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Climate, Insecurity and Displacement: Triple Barriers to the Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Associates

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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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Key Findings

- In the Lake Chad Basin region, climate change, insecurity, and displacement are intertwined and work together to create severe challenges for communities who are already struggling in the midst of an ongoing conflict and humanitarian emergency.
- Former associates of Boko Haram groups are facing unique challenges brought about by this interplay. They do not always have the same capacities to weather climate and other shocks due to lesser resources and access to adaptation strategies. Natural resource-based conflicts also affected their access to land. Moreover, women had even further limited access to input, finance, land, tools, and these strategies due to patriarchal familial and societal dynamics.
- In comparison, unassociated peers could be – to various extents – more able to cope in response to these shocks. Less able to adapt and with communities unable to support them, former associates could engage in negative coping strategies such as restricting food consumption, sex work, or cutting trees to sell as firewood and charcoal.
- Many people in the region have been forcibly displaced due to ongoing insecurity, including former associates. After exiting Boko Haram groups, they were often unable to return home and found themselves reintegrating into situations of displacement. Heightened insecurity meant that some experienced secondary – or multiple – displacements, and displaced ex-associates faced greater difficulties than those living in their home communities, due to language differences and lesser support from friends and relatives.
- Former associates continued to receive threats from Boko Haram groups. Perceived as traitors, they were targeted, limiting livelihood options and freedom of movement, with men at higher risk of being killed and women of abductions and sexual violence. In response, women put themselves in danger by farming and collecting firewood in insecure areas to provide for families. Gender-based violence was also linked to insecurity in other ways, for example through abducted girls and women who had escaped being threatened by their ‘husbands’ that they would take them again.

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 by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); the Government of Norway; Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; UNICEF; 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).

About This Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks 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 United Nations and its partners.

About This Report

This report details how climate change, insecurity, and displacement intertwine to affect the lives of people exiting Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin region. While all three issues are frequently discussed by those working in the region, the details of how they affect the reintegration of former associates and the communities they return to remains insufficiently addressed by policy and practice. The goal of this publication – which draws on qualitative

research in Cameroon and Chad – is to inform reintegration programming in the region to ensure it is fit for purposes, and ultimately, more effective.

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Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin Region has been a global emblem of the intersection of climate change, insecurity, and displacement for almost a decade and was the focus of one of the Security Council’s first resolutions to officially address climate insecurity. Resolution 2349 (2017) recognised “the adverse effects of climate and ecological changes among other factors on the stability of the Region” and emphasised “the need for adequate risk assessments and risk management strategies by governments and the United Nations.”¹ In the intervening years, more attention has been paid to addressing these three factors in global policy and integrating the ways they connect in on the ground programming. Yet, as this report shows, significant implementation gaps remain, particularly regarding support for people exiting Boko Haram and the communities into which they are reintegrating.² The report starts by outlining the research methodology used and providing a brief overview of the context. It then presents research findings, looking at the impacts of climate change, insecurity, and displacement on reintegration in turn. It concludes by examining implications of these findings and providing recommendations for making support more climate- and gender-sensitive.

Methodology and Sample

This report is primarily based on qualitative research conducted between February and October 2024. These include:

¹ UN Security Council, “Resolution 2349 (2017), adopted by the Security Council at its 7911th meeting, on 31 March 2017”, United Nations, 31 March 2017, S/RES/2349.

²² The authors recognize that Boko Haram is sometimes considered a derogatory name for the group, falsely presumes there is one cohesive group and is not the name used by the different groups itself. However, recognizing that the name Boko Haram is often used by local populations as an umbrella name – although this varies by geography and interaction – this report will use Boko Haram to encompass both groups. While both Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) were initially one and the same group under the umbrella name ‘Boko Haram’ and led by Abubakar Shekau, over time, key divisions emerged between Shekau and key critics including Mamman Nur and Habib Yusuf which saw the group splinter into two groups with different leadership structure and aims. For more on the split, see Vincent Foucher, “[Boko Haram: Mapping an Evolving Armed Constellation](#),” MEAC, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024. In this report, when reference is made to a specific group, 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.

- 89 interviews (41 women and 48 men) conducted in Igawa Mémé, Maroua, Meri, Mémé, Mora, and Zamaï in Cameroon’s Far North region in March and October 2024; and
- 94 interviews (43 women and 51 men) conducted in Bol, Kaya, Kindjiria, Kousseri 1, Magar, Melea, and Yakoua in Chad’s Lake Region as well as the capital N’djamena in February and September 2024.

Respondents were those who had once been affiliated with either or both Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), most commonly known as Boko Haram, and community members never associated with armed actors, as well as government officials and people working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies. The research took place in areas that had experienced the return of former Boko Haram associates, in locations which were more rural, more urban, mono-ethnic or mono-religious, and comprised with people of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds. Participant recruitment aimed for diversity in age, ethnicity, and gender.³ It drew a mix of former associates with different experiences of entry, exit, and displacement. Other community participants comprised people of different religions and displacement experiences, including community leaders in each location, while NGO and UN participants worked on reintegration. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, English, French, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanembu, Kanuri, and Mafa. After data collection, interview transcripts were coded to identify and analyse common themes, including gender and social exclusion as areas of focus.⁴ The team adhered to MEAC’s ethical research protocols throughout the process.

Research limitations included security considerations that narrowed the range of communities to which the team could travel. As many targeted areas were isolated and experienced continuing insecurity, access was logistically challenging. In Chad, researchers could not interview some potential participants from islands in Lake Chad who spoke a different form of Buduma to that spoken by the research team. This was particularly unfortunate given the relatively lower access to knowledge about and the historic social exclusion that people from these islands face. In Cameroon, although interviews were conducted with people who had spent time at the Meri transit centre, at the time of the field research, the centre itself was largely closed to outsiders.

Contextual Overview

Official approaches to current and former associates have shifted towards encouraging exits and reintegration. While early in the conflict, governments in the Lake Chad Basin region largely

³ Although government, NGO and United Nations participants were mostly men, community respondents reflected gender parity.

⁴ The researchers used NVivo software for coding transcripts.

adopted a punitive stance,⁵ in recent years, they have issued calls for people to come home and set up disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR)-like programmes to support individuals exiting and reintegrating into civilian life even as the conflict continued. These steps, as well as dynamics within and between the factions, had led significant numbers of people previously associated with Boko Haram groups to exit.⁶

In Cameroon, a previously predominantly penal approach has been replaced with “an offer of peace” to encourage exits through favourable treatment.⁷ However, shortcomings and a lack of clarity in the reintegration process have appeared to slow efforts. On 30 November 2018, President Biya signed a presidential decree which created the National Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Committee to manage and implement the process both in the Far North region and with regards to the conflict in the country’s Anglophone region.⁸ In the Far North, the Meri transit centre was established to house and prepare people for reintegration, and NGOs and UN agencies started to support the process.⁹ The process was seen as having reduced tensions and violence, with many people exiting Boko Haram groups due to assurances they would not be harmed by security agencies or taken to prison.¹⁰ Yet, respondents identified key shortcomings including around inclusion of women and gender-perspectives,¹¹ incompatibility between the presidential decree and reintegration efforts,¹² lack of government capacity and finances,¹³ and continued focus on the Meri transit centre occluding the reality that direct reintegration was already taking place in communities.¹⁴

In Chad, delay in the adoption of a National Strategy has meant that exits and returns have occurred in the absence of a formalised process, often with little formal support. An Inter-

⁵ In Cameroon, the Anti-terrorism Law 2014/028 of 23 December 2014 mandated the death penalty for those who carried out, abetted, or sponsored terrorism. Law No. 2014/028 of 23 December 2014 on the Suppression of Acts of Terrorism in Cameroon, 2014. Concerns were raised about the law’s ambiguity, lack of clarity, and imposition of the death penalty as well as those around arbitrary arrests, prolonged pre-trial detention, and prison crowding. For example, see Lydie Belporo, ‘[Building Peace through DDR Programs: Lessons from Reintegrating Boko Haram Ex-Recruits in Cameroon](#),’ Resolve Policy Note, August 2021.

