

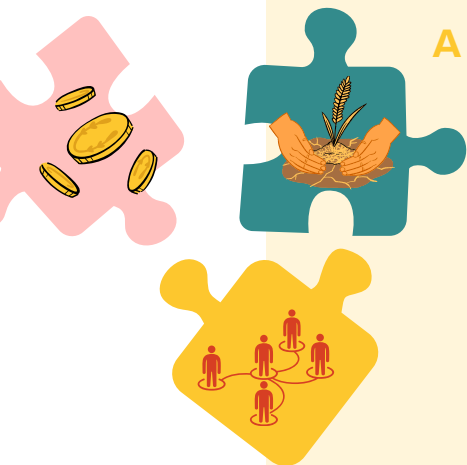
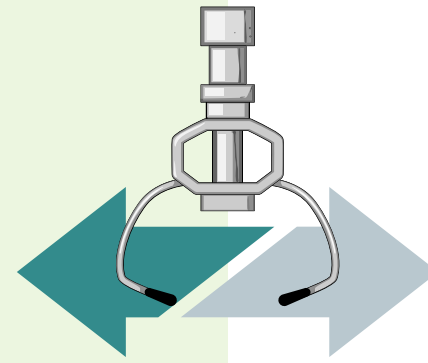
CHILD RECRUITMENT AND EXITS FROM ARMED GROUPS: EVIDENCE FROM THE LAKE CHAD BASIN TO INFORM THE UNSC CAAC DEBATE

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As the UN Security Council's open debate on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) approaches, [UNIDIR](#) and [UNU](#) are providing an important reminder about child recruitment by armed groups and their post-association reintegration trajectories. As Member States come together to advance efforts to protect children in conflict, the evidence base – including from the Lake Chad Basin – should inform discussions on how to prevent and respond to the grave violation of child recruitment.

RECRUITMENT OCCURS ALONG A CONTINUUM OF COERCION

“Child trajectories into NSAGs occur along a continuum of coercion. [All the evidence suggests that]... [a wide range of coercive factors](#) can influence child association with armed groups.” For [example](#), territorial control by armed groups increases a child’s interaction with them. “Across the [Lake Chad Basin] region, there are higher rates of Boko Haram [and militia/vigilante group] association among children who experienced occupation.”



A MULTIPLICITY OF RECRUITMENT CAUSES


Children's involvement with armed groups stems from interrelated reasons that range from extreme coercion to the mundane. Some of the specific factors that influence involvement include [physical and food security, family and peer networks, financial incentives, coercion, status, and identity](#). “While certain structural and social factors are especially influential in particular contexts, each child’s trajectory is determined by a personalized cocktail of interconnected risks, needs, and resilience factors.”

THE FALLACY OF NEUTRALITY

“In many of today’s wars, as in earlier ones, [it can be virtually impossible for children to remain unaffiliated with a party to conflict](#). When armed groups are the only employer and exert physical control over the populace, joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy.” Likewise, children often cannot avoid association with an aligned armed group or local self-defence vigilantes when their families and entire communities are mobilized.



THE PROSOCIAL APPEAL OF ARMED GROUPS




Armed groups, even those deemed as terrorist or “violent extremist,” can offer children and youth inside conflict zones “[a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid chaos.](#)” They exploit children’s greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding, providing individual perks from food and financial incentives to less tangible benefits. In the Lake Chad Basin, for example, “armed groups are more likely to make recruitment promises to children than adults. Promises go beyond economic incentives to include [safety, a sense of belonging, and assistance with marriage.](#)” Even if children do not join willingly, once inside, group processes may lead to identification and bonding, complicating exit.

EXIT MOTIVATIONS VARY

“Reasons for exiting armed groups differ among children and young adults and [highlight a complex interplay of personal motivations, changing circumstances, and disillusionment.](#)” For example, “Fear of violence or death was a primary motivator for leaving Boko Haram, especially for girls. 18-24 year olds expressed a loss of trust in group leadership and a diminishing belief in the cause.”



“EXIT” IS A PROCESS NOT A SINGULAR EVENT



“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” or continue interacting with armed actors. For [example](#), “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 remain in the communities in which these groups are embedded, and many of their family and friends stay involved.

REINTEGRATE INTO WHAT?

Many children cannot return home after armed group association due to access restrictions, insecurity or, increasingly, climatic shifts that render making a living off the land more difficult. They often reintegrate into situations of displacement and find themselves in a strange limbo. For [example](#), “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.”

