

MEAC Findings Report 31

# Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

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# CONTENTS

<b>Background</b>	<b>4</b>
About MEAC	4
About this Series	4
About this Report	4
<b>Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin</b>	<b>7</b>
Global Overview: Child Exits from Armed Groups	7
Reviewing the Evidence: Child Exits from Armed Groups	13
Findings	15
Policy and Programmatic Implications	40

## KEY FINDINGS

- In the region, the majority of children surveyed wanted to leave their former armed group. This desire was more common among children affiliated with community security actors (CSAs) than those associated with Boko Haram and its factions, potentially tied to what the latter anticipated would happen to them if they tried to escape (e.g., killed by the military or arrested).
- Although acceptance of children formerly associated with Boko Haram was relatively high, girls were less likely to say they were fully accepted by their family and community than boys.
- Reasons for exiting armed groups differ among children and young adults and highlight a complex interplay of personal motivations, changing circumstances, and disillusionment. Fear of violence or death was a primary motivator for leaving Boko Haram, especially for girls. Older respondents expressed a loss of trust in group leadership and a diminishing belief in the cause. Those leaving CSAs sought a different life, better job opportunities, or more financial stability. Some CSA ex-associates mentioned losing faith in the group's leadership, likely due to violence against the community or unequal distribution of benefits.
- Exiting armed groups during ongoing conflict is a process and often does not involve fully cutting all ties to the group. Many children and young adults who have left still have family and friends in their former group. At least 20 per cent of those who left Boko Haram as young adults reported talking to people still with the group at least once a month if not more often. In Nigeria, children who leave CSAs often continue to live in the communities in which these groups are embedded, and many of their family and friends are still involved with the CSA.
- Children who leave Boko Haram face many challenges in their long transition back to civilian life, as they may be detained, and spend time in transit centres, often followed by IDP camps.

Numerous children report facing a range of hardships such as food insecurity, violence, and lack of sanitation after they exit an armed group. Children often experience these challenges at higher rates than adults.

- Access to post-association services varied, with children formerly affiliated with CSAs more likely to report receiving no support compared to children formerly associated with Boko Haram and related factions. Support for those leaving Boko Haram is often short-term and administered largely in the physical venues that make up the defection pipeline.
- A gender gap in support provision was also observed for those exiting Boko Haram. Girls appeared to get slightly more support on average than boys exiting, but this gender trend reverses dramatically once girls turn 18. Many adult women have exited with no support, even when they themselves have children to support.
- Children who have exited armed groups often face health-related challenges, with a significant proportion reporting serious injuries sustained during the conflict. Especially for respondents who joined a CSA as a child, drug addiction is an issue, albeit with potential underreporting owing to the sensitive nature of the topic in the region.
- Children leaving armed groups face systemic challenges that impact their economic well-being, including limited access to income-generating opportunities, food insecurity, and displacement. Food insecurity is particularly acute in Nigeria, where only 34 per cent of respondents who had been associated with Boko Haram and left the group as a child reported having enough food.
- Displacement remains a significant challenge for children exiting Boko Haram, with many unable to return home due to ongoing conflict and living in IDP camps facing difficult conditions that hamper reintegration progress. While children who had been with CSAs are more likely to remain in their communities, they still experience constraints on their mobility because of the conflict.

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

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# Background

## About MEAC

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

## About this Series

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

## About this Report

This report is based on data collected in multiple quantitative and qualitative studies across the Lake Chad Region conducted from May 2021 through June 2022. Working with 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) (Cameroon, Chad, and Niger), MEAC has run several studies that inform this report. In Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, MEAC carried out the following studies:

- A 516-person survey in Niger with ex-associates of Boko Haram, ex-affiliates of Community Security Actors (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 Provinces (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).

In Nigeria, a much larger longitudinal study is underway from which numerous parts are drawn for this report:

- A 3,274-person baseline survey with ex-associates of Boko Haram (or one of its factions), ex-affiliates of CSAs, and non-associated community members living in the surrounding or receiving communities in Borno State (Maiduguri, Konduga, and Jere). The data used in this report represents the baseline survey collected from May 2021 to early June 2022.
- An ongoing midline survey which to date includes 1,270 respondents who were part of the baseline sample, predominantly comprised of armed group ex-associates and ex-affiliates and those who were matched with them in community-based reintegration programmes. Some of those “matched” individuals appear to be selected because they were thought to be vulnerable; for others, it was less clear if they were chosen by some criteria or just because their involvement would help ensure the community would benefit as well from any reintegration programming. The data used in this report represents the midline survey data collected from January 2022 to August 2022.
- A series of 21 focus groups with 105 participants was conducted in March and September 2022 in Maiduguri, Borno State, with current and former affiliates of CSAs, as well as former associates of Boko Haram, and non-associated community members. This included two groups of girls and boys who took part in a participatory research activity<sup>1</sup> to determine which reintegration “challenges” and “opportunities” should be further explored during the conversation.

Community survey samples were designed to be representative of the populations 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, randomly selected 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 (or one of its factions) and ex-affiliates from CSAs like the CJTF, the comité(s) de vigilance (et de sécurité) (COVI/COVIS), and vigilante groups were identified in the community sample. Most former Boko Haram associates and those formerly or currently affiliated with a CSA, however, were identified through the transit or rehabilitation centres where they reside, through UN-supported programmes and training, or through local leaders who had been involved in their return to the community, resulting in a sub-sample of convenience. This includes individuals who passed through the Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) and/or the Bulumkutu interim care centre in Maiduguri.

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<sup>1</sup> The research activity was based on a research approach developed by the MEAC project and War Child UK and used the High Stakes boardgame to guide the conversation and determine which subtopics should be discussed in further detail. More information on the research tool is available [here](#).

Certain survey questions, such as where people spent time during their exit trajectories, give insights into whether respondents were part of a formal exit path or not (e.g., the Gombe OPSC facility in Nigeria). Given that there are different pathways through the exit architecture which have not always been well signaled to participants and that support can come from multiple, sometimes overlapping sources (the origins of which not always clear given the layers of implementing partners involved), it is difficult to isolate which path people were part of, how long they spent at certain locations, and which services they received along the way. Future MEAC surveys are designed to collect more detailed data on which part of the exit structure respondents were a part of. The Nigeria baseline survey – which is the basis of some of the analysis presented in this report – was conducted with individuals who left Boko Haram before the start of the mass defections, following the death of Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, and therefore does not reflect the experiences of individuals who were passing through the emerging state-driven Borno Model part of the exit architecture. MEAC is currently conducting research with individuals who are part of these mass defections and will publish those findings separately in the future.

Given that this report aims at exploring the dynamics of **child** exits from armed groups, the focus is on those respondents who were under the age of 18 at the time of their disengagement from an armed group.<sup>2</sup> This specific subset consists of 422 children (158 female- and 264 male-respondents) across the Lake Chad Basin who were below 18 years of age when they disengaged from an armed group. Within the sample, 339 respondents were associated with Boko Haram or one of its factions. An additional 83 respondents (all in Nigeria) were affiliated with CSAs and below 18 years of age when they disengaged. By analysing the information from children formerly associated with Boko Haram, as well as with that from ex-affiliates from CSAs, this research seeks to capture how the experiences and exit trajectories of children vary according to the armed group they were engaged with. In order to identify and describe age-varying experiences and exit trajectories, the report will also focus on those respondents who disengaged as adults (aged at least 18 years old), and where relevant the report will disaggregate between young adults (18-24)<sup>3</sup> and older adults (25 and above). The adult subset is composed of 528 female and 439 male former associates of Boko Haram (or one of its factions) and 11 female and 194 former CSA affiliates.

As this report refers to children that exited from Boko Haram (or one of its factions) 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> This is also the upper youth band. The United Nations defines youth as the age cohort of [15-24-year-olds](#). See, UNDESA, [“Definition of Youth,”](#) fact sheet.

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.

This MEAC findings report aims to contribute evidence to enable a better understanding of the dynamics of child exits from armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin. The findings provide an insight into the expectations and experiences of child exits from armed groups, the reintegration support provided, community and family acceptance, and the risk of re-recruitment and continued engagement after exiting an armed group. Such knowledge has the potential to strengthen interventions that support children after they leave armed groups and re-enter civilian life, and to ensure that programming accounts for the unique needs of children.

# Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

## Global Overview: Child Exits from Armed Groups

Global estimates indicate that in 2021, countries affected by armed conflicts were home to about 1.35 billion children – approximately 59 per cent of the total children's population – including 449 million who were living within 50 km or less of conflict events.<sup>4</sup> The occurrence of conflicts undoubtedly has grave consequences for the children caught in its midst. According to the Secretary-General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict, in 2021 alone, 22,645 grave violations against children – consisting of killing and maiming, denial of humanitarian access, sexual violence, abduction, destruction of schools and hospitals, and recruitment – were recorded. Of these grave violations, 6,310 cases pertained to the use and recruitment of children by armed groups.<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress that collecting and verifying information in complex conflict settings remains difficult, and therefore, it is probable that some acts of grave violations against children remain unknown, unreported, and/or unrecorded.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the challenge of generating an accurate picture of the dimension of the problem at a regional, national, or global scale, a broader gap persists when it comes to understanding children's situation in armed conflict from a micro-level approach, i.e., to examine the manner in which armed conflict is experienced and perceived by the individual children, their families, and communities. In this regard,

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<sup>4</sup> Gudrun Østby, Siri Aas Rustad and Andrew Arasmith, "[Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990–2021](#)" Conflict Trends (Oslo: PRIO, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Security Council, "[Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#)," United Nations, 11 July 2022, S/2022/493.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Gaggioli, "[Sexual violence in armed conflicts: A violation of international humanitarian law and human rights law](#)," International Review of the Red Cross (2014), 96 (894), 503–538; Emma Birikorang and Fiifi Edu-Afful, "[Breaking the Silence of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men and Boys: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo](#)" (2019) KAIPTC Occasional Paper 43.

it is particularly essential to inquire into the individual experiences and trajectories of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG).

### Exit Trajectories

Despite the existence of grey literature examining child recruitment by armed groups during conflicts, evidence-based studies using methodologically robust data on children remain insufficient, and consequently, there are still numerous unanswered questions on this subject. What is clear, is that just as there is no single trajectory into armed groups, the manner in which and why children leave armed groups varies significantly. Children are expelled, abandoned, left behind, or captured, or they surrender, escape, defect, switch sides, and stand down upon the command of their group.<sup>7</sup> For some children, their trajectories out of a group may be against their own wishes, as was the case, for example, for some children exiting the FARC-EP following the 2016 Peace Agreement in Colombia.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has also reportedly impacted the trajectories of associated and affiliated children. Evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo indicates that some armed groups voluntarily released children from their ranks, primarily motivated by fears of the virus and economic uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

When children have some agency over their departure, their reasons for wanting to leave also vary widely. Experiences within armed groups; the trajectory of the conflict; outside opportunities; personal and familial relationships; and access to information can influence a child's decision to try to leave their group. These exit trajectories and decisions are often multidimensional and may be unrelated to whether an individual's membership within the group was originally forced or 'voluntary'.<sup>10</sup>

Alongside individuals who exit armed groups, there are also those who may wish to leave a group but are unable to do so. As a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of the Congo describes: "It's like dipping yourself into a muddy swamp, it's easy to join but so hard to get out."<sup>11</sup> Violence may be used to dissuade children and others from attempting to leave. As one young respondent shared, she was punished with one hundred lashes when Boko Harm caught her trying to escape the first time and told her she would be killed if she was caught again.<sup>12</sup> Attention should be paid to how decisions to remain with a group may be gendered. For girls who experience increased gender equality or enhanced protection from sexual or domestic abuse, staying with a

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<sup>7</sup> Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Wenche Hauge, "'Nobody listens to us' Minors in DDR processes – The Gender Dimension," PRIO Paper (Oslo: PRIO, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children, *The Gendered Dimensions of Armed Conflict on Children in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (2021).

<sup>10</sup> As victims of conflict, it should be acknowledged that children's decision making is constrained by the circumstances in which they find themselves. Even when a child may appear to have voluntarily joined an armed group, this decision has been made along a spectrum of coercion. The extent to which this choice was entirely voluntary is, therefore, debatable.

<sup>11</sup> Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children: A Crisis of Recruitment* (2021). Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children: A Crisis of Recruitment* (2021).

<sup>12</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).



group may be safer or more fulfilling than leaving.<sup>13</sup> In addition, if girls have been married, had children, or been the victim of sexual violence while with the group, they may have to – or want to – stay with their husbands and/or fear reprisals or rejection from their community or family if they returned to their community.<sup>14</sup>

### Reintegration Trajectories

For those children that can and do leave armed groups, their initial exit is only the first step on their reintegration journey. Transitioning to civilian life after conflict association and/or involvement with an armed actor is often a long and arduous process full of challenges. Not all journeys are the same, and many children's trajectories out of armed groups will not be linear. The government response, community receptivity, programming support, and the nature of the environment they return to all shape and influence a child's reintegration progress. Whether children make reintegration progress, including, but not limited to, desistance of conflict-related activities and disengagement, depend on a multitude of factors that vary based on an individual's personal, familial, community, and structural circumstances. These factors are of importance when attempting to understand children's journeys out of armed groups and how to better design and implement child-oriented reintegration support programmes.

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children should not be deprived of their liberty, and that the detention of children should be used only as a last resort and for the shortest time possible, in practice, this is not always the case.<sup>15</sup> Upon exiting a group, children may be detained for indefinite periods for their association and involvement and treated as security threats rather than primarily as victims.<sup>16</sup> Conditions in these detention centres are often poor, and reports of human rights abuses are widespread.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, upon exiting their group, children may be sent to interim care, reintegration, or transit centres. These centres can provide medical services, education and psychological support to minors and are supposed to facilitate a child's journey back into civilian life. However, some children report negative experiences in these centres, including stigmatization and discrimination due to their former association.<sup>18</sup> Even though these centres are

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<sup>13</sup> Wenche Hauge, "[“Nobody listens to us” Minors in DDR processes – The Gender Dimension](#)," PRIO Paper (Oslo: PRIO, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the experience of girls and women with the Boko Haram conflict, see Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London, Zed Books, 2017) and UNICEF and International Alert, *'Bad Blood': Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria*, (2016).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "[Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)," United Nations, 20 November 1989, A/RES/44/25.

