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MEAC Findings Report 18

# Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria

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October 2022

**MANAGING EXITS**  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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## KEY FINDINGS

- With improving security, some Community Security Actors (CSAs) have thinned their ranks and/or shifted their mission. In addition to defending communities, CSAs resolve disputes; enforce curfews; police petty crime; provide personal security; and enforce social and gender norms, particularly for girls and women.
- Despite being commonly labeled as “voluntary” security organizations, many respondents shared stories of being pressured or coerced to mobilize. Their stories stood in contrast to others who spoke of their pride in joining, highlighting the range of entry pathways into these groups.
- Many current and former affiliates of CSAs feel proud of their work with the group, but also describe negative aspects, in particular witnessing violence and abuse, drug use within the organization, and/or exposure to danger due to conflict.
- Women members of CSAs are often stigmatized for their involvement, but also report that their work gives them autonomy and empowerment.
- There are some initial indications that training can influence CSA perspectives and behaviours, an encouraging sign for efforts to reform, professionalize, and/or integrate these forces.

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

ISBN: 978-92-808-6579-0 © United Nations University, October 2022.

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Citation: Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O’Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report 18* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

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

## About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict prevention, conflict transitions, and related interventions 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 between May 2021 and August 2022, as part of a base- and midline survey with a sample of 712 former and current affiliates of different armed CSAs<sup>1</sup> from key locations in and around the Maiduguri metropolitan area in Borno State, Nigeria. It presents findings about the ways in which people in the North East became involved with these types of armed groups, as well their roles within the group and their expectations for demobilizing from these groups. This data may be useful to the UN and NGOs working in the region to bolster programming that facilitates exits from these groups. These insights are unique as this data is being collected during an ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> The ongoing midline survey data included herein represent responses from 594 respondents out of 712 panel respondents who had completed the midline survey at the time of writing this report. It is important to highlight that this is a sample of convenience, including participants who were identified through UN-funded programmes (66 per cent), as well as participants who were recruited by MEAC in and around the Maiduguri metropolitan area and self-identified as former or current affiliates in the MEAC surveys (34 per cent). It is important to take into consideration that CSAs are active across the North East (and beyond), and the experiences of those who are affiliated with these groups might be different and vary according to location.

conflict, and many of the respondents are still active affiliates of these groups. The report ends with an examination of the key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

# CSAs: Mobilization and Demobilization Trajectories in the North East

## Overview

Over the past year, the MEAC project conducted multimethod research with former associates from a range of different armed groups in Borno State in the North East of Nigeria. This research included people who were exiting or active members of community security groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), *Yan Gora*, vigilantes, and Hunters and Charmers. The findings below are based on a survey of 338 former affiliates and 427 current affiliates of such groups, as well as a series of focus groups conducted in March 2022 with former and active affiliates. This report examines how they came to be with their respective group, what roles they held in it, and – if relevant – how and why they left. The goal of this inquiry was to capture the multi-faceted trajectories of those who become involved with community-based armed groups, particularly as the security situation changes and evolves, and to explore what “leaving” or exiting looks like when people remain resident in those communities and insecurity persists. The findings presented in this report have implications for policy and practice as local, national, and international partners come together to promote stability and build long-term peace in the North East of Nigeria.

Previous publications by the MEAC project<sup>2</sup> have used the term voluntary security outfits (VSOs), but subsequent data collection suggests that affiliation with such groups is not always entirely voluntary, especially for young people. The term government-affiliated security actors (GSAs) sidesteps this issue but may overstate the degree to which such irregular forces are aligned, affiliated, or coordinated with the State. This report chose to use “community security actors” (inclusive of both individual affiliates, and organizations or groups) to describe this category of interest and to capture the spectrum of community-based armed actors in Nigeria, from the more formalized Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), the larger but more fluid *Yan Gora*, as well as more traditional community vigilante groups, such as the Hunters and Charmers or the Shuwa vigilantes known as Kesh. The authors recognize that there are a vast array of terms and accompanying acronyms circulating to refer to this type of armed group. While they do not wish to add to the list or generate further definitional confusion, they felt it would be problematic to continue using terms that did not properly describe these groups or the people who had been associated with them. While this report builds on MEAC’s [earlier work](#) on the topic, the terminology across reports has shifted.

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<sup>2</sup> Siobhan O’Neil, Sherif Mabrouk, and Kato Van Broeckhoven, “[Volunteer Security Outfits in North East Nigeria](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 5* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

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As this report will highlight, the roles and responsibilities of these actors extend far beyond providing security, and often include broader social and political roles that are locally seen as linked to peace and community stability. Thus, “community security” can be broadly defined and the “actors” of interest is an umbrella term inclusive of all who self-identify as having been members or active participants in these organizations.

## Findings

The following findings are based on a survey sample of 712 unique respondents who reported participating in a community security organization (7 per cent of whom reported being affiliated with more than one group). Within this sample, at the time of being surveyed, there were 97 former and 266 active CJTF affiliates, 215 former and 47 active Yan Gora affiliates, and 26 former and 114 active affiliates of the Hunters and Charmers. The first section of this report will discuss mobilization and highlight some of the reasons why respondents became involved with these CSAs. It will be followed by an exploration of respondents’ roles while they were with the group and some of the skills they acquired therein. The final section of findings will discuss exit trajectories and demobilization. The report ends with a reflection on the policy and programming implications of widespread community mobilization to combat the Boko Haram insurgency.

### CSAs in the North East

Since the start of the Boko Haram conflict in the North East of Nigeria, communities have organized vigilante committees and self-defence groups to protect themselves and contribute to the response against the Boko Haram insurgency. Many armed vigilante and militia groups operate in different regions, and all entertain varying and shifting levels of centralization and cooperation with the government.<sup>3</sup> This report focuses on the main CSAs trying to protect their communities from Boko Haram in Borno State:

- **Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)**, a somewhat formalized uniform-wearing organization with clear leadership structures, membership cards, and limited salaries/stipends from the government for a subset of those in leadership positions.
- **Yan Gora**, a more informal and broader umbrella group of community security activists, some of whom were recruited into the CJTF, and with whom CJTF is commonly conflated.
- **Hunters and Charmers**, whose existence precedes the conflict, have been called upon first by communities and now by the governor to use their hunting skills or traditional charms (akin to ‘magical’ or ‘medicinal’ practices elsewhere) to protect communities as well as provide physical protection from thieves, particularly in rural areas.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on other CSAs such as the Bakassi Boys or the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) in the South of Nigeria, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, [“Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria.”](#) *Brookings Report*, 3 September 2021.

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- **Vigilantes**, a broad term that is applied to a range of organizations, many of which operate under a more formal umbrella.<sup>4</sup> The term vigilante is often used to include Hunters and Charmers, but also ethnic militias and other types of self-defence actors who may not fit neatly into the three main organizational structures.

At times the distinction between different types of groups is unclear and there is confusion – and disagreement – about what constitutes a distinct, exclusive category of armed actors. The aforementioned categories can be better viewed as overlapping armed (and sometimes partially unarmed) configurations that work together periodically with each other or with the military. They all have highly decentralized structures, but with commanders and hierarchies designed to assign roles and tasks to participants. The CJTF implements the most formalized, military-like membership structures, whereas Hunters and Charmers have been traditionally institutionalized or inducted into their respective roles in communities. Who individually affiliates with these, and other actors, is often not clear-cut, as members regularly transfer between groups, and local translations are commonly used to refer to several of these actors.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, traditional actors and informal or fluid groups have been formalized in different ways at different points in time, and this formalization can also vary from community to community. As a result, these CSAs are consistently confused or conflated with one another.

