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MEAC Findings Report 10

Social, Economic, and Civic Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Affiliates

Authors: Dr Rebecca Littman, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Dr Zoe Marks, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

CONTENTS

Background	3
About MEAC	3
About this Series	3
About this Report	3
What Does It Mean to Reintegrate After Armed Group Involvement?	4
Overview	4
Findings	4
Policy and Programmatic Implications	8

KEY FINDINGS

- In and around Maiduguri, community members' willingness to engage socially, economically, and civically with former Boko Haram associates is generally high.
- Across almost all types of engagement, support for engaging with men leaving Boko Haram appears lower than support for engagement with women leaving the group. This suggests the public – although generally supportive of reintegration – views male former associates differently, likely due to fear.
- While most people want former Boko Haram associates to be able to live a peaceful life once they return to the community, there appear to be limitations to that sentiment as fewer people thought they should be safe from reprisals.

This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles?

These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected from December 2020 to March 2021, as part of a phone survey with a representative sample of 2,963 community members from key locations in and around the Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC) in Borno State, Nigeria. It presents data around community receptivity to and perceptions about individuals who exit Boko Haram. This data may be useful to UN and NGO partners working in the region to bolster their reintegration programming, as well as efforts to support the communities who receive former Boko Haram associates. This report builds on published findings that indicate that people are generally accepting of former Boko Haram associates,¹ but delves into what social acceptance means in practice and how it translates into the way people interact with former armed group associates in their daily lives. These insights are unique as this data is collected in ongoing conflict, while reintegration is actively happening, and communities in and around Maiduguri are receiving those who exit Boko Haram and other armed groups. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

¹ Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, "[Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

What Does It Mean to Reintegrate After Armed Group Involvement?

Overview

Between December 2020 and March 2021, UNU-CPR and one of its implementing partners in Nigeria – Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) – conducted a phone survey with a representative sample of 2,963 people from Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga.² In order to understand people’s willingness to interact with different types of former Boko Haram associates, respondents were asked a set of questions that provided a fictionalized profile of a “repentant” former associate of Boko Haram,³ and varied his/her gender (“Usman” or “Fatima”) and age (12- or 28-years old). The scenario then either provided no additional information, or explained that the formerly affiliated person had either been cleared by the government after completing a reorientation (reintegration) programme,⁴ or that he/she expressed a willingness to publicly apologize and ask the community for forgiveness. Respondents were asked a set of questions to ascertain their receptivity to engage with the fictional former associate of Boko Haram – ranging from tolerating their presence to acknowledging their human rights and interacting with them in a variety of social or economic scenarios. The analysis of the resulting data shows that beyond a cold peace with former Boko Haram associates, community members in and around Maiduguri are receptive to more positive forms of engagement with those returning. While there are limits to that reception – particularly for men exiting the group – the overall findings suggest that when they were surveyed, communities were largely receptive to former armed group associates engaging in most aspects of social, civic, and economic life in the community.⁵

Findings

As detailed in an earlier MEAC publication,⁶ acceptance of former Boko Haram associates is generally high in and around the Maiduguri area. This holds for different associate profiles (women, men, girls, and boys), with 85-90 per cent of respondents saying they would be okay with a fictional

² This research was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from Mobukar Consultancy. More information on MEAC partners and donors is available on <https://cpr.unu.edu/research/projects/meac.html#outline>.

³ The questions asked about “Boko Haram” because the local research team has found that community members often do not make distinctions between different factions (e.g., ISWAP). Indeed, the survey specifically asked whether respondents had ever heard of ISWAP and of the 9 per cent who said they had, whether they thought there was a difference between the groups. Only 32 per cent agreed there were differences. In other MEAC surveys where knowledge of different factions is greater (e.g., with former armed groups associates themselves), distinctions are made between groups.

⁴ The term most often understood locally is “reorientation” even though UN actors describe their programming as reintegration.

⁵ Following the recent death of Shekau, the leader of the faction known as Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah or JAS, thousands of militants have surrendered and are currently located in Maiduguri, putting strain on existing transit camps and unnerving local residents. This could shift perceptions on receptivity, and UNU-CPR is continuing its research to understand if and how perceptions change. See: “[Almost 6,000 Boko Haram fighters have surrendered, Nigerian army says](#),” *Reuters*, 2 September 2021.