⁶ In Nigeria for example, some 160,000 are reported to have exited Boko Haram to date. See for example: Ndahi Marama, [Over 160,000 Boko Haram Terrorists have laid down arms – Gov Zulum](#), *Vanguard*, 28 November 2023

⁷ Jan Jiles Van der Hoeven, ‘[The State of Play: Process and Procedures for Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin Region](#)’ UNDP (N’Djamena, 2023).

⁸ Decree No. 2018/719 to establish the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee (30 November 2018).

⁹ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two men government representatives (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹¹ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

¹² MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹³ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); ¹³ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); ¹³ MEAC, Interviews with two men government representatives (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); ¹³ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

¹⁴ MEAC, Interview with man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024). MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024). MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

ministerial Steering Committee, headed by the Ministry of Justice, was put in place to develop the National Strategy for Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation. Providing the legal framework for handling defections, it was adopted in April 2024.¹⁵ However, its adoption and implementation was delayed, meaning few reintegration interventions were active during data collection. Concurrently, increasing insecurity on the islands of Lake Chad had led to displacement of these communities, including those who had returned to them, to the mainland. Given these pressing realities, there was some standardisation in procedure even in the absence of a fully operational National Strategy. However, in reality, many people had been waiting a significant length of time for reintegration support, with people more often than not returning directly to communities and bypassing formal support.

Climate change, displacement, and insecurity greatly affected the realities of former associates as well as the communities into which they were reintegrating. Each of these topics will now be examined in turn.

Findings

Climate-change-related Impacts on Reintegration

The Lake Chad Basin region has experienced significant changes in the climate in recent years. While this has been confirmed by climate and hydrological data,¹⁶ this report focuses on the lived experience of local populations. Respondents noted that rainfall was more variable and unpredictable, temperatures and wind speeds had increased, the start, end, and duration of seasons was more erratic, and extreme weather events were more common.¹⁷ Moreover, there was increased vegetation and blue algae in Lake Chad, changes in the size of its islands linked

¹⁵ Such as Law 003/PR/2020 which examined terrorism and revised previous legislation to take the needs of children associated with armed forces and armed groups into account and Law 003/PR/2021 of March 2021 which provided the Police Judiciaire with legal status.

¹⁶ Chitra Nagarajan, Janani Vivekananda, Binh Pham-Duc, Florence Sylvestre, Benjamin Pohl, and Hector Morales Munoz, "[Peace in an extreme climate: How climate-related security risks affect prospects for stability in Lake Chad](#)," *PLOS Climate* (October 2024); Binh Pham-Duc B, Florence Sylvestre, Fabrice Papa, Frédéric Frappart, Camille Bouchez, and Jean-Francois Crétaux, "[The Lake Chad hydrology under current climate change](#)," *Scientific Reports*, vol 10, No. 5498 (March 2020); Janania Vivekananda, Martin Wall, Florence Sylvestre and Chitra Nagarajan, "[Shoring Up Stability: Addressing Climate and Fragility Risks in the Lake Chad Region](#)," adelphi, (2019).

¹⁷ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with one man community member and one man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with three men and one woman community members (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

to shifts in lake levels, and unpredictable seasonal lake expansion and regression.¹⁸ These changes were far beyond those respondents had experienced in the past.¹⁹

Climate change affected everyone, impacting health, wellbeing, access to water, and land-based livelihoods. People faced particular difficulties based on age, class, gender, and experience of violence. Displaced people were more at risk of illnesses such as malaria, measles, and yellow fever linked to increased heat (and more mosquitos) and as they lived closer together in camps.²⁰ Climate change also negatively affected soil quality and water bodies, resulted in less land for grazing animals, fewer trees producing fruit, and wells drying up. This meant people could no longer rely on seasonal lake regression leaving fertile land to farm or, conversely, found arable land now flooded.²¹ According to a woman in Cameroon, “Before, rain started in May, and you could sow seeds, but now, it starts June to July and ends in August. There isn’t enough rainy season. In October it rains a bit, maybe two or three times when the crops are sprouting. Before, it rained the whole of October.”²² These factors affected numbers and diversity of animals, fish, and plants and as a result, farming, fishing, and pastoralist livelihoods and related trade.²³ Even when harvests succeeded, respondents said that crop yields were diminished and prices of necessities were higher.²⁴ As a woman in Cameroon who used grains to produce and sell beer said, “When you cultivate, you don’t get a lot of harvest because the land has become weak as it doesn’t get lots of water [from rain] and that is why the agriculture does not give you much.”²⁵ As a result, respondents were forced to

¹⁸ MEAC, Interview with man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, 13 February 2024), Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with three men and one woman community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with one man community leader (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (N’Djamena, Capital, Chad, 20 February 2024).

¹⁹ Chitra Nagarajan, Janani Vivekananda, Binh Pham-Duc, Florence Sylvestre, Benjamin Pohl, and Hector Morales Munoz, “[Peace in an extreme climate: How climate-related security risks affect prospects for stability in Lake Chad](#),” *PLOS Climate* (October 2024); Binh Pham-Duc B, Florence Sylvestre, Fabrice Papa, Frédéric Frappart, Camille Bouchez, and Jean-Francois Crétaux, “[The Lake Chad hydrology under current climate change](#),” *Scientific Reports*, vol 10, No. 5498 (March 2020); Janania Vivekananda, Martin Wall, Florence Sylvestre and Chitra Nagarajan, “[Shoring Up Stability: Addressing Climate and Fragility Risks in the Lake Chad Region](#),” adelphi, (2019).

²⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, 6 March 2024).

²¹ MEAC, Interview with two women community members, (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman community member, three men community members and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC Interview with a man community leader (Kaya, Lac Region, 15 February 2024).

²² MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

²³ Interviews with a man and a woman community members and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024);); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

²⁴ MEAC, Interview with two men who exited a Boko Haram group, a man community member and a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member and a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

²⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

sell animals and goods, often below market rates, to get money for immediate needs or buy goods and necessities on credit hoping to repay loans.²⁶

“When you want to compare the climate over time, the change is like a camel and a goat. There has been a real change. There is water, you can see it with your eyes that there is water, but the depth is not good and there is not much quantity of fish in the water. You cannot get fish like before. When you cultivate millet or maize, before you would get a good harvest and also give to another person but now, you can cultivate but not even get a small quantity.”

– Man community leader (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024)

People tried to adapt and cope in light of these changes. They diversified their livelihoods to non-land based livelihoods such as trading, and maximised opportunities for generating incomes that arose.²⁷ They used new agricultural techniques, for example ploughing the land in advance of rain so water would be more likely to absorb into, rather than run off the soil, using more artificial fertiliser, or shifting to natural fertiliser.²⁸ They migrated to new areas or other parts of the country where environmental conditions were better.²⁹ They asked NGOs and government officials to dig new, deeper, wells for them and conducted prayer and rituals aimed at invoking the rain.³⁰

However, this adaptive resilience was limited given the scale of climate change as well as complicating factors of insecurity, displacement, and withdrawal of aid. While people had previously been able to adapt in the face of climate change or conflict, the combination of the two at a larger and longer scale, blocked previously effective strategies.³¹ People faced this combined challenge largely alone, as support from government, NGO, and international actors was insufficient to help them acclimate to new conditions. Moreover, with continued insecurity, land that was both fertile and safe became scarce, with increased population density linked to

²⁶ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group, (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

²⁷ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

²⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

²⁹ MEAC, Interviews with a man government representative and a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

³⁰ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

³¹ MEAC, Interviews with a man who exited a Boko Haram group and a man community leader (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

conflict displacement leading to overcrowding in the remaining secure areas. At the same time, people unable to farm crops and graze animals in many productive areas due to insecurity.³²