<sup>16</sup> See para 3.6 in [The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups](#), February 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, *"We Dried Our Tears" Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria's Conflict*, (London: Amnesty International, 2020); Human Rights Watch, *"They Didn't Know if I was Alive or Dead,"* (2019).

<sup>18</sup> Wenche Hauge, "[“Nobody listens to us” Minors in DDR processes – The Gender Dimension](#)," PRIO Paper (Oslo: PRIO, 2021).

described as providing support for children, those living in them often have their movements curtailed, and some of these centres can act as *de facto* detention facilities.<sup>19</sup>

The government response – particularly the legal frameworks that cover a child’s exit from an armed group – are key to not only where children end up after they leave the group (e.g., detention) but also their prospects for reunifying with their families and making reintegration progress. Age-blind counter-terrorism laws and the laws that lower the age of criminal culpability can impact the likelihood of detention and whether children are prosecuted for their association or actions during their time with an armed group.<sup>20</sup> In numerous cases, children are detained and tried for the undefined crime of “membership” in an armed group rather than specific crimes.<sup>21</sup> When the armed groups in question are listed by member states or sanctioned by the UN as terrorists, there is an even stronger tendency to “de-child” young people, particularly boys, and apply programmatic responses and legal frameworks meant for adults to them.<sup>22</sup> Being labelled or prosecuted as a terrorist has implications for a child’s ability to return to their family and community and successfully transition to civilian life (these policies also have implications that are relevant to those above 18).

Even when children are eligible for reunification with their families and/or are allowed return to their communities, doing so may be impossible given the security situation or due to challenges with family tracing. Many children and their families exiting armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin have been unable to return home and have instead “reintegrated” into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, sometimes for long periods, due to insecurity in the area of origin. Living in limbo and/or difficult circumstances after exiting can profoundly impact a child’s post-armed-group trajectory and reintegration progress.

Following detention or time spent in an interim care facility or IDP camp, some children return to their family, community, or foster care situations. There are often difficulties associated with this return for both children and the receiving families and communities. Accepting formerly associated children may be viewed as a security risk by families and communities, which may result in child returnees being stigmatized or viewed suspiciously. Furthermore, children themselves may struggle from a loss of agency, loneliness, return to traditional roles, and a lack of educational or employment opportunities.<sup>23</sup> There are accounts of families resisting taking their children back not because they viewed them as a threat but because they saw them as another mouth to feed and an economic

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<sup>19</sup> See Carolyn Hamilton, Kirsten Anderson, Ruth Barnes, and Kamena Dorling, [Administrative detention of children: A global report](#), (UNICEF: New York, 2011); Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, [“The Child Victims of ISIS Repatriating the Residents of Syria’s Detention Camps.”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, 27 May 2022; Amnesty International, [“We Dried Our Tears” Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria’s Conflict](#), (London: Amnesty International, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> UNODC, [Handbook on children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups: The role of the justice system](#), (Vienna, United Nations, 2017); Carolyn Hamilton and Laurent Dutordoir, [“Children and justice during and in the aftermath of armed conflict,”](#) Working Paper. No. 3 (New York, Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, [“Everyone Must Confess,”](#) (2019); Human Rights Watch, [“Flawed Justice Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq,”](#) (2017); Human Rights Watch, [“They Didn’t Know if I was Alive or Dead,”](#) (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, [“UN expert affirms the rights of child victims of terrorism, urges human rights-based approach,”](#) press release, 23 August 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

burden amidst a humanitarian crisis.<sup>24</sup> Girls, in particular, may encounter rejection and stigmatization from their family or community, especially if they were married to a combatant and/or had children during their time in the group.<sup>25</sup> Girls may also struggle to return to traditional gender roles and conform to expectations within their community.<sup>26</sup>

### Reintegration Outcomes

It is first important to define what constitutes reintegration progress and then consider how different factors impede or bolster progress toward those reintegration metrics. The MEAC project developed a framework that defines reintegration as a “transition from serving an armed group or armed force to a way of life that does not involve such service.”<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that “serving” does not imply willingness, nor is it limited to service in military roles. Furthermore, it must be recognized that conflict transitions may look very different from culture to culture and from place to place. However, their universal element is that such a life is defined in contrast to a life involved with or supporting violent conflict.<sup>28</sup>

A life not oriented to conflict or in service to an armed group/force could be measured by an individual's desistance from conflict-related violence, disengagement from parties to the conflict and related social networks, lack of – or decline in – support for conflict-related violence, and a shift in identification with armed actors and acceptance norms related to conflict and violence. It is important to highlight that one could make progress in all those areas and still not be considered well-reintegrated. For example, if a child left an armed group and never engaged with its members or performed any other roles for the group again, they would meet a narrow metric of reintegration success. Yet, if that child was rejected by their family, had no economic prospects, and was engaged in criminal acts, their transition shouldn't be viewed as a success story. A positive conception of reintegration requires not just disengagement from armed actors and desistance from conflict-related activities but some degree of physical and mental, economic, social, and civic well-being. As such, this report examines children's progress along a number of well-being markers – physical and psychological health, social and economic metrics as well as security and access to services.

The accounts of children exiting armed groups make it clear that their exit and reintegration journeys are full of challenges that can impede the transition to civilian life. Often children exiting a group face the same difficult conditions that led to their involvement in the first place. As one former child soldier from the DRC notes – “when the demobilized see that the cause that pushed them out into this group is not answered and he still has financial crisis, no job, they go home to the armed group.”<sup>29</sup> These

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<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch, *“They Didn't Know if I was Alive or Dead,”* (2019), p.33.

<sup>25</sup> War Child, *Rethink Child Soldiers*, (London 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Wenche Hauge, *““Nobody listens to us” Minors in DDR processes – The Gender Dimension,*” PRIO Paper (Oslo: PRIO, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC), *Agreed Conflict Exit Assessment Framework*, Unpublished Working Draft. (Forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> Given this conceptualization, a separate but related approach is necessary for examining transitions by ex-combatants from armed groups who are integrated into the military as part of their negotiated exit from illegal involvement in armed conflict.

<sup>29</sup> War Child, *Rethink Child Soldiers*, (London, 2019).

difficulties in reintegrating and rebuilding a life can place children at risk of returning to their former group or joining another armed group. Individual level factors – poor economic prospects (e.g., lack of education, unemployment, poverty) and an inability to distance yourself from combatants have all been argued to increase the likelihood of re-recruitment and continued engagement after exiting an armed group.<sup>30</sup> Lacking a sense of belonging and or a source of protection can also push people to rejoin an armed group.

Recent research suggests that gender and age potentially impact an individual's return prospects, with female- and youth-former members at a heightened risk of re-recruitment, although this finding requires further investigation.<sup>31</sup> The hypothesis for this age and gender disadvantage is that women and children are often excluded from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes. Women and children are more likely to self-demobilize and, therefore, may struggle to access reintegration support. In addition, the roles that women and children play within armed groups may not be recognized, resulting in them being disqualified from any available programming.<sup>32</sup> This can be the case in instances where reintegration support is only provided to those who partake in a weapons amnesty<sup>33</sup> or is provided primarily to those who are perceived as representing a security threat. Even if women and children did not play active combatant roles in an armed group, the support functions they provide are essential to the functioning of insurgent groups, and their involvement with these groups leaves them vulnerable. Limited or narrow understandings of who should be considered 'associated' with an armed group ignore this reality, resulting in these individuals struggling to access the necessary reintegration support. Historically, women and children were often not eligible for DDR-like programmes, and even when they were eligible, those programmes often failed to account for their specific needs or their unique experiences within an armed group.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-Combatants in Colombia," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol 62, No.1 (May 2016); Richard Hill, Gwendolyn Taylor, and Jonathan Temin, *Would you Fight Again: Understanding Liberian Ex-combatant Reintegration*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008); Anders Themnér, "[A Leap of Faith: When and how Ex-Combatants Resort to Violence](#)," *Security Studies*, vol 22, No. 2 (May 2013); Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle and John G. Horgan, "[Returning to the Fight: An Empirical Analysis of Terrorist Reengagement and Recidivism](#)," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol 33, No.4 (November 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Luís Martínez Lorenzo, Johanna Malm, Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, Sergio Triana-E and Sophia Wrede, *Reintegration or Recidivism? Why Ex-Combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Return to Arms* (Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> UN Women, *Young Women in Peace and Security: At the intersection of the YPS and WPS agendas*, (UN Women, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Luís Martínez Lorenzo, Johanna Malm, Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, Sergio Triana-E and Sophia Wrede, *Reintegration or Recidivism? Why Ex-Combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Return to Arms* (Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2021).

## Reviewing the Evidence: Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

Across the Lake Chad Basin, all non-state parties to the ongoing conflict have been known to recruit children. Boko Haram is believed to have first begun using children in 2009, when widespread conflict began following the execution of Boko Haram's leader Mohammed Yusuf.<sup>35</sup> As the group splintered, the affiliated factions formerly led by Abubakar Shekau (sometimes called the JAS faction) and Abu Musab Al-Barnawi (also known as ISWAP) continued to recruit and use children.<sup>36</sup> The recruitment of children has also occurred amongst the CSAs that were created to protect and defend communities against the threat of Boko Haram.<sup>37</sup>

The Secretary General's annual report on Children and Armed Conflict has listed Boko Haram and its factions (from 2014 – the present).<sup>38</sup> From 2015 to 2021, the annual report also listed the CJTF in Nigeria.<sup>39</sup> After being listed, the CJTF signed an Action Plan with the UN in 2017. The plan was created to address the group's use and recruitment of children by laying out measures to be taken to comply with international law and end the use of children in order to be de-listed.<sup>40</sup> Following the implementation of this action plan, the CJTF released more than 2,000 children from its ranks, and in 2021 the CJTF was de-listed.<sup>41</sup> No other armed group in the region has signed an Action Plan, and Boko Haram and associated groups remain listed for grave violations – including the recruitment and use of children – in the 2021 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.<sup>42</sup>

In response to the conflict, measures have been taken by both government and non-governmental actors to stabilize the region. The focus has been placed on the release, prosecution, and reintegration of adults formerly associated with Boko Haram, whilst children formerly associated with armed groups including Boko Haram do not face prosecution, but rather are supported with interim care, followed by social and reintegration assistance. In line with international principles, children should be handed over to child protection actors when encountered in the course of armed conflict. In September 2022, the Government of Nigeria, the United Nations system in Nigeria and UNICEF signed the *Agreement between the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, United Nations*

<sup>35</sup> UNODC, "[UNODC steps up effort to protect child victims and witnesses in terrorism-related proceedings in Nigeria](#)," Press Release, 2 February 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Malik Samuel and Oluwale Ojewale, "[Children on the battlefield: ISWAP's latest recruits](#)," *ISS Today*, 10 March 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, "[Who Will Care for Us? Grave Violations against Children in Northeastern Nigeria](#)," (2014); Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Security Council, "[Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#)," United Nations, 15 May 2014, S/2014/339; United Nations Security Council, "[Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#)," United Nations, 05 June 2015, S/2015/409; United Nations Security Council, "[Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#)," United Nations, 06 May 2021, S/2021/437.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> OSRSG-CAAC, "[Action Plans](#)," last accessed 26 September 2022.

<sup>41</sup> UNICEF, "[UNICEF reacts to UN delisting of CJTF from list of organizations using and recruiting children in armed conflict](#)," Press Release, 18 October 2021.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations Security Council, "[Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#)," United Nations, 11 July 2022, S/2022/493.

*Systems in Nigeria and the UNICEF Country Office in Nigeria on the Handover Protocol for children encountered in the course of armed conflict in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin Region.*<sup>43</sup> The signing of this handover protocol presented an opportunity to identify and transfer 100 girls and boys allegedly associated with armed groups from Giwa barracks to the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development.

For adults, in 2016, OPSC was launched by the Nigerian Government. Upon defecting from Boko Haram or fleeing controlled areas, adults are screened, and low-risk Boko Haram defectors go through a programme where they are provided with education, vocational training, religious instruction, and psychosocial counselling to prepare them for returning to the community.<sup>44</sup> However, concerns have been raised about the ‘unpredictable lengths of stay and an ad hoc approach to the operational and logistical component,’<sup>45</sup> and the narrowing criteria for determining OPSC eligibility,<sup>46</sup> subjecting participants to inhumane conditions, including poor safety standards and incidences of torture and rape<sup>47</sup>. More recently, following the death of Shekau in May 2021, over 93,000 individuals are said to have defected or escaped from Boko Haram-held territory and tens of thousands of them have ended up in camps in Maiduguri.<sup>48</sup> The Borno State government has announced a parallel exit programme for this population, called the Borno State Model, which the Borno government has said will include defection strategies, centre-based screening and identification in several large holding centres, and reintegration and reconciliation activities.<sup>49</sup> This includes the Hajj camp in Maiduguri, where many children reside alongside adults in poor conditions, creating protection and humanitarian.<sup>50</sup>

The other impacted countries of the Lake Chad Basin each have different national and regional approaches to deal with disengagement from Boko Haram.<sup>51</sup> In Cameroon, ex-associates – including children – initially spend time in centres run by the National Disarmament, Demobilization

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<sup>43</sup> UNICEF, [“Government of Nigeria, UNICEF sign handover protocol to protect children encountered during military operations.”](#) press release, 30 September 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Amnesty International, [“We Dried Our Tears” Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria’s Conflict](#) (London: Amnesty International, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> USAID Office of Transition Initiative (OTI), [Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation \(DDRR\) in Northeast Nigeria](#), (2021), p.19.

<sup>46</sup> Khalil, James, MaryAnne Iwara, and Martine Zeuthen, [Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Forced Recruits in Boko Haram](#), (Washington, DC, RESOLVE Network, 2022), p.2.

<sup>47</sup> Amnesty International, [“With a long-running armed conflict in the Northeast, Nigeria risks losing a generation of boys and girls,”](#) 16 June 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Vanguard Nigeria (Lagos), [“I’m proud of you, COAS tells troops on frontline.”](#) 10 April 2023.

