



The Current Needs of Former Boko Haram Associates and Their Communities of Return

Key Takeaways from Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria

Across the Lake Chad Basin, people who exit Boko Haram's two main groups – Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqiyā or the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) – are facing numerous challenges, as do the communities in which they have settled (1). Based on MEAC's research with affected populations in the Far North of Cameroon, the Lake Region in Chad, and North East Nigeria, this brief explores their main concerns and needs (2).

**1**

Food, water, shelter, clothing and healthcare remain the most urgent needs for people coming out of Boko Haram – even years after their exit

Many interviewees who left Boko Haram spent time in government reintegration or transit centres where basic needs support was provided (but often not enough). Overcrowding in these centres further meant children often did not have safe places to play, and women lacked spaces that ensure their privacy and dignity. Still, the interviewed women tended to view service provision as adequate, while some men had higher expectations and were frustrated with the support they received, wanting to restart their livelihoods. Women and men alike noted a lack of follow-up support upon returning to their home or another community.

Security is a key concern for both former associates and the communities that they return to

Due to continued attacks by Boko Haram near the Cameroon-Nigeria border and on the islands of Lake Chad, many ex-associates were reintegrating into situations of displacement. Protracted insecurity had blocked their return home and access to fertile lands – a key impediment to ensuring sufficient food and livelihoods. Men who exited Boko Haram were further prevented from working in some of these areas as they face a higher risk of revenge killings by the group. In order to protect them, it was often women and children who farmed and collected firewood – despite the risks of abduction, rape, and other violence. Post-exit, some women who had been with Boko Haram reported receiving threats from men they had been forced to marry in the bush and from whom they had escaped. Likewise, communities in which returnees had settled also faced risks of being targeted by the group. Despite the ongoing insecurity, interviewed community members were generally welcoming of those exiting Boko Haram but needed assurances that former associates would not become violent.

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Against the backdrop of climate change, displacement and insecurity, former associates face difficulties rebuilding and sustaining their livelihoods

The economic challenges faced by many in the region were exacerbated for those who had lost their cattle, land, tools, or capital when becoming associated with Boko Haram or, conversely, had to leave these behind upon exiting. Given their lack of resources, many ex-associates engaged in day labour and other precarious work. Those able to cover their immediate needs were unable to save for longer-term economic prospects or to safeguard against shocks.

Women who were with Boko Haram largely lack livelihood opportunities given their limited work experience and skills— challenges exacerbated by legacies of forced seclusion in the group and, occasionally, restrictions placed by their husbands post-exit. Entrenched patriarchal norms further reduced women's resources and options and left them with weaker social networks and fewer opportunities to migrate for work compared to men. Older former associates were often unable to undertake certain – particularly labour intensive – activities and were forced to rely on family. Additionally, community members reported how caring for returnees had exacerbated their own economic struggles and forced some (further) into poverty.

In terms of livelihood support, respondents noted that outside assistance was limited, and the aid provided largely focused on basic needs. The occasional livelihood interventions that existed were not designed to help people withstand climatic and other shocks. Aid was seen as decreasing, particularly in Chad, while in Cameroon some said ex-associates received more support than impacted communities, leading to frustration. Meanwhile in Nigeria, respondents felt aid was insufficient and mostly concentrated in transit centres, meaning those who were not part of formal reintegration processes were unable to access it. Some described how, even when economic support was provided, it did not help them address their most urgent needs. For example, former associates who received start-up kits (such as sewing kits) after completing skills training were forced to sell them within months, as they urgently needed cash to feed their families or could not afford materials (like cloth or yarn) to continue using them.

Persisting service gaps include healthcare, education and help with procuring identity documents

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Broadly, service provision was sparse in several of the researched areas, complicated by their remoteness as well as ongoing insecurity. While government officials and traditional leaders provided some generalised advice to former associates and the communities they were reintegrating into, this was often not accompanied by specific interventions. Notably, mental health and psychosocial support was missing, crucial to work through the violent experiences of both returnees and communities. Respondents also spoke of the need for childhood vaccinations, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, public health education, and access to (higher quality) education. Ex-associates faced further reintegration obstacles from missing identity documents, which impedes their access to education, registration for aid distribution, freedom of movement, and migration in search of work. Documentation procedures were lengthy, expensive, and complicated by the fact that many villages of origin were destroyed in the conflict.



