

CLIMATE CHANGE IS DRIVING PEOPLE INTO ARMED GROUPS

5 TAKEAWAYS

(JULY 2024)

A – quite literal – hot topic, **climate-security** is among the key concerns of the international community today. By now, it is well established that climate change plays a role in driving armed conflict, but the question remains: how exactly?

The general answer: It's complicated. There is no direct link by which higher temperatures or changes in rainfall automatically lead to violence. Rather, the climate-conflict-nexus is driven by **indirect pathways and mediating factors** that influence if or how these linkages play out. On top of that, as climate change manifests differently across – and even within – regions, its intermediate effects on conflict onset or conflict dynamics can vary as well. Broadly, heavy storms, torrential rains, floods, wildfires, as well as slow-onset stressors like droughts, shifting seasonal rainfall and desertification can fuel existing vulnerabilities, undermining human security and increasing the risk of – potentially large-scale – armed or criminal violence.

Importantly, by putting a strain on natural resources and the agricultural livelihoods that depend on them, climate change is eroding socio-economic resilience in often already fragile regions. Compounded by weak governance and limited coping capacities, this presents a breeding ground for competition over water and arable land – and for **armed groups to recruit from hard-hit communities** that lack economic alternatives and effective dispute resolution. Armed groups can also exploit resource scarcity by controlling access to land and waterways, gaining a foothold in local communities. Other factors, such as climate-induced displacement or food insecurity and their effects on inequality and social cohesion, only add to the pressure.

Across several case studies, **MEAC's unique local-level data sheds light on some of these links**. In surveys with community members, leaders, as well as former and current armed group associates, five key findings stand out:

CLIMATE CHANGE IS WIDELY FELT

1 In the North West of Nigeria, for example, 78 per cent of (adult) respondents reported significant changes in rainfall, heat, and related stressors such as droughts or floods compared to when they were younger.¹ Among community members in Colombia, it was 85 per cent.²

1. In 2024, adult respondents (N=2555) were asked: "Compared to when you were younger, do you think there have been significant changes in rainfall, temperatures, or the frequency and intensity of droughts or floods?" - Yes / No / Refused to answer.

2. In 2021, respondents (N=2460) were asked: "In your lifetime, do you think there have been great changes in rainfall, temperatures, or weather events such as floods and droughts?" - Yes / No / Refused to answer.

PEOPLE'S LIVE(LIHOOD)S ARE THREATENED

In each survey location, people struggle in their farming, herding, or fishing because of this. In the Lake Chad Basin region, many said that they, or people they know, were having longstanding difficulties making a living from agriculture because of specific climatic changes (28 per cent of respondents in North East Nigeria, 61 per cent in Cameroon, 78 per cent in Chad, 27 per cent in Niger).³

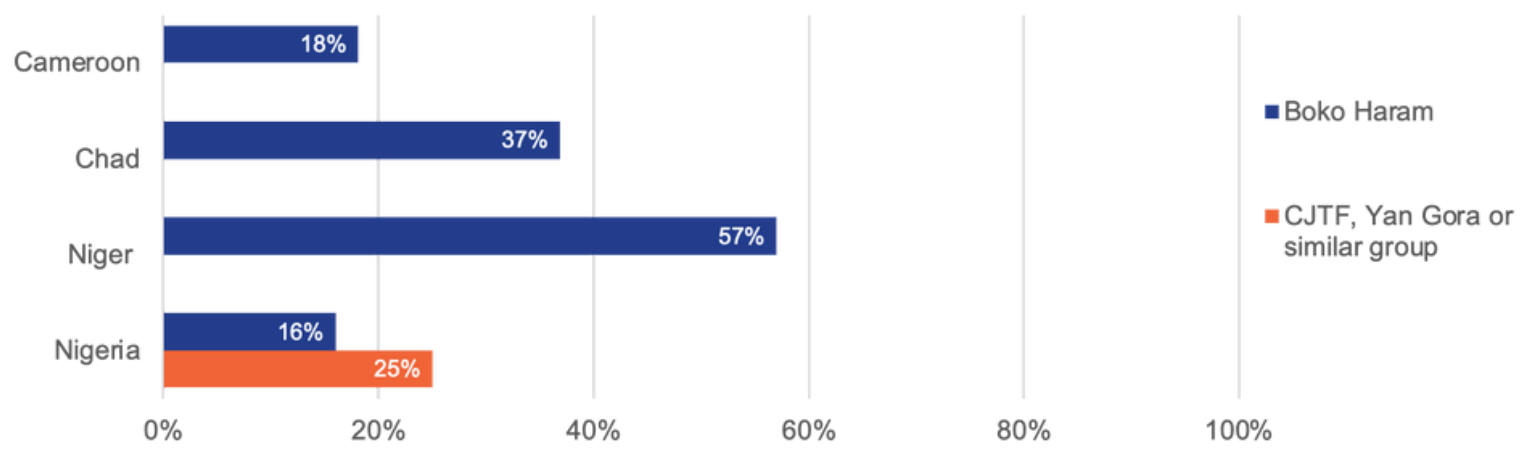
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CLIMATE-RELATED LIVELIHOOD CHALLENGES ARE PUSHING PEOPLE INTO ARMED GROUPS

