

Managing the journey out of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin

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In the highly volatile Lake Chad Basin region, dealing with ex-Boko Haram combatants and associates presents complex strategic and policy challenges for local, national and regional stakeholders. Understanding why and how individuals journey out of extremism is necessary to shape approaches to rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation. These insights also provide a path from countering violent extremism to peacebuilding and long-term stability.

Key findings

- ▶ Individuals choose to disengage from violent extremist groups in the Lake Chad Basin because of circumstances, opportunity and expectations. The reasons for individual disengagement overlap with intragroup, extra-group and structural rationales.
- ▶ Men and women are not given equal priority during processing and rehabilitation and therefore reintegration outcomes are different for female and male ex-associates. The variable reasons for women's engagement and their roles in Boko Haram are not comprehensively addressed.
- ▶ Communities that support initiatives that prevent and counter violent extremism could be more effectively integrated into rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation processes.
- ▶ Disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRRR) initiatives that have been developed by Lake Chad Basin governments are nationally focused and seldom address the regional nature of the crisis. Overlapping national and regional challenges necessitate more holistic DDRRR approaches based on cooperation, learning and sharing lessons, and building on successes.
- ▶ The lack of investment in multifaceted approaches to defeating violent extremist groups undermines holistic and sustainable solutions.

Recommendations

- ▶ Standard reception-screening-profiling mechanisms should be used for the receiving and screening ex-Boko Haram associates.
- ▶ There should be regional standards and protocols guiding demobilisation processes in the four Lake Chad Basin countries. These standards and protocols should be backed up by enabling legislation.
- ▶ Military responses should provide a more holistic approach towards demobilisation. This should include respect for the human rights of ex-Boko Haram associates, particularly when they are detained before going into the deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes.
- ▶ Community resilience and participation should be at the centre of stabilisation efforts in the Lake Chad region. Communities should be involved in the different stages of the rehabilitation process, including design and implementation. In particular, specific policies addressing the role of women and children in rehabilitation should be created.
- ▶ Full national and regional ownership of DDR processes will help avoid the replication of efforts and ensure a more efficient use of resources.

Introduction

Disengagement is the process by which individuals cease to be mobilised in support of a violent extremist movement.¹ Disengagement² of ex-Boko Haram associates³ reduces membership from within the ranks of the violent extremist group (VEG)⁴ as opposed to preventing the recruitment of members for the VEG.

In the Lake Chad Basin (LCB), the disengagement and dissociation of violent extremists⁵ is a particularly complex process that places individual and collective choices, as well as exit pathways and strategies, at the centre of multiple policymaking and programmatic processes.⁶

The African Union-Lake Chad Basin Commission's Regional Stabilisation Strategy (RSS)⁷ aspires to regionally harmonise disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDR⁸) approaches and standards against the backdrop of varying national approaches to a regional phenomenon. Disengagement provides an opportunity for LCB countries to transition from prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to stabilisation and peacebuilding interventions.

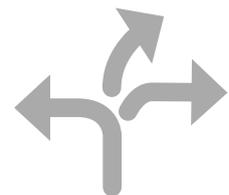
Disengagement is the process by which individuals cease to be mobilised in support of a violent extremist movement like Boko Haram

By exploring why and how disengagement from Boko Haram occurs in the LCB area, this report highlights why it is important to effectively implement Pillar III of the RSS strategy in the four LCB countries.⁹ Leaving Boko Haram is often the start of an uncertain and unpredictable journey from disengagement to reintegration. This report also highlights the importance of understanding the context, different approaches and priorities of specific countries before progressing from disengagement to P/CVE and peacebuilding.

Methodology

Research methods on terrorism and violent extremism highlight the importance of personal narratives in understanding individuals' journeys into and out of terrorism.¹⁰ An interview guide was used for this study and life history interviews were conducted with men and women who are ex-Boko Haram associates and peer group non-associates. To understand the nature, patterns and challenges of disengagement and disengagement programming in the LCB, interviews were also conducted with community-based actors and multilevel stakeholders responsible for shaping policy and programming on ex-Boko Haram associates.

Over 15 months, starting from March 2019, an eleven-member research team generated primary data with ex-Boko Haram associates in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria (Map 1). The choice of research sites was based on security



LEAVING BOKO HARAM
IS AN UNCERTAIN AND
UNPREDICTABLE JOURNEY

and access considerations obtained from mapping attacks in the area. This resulted in continual adjustments to the plans as the security situation in the region changed frequently. The research team prioritised areas known for recruitment and kidnapping of individuals into VEGs and areas where large numbers of ex-associates are gathered. These included communities, sites where internally displaced people (IDPs) are gathered and rehabilitation sites in LCB countries.

By negotiating access and building trust at different levels of engagement, the research team could successfully adapt to the specific contexts in a region which is characterised by different approaches and priorities when dealing with disengagement from Boko Haram.

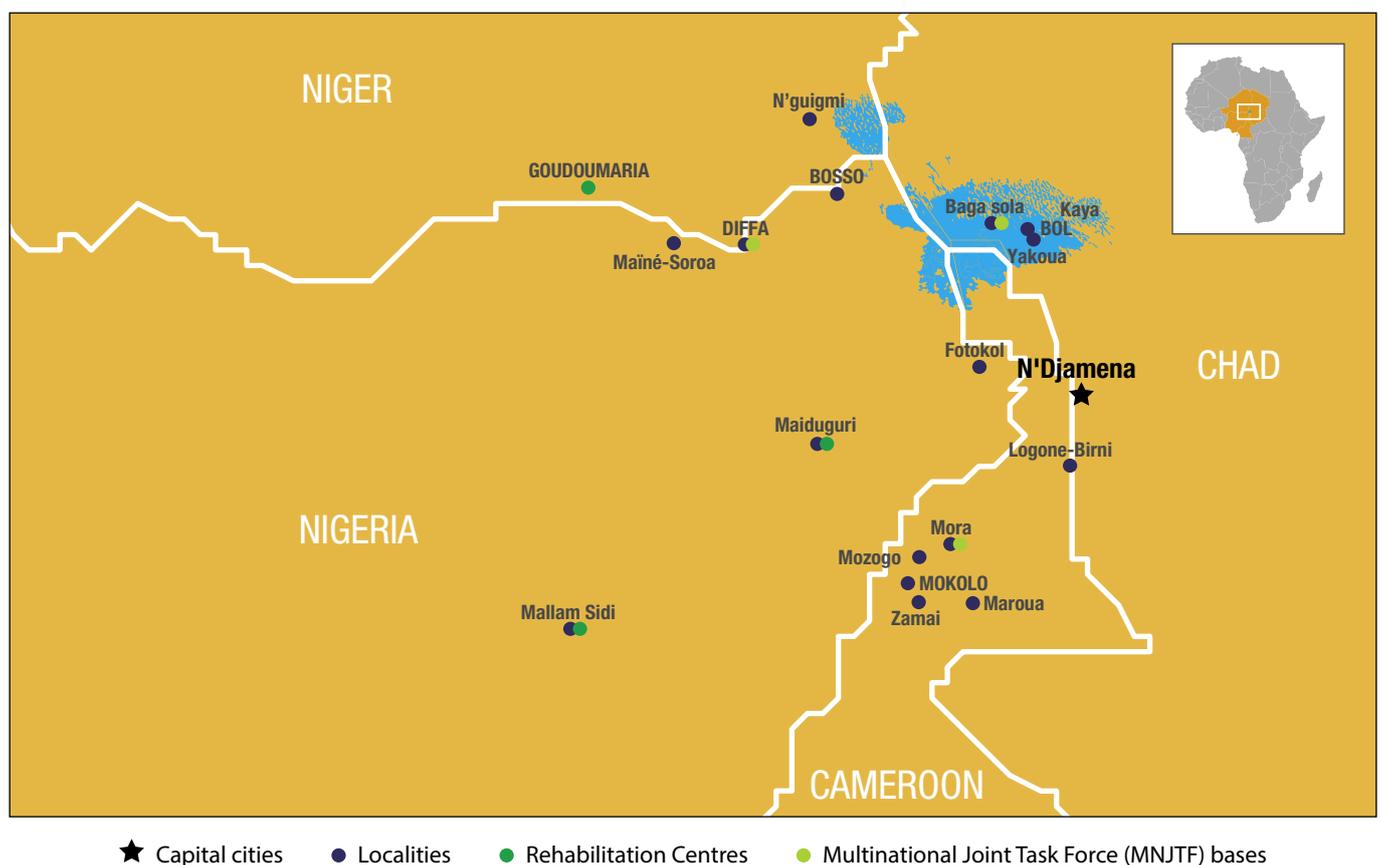
Interviews with ex-Boko Haram associates were facilitated by Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC)¹¹ in Gombe State, Nigeria and the Goudoumaria¹² Reception Centre,¹³ in the Diffa region, Niger. However, in Chad, many of the interviews were conducted in community settings, given the absence of established rehabilitation spaces. In Cameroon,¹⁴ ex-Boko Haram associates were

accessible at the facility of the Cameroonian Multinational Joint Task Force in Mora (where they were waiting for a rehabilitation site to be set up), as well as in the IDP camps and within the communities.

Security incident monitoring in the LCB and secondary data collection through a literature and legal-administrative documentation review complemented the primary data collection and policy engagement processes. In addition to formal interviews, meetings and consultative visits were held with government officials, community-based organisations (CBOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international partners.

Methodological limitations necessitated caution in the interpretation of data.¹⁵ The research team worked collaboratively to avoid purposive sampling challenges while researching in areas with ongoing insecurity and military operations. After obtaining administrative authorisation to access these areas, the team focused on identifying ex-Boko Haram associates who were willing to participate in the project. Fear, uncertainty and

Map 1: Research sites



stigmatisation pervaded the contexts within which ex-associates lived and it was not possible to factor how much this could have shaped their personal narratives.

To meet the study’s objectives, the research team identified four main categories of interlocutors, as outlined in Table 1.