### Mobilization and Involvement

Since the start of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, CSAs have been instrumental in protecting communities that are often at the margins of state and military control. They have provided support to formal security actors – or, in their absence, taken over some of their tasks – by lending additional manpower,<sup>6</sup> imparting intelligence and knowledge on the local terrain and languages, conducting patrols, arresting suspected insurgent associates, as well as monitoring former Boko Haram associates after they return to their communities. Over the years, their roles in the North East have expanded and they have taken on broader security, political, and social roles within their communities, including controlling internally displaced person (IDP) camps, resolving local disputes and domestic quarrels, and manning traffic security checkpoints.

The different CSAs regularly work together during operations, yet often compete over government recognition. Through an ongoing process of formalized cooperation with the government, select card-carrying members of the CJTF now receive monthly stipends. For most of the other groups and their affiliates, membership is more fluid, as are economic benefits. In return for their services, affiliates have received piecemeal benefits such as training, weapons, the opportunity for short-term paid assignments (such as providing security services to travelling State officials or private events) and maintaining other positions that they believe would afford them opportunities to make money.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) is a formalized and national association based in Abuja. It operates largely outside of Borno State and is therefore not a specific focus in this report.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the Hausa term for Yan Gora translates to people with clubs or sticks and is commonly used to describe both the more formalized CJTF and the more informal “Yan Gora” umbrella of people who are not formally registered with the CJTF.

<sup>6</sup> With 300,000 State security personnel for a population of over 200 million, the current ratio is roughly one police officer to 667 citizens. See, International Crisis Group, “Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity,” *Africa Report* 308 (2022).

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Defining membership for these groups is difficult. This is due to the lack of formalized structures and initiation processes, the common practice of simultaneously being affiliated with different groups,<sup>7</sup> the overlap between the different groups, and internal splintering.<sup>8</sup> These factors also challenge reliable estimates of the total number of people who are mobilized under these different umbrellas of CSAs. According to other research, the CJTF estimates its numbers to be around 31,000 members, yet the Nigerian military has only trained about 5,000.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned previously, the existence of the Hunters and Charmers precedes the Boko Haram conflict (as do government actors relying on them to address local security challenges). They generally operate in the most remote regions and are valuable to both State armed forces and other CSAs as local guides. The Hunters and Charmers are considered to be protected by magic, and affiliation is sometimes based on ethnicity and birthright (as is the case with the Shuwa Kesh hunters, for example). As one respondent describes it: “I joined the Hunters’ group through my father. One day he took me to the bush and taught me how to hunt with and without weapons, then he gave me some herbs which I will use when going hunting. Some months later he then took me along to their yearly meeting at the group leader’s residence, and from there I officially became a member.”<sup>10</sup> From open-ended survey responses, it becomes clear that some Hunters and Charmers in fact demobilized at the start of the conflict, out of fear of being targeted by Boko Haram. As one former affiliate explains: “When Boko Haram started fighting and killing people in the bush, I feared being killed by Boko Haram because they kill people with or without a weapon and I was among those that go to the bush for hunting every day with a gun. So, I decided to leave Hunters and Charmers.”<sup>11</sup>

For the CJTF and Yan Gora, on the other hand, mobilization was initiated in response to the Boko Haram conflict and commonly happened collectively. Many communities initially mobilized armed with nothing more than handmade weapons or sticks to protect their families, communities, and properties. Respondent stories about how they came to be involved with these groups highlight a range of experiences. As one of the respondents who was a child when he joined the Yan Gora recounted: “During the crisis of Boko Haram, we, the youths of my community, gathered ourselves and had a meeting to take sticks and start protecting our community.”<sup>12</sup> Other research has stressed

<sup>7</sup> At the time of conducting the baseline survey, 7 per cent of the respondents who reported affiliation with the CJTF, Yan Gora, or the Hunters and Charmers, reported having been with more than one of those CSAs.

<sup>8</sup> As Vanda Felbab-Brown describes in her 2020 report on militias in Nigeria, these groups: “frequently undergo splintering or relabeling themselves, making it hard for local populations to understand who operates where and conducts what operations, and what their connection to the CJTF is at any particular moment. In the area of Bama in Borno, for example, 200 CJTF, 50 BOYES, 150 kesh-kesh, 75 VGN members and 75 hunters reportedly operate under one CJTF commander and receive some stipends from the government of Borno.” See Vanda Felbab-Brown, “[Militias \(and Militancy\) in Nigeria’s North-East: Not Going Away](#),” in *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-conflict Transitions*, Adam Day, ed. (New York: United Nations University, 2020), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77; Estimates range between 25,000 and 36,000 CJTF members, including men and women. Also see, Nachana’a Alahira David and Muhammad Sanusi Lawal, “Gender, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in North East Nigeria” in *Routledge Handbook of Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Africa*, Usman A. Tar, ed. (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2021), p. 1397.

<sup>10</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

<sup>11</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January–July 2022).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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the importance of patriotism and commitment as key drivers of the rapid and widespread mobilization of community security units in the early years of the insurgency.<sup>13</sup>

Although membership or affiliation with these groups is usually described as voluntary, the reality is more complex. As previous research has shown, affiliation with non-State armed groups often takes place along a continuum of coercion, not least for children and young people, who may be particularly affected by social and family pressures in situations of community mobilization.<sup>14</sup> A respondent who was a child when they initially joined explained that “we were asked to join the CJTF by our elders. Most of the youth then registered so I did too. I was 15 years old.”<sup>15</sup> When entire communities are threatened, and community leaders are telling everyone to join, it is hard to imagine that many young people would have the autonomy and authority to decline.<sup>16</sup> This is especially the case during active conflict and in the absence of formal security actors effectively protecting communities. As several respondents stated when asked how they came to be with the group: “I was forced to join Yan Gora by our community leader,” “It was mandatory for all of us to join [the CJTF],” and “We had no option to say no [to the CJTF].”<sup>17</sup>

In addition, there is evidence that joining CSAs is often considered necessary to signal one’s loyalties to the community and show the military that one is not associated with Boko Haram. As one female respondent recounted: “I joined Yan Gora when our community members announced that anyone who does not join Yan Gora was a Boko Haram.”<sup>18</sup> A male respondent elaborated similar concerns: “The Boko Haram members usually attack our community, kill people and torture people. When they have gone, the Military will come to our community and torture the community members also. So, our community leaders gathered us and told us to cooperate in order to protect our lives. We then formed the CJTF group, selected our leaders among us, and started going out for operations.”<sup>19</sup>

All of the CSAs analysed in this brief have girls and women in their ranks. Like men, women often join these groups for a variety of different reasons, including their own security and self-protection. One respondent initially became interested in joining because she said that if she was with the Yen Banga<sup>20</sup> group [Hausa for Hunters and Charmers], no one would humiliate her or stop her from fetching water.<sup>21</sup> Others join because of family relationships, or because affiliation allows them to pursue certain livelihoods that would otherwise be unattainable. As one respondent described it: “My

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Agbibo, “[Vigilante youths and counterinsurgency in Northeastern Nigeria: The Civilian Joint Task Force](#),” *Oxford Development Studies* Vol. 48, No. 4 (November 2020): pp. 360–372.

