UNIDIR
UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE FOR DISARMAMENT RESEARCH

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

PICTURING CONFLICT

CHILD PERSPECTIVES FROM THEIR TIME WITH BOKO HARAM AND THEIR EXIT JOURNEYS

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This 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 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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Photo 1: Facilitator photograph of participants at the training in Maiduguri

Key Findings

- Child involvement with Boko Haram takes place along a continuum of coercion. Many children in the North East of Nigeria were abducted or forced to join, while others were taken into the group by family members. Family-linked recruitment is a common pathway into the group, especially in areas where whole communities and family units were brought under Boko Haram control.

- Upon their exit from the group, many girls and boys bypass formal reintegration support. 42 per cent of MEAC survey respondents who left Boko Haram as a child reported never having passed through a transit centre. Even of those who did, many reported problematic experiences in these locations such as insufficient food or water or a lack of sanitation.

- Unmet basic needs continue to be the main struggle for children formerly associated with a Boko Haram faction, both in the immediate term upon exit and even years into their reintegration journey. Food, water, shelter, and clothing are the most frequently listed needs of these children amidst the humanitarian crisis and ongoing instability in Nigeria's North East. Crucially, access to food and other basic necessities is a key risk for continued reliance on armed groups and a potent incentive for recidivism.

- Social networks are a key factor for reintegration progress, especially for those who bypass formal support. Amidst the humanitarian and economic grievances in the region, children without familial or other social ties face even more challenges in gaining a foothold in civilian life. For many, connections with fellow former associates represent important sources of support during reintegration. At the same time, social networks come with their own sets of challenges, both for families who receive former associates while already struggling to make ends meet for themselves, and for child returnees who often face additional pressure to support their own families, particularly when they already have children of their own.

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 benefits from generous support from UNICEF; the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the UN Development Programme (UNDP); UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR). The participatory work with children in the North East of Nigeria was made possible with the support from UNICEF Nigeria.

About This Series

MEAC's reports seek to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses of their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About This Report

This report features the experiences of girls and boys formerly associated with the Boko Haram factions – their entry and exit trajectories, needs, challenges, and aspirations, including as narrated by the children themselves. The findings are informed by a multi-method study in the North East of Nigeria that included a participatory photography and action research intervention with 16 conflict-affected children in April 2024. Some of the children had left the Boko Haram factions years ago while others exited just six months ago. In addition to the

programme, focus groups were run with the 16 participants. Along with the information gathered from these activities, the report pulls from additional focus group discussions with 99 participants (45 women and girls and 44 men and boys) between April and May 2024, as well as data collected through a 3,632-person phone survey conducted between April and July 2024. Ultimately, the goal of this report and the accompanying photography series and video is to elevate the voices of girls and boys formerly associated with Boko Haram in policy and programmatic discussions to ensure that their perspectives are reflected in resulting interventions aimed to support them.

Introduction

Across the conflict settings where MEAC conducts research, countless children have been displaced; spent years without sufficient food, medical care, or access to education; and have been exposed to violence, recruitment, and use by parties to conflict. The challenges faced by children and youth in conflict are undeniable, but how to best protect and support them in these volatile contexts, and once the guns of war are silenced, is not always clear.

The MEAC project was created to enhance the evidence base around trajectories into and out of armed groups in order to inform interventions to prevent recruitment and bolster sustainable exits. Recognizing that policy research and assessments related to children and youth in these contexts are mostly led by adults and recognizing that such work is often extractive and tokenistic,[1] MEAC sought to advance participatory approaches alongside its quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (e.g., panel surveys, focus groups). These research approaches seek to ensure that conflict-affected children and youth get the opportunity to influence the design, implementation, and recommendations of policy research that will inform interventions aimed at them.

Building on the experiences and lessons learned from a 2023 pilot programme in Mosul, Iraq,[2] MEAC expanded its participatory research with conflict-affected children and youth in 2024. In conjunction with UNICEF, 100cameras, War Child and several local partners, MEAC launched

[1] Roger Hart, 'Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship," *Innocenti Essays,* No. 4 (UNICEF, 1992).
[2] Having committed to shift the paradigm of how the international community supports conflict-affected young people, in June 2023, MEAC collaborated with War Child UK, 100cameras, UNICEF, IOM, Bridge, and Progress in Peace to pilot two participatory interventions in Mosul to engage Iraqi youth reintegrating into their communities after a period of displacement. The first, a qualitative research training programme, sought to empower young people to co-produce research. The second, a participatory photography intervention, worked to enable youth to process their emotions and share their conflict experiences through the lens of a camera.

a comparative initiative involving conflict-affected young people in three contexts: Colombia,[3] Iraq,[4] and Nigeria. The programme included a participatory research component and a photography and videography training that allowed for socio-emotional processing. The programme aimed to inform MEAC's research on children and youth impacted by conflict, equip conflict-affected participants with new skills, and provide avenues to process their experiences. Ultimately, the intervention aimed to elevate the voices of children and youth into policymaking discussions that impact them and their peers.

This report highlights key findings from the participatory programme in the North East of Nigeria, complemented by additional MEAC data collected in a large-scale panel survey and focus group discussions to illustrate and contextualize the findings against the experiences of other children affected by conflict in the region. After a short background on the conflict and the methodology, the report delves into key areas of girls' and boys' experiences during and after their time with the Boko Haram factions, including trajectories into the groups, the hardships during association, their way out, and their needs upon exit. It also explores other themes the children highlighted as central to them during the activity, including the importance of family and friends, which take on an essential function in the absence of any formal support. The report ends with reflections from the young participants about their dreams and aspirations for the future.

[3] In July-August 2024, MEAC worked with 100cameras, War Child Colombia, and Conflict Responses Foundation (CORE), to engage indigenous Nasa youth in Cauca, Colombia.
[4] In June 2024, MEAC worked with 100cameras, Progress in Peace, and Mosul Heritage to engage young Iraqis in Mosul who were displaced during the war.

Photo 2: A., 17 years old

Background: Conflict-Affected Children in the North East of Nigeria

The Boko Haram conflict, which began in 2009, has significantly impacted the North East of Nigeria, leading to widespread displacement, violence, and a severe humanitarian crisis. Over the years, the different Boko Haram factions (Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, or JAS, and the Islamic State West Africa Province, or ISWAP)[5] have recruited thousands of children along a spectrum of coercion, to serve as combatants, spies, or in various support

[5] The moniker "Boko Haram" is sometimes considered a derogatory term for the group and is not the preferred name used by the different factions themselves. However, recognizing that the name Boko Haram is often used by local populations as an umbrella name, often because they cannot or do not differentiate between factions, or in referring historically to the group before the split (although this varies by geography and interaction), this report will use "Boko Haram" generally to encompass both factions. When reference is made to a specific faction, this will be clearly indicated, and the names Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) will be used.

roles, including as wives and cooks.[6] In 2022, early in the mass exits, UNICEF estimated that a decade after the start of the conflict, more than 8,000 children were recruited and used by Boko Haram in Nigeria.[7] At the time of publication, UNICEF had documented 10,330 children who had passed through one of the three transit or interim care centres in Maiduguri (Shokari, Bulumkutu, and Hajj) for those exiting Boko-Haram-held territory from 2021 to early October 2024.[8] As this report highlights, some children bypass these centres altogether. In addition, many of those who were recruited as children become adults by the time they exit Boko Haram. Others did not survive long enough to exit and many are likely still stuck with one of the factions. The extent of child recruitment by the Boko Haram factions is therefore likely significantly higher than these figures. The prolonged conflict has deprived recruited (and otherwise impacted) children of education, of being with their families, of stability and safety, and has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian situation in the region.

Identifying and supporting children formerly associated with the Boko Haram factions presents a formidable challenge, especially those who leave the group without going through formal reintegration support and programming or for those who are insufficiently supported. Children often follow family members out of the Boko Haram factions, and their trajectories are partially dependent on the choices of their parents, siblings or other family members. Those who leave by themselves often try to reunite with family members in communities or IDP camps outside of territory held by the Boko Haram factions. After having lived in isolated areas for years, children and their families are often unaware of the existence of child reintegration programmes that could support them (if there are any in their areas of return). Even if they surrender to the military, are registered, and/or stay at a transit centre, formerly associated children can be difficult to identify or reach in the overcrowded IDP camps, urban areas, or the inaccessible conflict-affected areas where they resettle. As a result, many never access any reintegration- or child-specific programming. The challenge of reaching formerly associated children became exponentially more difficult starting in 2021 with the mass surrenders following the death of then JAS leader Abubakar Shekau. Since then, more than 160,000 people are estimated to have left the territories under JAS and ISWAP and largely fled to Maiduguri in Borno, as well as to other locations across the Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (BAY) states of the North East.

Children who exit the Boko Haram factions without support (or with insufficient support) frequently struggle with unmet basic needs, such as food, proper shelter, and healthcare, and

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[6] Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali (2022) "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin," *MEAC Findings Report 22,* United Nations University, New York.
[7] UNICEF, "UNICEF calls for end to recruitment and use of child soldiers," Press Release, 14 February 2022.
[8] Figures as of 4 October 2024 provided to MEAC by the UNICEF Nigeria Country Office.

encounter difficulties in accessing education and sustainable livelihoods. The ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis further complicate their reintegration progress. Today, the North East region grapples with severe food insecurity, the impacts of climate change, and, like the rest of the country, massive price increases in basic goods due to severe inflation.[9] These challenges, combined with displacement and ongoing insecurity, have further hindered the ability of formerly associated children to rebuild their lives.

Methodologies

Activities

This report details findings and observations derived from several research components:

- A five-day participatory photography and research training initiative with eight girls and eight boys between the ages of 14 and 19 who exited the Boko Haram factions as children (and are therefore and for simplicity referred to as children throughout this report), but who did not benefit from formal reintegration programming. The training took place in Maiduguri from 17-21 April 2024. At the time of participating in the research, the participants were living in Maiduguri, the Konduga IDP camp, the Bama IDP camp as well as in the neighbouring host communities.
- Twenty focus group discussions with a total of 45 girls and women, and 44 boys and men who were previously with one of the Boko Haram factions. Some of the participants bypassed any formal exit pathways or programming and returned directly to communities, while others had passed through the Hajj, Shokari, or Bulumkutu transit centres in Maiduguri, Borno State. Nine of these focus groups were with girls (24 girls in total) and boys (19 boys in total) between the ages of 13 and 19. Two of these focus groups were conducted with the young participants in the participatory programme described above (one focus group with the eight girls and another with the eight boys).
- A phone survey with 3,632 respondents from Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (BAY) states, including 589 minors (358 girls and 231 boys) conducted from April to June 2024. The total survey sample includes 905 respondents who were previously associated with one of the Boko Haram factions, namely Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Of those who were ever with a Boko Haram faction, 42 per cent (381 respondents) reported being a child when they first came to be with them, and 15 per cent (134 respondents) reported being under the age of 18 when they exited.

[9] UNICEF, "25 million Nigerians at high risk of food insecurity in 2023," *Press Release*, 16 January 2023; UN News, "Climate change fuels tensions in Nigeria," 14 June 2024.

Photo 3: Facilitator photograph of participants at the training in Maiduguri

MEAC's Approach to Participatory Research

As part of MEAC's global participatory initiative, MEAC partnered with the following organizations on the design and implementation of the participatory programme in Nigeria:

- **100cameras:** A non-profit organization that runs a global programme utilizing photography and storytelling to empower youth to process and share their experiences.
- **Mobukar Consultancy**: A research agency and MEAC's local implementing partner in Maiduguri, Nigeria.
- **Kanem Creative**: A Maiduguri-based non-profit focused on training and equipping young people in digital literacy, photography, and videography.

The work benefited from the support of UNICEF's Nigeria Country Office. Led by this consortium of partners, the intervention encompassed a comprehensive five-day training on photography and research skills:

- **Research component**: This section of the programme aimed to equip participants with very basic research skills, ultimately preparing them to interview their peers. They addressed questions such as "What is research?", "How do you ask interview

questions?", or "How do you ask for consent?" and practiced in role-play scenarios and interviews. The objective was to enable young people to co-generate action research and contribute to related recommendations that would inform policies and programmes geared towards them. Additionally, this training provided them with valuable analytical skills that they could apply to their educational and professional pursuits.

- **Photography/videography component**: This aspect of the intervention focused on equipping children with photography and videography skills. Each equipped with their own camera, they learned about photo composition and other techniques, which they could then put into practice in "photo walks" through their community. The goal was to help them process their emotions, share their experiences through an artistic outlet, and create images and videos that capture the themes explored in the research component of the programme and highlighted by MEAC's other research findings. Through photography and storytelling, the children were able to articulate their journeys and facilitate a deeper understanding of their realities, including their current needs and the sources of resilience that sustain them in the face of adversity.

The goal of the intervention was twofold. First, it aimed to move beyond a tokenistic inclusion of young people by creating robust, multi-method action research that can influence support to children who exit armed groups in the region. Second, while doing so, it aimed at providing participants – many of whom have had little schooling and no programming support to date – with skills and an expressive outlet to help them as they continue to navigate their reintegration journeys.

The Opportunities and Limits of Participatory Research

Before delving into the thematic findings that emerged from the intervention, a few considerations and caveats around the 'participatory' paradigm need to be highlighted, particularly relating to a set of competing values that surfaces in this type of research:

- **Research aspirations versus research realities:** Across MEAC's participatory programme in the three different country contexts, the curriculum was designed in a flexible way to enable swift adaptation according to participants' needs and profiles. And indeed, in some instances – even though the literacy requirements for participation had been clearly communicated – the constellation and literacy levels of the group were different than envisioned, particularly given the years of schooling many participants had lost. At times, this meant having to give up some of the original goals of the activity (e.g., participants conducting focus groups amongst themselves) to ensure the

children's wellbeing and adapt the programme to their needs and realities – which is, ultimately, one of the inherent goals of participatory research, beyond the traditional definition of what constitutes research 'success.'

- **Minimizing risks versus using opportunities:** Working with conflict-affected young people, particularly those who were with an armed group themselves, requires the utmost sensitivity and caution. In MEAC's participatory programme, facilitators were very conscious of mitigating participant discomfort in discussing conflict-related issues. They designed the curriculum in a way to slowly build to these topics, used the photography components to address some of them indirectly, and used a conflict-sensitive and ethics-based approach that prioritized emotional safety and participant agency in determining what they wanted to share. The programme was conscious of the oft-cited risk of re-traumatization in research with conflict-affected populations, but worked to ensure that this concern did not become so all-consuming that it became a risk in itself. Specifically, over-focusing on potential traumatization – especially when devoid of evidence that such activities can have that effect – can prevent work with largely invisible populations who are under-supported and have no seat at the programming or policy table to inform interventions that impact them (or that exclude them entirely). The resulting avoidance of engagement in the name of unsubstantiated protection concerns strips marginalized people of important outlets to influence their own trajectories and cathartic opportunities, especially when no other mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) exists. In the North East of Nigeria over the last four years, many MEAC survey respondents have expressed gratitude for the possibility of sharing their experiences in conflict (some of them did so for the first time), and experiences from the global participatory programme suggest that the participants did want to relay certain aspects of their life and felt more empowered and confident after having the outlet to do so. Doing no harm is the key principle behind the MEAC project, but it is essential to calibrate the need to not overwhelm participants while still offering programmes and research engagement that can generate positive change not only at the policy or programming level but also for participants in severely underserved contexts.

- **Empowerment versus protection:** A related area of tension in participatory work and elevating young people's contributions in public discussions is – on the one hand – promoting participatory values around agency and empowerment and – on the other hand – balancing protection concerns (e.g., being cautious about any topics that could

incriminate them or their family members, especially in still volatile security environments). For MEAC's photography activities, this has meant using only the first initial and age of the participant for attribution of the photos they took (including throughout this report) in order to safeguard their privacy and protection, even though many participants – and their caregivers – were willing to provide their full names.

- **True participatory values versus project limits:** Related to the topic of agency, operational realities and finite resources may at times limit the true participatory nature of respective research approaches. In its highest form, participatory research enables young people to co-design the activities from the start and co-decide on topics, methodologies, etc. In groups with limited education levels, with short-term funding cycles, and with pressing knowledge gaps for programming, however, compromises need to be made. In this case, this meant using predetermined curricula comprised of participatory activities with many feedback loops, and enough flexibility to accommodate participant limitations and preferences. Follow-up engagement in the future, especially with the same participant group, allows for even more in-depth participatory approaches.

Thematic Findings

This report follows the stories of the children from MEAC's participatory programme. They themselves take the reader on their journeys through conflict, from their way into the Boko Haram factions, their experiences in the bush, and, crucially, their way out and their needs upon exit both in the short and in the long term. The following sections build on as many direct testimonies as possible, to preserve the authenticity of their experiences and to directly convey their perspectives to policymakers and practitioners working to address their needs and promote their reintegration into society. In all of this, the report also explores topics which the participants identified as important for their lives – and which mark a key shift away from hardship and trauma towards a focus on sources of strength, resilience, and hope. This includes the importance of friends and family, especially in the period after exiting an armed group, and their dreams and aspirations for the future, such as going to school or, for many, resuming farming (for which they continue to face significant obstacles). Not only did the children share their stories through narrative, but also through the photographs they took during the programme. These pictures underpin their stories throughout this report, an added layer of unmediated insight into their realities. Additional findings from MEAC's panel surveys

and wider qualitative study serve to contextualize their stories. First and foremost, though, the children themselves will guide us through the evidence narrated by their stories – a role they are keen to play: "*I would like to share my experience from here with other people.*"[10] We encourage the reader to listen intently to find out how to best support them.

Trajectories Into Boko Haram

The stories of the children in the participatory programme illustrate how child involvement with Boko Haram takes place along a continuum of coercion. Many children in the North East were abducted or forced to join when Boko Haram took over their village, while others were taken into the group by family members. In other cases, even though children may have exhibited agency in their "choice" to join Boko Haram, they were doing so in contexts with severely limited options, which calls into question how voluntary this decision really was.

Coercion and Abduction

The stories of abduction and coercion told during the participatory intervention reflect findings from previous research with former Boko Haram child soldiers,[11] as well as MEAC's broader survey work, including a survey run from April to June 2024. Across the North East, children have been abducted during Boko Haram raids or were forced to join the group when their village was taken over. As one girl explained, "*Unfortunately, they checked in [the house] and found me and they just abducted me. They put me in between them, the rider and the other person on the bike and they took me to the bush.*"[12] Indeed, of the 380[13] survey respondents who were children when they first came to be with Boko Haram, 42 per cent reported having been abducted. Despite analysis which suggests that, with time, the Boko Haram factions have shifted away from using abduction to recruit, the caseload exiting the group in recent years still reports high levels of forced recruitment.

[10] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[11] Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict,* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).
[12] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[13] This is the number of respondents for whom Boko Haram was the first group they were ever associated with. This includes a small subset of respondents who were with a Boko Haram faction, but later became involved in another group – possibly a different Boko Haram faction, or another armed or CSA group.

Photo 4: F., 19 years old

Being coerced into joining a Boko Haram faction is a tragic and common trajectory for many conflict-affected children in the region, and one that is marked by narratives of fear, loss, and displacement. When asked about the lowest point in their life, one participant of the participatory intervention recounted, "*when I was forcibly taken to the bush by Boko Haram.*"[14] Another girl added, "*One of my lowest moments was when Boko Haram attacked our village and tried to kidnap us. We had to hide in a room for a whole week because we were scared that if we went out, they might take us [...] It was so scary. They beat my mom and dad, and they got hurt. One of my siblings got shot.*"[15] At times, children were abducted without their families. In

[14] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[15] Ibid.

other cases, entire family units were abducted and recruited, leading to children's association by default. As one girl described, "*They broke into the house, smashed the door, and kidnapped all of us [...] That was like the worst time of my life.*"[16] Such testimonies reinforce how families can facilitate recruitment into armed groups, notably when they themselves are already involved. The children also relayed these experiences of forceful recruitment using visual representations. During the photography classes, when asked to think about a photograph that could represent their "low" point in life, one boy noted, "*A photo of someone's hand on a grassland reminds me of when Boko Haram chased us out of our community and into the bush. Every time I see that photo, it reminds me of that moment we had in the bush.*"[17] Another boy said that such photos reminded him of a similar experience of being chased by Boko Haram members, who then raided their home: *"They collected everything from us, our food and everything.*"[18]

Family-Linked Recruitment

In some cases, children are recruited as a direct result of their parents or broader family's involvement with Boko Haram. Family can pull or push children into armed groups in myriad ways. In some cases, children were very young when their parents joined or began to live under Boko Haram's control (sometimes under extreme duress), thus making their involvement inevitable.[19] The stories shared by the young programme participants reinforced that children were sometimes expected to follow in the footsteps of older relatives. A boy in one of the focus groups recounted how his elder brother initially brought him into the group: "*I was at home when my brother came to our house and took me with some other children to the bush. [...] He said we will travel with him, but he did not tell us where we were travelling until we got to the bush.*"[20] Other children told similar stories, about being taken by their father, uncle, or brother into one of the Boko Haram factions. Sometimes, taking children into the group was framed as an attempt to protect them from violence, either by the Boko Haram factions or by other security actors. One boy explained that he was five when his father took him as it became too dangerous to stay in his village and everyone else was leaving. At that time, his father was already associated with one of the Boko Haram factions, who held control over the area where the boy was living.[21] This finding is not surprising as across the Lake Chad Basin Region, prior MEAC

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] 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.
[20] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[21] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

research found that having a parent in an armed group increased the statistical likelihood that their child would become associated themselves.[22] It must also be noted that there are examples of parents who tried to protect their children from their association by, for example, hiding them or – for girls – marrying them off to make them less attractive to the group's fighters.[23] While parents and other family members can push and pull children into armed groups for different reasons and in varied ways, so too can they protect them from recruitment.

Territorial Proximity of the Group

In many cases, the involvement of children with Boko Haram began due to the close proximity of the group and the eventual occupation of their village. As one girl in the participatory programme explained: "*I was six years old when my village was occupied by Boko Haram, and we could not escape as many people did because of my father's illness. We had to stay with him and that was how we ended up with the group.*"[24] Such experiences align with existing evidence that when armed groups exert territorial control, it increases a child's interaction with armed actors. Across the Lake Chad Basin region, there are higher rates of Boko Haram association among children who experienced occupation.[25] Indeed, in MEAC's 2024 survey data, 74 per cent of the 381 respondents who were children at the time of entry into Boko Haram reported their village ever being occupied by the group. When they occupy – or at least exert influence over – territory, armed groups often become de facto local authorities, controlling the lands and the lives of those living on them. As a result, children may be left with few viable options other than to enlist or at least cooperate with the group.[26] When asked in a focus group what would happen if they refused to join ISWAP after their village was occupied, a young boy simply said: "*It won't be possible.*"[27]

In some instances, children and their families were pushed into Boko-Haram-controlled territory as the military or community security actors (CSAs) such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) advanced into their village, fearing they would be suspected of being Boko Haram and killed. One participant recounted how "*the military and the Tada Kaa [CJTF] went*

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[22] 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). p. 19.
[23] MEAC report on the experience of women and girls associated with Boko haram in the Lake Chad Basin (Forthcoming).
[24] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[25] Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali (2022) "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin," *MEAC Findings Report 22,* United Nations University, New York.
[26] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), *When the Music Stops: The Impact of Terrorism on Malian Youth* (Turin: UNICRI, 2020).
[27] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

and burnt down our community, thinking that both the youths and Boko Haram were with the same group. Then my parents decided to move deeper to the villages to stay, and that was how we went into the village and stayed with the Boko Haram. So it was safer for us to join Boko Haram than to wait for the military to kill us."[28] While the military and the CJTF have brought back some stability to the North East, both were accused of human rights abuses, notably at the peak of the conflict, where little distinction was made between Boko Haram fighters and civilians living under their control.[29] Testimonies provided by the children show how these practices inadvertently forced entire families and communities – and by a consequence children and youth – to live in Boko-Haram-controlled territory, increasing the likelihood of their eventual recruitment. And once they are part of the group, their struggle only intensifies.

Hardships of Living with Boko Haram

When asked to reflect on life with the Boko Haram factions, children frequently spoke about the harsh realities of their time in the bush, emphasizing the loss of safety and normalcy. As one girl recounted during the participatory intervention, "*those moments in the bush were the lowest points in my life. I would take a photograph of an empty land or a dark night to show how empty my life was at that time.*"[30] Another explained the daily challenges they faced while with the group: "*Living with them was something else. There was hunger and there was no way for you to escape and if they catch you, they will kill you and if you stayed back, there was hunger. We have suffered a lot.*"[31] In the bush, children were often forced to make incredibly difficult choices to survive.

Deprivation and Isolation

Experiencing isolation, primitive living conditions, and a sense of unpredictability while living in the bush clearly leaves a mark on children exiting the armed groups. Their stories vary and likely depend on which Boko Haram faction they lived under, the territory they lived in, their status in the group, and when they left. Many of the children recounted harrowing stories of fire falling from the sky (attacks by jets), being constantly on the run, having to rebuild shelters, and facing extreme food insecurity because they were no longer able to farm. Some participants, on the other hand, did not face the same degree of hardship in the bush or seemed to re-think their difficulties under Boko Haram in light of the challenges they encountered post-exit, especially

[28] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[29] Chitra Nagarajan, *Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State*, CIVIC (2018).
[30] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[31] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

the struggle to secure food, the lack of access to farmland, the quality of housing (e.g., tents in the IDP camp where they live): "*In the bush we had food. We had our maize from the farm. We had our chickens that we can slaughter and eat*"[32] and "*our house in the bush is more comfortable, very cold, like an AC. It is made up of Ngalla. We used to spray water on top of the house. It's cooler there but here it's hot. It's just heat and zinc.*"[33] This diversity of experiences was also captured by a 2024 MEAC phone survey. When asked what they missed from their time with Boko Haram, if anything, most respondents who left the group when they were children (70 per cent of 133 respondents) said 'nothing,' but a sizeable minority signaled that some aspects of life were better in the bush. 17 per cent of children said they missed things like food or shelter, and a small percentage of respondents missed access to money, education, and farming.[34]

Beyond the daily hardships faced, life with the group was secluded and isolated. Participants from the focus group discussions explained that they had little to no contact with people outside of Boko Haram territory and were not allowed to leave their enclaves, with very few exceptions such as farming or running errands for the group. For girls and women, life with Boko Haram could be especially isolating, as they were expected not to socialize with each other during the daytime. With the exception of Islamic education, they would often spend extended periods alone while their husbands would be travelling for farming or armed group activities: "*For the men they are allowed to go to work, or even to the market on bicycles, but women are not allowed to move around. If you want to go anywhere, it would have to be at night and with the permission of your husband."*[35] This extreme isolation is an underappreciated challenge in a child's eventual reintegration journey, as those who were extremely isolated while in the bush need to re-learn basic social norms, such as how to conduct oneself in basic interactions. This loss of communication skills, proper social behaviours, and capacity to follow non-verbal social cues can stunt reintegration progress (e.g., challenges navigating social interactions for trading can impact one's ability to provide for themselves and their family).

Forced Marriage

During the discussions, some notable gendered differences in experiences under Boko Haram surfaced, especially when it comes to girls' roles within the group and their exposure to forced marriage and sexual violence. As one girl recounted: "*When I was in the bush, the Boko Haram*

[32] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).
[33] MEAC, Focus Group with women formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).
[34] Between five and six per cent across answer categories.
[35] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

members wanted to marry me off to one of them and when one refuses, they kill either or both of one's parents. To avoid that, I followed them and agreed to get married to one of them."[36] The findings of MEAC's 2024 survey and qualitative research in Nigeria align with this experience. Many of the girls who left one of the factions spoke of forced marriages, either of their own or those of their friends, when Boko Haram fighters came to their village. Indeed, 58 per cent of the 181 women and girl respondents who entered Boko Haram while they were minors married someone while they were with the group. One participant in a focus group recounted how after her village was occupied by the JAS faction led by Abubakar Shekau, an ultimatum was issued to the community: The message said that "*in three days, all the girls should be married off, if not, [JAS] will start killing people.*"[37]

In addition to being subjected to forced marriages, women and girls experienced sexual violence under both Boko Haram factions. Sexual violence is difficult to talk about and the incidences are likely severely underreported. For example, in the MEAC baseline survey, only 3 per cent of the women and girl respondents who were with Boko Haram reported ever having experienced sexual violence, and less than 1 per cent of boys and men did so. Given the scale of the conflict, and what is known about the armed actors involved, these percentages do not align with the extent of sexual violence thought to have occurred during the conflict. Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence committed against children, including rape and slavery, has been extensively documented in the region.[38] In addition to the likely hesitance of respondents to report sexual violence, those who have been married seem reluctant to describe their marriage as forced. In fact, only 30 per cent of the girls who ended up with Boko Haram as a child and reported getting married during their time with the group said that their marriage was forced. This runs counter to the findings from qualitative research that are highlighted in this section, showing how children themselves – and their families – tried to avoid forced marriages with Boko Haram fighters.

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[36] Luckily for this participant, she was able to avoid a forced marriage within the group. "*I tried to escape from the wedding venue, and I was able to do that even though I was scared that they might catch me and kill me and also kill my parents. But this did not happen luckily because we were able to escape from the bush before they found out where I was."* MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).

[37] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 30 April 2024).

[38] UN Security Council, "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations, 04 April 2024, S/2024/292; Amnesty International, *Help Us Build Our Lives" Girl Survivors of Boko Haram and Military Abuses in North-east Nigeria* (London, 2024).

Photo 5: Y., 14 years old

Parents would often go to extreme measures to prevent their daughters from being forcibly married to Boko Haram fighters. In some cases, parents would hide their children when Boko

Haram fighters searched their communities. As one girl explained: "*Our parents used to hide us, some parents buried their daughters and put some containers and other kitchen utensils on them [...] Because they search the entire house, looking for young girls, or sometimes our parents hide us in the laundry buckets and the Boko Haram men will not go there.*"[39] Some of the protection measures still resulted in the forced marriage of their daughters. For instance, during MEAC focus groups from 2022, girls described that when Boko Haram started attacking their village, their families started to marry them off to other men in their community – some at very young ages – because their parents thought that this would protect them from being forcibly taken and married to Boko Haram fighters. *"Most of us were around the ages of 10 or so, and we did not even know what marriage was. [...] Our parents decided to get us married to protect us from being abducted by Boko Haram.*"[40] For these girls, however, together with the boys they married, their forced union was not enough to save them. All the newly married couples ended up with Boko Haram when the group took control of their village, and the girls and boys were doubly coerced into relationships – with a spouse and a group – that they often did not have any say in.

These stories of forced marriages undertaken by Boko Haram need to be situated in the broader cultural marriage practices in the North East of Nigeria.[41] From their own accounts, girls rarely have a choice when it comes to marriage, whether inside the group or outside. Furthermore, while the forced nature of these marriages experienced by the girls highlights the severe gender-based violence and coercion they face, it is important to recognize that experiences are not always homogeneous and may differ according to the faction they belonged to, the rank of their husband, and the individuals involved. A focus group in April 2024 with girls who were married to former high-level fighters of Boko Haram sheds light on the different experiences and treatment of girls and women in the group. Given their husbands' rank, these girls expressed missing their lives in the bush and the importance they held within the group. One girl recalled: "*We were treated better and life there was better.*"[42] Another explained: "*I am young but because of the position of my husband, people treat[ed] me the way they treat older women. Even if someone is older than me, even if people are older than me, if*

[39] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[40] MEAC, Focus Group with girls and young women formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 16 September 2022).
[41] A recent report from Amnesty International highlights additional narratives from girls and women experiencing forced marriage and slavery in Boko Haram. Amnesty International, *Help Us Build Our Lives" Girl Survivors of Boko Haram and Military Abuses in North-east Nigeria* (London, 2024).
[42] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

something bad happens to them, my husband used to bring them to me, and I will take care of them, and nobody has the right to take them without the consent of my husband."[43]

These experiences highlight the nuances within girls' and women's experiences with Boko Haram. Girls and women exiting the Boko Haram factions are often assumed to have only known mistreatment and poor conditions, which can cloud a more mixed experience for some and make it harder to anticipate the types of challenges they may encounter post-exit, including, like for those quoted above, a loss of status. This loss of standing can be both material – as girls who were married to high-level fighters likely enjoyed better economic conditions than others while in the group – as well as about stature. The loss of both is likely brought into high relief when experiencing food insecurity and generally being treated as insignificant upon exit.

Relatedly, it is important to avoid imposing outside assumptions on the marriages of girls (and women) exiting Boko Haram. While some highlight that they themselves, or their friends, had abusive husbands, other girls generally spoke of their husbands positively. One focus group participant explained how "*we loved them, and we wanted to be married to them,*" although this also came from a place of need. She clarified that "*there is no one that will take care of you, so it's best for you to like them and he will help you. It's better for you to like him.*"[44] The necessity of having a husband was expressed by girls (and women) in other focus groups as well. When asked if they would divorce their husbands if they could, many expressed that they would not want a divorce, as they would be economically worse off without a husband. One young woman noted: "*One doesn't even have enough to provide for them and their children. Even now with a husband, it is difficult, so how will it be without a husband? It is hard even with a husband.*"[45] Among those who got divorced or found themselves widowed, many expressed difficulties in remarrying, as men would not marry a woman who already had children, or they feared their new husband would not look after their children from their previous marriage. A young widow noted: "*I did not get married even though I wanted to. Most suitors don't like a woman with children. Whenever men propose to me, the first question they ask is if I have children, and how many I have."*[46] Even for those who had family, many did not consider leaving their husbands to return to their parents. As explained by focus group participants in April 2024, their familial

[43] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[44] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[45] MEAC, Focus Group with women formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).
[46] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

network was more of a backup if their husbands were to go back to the bush to rejoin Boko Haram. However, girls without family networks have fewer options and are more dependent on their husbands for their own survival and that of their children. One group of girls explained that they could not separate from their husbands because they could not stay with their parents: "*Our parents are still in the bush. Where would we stay?*"[47]

Exits Out of Boko Haram

Given the hardships in the bush experienced by many, it is not a surprise that during the participatory intervention and the focus groups, most children recounted that they had wanted to leave Boko Haram long before they got the opportunity to escape. Similarly, almost all (97 per cent) of 133 survey respondents who reported leaving Boko Haram while they were still a child, said that they had wanted to leave Boko Haram. The most common reason for wanting to leave was fear of violence or death (43 per cent); many never wanted to be with the group in the first place (18 per cent) and others wanted to escape the hardships of life with the group (16 per cent) or missed their family (16 per cent). Wanting to leave the group was not enough to get out. Participants of the focus groups reflected that while they had long wanted to exit Boko Haram, it often took years to find an opportunity to do so safely. Many feared not only what Boko Haram would do to them if they were discovered, but also feared being killed or imprisoned by the military or community security actors. One girl mentioned: *"So, that's why at that time everybody was afraid to go out because if they [Boko Haram] caught you they might kill you and if you come out here, they [the military] will catch you and put you into a barrack."*[48]

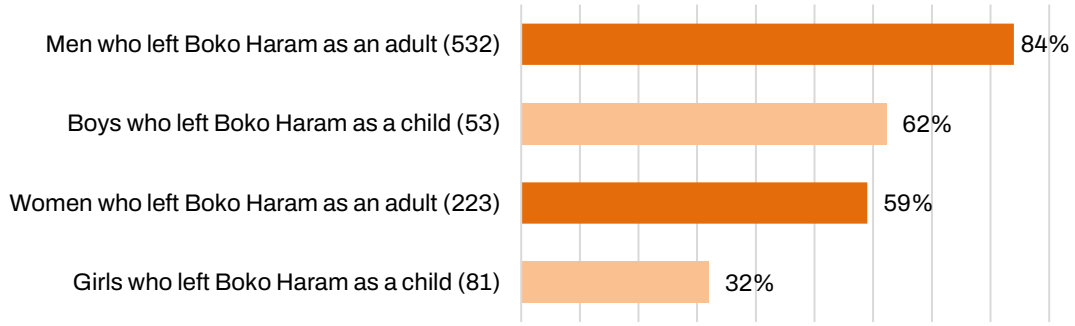
The perceived threat of the military and community security actors changed with time. MEAC's surveys and focus groups have found that many of those who left Boko Haram were gradually reassured by messages from the Borno State government that they would not be harmed and that they would be welcomed back. These messages were reinforced by people outside of the group encouraging them to come out and confirming their own safe exits. In addition to these messages, the death of JAS leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021 led to an opening for many to escape from Boko-Haram-held territory. Through word of mouth, the radio, phone calls, text and WhatsApp messages of family members and friends, and through leaflets dropped by jets, messages made their way into the bush, confirming that it was safe to exit. MEAC's phone survey confirms that nearly half of respondents who left Boko Haram as children had indeed heard a message encouraging them to come out, with the most common sources being a

[47] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).
[48] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

personal contact, the radio, or a flyer.[49] One girl shared: "*We heard messages that there were people that have come out and they were accepted [...] They were given certain things and they were held in a certain place. They were also given food. It was said that the government is accepting them.*"[50] Other children mentioned being contacted by family members, and how their encouragement spurred their decision to leave the group. "*Some people received messages from their parents that they should come out because they will accept them back, that's another reason that people started coming out in mass,*"[51] said one girl.

While the importance of this messaging campaign, combined with other factors like the death of Shekau, cannot be overstated, it is important to note that there are age- and gender-specific differences in access to information in the bush. For example, while 77 per cent of those who left one of the Boko Haram factions as an adult reported having heard a message from the government before coming out, only 44 per cent of those who left as a child had. When looking at girls specifically, an even larger information gap exists, as only 32 per cent of the girls who left Boko Haram had heard a message.[52] This deficit likely stems from children's reduced access to information channels: Adults were more likely to hear the message over the radio or to read it on a flyer, whereas children were more likely to say that they heard the message from someone else. Differences in mobility, literacy, and access to phones make it harder for children to hear the government communication campaigns while in the bush. This is essential to highlight because any messaging campaigns that seek to promote defections need to be gender- and age-sensitive to overcome these obstacles to accessing information in the bush.

Figure 1 – "While you were with [Boko Haram], did you hear any messages from the government encouraging you to come out?"



[49] 44 per cent reported hearing the messages. Those who heard the messages, heard them 'from someone else, e.g., a friend or family' (46 per cent), 'on the radio (36 per cent) and 'on a flyer' (25 per cent).
[50] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).
[51] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[52] Compared to 62 per cent of boys.

While most of the children interviewed by MEAC escaped (87 per cent), this is not the only exit pathway for young people coming out of Boko Haram.[53] Children can be expelled, abandoned, or captured, in addition to surrendering or defecting.[54] Insights from the participatory intervention and focus groups highlight the difficulties the children had in escaping. Children recounted harrowing stories of their journey leaving the group, where they were threatened, chased, and lost loved ones on the way. One child recounted: "*We saw some Boko Haram sitting on top of a tree waiting for anybody that would leave, to catch them and send them back, because they heard that there are people who are trying to leave when we saw them, we changed the road and followed the river. We were in the front while my uncles were at the back, we safely crossed the river, but one person among us was killed by them.*"[55]

Escaping from Boko Haram is only the first step of an often long, challenging reintegration journey. Many children found themselves detained (at least initially), despite official messages to come home and despite international legal obligations calling for the detention of children as a last resort.[56] The number of children who end up in detention upon exit (or spend more than a few days there) is thought to have declined in recent years since the 2022 *Handover Protocol for children encountered in the course of armed conflict in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin Region,* signed by the Government of Nigeria and UNICEF. The Protocol outlines the handover of children encountered by the military to child protection actors to ensure access to child-specific reintegration and rehabilitation programming.[57] Many children exiting Boko Haram eventually end up in transit or reintegration centres (and indeed many bypass detention and go there directly), with varying degrees of support and programming. These transit centres, while not the same as detention, are usually closed facilities, where residents cannot move freely. These centres play a key role in the official defection programmes supported or acknowledged by the government and the international community. Other children end up directly back in communities – theirs or others – or 'reintegrate' into IDP camps or other situations of displacement.

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[53] Survey respondents in the North East of Nigeria who were children at the time of leaving Boko Haram, indeed overwhelmingly stated that their time with Boko Haram ended by escaping (87 per cent), but (9 per cent) described their exit as by surrendering, which may be the same thing. The response options were not read out loud, and respondents could select multiple responses.
[54] Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, (New York: United Nations University, 2018).
[55] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[56] 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 3.
[57] UNICEF, "Government of Nigeria, UNICEF sign handover protocol to protect children encountered during military operations," *Press Release*, 30 September 2022.

In Nigeria, there are several government-supported official pathways for exit from Boko Haram: Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC; a federal programme for adult men) and the Borno Model (a more recent state-led programme that includes both adults and children). In both pathways, individuals who have exited Boko Haram undergo some level of screening and identification, as well as different reintegration activities.[58] The different transit or interim care centres include the OPSC centre in Gombe, Bulumkutu and Shokari in Maiduguri, as well as the more recently established Hajj camp in Maiduguri. Since the death of JAS leader Abubakar Shekau in 2021, Hajj, Bulumkutu, and Shokari have been overwhelmed with individuals who left Boko-Haram-held territory as part of the mass surrenders. In those three centres, children reside alongside adults as they prepare to reintegrate back into civilian life (although before the influx of surrenders, there had been efforts to largely separate children and women at Bulumkutu). Children may spend several months, or in many cases a year or more, in one or more of these locations. It is therefore important to account for the impact of these experiences on a child's reintegration journey. In MEAC's latest survey, out of 132 survey respondents who reported being children at the time of leaving Boko Haram, a significant number returned directly to host communities and bypassed the transit centres completely (41 per cent), while other children were in one or more centres: Hajj (42 per cent), Bulumkutu (12 per cent) and/or Shokari (9 per cent).[59] Of those respondents who were children when they left Boko Haram and stayed at a centre, 59 per cent said that their stay there was voluntary, while 41 per cent said that it was involuntary or they were not in a position to refuse to stay there.

Several of the children who participated in focus groups indicated that it was 'preferable' to have gone through official channels of return, as one would get more support (including food) and, as one boy explained "*so that they will release you officially [...] and no one will arrest you [later].*"[60] Nevertheless, children also highlighted some of the challenges of staying at one of the transit or interim care centres. When asked about their experiences at the centre, 43 per cent of those who left one of the Boko Haram factions as a child and stayed in one of the centres reported problems, including insufficient food or water, lack of sanitation, and, for a small group,

[58] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Mohammed Bukar, and Anamika Madhuraj, "Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin," *Findings Report 31*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.
[59] Some respondents passed through multiple centres. It is important to note that these numbers reflect the ways in which survey participants were recruited for the survey. Survey participants were initially recruited in the three transit centres in Maiduguri (Hajj, Bulumkutu, and Shokari) as well as through a randomized recruitment protocol in communities in the BAY states, and through snowball recruitment to access populations that were difficult to recruit through community recruitment (e.g., girls and women who were with Boko Haram).
[60] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

physical violence, amongst others.[61] Although this is a small sample of only 75 children, their responses are in line with those of adult survey respondents and confirm that even in centres – where much of the humanitarian and reintegration support is concentrated – the standards of care are lacking and residents struggle to fulfill their most basic needs.

Many children, whether they wanted to be in a centre or not, found their way directly back to communities, or were returned directly into communities by the military following their surrender. It is difficult to get an accurate estimate of the total number of children who went through a transit centre versus those who self-demobilized into communities, but MEAC's research suggests that many children bypass centres and/or any community-based support especially since the mass exits began in 2021. All of the children who took part in the participatory intervention had bypassed official programming. Stories on why some children bypass the transit centres vary. Family links were a factor in many young people's exit pathways. Some focus group participants thought that unaccompanied children with relatives in host communities were taken in by them, while those who came out with their parents (or, importantly, for girls, with their husbands), were transferred to transit centres. Similarly, those who had been released directly from the military outposts where they surrendered said it was because their family had come to pick them up.

Going through a centre largely determines whether or not children get support. Reintegration support for children is concentrated in these transit and reintegration centres. For almost all of them, after they leave, there is little to no follow-up support. Respondents who left Boko Haram as a child and stayed at a transit centre report having received food and water (87 per cent), cash (55 per cent), medical care (36 per cent), material goods such as clothing (26 per cent), skills training (21 per cent), and formal education (18 per cent). Most of this population (81 per cent) said that no one followed up with them after they had left the centre. 64 per cent said they did not receive further support after leaving. This is largely in line with the percentage of children who bypassed transit centres and reported not receiving any type of support after exiting Boko Haram (69 per cent). For those who did receive something once back in their communities (be it coming from a transit centre or directly from Boko-Haram-held territory), it is likely that this was not necessarily reintegration-specific support, but part of broader humanitarian efforts in the North East as is evidenced in the type of support provided. For those children who bypassed any centres after exiting Boko Haram, only some reported receiving food or water

[61] Insufficient food or water (16 per cent), lack of sanitation (15 per cent), and physical violence (1 per cent), among others.

(25 per cent), medical care (13 per cent) or shelter (13 per cent). The differences in types of support received in versus outside the centres highlight some of the longer-term oriented programming that occurs in centres, whereas outside of them, the only available support to children may be covering their basic needs.

In the focus group discussions, the children were asked what they believed would encourage other children to come out of Boko Haram. Their responses highlight the need for continued support to meet their basic needs. One participant poignantly shared: "*I think they will be convinced to leave the forest if those that came recently can get clothes, shelter, food and an available water supply after coming out from the bush. If they can get this support, they will convince other people like them to leave the forest. Children who are already out should be treated well, because if the children in the bush know that the people who are out are treated well, it will help the people in the bush to come out.*"[62] This important forewarning has not translated into support for exiting children, particularly those who bypass programmes and may face significant challenges once they finally come out of the group.

Immediate Needs Upon Exit

When leaving the Boko Haram factions, children and their families face immediate challenges in procuring adequate shelter, clothing, and the food necessary for their initial survival. The children highlighted these necessities in their responses to the question "*What did you need the most when you initially left the group?*". In line with the humanitarian crisis gripping the population of the North East, food was almost always listed as the most urgent need by young people coming out of Boko Haram. Due to inter-factional fighting between JAS and ISWAP, as well as increased military pressure, farming has become more and more difficult over time and food supplies and accessibility due to widespread inflation have dwindled. As a result, many who come out of the bush are malnourished, and especially those that fled are in immediate need of food.

Beyond food, shelter and clothing were mentioned by many of the focus group participants and the children in the participatory programme as urgent needs upon exit. They shared: "*I wanted*

[62] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

a house to live in, more than anything else,"[63] and "*A shelter was what we needed most when we initially left the bush and came to town.*"[64] These statements underline the critical importance of having a safe and dignified place to stay immediately after leaving the group, especially when children had been displaced to a location that was not their original community. Due to the ongoing conflict, many children are unable to return home. At the time of participating in the MEAC survey, more than half of respondents who exited Boko Haram as a child were not living in their home community (56 per cent). As expected, the most common reason for not having returned home was that their community was unsafe (said 51 per cent of those who left Boko Haram as a child and had not yet returned home).

Photo 6: Y., 14 years old

Clothing was also a significant need for many upon exiting the group. One girl shared, "*I needed clothing the most because we came out only [with] the cloth I was wearing.*"[65] This need seemed particularly acute for women and girls, as evidenced by stories from those who escaped from Boko Haram. If girls and women would be caught during their escape, their

[63] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

belongings and clothes would often be taken by Boko Haram to deter them from leaving the bush and surrendering to the military. This practice strips women and girls of their dignity, and in doing so, creates a significant barrier to escape as many women as possible and girls would be too afraid to escape without any belongings and surrender naked. Thus, clothing is one of the most immediate and urgent needs, particularly for women and girls, as they come out of the group. Some of these immediate needs persist well after their exit from the group, undermining reintegration progress in the long term.

Life After Boko Haram

Ongoing Challenges and Lack of Progress

For many children, meeting their most basic needs remains an ongoing challenge. The cohort of participants involved in the participatory intervention included a mix of those who had left Boko Haram years ago and others who exited just six months ago, yet they all seem to be in the same position when they arrived at the programme. Despite the passage of time, when asked about their greatest needs today, their answers remain largely unchanged. They continue to struggle with securing food, shelter, and income-generating activities and are experiencing continued displacement.

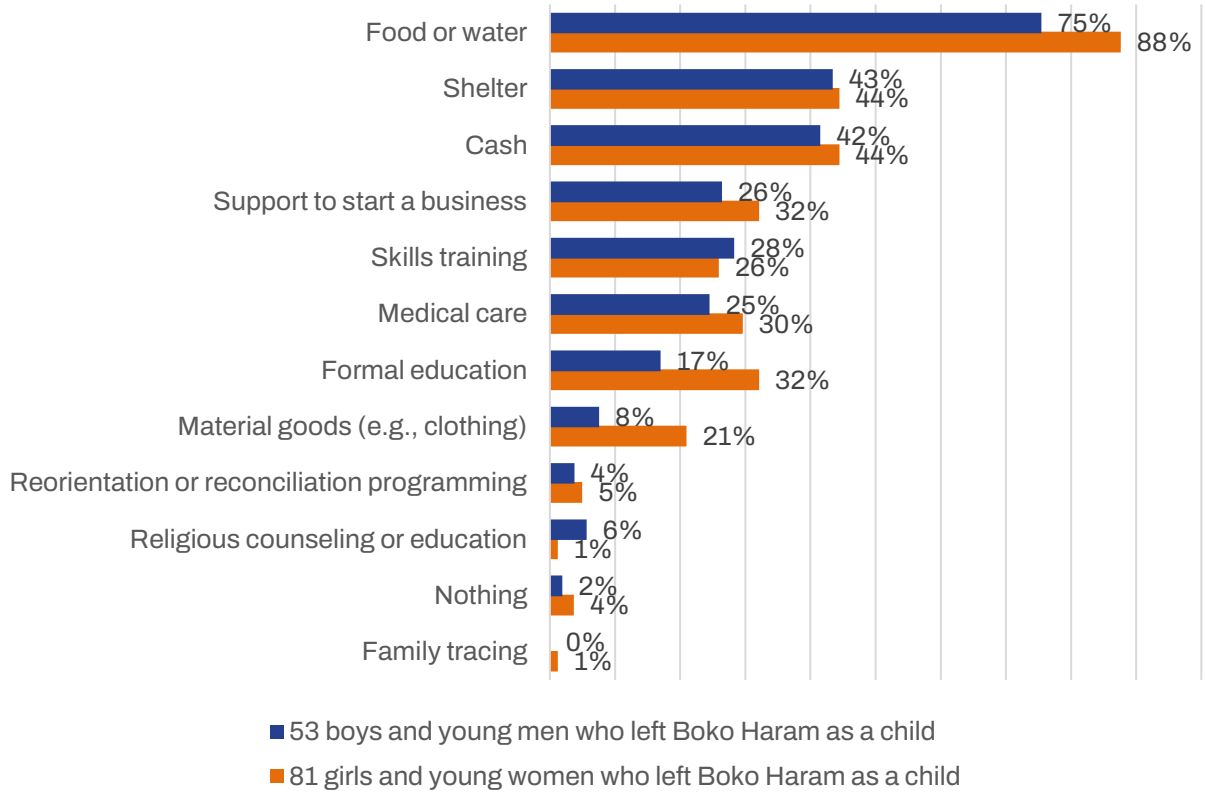
Many of the participants echoed their inability to fulfill their own most basic needs. "*I want us to have money, to be able to afford things like clothing,*"[66] said one boy, while another girl stated: "*What I need most today is money so that I will provide my family with food.*"[67] These testimonies align with the worsening security and humanitarian conditions in Nigeria as well as the overall economic vulnerability in the region. Indeed, most of the respondents who left Boko Haram as a child reported not getting enough food in the week before participating in the MEAC's survey (85 per cent).[68]

Food, water, cash and shelter continue to be viewed as the most useful types of support by recipients themselves. When asked in MEAC's survey "*If you could decide, what type of support would you make sure to give people like you?*", respondents who exited Boko Haram as children overwhelmingly selected food or water (83 per cent), shelter (44 per cent) and cash (43 per cent). Some interesting gender patterns emerge when disaggregating the data.[69] Girls

[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] By comparison, out of unaffiliated child respondents, 67 per cent reported not having had enough food in the week preceding their participation in the MEAC survey.
[69] In addition to differences with responses on food and water, girls and women who left Boko Haram as a child were more slightly more likely than boys and men to say that they would give support like shelter, skills training, medical care, formal education, and material good such as clothing to others like them.

and young women appear to have a slight preference for food and water (88 per cent) compared to boys and young men (75 per cent), which may highlight how food insecurity disproportionately impacts them and how feeding boys and men is often prioritized due to societal and gender norms.[70]

Figure 2 – "If you could decide, what type of support would you make sure to give people like you?"[71]



Continued Displacement and Its Impact on the Reintegration Progress

Exiting Boko Haram into a situation of displacement impacts the children's access to adequate shelter, food, and water. It was clear from the participatory intervention as well as MEAC's other research that even the children who report having returned to their home community, many live in IDP camps or makeshift shelters in host communities, where conditions hinder, rather than promote, their reintegration progress. Children in IDP camps in particular struggle to meet their basic needs as they have limited freedom of mobility and cannot meaningfully reestablish

[70] Alison Wright, *Beyond Hunger: the gendered impact of the global hunger crisis* (United Kingdom, Plan International).
[71] The answers were pre-programmed but not read out loud. Respondents could offer multiple answers. N=134 former Boko Haram associates who exited as a minor.

aspects of their life in these conditions, such as social networks and livelihoods. MEAC's research suggests that displacement in Nigeria's North East does not only affect children (and adults) who exited the Boko Haram factions but rather has become commonplace. One girl from the participatory intervention went into detail, saying: "*I don't know where to start from. Life has been challenging since we came out of the bush. Sometimes we don't get anything to eat for the whole day.*"[72] The particular challenges displacement poses for economic and social reintegration are underappreciated and rarely are reintegration programmes designed for preparing returnees to rebuild their lives in displacement.

Ongoing Insecurity

Many children endure prolonged displacement because of ongoing insecurity, and even in IDP camps it is hard to escape the threat of Boko Haram. The group's factions continue to be active around IDP camps and fortress towns where the children live. Some children in focus groups expressed being afraid that the group would find them in the camp where they lived.[73] This fear was amplified for those who had to leave the camp to make a living. In many cases, children are forced to travel far from where they live in order to farm and collect firewood to sell, as there is little available farmland close by. Young boys in the focus groups described the areas near their IDP camps as being surrounded by Boko Haram, saying: "*if you go east, you will meet Shekau's people [JAS]. And if you go west, you will meet Mamman Nur's people [ISWAP].*"[74] Such testimonies highlight the daily insecurity young people face while searching for ways to earn a living. Many of them feared that they or their loved ones would be targeted by Boko Haram while out farming. One child explained: "*The two factions have the habit of killing the farmers [...] They would go to the deeper bush and hide on a tree and wait for any farmer that came to their farm, they would snatch all the farmers' belongings and kill them.*"[75] These stories highlight that reintegration progress is stunted when armed groups remain in proximity and continue to exert influence and use violence against local populations.

[72] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[73] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[74] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[75] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

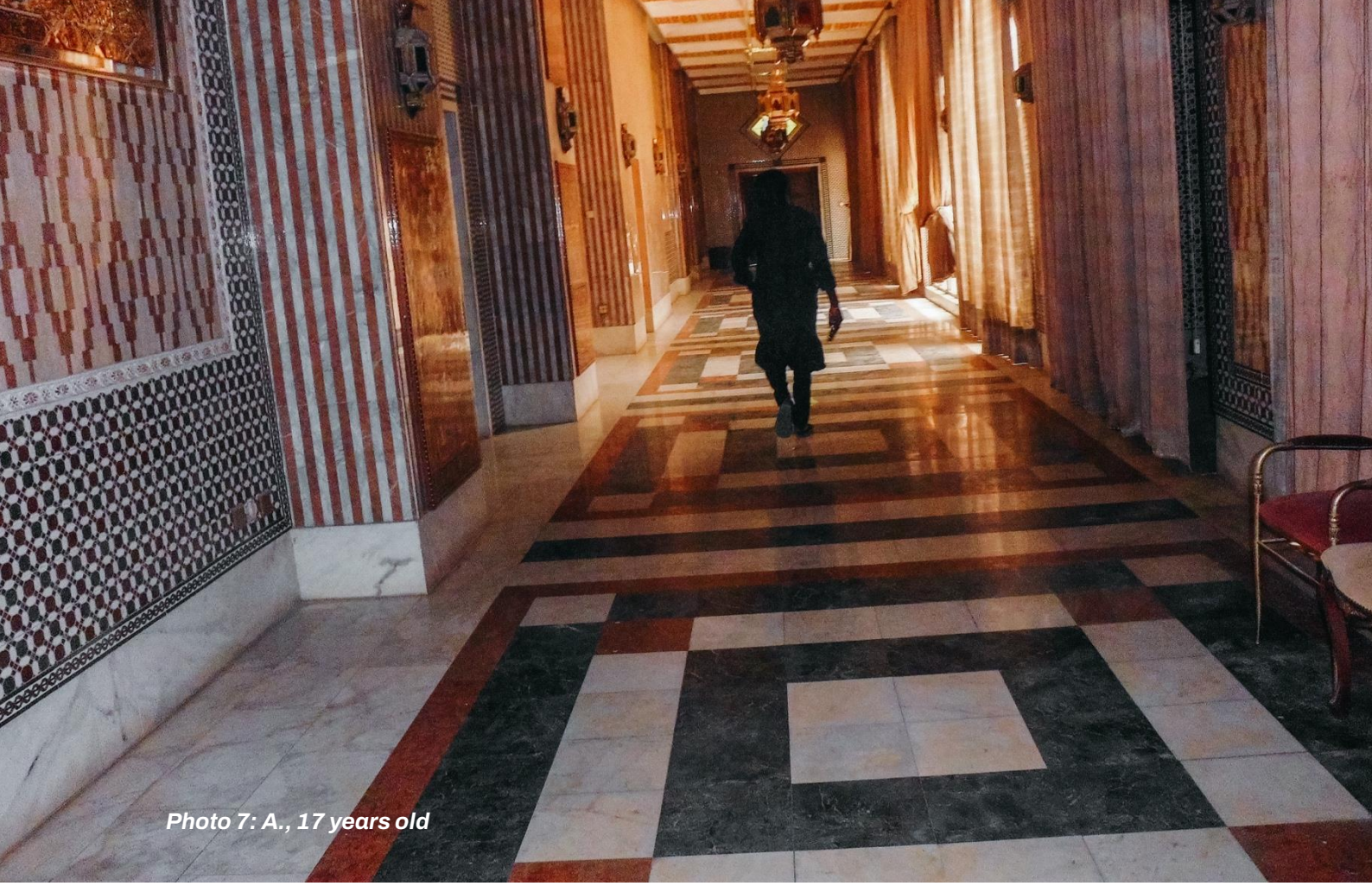


Photo 7: A., 17 years old

Community Security Groups

Even when children have no continued ties with Boko Haram factions, suspicion can hang over them and their families. Earlier research raised the issue of children exiting the Boko Haram factions and joining community security groups to signal they were no longer a threat to the community.[76] Community security actors like the CJTF are indeed playing a role – albeit often an informal one – in the reintegration of former Boko Haram associates. In their continued, informal security roles, community security groups can either facilitate returns by vouching for returnees or make it difficult for them to return. Accounts from some children reveal that such groups are sometimes strategically used by members of the community – or even by family members – for exacting personal vendettas [77]. As one girl recounted: "*One day my sister had a fight with our uncle's son and then our uncle took his son's side. He went and reported us to the CJTF, saying there's a Boko Haram in this house.*"[78] This narrative provides an example of how

[76] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Mohammed Bukar, and Anamika Madhuraj, "Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin," *Findings Report 31*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

[77] Since the start of the Boko Haram insurgency, militias have been repurposed and communities have mobilized self-defence groups to protect themselves against the insurgency. These groups are pervasive, and, in many communities, they are they source of protection. Indeed, during MEAC's 2023 endline survey across the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, 79 per cent of respondents identified the CJTF as one of the main security providers in their community, surpassing the military and police in this role. Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu (2022) "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report 18*, United Nations University, New York.

[78] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).

groups like the CJTF, while providing security services, can sometimes exacerbate community tensions that result in unjust targeting and arrests.

In other cases, these groups exert significant control over the daily life of community members, including child former associates. In focus group discussions with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram, several of the boys described having to pay bribes to the CJTF in order to be allowed to go in and out of the town. One boy explained: "*You'll have to give them money every time you go to the bush and come back or else, they won't allow you to enter the town.*"[79] The price of these payments ranged from 50-100 Naira per crossing or a bundle of firewood. As firewood has become scarcer, and they are now having to venture further out to find wood, the boys also described being "*hit with a stick*"[80] by the CJTF and military for returning past curfew. From these accounts, it was unclear if such extortive behaviours specifically target returnees or impact the general population, but it is within reason to assume that those with lower stature – including child former associates who are struggling economically – would be poorly placed to protest or report demands for bribes.

Family Acceptance

Family acceptance and support are pivotal in facilitating reintegration and broader community acceptance of those who have bypassed reintegration programming. Many children recounted how their family members took them in after they left Boko Haram. "*When we came out of the bush and we had nowhere to go or live, one of my uncles invited us to live with him and he took the responsibility of feeding us until we got our own shelter,*"[81] shared one girl. Another girl added: "*After my house was burnt, my elder brother provided us with a shelter and some food.*"[82] Research has shown that family acceptance helps in turn to facilitate community acceptance, which is key to economic reintegration.[83]

[79] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 30 April 2024).
[80] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 30 April 2024).
[81] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[82] Ibid.
[83] For example, see Randolph Rhea's book which concludes that "the family is a key stepping stone in the process of social reintegration through the expansion of social networks." Randolph Wallace Rhea, *A Comparative Study of Ex-Combatant Reintegration in the African Great Lakes Region: Trajectories, Processes, and Paradoxes* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2014), p. 25.

Stigma and Reticence to Accept Returnees

Despite several years of survey data from the region which shows high levels of community acceptance of former associates of Boko Haram,[84] several children in the participatory programme recounted being stigmatized after exiting the group. This feeling appears to dissipate the longer that they have been in the community.[85] For instance, one girl shared: "*My brother wanted to marry a particular girl and there was so much drama because people in our community do not want to give their daughters to someone who came from the bush."* Ultimately*, "after all their drama, my brother was able to [eventually] marry the girl he liked,"* which the child shared was *"one of my highs in recent times."*[86] Another young girl noted that "*they [the other children] also call us with names like 'hijiraw,' meaning displaced people or even Boko Haram."*[87] Girls and young women in the focus groups detailed how their children are sometimes called names, fight with other children, or are excluded from playing with them. One participant shared: "*For some people, even if they do not show they are scared of you, when your children go out to play with other children, their parents would not allow them, saying that they are Boko Haram children.*"[88]

Formerly associated children also recounted feeling a lack of acceptance from the families they were staying with (sometimes not their direct family, but extended family or neighbours). For the children who were part of the participatory programme, these were not formal alternative care arrangements facilitated by child protection actors, but often rather informal arrangements made by extended families and social networks who took in returning children. From their perspectives, the reticence they reported experiencing from the families they were staying with did not necessarily come from a place of suspicion or stigma, but rather derived from frustrations that these children placed an additional economic burden on families that were already struggling amidst a humanitarian crisis. One young girl explained her situation: "*They [the family she stayed with] only help their children, and they don't help us because we are not their children.*"[89] While the families or networks to which children return often seemed willing to

[84] Sophie Huvé, Siobhan O'Neil, Remadji Hoinathy, Kato Van Broeckhoven with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, "Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice," *MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
[85] Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, and Mohammed Bukar, "The Relationship Between Victimization and Receptivity to Returning Boko Haram Associates," *MEAC Findings Report 13* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).
[86] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[87] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[88] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[89] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 30 April 2024).

help, they often lacked the resources to do so. Another boy staying with a family friend explained that he "*stopped going to Islamiya because we cannot be able to pay the school fees. But he [the family friend] does the best he can to accommodate me.*"[90] Even amongst the participants who returned to their own families, the difficulties most encountered in trying to support the children were evident. For example, a participant explained: "*Only our parents help us [...] but sometimes it is difficult. My father is a labourer, and the work is not every day. Sometimes even if he goes out, he couldn't get anything to do and get money to bring us food. If he gets it, we eat food and if he doesn't, we will stay like this.*"[91] As children are returning to vulnerable families – their own and others – who are themselves struggling in the midst of an ongoing humanitarian crisis, the need for interventions to target the entire family unit or immediate network is evident.

Family Care Responsibilities

Just as returnee children struggle for support from the families and friends who received them, they in turn also struggle to support their kin. During the participatory intervention and the focus groups, children often expressed that they felt a sense of responsibility to care for their own family members, adding even more pressure to their immediate need to find viable livelihood opportunities. One boy said: "*I want to get a job and make my parents' lives better.*"[92] Another girl shared: "*I have to endure so many difficulties and be resilient to have something I can give my younger siblings and parents. My younger siblings were crying [because of] hunger over the phone this morning, and my mind is not at ease since I talked to them.*"[93]

This demonstrates that in cases where children reunite with their families after escaping from Boko Haram, there is significant pressure on them to earn and support not only themselves but also their families. As one girl expressed: "*What I need most today is money so that I will provide my family with food*."[94] Another girl added: "*I would have to get involved in labour work to support my family*."[95] These examples highlight instances where proceeds from children's income-generating activities need to support other family members, and demonstrate the burden they bear in sustaining their households.

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[90] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[91] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).
[92] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

This need for returnee children to support others is most immediate when it comes to their own children. Many of the children and young people who left Boko Haram came out with children of their own. In MEAC's survey, 32 per cent of survey respondents who were minors when they left Boko Haram had a child with someone from the group.[96] For those who became associated as children but left when they were over 18 (but often still quite young), the proportion of those exiting with children increases to 63 per cent.

