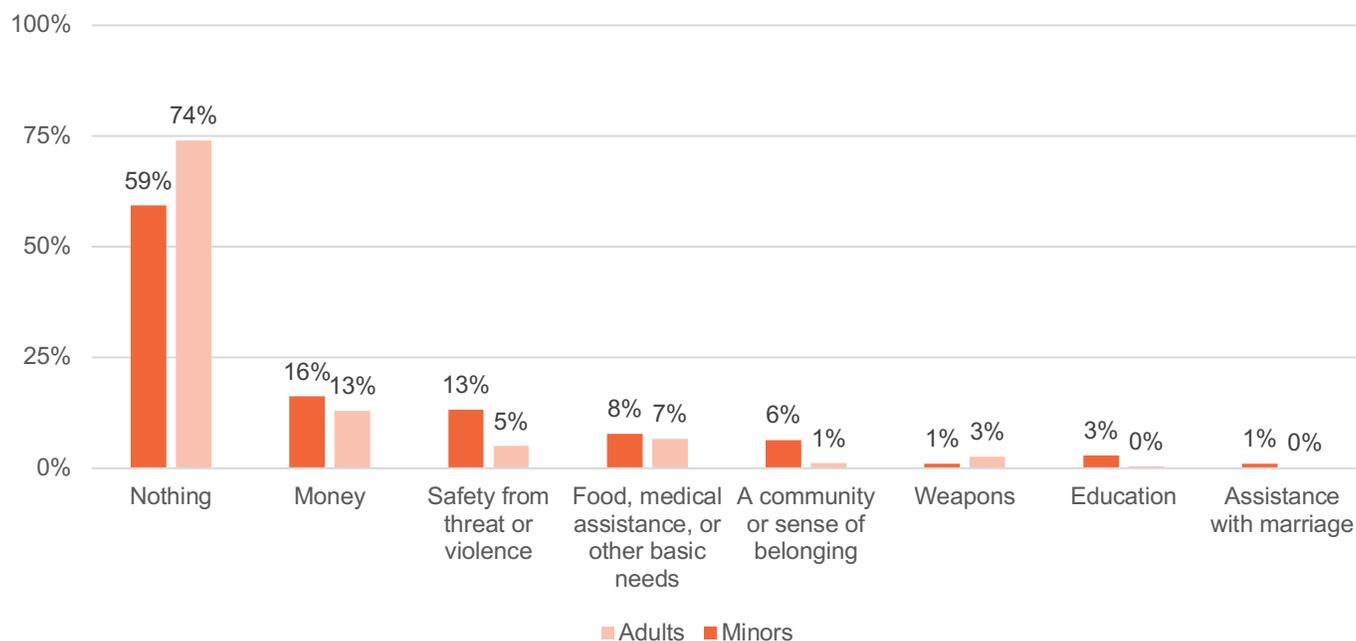
The data collected from Nigeria featured in Figures 11 and 12 show that children were more likely to have been promised something by a CSA or by Boko Haram when they initially became associated/affiliated, compared to adults who became associated/affiliated with the same groups. In Nigeria, 26 per cent of adult CSA-affiliated respondents said they were promised something, while 41 per cent of children said the same. Even though less notable, the same trend holds for those who were associated with Boko Haram. Of those who became associated as adults, 21 per cent said they were promised something, versus 25 per cent of children.

When looking at the types of incentives promised, it is clear they vary somewhat according to the recruit's age. For example, 6 per cent of CSA-affiliated child respondents said they were offered "a community or a sense of belonging," compared to only 1 per cent of adults. Both CSAs and Boko Haram seem more likely to promise "safety from threat or violence" to children than adults. For CSAs, 13 per cent of children say they were promised safety, versus 5 per cent of adults. For Boko Haram, 5 per cent of children were promised safety versus 2 per cent of adult recruits. These findings confirm that armed groups offer different incentives to children than they do to adults.[91] Armed groups appear to make a variety of promises that go beyond economic well-being. Much of the earlier research in this space has focused on economic incentives, but this data suggests that social incentives such as a sense of belonging are part of recruitment campaigns aimed at young people. This includes, for example, assistance with marriage, which is difficult-to-access and yet an important element of social status for young people in the North East.

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[91] For more information on the brand marketing of non-state armed groups, and how they tailor this to age, see Amanda E Rogers, *Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups Through a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State* (New York: United Nations University, 2017).

For CSAs, a slightly higher percentage of child affiliates (45 per cent) said they received all or some of what they were promised, compared to adults (41 per cent). Unsurprisingly, children who became associated with Boko Haram were less likely to receive what they had been promised (35 per cent) compared to those who became associated as adults (47 per cent). This suggests that Boko Haram is more likely to make disingenuous promises to children or feel less compelled to follow through on their promises. This is likely a sign that group leaders do not think frustrated children present the same potential threat as disgruntled adult recruits.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

The data collected as part of the MEAC study highlights various factors which impact child recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin region. Recognition of how and why children join armed groups, and an understanding of the nuances of the various trajectories into different types of groups are vital. For policy and programming efforts aimed at preventing child recruitment to be effective, the specific risk factors must be recognized and addressed.