<sup>14</sup> 1,646 children were verified as having been recruited by the CJTF until 2017. In 2021, the group was delisted from the UN’s list of organizations using and recruiting children in armed conflict. See, United Nations Security Council, “[Children and Armed Conflict - Report of the Secretary-General](#),” United Nations, 20 June 2019, A/73/907, para. 207; UNICEF Nigeria, “[UNICEF reacts to UN delisting of CJTF from list of organizations using and recruiting children in armed conflict](#),” Press Release, 18 October 2021; and Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, eds., *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

<sup>16</sup> With regards to young people’s experience with community mobilization pressures, see Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, “A Road to a Better Future,” in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, eds. (New York: United Nations University, 2018), pp. 239–240.

<sup>17</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> The Hausa term “Yen Banga,” also written “Yan Banga,” refers to the Hunters and Charmers, and loosely translates to people who are eager to confront conflict, battle, or trouble.

<sup>21</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).



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passion is to be a police but I cannot be a police because I've never gone to school, so my husband suggested that I should join Yan Banga.”<sup>22</sup> Some seek material security and relief from economic hardships in the North East: “I heard that CJTF members will be paid 10,000<sup>23</sup> every month and I am a widow with four children, and no one is looking after them. So, one of my brothers was a CJTF member and I asked him if there were any vacancies.”<sup>24</sup>

While these quotes highlight different expectations and individual calculations people make regarding the risks and benefits of participating in community security groups, the most common explanation given was one of necessity. Across four focus group discussions with active and former members of CSAs, representing different ages and genders, all commented on the need to mobilize as Yan Gora or CJTF to secure their communities in the face of Boko Haram attacks. Comparatively, individual benefits were less commonly discussed and were often not explicitly promised by the groups to new recruits. The vast majority of survey respondents (over 70 per cent) said they were not promised any benefits by the group when they first joined. The most common promise made was money (around 14 per cent), followed by food or other basic provisions (less than 10 per cent), and safety and security (also less than 10 per cent). Over half of those respondents said they did not receive the promised benefit, around 30 per cent said they did, and 12 per cent said that they received some but not all of what had been promised.

When assessing interviews, focus groups, and survey data, it became clear that most CSA affiliates understood their participation as a risk that they had to undertake for their own advancement and protection, as well as that of their communities. Their motivations, however, were often described – by themselves and others – as altruistic and community-oriented. The data presented in this report provide further support for the view that the reasons for becoming affiliated with an armed group in the first place are often multi-faceted and overlapping. Some may have had no other option but to join, others may have joined to protect their community, and for many others, both motivations may have been true.

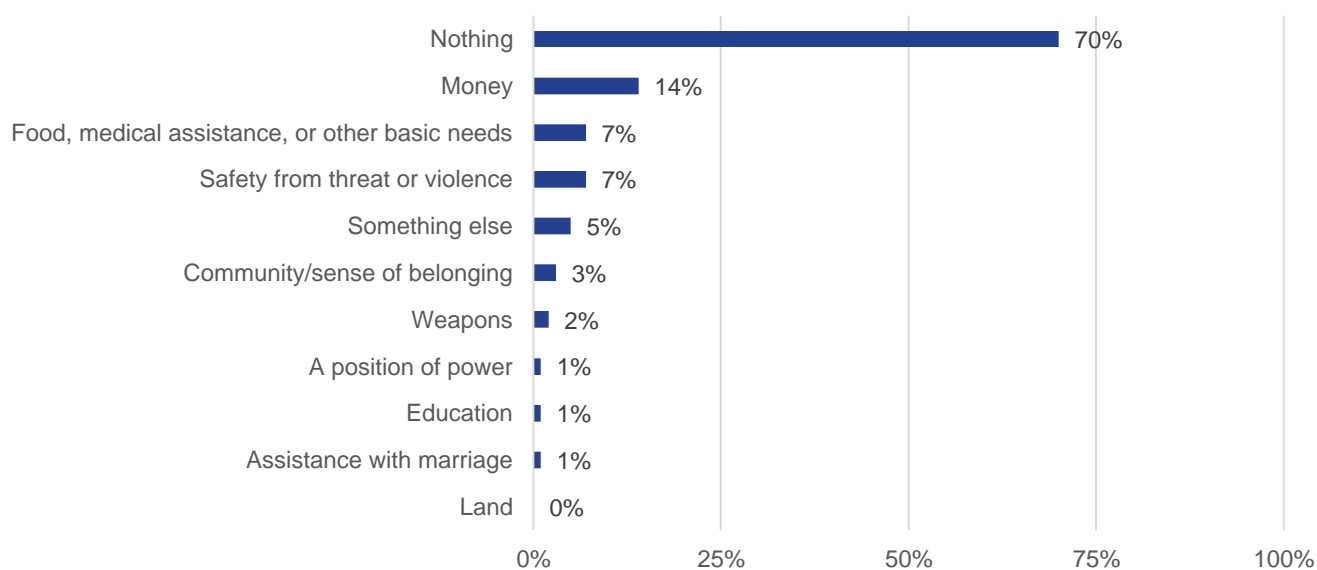
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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> 10,000 Nigerian naira at the time of the interview (February 2022) would translate to approximately USD 24.

<sup>24</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

**Figure 1 – “When you first came to be with [CSA], were you promised any of the following things? Please select all that apply.”**



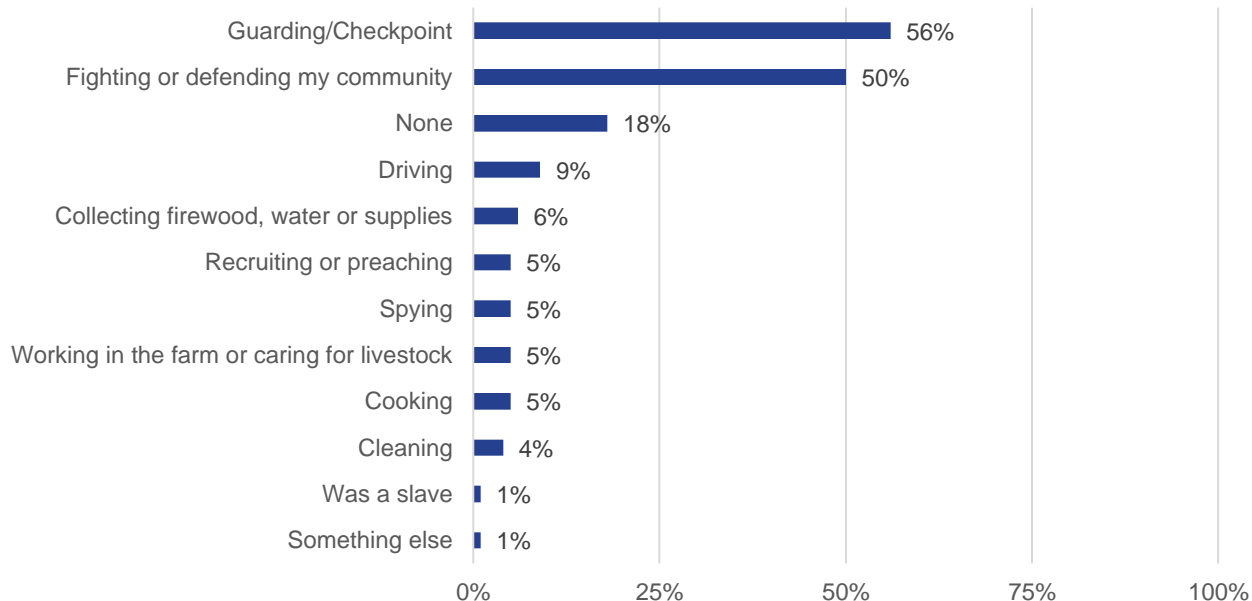
Once people were associated with a CSA they usually went straight to work. Given the urgency behind CSA mobilization, it is no surprise that most of those who joined the ranks of the different CSAs did not have to pass any initiation rituals or arduous training programmes. Of those respondents who have been affiliated with a CSA, 84 per cent did not go through an initiation ritual when they joined. A small number of respondents said they had to pass a physical or knowledge test (6 and 4 per cent, respectively),<sup>25</sup> a military or religious/spiritual ceremony (4 and 3 per cent, respectively), or another ritual to mark their enrollment (2 per cent). The lack of training or tests may not only speak to the urgency of mobilization, but also the lack of specialization across many of these organizations.