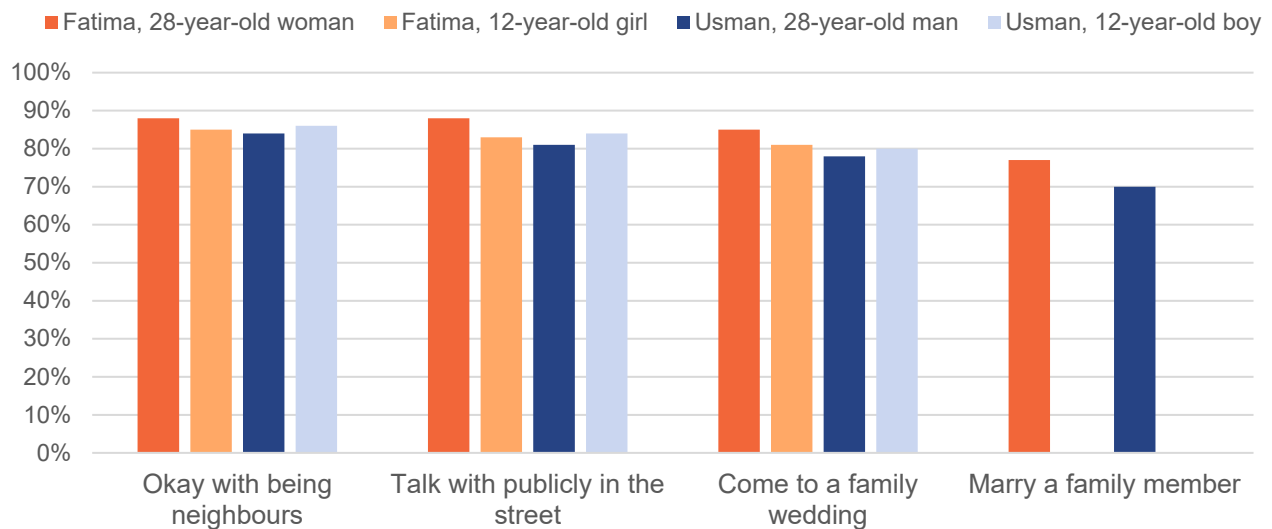
⁶ Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O’Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, “[Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

former associate of Boko Haram returning to their community. Acceptance is not just theoretical, as many respondents have been confronted with returning family or community members. When faced with such situations, most people (83-95 per cent) reported welcoming back their loved ones or neighbours. But what does it mean to welcome someone back?

To better understand what receptivity means in practice, the survey asked a series of questions about how respondents would be willing to interact with fictional former associates of Boko Haram (Usman and Fatima, who were either described as 12- or 28-years old in a randomized experimental survey condition). Overall, in looking at willingness to engage socially – a proxy for future social reintegration – respondents report high levels of willingness to engage with former Boko Haram associates across various scenarios.

Figure 1 highlights high levels of public willingness for a range of social engagement activities with former Boko Haram associates: from having them as a neighbour, publicly conversing with former associates, inviting them to a wedding, to having them marry a family member. Even though the base level of willingness to engage is relatively high, people were less comfortable engaging with the adult male former associate than they were with the adult female former associate. For example, respondents were slightly less receptive to adult Usman than to adult Fatima becoming their neighbour. When the questions moved beyond proximity to ask about more intimate types of engagement, the gap in willingness to engage with adult Usman and adult Fatima grew. Respondents were significantly less likely to say they would talk to, or offer a wedding invite to, adult Usman than to adult Fatima. When asked about marrying someone in their family, a very intimate form of engagement, support dropped slightly across both adult profiles, although it still remained relatively high. Again, a gender gap emerged, and respondents appeared less receptive to adult Usman marrying into the family (70 per cent said “yes”) than adult Fatima (77 per cent said “yes”).⁷

Figure 1 – Receptivity to Engage Socially with Former Boko Haram Associates



⁷ All of the statistics presented herein are contingent on answering the question. Non-response rates ranged from 3-11 per cent and were not included in the analysis.