Understanding disengagement

The terrorist group Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS), better known as Boko Haram, originated in Nigeria in 2002, turned violent in 2009 and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in March 2015.¹⁶ The emergent Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) loosely became part of a global terrorism franchise connecting well beyond its regionalised LCB sanctuaries. Following a split within the group in August 2016, ISIS recognised the Abu-Musab Al-Barnawi faction, as opposed to the Abubakar Shekau-led JAS faction. By 2020, violent extremism in the LCB had reportedly already caused more than 40 000 deaths¹⁷ and 2.5 million displaced persons.¹⁸

Boko Haram has largely adapted to the predominantly securitarian regional responses deployed by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).¹⁹ However, since the effective deployment of the MNJTF following

its authorisation by the African Union in 2015 and the 2016 fracture in JAS, LCB states have been confronted with the disengagement of ex-Boko Haram associates.²⁰ This created policy and programmatic imperatives to promote disengagement to prevent and counter violent extremism and build peace.

In Cameroon, disengagement officially began in 2016 with approximately 584 surrenders to date. Among them, 155 were held at the MNJTF facility in Mora,²¹ before being transferred to the Meri transfer centre. Three of the ex-associates fled the centre and two others were taken to court for crimes committed.

Some of those hosted at the MNJTF camp returned with their wives (53) and children (111) who moved into the community. Following basic screening by administrative and security authorities, the ex-associates were released into the community or transferred to the Meri transfer centre. Those released into the community were divided between IDP camps in Zamai and Mozogo, as well as villages that were relatively safe like Oupi, Madoussa, Gabas, Mabas, Koza and Zamai.

For the ex-associates transferred to the Meri transfer centre, the rehabilitation process had just started. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is

Table 1: Research interlocutors interviewed for the study

Category	Identification	Sites
1	Ex-Boko Haram associates	Villages and host communities IDP camps Rehabilitation centres Military camps pending rehabilitation Prison (Niger only)
2	Relatives and peers of ex-Boko Haram associates, i.e. wives, brothers, cousins, parents and members of their entourage	Towns Villages IDP camps
3	Peers who resisted recruitment into Boko Haram	Villages Host communities IDP camps
4	C4a – Territorial and administrative authorities	Sub-prefect, judicial authorities, gendarmes, military authorities, National Committee for DDR, traditional authorities of host communities, vigilant and development committees
	C4b – Humanitarian actors, international governmental and non-governmental organisations, and local actors	Examples: Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré, Association de Lutte contre les Violences faites aux Femmes, Association pour le Développement Economique et Social du Lac

supporting the Cameroonian government to develop screening tools and processes that are yet to be validated by the Cameroonian Government.

Disengagement in Nigeria began as early as 2015, with an official figure of more than 1 000 ex-associates disengaged to date. Since its inception in 2016, OPSC has received about 893 people, 881 of whom have already completed the process. The programme graduated its last batch of 601 former associates on 25 July 2020. This batch included 14 people with foreign nationalities: eight Cameroonians, five Chadians, and one Nigerian.

In Borno, at state level, the state government runs the Bulumkutu rehabilitation centre for women and children. The centre is supervised by the state government Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other NGOs. It was set up to receive women and children released from military detention or evacuated during military operations. After a rehabilitation period of between one and three months, they are released back into society.

Accurate records on the number of ex-Boko Haram associates in Lake Chad Basin remain elusive

In Niger, surrender from Boko Haram began in 2016 in the Diffa region and was followed by an offer of amnesty and reinsertion into communities by the Minister of Interior and Public Security in December 2016.²² Of the 243 ex-associates who participated in rehabilitation programming in Goudoumaria, 125 graduated from the centre on 7 December 2019 to return to their communities. Meanwhile, about 1 300 ex-associates were arrested by the security forces and were reportedly tried and detained.²³

In Chad, disengagements began in early 2016 and about 2 200 people have so far deserted.²⁴ However, a recent study states that there are 4 142 ex-Boko Haram associates in Lac Province.²⁵ This discrepancy shows the challenge of obtaining up-to-date official figures.

Disengagement: local labels and shifting numbers

Differentiated labelling of ex-Boko Haram associates as 'repentant', 'surrendered' or 'returnees' within national contexts, often belies their complex individual life histories. This heterogeneous group includes former combat and combat support operatives, hostages, forced labourers and inhabitants of spaces previously occupied by Boko Haram. Life histories also show changing roles within the group. While screening gives authorities access to facilities for prosecution and rehabilitation, labelling influences each individual's reintegration by either accepting or stigmatising the role they played in Boko Haram.

Although numbers would make a difference in the scaling of DDR interventions, accurate records for ex-Boko Haram associates in the LCB remain elusive. This is largely due to the lack of clarity in categorisation and shifting contextual dynamics. Cameroon reported approximately 584,²⁶ Chad 2 200,²⁷ Niger 243²⁸ and Nigeria²⁹ at least 1 200³⁰ individuals at different stages of rehabilitation and reintegration.

However, these numbers do not include individuals who escaped the screening processes due to the absence of established DDR programmes in Chad and Cameroon. Neither do they include the 1 300 individuals in Niger who were screened and committed to prison.

It is difficult to get accurate statistics when there is limited administrative authority and individuals attempt to return directly to their communities³¹ and escape official counts. The varying levels of insecurity and instability in the LCB further complicate the screening of individuals for risk level, involvement and criminality and this has a knock-on effect on processing them. Screening and processing are requisites for effective multidimensional DDR programming.

In addition to the unreliable statistics, interventions and processes of disengagement from Boko Haram are occurring within a context marked by ongoing violence. In the absence of a peace agreement, local communities continue to be both victims and sympathisers of Boko Haram.

Even as national approaches continue to dominate a regional crisis, getting the numbers right will

contribute to a better understanding of the possible impact of disengagement on Boko Haram's membership numbers. While local labels are useful, standardised categories will be more useful when designing both rehabilitation and reintegration pathways. The decision to disengage does not rest on one argument but is connected to many considerations,³² hence the need to go behind the numbers into personal life histories.

Why they disengage: choices and strategies

Evidence points to disengagement from Boko Haram being triggered by both personal and a broader set of logics. These reasons for disengagement are often interconnected and form a network of reasons for disengagement. Individual life histories show that disengagement results from a blend of circumstances, choice, opportunity and expectations often pondered over time. However, it is also based on expectations about rehabilitation, forgiveness (or not) and reintegration. Disengagement logics often mirror engagement logics.

There are a number of reasons why individuals disengage, but three have been considered in this report. They are:

- **Disillusionment:** Individuals who joined Boko Haram because of promises of socioeconomic ascension, justice or protection, were soon disappointed by the difficult conditions within the group which has its own norms and social hierarchies.
- **Misalignment of objectives:** Experience showed some ex-associates that serving the group did not often always align with their plans for the future. They were mandated to prioritise the objectives and agenda of the group or leaders above their interests. There was therefore very little time and freedom for personal plans and they often ended up working or fighting for the group without any possibility of fulfilling their economic agendas.
- **A lack of consistency in messaging and internal practices of the VEGs:** Dissonance between religious recruitment messaging and irreligious group practices was common. For those who had joined because of religious or ideological appeal, the discovery that material considerations often superseded religious issues within the group was disconcerting.

The situation was amplified by the fact that religious recruitment messaging of Boko Haram ended up contrasting with daily practices, notably regarding cruelty towards other Muslims and civilians (especially women, children, the elderly, and those with disabilities). Some also found this undistinguished violence contrary to Islamic principles. Sometimes it was the planning of attacks against their own villages and families, though strategically and operationally important for Boko Haram to hold them in allegiance, that drove some people away.



DISILLUSIONMENT WAS
A KEY REASON FOR LEAVING
BOKO HARAM

I left the group because I finally became aware of the atrocities and the crimes. They're using religion to accomplish their goals. I very much regretted having joined.

Male, 18–24 years old, Goudoumaria Centre, Niger, December 2019

I felt very bad. I didn't go there voluntarily. I was duped and what I saw there wasn't right. I was told if I try to run away, they'll go and kill my parents and that's why I stayed with them.

Male, 18–24 years old, Mora, Mayo Sava, Cameroon, December 2019

Everything the group does is contrary to the Muslim religion: killings, kidnappings, rapes, physical assaults, and so on are facts that religion condemns.

Male, 18–24 years old, Goudoumaria Centre, Niger, December 2019

I considered leaving after discovering that what we did was wrong and not godly, but when I saw the leaflets from the sky encouraging individuals to leave Boko Haram in exchange for amnesty, I finally made up my mind to leave.

Male, 24 years old, Gombe, Nigeria, February 2020

It's the beheading of human beings like me that I didn't like. That's why I ran away. It was the others who were slitting people's throats and I often witnessed it. I didn't like it at all.

Male, 18–24 years old, Koussiri, Lac, Chad, November 2019

I was always in fear of dying. One day they locked us in a prison for three days without food and water because they felt we didn't want to do what they were expecting us to do.

Male ex-hostage, 24 years old, Mokolo, Mayo Tsanaga, Cameroon, October 2019

'I was a language interpreter (Kotoko) and facilitated the execution of Boko Haram instructions within the hostage groups. I was not paid for they said that the work we do is for God. Living conditions became difficult, we were no longer treated as we used to be. One day, in the middle of the night, I was with my four children and two others, including a fighter and a woman. We had decided to run away when the others went to fight, it was very dangerous to run away because if we were caught it would automatically mean death. My husband had stayed with them, he asked us to come and he will join us. Until now he has not joined us, that already worries us, we don't know if he is still alive.

Female, 35–44 years old, Makary, Logone and Chari, Cameroon, November 2019

It is often interpersonal factors that motivate combatants to exit violent extremist groups. Maintaining contact with relatives is a double-edged sword because these contacts are important for the recruitment strategies of the group and in terms of surrendering. Some of the ex-associates eventually gave in to pressure from their parents, friends or wives who had stayed in the villages.

I felt very bad, I was always thinking about my family, my parents, my brothers, in the village. I could also see that what they were doing there was very bad.

Male, 24 years old, Mora, Mayo Sava, Cameroon, December 2019

Because of my role, I regularly came in contact with elderly people and they advised me to quit Boko Haram. I thought they were only saying so because they were angry with me or did not mean well for me. In spite of how I treated them by taking away their properties, they did not stop advising me. At first, I dismissed them but with time I started giving thoughts to what they said and considered quitting.

Male, 19 years old, Bakassi IDP camp, Maiduguri, Nigeria, December 2019

We called our parents, who were already repentant, for information. They reassured us that there was no problem if we returned the government would welcome us.

Female, 35–44 years old, Bol, Lac, Chad, September 2019

These reasons for disengagement are further influenced by the conditions within, between and outside the violent extremist groups. Conditions within Boko Haram have gradually deteriorated from 2013 to 2014 onwards, as military operations intensified. This deterioration takes several forms, including the chronic scarcity or rarity of food; the very strict control exercised over individuals, especially those who have been forcibly involved

and corporal punishment in cases of suspicion of misbehaviour; the deprivation and lack of basic amenities (clothing, bedding, etc.); and excessive workloads for the benefit of the group without access to the fruits of one's labour.

I ran away with my kid because I wasn't okay. If not, I would have stayed with my husband and children. We don't even have enough to eat, we're always afraid.

Female, 18–24 years old, Kalakachi, Mozogo, Cameroon, November 2019

I left the group because of several reasons – lack of freedom, lack of food in quality and quantity and various forms of abuse.

Male, 18–24 years old, Goudoumaria Centre, Niger, December 2019

Survival became difficult as time passed. We were not allowed to leave, meaning we could not get condiments to cook, we could not grind our grains. We ate what we didn't want only because we needed to stay alive.

Male, 56 years old, Bakassi IDP camp, Maiduguri, Nigeria, August 2019

Boko Haram is full of uncertainty. When you're there, one day they may ask you to fight for them, but when you refuse, they kill you. Then there's not enough good food there. You need authorisation from them to move a step. While here you can go about your business freely.

Male, 35–44 years old, Bol, Lac, Chad, November 2019

The split within the group, although providing potential recruits with multiple engagement motives, has led to factional fighting and settling of scores. This has further aggravated the security situation. In addition to the insecurity generated by this situation, it has also been a disappointment for some combatants.

The split in Boko Haram made me question the motives of our leaders. I felt they were selfish and not interested in God's work. So, I decided to leave.

Male, 25 years old, Gombe, Nigeria, February 2020

Boko Haram splintered in two groups: one led by Mamman Nur and the other by Shekau. After this split, seven marabouts from the Lac province were shot by Shekau's followers because they decided to follow Al Barnawi. Then all the nationals of the Lac fled to Cameroon before coming to Fitinè, Koulfoua and Baga Sola.

Male, 35–44 years old, Bol, Lac, Chad, September 2019

The permanent insecurity and uncertainty – both within the group and as a result of the military offensives – also favoured surrenders. Constant fighting, counterattacks and inter-factional fighting make life in some Boko Haram camps arduous. Both factions also seem to have built internal surveillance and intelligence capacity to prevent disengagement.

Airstrikes have accentuated uncertainty and contributed to disengagement. Fear of being killed is constant and pushes people to surrender, even those who have voluntarily committed themselves to Boko Haram. Internally, regular physical abuse and summary executions of certain elements adjudged by Boko Haram to be problematic especially recaptured deserters, contribute to this permanent fear.

There is too much suffering there and they are watching everyone's movements, if you try to escape and they find out, they'll slit your throat on the spot.

Male, 52 years old, Mokolo, Mayo Tsanaga, former hostages' camp, Cameroon, October 2019

I was forced to stay in the group. They'll kill me the minute I try to leave them. My little brother died trying to leave them. There is no solidarity or tolerance. The risk is death. They hunt down anyone who escapes to kill them.

Male, 25–34 years old, Goudoumaria Centre, Niger, December 2019



BOKO HARAM'S SPLIT
CAUSED INFIGHTING AND
INSECURITY

In Boko Haram, I didn't feel comfortable. I lived in complete insecurity. When someone breaks a rule, they are executed. Every time you make a move you have to inform them so that they will allow you, but if you don't do that, you are executed. For example, when you want to go to a certain market you have to inform them. And where you go, there are also people who inform them of your arrival.

Male ex-associate, 35–44 years old, Bol, Lac, Chad, November 2019

Sensitisation activities, calls for desertion and promises of amnesty launched by the various states have been very instrumental in the decision making that leads to surrender. The appeal by the Minister of the Interior of Niger and the Governor of the Diffa region, for example, was widely heard. The Nigerian state also distributed leaflets from planes flying over the Boko Haram camps to incite desertion. Associations, community radio stations and direct contact with parents also helped to relay and reinforce these messages. Based on research that examines why people disengage from armed movements, messaging should also seek to promote negative views about specific VEGs, rather than to instill positive values.³³

One day I heard on the radio that the government is asking us to go back home, that they are not going to kill us, that we give up our weapons and that if we find a way out in Cameroon, Chad or Niger, if we returned, they won't do anything to us.

Male, 18–24 years old, Mora, Mayo Sava, Cameroon, December 2019

One day, there were leaflets from a plane dropping in our village. They carried messages encouraging people to come out and surrender and that nothing bad would happen to them. We had people in the village who were able to read the leaflets. This made us more determined to come out.

Male, 25 years old, Gombe, Nigeria, February 2020

Once we came to attack around Kaiga and I took the opportunity to call one of my brothers who is a soldier. He convinced me to return to the village because where I am with the Boko Haram, it is dangerous. It was he who made me aware of the dangers of being with Boko Haram.

Male, 25 years old, Gombe, Nigeria, February 2020

The conviction or desire to leave Boko Haram is only the first step. The next is finding the path through which to exit the group. The life histories of ex-combatants highlight winding pathways towards legality.

Exit pathways out of Boko Haram

There are three main categories of ex-associates: voluntary, liberated and involuntary. Voluntary ex-associates normally planned their exit from the group and found a pathway to safety despite the risks of death or injury. Liberated ex-associates are individuals who were coerced to work the fields or serve as human shields for Boko Haram during military operations and who were left behind as the group retreated in the face of military operations. Involuntary ex-associates are those who, having willingly joined Boko Haram, surrendered to security and defence forces as an exit strategy.

3

TYPES OF EX-ASSOCIATES
ARE: VOLUNTARY,
INVOLUNTARY & LIBERATED

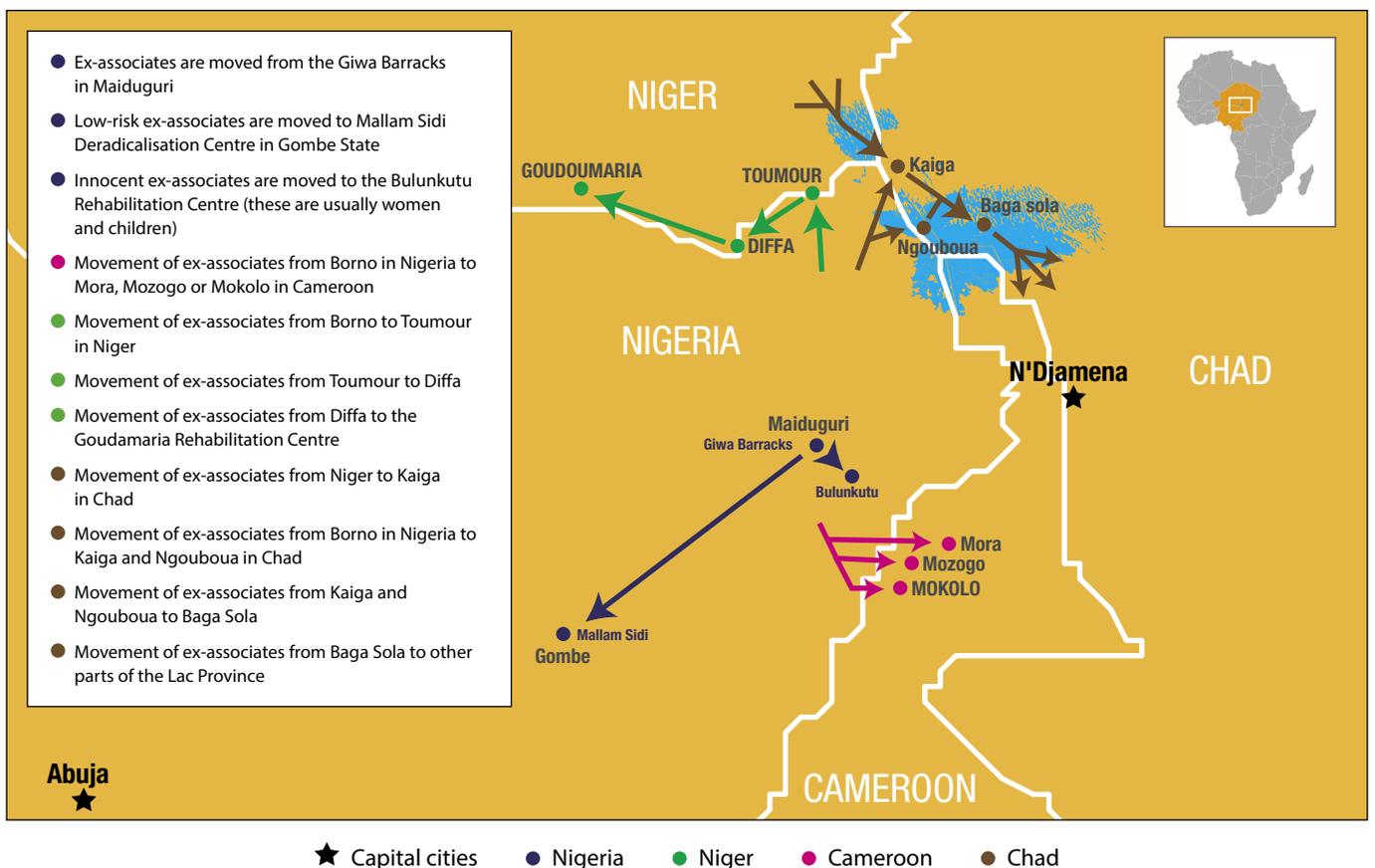
Based on the interviews and areas where the ex-Boko Haram associates were interviewed, pathways out of the group were largely determined by individual strategies, opportunities and post-exit expectations. Individuals also chose paths that led them to negotiate re-entry and processing into their communities of origin but were also based on expected pathways for rehabilitation and reintegration even if it meant surrendering across national borders.

The trajectories and modalities for exit from Boko Haram have been different for different countries. The Nigerian and Nigerian regions of Lake Chad, bordering Chad and Cameroon, as well as the areas around Sambisa have been the areas where most of the ex-combatants have been located, not necessarily in the same camps but often with movement within the area because of military attacks and harassment.