### Roles and Ongoing Activities

People affiliated with the CJTF, and other CSAs have often held multiple roles in the group at different times and/or simultaneously. As seen in figure 2, the vast majority of CSA survey respondents reported performing (or having performed) security-related responsibilities: 60 per cent guarded an area or manned a checkpoint, and 50 per cent fought for or defended their community directly. Fewer respondents reported being involved in support or logistical roles, including recruitment, intelligence gathering, and collecting supplies, firewood, or water (ten per cent or less for each). The low response rates for logistical support roles reflects the location and embeddedness of CSAs within the community. Members and affiliates mobilize for particular security-related roles and duties, but as most do not live away from their families and communities, they continue to be largely supported by them and therefore do not construct a dedicated Yan Gora or CJTF logistics apparatus.

<sup>25</sup> The CJTF affiliates were slightly more likely to report having to pass a military ceremony (7 per cent), which could be a result of their more formalized structure.

**Figure 2 – “During your entire time with [CSA], did you do any of the following things, even if it was just for one day?”**



As the conflict has shifted and the Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) factions of Boko Haram have shrunk in size and geographic reach, the roles of active CJTF and Yan Gora have also changed. Focus group discussions with active and former affiliates of community security groups highlighted how CSA conceptualizations of keeping the peace have shifted and broadened with time. Asked about the current activities of CJTF and Yan Gora in their communities, participants gave numerous examples of community policing:

- “In my community, the CJTF assists a lot in mediating between people fighting and settling the fight. And for instance, if there is a fire outbreak and people want to loot properties, the CJTF will make sure they protect such things from happening.”<sup>26</sup>
- “In my community, if there's any gathering, [such as] a wedding, naming ceremony, or funeral occasion the CJTF will come to organize and make sure there is no fight, theft, or no thugs to terrorize people.”<sup>27</sup>
- “Truly...most of the community members are happy because [Yan Gora] helps in even marital issues, like settling disputes between married couples, not just insecurity.”<sup>28</sup>

Other participants shared examples of how the CJTF provide everyday support for community members – from carrying sick people to the hospital late at night, to securing markets, locating missing children, notifying the Bulamas<sup>29</sup> of newcomers, and providing security details for government elites. Even before recent improvements in the security situation, the CJTF had been shifting and expanding its operations to provide services historically performed by the Bulama and

<sup>26</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with former CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 21 March 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> A tier of traditional leadership with the closest connections to, and visibility within, local communities.

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other community leaders (e.g., mediation) and, theoretically, by the police (e.g., responding to thefts).

### Community Relations and Social Norms

Across a dozen focus group discussions, participants mostly emphasized a positive relationship between the CJTF or Yan Gora and local communities. Male CJTF members described the positive reception from the public. One respondent explained: “It’s almost five years now since the police were involved in any issues in my community, and I can assure you that people in these communities are very happy with our work because we have saved them from having to give the police money to seek justice. Now, whenever there is any problem, people always contact CJTF first without thinking about involving the police.”<sup>30</sup> This rosy view of the CJTF – offered by a current member – may not align with that of the public. Indeed, other respondents explicitly said that they refer crime-related offences to the police and there are signs that some aspects of the CJTF’s expanding mission are less popular with members of the public. Nigeria launched a community policing initiative in 2020 and while the impact of that programme is not yet fully clear, it is worth following up to see how local constables and their engagement with groups like the CJTF may influence the latter’s working methods and community perceptions of these institutions.<sup>31</sup>

Beyond policing and mediation activities, the CJTF has become involved in policing and controlling social norms in some communities, particularly the behaviour of girls and women, as well as young people. For example: “When it’s curfew time, we arrest girls who are outside and take them to the station and then ask their parents to come and bail them out,”<sup>32</sup> and “for boys, we do not allow strange haircuts, bad dressing, drug selling and abusing, and other criminal activities.”<sup>33</sup>

Women who are currently working with the CJTF described their activities as observing and providing advice to their fellow community members. They highlighted activities such as counselling “boys who are stubborn and do not listen to their parents, and women drug abusers,” giving marital advice to “young women disrespecting their husbands,” and keeping an eye on how girls are spending money in public spaces like the market. Women CJTF members also investigate young peoples’ sources of income: “We look out for their source of income and consult their parents to know if the money is coming from them or if they know about it. If they do not know, we pay close attention and find out if it’s the proper way.”<sup>34</sup> More research is needed on the evolving missions of CSAs in the region and specifically on how their activities impact different segments of the community, with a particular view towards how they reinforce gender norms for girls and women.

Beyond the auspices of enforcing a local curfew, it is unclear under whose authority or what set of policies CSA members are acting when interpreting and enforcing social norms. This raises questions about whether all community members are receiving equal treatment, non-discrimination, freedom from harassment, and guarantees of their personal rights and liberties. However,

<sup>30</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with current CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 22 March 2022).

<sup>31</sup> John Campbell, “[Nigeria Launches Community Policing Initiative](#),” Council on Foreign Relations, 15 September 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Focus group participants described implementing a 9 pm curfew for unaccompanied girls and women, which is an hour earlier than the general government-ordered 10 pm curfew currently implemented in Maiduguri. *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with current CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 22 March 2022).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

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participants in focus group discussions – CSA affiliates and ordinary community members alike – were either approving or neutral about what might be described as social interventions by CJTF and Yan Gora affiliates. People expressed broad acceptance of these actors as grassroots interlocutors for providing security and stability, defined in the broadest sense, in communities that are both conflict-affected and feel peace is within their grasp. One of the most interesting observations across the different research streams that this report draws from is the duality of perceptions of CSAs. Many people in and around Maiduguri appear to simultaneously hold the views that CSAs are vital to their community's security and see them as patriots and hometown heroes, and yet, many also express fear and frustration with some of their activities and excesses.

The gender dynamics within the CJTF<sup>35</sup> and the experiences of female CJTF members reveal some of the ways gender roles are used as a tool for asserting a “peaceful” social order. While women CJTF members reported participating effectively and enthusiastically in enforcing what they viewed as positive social norms and relations, they are also often on the receiving end of sexist critiques and abuse for violating perceived gender norms. Several women described being verbally harassed while carrying out activities for the CJTF, including being called names for wearing trousers. At the same time, they highlighted being able to do so because of their affiliation: “If you wear a trouser in my community, they automatically give you names but now that we are affiliated, they respect us.”<sup>36</sup> Others described women sometimes leaving the CJTF because their husbands did not like that they worked, and several women highlighted relationship challenges, including issues with finding a husband: “When a man comes to ask for your hand in marriage, people will say, ‘what would you do with a prostitute?’ [a common slur for CJTF women].”<sup>37</sup> Although this briefing report cannot explore the complex implications of gender roles in the North East of Nigeria, this topic deserves a good deal of further research and attention. The CJTF and other groups are positioned to establish and enforce social norms and expectations around the roles men and women can have in a free society. Transparency and accountability, as well as more clearly defined protections for when and how CSAs refer – or do not refer – issues and incidents to local elites or the police will be key to the success of post-conflict transformation for people from all walks of life.