People who exited Boko Haram groups often had less access to the resources necessary to adapt to climatic shifts than counterparts who never became associated. Those who remained in their communities could maintain access to resources to adapt and adjust to climate change whereas former associates who returned had to restart their lives and livelihoods, which was more difficult given climate change. Other non-associated refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) faced similar issues and had fewer livelihood adaptation strategies available to them.³³ For those exiting Boko Haram groups, they returned to communities to find their land degraded, flooded, or used by others and their animals, goods, and tools sold, or destroyed. Many had also been forced to leave behind any capital or tools they had accumulated in the bush when they left the group. They therefore lacked capital to start income-generating activities and found it difficult to recover land as it was used by others. Their history of violence perpetration (whether proven or suspected) and related stigmatisation formed another barrier to reclaiming this land.³⁴ As a man working with a NGO in Cameroon on reintegration said, “They [former associates] don’t get any compensation for their lands being taken and those [who seized the land] who are living there now are not ready to leave.”³⁵ Widows faced particular challenges regaining land, especially if they returned to husbands’ communities rather than their own natal ones after exit.³⁶ Former associates engaged in pastoralism also faced a range of challenges. Many of their animals had died, pastoral land had been converted for farming, and herding was generally more difficult and expensive.³⁷ For example, changes in plant life due to climatic shifts led to falling milk yields and often meant that the milk produced only sufficed to meet family needs and was not sufficient to sell.³⁸ This change particularly affected

³² MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two men community members (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

³³ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024).

³⁴ MEAC, Interviews with two men who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community leader (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with UN representative (Online, 12 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man government representative (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

³⁵ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024).

³⁶ MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024)

³⁷ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group, (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024).

³⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group, (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024).

women who no longer earned incomes through selling milk thereby reducing their financial autonomy as well as the household's income.

“Their situation [that of former Boko Haram associates] is more difficult than ours because all of them are poor and they don't have anything. If you went to the bush voluntarily or by force, you don't have anything. You can go with your resources but when you join them, you cannot live like you like. You hide yourself to run away and when you come back here, you come with nothing. The resources you left here have disappeared and they don't have anything which is why they are suffering more than the other members of the community.”

– Man community leader (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 1 February 2024)

Former associates were unable to pursue the climate adaptation strategies used by others in their communities of return. As will be discussed below, those who exited were at greater risk of being targeted by former comrades and were unable to move freely or pursue livelihoods in areas with presence of Boko Haram groups. Many of them lacked national identity papers, weakening their ability to seek alternative employment that requires such documentation (e.g., jobs in the formal sector) and thus mitigate the economic impacts of climate change.³⁹ Without these documents, they also found it difficult to migrate in search of opportunities elsewhere as identity papers are essential for crossing checkpoints and as collateral for buying goods on credit or for loans.⁴⁰ When asked which economic activities required documentation, a woman government official in Cameroon replied, “All of them. If you go out and do, for example motorbike taxi, you need civil documentation. Even if you are a tailor and you want to have a workshop, you need civil documentation. You can't do anything without civil documentation.”⁴¹ She went on to say that even official documentation from the Meri transit centre would not resolve the issue as identification of having passed through this DDR facility could lead to stigmatisation and discrimination.⁴²

Even where ex-associates had managed to establish more or less sustainable livelihoods, extreme weather events could wipe them out. The Lake Region of Chad and Far North Region of Cameroon saw record amounts of rainfall in 2024, leading to the widespread flooding of

³⁹While many people in Cameroon and Chad did not have national identity cards, people exiting armed groups, including children born in the bush, were less likely to have them. Boko Haram insisted on destruction of government identification documents or punished those found with them, leading many to destroy or leave them behind when joining (or living under) the group. In MEAC's most recent survey in Cameroon and Chad (April-May 2024) former associates in both Cameroon and Chad reported having national ID documents at lower rates than their unaffiliated counterparts. In Cameroon, 26 per cent of former Boko Haram associates reported having a national ID document compared to 69 per cent of respondents who were never associated with an armed group. In Chad, the difference was less marked: 45 per cent of former associates reported having a national ID document compared to 52 per cent of unaffiliated respondents.

⁴⁰ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

farmlands and destruction of crops.⁴³ At the time of data collection in September 2024, many respondents said they would hardly be able to harvest any crops this year, likely leading to severe food insecurity. While this dynamic affected everyone in the community, former associates, particularly those who were unable to return to their community and were now displaced said they would struggle more to recover given they operated with little to no cushion. With fewer resources or savings than their unaffiliated, displaced peers, former associates lacked the capacity to weather climate shocks. Although it was not possible to visit the communities that were particularly affected, the research team also heard of similar dynamics in areas of Cameroon's Far North region during data collection in October 2024.

Women former associates faced particular livelihood challenges linked not only to climate change and insecurity but also to patriarchal societal dynamics and government policies. Due to gender norms in the region, they had greater challenges in accessing finance, land, and tools than men ex-associates.⁴⁴ Unable to start up their own farming operations, they also struggled to get jobs as day labourers on others' lands because of preference for male workers who were seen as stronger.⁴⁵ Due to their experiences of enforced seclusion while in the bush, they had become de-skilled during this time, lost physical strength in their bodies, and had less work experience.⁴⁶ This was particularly the case for girls and young women who had known no other way of life.⁴⁷ Compared with their male counterparts, their social networks, mostly family and women non-relatives, often had fewer resources to assist them to adapt to climate change impacts, while their household and childcare responsibilities limited the people with whom they interacted.⁴⁸ Moreover, unlike some men, women were unable to pursue migration strategies in search of better livelihoods, a significant climate adaptation strategy in the region. Gender norms required them to look after the home and family, so they stayed behind as their husbands and brothers migrated.⁴⁹ Moreover, former Boko Haram 'husbands'⁵⁰, used to the narrower gender norms of the bush, could sometimes restrict women's economic opportunities, leading

⁴³ Van Dijk et al., [Global Water Monitor 2024, Summary Report](#), (Canberra, Global Water Consortium, 2025).

⁴⁴ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024); MEAC, Group Interview with women who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Cameroon, 5 October 2024).

⁴⁵ MEAC, Interviews with a man and two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024)

⁴⁶ Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "[Survival and Struggle: The Experience of Women and Girls With and After Boko Haram](#)" Findings Report 39, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024

⁴⁷ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

⁴⁸ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

⁴⁹ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman and three men community members (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man and a woman community members and a man community leader (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group and a man community leader (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

⁵⁰ For ease of reading, the authors use the term 'husbands' to denote the men these women and girls were forced to marry while in the bush. The authors use quotation marks around the word husband to recognise that these marriages occurred coercively and were not always considered legitimate by those involved and amongst communities and family members.

some to earn incomes surreptitiously.⁵¹ Concurrently, due to climate change and other factors, many formerly associated men were unable to provide for their households and so women were forced to find ways to earn incomes, including through engaging in activities that were financially precarious and put them at risk of violence. Due to these dynamics, women both faced increased financial responsibilities due to men's struggles and became more reliant on men as their incomes dwindled.⁵²

Climate change also affected communities' ability to support former associates. Former associates of Boko Haram were reliant on others but, as humanitarian aid was not always forthcoming and reliable, their outcomes depended much on the orientation, generosity, and means of their friends, neighbours, and relatives.⁵³ People expressed solidarity while also discussing how they struggled to help one another. Community members were less able to provide food, shelter, clothing and other necessities to former associates due to their own economic hardship linked to climate change and other factors.⁵⁴ They also expressed that the arrival of former associates and displaced people had pushed them (further) into poverty as they could not see people in need without sharing what they had, depleting their savings and food stores.

As a result of these factors, former associates tended to engage in less profitable and stable income-generating activities. They worked others' land for daily wages or a share of the harvest, thereby earning less than if they had worked for themselves and were unable to build up capital to set up their own businesses.⁵⁵ Older former associates, particularly those with health problems or disabilities, were often unable to undertake physically demanding tasks or were not chosen as day labourers as people thought they would be unable to cope with the exertion required.⁵⁶ They therefore engaged in market gardening, growing crops like tomatoes and onions as they required small amounts of land and could be cultivated around their homes.⁵⁷ However, these kinds of crops required significant water and were affected by the

⁵¹ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); Interviews with a woman and a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, 4 October 2024).