<sup>49</sup> May Salem and others, [Advancing Holistic and Comprehensive Efforts to Confront Africa’s Growing Terrorism Challenge: A Nigerian Case Study on Developing Sustainable Pathways Out of Extremism for Individuals Formerly Associated with Boko Haram and ISWAP](#) (Cairo, CCCPA 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières, [“MSF warns of catastrophe as unprecedented number of malnourished children need lifesaving support.”](#) 26 April 2023.

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed description of the different nationally-focused approaches to disengagement and reintegration from Boko haram, see UNDP, [The State of Play: Process and Procedures for Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin Region](#), (2023).

and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC).<sup>52</sup> In Niger, eligible surrendered ex-associates receive rehabilitation programming in the Goudoumaria Centre or the new centre in Hamdallaye,<sup>53</sup> while children are to be handed over immediately to child protection services for rehabilitation support and family reunification.<sup>54</sup> In Chad, children who exit with their mothers are returned to their communities, and those who are unaccompanied are transferred to a Centre for Transit and Orientation (CTO) where they receive assistance with family reunification.<sup>55</sup> Beyond the individual responses by (and within) affected states in the region, there has been increasing coordination across states. Acknowledging the need for a regional response to the crisis, and following Security Council resolution 2349, the Conference on the Development of a Framework for a Regional Stabilisation Strategy was held in 2017. Organized by the African Union Commission, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and development partners, the conference aimed to develop strategies to stabilize the region, with a focus on going beyond a purely military response in order to address the root causes of the conflict.<sup>56</sup> Following this, the Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram Affected Areas of the Lake Basin Region was adopted in 2018. The strategy calls for reintegration programming to be designed with individual and context-specific needs in mind. In particular, the mainstreaming of a gender-sensitive approach and the importance of special provisions for children were highlighted.<sup>57</sup> An understanding of children's experiences of leaving armed groups and the type of support they would find most beneficial is therefore important.

## Findings

In this section, summary statistics from MEAC's studies in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria are used to outline patterns and trends in child exits and reintegration across the Lake Chad Basin. A review of children's exit decisions and motivations, expectations post-association, their experiences of reintegration, and their risk of re-recruitment and continued armed group engagement after exit follow. As the MEAC project continues to follow up with these children, future publications will address their reintegration progress.

### Exit Decisions and Methods

#### *Desire to Exit Armed Groups*

Across the Lake Chad Basin, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, the majority of respondents reported that they indeed had wanted to leave their armed group. This is not entirely surprising given the coercive

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<sup>52</sup> Global Center on Cooperative Security, [Realizing a Whole-of-Society Approach to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in the Far North Region of Cameroon](#), (2022).

<sup>53</sup> IOM, ["Niger Inaugurates a New Transition Centre to Facilitate the Return and Reintegration of Former Associates of Violent Extremist Organizations,"](#) 27 May 2022.

<sup>54</sup> IOM, [Gendered Dimensions of Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: The Niger](#), (IOM Geneva, 2022).

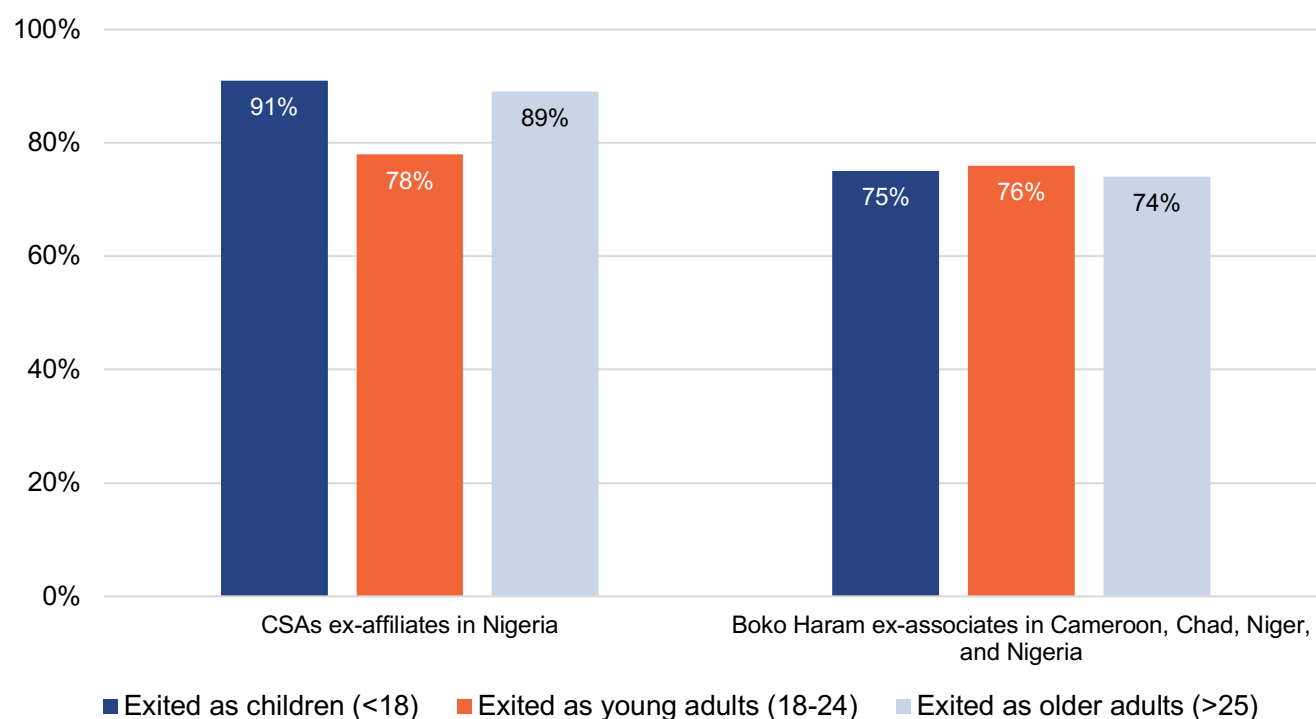
<sup>55</sup> IOM, [Gendered Dimensions of Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: Chad](#), (IOM, 2022).

<sup>56</sup> African Union, [Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery & Resilience of the Boko Haram affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region](#), (Lake Chad Basin Commission, African Union Commission, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

recruitment tactics of Boko Haram and CSAs in the region and given the hardships of life within many such groups.<sup>58</sup> When interpreting these data points, it is also relevant to take into account the way in which most former associates and affiliates came to be part of the MEAC sample. Many were recruited for the study because they were part of a UN-supported exit programme. Respondents who were associated with Boko Haram often came through programmes for which only low-risk defectors were eligible, and those who were affiliated with CSAs had often been offered support because they were children at the time of their affiliation.

**Figure 1 – Percentage of Respondents Who Wanted to Leave Their Armed Group – Disaggregated by Armed Group and Age at Exit (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)**



Overall, it stands out that respondents who were with a CSA in Nigeria were – perhaps counterintuitively – more likely to say that they wanted to leave the group than those with Boko Haram. As evidenced by findings explored later in this brief, this could be because respondents who were with Boko Haram were more afraid of what might happen to them if they tried to leave (e.g., arrested/killed by the military or rejected by their families and communities). In addition, leaving Boko Haram might have meant leaving family and friends behind without knowing if one would see them again. Respondents who were with CSAs, on the other hand, often did not leave their communities and knew they would remain close to their existing networks without fear of being rejected. Children who left a CSA were more likely to say they wanted to leave than those who exited CSAs as young

<sup>58</sup> Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O’Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, “[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).



adults. This could be because children were less likely to receive salaries or payments, whereas young adults may have been able to take on more meaningful (and paid) roles with CSAs.

It is important to remark that the decisions to leave a group seemed to be gendered. For respondents who were associated with Boko Haram, the data suggest that the desire to disengage from a group was higher for female respondents, in particular for those who left the group during their childhood. 82 per cent of girls who left Boko Haram as a child said they wanted to leave, compared to 69 per cent of boys. The differences between female and male former associates could perhaps be linked to unequal trajectories into and varied experiences within, the group, particularly with regard to experiences of forced marriage or sexual violence.

### *Reasons for Exiting Boko Haram*

For many children, violence and threats made them want to leave the group. Of all the respondents who exited Boko Haram or a related faction as children, 53 per cent stated that this was because of fear of violence or death. Other common reasons for exiting Boko Haram during childhood were due to missing one's family (27 per cent), the hardship of life with the group (15 per cent),<sup>59</sup> and because they wanted a different life for themselves (11 per cent). In Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, 17 per cent of respondents who left Boko Haram as a child said they wanted to leave because they never wanted to be with the group in the first place.<sup>60</sup>

When respondents exited the group when they were a bit older (e.g., when they were 18-24), the motivations for leaving shifted a bit. Particularly key is the change observed regarding fear of violence or death (8 percentage points higher), which may reflect this demographic's greater involvement in military roles and, thus, greater exposure to battlefield violence. In addition, this older demographic expressed a greater loss of trust in group leadership (8 percentage points higher) and

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<sup>59</sup> "Hardship of life with the group" could refer to a multitude of different factors and overlaps with other response options. Boys and girls who participated in a MEAC focus group and exited Boko Haram as part of the mass surrenders (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 16 September 2022) explained how difficult life was in "the bush" and listed hunger as one of the main motivations for fleeing from Boko Haram, as well as a lack of decent shelter and clothing. Although it is difficult to know for sure if individuals who left Boko Haram prior to the start of the mass defections (following the death of Shekau in May 2021) faced similar hardships, it would not be surprising if hunger ranked high, given the dramatic levels of food insecurity in the region.

<sup>60</sup> The answer options to the question "Why did you want to leave" were not read out loud, and enumerators selected the pre-programmed answer options that most closely aligned with the responses. Based on the experiences of enumerators in Nigeria (where the survey was rolled out first), a new option was added in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger surveys: "Never wanted to be with them." In Nigeria, this type of response could have been included by enumerators in the other answer options, such as "other reasons," "fear of violence/death," or "wanting a different life," for example, which makes a direct comparison of this particular response across all four countries difficult.

loss of belief in the cause (9 percentage points higher), which may be associated with a potential sense of dissatisfaction over unmet promises<sup>61</sup> and/or greater consciousness developed with age.<sup>62</sup> Gender also appears to impact exit motivations. Among those who exited from Boko Haram as children, girls were more likely than boys to indicate leaving the group because of fear of violence or death (61 per cent of girls and 45 per cent of boys). Although boys were more likely to report playing military roles or manning checkpoints – which would have exposed them to more battlefield dangers – it is possible that girls would have been exposed to (non-battlefield) violence within the group, such as sexual violence and assault. During focus groups with the mass surrenders, girls and young women also mentioned military air strikes as threatening their lives while they were with the group.<sup>63</sup> Boys were more likely than girls to indicate leaving Boko Haram because they were missing their family (31 and 22 per cent for boys and girls, respectively), loss of trust in group leadership (12 per cent for boys and 4 per cent for girls) and loss of belief in the cause (11 per cent for boys and 4 per cent for girls).

The gender gap in exit motivations grows for respondents who exited from Boko Haram as young adults (18-24). About three-quarters of female respondents who left Boko Haram when they were aged between 18 and 24 reported leaving the group because of fear of violence or death, while for male youths, this proportion only reached 46 per cent. Furthermore, 32 per cent of men who exited Boko Haram as young adults left because they lost trust in the group or belief in the cause, while only 1 per cent of female ex-associates cited this motivation. The age and gender differences in exit motivations are likely linked to the age and gender differences in pathways into the group and roles played within the group, as well as the social norms in the region.<sup>64</sup>

### *Reasons for Exiting CSAs*

Unlike Boko Haram ex-associates, the main reasons cited by young people exiting from CSA groups were not related to fear, emotional needs, or the loss of trust in their group. For those who were affiliated with CSAs and left the group as children, the most common reason for leaving the group was wanting a different life (40 per cent), followed by wanting a better job (23 per cent) or the need for more money (15 per cent). For those who exited from a CSA group as young adults (18-24), wanting a better job (35 per cent), and searching for a different life (35 per cent) were the two most common reasons cited for leaving the group. A relatively high number of responses referred to

<sup>61</sup> Findings on recruitment show that 25 per cent of children and 21 per cent of adults associated with Boko Haram were made a range of promises for joining their rank (including money, food and medical assistance, education, assistance with marriage, weapons, safety from threat, and/or a community or sense of belonging). See, Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Laurence Steinberg, et.al. (2018) "[Around the world, adolescence is a time of heightened sensation seeking and immature self-regulation](#)," *Developmental Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2018).

<sup>63</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with young girls and women who exited Boko Haram as part of the mass surrenders*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 16 September 2022).

<sup>64</sup> See Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, "[Data Points on Gender Norms and Sexism in and Around Maiduguri](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 3* (New York: United Nations University, 2021); Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022);

“another reason” for leaving – 10 per cent of respondents who left a CSA as a child, and 15 per cent of young adults. These reasons were illuminated in their open-ended responses, which suggested that several respondents left their CSA group because peace returned to their communities or because they wanted to go to school. Indeed, as relative peace returns to communities (even temporarily) and schools and markets reopen, CSA affiliates are likely to have increased access to options outside of the armed group. As one young man who was 22 at the time of participating in the survey explained, “My father told me to start following him to his marketplace. I stopped going out for work as a CJTF member when I started going to the market.”<sup>65</sup>

Some young people reported leaving their CSA group because they no longer believed in the cause or the group’s leadership (between 2-5 per cent). The loss of faith in group leadership is likely related to the violence committed by CSAs against community members or the perception that leaders are not distributing benefits equally, complaints listed in open-ended responses as reasons for wanting to leave.<sup>66</sup> As one young man who was 19 when participating in the survey recounted: “Someone in our community was caught because he stole someone’s property. He was brought to our leader, they did not interrogate him, but they just went ahead and killed him in my presence. After some time, I went to our leader; I told him I was going to travel because I was no longer interested in the group, I stopped going to them, and that was how I came to leave the Yan Gora group.”<sup>67</sup> Another respondent who was 22 when participating in the survey, said he “just stopped participating in any activity with CJTF when our leader was asked to bring the list of volunteers that stayed longer for permanenting by the Government [i.e., receiving a salary]. He refused to give our names but rather gave the names of his friends even though we stayed longer than them, and no one can compare our participation during wars with them.”<sup>68</sup>

### *Methods of Exit*

The differences between the armed actors in the region are also reflected in children’s exit pathways from different groups. For those who were associated with Boko Haram or its factions and exited as minors, respondents overwhelmingly stated that their time with the group ended by escaping (79 per cent). Open-ended survey responses underlined the difficulties that children had in escaping. Many respondents shared stories of how they had to take advantage of opportunities when the group was distracted or occupied to escape, such as when Boko Haram members were at prayers, asleep, or during adverse weather conditions. As one girl, who first became associated with Boko Haram when she was ten years old, explained, “We always wanted to escape from the group since from we were abducted. We planned on how to escape the group, and one day me and three other girls woke up in the middle of the night when the Boko Haram leaders were sleeping and ran out of the place. We

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<sup>65</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022); Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> For more findings on exits from CSAs, please 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).

