Some Lake Chad Basin countries (Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria) have been dealing with violent extremism for over a decade. Disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement processes in these countries may offer useful lessons for other West African contexts, including Mali and Burkina Faso, or more recently affected countries such as Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Togo. Such lessons include incentivising defections, coordinating at national and regional levels, gender sensitivity, appropriate legal frameworks and community engagement.
Key findings

- Understanding the circumstances that lead people to join and leave violent extremist groups, and their experiences in those groups, is key to crafting incentives for disengagement.
- The willingness to leave violent extremist groups is often clouded by uncertainty, as well as long waiting periods between disengagement and enrolment in programmes for disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRRR).
- Waves of defection from Boko Haram caught Lake Chad Basin (LCB) states unprepared.

Recommendations

- Non-military means of countering violent extremism should incorporate incentives and opportunities for associates to leave these armed groups. By depleting these groups’ human resources, their fighting capacity is reduced.
- To encourage defection, clear processes for screening, prosecution and integration are needed. National ownership of these processes, inclusivity, adaptation to local context and adequate resourcing are key, from inception to implementation.
- National ownership should not lead to isolated approaches, but rather create bridges between countries to enable a cohesive regional approach. Organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States, the Liptako-Gourma States Integrated Development Authority, the G5 Sahel and the Accra Initiative could offer relevant regional frameworks for this.
- Authorities in charge of DDRRR programmes should consider the diverse needs and backgrounds of ex-associates. Distinguishing DDRRR processes were thus implemented under pressure, hindering early coordination at a regional level.
- Women are treated mainly as victims, despite some voluntarily joining and playing active roles in Boko Haram, including volunteering as suicide bombers.
- DDRRR implementation in the LCB has revealed gaps in legal frameworks that require revisions.
- DDRRR lacks public support in some LCB countries, as many people view it as blanket amnesty for Boko Haram members.
- Individuals according to why they joined and their roles within the groups is important for providing appropriate treatment. The specific needs of women and children should be taken into account.
- Affected West African countries should proactively formulate relevant legal and institutional frameworks. International and regional provisions and standards should be taken into account, including the need for transparent and predictable screening, prosecution and rehabilitation processes.
- Due to their position connecting the LCB and West Africa, Niger and Nigeria could play a key role in sharing lessons learned from DDRRR implementation.
- Community organisations, platforms, and media should be used by the DDRRR authorities to raise public awareness of the reintegration process. This would help prevent perceptions of general amnesty for Boko Haram members and preconceived ideas about the disengaged from undermining the process.
Introduction

Following the death of Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS), in May 2021, members and associates from this Boko Haram faction massively disengaged. Since at least 2015, various factors have led to individuals leaving Boko Haram,1 among them the pressure induced by military operations and intra- and inter-factional dynamics.2

Lake Chad Basin (LCB) countries’ management of exits from Boko Haram has come with a myriad of challenges and opportunities. Their experiences can help other countries, in West Africa and perhaps beyond, prepare and implement effective disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRRR) processes.

In a period when countries affected by violent extremism are increasingly open to exploring alternatives to the use of force, this Policy Brief highlights lessons drawing on the main findings and recommendations from past and ongoing ISS research on DDRRR dynamics and policies in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) has evolved in terms of conceptualisation, content and practice over the decades. There are different generations of DDR, which in themselves mark efforts to adapt a concept and a body of practice to the evolving reality of conflicts.

The first generation of DDR aims to address the needs of ex-combatants in transition to civilian status by laying down their arms, disengaging from combat roles and integrating into civilian life, with an emphasis on social and economic (re)integration. It may also entail integrating into security and defence forces in certain countries. Traditional DDR processes often entail a prior peace or ceasefire agreement.

The second generation includes situations with multiple belligerents and a possible challenge to the ceasefire. This generation also focuses on community socio-economic reintegration. This is known as disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRR).

In the face of insurgency-based conflicts like those involving violent extremism, a so-called third generation has emerged that deals with contexts of ongoing violence, without a peace agreement. This third generation, while building on the achievements of the first two, takes into account aspects of violent extremism prevention, integration, reconciliation and repatriation of foreign fighters due to the transnational character of armed groups. This is known as disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRRR).