Geographical routes out of Boko Haram

Understanding the routes into or out of Boko Haram and the areas in which they are active shows the vulnerability of deserters and the uncertainty of disengagement. Identifying their points of re-entry into communities underlines the necessity to harness reception capacities at these locations and extract them from battlespace. Given Boko Haram's mobility and

Map 2: Geographical routes out of Boko Haram



adaptability, it is necessary to constantly track emerging routes which deserters use to avoid being intercepted by the group.

In Cameroon, the former hostages (who had been taken en masse into Boko Haram camps) from Zamaï were held in Tchegnegne in Nigeria, those from Mora were mainly held in Gahabouya, Kumche and Sambisa. These are areas located on the immediate border with Cameroon. From Tchegnegne, Modogoa, Gousdavriket-Moskota Barrage, Golodjé, Vouzi, Moskota and then on to Mozogo were the most used routes.

Departures were usually organised in groups. Opportunities for quitting Boko Haram came when members departed for combat, at nightfall, when army offensives caused chaos, and during the daily tasks requiring movement, especially valid for the shepherds and traders.

In Nigeria, it should be remembered that until mid-2013, Boko Haram's fighters were visibly in the heart of Maiduguri, the Borno state capital. Driven out of Maiduguri, the group spread to towns and villages, with Sambisa serving as its base. At its peak in 2014, the group controlled an area the size of Belgium³⁴ in northeastern Nigeria, stretching across Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states.

This area included local governments such as Gwoza, Bama, Dikwa, Kukawa, Monguno, Madagali, Mafa, Marte, Kaga, Konduga, Mobbar, Gamboru-Ngala, Kala-Balge, Abadam, Gujba, and Michika which were all under its control. Most of the interviewees for this report are from towns and villages under these local governments. Recapturing these areas from Boko Haram by 2015 was an opportunity to free hostages, arrest fighters and encourage desertion from the group.

In Niger, the region of Diffa was the one where most recruitment took place. Localities such as Diffa itself, Chetimari, Gueskerou, Mainé-Soroa and Bosso were the most affected. Villages on the border, such as Leila Karé, Toumbo-Bokoa and Bokoa occasionally hosted itinerant camps comprising Nigerien members of Boko Haram. Located on the border with Nigeria, not far from Chad, these villages are the same villages through which Chadians passed.

The town of Toumour, 75 km north-east of Diffa, was the gateway for Nigerien deserters, who were taken to the transit centre of Diffa and then to the rehabilitation centre in Goudoumaria, 193 km from Diffa. Desertion in Niger followed the same methods as in the other countries: carefully prepared, often in groups, and opportunistic such as at night or dawn, at prayer time, during attacks or production tasks.

Chadian ex-Boko Haram associates were based mainly in the areas of Tumbo Djini, Bokoa, Leila Karé (in Niger), Tumbun Jaki and Sambisa (in Nigeria). Many of them passed through several locations and very few reached Boko Haram camps in the Sambisa forest. The border towns of Kaiga Kindjiria and Tchoukoutalia were the returning gateways. From Kaiga Kindjiria, they were then taken either directly to Ngouboua, or first to Tchoukoutalia then Ngouboua, and then Baga Sola. Baga Sola was the screening point before they returned to their villages of origin, IDP camps or prison.

Given Boko Haram's mobility, emerging routes used by deserters should be constantly tracked

Departure from Boko Haram was more or less always in groups, at least for one family. Although all departures were carefully planned, it was necessary to wait for an appropriate opportunity to leave. Indeed, the cruel fate suffered by the recaptured deserters necessitated high degrees of caution. This is why departures often took place at night, when Boko Haram fighters were engaged in combat and when the army was carrying out offensives against the group.

Post-disengagement processing: country snapshots

Depending on the country, initiatives to manage disengagement vary, involving different actors and using different legal and non-legal tools. Stakeholders involved in the management of disengagement flows vary according to both context and situation. Most often, authority figures are involved by chance or because of their administrative responsibilities.

Cameroon: Where is the NDDRC?

In Cameroon, the first actors in the chain were the vigilance and security committees (COVIS) who, in most cases, were the first contacts for the disengaged:

We, vigilance committees, welcome them and send them to the sub-prefect. They are then taken to the police. As a vigilance committee, we spot those who enter the villages and we inform the sub-prefecture who registers them to send them to the police for investigation.

Member of COVIS, Mozogo, Cameroon, November 2019

The screening of disengaged individuals was conducted by an inter-agency security team through interrogations by the Officier de Police Judiciaire (OPJ).³⁵ Based on these screening, the team – comprising the army, the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), the gendarmerie and the police – separated individuals who were to be prosecuted from those who were to benefit from reintegration. Prosecution occurred under the provisions of Cameroon's Law on the Suppression of Acts of Terrorism 2014.

Traditional authorities (village chiefs, *lawan*³⁶ and *lamido*³⁷) and administrative authorities (mayor, division officer, sub-division officer) then took over. Initially, the latter took charge of the disengaged people by offering them IDP campsites and organising assistance. For many disengaged individuals, their villages are in areas under almost daily threat from JAS attacks. Since 2016, Sector 1 of the MNJTF in Mora has been instrumental in hosting some 200 disengaged persons in the camps.

Despite having managed the situation in a similar way to Chad, in February 2018, Cameroon set up an inter-ministerial committee coordinated by the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation to coordinate actions aimed at deradicalising and resocialising former members of Boko Haram.

In November 2018, a National Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) of former combatants from Boko Haram and armed groups from the north-west and south-west regions was established by presidential decree. Its mission was to manage the return to civilian life of ex-combatants from Boko Haram and armed groups from the Anglophone regions who wish to surrender.

The decree creating the NDDRC provided information on the composition of the committee and its material and competent fields but did not provide a framework for its use. Moreover, it put together two distinct types of crises each with different dynamics.

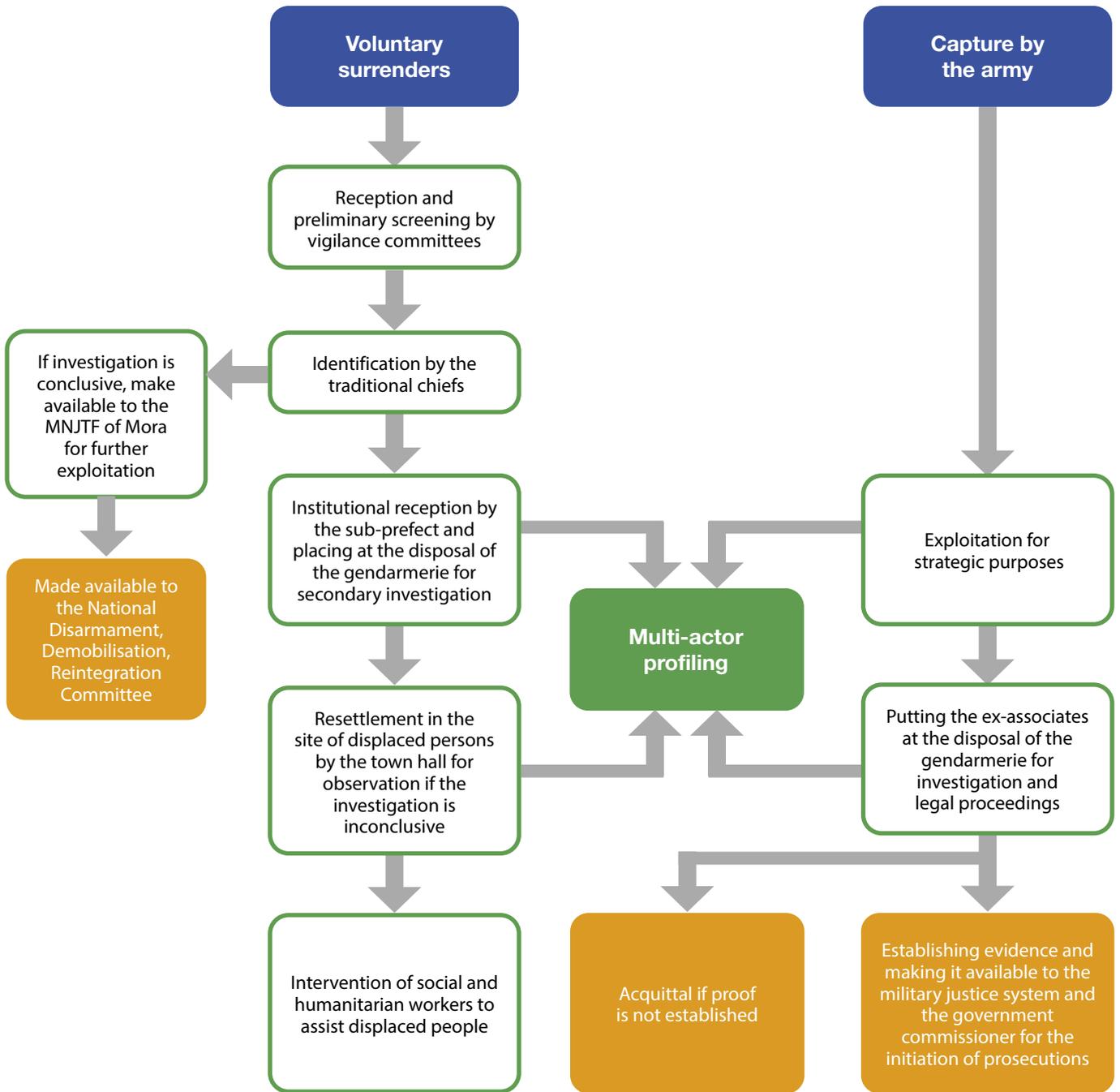
The structures that cater for the disengaged are being put in place but at a slow pace. After four years in the Mora camp, the ex-associates still have no clarity on their future and the structures set up within the framework of the NDDRC have not yet taken over to offer them support. This long period of uncertainty about the future discourages those who wish to disengage.

AFTER

4

YEARS IN MORA CAMP,
EX-ASSOCIATES HAD NO
CLARITY ON THEIR FUTURE

Figure 1: Process of reintegration in Cameroon



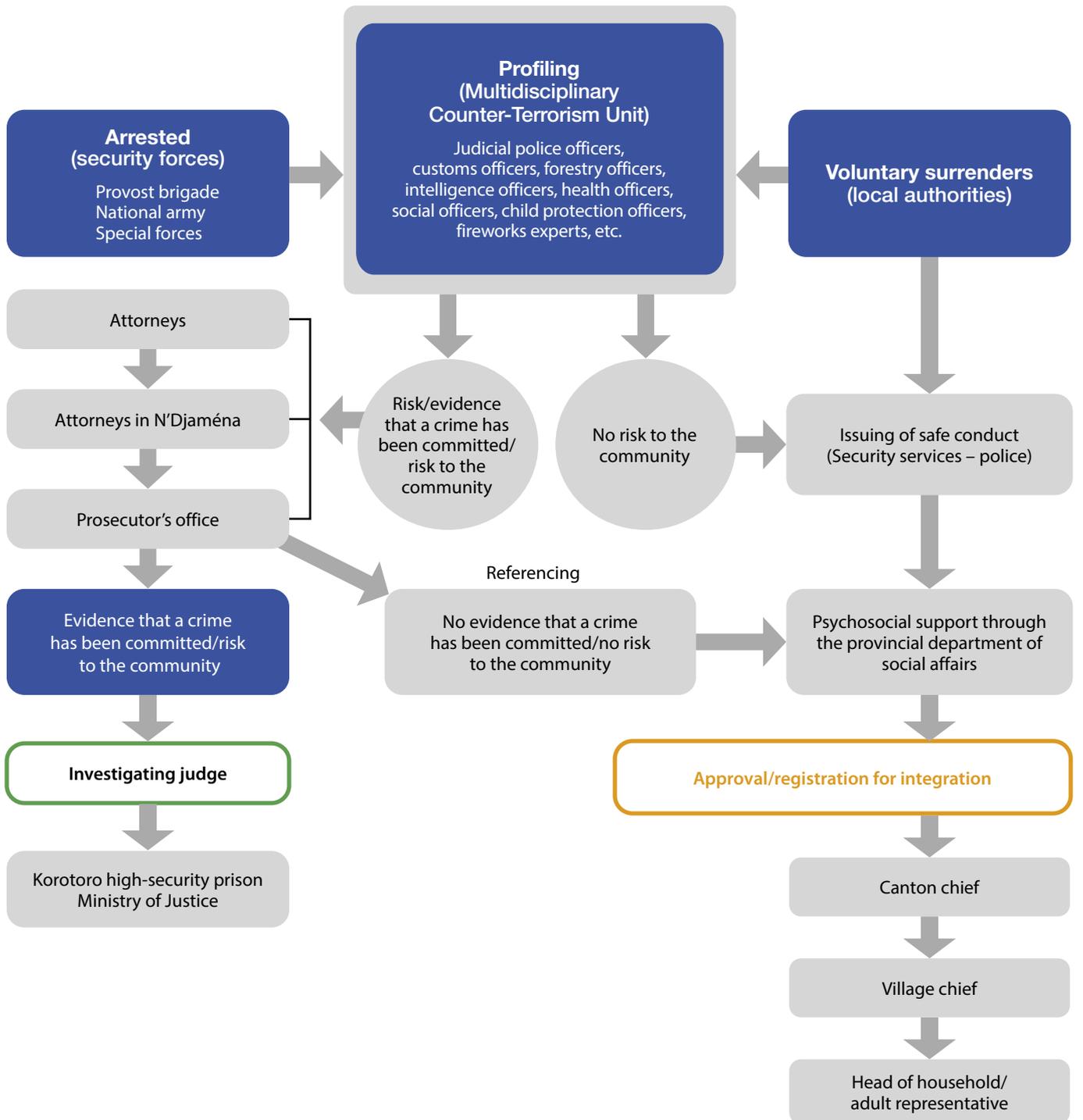
Chad: mediated local reintegration

In Chad, the encounter between community members and disengaged ex-Boko Haram associates was coincidental. It involved community members whose daily occupational activities put them at cross paths with the ex-associates. Deserters met herders, fishermen and farmers around the villages as first interlocutors and intermediaries. These intermediaries then linked them

with second category actors who were mainly local administrators (traditional chiefs, the village community and canton chiefs).

Eventually, the deserters were linked to third category actors who were the state administration and security services to which traditional leaders refer ex-Boko Haram associates. In most cases, it was the soldiers in the forward operating sector of Kaiga Kindjiria or

Figure 2: Process of reintegration in Chad



Ngouboua who recovered, searched and provided initial food assistance to these ex-associates.

An inter-agency counter-terrorism unit, based at the Kilometre 7 Camp in Baga Sola, conducted screenings to separate perceived high-risk individuals (with evidence that a crime had been committed while with

Boko Haram) from low-risk individuals (with no evidence of a crime committed beyond membership of a terrorist group). This happened through investigation, evidence gathering and interrogation.

High-risk individuals were handed over to the justice system for prosecution. Low-risk individuals were issued

with a safe-conduct certificate by the police services. At this point, the Ministry of Social Affairs through its Lac provincial delegation should have provided psychosocial help. However, considering the limited means of the provincial delegation for social affairs, psychosocial care has not been strong.

The Ministry of Territorial Administration, via the Governor of the Lac Province and the canton chiefs then handed the low-risk individuals over to the village chiefs and heads of families or, in the case of minors, to an adult referent.

In the process, the Ministry of Territorial Administration should have issued them with identity documents. This document is important because, in the absence of any other official identification document, movement becomes a real challenge. It was confirmed in the interviews that these disengaged people do not yet have identity cards or passports.

Moreover, some disengaged persons who could not return to their villages of origin because they were still under threat from Boko Haram ended up in IDP camps such as those in Yakoua. In the camps, they became dependent on humanitarian aid intended for IDPs.³⁸

Other ex-associates were directly recovered by military personnel either on the battlefields or in the villages as a result of investigation and intelligence. These ex-associates were introduced into the penal chain. If the investigating judge established their innocence, they were handed over to social affairs and ended up in communities or IDP camps. However, if there was evidence of serious crimes, the provisions of the anti-terrorist law would have applied and they would have ended up in Korotoro high-security prison in the north of the country.

A Transit and Orientation Centre was set up in Bol in 2016, with the support of UNICEF and the Ministry of Women, Early Childhood and National Solidarity. This centre aims to take care of minors in a situation of surrender.

It is apparent that at first, Chad dealt with the issue of emergency disengagement without an official rehabilitation programme. However, since July 2019, with the support of the IOM, the Chadian government, through the Ministry of Justice, has set up a DDRR Steering Committee to address the issue more systematically. An inter-ministerial committee to

coordinate DDR-related actions has also been established. The IOM is developing multifaceted technical and material support to enable it to set up a reliable screening and profiling service to lead to a more calibrated reintegration mechanism.

Niger's Goudoumaria centre experiment

In Niger, the ex-associates from the Diffa zone had various interlocutors as their first interface. Some contacted their parents and relatives who relayed the government's message of amnesty. In all cases, these first interlocutors referred them to the nearby authorities, namely the canton chief and the prefect of Bosso. The latter then referred them to the authorities in Tumur.

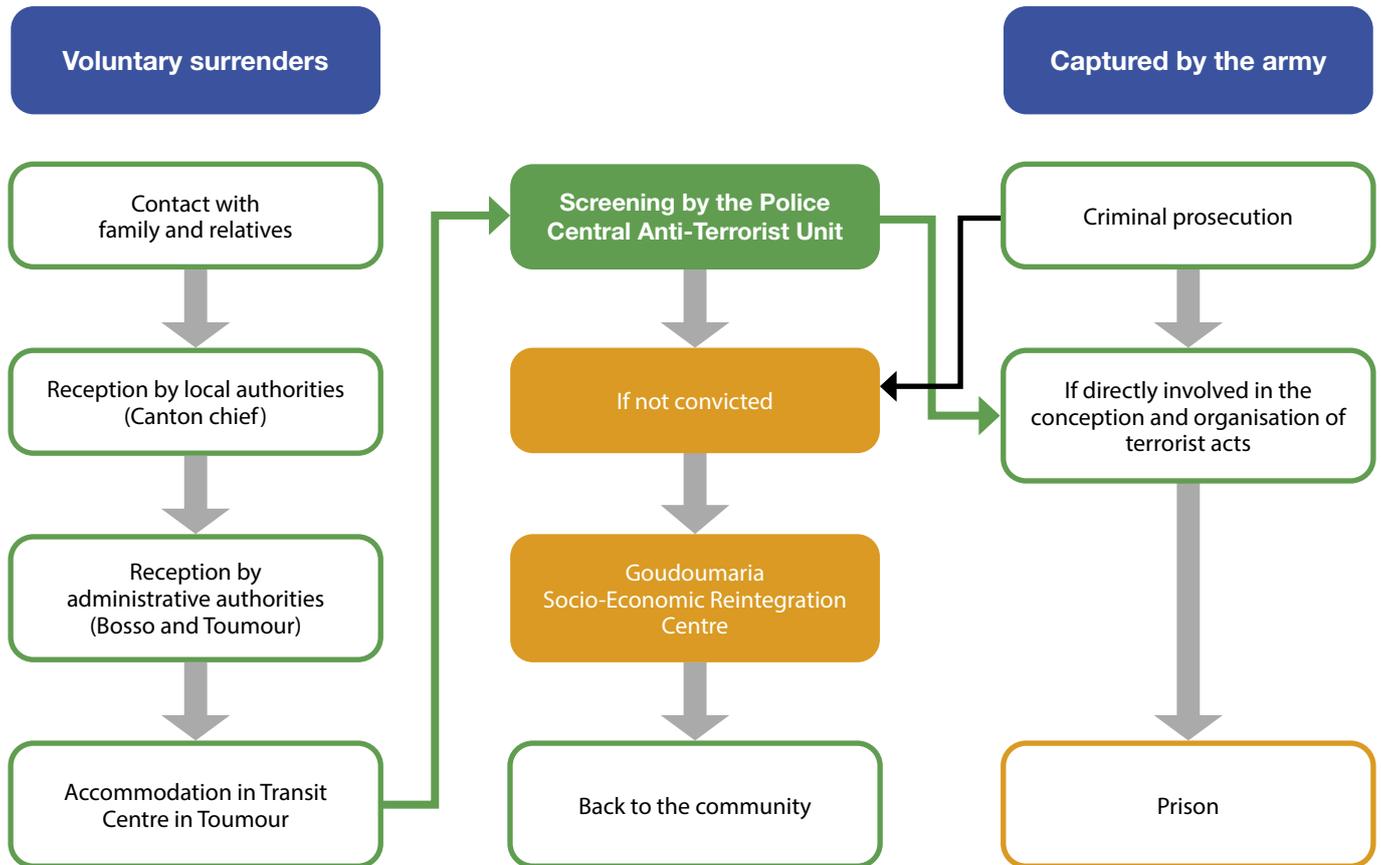
The authorities in Diffa then collected the ex-associates at the local transit centre before transferring them to the Socio-Economic Reintegration Centre in Goudoumaria, about 200 km west of Diffa. The centre is supervised by a committee headed by the prefect and composed of the canton or village chiefs and religious authorities from each of the four departments in the region (Bosso, Diffa, Mainé and Nguigmi). It has received some 240 beneficiaries since 2017.

In July 2019 Chad set up a DDRR Steering Committee with IOM's support to more systematically address the process

At the centre, the police's Central Anti-Terrorist Unit screened the ex-associates in order to deal with each one individually. The Nigerien penal code has been amended specifically for these voluntary disengaged persons. According to this amendment, repentant ex-associates of Boko Haram who are not directly involved in the conception and organisation of terrorist acts will not be subject to criminal prosecution but will benefit from a reintegration programme. The amendment also provides for a right to compensation for terrorism victims.³⁹

The amendment opens up the possibility of reintegrating, without criminal prosecution, former Boko Haram associates who voluntarily surrender to the authorities. The Government of Niger through the Ministry of Interior has taken a lead with the backing of the High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP) in the process.

Figure 3: Process of reintegration in Niger



After religious and professional training, the first wave of about 100 people which included about 40 Nigeriens, was rehabilitated and allowed to return to their home villages on 9 December 2019. As for those who were arrested by the army or the police and convicted of a crime, they were interned in the high-security prison of Koutoukalé, some 50 km north-west of Niamey.

The time spent in the Goudoumaria Centre (about two years) was longer than expected and the poor living conditions in the centre also led to attempted escape:

The repentants who are in the camp of Goudoumaria are still in the camp, they look like prisoners, in addition to that there are (innocent) prisoners who were detained for years and who are finally released but left with their suffering.

Brother of an ex-associate, 32 years old, Diffa, October 2019

The official number of desertions in Niger is minimal compared to the number of residents from the region

thought to have joined Boko Haram since the beginning of the crisis. This raises the question of why so many ex-associates who have left Boko Haram voluntarily, have disappeared.

Nigeria: some steady progress

The Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration programme, as it is being conducted by Safe Corridor, has evolved to be a concept for asymmetric warfare because its methods, practices, procedures, tactics and techniques have continued to provide alternatives for Boko Haram associates, particularly the low-risk members. OPSC derived its principles from African traits of compassion, forgiveness and empathy, which are complementary to kinetic efforts to degrade the insurgents.

Official, Operation Safe Corridor, June 2020

In Nigeria, the most comprehensive rehabilitation programme for ex-Boko Haram associates is the

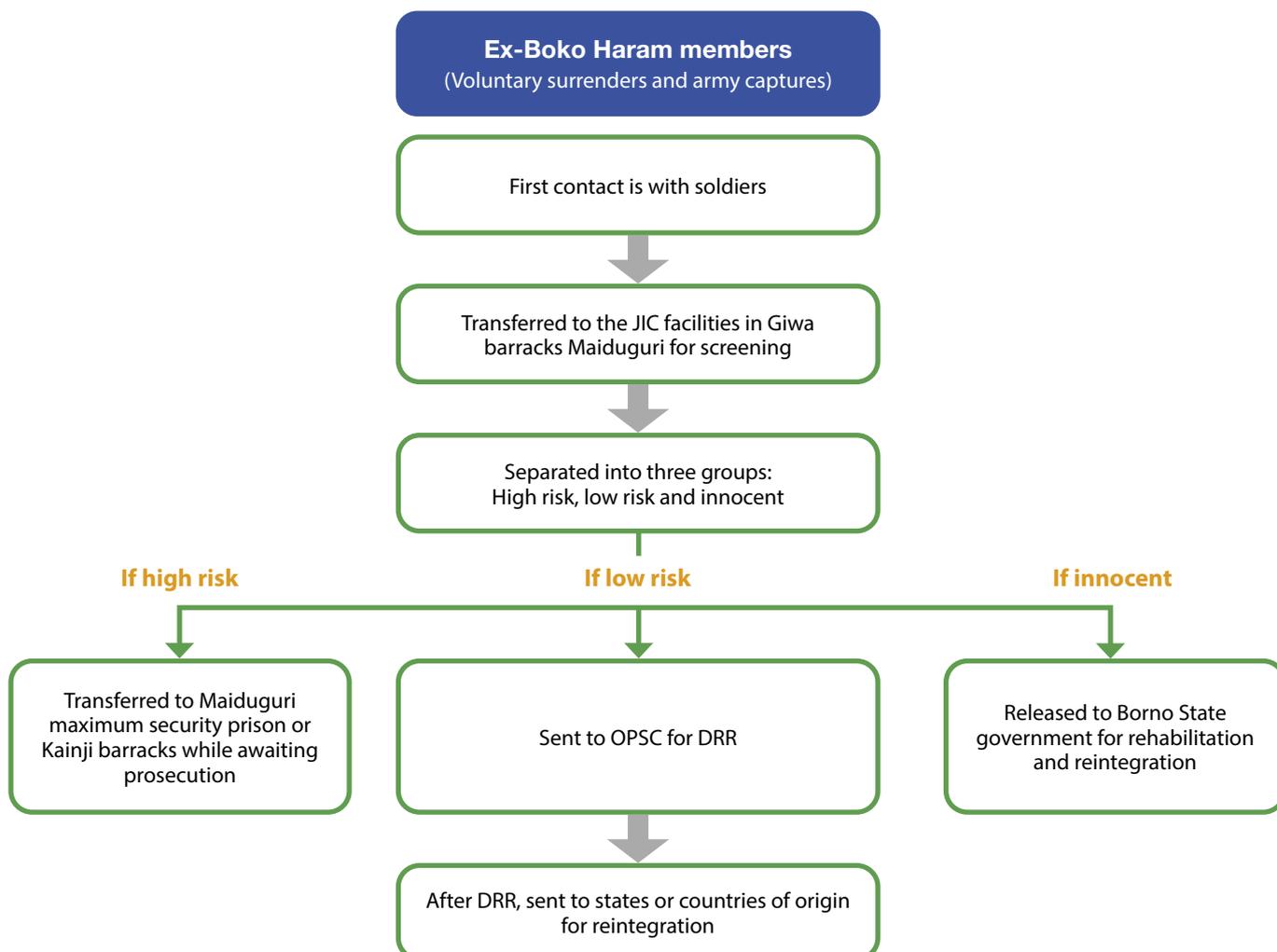
Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration programme run by OPSC. This is an initiative that received the personal approval of the Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. There are also other programmes like the ones run by the Borno state government, known as Bulumkutu Rehabilitation Centre for women and children, the Nigeria Correctional Services and other NGO-run initiatives.

OPSC was launched in 2016 to ‘facilitate easy access and passage for surrendering low-risk insurgents to security forces for subsequent disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.’⁴⁰ This was to enable them to undergo a 24-week (six months) deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programme at the camp in Gombe State, northeast Nigeria. At the end of the six months, they are handed over to the Borno state government for reintegration.

The advisory committee of OPSC is chaired by the Chief of Defence Staff and comprises the governors of the affected states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe and the heads of the country’s security agencies. As a joint and multi-agency operation involving 17 ministries, departments and agencies made up of military, security and law enforcement agencies, the government says OPSC is a humanitarian operation. In addition to providing command and control, the military leads the security component of OPSC while the Nigeria Correctional Service heads the deradicalisation and rehabilitation component.

After leaving Boko Haram, ex-associates first come into contact with troops of Operation Lafiya Dole, the counterinsurgency operation in the northeast, and are then transferred to the Joint Investigating Committee (JIC) detention centre in Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri where they are processed and categorised into three categories

Figure 4: Process of reintegration in Nigeria



based on the committee's interrogation: high risk, low risk and innocent civilians. The high-risk former members are sent to a different detention centre in Kainji Barracks, northcentral Nigeria while awaiting prosecution. The low-risk group is sent to OPSC for DRR programmes. The third group is made up of civilians arrested during military operations. When their innocence is established, they are released and handed over to the state government for rehabilitation and reintegration.

The major problem ex-Boko Haram associates eligible for DRR face is the uncertainty and indefinite detention period at the JIC in Giwa Barracks. Former detainees told the ISS that they spent between three months and four years in the barracks in very poor conditions that included overcrowding; lack of hygiene, a proper bed or ventilation; and a hostile reception from members of the JIC. These conditions fuel the spread of rumours, including that those who surrendered would be condemned to death. Some ex-associates told the ISS that at the JIC facility, they gave up hope of freedom and regretted surrendering.

When ex-associates arrive in the DRR camp in Nigeria, their perceptions become more positive

However, the moment the ex-associates are taken to the DRR camp, their perceptions change positively. By the time they got to the camp, they did not know what to expect and many of them thought they would be killed because of their experience in Giwa Barracks. However, the first thing they noticed was the cordiality between them and staff who referred to them as 'clients' instead of 'former Boko Haram members' and treated them with respect.

Upon arrival, ex-associates go through advanced profiling that includes medical screening, DNA sampling, biometric registration and a debrief. During the next 23 weeks, they undergo deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Deradicalisation programmes include psychotherapy, psycho-spiritual counselling, social therapy, drug use intervention, introductory formal education, and sports.

Rehabilitation involves the ex-associates being exposed to vocational training which is spearheaded by the National Directorate of Employment. They are allowed to

choose between hairdressing, carpentry, cosmetology, farming, leatherwork (shoemaking), tailoring and welding.

OPSC says it does not reintegrate ex-associates because it regards that reintegration as the responsibility of the state governments in the different states that the ex-associates come from. However, it does prepare them for this phase. This is done through family contacts and visitation from both family members and community leaders from the ex-associates' communities. The community leaders are then expected to sensitise their communities about the ex-associates returning to the communities.