<sup>67</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

<sup>68</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

walked for ten days before we reached Cameroon, where we went to the military, and they took us to barrack, kept us for two days, and later handed us over to our parents.”<sup>69</sup> Stories shared by other respondents also suggest that escapes were often planned in advance and were undertaken when an opportunity presented itself. Once they were out, those children who escaped often faced a long and risky path to safety.

The second most common way of exiting Boko Haram was defection. It is important to mention that for some, defection and escape may be synonymous; for others, escape may describe their physical flight from the group and defection, their ideological or political rejection of it. Some respondents may describe their exit as defection because they surrendered to the military and/or ended up in a defectors’ programme compared to others who either bypassed those pathways or were focused on the manner in which they left. High rates of escape and defection are unsurprising given that many of the ex-associates in the sample were accessed through programming designed for defectors and those who had surrendered to the military (even when children are supposed to be handed over to child protection actors and exempt from some of the adult requirements). As such, it should be noted that these results may not be reflective of all exits from Boko Haram and related groups, but only of this particular sample.

As expected, child exits from CSAs differ from those from Boko Haram. Of the respondents who exited a CSA in Nigeria – like the CJTF or Yan Gora – as a child, 63 per cent reported formally leaving the group, 18 per cent were asked to leave, and 7 per cent said they moved away and therefore stopped engaging with the group. When asked to tell the story of how they left the group, it becomes clear that for many, the Action Plan that was signed in 2017 between the CJTF and the UN played a key role in the ways in which children left the group. Following the signing, children who were with the CJTF were told that they were not supposed to be with the group because of their age, and many were offered support to transition out of the group. As one young respondent who was part of a UNICEF-funded programme recounted, “the [INGO] gathered us that were young and advised us to quit the CJTF group because we were too young to participate in their activities. They told us to choose between going to school or starting up a business. Then I chose starting up a business and they sponsored me to start up a business of electrical work. That was how I came to leave the group.”<sup>70</sup>

## Life After Exit

### *Expectations After Exit*

Most of the respondents who exited from Boko Haram as children expected to return to their home community (39 per cent) or to another community (22 per cent). Overall, children were more likely to fear the government response than that of Boko Haram when they thought of escaping. Across the region, 10 per cent of respondents who were children at the time of exit reported being afraid of retaliation from Boko Haram after exiting. A larger proportion of children thought they would be killed

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<sup>69</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

<sup>70</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

(16 per cent) or arrested (17 per cent) by the military. While the prevalence of these fears is somewhat lower than that reported by adult ex-associates (21 and 22 per cent, respectively), this is still concerning, especially when considering international legal obligations to support the reintegration of exiting children.<sup>71</sup> It is notable that the fear of being killed by the military upon exiting Boko Haram was significantly higher in Nigeria, where 27 per cent of those who left as children expressed this concern (compared to only 8 per cent in Chad).

Very few children leaving Boko Haram thought they would receive support upon exit. Only 1 per cent of children who left Boko Haram said that they expected to receive reintegration support, and 12 per cent (across the region) thought they would enter some sort of rehabilitation facility. While no child ex-associates in Nigeria expected to enter a formal reintegration facility, the situation differed in other countries, with respondents in Cameroon (4 per cent) and Chad (24 per cent) mentioning CNDDR centres as their anticipated starting point for reintegration (Mora and Meri Centres in Cameroon and the Bagasola centre in Chad were cited as destination). Boys were much more likely than girls to think that they would go through a transit centre or formal process (e.g., in Chad, this was 33 per cent of boys compared to 4 per cent of girls). These expectations appear to mirror reality, as historically, girls and women were often considered “low-risk” and found to bypass the formal exit architecture and be returned directly to the community.<sup>72</sup> Overall, the age at the time of exiting did not seem to have a significant impact on expectations, although young adults (18-24) were slightly more likely to expect reintegration support (3 per cent across the region) or to enter a rehabilitation centre (15 per cent across the region). This differential may be due to children having less access to information on exit pathways and accompanying support.

Evidence from Nigeria, where the sample of former CSA-affiliated children was large enough to compare to ex-associates of Boko Haram, suggests that children exiting CSAs had higher estimations of their options outside the group, and in particular with regard to opportunities for education. Most of the respondents who left as children reported expecting to attend school (51 per cent) or get a job or skills training (30 per cent). A smaller percentage of children expected to start a business (14 per cent). Unsurprisingly, this option ranked higher for those who exited as young adults (ages 18-24) (30 per cent), although they also ranked education high when it came to their expectations (32 per cent for school and 21 per cent for job or skill training). As highlighted earlier, these expectations could be in line with some of the explicit promises children and young people were made when offered support to leave the group within the framework of the UN Action Plan with the CJTF. Whether or not children and young people who left CSAs are indeed able to go back to school or start a business will likely depend on the conflict dynamics and the availability of schooling and business opportunities.

### *Transit and Detention*

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<sup>71</sup> See for example, signatories of the [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict](#).

<sup>72</sup> May Salem and others, [Advancing Holistic and Comprehensive Efforts to Confront Africa's Growing Terrorism Challenge: A Nigerian Case Study on Developing Sustainable Pathways Out of Extremism for Individuals Formerly Associated with Boko Haram and ISWAP](#), (Cairo, CCCPA 2022).

Although returning ‘home’ was one of the main expectations, this is not always an immediate option for children and young people trying to exit Boko Haram. While detention should only ever be a measure of last resort for children, globally, children (particularly boys) who exit armed groups are at (high) risk of being detained, in transit or in detention centres.<sup>73</sup> despite the international legal obligations for detention to be a last resort.<sup>74</sup> When calibrating children’s reintegration progress, there is a lot of focus on children’s time spent in an armed group, while there is less attention in the literature to the places in which children find themselves post-exit, including detention centres, their treatment there, and the subsequent impact these experiences have on their reintegration progress. Children – like adults – can spend years in detention or separated from their homes and families, which will influence their subsequent well-being, reintegration progress, and their likelihood of re-recruitment likely as much – or even possibly more – than their initial conflict experiences. Understanding where children end up after they exit armed groups and the experiences they have in these different places, is, therefore, of utmost importance for weighing reintegration outcomes. Conversely, not considering these experiences may undermine the reliability of assessments of children’s reintegration progress.

Where children end up when they exit Boko Haram differs by country. The survey asked respondents how long it had been since they left their group and where they had been during most of that time. In Nigeria, 20 per cent of those who left the group as children said they spent most of this period in their community. However, 18 per cent, were in Giwa Barracks or another detention facility.<sup>75</sup> Approximately 22 per cent ended up in an IDP camp during this time. In Chad, 53 per cent of those who left Boko Haram or one of its factions as children returned to their community and 22 per cent ended up in the Bagasola screening centre. In Cameroon, 30 per cent of those who left the group as children went to the Meri Centre, 6 per cent stayed in the Mora Centre, and 46 per cent went to a community that was not their own.<sup>76</sup> The differences in where children go after exiting armed groups are largely driven by government policies (and adherence to them) and programmatic eligibility. These policies and practices change over time, and thus the movements and experiences of children exiting Boko Haram have evolved over time. For example, in September 2022, the Nigerian government signed an agreement with UNICEF on the handover of children encountered during military operations to prevent or reduce their detention, which should reduce the number of children going to Giwa Barracks.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, [Gaps and Needs for the Successful Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Groups or Armed Forces](#), (2020); War Child, [Rethink Child Soldiers: A New Approach to the Reintegration of All Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups](#), (2019).

<sup>74</sup> The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “No child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.” See Article 37b in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Adopted 20 November 1989 by UN General Assembly resolution 44/25.

<sup>75</sup> Giwa barracks is a military detention center for Boko Haram detainees located near Maiduguri. The facility is notorious for its poor conditions, including a lack of food, water, and sanitation. See, International Crisis Group, [“An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria’s Operation Safe Corridor.”](#) *Africa Report 170*, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> In Niger, the sample of respondents who exited Boko Haram as children was too small to meaningfully use percentages. In this survey, 9 out of 16 exiting children spent most of their time in the Goudoumaria centre. Among respondents who left Boko Haram as young adults (18-24) most went to Goudoumaria Centre (84 per cent), and only 4 per cent were back in their community.

<sup>77</sup> UNICEF, [“Government of Nigeria, UNICEF sign handover protocol to protect children encountered during military operations.”](#) press release, 30 September 2022.

Of the people surveyed, those who left Boko Haram as children were more likely to describe their time in the intermediary location as involuntary (31 percent compared to 17 per cent of older youth), which may highlight a difference in the perceived agency in their exit paths (or possibly how practitioners engage with them differently than young adults). It must be noted that this only gives us a general trend as these are aggregated across different types of locations (e.g., detention centres, host families, and IDP camps). It is clear that children's perceptions of whether their stay is voluntary or not might not align with a legal metric or the stated mission of a facility. From this viewpoint, given the apparent lack of clarity with regard to some of transition or rehabilitation centres, efforts should promptly be made to ensure that children are duly informed of their situation, notably in terms of any deprivation of liberty, to ensure that their rights are fully respected. For example, although an interim care centre like Bulumkutu in Maiduguri, where many residents receive a range of different services such as health care and skills training, is a far cry from a military detention facility like Giwa Barracks, those who are housed there reportedly cannot move in and out freely.

#### *Hardships in the Transition Away from an Armed Group*

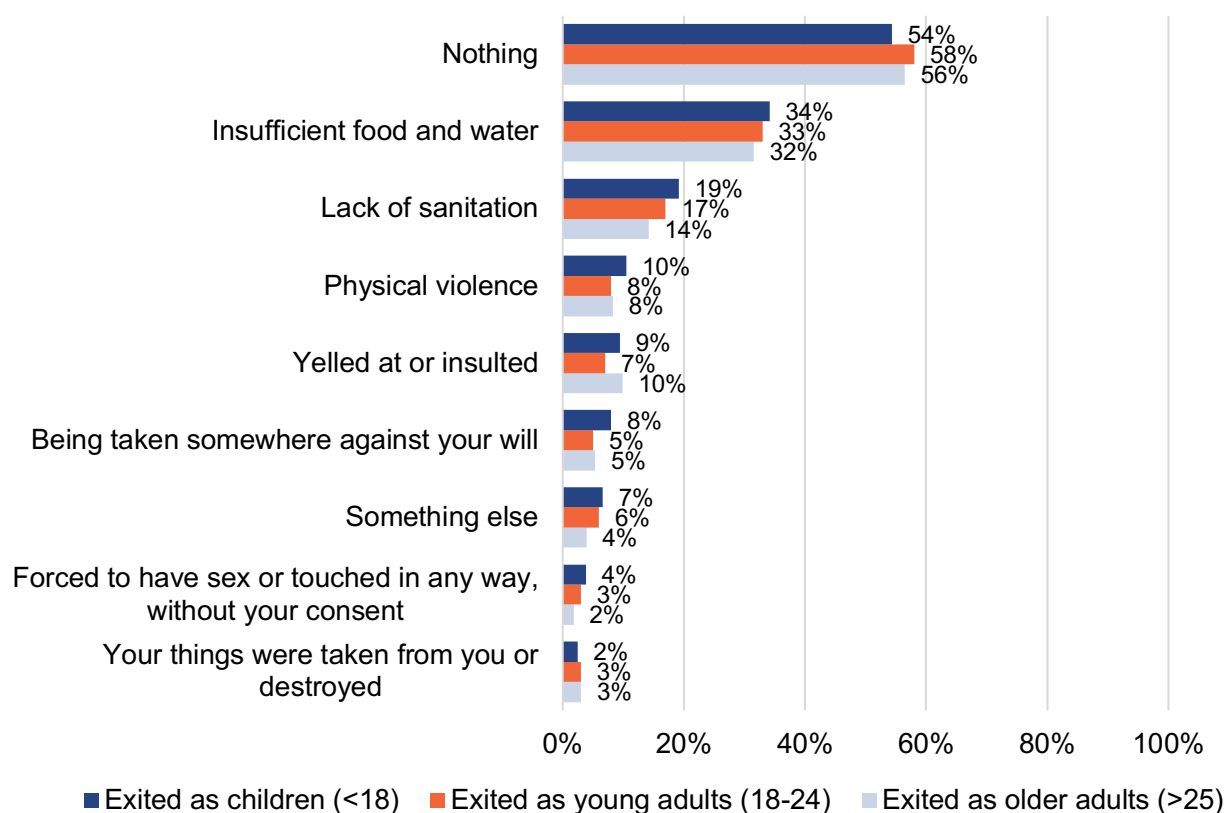
There is often the assumption that when a young person manages to escape an armed group, their exposure to conflict and hardship ends. For many, this is far from the case. Many children face food insecurity, violence and abuse, and other hardships during their transition to civilian life, including in facilities along the exit pipeline. As expected, difficulties were more frequently reported by ex-associates of Boko Haram compared to ex-affiliates of CSAs. In Nigeria, among former CSAs, 94 per cent of those who exited as children said they had not experienced any of these problems,<sup>78</sup> compared to only 62 per cent of respondents who had left Boko Haram as children.<sup>79</sup> The different experiences of children formerly associated with Boko Haram compared to those of children who had been with a CSA are driven – at least in part – by the types of places these children end up after they exit.