First and foremost, it is important to consider that the immediate proximity of armed groups puts pressure on many aspects of life. Territorial control by non-state armed groups impacts children's likelihood of being directly engaged with armed actors, while also increasing the likelihood of other negative outcomes that can have long-term repercussions. Findings also demonstrate the role that family and support networks play in either facilitating or preventing child recruitment. For children whose parents themselves are or have been associated with Boko Haram, the likelihood that they will become associated is high. While some of the data presented herein show that a strong family unit and strong social network can be a protective factor, it is also clear that associated families can significantly influence their children's involvement with armed groups. These findings suggest that prevention programming cannot just focus on children, but rather needs to be oriented at the family unit. This is similar to what has been done in some anti-gang programmes, which recognizing the role of family affiliation in recruitment and successful transitions out of gangs, provide support in multi-generational family settings.[92]

Addressing food insecurity and economic conditions for children in the Lake Chad Basin is not a humanitarian issue, but also one of conflict prevention. It is clear that economic fragility – particularly food insecurity – is associated with higher probabilities of association with CSAs. Children in need of basic support should not have to turn to armed groups to make sure they can get a meal. This is an area where the international community can focus its efforts. The data on Boko Haram association is more mixed. While further reflection is needed, there is a question about what type of income generating activities children in the North East of Nigeria are undertaking and if these activities are exposing them to Boko Haram.

As evident from these findings, the risk factors that may lead to children becoming associated with Boko Haram are not necessarily the same as those which may result in children becoming affiliated with CSAs. While in Niger, political and civic engagement appears to play a protective role against

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[92] Meagan Cahill, Jesse Jannetta, Emily Tiry, Samantha Lowry, Miriam Becker-Cohen, Ellen Paddock, and Maria Serakos, *Evaluation of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development Program* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2015).

Boko Haram recruitment, engagement in social organizations and political/civic engagement appear to increase a child's chance of recruitment into CSAs across the region. Targeted measures are required to prevent child recruitment into groups such as the CJTF, COVI/COVIS, Yan Gora, or Hunters and Charmers. While social organizations and political activities are thought to play positive roles in children's lives (and reduce vulnerability to recruitment in some groups), it is clear that they can be co-opted to facilitate recruitment in others. It is important that groups such as school clubs, religious organizations, and sports clubs are incorporated into efforts to prevent recruitment by all armed actors. International organizations that work with and promote civic and social organizations in the region should talk with local partners about this evidence and discuss ways to ensure that social and civic opportunities for children remain safe and supportive environments that do not expose them to harm. This can be a particularly challenging area of engagement since communities have experienced years of violence and CSA-type groups have been seen as heroic defenders of families and neighbourhoods.

Given that the findings suggest access to formal education is associated with a lower likelihood of child association with Boko Haram, education and schooling should play a central role in prevention efforts. Formal education settings provide children with a sense of structure, purpose, and belonging, informal monitoring and safeguarding, and skills which they can benefit from as they enter the labour market. Education may not only have short-term preventive effects, by keeping children engaged and off the streets, but also generate long-term positive impacts by expanding their outside options and worldview beyond what armed groups can offer. The provision and protection of education – even during times of conflict – is therefore vital. It must be noted, however, that having received formal education in Nigeria is associated with increased probability of CSA association, raising questions about how schools facilitate community mobilization. This issue requires further examination to better understand what is behind this relationship. In addition, the analysis found that being an almajiri significantly increased association with Boko Haram but also with CSAs in several countries across the region, highlighting the vulnerability of children in the Almajiranci system to recruitment by a range of armed actors.

Efforts to prevent child recruitment within the Lake Chad Basin are essential – not only to protect children, but also to promote security across the region. As presented in this report, whilst patterns relating to child recruitment do exist, it is essential to remember that recruitment is the outcome of complex, highly individualized interactions of several different factors. The data presented herein help us isolate some relationships, but they should not be operationalized piecemeal or in silos. Moreover, the research makes clear that there are variations, both between countries and between different types of armed groups. A targeted, localized approach to prevention programming is therefore recommended, with interventions being designed to address both local needs and the types of armed groups recruiting and using children in each context.

Consideration should also be given to the fact that this findings report focuses on first-time recruitment into armed groups. The reasons why children return to an armed group or switch sides to join another group are very likely not the same as those that led them to be recruited initially. Earlier research in Nigeria highlighted that children exiting Boko Haram feel the need to join the CJTF or another CSA to signal their loyalties to the community and make clear that they do not pose

a threat.[93] While reintegration programming can benefit from the data laid out in this report, it is important to recognize that prevention and reintegration support needs to be targeted and contextualized to address the different factors that impact children at different stages of their journeys. It is essential to bear in mind that the reasons for a child's initial recruitment may or may not correspond with why they are re-recruited or compelled to switch sides.

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[93] For example, see Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett, "Beset on All Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria," in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* eds. Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven.(New York: United Nations University, 2018).

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT