

Farming Amid Conflict: Agricultural Challenges and Their Impact on the Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Associates in the North East of Nigeria

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Farming, herding, and fishing form the backbone of livelihoods for communities in the North East of Nigeria. These activities are vital for providing food security and income for millions across the region. For former Boko Haram associates, farming is more than a livelihood: it is often a means of survival, a way to regain purpose and a visible step that they have transitioned away from conflict for their communities. But the question is: how realistic is this pathway today?

The short answer: increasingly difficult. Persistent insecurity, combined with escalating climate shocks, mass displacement, and soaring costs are converging to make agricultural livelihoods – farming, herding and fishing – less viable than ever. At the 12th North East Governor's Forum in August 2025, authorities warned of an unfolding agricultural

crisis marked by unaffordable fertilizer and recurrent floods which have destroyed farmland and critical infrastructure.¹ Against this backdrop and considering the return of over 200,000 individuals who left Boko Haram by early 2025, understanding how these pressures affect reintegration becomes extremely urgent.²

This brief examines how challenges to agricultural livelihoods hinder the reintegration of many former Boko Haram associates. It highlights barriers to subsistence farming and agricultural livelihoods and their impacts on reintegration progress. The brief concludes with recommendations on how policies and programmes can better support dignified, sustainable, and climate-resilient pathways for returnees. This brief draws primarily from findings from a 3,388-person phone survey conducted

between April and July 2025 with respondents across the Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States, including 576 boys and men and 276 girls and women who were previously associated with Boko Haram.³ These findings are complemented by qualitative accounts from former associates and community members in the North East gathered primarily in 2024, alongside previous studies of the Managing Exits from Armed Conflicts (MEAC) project in the region.

1. Agriculture is the backbone of the North East of Nigeria - but people are struggling

Agriculture remains the predominant source of household sustenance and income across the region. A 2019 survey showed that 84 per cent of families in the North East were then involved in crop farming and 69 per cent in livestock rearing.4 It is the foundation of survival, shaping diets, incomes, and social identity across rural communities. Yet despite this centrality, MEAC's most recent survey found that only 15 per cent of respondents in the region currently earn an income from farming.5 While this drastic differential may be in part due to survey recruitment in towns and the fact that some people only farm for substance, this 69 percentage point difference also likely reflects the impact of insecurity, climate shocks, and displacement on agricultural livelihoods in the region. Indeed, MEAC's qualitative research in the Lake Chad region has shown that these converging challenges have prevented many people from accessing their lands or investing in agricultural production.6

The consequences of these interconnected challenges are devastating and have culminated in widespread food insecurity. Over half of unaffiliated community members who had never been with an armed group (54 per cent) reported not having enough food to eat over the past week. Among former Boko Haram associates, the situation was even more acute, with 67 per cent going without sufficient food over the same period.

2. Climate change compounds other challenges

Climate change in the North East of Nigeria causes reduced rainfall, frequent droughts, erratic rainfall patterns, and floods all of which disrupt farming livelihoods and crop yields.7 Additionally, Lake Chad has dramatically shrunk from about 26,000 km2 in the 1960s to around 1,350 km² today, largely due to rainfall decline, increased temperatures and unsustainable water use.8 This has led to devastating consequences for communities dependent on its resources - farmers, herders, and fisherfolk alike. Crop yields fall significantly with even a small temperature increase, with estimates showing that a 1°C rise above 20°C is correlated with roughly a 2 per cent crop loss, while unpredictable weather patterns make planting schedules erratic and unreliable.9 These hardships have been further compounded by man-made disasters, such as the September 2024 Alau Dam flood, which devastated farmlands, destroyed livestock and displaced communities around Maiduguri in Borno State. 10

Boko Haram has capitalized on these climaterelated difficulties to attract recruits: 5 per cent of former associates reported that the group promised access to better farming, herding, or fishing opportunities when they initially joined. 11 As one man described: "When Boko Haram members occupied my community, they built their base on the mountain and that stopped me from having access to good farmland. Heavy rainfall and flooding made it impossible to farm on the lands available to us. To be able to access good land, one had to join them."12 This man's experience highlights how climate change and related shocks can influence people's trajectories into armed groups. This is born out in survey research: among former Boko Haram associates interviewed in MEAC's 2022 survey in the North East of Nigeria, 11 per cent of those who were having difficulties making a living from agriculture due to specific climatic shifts (e.g. drought) reported that these difficulties played a role in their recruitment.13