⁵² MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC Interviews with a woman and a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon 6 March 2024); for more on the experiences of women and girls exiting Boko Haram, please see Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "[Survival and Struggle: The Experience of Women and Girls With and After Boko Haram](#)" Findings Report 39, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024

⁵³ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamai, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024)

⁵⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February).

⁵⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

⁵⁶ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February).

⁵⁷ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

rainfall unpredictability which is a feature of climate change in the region.⁵⁸ Those former associates with access to land, boats, and nets, either from their savings or due to the support of others, also faced difficulties.⁵⁹ For example, fishermen in Chad who had lost their nets when they joined Boko Haram groups were able to make only small nets and struggled to compete with those with bigger nets who tended to fish in the best spots and get more fish, creating tensions on the lake.⁶⁰

Former associates also engaged in negative coping strategies, which exacerbated climate change and its impacts on the local population. They restricted the amount of food they ate or shifted from eating two or three times a day to once a day, with attendant adverse health impacts.⁶¹ This tactic in turn impacted their capacity to engage in agricultural labour or other types of economic activities. Other coping strategies had negative consequences beyond the individual or household. Former associates often cut trees to sell as firewood and charcoal, despite general community knowledge that “trees bring rain.”⁶² These coping strategies generated frustration and tensions with communities of return due to the widely understood implications for rainfall, soil quality, and others’ livelihoods. Deforestation not only had negative environmental impacts but also led to repercussions from government agents who levied fines against those engaged in deforestation, thereby eating into savings and occasionally driving grievances against the state.⁶³ Further, some women, particularly displaced women, were said to turn in desperation to exchanging sex for food, money, and other necessities to feed themselves and their families.⁶⁴ Some male former associates also spoke of feeling like they had no other option but to turn to criminality out of economic need.⁶⁵ As one former associate in Cameroon explained, “As the head of family, it’s you to bring to the household but if you don’t have means, even if someone has given you something for small trade, you are obliged to do dishonesty to your boss or the other person who has given confidence in you.”⁶⁶ Further, in several locations in Cameroon, people complained of former associates stealing their crops, firewood, and other items, cutting trees which local tradition forbade from touching, and chasing people away from water points, with impunity.⁶⁷ While some respondents stated there was no proof that it was former associates who had perpetrated these acts and spoke of false

⁵⁸ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁵⁹ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February).

⁶⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

⁶¹ MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man community member (Zamaï, Lac Region, Chad, 10 March 2024).

⁶² MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Zamaï, Lac Region, Chad, 10 March 2024).

⁶³ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Online, 12 February 2024).

⁶⁴ MEAC, Group Interview with men community members and men who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 16 September 2024).

⁶⁵ MEAC, Group Interview with men community members and men who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 October 2024).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ MEAC, Group Interviews with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North Region, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two men community members (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

rumours being spread, including via WhatsApp messages,⁶⁸ others were more certain of their culpability and noted how criminality had increased since their arrival in their communities. One man stated that, “Some of them cannot give up their old ways of life.”⁶⁹ Yet, for former associates too, theft and robberies meant the results of years of hard work rebuilding lives could be wiped away.

The compounding challenges of climate change and insecurity had not been met with a vigorous response; in recent years, aid had sharply dropped off and there was little investment in sustainable livelihoods and climate resilience. In both Cameroon and Chad, the majority of aid had focused on food, healthcare, shelter, water, and other basic needs and respondents were thankful for this much needed assistance. However, aid had completely stopped in most communities that the research team visited, particularly in Chad. Moreover, there were few livelihood interventions aimed at supporting former associates to transition to economic self-sufficiency. When these existed, such interventions tended towards one-off cash transfers or distribution of animals which did not seem designed to support respondents to withstand climatic and other shocks. Further, even though the implications of 2024’s heavy rainfall on agricultural areas of Chad and Cameroon were well known and discussed, concerted action to address future food insecurity had not yet been put in place as of the time of data collection in September and October 2024. This lack of focus on climate resilience – or support for affected populations suffering the knock-on effects of climatic events – has and will continue to have lasting impacts, including on community relations and insecurity.

Insecurity-related Impacts on Reintegration

Climate change, insecurity, and government policy contributed to natural resource-based conflicts over land and water. The reduced quality and size of agricultural land discussed above and lack of protection for grazing land contributed to a rise in conflicts over resources.⁷⁰ For example, in the Logone-et-Chari department in Cameroon, there was conflict between Mousgoum fisherfolk and Shuwa Arab pastoralists over access to water. Basins dug by the fisherfolk to trap fish and water in response to rainfall unpredictability had caused the death and injury of cattle who became trapped in these basins, further heightening tensions.⁷¹ The military building trenches on land without providing accompanying compensation not only meant that people lost the use of this land but there was increased competition over the smaller areas of land that remained available.⁷² In several locations in the Far North, fights between people waiting at water points broke out when it was perceived that some people were taking more

⁶⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

⁶⁹ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

⁷⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon 6 March 2024).

⁷¹ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁷² MEAC, Focus Group with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North Region, 7 March 2024).

than their fair share.⁷³ In Chad, respondents shared examples of competition and tensions between fisherfolk over fishing spots and the size of catch,⁷⁴ and between pastoralists and farmers over the movement of herds southwards in search of lands for grazing,⁷⁵ both of which had previously flared into violence.⁷⁶ There was also tensions over land between and amongst farmers due to the lack of cultivable land. This sometimes formed a cycle between the lack of cultivable land, natural resource conflict, and interruption of agricultural activities. Such events had occurred around Kindjiria and Kolom where the government had proscribed the cultivation of a large area of arable land due to fighting between farmers which could not be peacefully resolved.⁷⁷

These conflicts over natural resources greatly affected former associates who were disadvantaged in navigating them. Those who came home to find their land occupied, sold or allocated to others struggled to regain ownership. Respondents spoke of potential risks of revenge against those who attempted to reclaim their land.⁷⁸ For example in Amchide, Kirawa, Kolofata, Limani, and Tokomari in Cameroon, land disputes had spilled over into violence: “The people who are displaced have come and taken that land [but] when he comes back after finishing the DDR process, he takes back this land.... Logically, it is in the law – it’s his land and house but the villagers say this man has killed and caused us to be displaced, he should still be in prison. There are many cases where this escalates into violence.”⁷⁹

Continued fighting between the Boko Haram groups and security forces and related insecurity affected former associates and the communities in which they lived. Respondents in Chad were worried about abductions, attacks, theft of harvest and other items, and improvised explosive devices.⁸⁰ In Cameroon, people of all genders remained afraid about potential attacks, abduction of daughters, theft, and murder.⁸¹ Women also worried about sexual violence, which affected their freedom of movement.⁸² In particular, people were still unable to

⁷³ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

⁷⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

⁷⁵ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

⁷⁶ However, although conflict had led to violence, it was on a relatively small scale compared to other parts of the country and the number of people killed in confrontations remained relatively low); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman community members (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

⁷⁷ MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group and a community leader (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

⁷⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁷⁹ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024)

⁸⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited a Boko Haram group and a man community leader (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

⁸¹ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

⁸² MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

freely go to the islands of Lake Chad or areas bordering Nigeria in Cameroon, of particular relevance to internally displaced people and refugees, including former associates, who were unable to return home and who struggled in situations of displacement.