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<sup>78</sup> The place where children spent the most time post-exit may refer to a number of locations, such as in detention, a transit centre, an IDP camp, or home community. The responses are not differentiated based upon the specific location but are designed to provide a general idea of the quality of life for children in the period following their armed group exit.

<sup>79</sup> Across the four countries, the total rate of child ex-associates who did not report these hardships was 54 per cent: 62 per cent in Nigeria, 44 per cent in Cameroon, 53 per cent in Chad, and 73 per cent of a very small sample of 16 respondents in Niger.

**Figure 2 – “During your time there, did you experience any of the following? Please select all that apply.” (Former Boko Haram Associates in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)**



As shown in Figure 2, respondents of all ages faced different types of hardships during their transition. Strikingly, children who leave Boko Haram are slightly more likely to experience a range of hardships and abuse than those who exit as adults. Children were more likely to report not having enough food and water and lack of sanitation than adults. Children also reported higher rates of physical and sexual violence than adults. The multiple locations respondents reside at during their exit trajectories, and the continued abuse and hardship they are reportedly exposed to, make it difficult to isolate the perpetrators and locations of incidents with survey data. For example, in Nigeria, several respondents who were children when exiting from Boko Haram (or who were arrested for suspected association), described spending months in Giwa Barracks, followed by years in a maximum-security prison, followed by months at the Bulumkutu interim care centre, after which they moved to an IDP camp. This information pertaining to the detention of children, the length of such detention, and the conditions in which children are deprived of liberty and/or subjected to violence raises deep concerns. If these were to be confirmed (and persistent, following the 2022 hand-over protocol), efforts should promptly be made to ensure that this situation is rectified, and children’s rights are fully respected. Hardship and violence, however, are not confined to detention settings. Children who exit armed groups and find themselves in a variety of settings report experiencing hardship and/or violence.



## Reintegration Support

This next section examines whether or not children access support, where, and which types. It ends with the feedback from young people about which types of support were the most useful to them thus far and what type of support they would provide others if they were in charge. Findings from across the Lake Chad Basin suggest that many respondents received no support services at the locations where they stayed soon after exiting from an armed group – although rates varied significantly with the armed group and facility in question. When analysing which services or support respondents received, it is important to take into account that the ex-armed group association/affiliate sample was one of convenience. The findings may reflect the particular subset of children in the MEAC survey sample, which draws ex-associates/affiliates largely from reintegration centre populations and “graduate” referrals from UN and NGO reintegration programmes. A smaller portion of self-reported ex-associates/affiliates were identified through the random community sampling and may have spontaneously reintegrated without assistance or going through a defector or reintegration process. It is likely that these findings are influenced by the profile of the respondents and the places where they resided when first being interviewed, and thus may not reflect the experience of all children who exit armed groups in the region.

Those coming out of self-defence groups and CSAs were much less likely to receive reintegration support. Of the total ex-affiliates in Nigeria who left the group during childhood, 75 per cent said they did not receive any type of support. This is comparable to those who left a CSA as adults (77 per cent). Given that affiliation with CSAs is often fluid, and there are few exit programmes (although for children, this has changed with time and new political commitments), it could be that many exit the group without going through any formal processes that would provide reintegration support. One young respondent who was formerly affiliated with the CJTF suggested that “the reason why I did not receive any help from the NGOs is because they said that the CJTF group are not among the vulnerable people of the community.”<sup>80</sup> That said, as highlighted previously, others explicitly referred to exit support they had received within the framework of the UN Action Plan with the CJTF, and listed the support received as the main reason they were able to separate from the group. In Nigeria, of those children that did report receiving support, the most reported types were cash and education (7 per cent each), followed closely by skills training and basic needs coverage such as food, water, or shelter (6 per cent each). Most of the support received by those exiting CSAs was provided in their communities (in contrast to the experience of those exiting Boko Haram, which is discussed below), making it difficult to pinpoint whether the support was reintegration-specific, or reflected the broader humanitarian aid provided to their communities.

This picture looks different for children who leave Boko Haram, and often receive services while they are passing through reintegration-related facilities (i.e., before they return to their communities). In Nigeria, 42 per cent of respondents who left the group as a child said they received no support after exiting. This rate is comparable to those who leave as adults (45 per cent).<sup>81</sup> When they were supported, child ex-associates reported receiving different types of programming and goods. For respondents who left Boko Haram and related groups as children, the most reported services were

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<sup>80</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

<sup>81</sup> Children leaving CSAs are supported roughly at the same rates as adults leaving CSAs.

basic needs support (37 per cent of respondents), material goods (25 per cent), medical care and cash (22 per cent each), skills training (18 per cent), education and family tracing (11 per cent each), and religious education or broader reorientation support (8 per cent each). Given the conditions under which many of those formerly associated with Boko Haram left, food, medicine, clothing, and shelter are likely to be what is most urgently needed and are indeed in line with the needs identified by respondents themselves. During focus groups in Nigeria in September 2022 with children and young people who left Boko Haram as part of the mass surrenders, it became very apparent that the biggest challenges post-exit revolved around meeting their basic needs. Boys and girls described not being able to secure enough money to buy sufficient food for themselves and their families. A group of girls discussed how crippling hunger can be: “When you are hungry and thirsty, it can even prevent you from walking.”<sup>82</sup>

Young adults who left Boko Haram between the ages of 18 and 24 reported similar support services when asked what they received. During qualitative research activities, several young adult female respondents indeed referred to having received skills training for tailoring, jewelry, or cap making.<sup>83</sup> Although some were still using these skills, others had sold their sewing machine to cover immediate needs, or did not have enough materials (e.g., fabric) to turn this into profitable employment. Skills training could provide a helpful bridge in setting up a life post-exit and generating income – especially for those who relocate to locations with few services and less support. Nevertheless, programmes and services to support the exit of those who come out of Boko Haram seem to be mostly focused on the time immediately after exit, when individuals are residing in detention or rehabilitation centres. Examining the impact of gender on post-conflict services for former Boko Haram members, it stands out that female respondents are less likely to report receiving support the older they are when exiting. Out of those who exited Boko Haram when they were children, 39 per cent of girls say they did not receive any type of support compared to 45 per cent of boys. For those who leave the group above the age of 18, however, the percentage of respondents who say they never received any support grows to 53 per cent (compared to 29 per cent of male respondents). This suggests that while girls are supported at somewhat similar rates as boys, a significant gender gap exists for those who exit as adults. Observations from qualitative work in March 2022 Nigeria further confirm that many girls and women who had been with Boko Haram were returned directly to their communities by the military, bypassing the transitional care centres, and not receiving support despite having several children to care for.<sup>84</sup> In Nigeria, within the MEAC sample, boys and men were indeed more likely to have spent time in detention facilities, or the Operation Safe Corridor facility in Gombe, whereas girls and women, often went directly to their (or another) community or IDP camp.

Support is often short-term and administered largely in the physical venues that make up the defection pipeline (e.g., in military detention centres, prisons, interim care centres, and IDP camps. Once they leave transition facilities, it likely becomes harder to follow up with programme

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<sup>82</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with young girls and women who exited Boko Haram as part of the mass surrenders*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 16 September 2022).

<sup>83</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with young women formerly associated with Boko Haram*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 23 March 2022).

<sup>84</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with young women formerly associated with Boko Haram*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 23 March 2022).

participants. When asked about the support they had received since they had last been interviewed, 85 percent per cent of those who left as children said they had not received anything. For those who did not receive any support, a dominant explanation was that they were simply unlucky, whilst others blamed living in areas where no support was available, ongoing conflict, and/or favouritism amongst community leaders.

### *The Perceived Value and Impact of Support*

In order to improve and tailor service provision to the needs of formerly associated children, it is necessary to understand what services they consider the most useful. Of the support services received by those few respondents in Nigeria who left CSAs as children, education was considered the most useful, followed by skills training, cash, and basic needs support. 14-year-old boy said that while he did not expect any support when leaving Yan Gora, but added, “I want to tell you that the services I received (i.e., skills training) did help me to support my needs a bit, even though not as much as I wish.”<sup>85</sup>

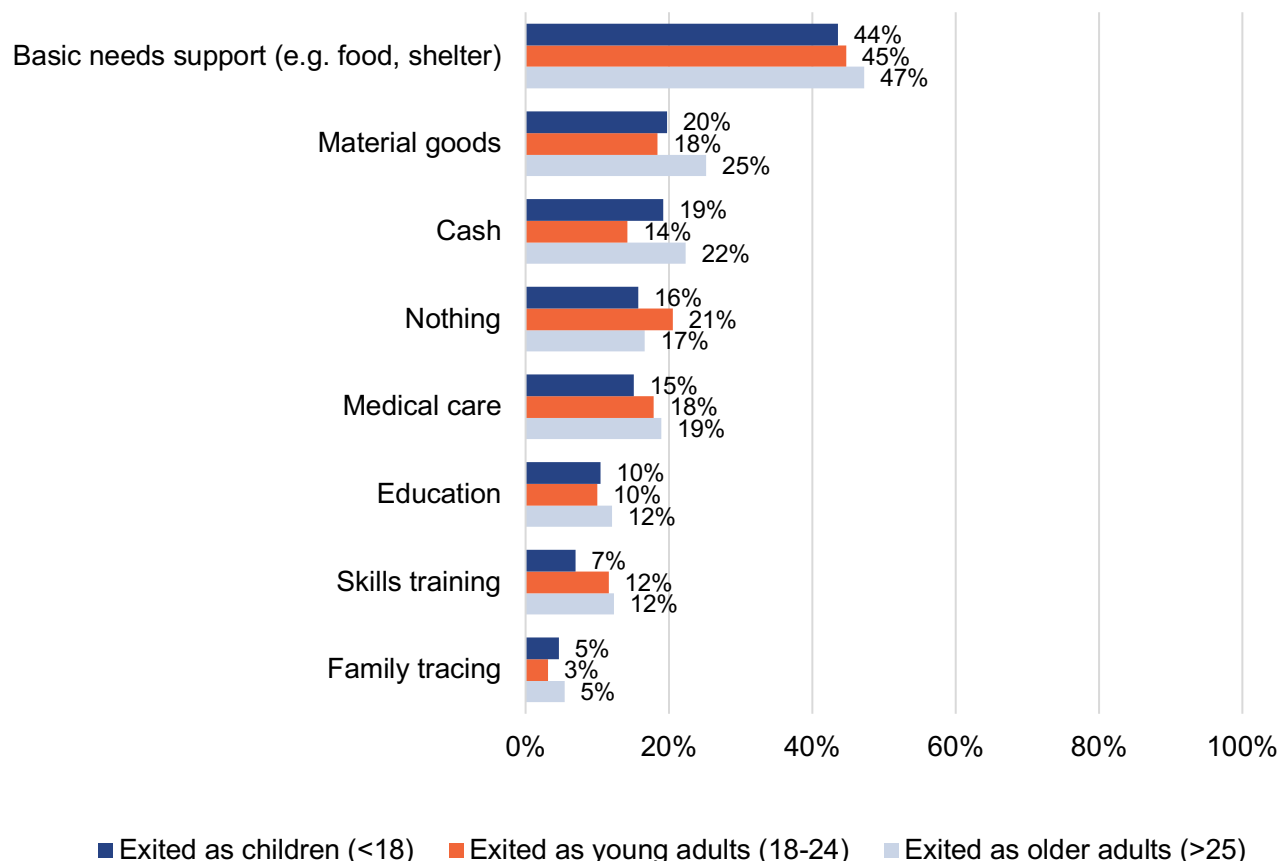
On the other hand, of the services received by those who exited from Boko Haram as children, basic needs support was the most useful. This seems to be the case regardless of the age at the time of exit and is followed by material goods and cash. A minority of respondents who left the group as a child said that none of the support received had a positive impact on their life (16 per cent). Female respondents who left Boko Haram as a child were more than twice as likely to say that services did not have a positive impact on their life compared to male respondents (22 to 10 per cent). They were also less likely to rank medical care (9 per cent to 21 per cent), cash (9 per cent to 29 per cent), and material goods (16 per cent to 23 per cent) than male respondents. Female respondents who left the group as a child were, however, more likely to value basic needs support (51 per cent to 37 per cent). It is important to note that Figure 3 reflects aggregate data from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, but the rates vary by country.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

<sup>86</sup> For example, in Nigeria, respondents who left Boko Haram as girls were in fact more likely to value medical care than those who left as boys (18 versus 6 per cent). Formal education, on the other hand, was valued more by those who exited as boys (25 per cent) than girls (9 per cent). Given that the options in Figure 3 are determined by the services that respondents received in the first place, the value given to them is likely impacted by the different support received by girls and boys in the first place. For example, it is possible that girls and women are less likely to receive cash and other material support when passing through exit programmes, compared to boys and men.

**Figure 3 – “Of the support you’ve received, what had the most positive impact on your life today? [Select all that apply] (Former Boko Haram Associates in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria)<sup>87</sup>**



When evaluating the impact of support, it is important to not only assess how it addresses objective needs, but also the recipient’s expectations. When asked what type of support they expected following their armed group exit, most respondents reported that *they did not expect to receive support*. For those that did expect support, the specific types of support they anticipated receiving ranged from basic needs support (such as food, water, and shelter), medical care (including physical and mental health support), education, employment, and financial assistance. Discussing whom they expected such support from, many respondents referred to the government and NGOs, with smaller numbers expecting support from their family or community. Although families may be expected to provide support to children returning to their care post-exit, this may not always be possible. As one female respondent who became associated with Boko Haram at age 14, noted – “I thought of getting special care from my family, but unfortunately nobody gave any special care to me because they too needed the care.”<sup>88</sup> This quote highlights that children are going back to vulnerable families (and

<sup>87</sup> Other responses, not displayed in this graph, that were selected at low rates by those who left Boko Haram as children included a broader category of reorientation programming (4 per cent); employment (1 per cent); sport activities (1 per cent) and something else (4 per cent).