3. The Boko Haram conflict disrupts farming practices

The ongoing Boko Haram conflict has also reshaped how communities farm, herd and fish in North East of Nigeria. It has introduced barriers that make even basic cultivation risky and unproductive. One of the most direct impacts is on land and water access. Boko Haram controls and occupies large swathes of farmland and rural areas, denying local communities access to lands crucial for cultivation. Even when land is accessible, insecurity is pervasive and adds to these difficulties. A respondent poignantly recounted: "Whenever I get ready to go to the farm, my heart beats with uncertainty about whether I will come back home safe or not. The Jamāat Ahl as-Sunnah [Boko Haram's Shekau faction] will kill you if they find you; they will not listen to any excuses and will just slaughter you like a ram." 14

In addition, governments' security policies in the region have impacted the availability and price of farming supplies. Fertilizer bans have also contributed to making farming less productive. In some parts of the North East of Nigeria, authorities have banned the sale and use of certain components of fertilizers because of their use by Boko Haram to produce improvised explosive devices (IEDs). While intended as a security measure, this policy has had severe consequences for local farmers. Nearly half (46 per cent) of respondents who farm identified lack of fertilizer as a major barrier factor impacting their ability to farm. Fertilizer has become even more important with climatic shifts in the Lake region, which have rendered land increasingly less productive and fertile.

Similarly, security related crop bans have reduced crop diversity and limited the choice of staple crops available in the region. Authorities in the region have placed restrictions on the cultivation of certain tall crops such as maize and millet citing security concerns because they have historically been used as cover for Boko Haram fighters during attacks. One responded explained: "The military personnel in





my community refuse to allow us to grow millet or maize because they say the terrorists can hide inbetween the crops since the stem is tall, and the military will not be aware or will block their view of them. So, I am only allowed to grow beans and groundnuts since their stems are short." ¹⁷ These restrictions have significantly impacted local agricultural practices, forcing farmers to abandon staple crops and adapt to less profitable alternatives. Overall, these limitations have reduced household food security, lowered incomes, and made returnees and community members more vulnerable to economic and nutritional hardships.

4. Former associates face specific agricultural challenges as they reintegrate

In addition to climatic and access challenges, economic and material barriers continue to limit the ability of former Boko Haram associates to rebuild their lives through farming. Past MEAC research in Cameroon and Chad has highlighted similar challenges, showing that loss of land, tools, and livestock during conflict leaves many without the capital, inputs, or credit needed to restart agricultural activities.18 In some cases, land previously held by returnees has been taken over by others or remains inaccessible due to insecurity. Women face particular difficulties in securing land or loans, leaving them further excluded.19 With farming increasingly out of reach, ex-associates often turn to precarious day labour, which offers little stability and slows their economic reintegration.

Boko Haram's continued presence around farmlands has dissuaded many from engaging in farming, but former associates are particularly affected.²⁰ As men and boys who left Boko Haram are seen as traitors by their former factions, they were at high risk of being killed if they are intercepted. Returning to fertile but insecure agricultural lands far outside town centres places them in danger. While men and boys were customarily primarily responsible for farms and for cultivating certain crops, those who previously associated with Boko Haram often report that they

do not return to their fields out of fear for their lives. As a result, farmwork has increasingly shifted to women and girls, who are perceived as not facing the same existential threats in the fields and as such now shoulder much of the duties of farming and firewood gathering. Yet, their role comes with its own grave risks as they face significant danger of abduction and sexual violence if they encounter armed groups while engaging in agricultural activities.²¹

In addition, rising food prices, rapid inflation more broadly, and the withdrawal of humanitarian support have deepened vulnerability, trapping many in dependency. The UN World Food Programme in the North East of Nigeria has warned that cuts to humanitarian aid could push people into the arms of Boko Haram.²² MEAC's own research suggests as much: in focus group discussions, women, girls, boys and men alike cited extreme food insecurity as the reason they would be forced to return to Boko Haram.²³ The loss of livelihoods and inability to procure food may force individuals to rejoin Boko Haram in order to simply survive. This highlights the

fragility of reintegration pathways and the need for more climate-sensitive and conflict-sensitive livelihood programming for both ex-associates who want to continue to farm and for agriculturaldependent communities throughout the region.

5. Displacement adds to the pressure

Displacement remains widespread across North East Nigeria further complicating the population's ability to sustain already fragile livelihoods. The situation is even more acute among former Boko Haram associates, nearly half of whom are currently displaced, compared to slightly over a quarter of unaffiliated community members.²⁴ This is unsurprising, as displacement and recruitment are often driven by proximity to armed groups and insecurity and many defectors from the Boko Haram factions are unable to return to their communities of origin out of security concerns. However, being unable to return home after leaving an armed group makes reintegration more complex, as individuals are forced to navigate unknown - and often iterant - economic and social environments.



Many former associates were forced to abandon their farmland during the conflict and are now unable to return to their land given ongoing insecurity. Many now live in IDP camps where quantities of, and access to, farmlands is limited. In some cases, access to these camps is strictly controlled by community security actors who impose strict curfews on residents.²⁵ As productive farmland has become scarcer, former associates are having to venture further to farm and risk returning past curfew, with potential physical punishment including beatings for those returning This breaks longstanding cycles of subsistence farming and worsens food insecurity. Today, ex-associates often face a stark choice: remain in safer areas with few economic prospects and little access to farmable land or risk returning to fertile but insecure land, where their lives may be in danger.

Conclusion and recommendations: Farming as dignity and belonging

Farming in the North East of Nigeria is not simply about food or income - it is deeply tied to dignity, belonging, and identity. Previous MEAC research with children who had previously been associated with Boko Haram not only illustrated the importance of farming to economic reintegration but as sources of pride. A young boy poignantly shared how "[The] high in my life [was when] we got a lot of farm harvest..." 27 while another simply shared, "I miss going to farm." This sense of pride and purpose highlights why access to farming is not only an economic matter but a crucial step in rebuilding lives. Reintegration efforts must address the security, economic, climatic and gender-specific barriers that prevent former associates from resuming agricultural livelihoods in order to promote their full and sustained transition to civilian life. Support cannot focus on ex-associates alone. The communities from which they come and those in which they settle face similar challenges including food insecurity, disrupted livelihoods, and climaterelated shocks. They too require livelihood support,

secure access to farmland with essential farm agricultural climate-adaptive inputs, and programmes.

Key priorities include:

- · Balancing security measures with livelihood access: Restrictions on crops, fertilizers and farming practices should be designed to minimize disruptions to agriculture in the North For example, the Agro-Rangers programme has been highlighted as an initiative that - if implemented with appropriate oversight and guided by a human-rights-based approach - could help restore farm access and farmer confidence, mediate farmerherder conflicts, and protect agricultural investments.28 In August 2024, the federal government deployed 10,000 Agro-Rangers across 19 states and the Federal Capital Territory.²⁹ While this is promising, the coverage remains limited. Exploring a range of approaches to improve the security of farmlands - through community engagement, coordinated local initiatives, or other contextspecific mechanisms - could help enhance safety and enable more farmers to cultivate without fear.
- Scaling up conflict-sensitive, climateadaptive livelihoods support for returnees and their communities: Climate resilience should be integrated into reintegration by promoting climate-smart farming and alternative livelihoods. This could be done by supporting seed banks of climate-resilient crops, using agro-ecological methods to restore degraded soil and investing in alternative income sources such as poultry farming or small-scale irrigation that can reduce dependency on risky farmlands. Equally important is providing vocational training in trades and skills less dependent on climate conditions, such as carpentry, tailoring, mechanics, or small business management.





- Prioritizing access to land, tools, and credit for returnees - especially women: Returnees would benefit from starter kits with seeds and tools or cash transfers, depending on local market access and availability of goods. Starter kits ensure returnees can immediately access climate-resilient crops and essential tools, while cash allows flexibility and supports local markets. In addition, facilitate joint land titling for women, strengthen women's cooperatives, and expand training on market access and business skills to overcome barriers and ensure equitable participation.
- Sustaining humanitarian assistance: MEAC's
 research has repeatedly found that disrupted
 livelihoods and food insecurity are driving
 factors that could force individuals to return to
 Boko Haram. Therefore, it is necessary to
 continue food and livelihood support in the short

term while progressively transitioning towards development assistance to promote long-term food and economic security. For example, food-for-work or cash-for-work schemes linked to farm-related infrastructure, such as irrigation channels and storage facilities, could potentially help bridge the gap while returnees and their communities seek to bolster farming-based livelihoods.

Without these measures, farming as a reintegration pathway may remain out of reach for some exassociates of Boko Haram (and the communities to which they return) further entrenching cycles of poverty, insecurity, and conflict.



Endnotes 1/2

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Endnotes 2/2

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