Former associates also faced threats from Boko Haram groups as they were considered traitors for having exited. In Cameroon, JAS sent a message to the authorities in May 2023 warning it would attack the Meri transit centre to recover its combatants.⁸³ Some people who left the transit centre to return to border villages were targeted and killed while others who stayed away from these border areas received threats.⁸⁴ For example, a woman in Melea who had been associated with JAS said, “The security forces are a bit far and don’t secure the village. We don’t know why. Even around a week ago, they came to abduct people some kilometres away from us. In the islands, all the time, we hear of attacks – during which they have taken someone, killed someone.”⁸⁵ In addition, former associates, especially men, were concerned about potential accusations and reprisals for association from the military and said that related fears had dissuaded exits by some who wanted to leave the bush.⁸⁶ In Chad, some ex-associates had also been targeted by former comrades as reprisals for having left or to prevent them from divulging information to the security and defence forces.⁸⁷ As a woman respondent said, “We have more fear than others as, when they come, they think we have given away their secrets to those who come to speak with us so they will attack us more than others as they know that we know all their positions and plans.”⁸⁸ Buduma former associates were said to be more at risk because more of their co-ethnics had joined Boko Haram groups. In both countries, this targeting also particularly affected former associates who were known to have held leadership roles, been involved in military strategy, or participated in combat operations. Women who had left ‘husbands’ behind in the bush were also targeted by these men who called and threatened them and their communities.⁸⁹ A woman community member in Yakoua described the trend: “Their husband that took them by force, they call. Even if they change their

⁸³ In response, the state reinforced security and increased deployment of COVIS members; MEAC, Interview with a man community member and a man government representative (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁸⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁸⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

⁸⁶ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

⁸⁷ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Online, 12 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman community member, two men who exited a Boko Haram group and two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram, (Kindjiria, Lac region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

⁸⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group and two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

⁸⁹ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member, (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community leader (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

numbers, they call them to say, ‘You have fled and I will come to take you back’... Every day, they call to say they are coming to take them....”⁹⁰

“They promised to us that whenever they come and find us, they will kill us because we are considered as traitors. That is why, even if you are here in Zamaï or Minawao, you are not calm because you are always thinking of the fact that if they find you, they will kill you. Wherever they find ex-associates, they will deal with them.”

– Woman formerly associated with Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024)

This targeting limited ex-associates’ options and freedom of movement, which in addition to climate change livelihood difficulties further winnowed their economic opportunities. As communities in which they lived tended to be more targeted for attack,⁹¹ some former associates, women in particular, had been advised by community leaders to move to areas with military presence, as the community leaders feared that they could not protect them.⁹² Other ex-associates felt compelled to join community security groups to stop community members from blaming them for potential attacks as well as to safeguard themselves and others from this threat.⁹³ Their membership was a powerful signal to their community, but it was unpaid, meaning they had less time for other livelihood activities.⁹⁴ Further, the threat of attack affected the ability of ex-associates to travel to markets, participate in social occasions, access farmlands and other livelihood options, or even resettled in their communities of origin. The threat of reprisals affected their sense of safety.⁹⁵ It had psychological impacts, caused fear, and affected sleep patterns.⁹⁶ A woman in Cameroon said, “Even in my head, I am not at ease

⁹⁰ MEAC, Interview with woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

⁹¹ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group and a man community leader (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

⁹² MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman community member and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

⁹³ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

⁹⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (N’Djamena, Capital, Chad, 20 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

⁹⁵ MEAC, Interviews with three men who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

⁹⁶ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

as I am always thinking that they would come and find me. Everyone who escape them is also thinking in this way.”⁹⁷

In response to these threats, women put themselves in danger to safeguard men. In some locations, women, particularly those who were displaced former associates were the ones working in the fields while men, seen at higher risk of being killed by Boko Haram groups, stayed in communities rather than engaging in farming or fishing.⁹⁸ Even if they were less likely to be killed if they were encountered by Boko Haram groups, women faced significant threats of (re-)abduction, forced marriage, and sexual violence while working in farmlands and gathering firewood. For example, a woman in Cameroon shared that she had recently come across a woman lying in the fields who had been raped by six men while she was harvesting maize.⁹⁹ However, the risks to women farming or collecting firewood were downplayed compared to those posed to men. Regardless of marital status, women felt they had little choice but to take these risks as they had few other livelihood options and had to provide for their children.¹⁰⁰ According to one woman who had been formerly associated with Boko Haram, “The men are scared [but] the women are less scared because we feel we have no other choice. We have to feed the children.”¹⁰¹

These dynamics of insecurity had serious and lasting effects on ex-associates and the communities in which they lived. They affected economic life, weakened social cohesion, occasionally hardened religious divides, and prevented joint efforts to build peace.¹⁰² In response, people in some villages donated a monthly sum to local community security groups, known as *comité de vigilance et de sécurité* (COVIS), a levy households could little afford given the low levels of revenue.¹⁰³ This insecurity not only limited former associates’ ability to return to home communities that were in insecure zones but also drove criminality and displacement, as will be discussed next.

In Cameroon, criminality and “banditry” were seen to have risen as a result of insecurity and economic conditions, including livelihood difficulties exacerbated by climate change. Against a backdrop of economic precarity linked to the climate change dynamics discussed above, a

⁹⁷ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

⁹⁸ MEAC, Interview with two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman community member and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

⁹⁹ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024). The UNIDIR team connected this survivor to medical and psychosocial care.

¹⁰⁰ MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁰¹ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

¹⁰² MEAC, Group Interview with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North Region, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁰³ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

variety of armed actors commonly referred to collectively as “bandits”¹⁰⁴ were believed to be taking advantage of current economic conditions and insecurity, and the related proliferation of small arms and light weapons.¹⁰⁵ Respondents discussed how it was difficult to distinguish these bandits from JAS and ISWAP.¹⁰⁶ A man working for a UN agency characterised current dynamics as “privatisation of the Boko Haram conflict... from an ideological conflict to urban violence” by conflict entrepreneurs who had taken part in past JAS kidnapping of missionaries after which they continued kidnapping people for ransom.”¹⁰⁷ Another respondent shared being kidnapped by a group of thieves which he thought was linked to a Boko Haram group (he was unclear which one it was) as the assailants went to the group’s stronghold and interacted with its leader.¹⁰⁸ In addition to organized (or semi-organized) banditry, small scale theft was seen as linked to increased poverty and attributed to both ex-associates and others in the community. Young people blocked from studying or apprenticeships, even if qualified, due to nepotism, corruption, lack of training and other opportunities, and perceptions that certain jobs are only for men were seen to engage in theft if men and sex work if women.¹⁰⁹ Respondents who lived in the Minawao refugee camp said cases of theft in the camp and nearby market started in 2023 due to lack of food assistance and withdrawal of humanitarian aid.¹¹⁰

Whether the origins are banditry or Boko Haram-related, there was scepticism that the security services could protect local communities from conflict or address rising criminality. In both countries, continued insecurity prevented people from pursuing farming, fishing, and pastoral livelihoods in areas suitable for them. For example, in Chad, respondents complained that the state was not providing enough security, leading to significant displacement from the islands to the mainland.¹¹¹ This link between physical and livelihood insecurity left former associates in particular dependent on others in their communities who were often already struggling.

Persistent insecurity also affected how former associates were viewed and in turn could undermine their social reintegration. Community relations were described by respondents as broadly positive although some noted perceptions that ex-associates continued to be

¹⁰⁴ For more on the evolution of banditry in the region, see for example, Issa Saïbou, *Les coupeurs de route. Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad*. (Karthala, 2010) and Johanna Kleffmann, Swetha Ramachandran, Noah Cohen, Siobhan O’Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Francesca Batault, Kato Van Broeckhoven, “[Banditry Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Insights from Affected Communities](#),” Findings Report 36, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024. For more on the proliferation of SALW see for example, Célestin Dalanga “[Northern Cameroon is losing the battle against arms trafficking](#)” ISS Today, 29 February 2024.

¹⁰⁵ MEAC, Group Interview with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North Region, 7 March 2024); MEAC, interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁰⁶ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁰⁷ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁰⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

¹⁰⁹ MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman community members (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

¹¹⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹¹¹ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

adherents of the ideology of Boko Haram or in touch with former comrades, and that low levels of information about the process undermined reintegration.¹¹² While many community members had accepted their return, some in Cameroon were concerned about the potential crimes that those returning – even close relatives – could commit in the future.¹¹³ Some community members believed that former associates had a different ‘mindset’ that remained unchanged,¹¹⁴ as shown by how some men formerly associated with Boko Haram groups continued to restrict the movements of their wives and daughters and did not want to mix with women in the community.¹¹⁵ While men were seen as more culpable in violent actions and so tended to be more feared,¹¹⁶ women were seen as spies who lived in the community to benefit from humanitarian assistance but would likely return to the bush.¹¹⁷ Given these beliefs, respondents worried that former associates’ financial precarity, linked to climate, displacement, and other factors, made them more likely to become involved in criminality and violence. For example, a woman living in the Minawao refugee camp thought that the incidence of theft and sexual violence had increased since the arrival of ex-associates and shared that some people believed that they were collecting intelligence about the camp to plan a future attack.¹¹⁸ Some of these perceptions are common in reintegration contexts, and these suspicions and fears have implications for the mobility and economic vitality of recipient populations. As a result, in some locations, people were changing their patterns of movement and engagement in livelihoods, such as restricting their time on farmlands or searching for firewood out of fear that returnees would commit physical or sexual violence against them.¹¹⁹

¹¹² MEAC, Interviews with three men and two women who exited a Boko Haram group groups (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man and a woman community members (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mémé, North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹¹³ MEAC, Interview with a man community member, (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹¹⁴ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024).

¹¹⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹¹⁶ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹¹⁷ MEAC, Group Interview with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹¹⁸ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 1- March 2024).

¹¹⁹ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

“We’ve lost trust between ourselves as a community. If I have a Mofu brother [ethnic group in Cameroon] like me who I haven’t seen for 4, 5, 6 years that might have gone to Boko Haram, I will be afraid. When he comes back, I’ll be scared. There isn’t the brotherly love as there was... Even if they have escaped and they are a brother, we consider them a murderer. People were afraid and even those who escaped from far they were afraid... [With time] there is a trust that is being rebuilt between people.”

– Man community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024)

In some locations, fear did diminish, and relations improved with the passage of time. Where dynamics shifted, this tended to be due to outreach and sensitisation interventions with community members, including to socialise former associates and promote shifts in their attitudes and mindsets.¹²⁰ However, many people tended not to have had this support and actors who worked on social cohesion around reintegration of former associates said more work was needed.¹²¹ Building of trust in such circumstances is challenging in and of itself, let alone in environments where violence and related displacement continue and people face challenges rebuilding their economic and social lives, due to the impacts of conflict, climate change, and other factors. Moreover, even if returnees were no longer viewed as threats, there was often friction over limited resources in communities that had received not only ex-associates but also populations displaced due to the conflict. Tension points included tussles over access to food distribution¹²² and economic disputes between neighbours,¹²³ often brought on by climate- and security-related constraints. They also identified a range of other issues including domestic violence and related inter-family disputes brought on or exacerbated by the same factors. Violence against women was tied by respondents to men’s livelihood challenges, which had often been exacerbated by climate change and insecurity, and thus rendered them unable to meet norms of breadwinner masculinity.¹²⁴ Some women ex-associates were sexually exploited and abused because of how climate change and insecurity

¹²⁰ MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group and a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man community members (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

¹²¹ MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women government representatives (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

¹²² MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

¹²³ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, 11 March 2024); MEAC Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mora, Far North Region, 5 March 2024).

¹²⁴ Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

affected family finances and options, leaving them no other option but to trade sex in exchange for food and other necessities.¹²⁵

Displacement-related Impacts on Reintegration

Ongoing insecurity led to significant levels of displacement, including of former associates, in the North and Far North of Cameroon and around the Lake in Chad. Those recruited into Boko Haram from areas where the groups still have presence were unable to return to their home communities, for example in the islands of Lake Chad, and displaced after leaving the group.¹²⁶ Many others in Cameroon from areas bordering Nigeria were unable to return to their communities since their villages had been destroyed or there were high levels of conflict over natural resources there.¹²⁷ Insecurity pushed former associates (and communities) over international borders. Some Nigerian former associates had relocated to Cameroon to be with family members who were refugees in the Minawao refugee camp where they felt safer due to continued insecurity and scrutiny of security forces in their country.¹²⁸

“I think less than 30 per cent have returned to their own community [in Cameroon]. Others have gone to other communities. There are two reasons... To cut the link with the family, JAS got people to commit destruction in their own communities and [so] they have fear of reprisals and prefer to go elsewhere. They killed their own parents so they prefer to go elsewhere. The other reason... there is no village or the village is destroyed. Maybe this is another reason: they don't want to have memories of what they have done [if they returned to where they committed violence].

– UN representative, (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon 7 March 2024)

Decisions whether to return home were also influenced by (perceived) perpetration of violence. Some ex-associates, particularly former leaders, chose to stay away from their home communities as they feared Boko Haram groups, the military, and their communities, the latter

¹²⁵ MEAC, Group Interviews with men community members and men who exited a Boko Haram group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024); MEAC, Group Interview with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North Region, 7 March 2024).

¹²⁶ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹²⁷ MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹²⁸ MEAC, Interviews with two women and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two men who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

especially if they had perpetrated violence against them.¹²⁹ According to a man working for a NGO on reintegration, “The choice is dictated by the crimes they committed. They may be known for their crimes, and they may be looked at differently by the community.”¹³⁰ As a result, those who were abducted and escaped relatively quickly were able to return to communities without experiencing much stigma, while those who had participated in violent attacks against civilians preferred to settle elsewhere.¹³¹ The group to which people had been associated could also influence community receptivity. In Chad, ISWAP, the group most present there, refrained from perpetrating violence against civilians in its early years. In contrast, JAS had directly targeted and attacked civilians in Cameroon and required its fighters to commit attacks against their own families and communities so that this violence broke their social links and networks. As such, it was harder for many JAS ex-associates to return to communities in Cameroon than it was for ex-ISWAP associates to go home in Chad.¹³²

People who returned to their home communities after exiting Boko Haram groups fared better than those who exited into situations of displacement. Those who went back to their communities of origin had greater access to resources and social networks and encountered fewer information and logistical challenges in restarting their livelihoods. Those who returned to their own communities often benefited from support from friends and relatives, including food, housing, access to land, and start-up capital. These former associates were also more able to navigate the local economy, for example to move for work as they knew the local area.¹³³ In contrast, the social networks of displaced former associates were often also displaced and in similarly precarious situations, especially if they had been forced to flee their homes suddenly, leaving their animals and goods behind. As a man formerly associated with a Boko Haram group in Cameroon said, “The problem here is that I used to farm and I could do it [again] if I had land, but there isn’t a possibility to get land... because I am a refugee. You need to be a part of the community to own a land or farm.”¹³⁴ Even if displaced ex-associates were allocated land to farm by generous host communities, they found it difficult to access seeds, capital, inputs, and tools.¹³⁵ Displaced people therefore often had to work in unsafe areas, labour for others, and work in economically precarious jobs, thereby putting themselves at risk and

¹²⁹ MEAC, Interviews with a woman NGO representative and a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹³⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024).

¹³¹ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹³² MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹³³ MEAC, Interview with two men who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with two men who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024).