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Many respondents confirm that armed groups can and are taking advantage of these grievances (a prominent example of which were ISIL's targeted recruitment campaigns in drought-stricken villages across Iraq and Syria). In the North East of Nigeria, of those survey respondents acknowledging climate-related agricultural difficulties in their area, 16 per cent said they knew someone who joined Boko Haram because of this (18 per cent in Cameroon, 37 per cent in Chad, 57 per cent in Niger).⁴ The numbers are even higher for associates of community security groups such as the CJTF in Nigeria. Notably, climate-related difficulties not only seem to impact recruitment into insurgent groups but are seen by the public as precipitating a shift towards all kinds of conflict actors.

Q: [OF THOSE WHO ACKNOWLEDGED CLIMATE-RELATED DIFFICULTIES]: DO YOU KNOW OF ANYONE WHO JOINED [NON-STATE ARMED GROUP] BECAUSE OF THESE DIFFICULTIES?



3. Between 2021 and 2022, respondents (N=764 in Cameroon, 729 in Chad, 463 in Niger, 2847 in Nigeria) were asked "Before the conflict came to your community, from what you have heard, did you or anyone you know experience difficulties making a living from farming, herding or fishing because of any of the following? Please select all that apply." - Changes in average temperature / Changes in average rainfall / Natural disasters / Changes in the lake or the cultivable lands (polders) [option in Chad, Cameroon, Niger only] / None of the above / Refused to answer.

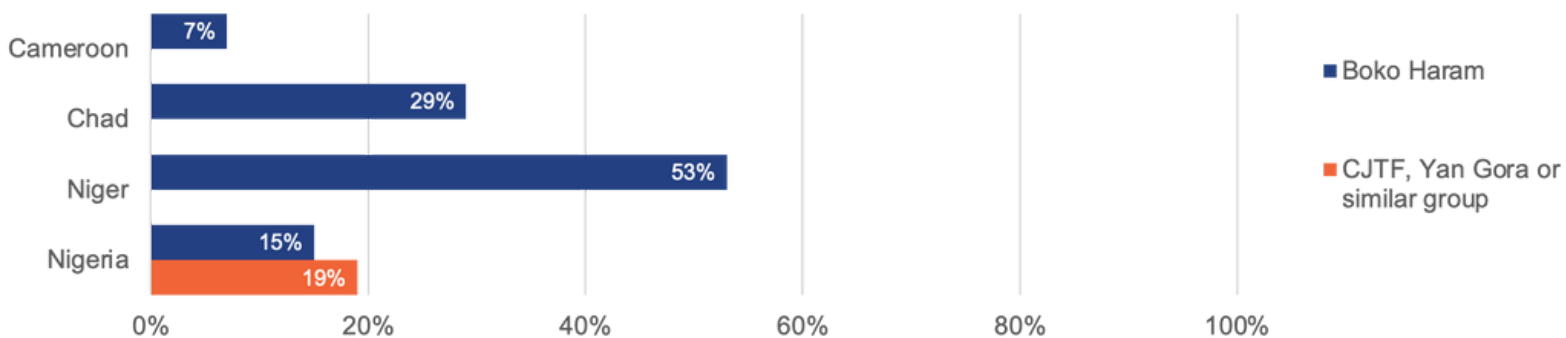
4. In Chad (N=567), Cameroon (N=463), and Niger (N=126), respondents were asked: "Do you know of anyone who joined Boko Haram because of these difficulties?" - Yes / No / Refused to answer. In Nigeria (N=826): "Do you know of anyone who joined Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah (also known as Boko Haram) or another group like this because of these difficulties?" - Yes / No / Refused to answer.