This involves fostering defections, recovering, profiling and reintegrating or prosecuting individuals associated with violent extremist groups or other non-state armed groups in communities in social and economic terms. It also entails preventing new recruitment into these groups while seeking to gain community buy-in. In many situations, individuals leave the groups unarmed and many are victims of the groups. It is thus important to distinguish between the different profiles and experiences of people that exit violent extremist groups so that tailored approaches can be implemented. The emphasis is therefore on screening, to enable continuation or rehabilitation and reintegration.

Methodology

In addition to a review of literature on DDRRR, field data was collected between 2019 and 2022 during successive phases of research on DDRRR. This was done in the eight territories most affected by Boko Haram in the four LCB countries: North and Far North regions in Cameroon; Lac and Hadjer Lamis provinces in Chad; Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states in Nigeria; and Diffa region in Niger (Chart 1). Gombe state in Nigeria was also in focus because this is where the country’s DDR programme takes place. Individual interviews were conducted with former Boko Haram associates, members of their communities, security officials, administrative authorities and development or humanitarian agencies.

ISS developed and sustained a network of local research partners in the aforementioned regions. This enabled the tracking of successive waves of disengagement and monitoring of the dynamics surrounding or underlying these disengagements.3
**Key lessons from the Lake Chad Basin**

**Appropriate incentives**

Understanding former associates’ individual trajectories in violent extremist groups, especially the reasons why they engage and then disengage from these groups, is key. This enables tailored and relevant policy measures to be implemented, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.

In the LCB, former members of Boko Haram gave varying reasons for their engagement or recruitment into the group. Some joined Boko Haram to seek protection for themselves and their loved ones, some were lured by the promise of economic prosperity and some were convinced that they were fighting ‘jihad’. Some were forcibly recruited through abduction and the threat of execution; others were influenced by their peers or recruited by family members, among other reasons.

Similarly, those who left the group cited various reasons, such as unfulfilled economic aspirations; disillusionment; inter- and intra-group clashes that ensued; a reluctance to continue killing civilians, including Muslims; military operations; and non-kinetic measures by states.

The non-kinetic approach, such as the call for voluntary surrender and amnesty by the Nigerien government and Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) in Nigeria, has yielded positive results. LCB countries deliberately try to weaken Boko Haram’s fighting capacity by offering incentives for defection, thus diminishing the group’s human resources. LCB countries have taken advantage of Boko Haram members’ grievances and have capitalised on the fact that some people wanted a way out of the group.

Governments in the LCB countries have incentivised disengagement from Boko Haram by promising deserters safety, non-imprisonment, rehabilitation and reintegration.

---

Chart 1: The eight Boko Haram-affected states, regions and provinces in the Lake Chad Basin countries

Source: Authors
In Nigeria, this message was conveyed through radio broadcasts and leaflets dropped from the sky. In Chad, Cameroon and Niger, community-based radio stations broadcasting in local languages have been widely used to spread this kind of message. This was successful in convincing some Boko Haram members in all four LCB countries to desert.

Those who left the group cited reasons such as unfulfilled economic aspirations and disillusionment.

Understanding the logic of engagement and the recruits’ individual experiences is key to crafting incentives for disengagement. In affected West African countries, an increasing body of literature has documented engagement and group recruitment strategies. Such work provides an entry point to better understand the needs of violent extremist group recruits, and to generate context-specific incentives and discourse to encourage defection.

National and regional coordination

While Chadian, Cameroonian and Nigerien ex-associates have been found in Nigeria, Nigerian ex-associates have been found in Goudoumaria (Niger) and Mora and Meri (Cameroon) before being repatriated.

Each country has set up a structure to manage disengagement flows. In 2016, Nigeria set up OPSC. In 2018, Cameroon set up a National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration with regional coordination in Mora. In 2019, Niger set up the Goudoumaria centre and, in the same year, Chad set up a national DDR steering committee.

While the four countries have sought to address the Boko Haram crisis through the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Multinational Joint Task Force, they have not yet established a regional mechanism for managing disengagements. This has precluded a coordinated regional strategy for that purpose. LCB countries have nonetheless capitalised on the Governors’ Forum to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Similar to the LCB, borders in the Sahel and West Africa do not hinder the activities of the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, which have been particularly present and active in the tri-border area of Burkina, Mali and Niger, and increasingly in the north of coastal countries.