¹³⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹³⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mora Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Mora Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024).

earning less than others.¹³⁶ Indeed, there was often more similarity between formerly associated and non-associated refugees and displaced people as they faced similar financial, housing and other challenges, compared with more divergent experiences between ex-associates who were displaced and those who had returned to their own communities, especially if the period of association had been relatively short.¹³⁷

Former associates who went home after exiting Boko Haram groups were not guaranteed stability and many had experienced multiple displacements along with their communities years later, disrupting their reintegration progress. Heightened insecurity and related livelihood impacts in Chad since late 2023 have led to significant displacement, including of former associates, particularly from the islands to the mainland.¹³⁸ Similarly in Cameroon, insecurity and natural resource-based conflict had pushed former associates to leave their communities in border regions. This repeated displacement after ex-associates had had to re-establish their lives was a further setback for them. For women who had been able to work when living on the islands in Chad but had since had these livelihoods destroyed, it was particularly difficult to re-establish income generating activities given their lack of startup capital, tools and a lack of support from social networks.¹³⁹ The withdrawal of humanitarian aid and the lack of sustainable transition to development assistance that supported livelihoods were other factors encouraging people to move to areas more likely to have aid. As a result, many lived in camps for displaced people or as displaced people in host communities that received aid.¹⁴⁰ Further, those reintegrated into their communities and subsequently displaced with them were generally more accepted by their new host communities, who often did not know their past history of association with Boko Haram groups, as opposed to newer arrivals who were viewed with suspicion and seen as posing a threat.¹⁴¹

In both countries, when they could not or would not go home, former associates tended to reintegrate into communities where they had social ties either on their own accord or aided by governments. In Chad, recognising that they were unsafe, people from the islands who had exited more recently were taken by government officials to IDP camps and host communities where people from their island now lived, to be reunited with friends and family.¹⁴² In Cameroon, former associates tended to go to places where they had relatives, former neighbours, or others

¹³⁶ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with two men who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹³⁷ MEAC, Interview with two woman community members (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 12 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman and two men community members (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative, (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹³⁸ MEAC, Interview with a woman and a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹³⁹ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁴⁰ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁴¹ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

¹⁴² MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

they knew.¹⁴³ Many times, their communities had also been displaced and people had started to re-establish themselves in their new homes.¹⁴⁴ However, some people were said to prefer staying in IDP camps where they could find government and NGO support as opposed to outside the camps with family members who did not have the means (or desire) to support them.¹⁴⁵ In general, recipient communities tended to be more welcoming to people they knew as opposed to newcomers and particularly those who had not known to have joined willingly or engaged in violence.¹⁴⁶

Displacement had some positive aspects. Many respondents shared how they had found increased security, greater access to education, and better agricultural conditions and economic opportunities in their new communities as compared to the communities where they originally settled after leaving Boko Haram groups.¹⁴⁷ Community members shared how they had offered support and care to those who had been displaced.¹⁴⁸ A woman in Chad who had been associated with ISWAP before returning to her island community and being once again displaced to the mainland reflected, “Here, it is more secure and I find a bit of food and engage in trade to be able to look after the family. There are even schools here for my children... It’s easier to find work here – when you come [as someone who is] displaced to come here, they will accept and help you. The village leader is kind and accepts you.”¹⁴⁹ However, not everyone was successful or able to choose where they were displaced, with implications for their reception and support. As a female government official in Cameroon said, “Reintegration is difficult as if you are prepared to be reintegrated into one community and then go to another community and nobody is prepared to help you, it causes problems.”¹⁵⁰

Even when there was a willingness to provide support, host communities struggled to meet the needs of all the people displaced into them. Displaced people formerly associated with Boko Haram often were not self-sufficient. Humanitarian aid and reintegration support were either non-existent or unreliable. As such, former associates were often reliant on host community support to meet their basic needs. Returns and broader displacement increased pressure on

¹⁴³ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two men who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹⁴⁴ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁴⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁴⁶ MEAC, Interview with two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a community leader (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

¹⁴⁷ MEAC, Interviews with two men and two women who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 12 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with two women community members (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁴⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁴⁹ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 12 February 2024).

¹⁵⁰ MEAC, Interview with a woman government representative (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

already insufficient community resources.¹⁵¹ Host communities were often unable to cope with the scale of need, particularly as people struggled to support even their own immediate families let alone assist wider familial and community networks as they might have been able to do in the past.¹⁵²

For displaced former associates (and others) language was a barrier to economic and social reintegration. In Cameroon, displaced former associates from border areas did not always speak the languages of the communities in which they now lived, affecting their social and economic life. Similarly in Chad, former associates from the islands described more limited interactions with community members than others, particularly if unable to speak either Kanembu or the variant of Buduma spoken on the mainland (which differs considerably from that spoken on the islands).¹⁵³ These language barriers disproportionately affected women and girls who had had fewer chances to migrate to places where they could speak the same language and did not mix with other community members, which reduced their ability to pick up new dialects or languages.¹⁵⁴

In some cases, displaced people, including former associates, arrived in places they considered to be their ancestral homelands where they were thought they were entitled to land by custom, but received a mixed reception from the populations living there. In Chad, the Buduma people whose ancestors had left communities decades ago for the islands still laid claim to all the area around Lake Chad. Displaced Buduma communities and ex-associates were returning to this land now inhabited by the Kanembu people, many of which had lived there for several generations.¹⁵⁵ In such cases, particularly if land was plentiful, people could be welcomed back by family members whose ancestors had stayed behind, supported in many ways, and granted familial land.¹⁵⁶ In recent years, however, when Buduma populations returned to these ancestral lands, access to land not forthcoming.¹⁵⁷ As a male former - associate explained, “We are from somewhere else coming to the land of our ancestors. Since we don’t have any power or possibility to get it, we are following what our relatives say and staying without anything. With empty hands. We don’t have the right to say anything. We are just following what the community says.”¹⁵⁸ In Cameroon, people from the Mandara Mountains along the present Cameroon-Nigeria border descended the mountains to farm the plains in the

¹⁵¹ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁵² MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁵³ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

¹⁵⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹⁵⁵ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (N’Djamena, Capital, Chad, 20 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community leader (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

¹⁵⁶ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

¹⁵⁷ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

¹⁵⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

early twentieth century.¹⁵⁹ Due to recent insecurity, these communities moved back into the mountains and tried to reclaim what they considered to be their ancestral land, leading to tensions and conflict: “They wanted to have their farm and they could not have and there were many problems in the Mandara mountains.”¹⁶⁰ In both countries, some of those involved had been formerly associated with Boko Haram groups, which due to their vulnerability and lack of networks further limited their ability to (re)claim this land. Efforts to return to ancestral lands were further complicated by stigma against those associated with communities with high recruitment or thought to be closely associated with Boko Haram groups.¹⁶¹ For example, in Chad, the return of Buduma ex-associates and larger Buduma populations from the islands of Lake Chad reinforced links in the minds of some Kanembu people between the Buduma and Boko Haram groups.¹⁶²

“Say you and I are brothers and grew up here. I left and had children and grandchildren elsewhere and you and I died. Your children divided the land between them. Because of insecurity, my children came back and knew that our grandfather had land and they need space for working. They hear, ‘You left this place 50-70 years ago, we are working here, you cannot come back’ [and reply,] ‘But this is the land of our grandfather.’ There is plenty of conflict like this.... It’s over 500 years ago we have been living together, the Buduma and Kanembu, but now there are problems... Since [the time] we were living together, the Buduma moved into the islands and the Kanembu stayed and, because of the insecurity, the Buduma came back and said this land belongs to our ancestors and the Kanembu say, ‘No, we were living together and this land belongs to us too’.”

– Man who exited Boko Haram (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024)

In addition, levels of acceptance could depend on the recipient community’s conflict experiences. Internally displaced people and refugees, tended to find it more difficult to accept those who had exited due to their past experiences, continued suffering, and lack of inclusion in outreach activities.¹⁶³ As a male community leader in Cameroon said, “They don’t want to get involved with them as they have hurt them. They recognised the people that hurt them and now they have to live with them.”¹⁶⁴ For example, refugees who lived in Minawao camp were

¹⁵⁹ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); [add citation to academic sources]

¹⁶⁰ MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁶¹ MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Zamai, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹⁶² MEAC, Interview with a man UN representative (N’Djamena, Capital, Chad, 20 February 2024).