EX-ASSOCIATES THEMSELVES SAY SO

Uniquely, MEAC has first-hand reporting on this climate-driven recruitment. Out of former Boko Haram associates in the North East of Nigeria who acknowledged climate-related difficulties, 15 per cent reported that this played a role in their recruitment. In Cameroon, Chad and Niger, this was 7 per cent, 29 per cent and 53 per cent, respectively.⁵ In Colombia, 43 per cent of surveyed ex-combatants from different armed groups said that they had joined because of economic difficulties generally, and 6 per cent specifically attributed those to climate change.⁶

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Q: [OF THOSE WHO ACKNOWLEDGED CLIMATE-RELATED DIFFICULTIES]: WERE THESE DIFFICULTIES AMONG THE REASONS FOR WHY YOU CAME TO BE WITH [NON-STATE ARMED GROUP]?



EVERY STORY LOOKS DIFFERENT

While a sizeable number of ex-combatants said climate-related challenges drove them to align with an armed group, their individual paths differ significantly. This makes sense given the subregional (and often even local) variations of climatic impacts – as illustrated by the stories of former Boko Haram associates in Nigeria:

“My farm was affected by flooding. Before the insurgency, I was farming in the hills Gwoza in Borno. When Boko Haram members occupied my community, they built their base on the mountain and that stopped me from having access to good farm land. Heavy rainfall and flooding made it impossible to farm on the lands available to us. To be able to access good land, one had to join them.”



5. Former armed group associates who acknowledged climate-related difficulties (N=222 in Cameroon, 243 in Chad, 40 in Niger, 344 in Nigeria) were asked: “Were these difficulties among the reasons for why you came to be with [non-state armed group]?” - Yes / No / Refused to answer.

6. In 2022, respondents (N=134) were asked: “What are the main reasons why you joined [non-state armed group]? Please select all that apply.” - To fight against the state / To achieve structural changes for the country / Because of domestic violence / For status, power, and/or weapons / To protect my family or community / I was forced / For revenge / Due to income generation difficulties caused by changes in climate or the environment / Other(s) / I refuse to answer. Although there is no direct evidence, it is possible that respondents whose economic conditions are affected by climate change chose only the general 'economic difficulties' option.

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I had no choice. The crops I planted were spoiled due lack of enough rainfall, and did not yield anything. My livestock was dying because there were no grass for them to feed on and no water in the rivers for them to drink. My health was also at risk because I wasn't able to get enough food to eat due to all these problems. This is why I joined.

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At that time, sandstorms became more frequent and more powerful...there was a sandstorm that removed the roof off my house and destroyed it. Life became really hard as a result of being displaced and I joined the group when the opportunity came along, thinking my life would be better.

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CLIMATE-SENSITIVE PEACEBUILDING, CONFLICT-SENSITIVE CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Stories like these and the quantitative findings that reinforce them call for more attention to how climate change is influencing involvement in conflict. With a view to effective prevention, they also call for **tailored responses** that take local variations into account, especially in areas where agriculture is the sole source of income and subsistence.

This is equally key for supporting exits from conflict and preventing recidivism. People coming out of armed groups will likely find their land as dry, their wells as empty and their families as hungry as before – likely even more so. In fact, MEAC research in Chad and Cameroon suggests that **climatic factors and dwindling resources may be stifling the reintegration of ex-combatants**. Former Boko Haram associates, most of them farmers or fishers before they entered the group, came back to their communities of origin to find their lands, boats, and equipment taken over in their absence. Especially where the group still controls farmland and fishing sites, they are left without access to resources and without ways to restart their lives.

Through conflict- and climate-sensitive programming, these grievances and impediments to reintegration need to be addressed. As more evidence on climate-conflict-pathways emerges, interventions that are highly attuned to these linkages offer the potential to foster resilience and, ultimately, pave the way towards more stability for those most affected by the climate crisis facing the world today.