### Exit and Demobilization

Given the relative security in Maiduguri at the time of data collection and writing of this report (March–September 2022), this period has marked a turning point for some CSA affiliates. There are indications that many who were with Yan Gora have either been absorbed into the CJTF or stopped carrying out activities for Yan Gora. As a respondent explained during focus group discussions: “During the time of conflict, almost everybody in my community joined Yan Gora to protect our community, then the government came to us and selected some people among us and converted them into CJTF, so I was not opportuned to be among the selected people - then, I left Yan Gora.”<sup>38</sup> Most former CSA members surveyed indicated that they wanted to leave the CJTF (88 per cent) and Yan Gora (83 per cent) while they were in their respective group, and figure 3 lists their motivations.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> This may also apply to Yan Gora, but only female CJTF members were interviewed.

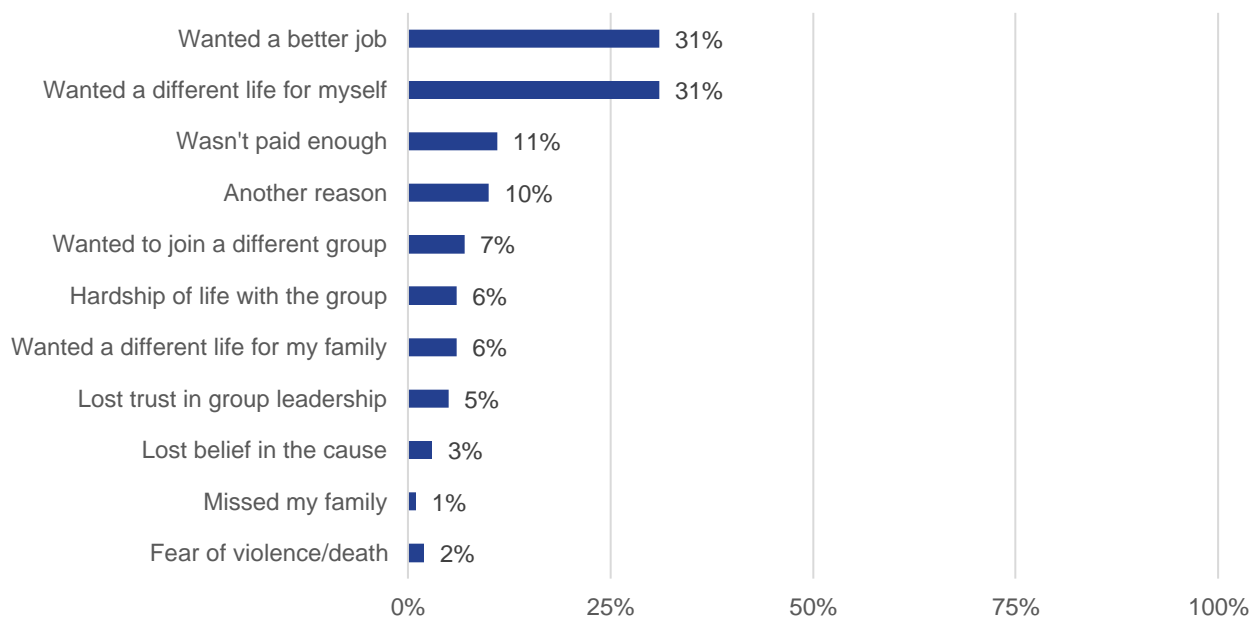
<sup>36</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with current CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 22 March 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January–August 2022).

<sup>39</sup> The list of response options was not read out loud, and enumerators categorized open-ended responses against this multiple-select list.

Figure 3 – “Why did you want to leave?”



When asked in focus group discussions if there was a process to follow when leaving the group, small differences were observed across CSAs and within them. One former affiliate of the now diminished Yan Gora explained: “The way it was voluntary to join, it is also allowed to leave the group any time. But for CJTF there were some criteria for its recruitment, so there will be a process of leaving. For Gora, you just leave anytime you want to.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, when asked in a survey how they left the group, former CJTF affiliates described getting permission from their leader to go back to school or start a business, and then handing in their ID card and uniform. “The time I decided that I wanted to go back to school, I met the chairman of the CJTF of my community and told him my intentions. He welcomed my idea with respect and asked me to write a resignation letter and bring it to him,” a former CJTF member explained.<sup>41</sup>

Several focus group discussants described attending the same majalisa<sup>42</sup> as former Yan Gora and CJTF commanders and fellow members and have remained active and visible participants in their communities. They indicated being accepted in their new social roles and educational or livelihood activities, and even providing feedback – both positive and constructive – to the local CJTF. While some demobilized affiliates said they would “help them” if needed and maintained good relations with the group, they did not indicate any desire to rejoin. Rather, when pressed, most suggested they “did not even want to think about”<sup>43</sup> remobilizing, so closely did they associate their participation with extreme insecurity.

<sup>40</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with former CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 21 March 2022).

<sup>41</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January–August 2022).

<sup>42</sup> A majalisa is a social gathering point for male peers (who share similar social, political, religious, or economic interests) in a fixed location, usually in front of a member's house, shop, or any other convenient location. One majalisa can consist of as little as 3 members, but there is no real limit to the number of individual members.

<sup>43</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with former CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 21 March 2022).

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Given that the sample for the surveys and focus groups included some CSA former affiliates who were receiving “off boarding” or reintegration programming, it is no surprise that education and return to school are highlighted by many respondents as the reason for leaving the group. In particular, respondents who were children at the time of being affiliated highlight that they were told to leave the group because they were minors, and in turn were offered vocational training, business start-up kits, or return-to-school assistance. As explained by a former Yan Gora affiliate who became affiliated as a child: “When [INGO] came, they asked our leaders to screen and gave the list of all the under 18 members in the group. So, our names were listed, and we were called for trauma and violence training. After the training, they asked us to choose between money to start up a business and going back to school. So, I choose capital and left the group so that I can peacefully start up my business.”<sup>44</sup>

When describing their reasons for demobilizing some cited their frustration over the perceived unfair allocation of financial benefits. In September 2015, the government started paying a monthly stipend to a minority of CJTF affiliates. Many who did not make the list believe the funds are not going to those who dedicated their time and personal resources to combat Boko Haram, but rather to those who are well connected. As one formerly affiliated Yan Gora respondent recounts: “I left Yan Gora when the work turned political. When the government formalized the group, the list of people who were not with Yan Gora was taken to the government, and those who fought with their lives to save Borno State were left behind. I was among the people that were left behind. So, I decided to leave the group and get another job.”<sup>45</sup> A participant who had been with the CJTF said: “I left the group when I [lost] trust in the leadership of the group. I was due time for promotion to be registered as a member of the CJTF, because before I was just a volunteer to the group, but the leader gave my slot to his relative, so I decided to quit from the work.” Others emphasized the hardships of being affiliated with the group, and frustrations with their leaders or the behaviour of their comrades. For instance, a former Yan Gora affiliate said: “I was with the CJTF group but I was not happy with the way some of us were taking drugs, I also do not like the way we used to sleep outside in the cold and mosquitoes biting us.”<sup>46</sup> Additionally: “I left Yan Gora when some of our members started some strange behaviours like smoking, taking drugs, and womanising, so I felt I cannot continue staying with them because I might get intimidated.”<sup>47</sup>