Having children of their own shapes young people's daily realities and needs. When asked about which type of support they needed most, young participants in focus groups often brought up the plight of their own children. They emphasized their desire for their children to attend school like others, but that this was too expensive. One participant explained: "*Our lives are entirely different [from community members] because they enroll their children to school, but where will we get money and enroll our children in school?*"[97] While regardless of association, large swaths of the population in the North East struggle with raising school fees, the sentiment expressed here highlights the potential multi-generational challenge posed for those exiting Boko Haram if they are not able to provide their children with opportunities.

Importance of Social Networks

Emotional Support from Family and Friends

Beyond fulfilling a child's basic needs and facilitating community acceptance, emotional support from family has a significant impact on a child's ability to navigate the challenges of life after group exit. Children repeatedly cited supportive relatives as a significant source of strength. In the participatory intervention, one girl, when asked to reflect on a photograph that could represent a "high" moment in her life, expressed this sentiment: "*I would take a photograph of my family walking together and that would reflect a sense of freedom and togetherness.*"[98] When asked what helps them face challenges and get through the "low" periods of their lives, children frequently mentioned family members and friends: "*Most times I find an elder in my family and talk to them and seek help if I needed to. These elders could be my parents or my uncles*."[99] Another girl added: "*I have an elder brother [...] He helps me out in*

[96] These numbers specifically reflect being married to or having children with someone from a Boko Haram faction. In addition, it is also possible that those who ended up with the Boko Haram factions were already married before; and that those who left might have gotten married after their time with the factions.
[97] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).
[98] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[99] Ibid.

difficult situations."[100] Another girl said: "*When I face something difficult, I always tell my father because I find relief in talking to him.*"[101] And a boy noted: "*My parents and my friends, they always make me forget things every time I'm in a difficult situation.*"[102]

However, not all children have supportive families, let alone any family members to turn to. Almost all the girls in the group said they had no one to turn to for help or to overcome challenges. "*I have no such people and such things. I am for myself and that's all I have,*" said one girl.[103] Another added: "*The only thing that makes me feel like I can overcome challenges in my life is prayers. I have no one or nothing.*"[104] Indeed, separation from family, whether due to death, displacement, or detention, exacerbates the challenges faced by these children and robs them of the moral support to face them. Another said: "*I don't have anything or anyone. I have a brother who used to help me overcome challenges, but he is now detained in Giwa Barracks.*"[105]

The loss of family members significantly impacts the children's sense of security and well-being. For many, the yearning for the times when their families were whole and together is a poignant reminder of this. In response to an exercise mapping the highs and lows of their journey, one girl reflected: "*My high was about five years ago when all of my family members were complete. [Since then] we have lost some of them, including my father.*"[106] Another said: "*My high was back then when we were peacefully living in my village with everyone from my family alive before Boko Haram captured my village. Some of them are no more, and we no longer have a house.*"[107] The sense of loss and nostalgia for a time when family life was intact is a recurring theme. As one child said: "*I miss my family and whenever I miss them, I feel sad.*" And another added: "*I want to be reunited with my parents.*"[108]

[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

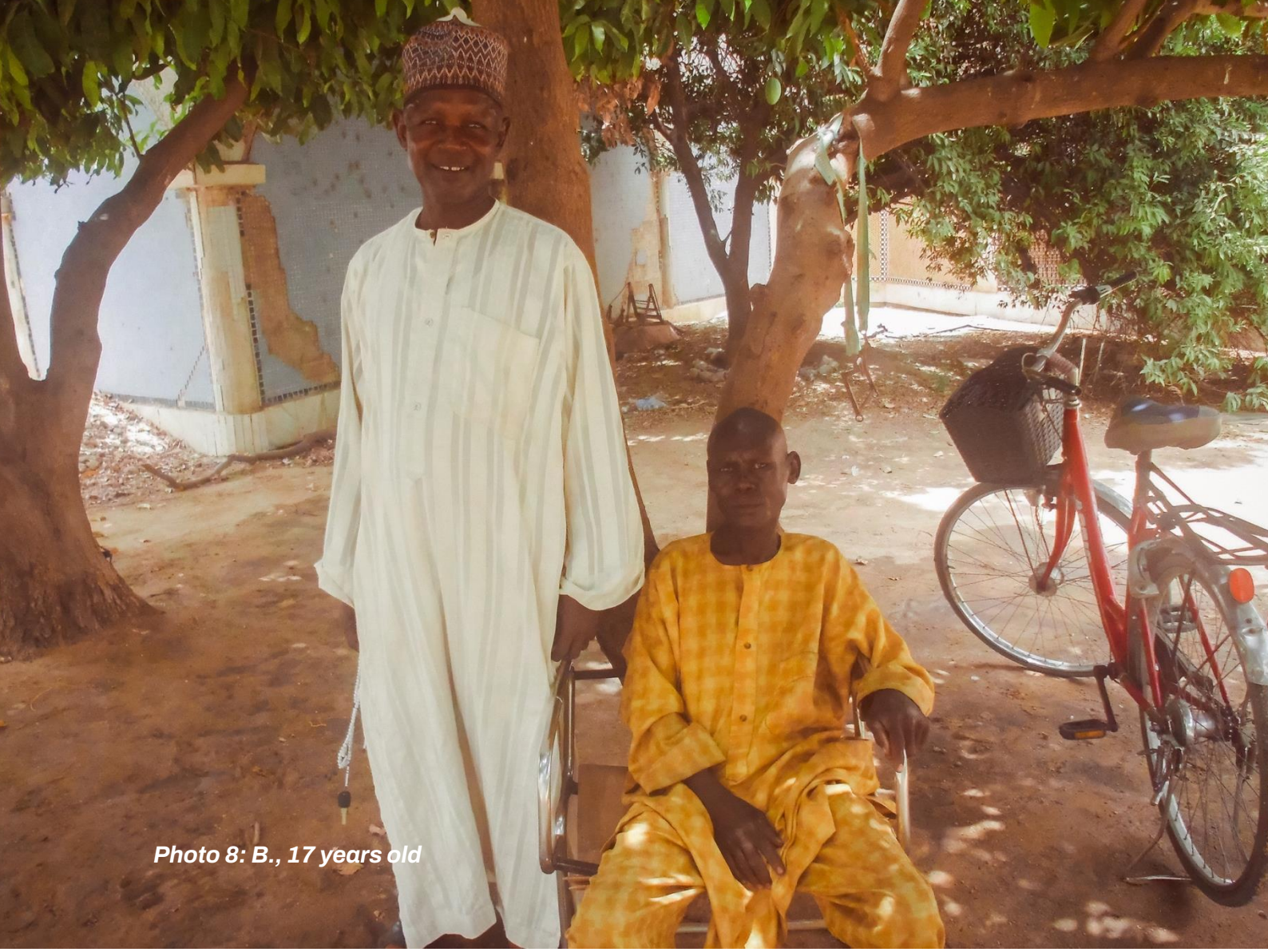

Photo 8: B., 17 years old

Support Amongst Former Associates

Without family to turn to, friendships and social networks created during the time with an armed group can also be instrumental in providing support to returnee children as they reintegrate into civilian life.[109] Many children in the participatory intervention referenced examples of when other former associates had helped them with food or finding shelter. In focus group discussions, when asked who supports them with meeting their needs, boys and girls often cited support from other former associates. Some had lost their families during the conflict, and some now lived with each other, their neighbours, or elders. Some children knew each other from their time with the group. Post-exit, these relationships between former associates become more important as they often live together in places such as IDP camps, as it is not yet safe to return to their home communities, and some have few other people to turn to for help.

[109] Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

While historically, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) interventions had tried to break the bonds and structures of armed groups – particularly hierarchal ones with commanders – to prevent the resurgence of organized violence, there is growing recognition of the potential value of maintaining some of the relationships from the bush. When they are repurposed, and particularly when there is no one else to turn to and/or no one else who quite understands what life was like with the armed group, relationships amongst former associates can be important sources of moral and other support. That said, while social ties with *former* associates can support reintegration, there is concern that continued ties with *active* members can undermine reintegration progress. Given the nature of association in the North East, many of the children coming out of the Boko Haram factions still know people who remained in the bush. Continued ties to the factions can work against reintegration outcomes, when those still in the group pressure former associates to continue providing support or encourage them to return to the bush.[110] There is particular concern that, as returnees face hunger and struggle to fulfill their most basic needs, they are increasingly vulnerable to re-recruitment by their contacts in the group or armed group propaganda campaigns about how life is better in the bush. Several participants of focus groups and interviews in April and May 2024 said that they were still in touch with people who were with one of the factions who told them over the phone that they should return to the armed group to escape their hardships. For example, a young man in a focus group in May 2024 explained he tried to convince a friend who was still with ISWAP to come out, but the conversation turned: "*You should be the one to come back. What happened to you is a lesson for us*."[111]

In several focus groups, participants explained that they knew people who had gone back to one of the Boko Haram factions because of hunger or other hardships faced after they had come out. Although almost all focus group participants were adamant that they did not want to go back if they had a choice, many were pragmatic and admitted that they might be forced to go back in order to secure food for themselves and their families. One group of girls explained that they were hoping that their current situation would improve, specifically so that they would not have to go back to the bush together with their husbands. "*I might [go back]. We might go together if the situation becomes worse, because now, even if it is [only every] three days, [my husband] will find something to bring me to eat.*"[112] Across the focus groups, food was the main

[110] Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (2023). "Conflict Exits Assessment Framework," UNIDIR, Geneva
[111] MEAC, Focus Group with men formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 1 May 2024).
[112] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

factor mentioned in contemplating a return to the group. As one boy plainly stated: "*If we are able to get what we can eat, why should we want to go back?*"[113]

Moving Beyond Surviving to Thriving? Prospects for the Future

Given the almost all-consuming focus on securing sufficient food, clean water, shelter and clothing, it was remarkable that children who exited the Boko Haram factions without support were able to look beyond their immediate situation to imagine another reality for themselves. The children in the participatory intervention talked of their professional aspirations. Indeed, some viewed economic opportunities or education as a means to ensure they and their families were fed and had a safe place to sleep, but some responses hinted at far greater aspirations, and at hope that they could still do something truly meaningful or creative with their lives. That said, participants were clear that challenges to realizing those aspirations abound.