The overall takeaway is that support across a variety of types of **social interactions** is high and relatively stable across profiles, and yet, there is clearly more concern about adult men coming out of Boko Haram than there is about women, girls, and boys. The direction of these gender gaps is consistent with popular assumptions around adult men's heightened rates of involvement with Boko Haram. Moreover, in male dominated family structures, the power and status of the husband – and therefore his influence on the broader family – may be seen as more impactful than that of a woman. This could explain the greater hesitation about family marriages with men returning after association with Boko Haram, although it should be noted that willingness for Fatima to be married to a family member also dropped in comparison to other less intimate types of engagement (e.g., talking in the street).

As with social engagement, people in and around Maiduguri appear open to engaging with former Boko Haram associates in **business interactions** as well. When asked whether they would trade with a former Boko Haram associate, most respondents said they would, but there is more support for engaging in business with adult Fatima (84 per cent) than with adult Usman (76 per cent said “yes”). Despite this gender differential, receptivity to engage in economic activity with former Boko Haram associates was relatively high. This is important for former Boko Haram associates' ability to create a livelihood that is not tied to conflict.

Economic reintegration – like all aspects of reintegration after conflict – is a two-way street. Skills training, cash loans, and business start-up kits cannot enhance former associates' economic well-being if there are no employers who will hire them or no customers who will buy their products or services. Strong willingness to engage economically with those who have left Boko Haram is a promising sign against an otherwise dreary economic outlook for North East Nigeria.⁸

Community members' willingness to socially and economically reintegrate former Boko Haram associates may derive in part from support for former associates' human rights and the perceived humanity of those exiting armed groups. Previous research in other conflict contexts has suggested that violent conflict leads to cleavages and dehumanization within affected communities. In an effort to measure dehumanization and anticipate hostility toward former Boko Haram associates, respondents were asked whether they thought Fatima or Usman sometimes “acts like an animal.” The findings are promising: only a small percentage of respondents said “yes” (14 per cent and 12 per cent respectively).⁹ Given that blatant dehumanization makes it easier to deny individuals and groups their basic **rights and freedoms**,¹⁰ the survey then asked respondents about a range of freedoms and protections Fatima or Usman should be afforded. The questions varied from the most basic – being safe from violent attacks from those seeking revenge – to more positive framings of rights, including whether Fatima and Usman should be able to live in peace, move freely about the community, and engage in civic life (e.g., attend community meetings).

⁸ UNDP, [Assessing the Impact of Conflict on Development in North-East Nigeria](#) (Abuja: UNDP, 2021).

⁹ Interestingly, female respondents were much more likely to say that they thought Usman and Fatima sometimes acted like an animal. The specific gender dynamics will be explored in a separate forthcoming Findings Report.

¹⁰ Research has shown that “blatant dehumanization contributes uniquely to hostile intergroup attitudes and behavior” (e.g., supporting housing and educational discrimination, collective punishment, and torture). Nour S. Kteily and Emile G. Bruneau, [“Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to \(Re-\)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization.”](#) *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26 6 (2017) p. 10.