There are also those who point to abuses by the group and cite the maltreatment of community members as a reason for leaving. As one former Yan Gora affiliate stated: “The first time I joined Yan Gora, I swore that I will not receive any bribe. One day, I noticed that my colleagues are receiving bribes and I decided to leave.”<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, a former CJTF affiliate also expressed moral concerns: “I do not like how some members maltreated a lady, and after I reported them to our leader there was no action taken. I then told him I was leaving.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Midline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, January–July 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

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Instances of maltreatment and abuse were shared by many survey respondents, including when asked broadly about what they disliked the most during their time with their group. Before describing this data, it is important to caveat that the question discussed below was broad in scope and not designed to capture when or where these alleged activities happened, so it is not possible to determine if these testimonies refer to historic events (e.g., at the height of the conflict) and/or reflect the current modus operandi of different CSAs. Nor was it possible using the survey data to identify whether these answers referred to the respondent's direct involvement in these incidents, their direct or indirect observation of the events, or whether they had simply heard about them. A different type of inquiry would be required to determine the specifics of the abuses recounted by respondents. Although these stories cannot be fully corroborated by the existing MEAC data collection, given their sheer number and seriousness and the continued State cooperation with CSAs, it is relevant to note this continuing point of concern and to consider the ways maltreatment and abuse may have affected those who chose to stay in or leave the groups, as well as the entities that work with them.

When asked what they disliked most about their time in the group, across all CSA categories, a significant percentage of respondents highlighted disliking the way their group treated civilians and suspected Boko Haram associates. The stories they shared in an open-ended question range from instances of disrespecting elders, harassing women, forcing youth to join the group, taking bribes, and stealing, to indiscriminate violence committed against suspected Boko Haram associates. It must be noted that these types of stories were volunteered by a significant percentage of respondents (36 per cent) in response to this general question.<sup>50</sup> One respondent alleged the CJTF "tortured Boko Haram members when they catch them by cutting their ears, legs and hands before killing them and leave their dead bodies openly for people to see."<sup>51</sup> Another former CJTF described "...how they kill suspects brutally. They will put tires around the person and burn them alive,"<sup>52</sup> and another claimed that the "...CJTF is given a lot of authority to do whatever they want, because that has given them the opportunity to punish anyone, they want to whether they're guilty or not. They're the ones that decide the type of punishments, too."<sup>53</sup> Some former Yan Gora affiliates shared similar accounts: "...they hang the mothers of Boko Haram members for allowing their children to run away. You see at that time not all parents were aware their children have joined Boko Haram, so I see no reason for punishing them mercilessly."<sup>54</sup> Historically, this type of alleged behaviour and the lack of oversight of many CSAs has been documented by other research and news outlets.<sup>55</sup> Taken together, the data collected in the MEAC survey echo the accounts in these other reports.

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<sup>50</sup> Coding open ended answers found that about 36 per cent of formerly affiliated CSA respondents spontaneously mentioned disliking different types of violence and harassment committed by their group against civilians or suspected Boko Haram associates. This mostly includes references to torturing or killing Boko Haram suspects, as well as other types of violence such as sexual violence, stealing or taking bribes, forced recruitment, and general references to harassing and humiliating community members. It is possible that this percentage would have been higher if the question would have specifically asked about having witnessed this type of behavior and not been a general question about aspects of group life that they disliked.

<sup>51</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021 – June 2022).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> See Vanda Felbab-Brown, "[Militias \(and Militancy\) in Nigeria's North-East: Not Going Away](#)," in *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-conflict Transitions*, Adam Day, eds. (New York: United Nations University, 2020); International Crisis Group, "Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity," *Africa Report 308* (2022). "Some CJTF forces have been implicated in civilian harm and human rights abuses, in a context where they are



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Although some respondents said they did not dislike anything about their time with the CJTF, others pointed to the hardships of being with the group, including the constant fear of Boko Haram attacks, hearing gunshots, the exhaustion of conducting night patrols, and the horror of witnessing violence and seeing dead bodies. Of CSA-affiliated respondents, 36 per cent said they felt in danger of being hurt or killed sometimes, and more than one in four respondents (28 per cent) said they felt in danger of being hurt or killed at all times. Across the different CSAs, 33 per cent of former and current CSA affiliates reported having been seriously wounded or injured as a result of the conflict, and 39 per cent of those respondents reported that their injury is still a problem today.

Many respondents also expressed frustration about the use of drugs such as marijuana and tramadol (a highly addictive prescription-strength opioid). For example, one respondent recounted that he “disliked their habit of using tramadol because whenever they use it they will start falling down from the trees where we used to hide when searching for Boko Haram.”<sup>56</sup> Over half of the respondents said there was drug use in their group – ranging from a few to everyone in their group.<sup>57</sup> Respondents were most likely to list tramadol (54 per cent) and marijuana (35 per cent) as the drugs of choice.

When asked about what they missed the most from their time with the group, respondents who had already exited often said they did not miss anything. Some respondents reminisced about the freedom, respect, and status they enjoyed as a result of being with the CJTF saying that “even if the State is in curfew they have the freedom to move anywhere.”<sup>58</sup> Many miss being able to provide simple acts of service to community members, such as “when they helped women in their community who were about to give birth by taking them to hospital for delivery,”<sup>59</sup> or how they “sit together and discuss issues about the community to be protected and [make it] a better place to live for everyone.”<sup>60</sup> Some missed their friends or the social aspects of being involved, as well as the sense of safety and duty. For example, a former CJTF affiliate stated: “I miss going out to communities’ outskirts in search of Boko Haram. I also miss how we love one another and how we solve things together in the CJTF group.”<sup>61</sup> Another member also referred to a sense of comradery: “I liked the cooperation between young people to come together and fight our enemy.”<sup>62</sup>

Because the CSAs remain physically and socially embedded in their communities, many former affiliates also remain in frequent contact with active members and describe having good relationships with the group. As one former male affiliate explained: “Even though I am not currently an active member of the group, I still have access to a lot of information about the group’s activities. I get that

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not held accountable. They are reported to have become part of the local war economy, participating in criminal networks, while acting as a local police force.” Also see European Union Agency for Asylum, “[Nigeria Security Situation](#),” *Country of Origin: Information Report* (June 2021): 29; US Department of State, [2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria](#), (2020); US Department of State, [2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria](#), (2021); Melisa Dalton, “[Conduct Is the Key: Improving Civilian Protection in Nigeria](#),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 9 July 2020; Vanguard, “[Excesses of vigilante groups worry South East communities](#),” 29 July 2020.

<sup>56</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

<sup>57</sup> When asked if they themselves used drugs, most respondents said they did not (95 per cent), and only a few respondents said sometimes (4 per cent) or most of the time (2 per cent).

<sup>58</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

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information at the majalisa I go to because a lot of my friends are currently involved with CJTF.”<sup>63</sup> When asked how often, if at all, former affiliates talk to people who are still actively involved with the group, over half of respondents said they talk to current affiliates every day or several times a week (31 and 28 per cent, respectively) and more than 20 per cent speak to active members a few times a month. This ongoing social contact does not correspond to active support or activities that could be construed as remobilization: 86 per cent of respondents said they do not continue to help the group. Only a small number of respondents reported continuing to provide some sort of support to their group after they left by fighting or defending their community (4 per cent), guarding checkpoints (4 per cent), or spying, driving, cleaning, transporting items, or delivering messages (less than 2 per cent each).

When asked if there was anything that would make them return, 85 per cent of former affiliates said that nothing would. A small minority of respondents said that they would return to protect their community from Boko Haram (4 per cent) or something else (2 per cent), and a fraction said they would return if they were unemployed or the group offered better pay than their jobs (2 per cent). The hesitation to return to the group is reflected in the number of respondents who said that their life was worse when they were with the group (50 per cent).<sup>64</sup> These findings were confirmed in focus group discussions in which former Yan Gora affiliates stated a mix of reluctance and willingness to rejoin: “I pray nothing bad happens, but if it does, I will definitely join again to protect myself and my community,”<sup>65</sup> and “May Allah protect us, but if it happens I am forever ready to take part in peacekeeping and protect myself and our community at large.”<sup>66</sup>

### Pathways to Peacetime Activities

While the majority of respondents said that their life was worse while they were with the CJTF or Yan Gora, that does not mean it is easy to leave a CSA. When asked if they thought it was possible to leave while they were with the group, many said that they did not think it would be possible (43 and 33 per cent of former CJTF and Yan Gora affiliates, respectively). The survey does not capture why respondents thought this was the case. One hypothesis is that respondents felt they could not leave because the conflict was still actively ongoing, and another is that perhaps they felt their communities would perceive them negatively if they separated from their group. When asked what they thought would happen after leaving the group, most respondents said they expected to go to school, get skills or job training, or start a business.<sup>67</sup> This was consistent for both the CJTF and Yan Gora. One notable difference that stands out in figure 4, is that approximately 10 per cent of those previously with Yan Gora expected to transfer to the CJTF.<sup>68</sup> Beyond needing skills training and help accessing capital to start a business, other survey questions highlighted that many of those exiting

<sup>63</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with former CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 21 March 2022).

<sup>64</sup> Of those who have left, 22 per cent of respondents say that their life was better while they were affiliated with a CSA and slightly more respondents indicate that their life was the same (28 per cent).

<sup>65</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with former CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 21 March 2022).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

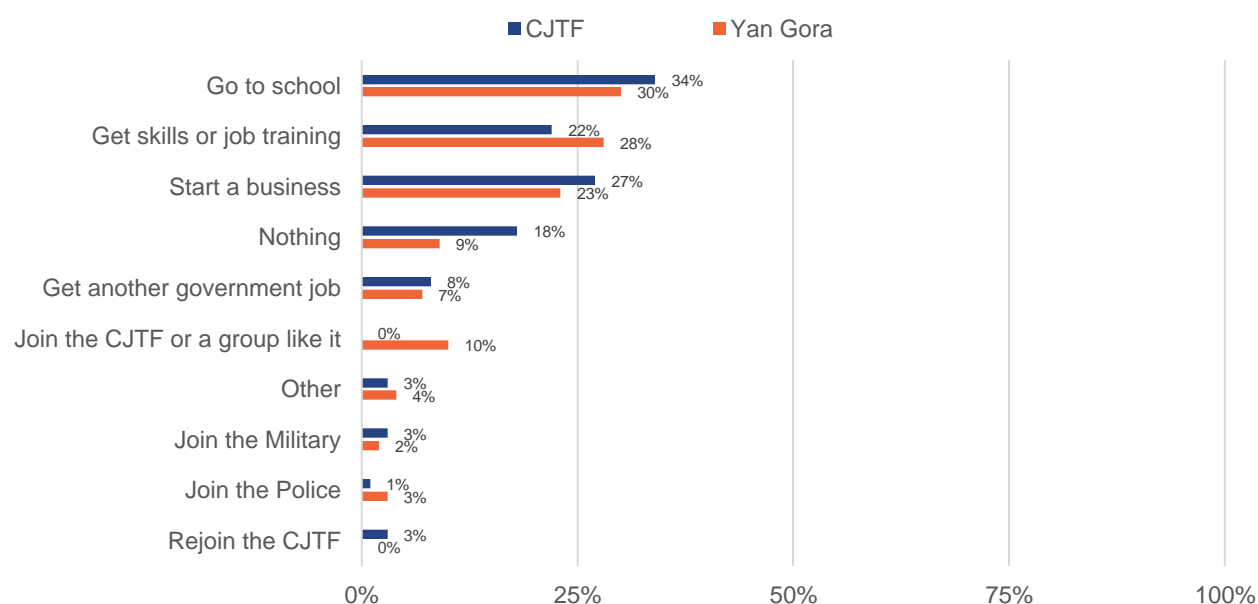
<sup>67</sup> It is important to emphasize that because a significant portion of the CSA affiliate sample participated in a UN or INGO programme to offboard and reintegrate, figure 4 is unlikely to be representative of what CSA affiliates thought was going to happen when they left their group as these responses were likely influenced by the programmatic experiences of those in the sample.

<sup>68</sup> Only 35 per cent of the former Yan Gora affiliates who said they thought they would join the CJTF or another similar group when they left Yan Gora, had indeed joined the CJTF at the time of taking the survey.

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a CSA have trouble meeting their basic needs. Given the dire economic and humanitarian situation in the North East, it is perhaps not surprising that when asked an open-ended question about what type of support they would give to people like them, most respondents noted basic needs like food and water, shelter, and medical care.

**Figure 4 – “What did you think would happen when you separated from [the CJTF/Yan Gora]?”**



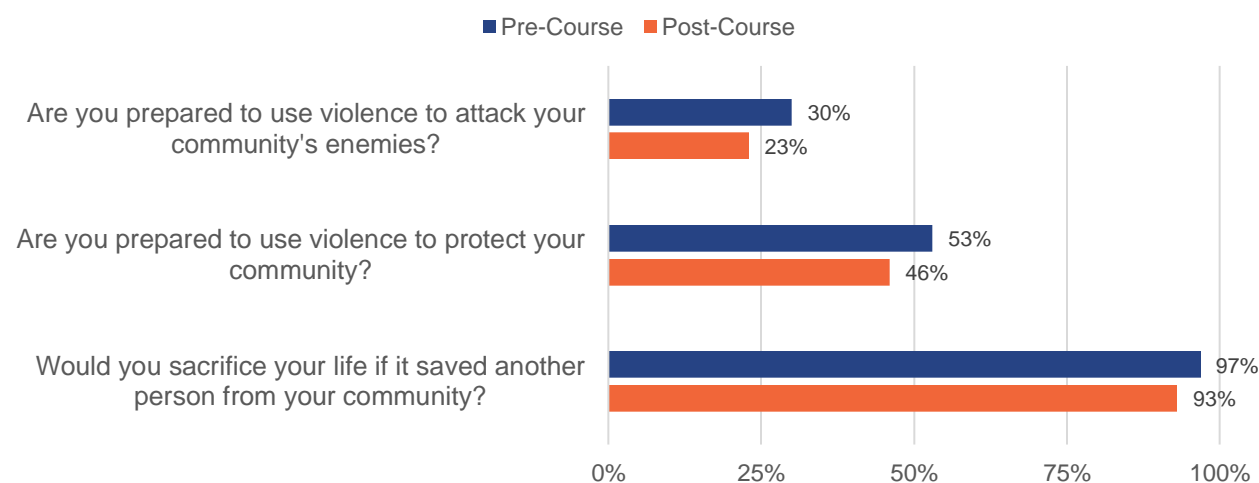
The vast majority of community security actors had no security sector experience prior to joining their respective groups (e.g., Yan Gora, CJTF), with almost zero per cent of respondents reporting any security skills. Rather, their pre-conflict livelihoods were largely as merchants and traders, farmers, or students, with smaller percentages engaged in tailoring, bricklaying, cap-making, and electrical work. Because roles within the CSAs were overwhelmingly focused on guarding or fighting (see Figure 2 above), the primary skill people acquired through their membership was in security work: over 70 per cent of men and more than 60 per cent of women reporting some skill acquisition said they gained security skills. Only a fraction of CSA respondents reported gaining skilled labor experience, such as brick laying, construction, electrical work, or driving, and nearly half (48 per cent) of current and former affiliates reported gaining no skills at all from their time in the group. The narrow, security-focused skills transfer CSA members have received shapes their plans and aspirations for life after demobilizing from community security groups. Years of conflict-related community engagement leaves former affiliates poorly equipped for peacetime professions, forced to pick up where they left off – sometimes years later – with other business and educational activities, or pivot into a more sustainable security sector profession.