Education and Skills Training

Accessing formal education remains a recurring aspiration for children exiting Boko Haram, but gaining access to continues to be a challenge. First, children who exit the group have typically lost formative years of schooling or, in many cases, have never had access to formal education. Indeed, only 33 per cent of respondents who became associated with Boko Haram as children have ever had formal education. Second, when they are finally able to separate from the group, and for those who want to pursue their education, few children are actually able to attend school. The desire for education was clear. One boy expressed: "*I still want to go to school to get some education.*"[114] Of the school-aged children who have been released from administrative custody through Hajj camp, the Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre, and the Shokari transit centre, more than 5,000 are out of school.[115] These statistics were reinforced by the stories shared by the children in the participatory programme. One girl said: "*I would like to have full access to education so that I will study hard and become successful in life.*"[116] Another boy shared: "*I want to go to school. That will make my parents happy and our home a happy place.*"[117] Yet, only two of the 16 children in the participatory intervention were currently in

[113] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).
[114] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[115] UNICEF estimates at least 10,000 children formerly associated – or who lived under Boko Haram – have transited through these centres to date.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.

formal school. One of the main hurdles to accessing education is school fees. Additionally, being behind in the curriculum makes it difficult to stay in school. Boys in the focus group discussions who were able to access some education at the Hajj camp explained that it was difficult for them to catch up after years of lost schooling and that they could not keep up with the pace, leading them to drop out. One boy explained: "*They do teach, but, you know, when someone does not know anything, he is supposed to start from the beginning, right? [...] But they start from the middle.*"[118] These experiences highlight the importance of remedial education, school fee support, and adapting school schedules to allow for students to also engage in income-generating activities. In addition, it is essential to stress the importance of formal education, which MEAC's research has shown may play a protective role in discouraging Boko Haram association in the region.[119]

Children see education as the key to a better future for themselves and their families. One participant explained: "*We want to be included when job opportunities come, because our friends who went to school have access to every job opportunity. They receive salaries on a monthly basis. When they close for work, they come back home and rest. If we can be able to read and write, we will also have similar opportunities like them.*"[120] In addition to formal education, children also see skills and livelihood training as critical to their future success. Many children want training, and upstart capital, to start their own business. One boy said: "*At the moment, what I need is to start a business of my own*"[121] – a sentiment that was repeated by many others.

While the focus was often on cash to start a business, some children were focused on other types of capital. One notable gender difference was that many of the female participants mentioned needing a sewing machine, in line with their aspirations of starting their own tailoring business. One girl articulated: "*My greatest need today is to own a sewing machine. I want that because I would like to replace my father through his business before he dies.*"[122] Another

[118] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[119] For example, "Children in Cameroon who reported having some formal education in the pre-recruitment period were 23–24 percentage points less likely to become involved with the group. In Niger, formal education appears to have a similarly strong protective effect (24 percentage points for boys)." Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali (2022) "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin," *MEAC Findings Report 22,* United Nations University, New York., p. 24.
[120] MEAC, Focus Group with girls formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[121] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[122] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).

stated: "*Now I need a sewing machine so that I can practice sewing clothes.*"[123] Another dreamed even bigger and said: "*My greatest need today is to own a sewing machine. I want to become a fashion designer and I have started learning how to sew clothes from my friends.*"[124] These sentiments highlight that sewing is an economic opportunity deemed attainable and of great interest to some of the girls coming out of Boko Haram.

Photo 9: Y., 14 years old

As other MEAC focus groups have highlighted, however, those ex-associates who had received start-up kits (with equipment like sewing machines) after completing skills training

[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.

were often forced to sell them within a few months, either as they could not afford materials (e.g., cloth or thread) to continue using them or urgently needed cash to feed their families. The increased cost of basic goods due to inflation has meant that it has become harder for families to feed themselves, and many described having to make the difficult decision of selling their start-up kit equipment to meet their immediate needs. A participant explained how inflation not only affects her parents, but is something they, as children, are also acutely aware of: "T*here is no money and the way food prices increased [...] everything has become costly.*"[125] While skills training and capital can support economic reintegration after association, longer-term support for basic needs or materials could help ensure that those who have received them can continue and even build their businesses.

Farming

From both an immediate and a long-term perspective, the loss of farmland for subsistence and professional farming was a significant challenge to economic reintegration. This problem was often raised by boys, including when thinking about their time with the Boko Haram factions: "*I miss going to farm. Whatever I plant and harvest belongs to me [...] and we can farm as much as we want*."[126] Lack of access to farmland, which was either seized, lost during time spent in the bush or abandoned due to displacement, insecurity, or climatic shifts has a profound impact on food security and livelihoods. One boy noted: "*We have a rice farm that's going bad due to insufficient water supply.*"[127] The boys reminisced about farming and wished to resume once the fighting stopped. One respondent said: "*[The] "high" in my life [was when] we got a lot of farm harvest, and we got a lot of money from it.*"[128] A poignant memory came from a boy who said: "*I saw a photo of a green field that I believe was a rice farm, there was a hand in the photo holding a dry grass or twig. This picture reminded me of what I had lost.*"[129]

Resilience and Looking Ahead

Despite all they have been through and their acute needs, children who exit Boko Haram demonstrate that they are resilient. Those who have exited without family to receive them and/or without formal support have continued to overcome many challenges. When asked what resilience means to them, the children in the participatory intervention showed the depth

[125] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).
[126] MEAC, Focus Group with boys formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).
[127] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.

of their experiences and the strength they possess. One girl shared: "*Resilience to me is being able to live even though you had wished to be dead many times.*"[130] One of the boys reflected: "*When something horrible happens repeatedly to a person and he exercises patience and tries to forget about it. That is what resilience means to me.*"[131] Another child said: "*Resilience to me means patience and being hopeful for the future. For every difficulty, there is ease, and being able to have patience to wait for this ease is resilience.*"[132] Another boy illustrated resilience through a heartrending example given the level of food insecurity in the region: "*When you go to your farm and find the crops are dying and realize you are losing all your hard work, and you are able to come back from that, that's resilience.*"[133]

One indication of their resilience, which was on full display during the photography sessions of the participatory intervention, is the ability of children to celebrate small pleasures and identify sources of happiness. One girl shared: "*I will tell you something that makes me very happy. I saw a flower somewhere here in the city and had I had a camera at that time I would have snapped a photo of it.*"[134] Another child recounted: "*In the past weeks [during] the month of Ramadan. There was an organization that [...] gave us bathing soaps. That made me very happy.*"[135] One of the girls expressed: "*My favourite things are the big tree in our compound and my room.*"[136] These small moments of joy and treasured possessions and their ability to find happiness in simple things speak volumes about their enduring spirit.

When combined, the reflections of focus groups and participatory discussions with, and survey data about, children who have left the Boko Haram factions and started their reintegration journeys without formal support present a picture of endurance in the face of adversity. In their own words, these children are clear that, despite the significant intersecting challenges they have faced, they continue to hold onto optimism, hope, and patience. One child said: "*I want to overcome the challenges and difficulties that I have faced and move forward without being weighed down by them.*"[137] As one girl put it: "*I have been patient with a lot of things in my life and even after going through these difficulties, I am able to live and laugh and stay hopeful. I can say I am strong.*"[138] This is a powerful reminder of the hope and resilience that lies within

[130] MEAC, Participatory training with children and youth formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 17-21 April 2024).
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.

each of them, but also a call to support them so that they may continue to overcome these challenges and eventually thrive.

Photo 10: A., 19 years old

Policy Recommendations

Based on the multi-method research findings detailed above, the following recommendations are put forward to improve support to formerly associated children in Nigeria:

- **Make communication and outreach campaigns age- and gender-sensitive**. Children, and particularly girls, have varying access to information and mediums to receive it. Practitioners and policymakers should consider children's potentially low levels of literacy and lack of access to phones, as well as girls' limited access to public spaces in which information is shared when designing outreach campaigns. Strategic communications should prioritize being digestible, easily shareable, and might have to be repeated over time to make sure it reaches as many children as possible.

- **Improve screening to ensure fewer children fall through programming gaps and bolster longer-term follow-up.** The findings presented in this report highlight how many children exiting armed groups go under the radar and are unable to access any form of reintegration or child-specific support in Nigeria. For those who do receive some form of support, it is often concentrated around their time in a transit centre. Once they leave, it is challenging to follow up with them, and they reside in hard-to-access locations where their needs, and those of the families who receive them, continue to be unmet. There are significant hurdles to providing continued care for this population beyond identification. Lack of funding, dispersed locations of resettlement, change of contact information or access to phones can make it difficult to follow up. More creative thinking into expanding follow-up support and making it sustainable is needed.

- **Expand basic needs provision**. As this report and other needs assessments have shown, food, water, shelter, and clothing remain the key priorities for support for children (and adults) exiting Boko Haram as well as the general population suffering from an enduring humanitarian crisis in Nigeria's North East. For children and youth coming out of Boko Haram, this type of support is relevant immediately upon their exit, but – as MEAC's research has shown – tragically even years into their reintegration journey. The focus on radicalization and extremism contributing to recruitment in the region in the region often misses the urgency of a crucial fact: basic needs – particularly food – are a key factor driving continued reliance on armed groups. The children in this report said it themselves: What they need most is to be clothed, fed, and sheltered.

- **Address gender-specific needs**. The accounts of the girls and boys in this report revealed important gender dimensions in the constellation of reintegration needs. Girls (and women) oftentimes find themselves in extremely vulnerable positions after exit and entirely dependent on their husbands, particularly when they have no broader social network to rely on. In addition, MEAC research uncovered that girls (and women) who left or escaped Boko Haram regularly bypass reintegration programmes and end up cut off from financial support and vulnerable to exploitation. Support must not systematically disadvantage women and girls (e.g., only allowing men to collect aid distributions). This is important not only for them but as many of them have several children in their care, such inequalities have knock-on effects for much larger populations. Interventions need to address these specific dynamics to provide targeted support for girls, as well as the particular needs and expectations of boys. Despite assumptions that girls and women cannot meaningfully be part of the workforce in the North East, there are a variety of livelihoods that are culturally acceptable and of interest to young women and girls, support for which should be further bolstered.

- **Scale up mental health and psychosocial support**. The harrowing stories the young people shared during the participatory research activities drive home how critical it is to provide safe spaces for emotional processing and psychological support. Again, considering the gendered experiences in conflict (e.g., girls' experiences with forced marriage, exploitation, early motherhood, and sexual violence) any support must be gender-sensitive. Such support must be contextualized and conflict-sensitive to do no harm and be relevant to the population in need. Recognizing the paucity of MHPSS resources in the region, the potential psychosocial value of other non-MHPSS-oriented interventions should be further explored to help provide a minimum of outlets for those coming out of the group. For many young people who were with Boko Haram, they have never had an outlet in which to discuss their emotions and experiences. Ways to provide and scale up safe spaces for children and youth to process their experiences without relying solely on the scant clinicians in the region or using extensive resources require further exploration.

- **Incorporate participatory approaches into policy and programming**. Participatory work with conflict-affected populations, including children and youth who are often left out of policy and programming decision-making, has immense benefits. To date, however, such approaches have not found their way into the bloodstream of research, policy, and practice, where tight budgets and timelines – and perhaps a general mindset focused only on quantitative metrics and measurable outcomes – have limited the

uptake of participatory work. For young people's voices to effectively feed into the programming that seeks to support them, a long-term, sustained participatory engagement needs to be incorporated.

- **Build social capital**. Across this report and MEAC's broader research findings, the topic of social networks recurs as a key factor for reintegration success. The children and youth who were part of the qualitative work highlighted the importance of family ties and friends post-exit, and for those without such ties it is significantly harder to gain a foothold in civilian life and the continuously harsh economic and security environment. Interventions geared at sustainable reintegration should account for the risks that come for those without networks and seek to foster social connections amongst the young people exiting Boko Haram as they often end up becoming vital sources of support when other help does not materialize. Such programming for formerly associated and other vulnerable children should not target individual children alone, but rather their family or social unit as a whole. Additionally, efforts could be made to help repurpose relationships from the bush to facilitate peer-to-peer support when formal and location-based programming is difficult to scale up sufficiently.

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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