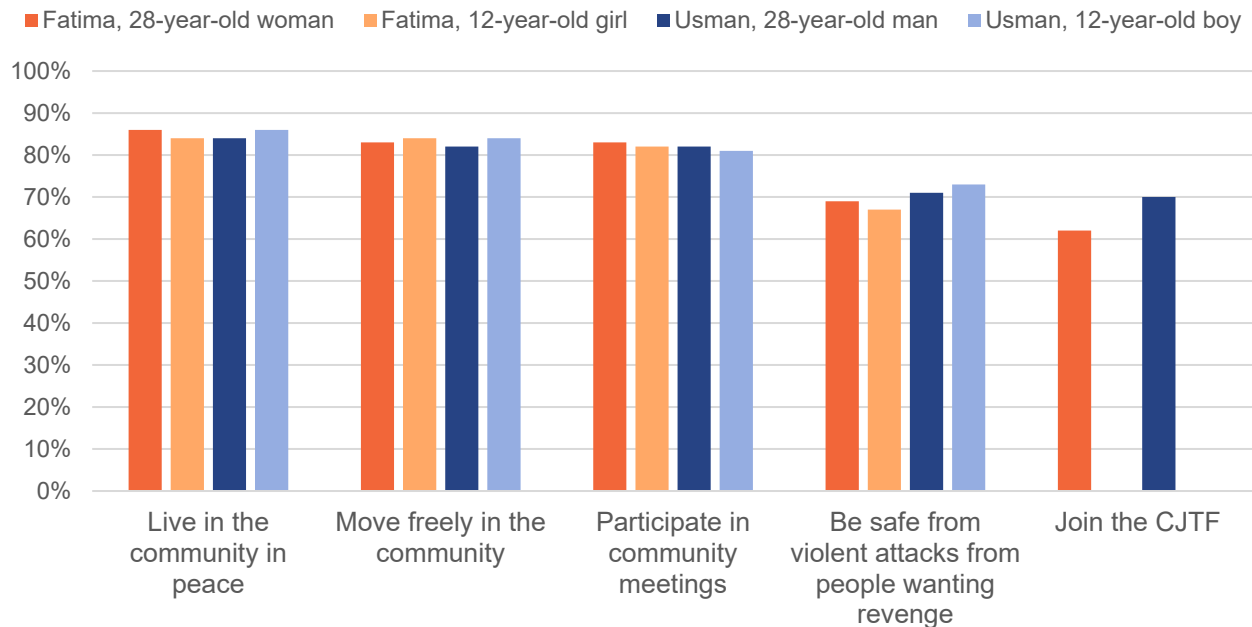
Figure 2 – Support for the Rights and Freedoms of Former Boko Haram Associates

Figure 2 shows that the public are largely supportive of former Boko Haram associates being able to live in peace (84-86 per cent) and move freely (82-84 per cent) after they return to the community. When framed in a different way – whether they should be safe from violent attacks from those seeking revenge – however, support fell somewhat across all profiles (69-73 per cent). This means that about a third of respondents did not think former associates should be safe from reprisals, even when the former associate is a child. Among the child profiles, respondents were less likely to think Fatima should be safe from revenge attacks (67 per cent) than Usman (73 per cent). One might assume the response rates to this question would be similar to the question about living in the community in peace, since they are two ways of asking about the same outcome. However, the gap may be due to respondents interpreting the question as suggesting they themselves might need to take a role in protecting the former associate from revenge attacks, or perhaps was spurred by a general feeling that while ex-associates should generally be allowed to live in peace, if there were people who had a reason to want revenge, that would be understandable and justified. Respondents also may have interpreted the question about “living in peace” as the returnee not committing acts of violence, conflict, or aggression, rather than community members initiating such hostility.

Beyond peaceful co-existence in the community, there is also a high level of willingness to allow former associates of Boko Haram to engage in civic life. Figure 2 shows that most people think former associates should be allowed to participate in community meetings across all profiles (81-83 per cent). This is important because it signals that communities are receptive to former Boko Haram associates engaging in civic affairs. When people have access to lawful outlets for pursuing social and political change, they may be less likely to be swayed by armed group appeals based on claims that formal channels for redressing grievances and achieving change are not open to them.

When asked if adult Fatima or adult Usman should be able to join the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), the majority of respondents agree, but the level of support is significantly lower than observed for other types of civic, social, or economic engagement. 62 per cent of respondents said that adult Fatima should be able to join the CJTF, compared to 70 per cent for adult Usman. This gender differential may be explained by the perception that participating in the CJTF is a largely male undertaking, although women do work with the CJTF in a variety of ways. Alternatively, there may be a connection with higher support for adult Usman joining the CJTF and the lower levels of receptivity to accepting Usman in social and economic life highlighted earlier in this report. Earlier research has found that many young people who came out of Boko Haram immediately joined the CJTF to signal to their communities that they were no longer a threat.¹¹ If the lower levels of support for engaging with adult Usman reflect more fear of men coming out of Boko Haram, then it might be understandable that community members are more supportive of adult Usman joining the CJTF to prove his commitment to protecting the community and rejecting Boko Haram.