Another aspect of the preparation for reintegration involves each ex-associate having to face a quasi-judicial panel. The panel is headed by a judge of the Federal High Court with members comprising military lawyers, traditional leaders, religious leaders, state government officials and a senior judicial officer from the Federal Ministry of Justice. Here, the ex-associate is expected to denounce membership of Boko Haram and swear an oath of allegiance to the Federal Government of Nigeria.

The government says the DNA and biometric information collected from ex-associates will help in monitoring their reintegration, complementing the roles played by their community leaders.

The rehabilitation programme for women and children is housed at the Bulumkutu transit camp in Maiduguri. This facility was established in the 1980s as a rehabilitation centre for persons with disabilities, but in 2014, it began to be used as a transit camp for women and children released from detention in Giwa Barracks detention centre for suspected association with Boko Haram. Following their release and transfer to the centre, the women and children are expected to be collected by family members and relatives.

The centre is administered by the Borno state government, in particular the Ministry of Women Affairs, and is supported by international and bilateral partners, such as UNICEF and the International Red Cross. The duration of the programme is unspecified. Some of those who passed through the camp told the ISS that they were there for less than one month and others were there for three months.

Finally, there is the Yellow Ribbon Initiative launched in 2017 by the NEEM Foundation. NEEM is an NGO based

in Abuja and Maiduguri in Borno State. It mainly targets women, children and youth associated with Boko Haram and seeks to provide them with psychosocial, behavioural and reintegration training that will enhance economic empowerment, reconciliation, peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Specifically, the rehabilitation programme covers trauma support, moral instruction, peace mentoring, sports programmes and creative education.

This programme is considered one of the major rehabilitation and reintegration projects initiated by a national NGO because of the scope of its programming. It has been lauded for its participatory approach where community members are directly consulted and their opinions are taken into consideration before any programme is implemented. In addition, local actors such as traditional authorities and vigilance committees have played a crucial role in the processes observed.

Implications for DDR in the LCB

Understanding the current state of disengagement in the LCB puts ex-associates of Boko Haram at the intersection of multiple ongoing security, development and peacebuilding processes. It is therefore important to understand the implications of the dynamics of disengagement from terrorist groups for the communities, states, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the African Union (AU), particularly within the framework of their RSS.

Fight against Boko Haram

Understanding disengagement dynamics also provides insights on recruitment capacities, tactics and strategies of Boko Haram's factions, population control, military capabilities and economic resilience. These four elements are the mainsprings of Boko Haram's capacity to survive and to harm.

The data clearly illustrates a significant number of people, sometimes entire communities, being kidnapped and forced to follow Boko Haram. There was also voluntary engagement. Individuals voluntarily joined Boko Haram because of the group's recruitment narratives of exclusion and victimisation by states and the lack of opportunities coupled with promises of a better life. These narratives were quoted far ahead of religion as a reason for joining Boko Haram. It was only in Nigeria that religion appeared as an important reason for joining Boko Haram.

Life histories illustrate abysmal living conditions under Boko Haram amid permanent insecurity within and between groups and due to military offensives. Even on the religious level, Boko Haram disappointed many ex-associates. Disillusioned post-Boko Haram realities contrast starkly with their glorious recruitment narratives. This dissonance is fundamental for voluntary disengagement.

Reverse communication by key community, state and NGO stakeholders on the group's failed religious, security and prospective promise, together with amnesty offers from states ultimately counter Boko Haram recruitment and encourage desertions. Effective DDR processes foster further disengagement. However, uncertainties and limitations associated with these processes or their uncertain outcome block many individuals tempted to leave the ranks of Boko Haram.

For individuals who join Boko Haram (particularly JAS), disengagement is a perilous option punishable by death. After successive waves of desertion, JAS enhanced surveillance and now severely punish those who attempt and fail to disengage. Timing and opportunity are key to disengagement. More territorial pressure on the factions and securing exit corridors will provide opportunities to disengage. Meanwhile, prompt processing of deserters will demonstrate certainty for disengagement outcomes.

For those who join Boko Haram and especially JAS, leaving is a perilous option punishable by death

This requires more coordinated and effective military action against Boko Haram to liberate hostages. This must be accompanied by civil protection mechanisms to secure communities and development possibilities that enhance livelihood options. Treatment of the first waves of individuals who surrender and rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes send strong signals to individuals and communities still under the control of Boko Haram, whether under duress or by conviction.

Communities and their leaders

The first victims of the insurgency of the extremist group, Boko Haram, were the communities directly bordering Lake Chad in the surrounding countries of Cameroon,

Nigeria, Niger and Chad. It is from these populations that the terrorist group draws its economic resources, food, labour, intelligence and human resources. At the same time, the proposed military responses have not spared these populations, in some cases limiting their resilience. Yet, the war against Boko Haram cannot be won without these populations. Moreover, in the four countries, it has been observed that these same populations play an important role in the processes of desertion, disengagement and reintegration.

Indeed, the contacts maintained by the communities with some of their members associated with Boko Haram and the pressure exerted on them were decisive in the eventual decision to leave. Communities also play the role of first contact or intermediary between the deserters and the security forces or traditional authorities. At the end of the various processes, it is still to the communities that former associates are referred. In Chad, for example, the communities are in the front line with their traditional authorities in receiving former associates immediately after their profiling in Baga Sola.

Communities and their leaders need a more important role in DDR processes at country level

However, both for the management of former associates and most of the efforts in the fight against Boko Haram, these host communities have not always been as involved as they expect and want to be. On the contrary, they are often stigmatised and exploited. Their concerns and needs about reconciliation have not always been properly taken into consideration in the design of processes, sometimes resulting in rejection.

In reality, on the one hand, the programmes put in place have caused resentment and rejection in some local communities. On the other hand, the fear of reprisals by the community has repeatedly delayed the authorities' plans to release those who have completed DDR programmes.

There are varying degrees of mistrust towards those who have disengaged, regardless of the role they played within Boko Haram or the fact that they were recruited under

duress. Those who have been most affected by Boko Haram through direct or indirect victimisation are often reluctant to accept ex-associates back into their communities. This limits successful reintegration and reconciliation.

Moreover, the communities into which the former associates are to be reintegrated are those that are already paying a heavy price of the war against Boko Haram. Community members often find themselves double victims – violent attacks by Boko Haram and human rights abuses by the four LCB countries.

The question, therefore, remains as to whether these communities have the capacity to offer better prospects to these ex-associates. Do they have the means to support themselves, considering their resilience has been so severely undermined by more than a decade of insurgency and counterinsurgency? Without appropriate answers to these questions, reintegration processes could become an additional burden for these communities.

The process analysis highlights the important role played by local actors, including village chiefs, canton chiefs, *lamido* and *lawan*, in the interface or the reintegration of individuals released from Boko Haram by the army or voluntarily disengaged. Their proximity to the population inspires greater confidence. However, in this conflict, they have most often paid a heavy price, sometimes being harassed and even killed by Boko Haram and sometimes put under pressure by the military authorities.

Considering the importance of their role, it is essential that a more consistent place be given to communities and their leaders in the DDR processes at country level. This will help consolidate voluntary departures from Boko Haram and the processes of reintegration and reconciliation, of which they are more than any other actor, custodians.

Uncertainties related to amnesty

All four LCB countries have at one time or another issued calls for the surrendering of combatants or persons associated with Boko Haram to encourage their departure from the terrorist group. These calls have been instrumental to the increase of surrendered fighters.

- In December 2016, Niger officially announced an amnesty for those who surrendered, and they were received at the Goudoumaria Centre.

- In Chad and Cameroon, initial profiling has made it possible to find elements among the returnees deemed at risk and integrating them into the penal chain.
- In Nigeria, there were negotiations in connection with the abductors of the Chibok schoolgirls, and more recently, the possibility of an amnesty for the Boko Haram combatants was mooted. This amnesty was particularly concerned with ISWAP, that which under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, seemed more open to possible discussions. However, no legal act confirmed these announcements.

Generally speaking, there is therefore tacit clemency for repentant persons except for those with a criminal record. However, no formal amnesty laws have been adopted by the four countries.

Difficulties with systematic legal police screening also make it difficult to establish who is responsible for particular tasks. In most cases, the usual criminal procedures or anti-terrorism laws are used as the legal framework.

Transitional justice as a major element of the reconciliation process and as the juridical basis for amnesty and prosecution is often obscured by knee-jerk reactions to situational dynamics. Individuals found by security forces in *red zones*, which are off-limits to civilians, are often assimilated to Boko Haram. The situation of the prisoners is an element contested by many actors:

I believe that the way the process has been conducted may facilitate reconciliation within our community. However, a lot remains to be done because there were innocent people in prison and then the repentant individuals who are in the Goudoumaria camp are still there as prisoners and then there are the innocent people who are detained for years and are finally released but left to their sad fate.

*Traditional authority in Bosso, Niger,
November 2019*

Finally, the question of amnesty in general and in a context of violent extremism aims to address the challenge of complying with the United Nations guidelines⁴¹ on the matter. This stresses in particular the need to leave a window of opportunity for the prosecution of proven criminals and

reparation possibilities for victims. At the local level, amnesty could also address the challenges of reconciliation. While amnesty can be legislated, reconciliation cannot be legislated because it is ‘the process of resolving conflictual and fractured relationships, which includes a range of activities. It is a voluntary act that cannot be imposed.’⁴²

Reintegration amid enduring fragility

From the start, the perception of the DDR process is usually different in each country. However, further analysis shows that the optimism following departure is worn down by the harsh realities of life. In many cases, life will be more difficult after reintegration than it was before the conflict. The reintegrated ex-fighters have met significant difficulties in their new lives.

To begin with, there is the loss of the minimum means of production available before the conflict. This forces them to depend either on the community and relatives or on humanitarian assistance in IDP or refugee camps. All communities and individuals in the area have to some extent suffered in the crisis and their resilience has been severely impacted. This makes supporting the ex-associates in a context of general distrust difficult and problematic.

Thus, nutritional difficulties, not knowing where their loved ones are, the difficulty of maintaining a productive activity and the impossibility of carrying out an economic activity despite the skills acquired (with the OPSC or elsewhere) characterise the daily experiences of the ex-associates and their families.

In Niger, it is certainly too early to assess the level of integration of the 110 ex-associates who left Goudoumaria on 7 December 2019. Data collected in Chad also confirmed that the ex-associates are in a precarious situation.