Affected West African countries may face the same challenges that the LCB countries have dealt with: initiatives too nationally anchored, without real regional coordination. The LCB experience points to the need to follow a simultaneous national and regional approach to DDRRR from the outset, through regional organisations that can foster experience sharing and coordination, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Liptako-Gourma States Integrated Development Authority, the G5 Sahel and the Accra Initiative.

This would allow for foundations to be laid from the start for a regional strategy, taking into account bridges of collaboration and experience sharing with regard to national initiatives. Such an approach would also permit more effective coordination of initiatives by international partners and alignment with national and regional priorities.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming, particularly taking into account the needs of women, is a key component of effective DDRRR programming. Understanding women’s experiences and diverse roles within Boko Haram is crucial in crafting relevant policies that directly address their needs.

Women are particularly targeted for abduction and often forcibly married to fighters. Thousands of cases of sexual abuse committed by Boko Haram against women and girls continue to be documented. Women and girls have also been forced to become suicide bombers, a dominant modus operandi of Boko Haram. Some have been subjected to sex and domestic slavery, while others have been forced to become heads of households following the death or disappearance of their male relatives.

However, not all women associated with Boko Haram are victims. Some voluntarily join the group and play important strategic roles as recruiters, encouraging men to take part in ‘jihad’ or volunteering themselves as suicide bombers. Many have also received combat training, such as dismantling, cleaning, assembling and firing rifles and detonating explosive devices. Some
women have also served as spies, specifically assigned to keep tabs on defectors, including their spouses, and surveilling military locations. Some former male fighters reported disengaging from Boko Haram and leaving without their wives’ knowledge for fear that they would report them to Boko Haram commanders.

The current blanket programming in the LCB that systematically treats all former female Boko Haram associates as victims is problematic. Given that women are considered victims, programmes focus only on their rehabilitation and reintegration, which in many cases are inadequate, neglecting the key aspect of radicalisation that some may have undergone. Unmet DDRRR expectations have in some cases pushed women to return to the group. Reintegration for women can only happen if there are screening processes in place that are designed to identify the different roles they play.

Not all women associated with Boko Haram are victims, some voluntarily join the group and play important strategic roles as recruiters.

As in the LCB, what would be instructive for other West African countries affected by violent extremism is a clearer understanding of the range of dynamics that underlie women’s association with and disengagement from violent extremist groups. This would help limit their connections to violent extremists. In addition, better consideration of women’s roles in recruitment, operations and fundraising could help weaken these groups in the long term. 13

Efforts aimed at limiting women’s links with these groups should also consider their ties with male relatives who are group members and critical conduits for women into these groups. Long-term responses to preventing violent extremism should involve reinforcing women’s resilience to the groups involved. 14

Institutional and legal framework

UNSC Resolution 2349 of 31 March 201715 on the Boko Haram crisis urges the member states of the LCBC to encourage defection from the ranks of Boko Haram factions and to develop ‘transparent and inclusive disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives’ for those leaving the factions, based on the relevant international provisions. Amendments to legal frameworks in countries such as Niger were applied in recent years. For instance, the Nigerien penal code was specifically amended in 2018 for voluntarily disengaged persons. According to this amendment,16 ex-associates of Boko Haram who were not directly involved in the conception and organisation of terrorist acts will not be subjected to criminal prosecution but will instead benefit from a reintegration programme. The amendment also provides for a right to compensation for terrorism victims.
Nationally across the different LCB countries, progress has been made towards elaborating legislation and creating or tasking institutions for reintegration. However, there is still no sufficient predictability in terms of prospects and outcomes for the individuals who disengage from Boko Haram. This lack of predictability, coupled with the mixed results of the processes, can discourage additional defections.

The development of a clear screening, prosecution or rehabilitation approach, based on the requirements of international law and local realities, is essential to sort individuals according to their background with armed groups and adapt treatment accordingly. DDRRR processes should also address the concerns and needs of former associates to enable them to reintegrate successfully and prevent recidivism.17

It is therefore important for affected West African countries which are yet to get to the DDRRR stage to start familiarising themselves with international requirements and regional lessons about the ways different countries have adapted their legal frameworks. In addition, as in the case of the LCB, the United Nations and the African Union should provide technical and financial support to countries as they gradually work their way towards DDRRR.