As previous publications¹² have highlighted, it appears that individual support for social reintegration may be influenced by the attitudes and responses of other community members. Regardless of the particular question asked, there was always a small minority (10-15 per cent of respondents) who said they were not receptive to the former Boko Haram associate. This has implications for social attitudes, economic reintegration, and also personal safety. When asked if they would join in if others in the community began to insult or beat Usman or Fatima, between 10-12 per cent of respondents said “yes.” Respondents who had anti-reintegration responses were more willing to join in on beating. Among those who were willing to accept Fatima or Usman, 11 and 10 per cent respectively said they would join in for the beating. Among those who were not willing to accept them, 27 and 31 per cent respectively said they would join in for the beating. The relationship between anti-reintegration responses and willingness to join in on a beating for Fatima was smaller than for Usman but is still statistically significant, potentially because of more reticence to beat a woman. Even a small amount of vocal opposition in a particular community could have a large effect on a former associate’s social acceptance, and thus, potentially, their reintegration prospects and broader political attitudes or conflict dynamics.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

As highlighted in earlier reports, the main takeaway from this research is that in and around Maiduguri, receptivity to the return of former associates of Boko Haram is generally high. By asking about specific types of social, economic, and civic engagement, one can see that people are generally willing to engage with former Boko Haram associates in a range of ways, from socializing to trading with them. Better understanding how community members engage – or not – with former armed group associates who are reintegrating is essential to understanding where the latter are likely to face challenges and where they may remain vulnerable to re-recruitment, as well as a whole host of negative outcomes (e.g., poverty). While in and around Maiduguri, support for former associates’ social, economic, and civic engagement is generally high across engagement types, a few notable deviations are worth re-emphasizing because they have important policy and programming implications.

¹¹ Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria,” *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* eds. Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

¹² Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O’Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, “Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates,” *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

First, for almost every question, willingness to engage with the adult Usman profile was lower, suggesting relatively greater concern about men than women, girls, and boys returning to communities. This may explain why there was higher support for adult Usman joining the CJTF than other former associate profiles, as doing so is often a signal to the community that the individual does not represent a threat to them and has truly rejected Boko Haram. While finding a way to send such assurances to the community will likely be important – particularly for men – joining the CJTF may not be a welcome or sustainable way to do so. There are currently efforts to further professionalize the CJTF and related volunteer security outfits, better vet their members, and provide off ramps for those who may wish to stand down from these groups. Adding to the ranks of the CJTF, not out of need but to achieve a signalling function, runs counter to these efforts. Indeed, it may undermine the right-sizing and professionalizing of these forces, which is seen as key to reigning in the abusive behaviour of some of their members.¹³ Finding other ways to send such signals will be important for reintegration, as will adjusting expectations so that community members know that not all returnees can join the CJTF.

Finding an effective signalling function has taken on a new urgency in recent weeks as thousands of people who were with the Abubakar Shekau faction of Boko Haram have surrendered following the death of Shekau. For example, when community members were asked whether they would accept Boko Haram associates back if their community leader (known as Bulama) or the government vouched for the individual, acceptance increases into the 92 to 95 per cent range across profiles. This evidence may suggest there are other effective ways to help those exiting Boko Haram signal their intentions and assure community members who are more anxious about their return.

A second result worth highlighting is that respondents were far less likely to say that former associates should be safe from reprisal attacks than generally agreeing they should be able to live in peace. The differential (15-17 percentage point shift) could be the result of a number of things, for example interpreting the question to mean that the respondent had a role in protecting them, or that living peacefully is the responsibility of the returnee, rather than the community. It could, however, show that some respondents may see revenge attacks as acceptable exceptions to a peaceful post-armed group existence. Given that this study found that respondent's receptivity to accepting former Boko Haram associates was sensitive to the influence of their peers and community leaders,¹⁴ it may be helpful to have community leaders signal disapproval for reprisal attacks and demonstrate their own willingness to engage socially with former group associates. Doing so may help mitigate the impact of the minority of the population in and around Maiduguri who are unsupportive of the reintegration of former Boko Haram associates.

¹³ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "[Militias \(and Militancy\) in Nigeria's North-East: Not Going Away](#)," *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-conflict Transitions* ed. Adam Day (New York: United Nations University, 2020).

¹⁴ Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, "[Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

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