At the moment I do practically nothing. I am suffering because I don't have any fishing equipment. It is therefore difficult for me to think about the future. My only wish is to see my situation improve.

*Male ex-associate, 35–44 years old, Kaya, Chad,
September 2019*

Added to this is the relentless stigma that sometimes still blocks any chance of rebuilding one's life:

They are often not well accepted by the family and community. With everything that happens out here, people are often on their guard, they are observed and have to do their best to regain their trust.

Mozogo Sub-prefecture, Cameroon, November 2019

I can say that the welcome was good, but it's also true that there were some people who threw words at us to say that we are bad guys. Some shopkeepers refused to sell us their merchandise.

Female ex-associate, 35-44 years old, Logone-et-Chari, Cameroon, November 2019

Though happy to have left Boko Haram alive, ex-associates are increasingly challenged by the lack of prospects. Some opt to go back to Boko Haram as the lack of livelihood options within the communities rekindles attraction to the violent extremist group:

There is one who returned to Boko Haram, only to be executed because he was considered a traitor. He left after three months. We don't know why he left, we think he was a guard because he left in the night.

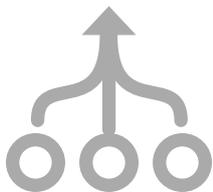
Mozogo Sub-prefecture, Cameroon, November 2019

The same thing happened to this former enlisted Nigerian man:

Several times, I had packed my load to go back to Boko Haram but a man I look up to in the camp always persuades me to stay. I may go back without telling him because I can't continue living like this. We often go an entire day without food.

Male ex-associate, 17 years old, Bakassi IDP camps, Maiduguri, Nigeria, August 2019

For some community members, the level of violence meted out by Boko Haram on communities remains a hurdle to reintegration.



IOM, UNODC & UNDP
SUPPORT SHOULD BE
ALIGNED AT COUNTRY AND
REGIONAL LEVELS

There's still bad blood between former Boko Haram members and their communities. Those who are known to have been coerced into the group will likely be welcomed back by their families. For those who willingly joined the group and committed violence against members of their family, it is difficult.

Male community member and NGO worker, 45 years old, Maiduguri, Nigeria, August 2019

A community leader believes a way of solving the reintegration problem is to resettle former Boko Haram members in communities different from their own, where they are not known.

It is difficult to understand and accept bringing ex-Boko Haram members back into the same communities they have wronged and terrorised for years. However, ex-Boko Haram members could be reintegrated into different locations. Resettling them in communities where they are not known might be a better option. It will be difficult for their own communities to accept them back.

Female community leader, 50 years old, Maiduguri, Nigeria, August 2019

Regional Stabilisation Strategy

Desertions are a definite boon in the war against Boko Haram. If they are skillfully managed they are an effective means of reducing the terrorist group's base and undermining its credibility in the communities. However, states would only really benefit from desertions if they can develop, alongside national approaches, a more collaborative regional approach.

The locations of the ex-associates within Boko Haram reflects the regionalised evolution of the terrorist group's activities from Nigeria to Niger, then Cameroon and Chad from 2013. The mapping of the locations also shows the capacity of the group to take advantage of the reality on the ground, namely the physical environment of the area, the porosity of the borders and the socio-anthropological continuities across borders.

Given this situation and considering that each of the LCB countries has already registered ex-associates from one or more of the other three countries, more collaboration and a sub-regional approach are needed. This is where the link with the RSS becomes important. The RSS has made the DDR of persons associated with Boko Haram the third pillar of its action to stabilise and rehabilitate the areas affected by the crisis.

This pillar makes the RSS a reference point for sub-regional coordination on issues concerning DDR. In practical terms, it endorses the call for a collaboration of efforts on the national level towards a harmonised approach of screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of former Boko Haram associates. This is in line with human rights principles and international standards. This is also without losing sight of the specific national judicial contexts and requirements.

The observation highlighted processes that are not necessarily linear or systematic depending on the country. Despite the differences in the processes in place, many individuals seem to have escaped the circuit and gone directly to the communities, circumstances permitting. Cases of recidivism have also been reported.

This complements the testimonies of ex-combatants who, having benefited from 'rehabilitation' programmes, have nevertheless expressed a desire to return to the ranks of Boko Haram. Some of these individuals testified that they were trapped between being stigmatised in their communities of origin and the fear of being summarily executed as spies if they tried to return to Boko Haram.

International partners

Development partners, including UN specialised agencies, represent an important opportunity in the implementation of DDR in Boko Haram-affected areas. Institutions such as IOM, UNODC and UNDP have a lot of experience with these processes in many contexts that could be put to good use in the LCB. In practice, IOM is already providing support to states to take basic human rights principles into account in the conduct of the processes. UNDP is also an important partner of individual states and the LCBC in the implementation of the pillars of the RSS.

The challenge is to coordinate and align this support at country and regional levels, particularly with the third pillar of the RSS (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation, Reinsertion and Reintegration of Persons associated with Boko Haram) to achieve greater results.

Recommendations

Build predictability into reception and screening

- Establish a standard reception-screening-profiling mechanism in each LCB country so that the categories of ex-associates involved can be distinguished in order to identify their level of involvement and responsibility and, based on this, calibrate adequate mechanisms for their management.
- Given the difficulty of deriving adequate and consistent statistics on the exact number of ex-associates per country, it is important to make this a key element of the disengagement management

processes. These figures are key for scaling of reintegration programmes.

- DDR programmes should recognise the nuances in the different classes of ex-combatants, including those who were captured and did not surrender voluntarily. This will allow the programmes to address specific needs that may exist in these different groups by establishing protocols for engagement.
- Develop an integrated framework for sharing and exchanging experiences on DDR processes between the four countries. This should also identify local and national actors directly involved in these processes at the country level and in communities to help consolidate and inform practices in each country. Community leaders and reintegrated former combatants can help with identifying these actors.
- The participation of women and children in Boko Haram is generally not comprehensively addressed in DDR processes by the various countries. Specific policies in favour of these groups are necessary. Hence the need to develop and strengthen the gender aspects of initiatives in favour of women and children of ex-Boko Haram associates with the support of specialised structures such as UNICEF.

Improve military responses and effects on demobilisation

- Maintain military pressure that deprives the Boko Haram factions of territorial control. This should further be supported by strengthening integrated sub-regional diplomatic, developmental and peacebuilding efforts.
- After each major military operation (Lafiya Dole, Wrath of Boma, Émergence 3, Yancin Tafki, etc.), deploy mechanisms to receive, screen, profile and record any fighters and hostages who surrender to limit losses.
- These mechanisms should be accompanied by national legal mechanisms that can be adapted to the management of DDR to enable fair trials for ex-combatants who are allegedly associated with criminal activities. Adopting amnesty measures regarding other categories of ex-combatants should also be ensured.

Stabilisation and community reconciliation

- Accelerate the implementation of the RSS to support the resilience of communities affected by the crisis and involved in the reintegration process to enable them to more easily support the return of ex-combatants.
- Traditional authorities, religious leaders and ex-combatants should be more involved in DDR processes at country and regional levels. As custodians, they can contribute to consolidating voluntary departures from Boko Haram as well as processes of reintegration and reconciliation.
- Develop more intense community sensitisation activities through the engagement of traditional chiefs, religious leaders, vigilance committees and ex-associates to reduce stigmatisation and mistrust and to foster reconciliation.
- Develop a reverse communication or a set of counter-narratives on the inability of Boko Haram factions to offer a better future. Counter-narratives should also target the group's anti-Islamic practices and the insecurity within them. Emphasis should be placed on the outstretched hand of states to accelerate voluntary surrender.
- Community radio initiatives should be utilised to raise awareness and this can be done by organising regular radio programmes on peaceful coexistence and the dangers of terrorism with testimony from former terror recruits to deconstruct Boko Haram/ ISWAP rhetoric.

Coordinate international action

- Develop a platform for the coordination and coherence of support from development agencies (e.g. IOM, UNDP, UNODC and CTED) at country and regional levels to achieve effective results. This is particularly important with reference to Pillar III of the Regional Stabilisation Strategy. All efforts by international partners should be monitored by regional and national agencies to ensure complete ownership and to build sustainability into the peacebuilding and development initiatives.

Notes

- 1 JM Berger, *Promoting disengagement from violent extremism*, ICCT Policy Brief, August 2016.
- 2 The Regional Strategy for the Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin (2018) refers to 'Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation, Reinsertion and Reintegration of Persons associated with Boko Haram.' This aligned with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2349 of 2017 (www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_RES_2349.pdf) which called for a regional and coordinated strategy that encompasses transparent, inclusive, human rights compliant disarmament, demobilisation, deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives for persons associated with Boko Haram and ISIL.
- 3 For the purposes of this report, 'ex-Boko Haram associates' is a generic term that also includes former members of the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP).
- 4 The Institute for Security Studies has published numerous reports on Boko Haram. These include: OS Mahmood and NC Ani, *Responses to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region: policies, cooperation and livelihoods*, ISS Research Report, July 2018.
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- 6 These include policy and programming for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE); Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement of Violent Extremists (DDR); and the Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremists (SPRR).
- 7 African Union – LCBC Regional Strategy for the Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected regions of the Lake Chad Basin.
- 8 This report uses the standard Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) as the overarching terminology for demobilisation efforts.
- 9 The four Lake Chad Basin countries are Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.
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- 12 Officially known as the 'Centre d'accueil des personnes associées au groupe terroriste Boko Haram ayant fait acte de reddition volontaire' and translated as 'Reception centre for persons associated with the terrorist group Boko Haram who have voluntarily surrendered.'
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- 24 According to figures from traditional and administrative authorities in Lac province.
- 25 Unpublished study by the Centre d'Étude pour le Développement et la Prévention de l'Extrémisme (CEDPE), 18 February 2020.
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- 27 Interview with traditional authority in Bol, Lac Province in Chad, 12 September 2019.
- 28 Interview with judicial authority in Niger, 13 December 2019.
- 29 It is difficult to get accurate statistics from Nigeria as a lot of information is concealed.
- 30 'The Nigeria Army says it has rehabilitated 893 ex-Boko Haram members since 2019. Meanwhile the Nigerian Identity Management Commission said it has registered about 900 repentant BH members in the country.' Quote from: Accepting Ex-Boko Haram fighters, *Nextier SPD*, 1 July 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/accepting-ex-boko-haram-fighters>.
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