5 Programmatic responses are not fully aligned with the gendered experiences and varied relationship dynamics of those exiting Boko Haram

Some couples joined together. Some girls and women chose to join and marry men in the group. In many other cases, women and girls, including those already married, were abducted by groups, and forced to marry. In Chad, at first contact, the military would ask exiting women if they wished to stay in their relationship and facilitated separation if desired. However, many women felt unable to end forced marriages, as they could not survive economically on their own. Moreover, while some previous – i.e., pre-association – husbands accepted back their wives who had been abducted, others would reject them and the children with whom they returned. If this was the case, women's forced 'husbands' (3) could gain custody of children born out of these relationships in the bush. Not wanting to be separated from their children motivated many returning women and girls to 'choose' to stay in relationships. Moreover, as separations had to be facilitated by the military or the local cantonal leader, women were forced to make quick decisions before moving to the community. Meanwhile in Cameroon and Nigeria, similar separation support appeared to be lacking.

Interventions are needed to address gender norms and practices from the bush

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Both groups imposed strict gender roles and subject women to forced seclusion, forced marriage, and other violence. While interviewed women were happy about being free from Boko Haram, some found it difficult to adjust to being in public spaces, working, and engaging in social interactions. Some husbands, in turn, post-exit still wished to follow norms around women's dressing and restricted movement and continued to perpetrate violence against their wives, leading to community member concern that they continue to hold the beliefs of the group. Returnees themselves as well as those around them recognized that interventions were needed to address the norms and experiences faced during their time in the bush.



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More clarity about the DDR process is needed

Across the three countries, former associates expressed frustrations about the lack of clarity and unmet expectations in the process of leaving Boko Haram. In Chad, the first cohorts of people exiting Boko Haram had mostly joined for financial reasons or been abducted. Many of them had not committed crimes against civilians, returned from the bush rather quickly, and were thus met with relatively high community acceptance. In Chad, those who exited more recently, however, had often spent more time with Boko Haram, appeared to have internalized its ideology (all genders), and committed violence (men). Post-exit, some of these men were unhappy with their current loss of status compared to their previous position in the group, expressed bitterness at the government (in)action, and even said they might return if conditions did not improve.

In Cameroon, people who exited Boko Haram before November 2018 were held in pre-trial detention under terrorism legislation with their status unclear (4). Several respondents said that they had been told there would be more support, particularly for livelihoods, than had been forthcoming. Men, in particular, were unhappy with what they saw as the government's unfulfilled promises. Moreover, despite outreach and sensitization campaigns, some community members lacked information about the arrival of people exiting Boko Haram, particularly women and minorities (e.g., Christians, and refugees). In the absence of official information, rumours circulated and sometimes fed into fear and distrust of former associates.

Community cohesion, while fostered by government and NGO actions, needs to be strengthened

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Some families, friends, neighbours, and others in the community provided support to ex-associates, despite their own struggles in the midst of an ongoing humanitarian crisis. Social ties tended to be stronger in communities where many people had become associated, as receiving community members were more likely to know returnees and be more understanding of their experiences. In many cases, people exiting Boko Haram married community members, with such marriages seen as connectors and proxies for reintegration progress.

Community receptivity also depended on perceived involvement in violence. In Cameroon, people who had experienced significant harm found it difficult to welcome back those they held responsible. In Chad, more recent waves of people exiting armed groups (who were more implicated in violence) had less interaction with community members upon their resettlement. In Nigeria, in some cases, former Boko Haram associates did not disclose their past affiliation, fearing stigma or rejection. In several cases, community members felt pressured to openly accept former associates, fearing reprisals from them otherwise, or disapproval from local or religious authorities.



9 Language barriers were another impediment to community reintegration

Some people exiting Boko Haram, especially women who reintegrated into a situation of displacement, did not speak the language of their new localities. Their inability to access language instruction and communicate with their neighbours impeded economic prospects, social relations, and interactions with government and community leaders.

1. In this paper, 'Boko Haram' is used as an umbrella term for both factions (since they originated from the same group and are often referred to as such by local populations), recognizing that this is sometimes considered a derogatory name and not used by the different groups themselves.

2. This brief is based on findings from 56 interviews (26 women and 30 men) in Bol, Kaya, Kindjiria, Magar, Melea, N'Djamena, and Yakoua in Chad in March 2024; 57 interviews (25 women and 32 men) in Maroua, Meri, Mémé, Mora, and Zamaï in Cameroon in March 2024; and 20 focus groups (with 45 women and girls and 44 men and boys) in Maiduguri in Nigeria in April-May 2024. Respondents included people who had exited armed groups, and other community members including leaders, government officials and people working for NGOs and UN agencies.

3. The term 'husbands' is used to denote the men these women and girls were forced to marry while associated with Boko Haram. Quotation marks around the word husband are used to recognize that these marriages occurred coercively and were not always considered legitimate by those involved and amongst communities and family members.

4. In 2018, a presidential decree establishing the National Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Committee marked a departure from anti-terrorism law which mandated the death penalty for those who carried out, abetted, or sponsored terrorism.