¹⁶³ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man and a woman community members (Meri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Kindjiria, Lac region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Magar, Lac region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

¹⁶⁴ MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

disturbed by the presence of former associates there given what they had gone through, the worries about future violence, and how it impacted the quantity of assistance provided to them.¹⁶⁵ In some cases in Chad, host communities served as a bridge: “ [They] were accepted by the community not by the displaced people... We ran due to the insecurity [and] at the beginning, we didn’t even like to see them as they had done many bad things [to us]... We came to know them later when the community convinced us to accept them.”¹⁶⁶

Insufficient efforts at community outreach and reintegration were linked with continued displacement. According to a man working for an NGO on reintegration in Cameroon, “The fundamental problem is that DDR is not working to prepare the community so the people accept [ex-associates] ... The people who are displaced elsewhere, it’s one of the consequences of the process of DDR not working. In Zamaï for example, they don’t want to go back, they say it’s better to stay here as they will be victims of reprisals and stigmatisation.”¹⁶⁷ Without the outreach and sensitization to ensure safe resettlement, people were unable to return to their own communities and displaced to areas which also had not been prepared to receive them; given the lack of connections to many recipient communities, levels of fear and stigma were significant.¹⁶⁸

Displaced former associates did not always see permanent futures for themselves in the communities in which they now lived. Some were happy in their current locations, while others wanted to return home but felt unable to do so, and a third group were planning to go somewhere else.¹⁶⁹ In Chad, feeling unsafe and unable to pursue decent and sustainable livelihoods, some former associates, especially those without family or connections in the region, spoke about planning to migrate to other areas of the country and across the border, for example to Libya, in search of economic opportunities and greater security.¹⁷⁰ In Cameroon, respondents said some former associates had gone to other parts of the country, such as Garoua, where people did not know about their association and in search of economic opportunities.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹⁶⁶ MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Magar, Lac region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

¹⁶⁷ MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024).

¹⁶⁸ MEAC, Interview with a man government representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

¹⁶⁹ MEAC, Interviews with three men who exited a Boko Haram group and a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two men and a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹⁷⁰ MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited a Boko Haram group (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited a Boko Haram group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

¹⁷¹ MEAC, Group Interview with men and women representatives of an NGO (Maroua, Far North region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024).

Policy Recommendations

- Former associates faced many reintegration challenges linked to climate change, insecurity, and displacement. Yet, DDR-like programming and related support often placed little priority and resourcing on addressing these issues. Action tended to focus on meeting basic needs rather than supporting former associates to transition to meeting their own needs and those of their households and communities through dignified, sustainable, and climate change-resilient livelihoods. Broader non-climate-related reintegration support was also unavailable or insufficient to address needs in the region. Interventions around community outreach, social cohesion, normative change, and gender-based violence prevention were often not present or operated in small geographical pockets and inadequately resourced. Without this broader support, ex-associates are even less able to weather the challenges of climatic shocks and change, continued insecurity, and displacement realities. This has knock-on effects for the communities that receive un- or under-supported ex-associates, contributing to fears, tensions, and conflict.
- Yet, the adoption of the National Strategy in Chad and the opening of a new transit centre in Cameroon offer important entry points for retooling policy and programming to support the sustainable reintegration of ex-associates and ensure they can overcome the combined challenges of climate change, insecurity, and displacement more effectively. In order to help people adapt to changing climate, economic, and conflict environments, actions that both help with reintegration generally and are focused on addressing the impacts of climate change, displacement, and insecurity are needed. There are several different ways to do so:
- Strengthen conflict management, security, and peacebuilding measures to improve safety via:
 1. Supporting communities, including displaced people and ex-associates, to map security risks, discuss how to mitigate them, and advocate to security forces, government, and other actors for their protection;
 2. Improving dispute resolution mechanisms around natural resources so they are inclusive, transparent, and fair;
 3. Mitigating natural resource-based conflict through increased access to land, including for former associates, dialogue on and resolution of resource and land disputes, and conflict prevention mechanisms, for example through community-ed demarcation of grazing routes and agreement on fishing practices in both countries;

4. Working with security forces and groups such as the COVIS to put in place farm and firewood patrols¹⁷² to improve the safety of the mostly displaced and formerly associated women who have little option but to engage in these livelihoods in insecure areas; and
 5. Supporting communities to prevent gender-based violence, a significant threat to women and girls' safety and security, based on evidence from similar contexts of what works.¹⁷³
- Build climate resilience into DDR programming to support ex-associates and their communities towards dignified and sustainable livelihoods by addressing the needs of all those affected by climate change rather than focusing only on ex-associates in order to mitigate potential grievances linked to differential benefit and ensure local economies restructure to address climatic shifts via:
 1. Integrating climate and hydrological information into government planning so it takes into account potential droughts and floods and works with communities to mitigate their impact;
 2. Improving access to weather information and forecasting for people engaged in land-based livelihoods so they can plan activities accordingly;
 3. Supporting communities to maintain seed banks of climate resilient seeds, engage in agro-ecological methods that improve soil quality, and explore alternative forms of farming, in consultation with communities, that involve climate resilient, non-traditional products to diversify rural incomes;¹⁷⁴
 4. Providing livelihoods training that offer diverse skills and pathways into alternate trades as a climate mitigation strategy;
 5. Addressing how women's adaptive capacities are hindered by patriarchal social norms and increasing their access to land, tools, capital, and other resources;
 6. Working with women former associates to build (back) their skills, physical capacities, and work experience to compensate for their time spent in forced seclusion so they are more able to cope with climate change impacts; and
 7. Providing financial education alongside other support.
 - Adapt programming to take into account the reality at many people exiting Boko Haram groups and communities that receive them have no immediate prospect of returning

¹⁷² Lessons learned could be gleaned from previous experiences. In Nigeria for example, efforts have been made to establish 'Agro Rangers' to protect farmlands in the North East and other regions. See for example France 24, "[On patrol with Nigeria's 'Agro Rangers', who protect farmers from Boko Haram](#)", video, 22 September 2020; and, more recently, Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food security, [Federal Government deploys 10,000 agro-rangers to 19 states, FCT to combat insecurity in farms](#) (Abuja, 2024).

¹⁷³ Please see <https://ww2preventvawg.org/> for evidence on what works to prevent violence in low to middle income settings.

¹⁷⁴ For example, typha, a type of reed which grows in many parts of Lake Chad and is a source of protein, an efficient biofuel and building material, and spirulina, a nutritious alga in Lake Chad, which is already collected and eaten by the local population but has potential for increased production and harvest.

home and will be in situations of prolonged – and possibly secondary – displacement via:

1. Expanding government policy and action to support the reintegration of former associates into displacement sites (as opposed to only their own communities, which may be unsafe);
 2. Uncovering patterns of migration of former associates to better understand their motivations and the pull factors drawing them to particular locations, so that interventions can better address these dynamics;
 3. Supporting displaced people, including former associates and particularly women, to re-establish livelihoods that are mobile and can be re-started with little capital or local knowledge or connections; and
 4. Supporting a transition towards non land-based livelihoods for displaced people, including former associates, through continued education and the acquisition of transferable skillsets.
- Increase community cohesion in communities into which ex-associates are reintegrating via:
 1. Using implementation of the National Strategy in Chad and the opening of the new Mémé transit centre in Cameroon as opportunities for public information campaigns on the DDR process;
 2. Engaging in community outreach and sensitisation prior to and after arrival of ex-associates so a diverse range of community members are informed about the DDR process and are able to have their concerns addressed, including that which is adapted to facilitate reintegration in sites of displacement;¹⁷⁵
 3. Specifically addressing perceptions of displaced communities from areas perceived as having high levels of recruitment into Boko Haram groups through community-based dialogue;
 4. Facilitating community conversations and decision-making about displaced people, including ex-associates, returning to ancestral villages, including around land, particularly in Chad;
 5. Funding and strengthening the capacity of civil society, especially women's rights organisations and associations, to support communities to build social cohesion;
 6. Addressing restrictive JAS and ISWAP gender norms among former associates prior to reintegration into communities so they are more readily able to adapt to new realities including economic ones; and

¹⁷⁵ Specific outreach should include women, displaced people, religious and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, groups who the research found tend to have lower levels of knowledge about reintegration and relatedly higher levels of fear about the presence of ex-associates in their communities.

7. Running language classes for people, particularly women and girls, reintegrating into communities whose languages they do not speak.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Upon exit, some people spent time in camps or reintegration facilities before either returning to their villages or moving to IDP or refugee camps if their home communities were unsafe. Language learning would be a valuable way to use their time there and better prepare them to socially and economically reintegrate. Having multilingual beneficiaries (including graduates of the programme) assist instruction would provide them with purpose and economic support as well as serve as role models that learning is possible. Such programming can be easily scaled and must be digestible and tailored to an audience that has received little formal education.



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