<sup>88</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

communities), and their individual support will only go so far if their immediate social networks are unsupported.

In line with expectations, engagement is key to understanding when support is effective. It is argued that engaging children exiting armed groups as partners, and not as passive beneficiaries, is more likely to result in reintegration success.<sup>89</sup> When asked whether they were given “a say” in the support they received, 70 per cent of men who were children at the time of their exit from Boko Haram stated that they did, compared to a much lower 24 per cent of women. The huge gender disparity in the perceived agency in one’s reintegration support suggests that increased involvement and participation of children – particularly girls – in the design of support and service provision is likely necessary in order to ensure support is tailored to the needs and aspirations of young people so they can be active participants in their own recovery and transition. The MEAC surveys asked respondents what type of support they would give to others like them if they could decide. A lot of the open-ended responses given by children reflect the urgent basic needs faced by those exiting armed groups. They mention start-up capital for small businesses, education (including paying for school fees), food and shelter. As one 12-year-old boy who was captured by Boko Haram for several months stated, “I will support children like me with money to pay their school fees, and food to eat because our parents are suffering from paying our school fees and how to feed us.”<sup>90</sup>

### *Conflict Orientation and Reintegration Progress*

When assessing reintegration progress, there are a number of core outcomes related to conflict orientation as well as a broader series of well-being indicators that are important to consider. Exiting a group does not always mean that an individual makes a clean and enduring cut from the group or its members or ceases to identify with them or stops all conflict-related activities. Exiting an armed group is often a process full of fits and starts. Rarely is the disengagement and separation process immediate or completely linear. Post exit, young former associates or affiliates may still be entangled with their former group and its members and continue to provide help or assistance in some capacity. Support for the group, its goals, and its ideals may also persist. Alternatively, some children may end up being associated with a different armed group. A better appreciation for the lived experience of trying to transition away from an armed group, and the factors that increase the risk of re-recruitment or side-switching, is key to crafting effective interventions to promote full and sustained conflict exits – for young people, but also older adults.

### *Post-Exit Support to Armed Groups*

Across the Lake Chad Basin, the majority of respondents who disengaged from armed groups as children reported not providing any support to their former group since leaving. The survey asked respondents if they helped the armed group in a number of ways after they had left. High rates of ex-affiliates of various CSAs in Nigeria said they had not (86 per cent), which is somewhat surprising given that many young people may have stayed physically close to the group after exit and such organizations are often quite porous. Those who did provide some sort of help after leaving mostly

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<sup>89</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*. (New York: United Nations University, 2018), p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

listed support functions like cleaning (5 per cent), transporting items or delivering messages (3 per cent each), and collecting firewood, water, or supplies (2 per cent). Fighting or defending their community (2 per cent) and spying (3 per cent) were mentioned by only a few respondents. While children might have formally left the group, as long as they continue to live in communities where CSAs are active and their friends and family members are affiliated, they will likely re-mobilize if their communities are under threat. Even during relative peace, affiliation and exit might be a fluid concept, and they might continue to interact with these groups at varying levels. One boy who was 17 when being surveyed, said that he continued to help the CJTF after he left because his elder brother was still working with the group, so if he has free time, he will go to help his brother with some activities like cleaning their place and washing their clothes.<sup>91</sup>

For ex-associates of Boko Haram across the Lake Chad Basin, the majority of respondents who left as children said they had not helped their former faction in any way. In Nigeria, not a single respondent who left the group as a child said they provided any help to the group after doing so. In Cameroon and Chad,<sup>92</sup> it appears that some children who exited from Boko Haram continued to engage with the group afterwards.<sup>93</sup> Some formerly associated children reported performing functions such as collecting firewood, water, or other supplies (6 per cent in Cameroon; 14 per cent in Chad), cooking (17 per cent in Cameroon; 3 per cent in Chad), cleaning (7 per cent in Cameroon; 5 per cent in Chad), carrying or transporting items (7 per cent in Chad), and working on a farm or caring for livestock (9 per cent in Cameroon; 3 per cent in Chad). Smaller percentages of respondents referred to fighting with the group (9 per cent in Cameroon; 3 per cent in Chad), driving (4 per cent in Chad), or guarding checkpoints, recruiting, or spying (1 per cent each in Chad). This does not imply that the support after exit reported here was continuous support, and the question was phrased in such a way that respondents could be reflecting a single occasion or periodic engagement. Among those who left Boko Haram as children in Cameroon and Chad, there are gender differences in post-exit support rates. Higher rates of girls said they had not provided any support post-exit compared to boys. When girls did provide some sort of continued support, it was cooking, collecting supplies, or cleaning.<sup>94</sup>

The instances of continued engagement after exiting Boko Haram – although confined to a small minority – are a contrast to the overwhelming desire expressed by children to stay away from the group. Across Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, the vast majority of respondents formerly associated with Boko Haram and who exited from this group as children stated that nothing would make them return to their armed group (98 per cent). This lack of desire amongst ex-associates to

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<sup>91</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January 2022 - August 2022).

<sup>92</sup> In Niger, the specific sample of respondents who left Boko Haram as a child is too small to be able to analyse recidivism. Only 16 respondents who responded to this question in Niger fall within the category of having exited from Boko Haram as a minor. Out of those, 15 said they did not provide help to the group after leaving.

<sup>93</sup> The response rates of respondents who exited the group as children are similar to those of adults, with 98 per cent in Nigeria, 53 per cent in Cameroon, 56 per cent in Chad, (and 73 per cent in Niger), saying that they did not provide any support to the group after having left.

<sup>94</sup> To capture both offensive and defensive conceptualizations of military roles, the question was posed as “After your time with [last armed group] ended, have you helped them in any of these ways? Please select all that apply: Fighting or defending my community”.

rejoin their group may be linked to high rates of respondents stating that they actively wanted to leave in the first place and the reasons for this (e.g., fear of violence and death, never wanting to be associated in the first place). It may also signal that the continued engagement was less formal or forced, and not reflective of a continuous or willing engagement with their former group. When armed groups still control territory or exert influence in the places where ex-associates end up, it can be difficult to avoid all engagement with them. As previous research on child recruitment has shown, geographical proximity to armed group has a big impact on child engagement with armed actors,<sup>95</sup> and this is especially the case with a highly coercive armed group such as Boko Haram. Indeed, open-ended answers to a question that asked why respondents continued to help the group, show that most had no choice. One boy who was 17 at the time of participating in the survey in Chad, explained, “*C'est une obligation, et je n'ai pas d'autre choix. Si je dit non c'est la mort qui m'attend.*”<sup>96</sup>

In all four countries, when asked if there was anything that would make respondents return to Boko Haram, almost everyone who left as a child responded with “nothing” (98 per cent), rates similar to that for young adults or older adults (95 and 96 per cent, respectively). Only a few respondents pointed to factors like unemployment as a potential reason why they might return. In Nigeria, children who had left CSAs were as likely as those who left Boko Haram to say that nothing would make them return to the group (98 per cent), but those who left as young adults or older adults were somewhat less likely to say “nothing” (88 and 86 per cent, respectively). The most common reason listed for a hypothetical return, was protecting one’s community against Boko Haram, while only a few respondents indicated unemployment or better pay as potential reasons to go back.

When asked about whether respondents would consider joining a different group, the desire was low among child former Boko Haram associates and ex-CSA-affiliates (95 and 88 per cent, respectively said no). Among those in Nigeria who exited a CSA as a child, there was a notable minority of respondents that would consider joining a different armed actor (and not returning to their initial group) (12 per cent for those who exited as children and 17 for respondents who left the group as young adults). A few respondents indicated that they would want to join another CSA (and usually the CJTF, the most formalized and compensated CSA, which has historically absorbed affiliates from other CSAs).<sup>97</sup> Focus group discussions in Nigeria in March 2022 highlight the mobility between different CSAs and show how many Yan Gora affiliates had hoped to move to the CJTF for a more formalized role and in order to earn a paycheck. Among such former CSA affiliates who said they would be willing to join a different group, most were actually referring to joining the military and the police. When asked about aspirations for the future, young people who got involved with a CSA often

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<sup>95</sup> Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O’Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, “[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

<sup>96</sup> MEAC, *Chad Survey* (March 2022). Translation “It’s an obligation, and I have no other choice. If I say no, death awaits me.”

<sup>97</sup> For more in-depth analysis on exits from CSAs 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).

hoped to get a job with the state security services and saw experience in a CSA as providing a potential door into these careers.<sup>98</sup>

### *Armed Group Embeddedness and Social Networks*

Children who leave CSAs in Nigeria often continue to live in the communities in which these groups are embedded, and many of their family and friends may still be involved with the CSA. This means that exits are often not singular events, as children continue to interact with group members in their community. When asked how respondents would describe their relationship with their former armed group, about half of the respondents who left as a child (46 per cent) responded “very close” or “close,” and 37 per cent responded, “not so close” or “not at all close”. This is similar for those who exit a CSA as young adults. When asked how many of their friends are still with the CJTF, only 17 per cent of those who left as a child say that none of their friends are with the group. Similarly, when asked how often respondents talk to others who used to be with their CSA, 18 per cent said never. A notable minority, however, said every day (33 per cent), with other responses ranging from a few times a week (18 per cent) or a month (24 per cent), to a couple of times a year (6 per cent). This is not surprising, as these groups are very embedded in their communities, and many children already had family members with the group before they became affiliated.<sup>99</sup>

When looking at children and young people who left Boko Haram, the numbers are flipped, and the exit seems to be more drastic when it comes to social networks and embeddedness. Most respondents who left Boko Haram as a child in the Lake Chad Basin state that they are “not at all” close to the group (87 per cent), with smaller numbers of respondents saying that they are not so close (2 per cent), mostly close (3 per cent), or very close (5 per cent) to the group. As was the case with children who left CSAs, these percentages are in line with their older peers who left the group as young adults. When asked how many of their friends and family are still with the group, 45 per cent of respondents in Nigeria said: “none,” 42 per cent said, “a few,” and only a few respondents said, “many” (13 per cent) or “almost all” (1 per cent). It should be pointed out here, that even those respondents who were not with Boko Haram, often have friends and family members who are currently with the group. For example, of those respondents who left a CSA as a child, 29 per cent say that they currently have “a few” family members or friends who are with Boko Haram. Given how widespread the conflict in the North East is, it is likely that people are indeed connected to those who are with the group.

When asked how often respondents still speak to people who are with Boko Haram, most of those who left as children (89 per cent) say never, and small percentages say that they do a couple of times a year or month (4 per cent each), or every day (1 per cent). Respondents who left Boko Haram as young adults (18-24) seem slightly more likely to be in touch with those who are still with the group, with 80 per cent saying they never talk to people who are with the group, 8 per cent a

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<sup>98</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with young men currently associated with the CJTF*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 22 March 2022).

<sup>99</sup> Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O’Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, “[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).



couple of times a month, and smaller percentages saying a couple of times a month, a week, or every day (4 per cent each). As is the case with CSAs, many respondents already had family and friends with Boko Haram before they became associated.<sup>100</sup> Given that entire communities were often occupied by the group, and those who lived there were forced to join, it is no surprise that those who exit the group are still in touch with those who stayed. Although it could intuitively feel like a negative sign of reintegration, social networks have been shown to be instrumental in encouraging others to come out of the group and can even provide important support when reintegrating back into civilian life.<sup>101</sup>

### **Family and Community Acceptance of Returning Children**

Within the academic and grey literature, the role that families and communities play in the reintegration of formerly associated children is often argued to be of great importance. When facing discrimination and stigmatization from those around them, formerly associated children may struggle to adapt to normal life or feel unwelcome in their place of return. Family acceptance is argued to be key to facilitating broader community acceptance and economic reintegration.<sup>102</sup>

Overall, family acceptance is relatively high across all groups, regardless of one's age at exit from Boko Haram. Across the Lake Chad Basin, most respondents who left Boko Haram as a child said they were received very warmly (81 per cent) or warmly (14 per cent) when they returned. As seen in Figure 4, the rates of respondents that feel "fully accepted" or "mostly accepted" by their families vary significantly by country.<sup>103</sup>

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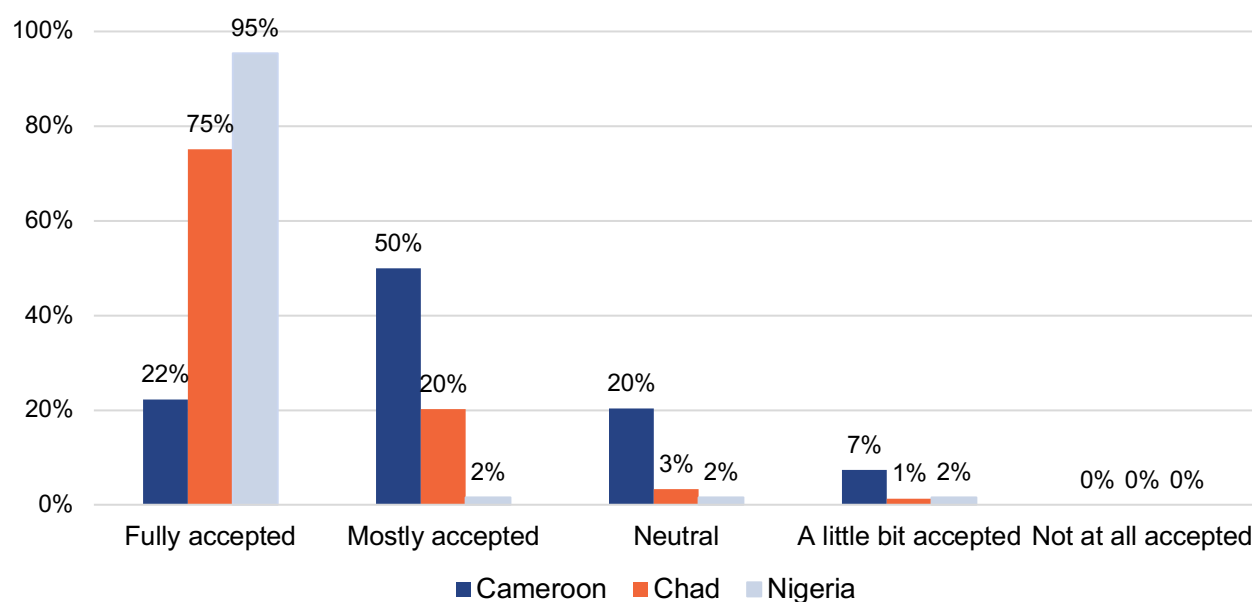
<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*. (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Randolph Wallace Rhea, *A Comparative Study of Ex-combatant Reintegration in the African Great Lakes Region: Trajectories, Processes, and Paradoxes* (Washington, DC, The Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program, World Bank, 2014).