In addition to offboarding or exit programmes, and in line with the security-focused skills development that happens for some members of CSAs, there are some ongoing efforts to provide integrated sets of skills to the ranks of CSAs in Nigeria. The MEAC study examined the impact of a UN-integrated capacity development course that included modules on, among other topics, leadership and civility, communication and dialogue, community engagement, community-based reconciliation and reintegration, protection of civilians, and human rights (including transitional justice and sexual and

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gender-based violence). The course was designed to enable participants to navigate current responsibilities with newer skills, setting the foundations for exiting groups. A subsample of CSA affiliates was surveyed right before receiving the course and another subsample was interviewed right after receiving the course. When asked questions about their willingness to use violence, respondents who had participated in the course were slightly less likely (4–7 per cent) to say they would engage in violence in different scenarios than those who had yet to take the course.<sup>69</sup> This is a preliminary and small indication that such interventions might help address problematic practices within CSAs. A larger longer-term study is needed to determine if such interventions have enduring effects on attitudes and behaviours.

**Figure 5 – The Impact of Integrated Capacity Development Training**



Finally, when discussing the future of the CJTF during focus groups, there was significant interest among both former and current affiliates for the CJTF to be further formalized, given offices “just as police,”<sup>70</sup> and to have its members incorporated into the formal state security apparatus, including the military. As one former affiliate explained: “These CJTF members should be recruited into the various security forces with the little training they have on security, like the Nigerian army, police, and civil defence, among others.”<sup>71</sup> Community members who participated in focus groups held diverse perspectives, with some reiterating that the CJTF should be given more power, and others voicing a different perspective, for example: “When the conflicts ends, I think the CJTF should drop their weapons and be like normal civilians.”<sup>72</sup> One person suggested a dilemma for community security demobilization: “if we ask them to drop their weapons and similar fights like Boko Haram happen again, they will not help us again.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> These questions are inspired by the work on identity fusion – “a visceral sense of “oneness” with a group and its individual members that motivates personally costly, pro-group behaviours [including violence]”. See William B. Swann Jr. and Michael D. Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (February 2015).

<sup>70</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with former CSA Affiliates*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 21 March 2022).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> MEAC, *Focus Group with community members*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 March 2022).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## Policy and Programmatic Implications

The data collected by the MEAC project to date in Nigeria reinforces the perception that the CJTF, Yan Gora, and other vigilantes who provide community security play a key role in the fight against Boko Haram, its factions, and other armed groups. The role that different CSAs play in supporting the military, their knowledge of the area, and their mobilization from the community make them uniquely placed to help in the response to armed actors in the region. Looking forward, it is hard to imagine a continued response to the Boko Haram crisis in which these CSAs would not play a part. While their continued role is inevitable in the short term, there are questions for donors and UN partners about how best to engage with these groups as part of their response to the crisis. In thinking long term about when Boko Haram is further weakened or defeated, and the security situation is stabilized, there are questions about the role these CSAs should play moving forward.

The research raises concerns about the nature of involvement with these CSAs and some of their activities. Survey data and focus group discussions have highlighted that while many mobilize into their group to defend their community on their own accord, there is evidence that pressure and even coercion are part of many respondent's entry pathways. There are many accounts of people who joined because they were told that anyone who did not would be presumed to be with Boko Haram. Thus, when engaging with CSAs it is important to recognize that a combination of necessity, fear, pressure, and coercion may have played a role in motivating the participation of members. Similarly, different, and related factors can shape why people choose to stay involved with the group. Indeed, although many survey respondents included in the MEAC samples have since left the group, a significant percentage felt they could not leave the organization if they wanted to (including some who have since exited). In addition to the individual experiences of affiliates, the diverse and ever evolving organizational structures of the different CSAs in the North East should be taken into account when thinking about longer-term demobilization and reintegration. Many of these groups are fluid with different layers and variations across time and location.

Beyond mobilization patterns, the survey data and focus groups raise additional questions about the activities of these groups and their implications for human and civil rights, particularly with regard to women and girls and people from marginalized groups. As the research highlights, CSAs are purported to engage in abuses. One respondent who was with Yan Gora hinted at the inevitability of such violence: "I really dislike the fact that we have to be armed, because holding a gun means you have to shoot, holding a knife means you have to cut, and holding a club means you have to beat someone. Even though we only punish criminals, I still feel bad that I have to use it."<sup>74</sup> If CSAs are to continue to play security and policing functions, systematic efforts need to be undertaken to professionalize these forces and ensure the types of abuses reported in this and other research do not persist. There are initial indications that training may impact attitudes about violence and could – in concert with additional oversight and screening – help address abuses and professionalize these forces. Establishing more robust civilian oversight and accountability mechanisms will be a key piece of successful institutionalization.

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<sup>74</sup> MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, May 2021–June 2022).

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If community leaders support the expanded scope of CSA activities, members will need to be properly prepared and equipped for performing broadened roles (e.g., dispute resolution). If there are governance or service gaps these groups will fill, there should be scaled up guidance and training to support their transformation. Relatedly, if CSAs continue to engage in morality policing and enforcing gender norms, there are questions about how national and international actors who seek to protect and promote the rights of women and girls, and youth can best engage with CSAs. For example, gender equality and human rights training is often a feature of security sector reform toolkits; however, quotas, recruitment policies, and clear parameters around CSAs' roles in social governance should also be discussed.

Community input and buy-in, as well as civilian governance, should be engaged in the development of any training, oversight, and policy design to accommodate CSAs' long-term roles and prospects. Long-term efforts to reform these forces and integrate some of them into standing security and police forces (or even other civil functions) lead to two key considerations. First, understanding the goals of those involved in CSAs will be important for crafting strategies to demobilize or integrate some of their ranks. The research uncovered many stories of those who became involved with the Yan Gora wanting a paid position with the CJTF, or those who were with the CJTF hoping to parlay it into a career as a police officer, soldier, or customs official. Not everyone can or should be integrated into standing forces but being cognizant of these preferences can help in the creation of attractive off-ramping avenues. A tailored approach should also extend to women former affiliates and reflect their specific needs. For example, the findings show that the social standing of women in their communities is impacted by their affiliation with a CSA. Capacity development and demobilization efforts should consider the specific needs of women, target the prevention of stigma, and maximize future opportunities that their affiliation affords them.

The second consideration is whether and how current and future demobilization interventions could affect communities' safety and preparedness should the region be further plunged into conflict. The same dynamics captured by the research – the public spirit, altruism, and coercion that influence community mobilization – in the initial years of the Boko Haram crisis will likely be present in the face of renewed insecurity. In such environments, it should not be assumed that everyone who has exited a CSA will remain standing down, and practitioners should consider investing in preventative capacity building to avoid some of the problematic aspects of community mobilization such as child recruitment and human rights violations, while also harnessing the positive legacy of their collective action.