**Community engagement**

Reintegration is a key DDRRR pillar and ought to be accorded the same attention as other components. Linked to reintegration are communities that are usually at the receiving end of violent extremism, forced displacement, loss of lives and livelihood, destruction of infrastructure, and family separation.

Communities ought to be involved in decisions related to DDRRR if they are expected to receive the ex-associates of violent extremist groups. Some communities in the LCB have been shown to oppose the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-associates.18 This is often the case when these communities are not consulted and given a voice in the process. This has led to accusations against the government of rewarding perpetrators of violent extremism-related crimes.

There has to be a system that matches the empowerment that ex-associates receive during the DDRRR programme with the benefits that communities get. This is to prevent possible conflicts between reintegrated ex-associates and community members.

Similarly, community sensitisation on the reasons why some people join violent extremist groups is important. This can help prevent blanket stigmatisation, especially in cases where people were forced to join the group or joined to protect their families. Through sensitisation, communities are likely to view some of the ex-associates as victims, just like themselves.

**Through sensitisation, communities are likely to view some of the ex-associates as victims, just like themselves**

Processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses would need to be considered in the affected Sahelian and West African countries, in order to ensure accountability and serve justice.

**Conclusion**

Efficient DDRRR processes are important tools for states as they can help to weaken violent extremist groups but also prevent recidivism and further recruitment, while offering prospects for reconciliation. However, in order to take full advantage of DDRRR, states need to incentivise and facilitate the exit of former group members, while ensuring that there is a balance between national ownership and regional coordination of DDRRR processes.

The gender sensitivity of these processes is important, as is ensuring a legal and institutional framework, as well as financial and technical means. Political will and the clarity of the DDRRR processes are essential. The sensitisation of host communities about different motivations and experiences of individuals who engage with violent extremist groups is critical. The results obtained by states in this area are important because they can stimulate additional voluntary disengagement.

In the LCB, states were surprised by the waves of disengagement, although in most cases they had called on individuals to disengage from Boko Haram. Each of the four countries’ experiences in this area show progress.
but also point to numerous challenges and lessons to be learned. To some extent, other affected countries in West Africa and the Sahel share attributes with the LCB, and the pitfalls of the latter’s environment could inspire policy reflections and responses in the former. The lessons examined in this brief offer guidance that can set the stage for even further exploration of ideas and more efficient policy responses and interventions in West Africa.
Notes

1 Nigeria and Cameroon were the most concerned by the last waves of defection. See A Haruna, Nigerian military says over 14,000 Boko Haram fighters have surrendered so far, HumAngle, 2022, https://humanglemedia.com/nigerian-military-says-over-14000-boko-haram-fighters-have-surrendered-so-far/; and M Samuel et al., Boko Haram desertions could be the tipping point, ISS Today, 2021, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-desertions-could-be-the-tipping-point.


3 Additional field data was collected in the context of ISS's partnership with the United Nations University on a project titled 'Managing Exits from Armed Conflict'. As part of the project, a survey was conducted among at least 3,000 individuals in Cameroon, Chad and Niger in 2022, including former Boko Haram associates and members of their community.

4 Particularly as Boko Haram gave money and motorcycles in some cases.


6 This is a body made up of the eight governors of the Boko Haram-affected LCB regions/states. The essence is to bring these governors together annually for the purpose of jointly addressing issues that affect their regions, including insecurity. See, https://guardian.ng/news/undp-borno-govt-establish-lake-chad-basin-governors-forum/.


Visit our website for the latest analysis, insight and news

The Institute for Security Studies partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa’s future

Step 1  Go to www.issafrica.org

Step 2  Go to bottom right of the ISS home page and provide your subscription details
Read our latest publications on the Lake Chad Basin at www.issafrica.org
About the authors
Remadji Hoinathy is a Senior Researcher on Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region at the ISS.
Malik Samuel is a Researcher in the Lake Chad Basin Project at the ISS.
Akinola Olojo is Project Manager, ISS Regional Office for West Africa, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.

About ISS Policy Briefs
Policy Briefs provide concise analysis to inform current debates and decision making. Key findings or recommendations are listed on the inside cover page, and infographics allow busy readers to quickly grasp the main points.

About the ISS
The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa’s future. The ISS is an African non-profit with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible policy research, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

Development partners

Government of the Netherlands

This policy brief was funded by the government of the Netherlands. The ISS is also grateful for support from the Robert Bosch Foundation and the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.