<sup>103</sup> Figure 4 excludes Niger, as the sample of respondents who left Boko Haram as a child was too small to meaningfully reflect in percentages.

**Figure 4 – “How accepted do you feel by the members of your family?” (Former Boko Haram Associates Who Exited as Minors in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria)**



With regards to gender differences among ex-associates who exited from Boko Haram as children, the findings suggest that overall family acceptance [combined “totally accepted” and “mostly accepted”] was similar for both boys and girls. Full acceptance, however, was slightly less common for girls (67 per cent) than boys (71 per cent). Lower rates of full acceptance for girls may be due to various factors, such as if they had been – or are currently – married to a member of the armed group or returned with children.<sup>104</sup>

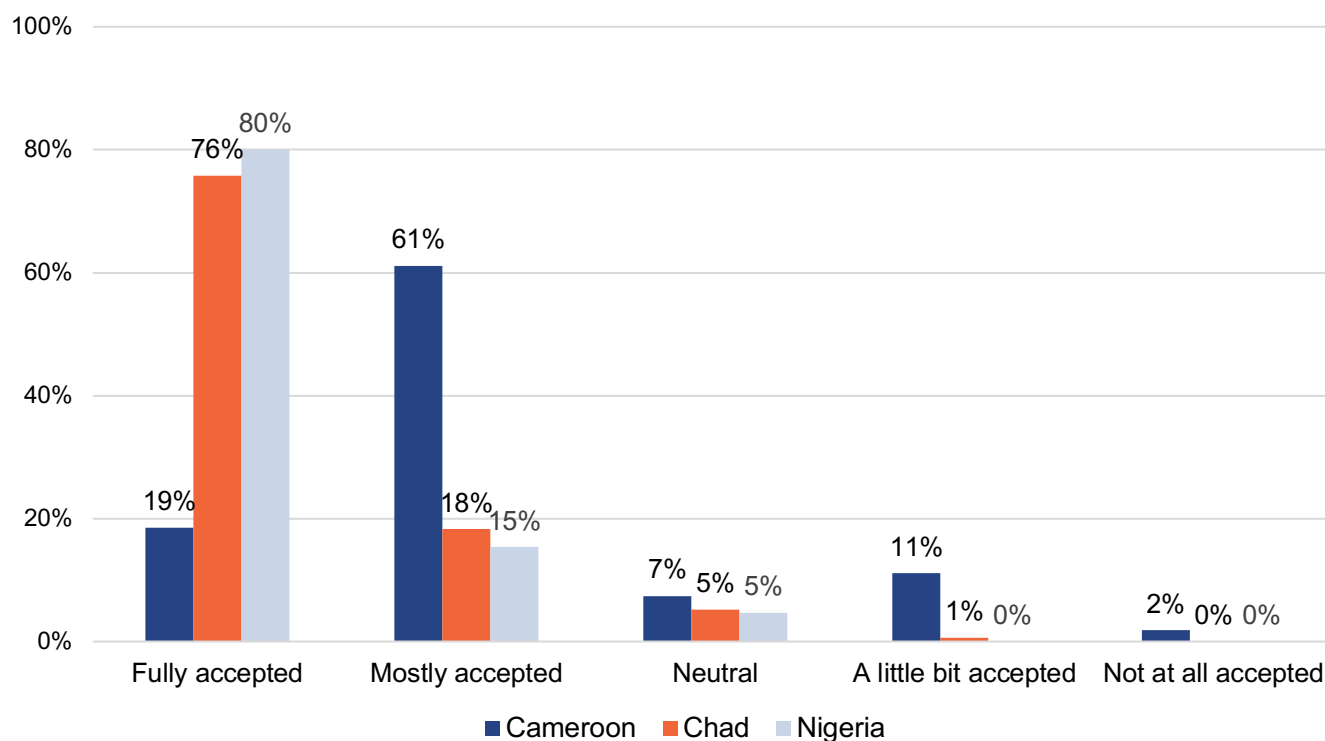
Similar trends are evident when investigating community acceptance – which family acceptance may help facilitate, and thus the two metrics may be correlated. As seen in Figure 5, overall community acceptance [“fully accepted” and “mostly accepted” answers] is again high for all countries,<sup>105</sup> and particularly in Nigeria. Other MEAC research in the North East of Nigeria, including two different community perception studies from 2020 to 2023, show high levels of acceptance towards those who exit Boko Haram.<sup>106</sup> More research is needed to determine why this might vary in other countries.

<sup>104</sup> See for example UNICEF and International Alert, *‘Bad Blood’: Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria*, (2016).

<sup>105</sup> Figure 4 excludes Niger, as the sample of respondents who left Boko Haram as a child was too small to meaningfully reflect in percentages.

<sup>106</sup> Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O’Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, *“Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates,” MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

**Figure 5 – “How accepted do you feel by the members of your community?” (Former Boko Haram Associates Who Exited as Children in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria)**



Variations in community acceptance between boys and girls who left Boko Haram also become apparent in the data. Across group types, rates of full acceptance were again lower amongst girls than boys, with 62 per cent of girls reporting being fully accepted by their community compared to 67 per cent of boys. Furthermore, 7 per cent of female respondents who were children when leaving Boko Haram reported being ‘a little bit’ or ‘not at all’ accepted by their communities, whilst no boys reported this. Reasons for why girls were less accepted by their communities may once again be linked to their possible deviation from traditional or expected gender norms or due to the stigma of having a child with someone from Boko Haram.

In Nigeria, CSA affiliates reported high levels of acceptance. Ninety per cent of respondents who left a CSA as a child said they were fully accepted by their family, with the remaining 10 per cent saying they were mostly accepted. Children who exited from CSAs in Nigeria also reported high rates as well when it came to community-level acceptance. Seventy-two per cent said they felt fully accepted in their communities, and 24 per cent said they felt mostly accepted. Although their reputation has shifted in recent years due to the violence committed by CSAs, they were previously often viewed as hometown heroes and defenders of the community, and, as such, ex-affiliated children from these

groups may be expected to be perceived positively.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, when asked if they would tell people in their communities that they were with an armed group, 82 per cent of children who were with a CSA in Nigeria said that they would tell people, compared to 47 per cent of those who were with Boko Haram. This implies that children who were with Boko Haram are more careful in sharing their experiences with others, potentially because they are ashamed or afraid of retaliation.

### Physical Well-being

An important aspect related to life after having been with an armed group is physical and mental well-being. While the latter is the subject of a separate forthcoming report, it is worth highlighting that many children who exit armed groups face health-related challenges. Across the region, about one-third of respondents who left Boko Haram as a child said that they were seriously wounded because of the conflict, and more than half of those respondents said that this injury is still a problem for them today. In Nigeria, respondents who left CSAs as a child were exactly as likely as those who left Boko Haram to say that they had been seriously wounded or injured in the conflict (34 per cent each). Ongoing follow-up with former associates will enable MEAC to better understand the longer-term impact of injuries on different reintegration outcomes (e.g., income and employment) as well as the availability of – and access to – healthcare and physical products (e.g., prosthetics) for those with disabilities.

Although not widely reported, one of the health issues that appears to follow some children who leave certain armed groups (as well as some adults) is drug addiction. Across the Lake Chad Basin, only 8 per cent of those who left Boko Haram as a child admitted to using drugs at the time of being surveyed (compared to 7 per cent of those who exited from the group as young adults between 18-24, and 13 per cent of older adults). Drug use is a highly sensitive topic in the North East of Nigeria and the region, and it is, therefore, possible that respondents are underreporting use.<sup>108</sup> In Nigeria, respondents who left CSAs seem slightly more likely to report drug use. Eleven per cent of respondents who exited from a CSA as a child reported drug use (compared to 10 per cent of those who exited the group as young adults between 18-24, and only 1 per cent of older adults). These rates are similar to those of respondents who were never associated or affiliated with any group. Eleven per cent of respondents who were minors or young adults at the time of participating in the survey, reported using drugs (compared to 8 per cent of older adults). However, evidence from a regression analysis suggests that, after controlling for current age, group, gender, and type of interview (in-person versus over the phone),<sup>109</sup> people who first became associated with CSAs as children, were significantly more likely to indicate consuming drugs nowadays in comparison to people who were never engaged in an armed group (17 per cent more likely). Although the surveys

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<sup>107</sup> For more findings on exits from CSAs, please 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).

<sup>108</sup> Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Siobhan O'Neil, and Kato Van Broeckhoven, "[The Prospects for Remote Assessment: A Comparison of Phone vs In-person Interviews in Nigeria](#)," Findings Report 29, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

do not specify which type of drugs is used by an individual respondent, broader questions about the use of drugs by armed groups and in communities, mainly point to Tramadol, followed by Marihuana.

### **Economic Well-being**

Besides specific health concerns such as lasting injuries or drug addiction, it is important to mention again that many children who leave armed groups in the region will face systemic challenges that will impact their health, including continued exposure to violence, lack of shelter, and food insecurity. In fact, across the region, only 54 per cent of non-associated respondents said they had enough food over the past week. Respondents who were associated with Boko Haram were even less likely to report having had enough food (46 per cent). Food insecurity seems particularly acute in Nigeria, where only 34 per cent of respondents who had been associated with Boko Haram and left the group as a child reported having enough food (compared to 28 per cent of those who left Boko Haram as adults).<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, although still in a precarious situation, respondents who had been affiliated with a CSA seem to be slightly better off when it comes to food security, with 42 per cent of those who exited a CSA as a child reporting enough food over the past week (compared to 54 per cent of those who left as adults).

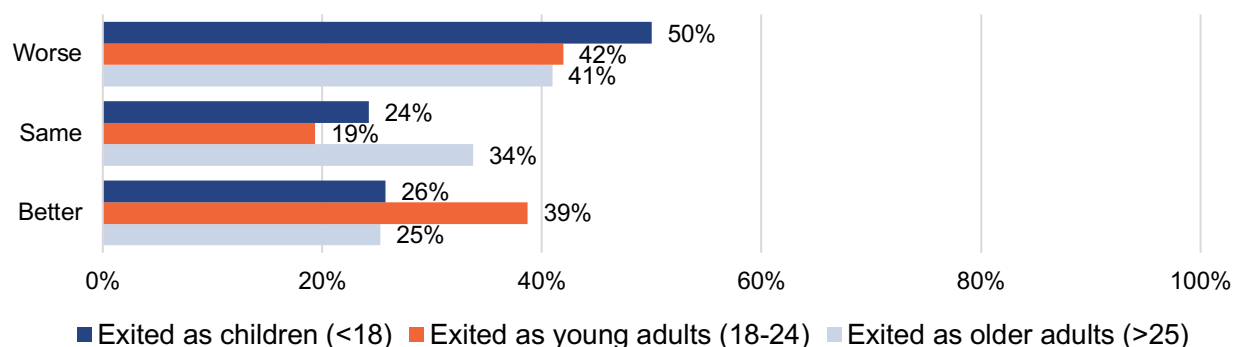
This confirms other data indicating that those who were with a CSA are economically better off, compared to those who exit Boko Haram. When asked if respondents are doing anything that is making them money, 83 per cent of ex-CSA affiliates say they are, compared to 69 per cent of ex-Boko Haram associates. This data point has limited value without further context, and more research would be needed to understand if respondents are making enough money to get by, and how sustainable their income-generating activities are. However, it does indicate a clear gap between those who were with CSAs and those who were with Boko Haram. It is possible that being with a CSA allows people to build local networks that result in income-generating activities after affiliation, or that those who were with CSAs are less impacted by displacement.

When asked if their money situation was better or worse when they were with the group, less than half of all ex-CSA affiliates (45 per cent) said that it was worse. When looking specifically at those who exited from a CSA as a child, 50 per cent say they were worse off (with 26 per cent saying they were better off while with the group, and 24 per cent saying their situation is the same). It is possible that this is because children who were with a CSA were perhaps more likely to go to school after their involvement with the group ended, and, therefore, less likely to have full employment and earn money right away. Many of the children in the MEAC sample were able to access support programmes when they exited, mostly focused on education and/or vocational training. It is notable that young adults were better off economically while they were with their CSA group, suggesting a potential pull to return to them if they can't find economic stability outside of these groups.

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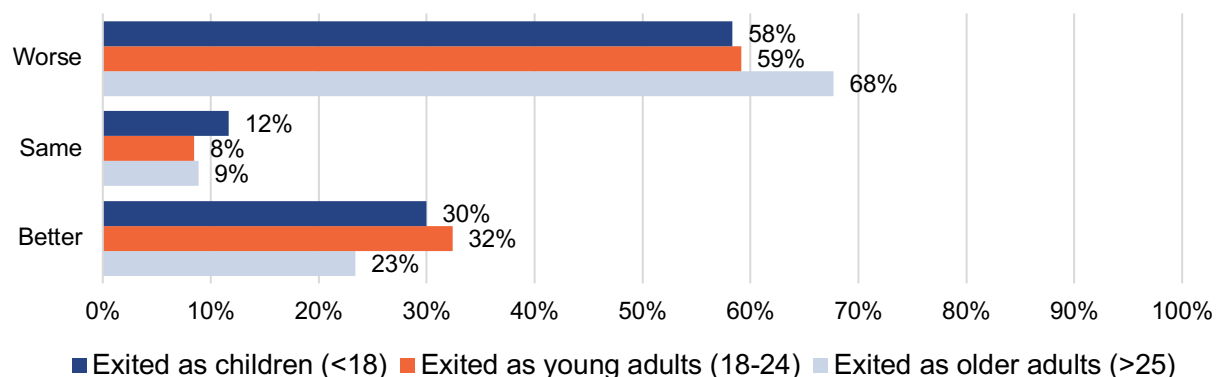
<sup>110</sup> Female respondents who left Boko Haram as adults seemed to be worse off than their male counterparts, with only 23 per cent reporting having had enough food in the past week, compared to 38 per cent of male respondents.

**Figure 6 – “When you were with [CSA], was your money situation better, the same, or worse than it is today?” (Former CSA Affiliates in Nigeria)**



When looking at the same question for former Boko Haram associates in Nigeria, a different picture emerges. As would be expected, most people were economically worse off in the group than outside it. That said, respondents who exited the group as a child or young adult were more likely than those who exited as older adults to indicate that they were economically better off while with the group. As shown in Figure 7, 30-32 per cent of those who exited as a child or young adult say their money situation was better while with the group, compared to 23 per cent of older adults.

**Figure 7 – “When you were with [Boko Haram], was Your money situation better, the same, or worse than it is today?” (Former Boko Haram Associates in Nigeria)**



The precarious situation of young people in the region, the ability of armed actors to cover basic needs or pay salaries, and the viability of outside employment options for those who were once associated with armed groups, are important factors to take into account when thinking about the prevention of further recruitment and the sustainable transition to civilian life. Recognizing that reintegration – particularly economic reintegration for those displaced and in insecure environments – is a process, the MEAC study tracks economic metrics over time. By doing so, it is possible to better understand how the reintegration outcomes of ex-associates and ex-affiliates change over time depending on factors such as continued displacement and security.

### Looking Ahead: Displacement Amongst Ex-associated and Ex-affiliated Children

Due to the ongoing conflict, many young people exiting armed groups cannot go home. At the time of participating in the MEAC surveys, 72 per cent of female and 58 per cent of male respondents who left Boko Haram as a child said that they were currently displaced. Of those who were displaced, 63 per cent were living in an IDP camp.<sup>111</sup> Unsurprisingly, the most common reason why they had not returned to their home community was that their community was unsafe or remained occupied by an armed group. As one 17-year-old boy explained, “The armed groups are still in our community, so if I go back, they may kill me because they know me.”<sup>112</sup> Another common reason for not returning was the lack of government approval to return home. Without approval, they would not be able to pass through military checkpoints, and there was concern about being arrested by the military for being suspected Boko Haram associates.

Some respondents also said that they are waiting for the government to rebuild their communities. Indeed, some respondents highlighted that there was nothing left in their home community to go back to. Their house was destroyed, everyone had left, and there would not be any jobs or schools to go to. With ongoing insecurity in the region, and the damage caused by the conflict, it might take a long time before children can return to their communities or find themselves in a more stable living situation. Several children also explained that their families did not want to return yet, highlighting that children’s return decisions may not be their own, but rather reflect their families’ decisions. This may be particularly true for girls and women, who sometimes mentioned getting married in the IDP camp where they are staying, which impacted their decisions to date to not return to their communities.

Making reintegration progress in an IDP camp can be challenging when the conditions there are difficult and improving them is beyond the control of residents. Children who ended up in an IDP camp after exiting an armed group struggled with basic needs and limited freedom of mobility. They often had to set up makeshift shelters that did not withstand the rainy season, faced long delays in getting registered with camp authorities for food distribution and other services. Stuck “reintegrating” in a camp, children and young people, like older adults, find themselves in a strange limbo – no longer with an armed group, but constrained in their ability to make economic and social reintegration progress. Young people who are part of the mass surrenders and participated in MEAC focus groups in September 2022, highlighted some of the particular difficulties of re-establishing the various aspects of their lives in an IDP camp. Most did not yet have national ID cards, making it difficult or impossible to move through military checkpoints to work outside the camp. A young person’s ability to go to school and find employment are constrained by the resources, offerings, and rules of the camp. Psychologically, it can be challenging to invest in a new start - and new relationships - when it is unclear how long you will be in this intermediary location.

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<sup>111</sup> IDP camps were included in MEAC’s randomized community sample. It is difficult to know how this sampling might impact these rates. Displacement is widespread in the region. The February 2023 figures suggest that almost 2.4 million people remain displaced in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States. See, IOM, [“Nigeria — North-east — Mobility Tracking Round 44 IDP and Returnee Atlas - April 2023.”](#) (Nigeria, 2023).

<sup>112</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

While many of those exiting Boko Haram are fleeing areas controlled by the group and are not able to return home, those who have been with a CSA often never leave their communities. Although thirty-two per cent of children who left CSAs in Nigeria reported being displaced, almost none of these respondents resided in an IDP camp at the time of participating in the midline survey. That said, for those affiliated with CSAs, as well as non-affiliated respondents, mobility (or the lack thereof) plays a very important role in daily life. When asked in focus groups about what peace looks like, and what conflict looks like, participants often linked peace to freedom of mobility and being able to go to work or school without fearing for one's life. As one CJTF affiliate explained: "True peace is being able to go to wherever you wish and travel to wherever you want at any time you want."<sup>113</sup>

## Policy and Programmatic Implications

The data collected as part of the MEAC study in the Lake Chad Basin highlights various factors that impact how and why children exit armed groups in the region, and what their lives look like after exiting and transitioning to civilian life. For child reintegration efforts to be effective, they need to be responsive to the specific factors outlined in this report.

The differences between exiting Boko Haram and its factions and exiting a CSA like the CJTF are made clear in this brief and highlight a longstanding weakness in the international community's approach to reintegration. Many of those who leave CSAs do not receive any help transitioning to civilian life. As this report highlights, those leaving a CSA may not face some of the same challenges as those leaving Boko Haram (e.g., stigma, detention), but they face many other vulnerabilities that should be addressed. This becomes clear in the findings related to injuries and drug use data, for example. Likewise, the concerns about CSA violence and other rights violations committed in the name of defending communities against Boko Haram have raised concerns about the long-term security and social cohesion in the region.<sup>114</sup> In open-ended answers, former CSA affiliates frequently mention this violence as one of the main reasons why they left their group. Unaddressed normalization of, exposure to, and even engagement in such violence may present challenges to successful individual transitions to civilian life and larger peacebuilding efforts. It must be noted that MEAC accessed a number of children who left CSAs via a UNICEF-supported reintegration programme, which supports children who have demobilized from the CJTF and other community security groups. Yet, the data suggests that many of those who left CSAs as children disengaged without a formal handover (possibly prior to signing the [Action Plan with the United Nations in 2017](#)) or garnering the notice of international organizations, and transitioned without support.<sup>115</sup> This highlights the need for a better understanding of how the different CSAs in the region recruit and use children, better messaging campaigns about the support available to children exiting armed groups, and enhanced efforts to identify children who need reintegration support.

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<sup>113</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with young men currently associated with the CJTF*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 22 March 2022).

<sup>114</sup> Center for Civilians in Conflict, *Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria*, (2018), p. 21.

<sup>115</sup> OSRSG-CAAC, "[Nigeria: Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Welcomes Release of 833 Children by Civilian Joint Task Force](#)," 12 October 2018.



This study also raises similar concerns about the influence of age and gender on access to support. While the girls in the MEAC sample who left Boko Haram were somewhat more likely (6 percentage points) to say they had access to support compared to boys who left the group, analysis by age and the qualitative work with women and girls paints a different picture. Looking at the 24 per cent drop-off in support at age 18 suggests that while there is a major gender difference in reintegration support, the particular work to support children has benefited girls beyond what the gender trend in the data would predict. This gender gap flips and grows with age, raising the question about the vulnerability of adult women, many leaving the group with children themselves and very often without support.<sup>116</sup> Given the vulnerability of these women and their children, and especially in light of their continued ties to male ex-combatants (as they are not able to initiate divorce, nor would they likely be able to support themselves without them), there is a need for a revised approach to gender-sensitive reintegration support in the region. This could include prioritizing and enhancing employment opportunities, fostering social and political participation, and ensuring physical security, as well as addressing the discrimination and social stigma attached to female returnees. Psychosocial well-being and assistance tailored to the specific challenges and trauma endured by young girls and women, such as forced marriage, exploitation, abuse, early motherhood, and sexual violence, is also critical. Psychosocial support should complement economic assistance, for instance, through access to education, housing, vocational training, and capacity and skills-building programs, in order to eliminate economic dependence and further self-sufficiency of female returnees.

Given that family and community acceptance are often deemed vital to a child's successful reintegration, lower rates of acceptance amongst girls are therefore of concern. There is a need to better understand the reasons why girls feel less accepted and to ensure that reintegration programming includes families and communities, as well as address these gender-specific barriers to acceptance. It is vital that all children exiting armed groups have access to reintegration support, regardless of the group they were part of or their gender. Failing to do so will not only impact the potential for these children to successfully transition to a productive civilian life but may also have risks for communities. The exclusion of ex-affiliates from CSAs, for example, may risk isolating these children and causing resentment, as some people receive support and others do not.

Even when support is available, and children are entitled to it, the findings show that many children do not expect to receive any support when they exit. Developing tailored and age-appropriate messaging and communication strategies that can empower children to make informed decisions and encourage defections and disengagement from armed groups, are therefore crucial. This can also help with setting realistic expectations and thus avoiding undue frustrations during programming, and facilitating genuine inclusion of children in decisions around their reintegration and well-being. Furthermore, engaging child returnees in meaningful ways, giving them a voice and agency in their own reintegration process, can, in turn, help ensure that their expectations and aspirations are heard and considered when designing and implementing reintegration programming,

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<sup>116</sup> Many girls, some as young as 13, became pregnant in captivity and gave birth without any medical care. See, UNICEF, [Silent Shame: Bringing out the voices of children caught in the Lake Chad crisis](#), (2017).

further fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for their future. This is not only relevant for children who reintegrate, but also for the families and communities around them.

Indeed, as an [earlier MEAC report](#)<sup>117</sup> made clear that parental and family member association increases the risk of child association with armed groups, there is a need to programme to the family unit, much in line with UNICEF's social ecological model of child protection.<sup>118</sup> The inclusion of families and communities is not only important for recruitment prevention but also for reintegration support. Successful reintegration is not solely dependent on the individual, but on those around them too. Prior research has shown that the family plays a key role in community acceptance for ex-combatants and former armed group associates, and working with them to promote acceptance and, in some cases, address family association may promote reintegration progress. Particularly for children, reintegration support needs to factor in and include family and social support networks to address both risks for re-recruitment but also to bolster social and economic reintegration.

When it comes to re-recruitment (or the type of less formalized, post-exit engagement with armed actors highlighted in this report), the findings show that exiting an armed group is not necessarily an event, but rather a process. While the snapshot of engagement provided in this report is important, it is necessary to view desistance from armed conflict over a longer period of time to more accurately reflect the accurate picture of re-recruitment and re-engagement risks. As long as the conflict is ongoing, not all children who exit might be able to avoid re-engaging with an armed actor. Sustainable disengagement is particularly difficult when the armed group is still active in the locations where children return to after exit, making it difficult to completely avoid interacting with armed groups. Many people who exit armed groups – including children – also continue to be in contact with friends and family who are still with the group. This is not necessarily negative, as those who exit can help others who want to leave and support each other in their reintegration journeys. Recognizing the complex realities of living in an ongoing conflict and in close proximity to active armed groups is crucial for setting realistic expectations when it comes to reintegration programmes. It is important to consider what children are reintegrating into, especially if the conditions that contributed to their initial recruitment remain the same. Establishing holistic and localized support that engages family, community, and educational institutions can help with mitigating the risks.

In addition, this report highlights a missing element in many of the discussions around child reintegration after armed group involvement – the impact of detention on reintegration trajectories and post-exit daily stressors. In reintegration discussions, there has long been a significant focus on the lost formative years in an armed group and the traumas of exposure to armed group violence in evaluating needs upon exit and, increasingly, on qualifying reintegration progress. More attention is needed on the impact of post-exit trauma (including from detention) and the daily stressors of post-exit life on reintegration progress. In contexts like the Lake Chad region, there are some young people who have spent more time deprived of their liberty after they left a group than they have in

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<sup>117</sup> Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "[Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

<sup>118</sup> See, UNICEF, [Brief on the Social Ecological Model](#), accessed 22 May 2023.

an armed group. Time in detention can be particularly traumatic. Many children report facing food insecurity, physical and sexual abuse, and other hardships during their transition to civilian life. The findings highlight the need for all exit pipelines to comply with human rights in general and child rights in particular. The treatment of some of the children interviewed suggests more needs to be done to ensure that exiting children are promptly handed over to child protection services in line with handover protocols. Children should also be provided with comprehensive information on how they will move through the exit architecture, including time to be spent in transition and rehabilitation centres, including addressing potential deprivation of liberty in these locations, in order to respect their rights and help create a greater sense of agency in their exit paths.

Likewise, the process of reintegrating during a humanitarian crisis, lacking the means to cover essential needs, or being trapped in the uncertain conditions of an IDP camp can severely impede reintegration progress. Children formerly associated with Boko Haram face higher rates of displacement than adults. Continued displacement may undermine reintegration progress and compound the vulnerability of already vulnerable children and youth. Further thinking on how to effectively “reintegrate” children (and adults) in displacement contexts is required to ensure that programming addresses their specific requirements and the constraints of their situation. Moreover, in contexts where there are highly securitized responses to children coming out of armed groups, reintegration interventions must cater for the entire experience of these children, including time in the armed group and also time during which they may have been deprived of their liberty after exiting the group, as well as the daily stressors that they face today. Robust protection mechanisms are needed to shield children from further harm, exploitation, or recruitment during their transition journeys. This includes ensuring respect for their rights and access inter alia to safe shelter, healthcare, education, and psychosocial support services in intermediary locations.

Ensuring that all formerly affiliated or associated children receive holistic, flexible reintegration support which addresses the entirety of their experience – including time in the armed group, possible deprivation of liberty, and the continued stressors they face today – is important to ensure that children can reclaim their childhoods and build their futures. The needs of child returnees – like those of adults – change over time as they progress in their exit journeys. Support programmes for children need to be flexible and responsive to their evolving needs to ensure they can achieve their potential.



**MANAGING EXITS**  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT