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Non-Military Actors as a Regional Strategy in the Lake Chad Region

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NON-MILITARY ACTORS
AS A REGIONAL STRATEGY
IN THE LAKE CHAD REGION

This paper has been prepared by

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WEST AFRICAN PAPERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine current regional strategies employed to counter extremism in the Lake Chad Basin region. Using the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) as a case study, the paper highlights the importance of non-military actors in shaping African regional military strategies. Regional peace and security frameworks have generally placed a predominant emphasis on member countries' militaries and their institutions. Unfortunately, such an approach remains incomplete in effectively countering transnational terrorist threats. By assessing current LCBC collaborative mechanisms with non-military actors under the Regional Stabilisation Strategy created in 2018, the paper concludes that there is a need to incorporate more local actors in the regional security framework. Such collaborations will improve civil-military relations while boosting the resilience of member states in combatting Boko Haram and other transnational groups.

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List of acronyms

AU	African Union
CEMAC	Central African Economic and Monetary Community
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization & Rehabilitation
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAP	Joint Action Plan
LCB	Lake Chad Basin
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
OPSC	Operation Safe Corridor
PWG	Pillar Working Group
RSF	Regional Stabilisation Facility
RSS	Regional Stabilisation Strategy
RTF	Regional Task Force
TAP	Territorial Action Plan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VEO	Violent Extremist Organisation

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Executive summary

This paper examines the current regional strategies employed to counter extremism in the Lake Chad region between Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Particularly, it examines the current collaborative mechanisms with non-military actors implemented by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) under the Regional Stabilisation Strategy (RSS) for the recovery and resilience of Boko Haram-affected areas. Although there has been considerable attention by scholars and policy practitioners on the LCBC's increased commitment to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in encouraging regional co-operation for counterterrorism offensives, there remains limited information on the Commission's Strategy created in 2018. This paper therefore aims to shed light on LCBC's non-military measures and the evolving dynamics of regional strategies in countering extremist violence in the Lake Chad region. It highlights the scope and priorities of the Strategy, the means of implementation, and the roles of civil society and international partners in stabilisation efforts. It also examines the challenges faced in implementing the Strategy along with opportunities for member states and international partners in leveraging the framework of the RSS to promote community-based approaches for multifaceted crises.

PAPER FINDINGS

- The crisis in the Lake Chad region is multifaceted and will take time to address. However, in stabilizing the region, the primary focus of member states and international partners has mostly been on the terrorism component even though the stabilization and recovery of the region requires addressing the many complex root causes that has resulted in the rise of violent extremist organisations, such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province. This focus on terrorism, unfortunately affects the type of aid requested and used in countering violent organisations as well as the willingness of international partners to fund non-military strategies.

- There is a need for more funding for the RSS and the civilian component of the MNJTF in promoting community-driven solutions that can address the region's complex crisis while ensuring the human security of vulnerable populations. The decision to employ primarily military measures continues to stem from the perceived relative military capacity of member states when compared to that of violent organisations operating in the region. How much confidence member states and international partners have in the non-military regional strategy will determine the RSS's adoption and its successful implementation in the future.

- The success of non-military actors in recovery and stabilization efforts lies with the physical securitization of the region and the political commitment of the affected states. This requires an inclusive approach based on the co-operation of government and non-government stakeholders to develop essential infrastructure in under-governed areas in the Lake Chad region. These sort of development initiatives may be able to at least address and decrease the ability of violent organisations to mobilize foot soldiers.

- Certain countries like Niger and Chad are involved in both the LCBC and the G5 Sahel, which has resulted in some member countries feeling that these countries' loyalties are divided. Member states of the LCBC and G5 Sahel must however see themselves as West African states first, and not as Francophone or Anglophone countries or separate regional bodies in implementing effective military and non-military measures that are able to counter the threats from violent organisations. One way to improve collaboration and co-ordination is to increase data management and data sharing capacity between the two sub-regional bodies.

- Various Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) policies have hindered the stabilization process of the region. A regional DDR policy may therefore be the key to the stabilization and recovery of the Lake Chad region. Member countries can tailor their DDR policies, but should agree on the underlying framework and principles that will inform the uniform reintegration of ex-combatants into their local communities. However, such reintegration efforts must also provide support and resources to communities that have been most affected by the crisis in facilitating behavioural changes towards former fighters.

Introduction

This paper examines the current regional strategies employed to counter extremism in the Lake Chad region. Particularly, it examines the current collaborative mechanisms with non-military actors implemented by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), a regional body established in 1964 to ensure the equitable and sustainable management of the Lake Chad while also promoting sub-regional integration, peace and security in the basin (LCBC, 2014). The paper focuses on the Regional Stabilisation Strategy (RSS) developed for the recovery and resilience of areas affected by Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The two organisations have remained largely responsible for militant jihadist group activity in the four countries that border the Lake Chad (Map 1). As a result, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria have continued to experience unprecedented levels of crises that have deepened instability, slowed economic growth and engendered humanitarian concerns in the region (OECD/SWAC, 2020).

Map 1

West Africa and the Lake Chad region
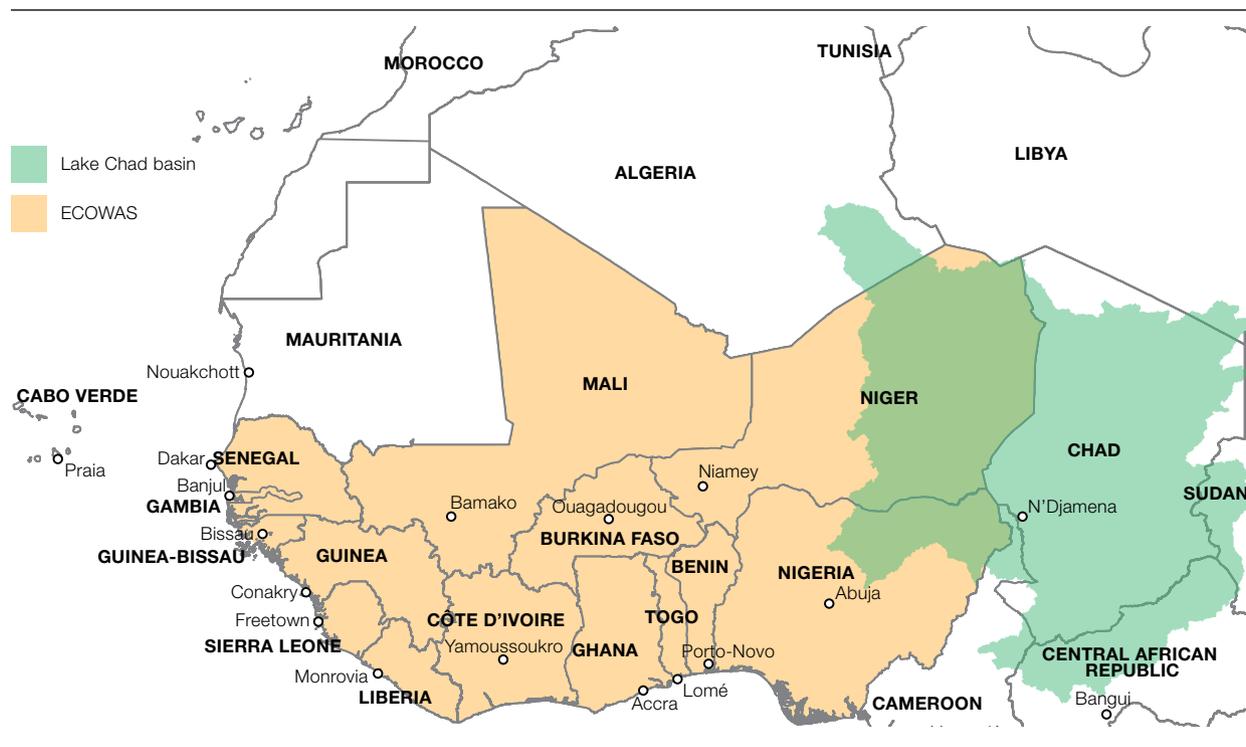
Source: OECD/SWAC (2017).

Since 2014, the LCBC and the African Union (AU) have encouraged regional and international co-operation through the strengthening of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram. The MNJTF is mandated to secure the borders of member countries in order to ensure that Boko Haram and its associates do not have access to the use of borders for launching attacks through co-ordinated counterterrorism offensives with national militaries (AUPSC, 2015). The force is also in charge of facilitating the implementation of stabilisation programs in member states and the delivery of humanitarian aid to affected populations.

Yet, in stabilizing the region, the primary focus of member states and international partners has mostly been on the MNJTF's counterterrorism component (Box 1). This focus unfortunately affects the type of aid requested and used in countering Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) as well as the willingness of international partners to fund non-military strategies. Although co-ordinated military operations with national governments and the MNJTF have been relatively successful in retrieving territory formerly held by Boko Haram and ISWAP, these military strategies do not address the many complex root causes that have resulted in increased activities from VEOs operating in the Lake Chad area.

Box 1
The Multinational Joint Task

Established by the LCBC in 1994 as an instrument for the cross-border control of criminal activities in the Lake Chad Basin area, the MNJTF was reactivated and authorized by the AU in early 2015 to combat the increasing regionalization of Boko Haram. The 10,000-strong force comprising troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, are supported by strategic partner countries like the U.S. and France. The task force is designed to respond to the transnational terrorist threat from Boko Haram by recovering territories previously controlled by the movement and freeing civilians taken as hostages (Ismail and Kifle, 2018). Despite increased activity from Boko Haram and its offshoots, MNJTF operations have made considerable progress in degrading the combat capacity of the movement. International partners have been able to reinforce the ability of MNJTF to co-ordinate, command and conduct joint multinational operations in the region by providing it with the necessary assets (infrastructure, communication, transportation, intelligence) to do so (EC, 2019). Yet, the acute humanitarian situation continues to call for an approach that goes beyond military intervention in stabilizing and increasing the resilience of affected areas in the region.

The establishment of the RSS in 2018 was a welcome development that demonstrated the commitment of the Lake Chad Commission in developing non-military regional responses. The Strategy, for example, recognizes the convergence of political will and effective national/subnational ownership necessary to address the root causes of the Lake Chad crises in consolidating the gains of the MNJTF. Nevertheless, there remains limited information on the RSS objective and its operationalization in the literature on this topic. When assessing the effectiveness of regional strategies in countering violent organisations in the Lake Chad area, consideration has generally been directed towards the MNJTF military component.

This paper intends to fill this gap by providing an overview of the Strategy and assesses its effectiveness in countering violent extremism in the region. Using data from primary and secondary sources, this study demonstrates the importance of non-military actors in shaping African regional strategies that can support military operations as well as protect vulnerable populations. It argues that regional strategies similar to VEOs are evolving. There is therefore, a need for scholars and practitioners to be aware of these non-military measures taken by regional organisations that can contribute to stabilisation and recovery efforts in ensuring holistic assessments of the effectiveness of African regional strategies.

Interviews were conducted between June-August 2020 with diplomats, MNJTF civilian staff, international organisation representatives, and leading subject matter experts on security in the Lake Chad region. These interviews were conducted virtually given the various travel restrictions and border closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews yielded data that generated an overall picture of progress of the RSS and the current challenges in implementing the Strategy. The study also draws on legal documents, reports, and white papers from regional and international agencies involved in LCBC's Strategy. Other sources include academic publications, official documents from the AU, LCBC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as well as mission reports and resolutions towards LCBC member states.

Security threats in the Lake Chad region

For decades, countries surrounding Lake Chad have been plagued with weak governance structures, resource scarcity, environmental degradation, political uncertainties and low human development indexes. These underlying causes have resulted in the region's increasing fragility and its susceptibility to violence and conflict. The shrinking of the Lake Chad by nearly 90 percent, for example, has been linked to insecurities associated with food-related environmental stress, forced migrations, and conflicts among communities over control of the remaining water (Frimpong, 2020; Mahmood et al., 2019).

A lack of development progress on several fronts resulting from years of neglect from national development plans and investments in the Lake Chad region emerges as an additional key enabler of the political, economic and social marginalization that the region has endured. Ineffective governance, corruption, inadequate basic services, the mistrust of state security forces and a sense of isolation from the central government have fostered a permissive environment conducive to armed group activities and alternative state structures. Indeed, armed conflicts between the state and non-state actors competing for space and territorial control remain a recurrent feature of politics in the region (Walther, 2017). Member states have continued to experience varying degrees of conflict related to insurgencies, secessionist movements, and terrorism (OECD/SWAC, 2020).

Since 2009, however, the major security threat in the Lake Chad region has come from the Boko Haram insurgency, emerging as one of the most active and deadliest terrorist groups in sub-Saharan Africa (IEP, 2020). Although the movement originated from Nigeria, Boko Haram and ISWAP have remained largely responsible for jihadist activity in Chad, Cameroon, and eastern Niger. This exportation of violence beyond Nigeria's territory is demonstrative of the evolving nature of VEOs and the transformation of the Lake Chad region into a strategic theatre for terrorism analysis in Africa (Ayandele 2020; Okereke and Achimugu, 2018).

The existence of radical narratives is not a new phenomenon in the Lake Chad region. The region's under-development has resulted in the emergence of violent organisations and their extremist ideologies. VEOs have been able to formulate a discourse that resonates with local social and political demands, with groups emerging in a context of political political opportunity provided by the following factors— member states' limited ability to govern, highly fragmented societies, and the ability of non-state actors to easily resort to violence to express their social and political grievances (Ibrahim, 2017). Deteriorating social and political conditions along with the perceptions of marginalization in the Lake Chad have therefore allowed for religion to be manipulated in favour (or disfavour) of certain interests that have continued to threaten national and regional stability (Olojo, 2018; Ayandele, 2019).

At its peak in 2014 and 2015, Boko Haram's violence precipitated a humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad reported as the "worst humanitarian crisis on the African continent" (UN, 2016). As of the last quarter of 2020, the movement's insurgency had led to the loss of more than 35,000 lives, the displacement of 2.7 million people, with an estimated 9.8 million people in need and 4.1 million food-insecure people at crisis and emergency levels across the affected areas of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria (UNOCHA, 2020).

Moreover, despite successes recorded by the MNJTF—the retrieval of territory formerly held by Boko Haram, instances of troops engaging with the militants across national borders, and improved morale among soldiers—insurgents have been able to quickly regroup (ICG, 2020). The ISWAP faction, for instance, has been able to effectively appeal to and co-opt local networks in the Lake Chad region, by blending its extremist narrative with local grievances in establishing its legitimacy (GICS, 2019). Furthermore, reoccurring violent incidences in the last two years have sparked fears in the international community that the security situation is once again deteriorating (OECD/SWAC, 2020). The transition to recovery and stabilisation in the Lake Chad region is thus dependent on a combination of security responses and the development of essential infrastructure in areas that have been recovered from conflict to consolidate the gains of the MNJTF and permanently eradicate violent extremism.

The Regional Stabilisation Strategy

AN OVERVIEW

The RSS established in 2018, is a non-military measure that complements the efforts of the MNJTF and member states in stabilizing Boko Haram-affected areas. The five-year strategy is the product of broad consultations among experts of the LCBC and those of the African Union Commission, relevant agencies of the United Nations, and other stakeholders such as civil society representatives and bilateral partners to address the key challenges affecting the Lake Chad Basin.

The Strategy seeks to establish a common approach and an inclusive framework that can address the structural challenges of vulnerability and insecurity for sustainable peace and development in the Lake Chad region. Anchored on nine strategic pillars, the RSS contributes to the achievement of the AU's Agenda 2063, the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel (AU, 2018).

As such, the RSS provides a comprehensive, integrated and multi-level framework for overall stabilisation to support MNJTF operations, humanitarian assistance responses, and key development initiatives to secure early recovery and longer-term resilience in the region. Its goals can therefore be understood as threefold. The first goal is to generate policies and programs that are geared towards the short, medium and long-term stabilisation and development of the Lake Chad region. The second is to anchor on commonalities while taking into account the peculiarities of each of the concerned states in the region, given that the Boko Haram situation differs from country to country. The third goal, is to address the root causes of the crisis in order to enhance resilience in Boko Haram-affected areas (AU, 2018).

Moreover, in recognizing the important nexus between governance, security, and humanitarian intervention and development, the Strategy calls for a "New Way of Working" to be at the heart of the response to the Lake Chad Basin crises. The pillars under the Strategy are therefore designed to enable cross linkages that allow for synergies and optimization of impact as well as adequate opportunities for national and local ownership in tailoring responses that are contextualized to specific dynamics on the ground (AU, 2018). Box 2 outlines each pillar, the RSS whole-of-government approach, along with its guiding principles.

Box 2
The Regional Stabilisation Strategy

The five-year RSS provides a framework for regional co-operation and the harmonization of stabilisation, recovery and resilience efforts in the Lake Chad region against violent extremism. It is anchored on the following nine strategic pillars:

- Political Co-operation
- Security and Human Rights
- Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, Reinsertion and Reintegration of Persons associated with Boko Haram
- Humanitarian Assistance
- Governance and the Social Contract
- Socio-Economic Recovery and Environmental Sustainability
- Education, Learning and Skills
- Prevention of Violent Extremism and Building Peace
- Empowerment and Inclusion of Women and Youth

The RSS is predicated upon a whole-of-society approach that involves government actors, as well as all sections of civil society, including local communities, traditional leaders, non-government organisations and community-based organisations, the media, academic institutions and the private sector.

The RSS is underpinned by nine guiding principles for its implementation:

- National and Regional ownership
- Leadership: National, Regional and Continental
- Mutual Accountability
- Co-operation and Complementarity
- Mutually Reinforcing Partnerships
- Transformative Approaches to Stabilisation/Development
- Respect for Regional, Continental & International Human Rights Instruments
- Capacity Building for Effective Service Delivery
- Gender Mainstreaming

Source: LCBC and UNDP (2019)

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL STRATEGY

The implementation structure of the RSS is visually represented in Figure 1. The LCBC Ministerial Council is the apex decision-making body for implementation of the Strategy, with the Steering Committee reporting to the Council of Ministers at the regional level. The Steering Committee also receives advice and support from the International Support Group as needed. At the national level, LCB Governors via the Governors Forum report to the Steering Committee, advising the Committee on the progress of the Strategy in affected areas. At both regional and national levels, the Steering Committee and the Governors Forum receive technical support from the Secretariat via the Regional Task Force and Pillar Working Groups. The Secretariat also helps to facilitate the meetings of the Steering Committee and the Governors Forum.

Figure 1

Implementation organogram and actors
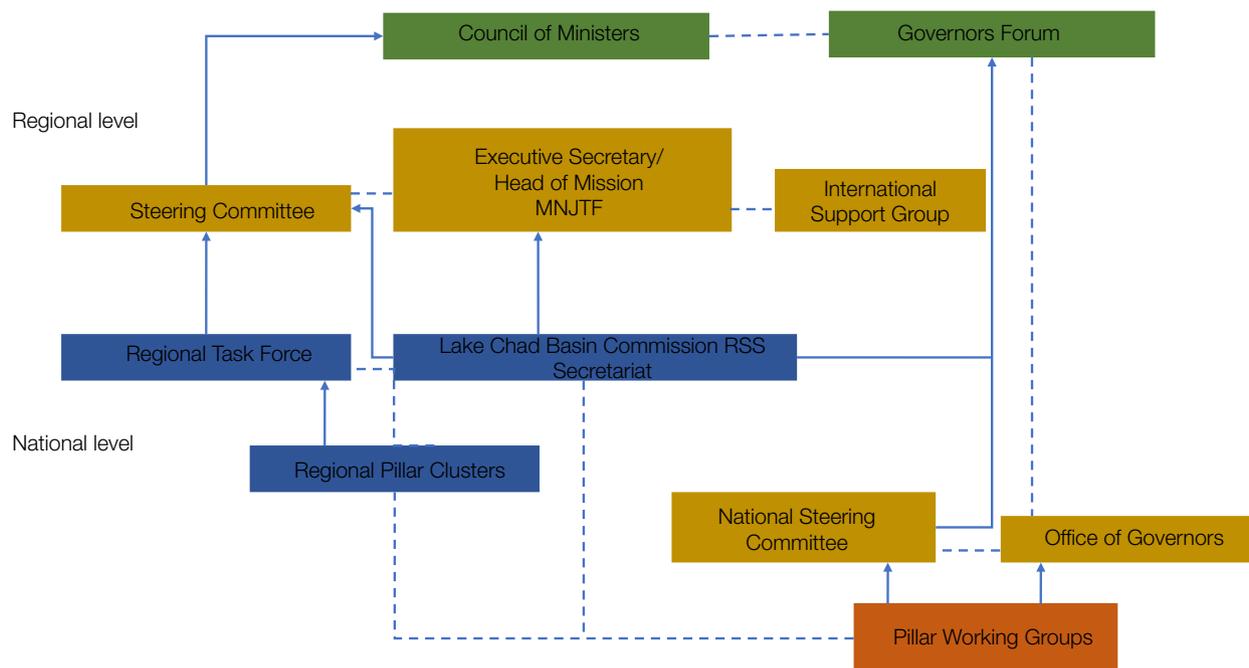
Source: author based on materials drawn from AU (2018), primary sources and interviews.

The Steering Committee is composed of representatives of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Benin, the AU Commission, the LCBC, the MNJTF, the Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS) and East African States (ECCAS), the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), the United Nations, and regional civil society organisations. The Committee, chaired by the LCBC with the AU Commission reports to the LCBC Council of Ministers, who provide the strategic oversight and policy guidance of the RSS. Through its Secretariat, the Committee supports regional-level civil-military co-operation with the MNJTF as well as cross-border co-operation mechanisms and initiatives like the Lake Chad Governor's Forum (Box 3). The Secretariat is also responsible for mobilizing resources, building strategic partnerships, technical co-ordination and oversight, and the management of a research and knowledge depository to support the achievement of the key results (AU, 2018).

Box 3
The Governor Forum

The Governor Forum was formally launched on 8–9 May 2018 in Maiduguri, Borno State, in Nigeria and comprises the governors of the regions in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria most affected by the violence caused by Boko Haram and related challenges. The objective of the Forum is to promote continuous dialogue and the sharing of information, best practices and lessons learned from the implementation of the RSS, and to strengthen co-ordination and collaboration on cross-border initiatives at the subnational level around the Lake Chad Basin. The Forum emerged from the recommendations of the Senior Officials' Meeting of the Oslo Consultative Group on Prevention and Stabilisation in the Lake Chad Region, held in Berlin in September 2017. It aims to support the political process to stabilize the region, prevent further crises in the region, and makes a significant contribution to the regional response to the challenges, as called for in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2349 (2017).

Source: Government of Nigeria and UNDP, 2018; Okeke, 2020)

To ensure an integrated, targeted, and sequenced move from humanitarian assistance to sustainable development in Boko Haram-affected areas, a civil-military co-operation cell reinforces the capacity of the MNJTF by building trust between communities, governments and security providers (AU, 2018). For example, the civilian component under the MNJTF is in charge of planning and co-ordinating initiatives that extend humanitarian access, facilitating the safe return of international displaced persons and refugees, and supporting MNJTF troops' compliance with global standards of human rights and humanitarian law. The civilian co-ordinator along with translators, child protection officers, humanitarian liaison officers and human right officers also engage communities and troops in workshops and training programs and assist in the reconstruction of social infrastructures in Boko Haram-affected areas.

The strategy also relies on Territorial Action Plans (TAPs) in the eight areas of the four member states most affected by Boko Haram activities: Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states in Nigeria; the Diffa Region in Niger; Region du Lac and Hajder-Lamis Region in Chad; and the Far North Region in Cameroon. National Governments of the four member states co-ordinate the TAP implementation framework through a devolved mechanism that allows governors to provide direct oversight and guidance for the stabilisation, recovery, and resilience of the eight respective territories under the nine pillars of intervention. The governors are responsible for the preparation of specific initiatives under each territorial plan and for ensuring that they are harmonized with local and national development plans. The governors in overseeing the implementation of the territorial plans, also chair co-ordination meetings of humanitarian and development actors operating within their territories, liaise with relevant national authorities, and advocate for the resources required to fulfil the territorial plans from regional and international organisations. Although governors of affected areas remain responsible for ensuring that the regional objectives are tailored to local contextual needs, the TAP framework is based on a whole-of-society and human rights-based approach. It brings together all agencies and organisations at the national, regional, and international levels to have one action plan for each territory.

In addition, under the direction of the LCBC with the support of the AU Commission, the Regional Task Force (RTF) supports the technical co-ordination of the pillars of intervention at the regional level. Composed of UN agencies and other development partners, the RTF assists with monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The Pillar Working Groups (PWGs), on the other hand, ensures the technical co-ordination of the nine pillars of intervention at the territorial level. Its members include implementing partners and other stakeholders in each of the eight affected territories. PWGs are led by the office of the governors of each affected territory (UNDP, 2020a).

THE REGIONAL STABILISATION FACILITY

The Regional Stabilisation Facility, set up by the UNDP, is a multi-donor basket financial facility to support the implementation of the Strategy in affected communities in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The Facility acts as a rapid-response mechanism that relevant authorities can sequence with military operations to ensure immediate follow-up in specific locations, with the goal to curtail the ability of Boko Haram to re-infiltrate and exploit any security vacuum or community perceptions of a non-responsive government.

The RSF is engaged in two types of support in consolidating MNJTF military progress and in extending an organized and effective civilian security umbrella. The first type of support—The Joint Action Plan (JAP)—is concerned with the immediate stabilisation of insecure areas where there are few actors working, and where communities remain vulnerable to continued infiltration and attack. Each JAP is developed in collaboration with governors and relevant ministries at the national level. The second is aimed at long-term stabilisation at the regional level by strengthening LCBC capacities for Strategy implementation and multi-partner co-operation mechanisms under the Territorial Action Plan. Activities under the RSF therefore seek to provide or improve on community safety and security, essential infrastructure and basic services, and livelihood opportunities in Boko Haram-affected communities (UNDP, 2020a).

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organisations remain important stakeholders in the implementation of the Strategy. Effective civil society organisations that have local credibility in seeking to build community resilience against radicalization can address real and perceived local disaffection and alienation from the State. In addition to facilitating the design, implementation and follow-up of action plans like TAPs and JAPs, civil society organisations are also expected to advocate for cross-cutting issues that can have broader regional value and impact. The establishment of the Regional Consultative Forum, for example, enables the regular and constructive engagement between the Governors' Forum and civil society, including traditional and religious institutions, women, and young people, to ensure that the needs of vulnerable communities are heard and responded to throughout the implementation of the Strategy (LCBC, 2019).

Assessing the Regional Stabilisation Strategy

By some measures, the Strategy has experienced some success in securing the early recovery of Boko Haram-affected areas in the Lake Chad region. Since its establishment, the Strategy has promoted programs and initiatives that are anchored in the commonalities of affected states while acknowledging the peculiarities of each of the concerned member countries. LCBC and AU representatives in interviews pointed out that the ability of the LCBC to bring together heterogeneous states in addressing the Boko Haram crisis must be commended. Although there remain issues related to political interests along with language and culture barriers, participating states have been able enhance political co-operation by coming together to form, design, and agree on the stabilisation plan and its framework.

In implementing the Strategy for 2019/20, for example, the Governor Forum meeting held in July 2019 in Niamey, Niger was key in identifying regional and cross-border priorities that included strengthening cross-border trade, regional economic development and employment opportunities, especially for youth, as part of efforts to reduce VEO recruitment. The forum also highlighted the need to rehabilitate and reintegrate victims of the Boko Haram insurgency and ex-combatants, and increase the engagement of civil society, including traditional and religious leaders in managing local conflicts (LCBC and UNDP, 2019).

The Strategy has also embarked on campaigns that increasingly engage local communities, by organizing workshops and meetings to inform participants of its objectives and modalities of implementation, particularly the role of the LCBC, the Governor Forum, and civil society in enhancing resilience in Boko Haram-affected areas. These regional consultative forums with civil society groups have been essential in providing a space for participants from affected communities in the region to share their experiences and existing good practices to strengthen state resiliency. They also underline the willingness of civil society to engage with government actors to advance stabilisation and peacebuilding efforts (LCBC and UNDP, 2019).

Furthermore, the RSF via the Joint Action Plan has been able to establish initiatives to boost youth empowerment in efforts to reduce recruitment among violent organisations. Local initiatives such as "cash for work" in the Far North Region in Cameroon and Nigeria's Banki town in Borno State have provided jobs, by encouraging young people to engage in sanitation, reforestation, and the rehabilitation of roads and public infrastructure buildings to curb youth unemployment in these affected communities (UNDP, 2020b, 2020c). Similarly, in Ngalamia, located in Chad's Region du Lac, the RSF has been essential in strengthening the capacities of young people through scholarship programs to fund training in vocational programs that can improve their employability in promising sectors (UNDP, 2020c). Various infrastructure projects such as the rehabilitation and upgrade of Damboa's water distribution and pumping system in Borno and the provision of solar-powered streetlights in the Diffa region of Niger also illustrate the will of the RSS in laying the foundation for the recovery of the Lake Chad region (Okeke, 2020).

Besides, the Lake Chad Commission and UNDP have embarked on sensitization workshops to improve the local ownership and implementation of the Strategy (UNDP, 2020b). Representatives of the AU, LCBC, MNJTF and UNDP for example, noted that sessions under the Regional Task Force have been essential in highlighting the Strategy implementation roadmap, monitoring and evaluation measures as well as the key responsibilities and role of various actors in improving the co-ordination and synergy of stakeholders for the stabilisation of the region.

With regards to reinforcing the capacity of the multinational force, the civil-military co-operation cell of the joint task force has continued to support MNJTF troops by facilitating training and workshops for newly deployed military personnel on human rights and humanitarian law. These training programs have improved the attitude and skills of MNJTF troops, particularly, their ability to engage in strategies related to civilian protection to win the hearts and minds of local communities. In interviews, MNJTF civilian staff emphasized the strong relationship between MNJTF troops and their human rights training and its positive effect on intelligence gathering in military operations against Boko Haram, especially post 2015. One civilian staff, for example, noted that when compared to national security forces, this strong relationship might explain why there was limited human rights violations in areas where MNJTF troops were deployed. In instances where human rights violations were reported, MNJTF civilian staff representatives reported that investigations were usually carried out with consequences meted out for military personnel found guilty.

Challenges and Implications

MEMBER STATE INTEREST AND OVERRELIANCE ON MILITARY INSTITUTIONS

Member state have continued to rely on military institutions to address governance issues in the region (ICG, 2020). Officials involved in the implementation of the Strategy contended that the decision to employ military measures resulted from the perceived relative military capacity of national armies when compared to violent organisations operating in the area. Despite the establishment of the Strategy, MNJTF and national security troops remained the face of regional and national strategies to counter violent extremism in the Lake Chad region.

Interviewees further noted that state leaders were more likely to be approved for external funding from the international community when they employed military approaches because of the increasing militarization of security. This may also explained why there was little to no information about the activities of the civilian component of the multinational force and the work they carried out on the field to win the hearts and minds of local communities. Member states' focus on military measures unfortunately continued to affect the type of aid requested and used in the fight against violent extremism in the region. Although MNJTF troops and national armies engaged Boko Haram and ISWAP with superior training and equipment, operations were rarely sustained with longer-term development projects and initiatives. Insurgents were therefore able to quickly regroup after MNJTF operations (ICG, 2020).

This was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the RSS outlined prioritization for 2019/20, MNJTF civilian staff were unable to carry out most of the proposed critical infrastructure development projects in target communities. For one staff, this limited engagement with local communities as a result of travel restrictions and border closures from the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to member states' further reliance on military institutions to counter Boko Haram as well as the growing distrust between local populations and state security forces in the Lake Chad.

Interviewees also pointed to increasing competition for limited resources from Western partners in the wider Sahel region. Some even argued that the limited co-operation between the LCBC and the G5 Sahel resulted in competition for funding and the resulting prioritization of military strategies, given that military strategies were often cheaper than political and development responses. Shortages in funding for the RSF to support the Strategy implementation signalled to respondents the international community's lack of political will to fund a development model of stabilisation in countering violent extremism in the Lake Chad region. Nevertheless, interviewees stressed the importance of non-military actors in stabilizing the region and the need for more funding for the civilian component of both the MNJTF and the Strategy to support military gains.

CIVIL-MILITARY CO-ORDINATION

Interviews with AU, UNDP and MNJTF representatives additionally highlighted the importance of civilian police forces, their key role in rebuilding areas recovered from Boko Haram, and its associates after military troops engaged with them. For these representatives, training exercises were essential in improving the skills of police officers in terms of local judicial governance and the rule of law in efforts to establish and maintain trust between civilians and the forces of law and order (LCBC and UNDP, 2019; UNDP, 2020c).

There was also a need for greater co-ordination between military and humanitarian actors in ensuring that humanitarian assistance was distributed to areas and communities considered unstable and where humanitarian actors were vulnerable to attacks. Allegations of human rights abuses brought against security forces, by the international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and partner states had resulted in certain countries refusing to protect humanitarian actors. As one UNDP representative involved in the Lake Chad region noted, humanitarian actors were increasingly being viewed as collateral damage by certain member states in the war against Boko Haram and other armed groups.

Civil society representatives in forums reported feelings of exclusion in the decision-making process. Forums with civil society were thus, often viewed with scepticism by civil society organisations as another "talk show" that lacked the necessary political commitment for LCB members to implement non-military strategies (LCBC, 2019). Civil society organisations, for example, had pointed out in consultative forums that the current military strategy of asking populations to vacate the islands in the Lake Chad before engaging with Boko Haram and ISWAP was counterproductive, as it affected vulnerable communities' livelihoods. Yet, member states had

continued to deploy military troops to Lake Chad islands, with the sole objective of detecting and neutralizing insurgent groups in the area.

Interviews further highlighted the need for a co-ordinated framework under the regional Strategy that would inform the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of Boko Haram combatants. MNJTF civilian staff, for example, reported that foreign combatants were more likely to surrender around Nigerian border towns because of Nigeria's perceived friendlier reintegration process under Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). Although foreign fighters from neighbouring countries when apprehended were eventually transferred to their respective countries, participants of Nigeria's OPSC were provided with resources and training to rebuild their lives and livelihoods when compared to other countries' rehabilitation and reintegration programs. These differing disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation programs in member states in turn, influenced where Boko Haram fighters were more likely to disengage and surrender to MNJTF troops as well as the types of strategies MNJTF troops employed in countering Boko Haram and ISWAP in border towns.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE RSS

Despite these challenges, the Strategy and the Lake Chad experience provides a practical example of a developmental approach to stabilisation efforts that combines hard-security interventions and soft-security measures (Okeke, 2020). Nevertheless, there remains room for improvement and opportunities for member states and international partners to learn from successes and challenges. A useful starting point is to note aspects of the Strategy that have been most effective and aspects that need improvement in promoting civil-military relations that can boost the resilience of member states and the LCBC in stabilizing the region.

For example, in boosting resilience, more funding for the Strategy can promote community-driven solutions that address the region's complex crises while ensuring the human security of vulnerable populations. This is because local communities themselves have vital roles to play in the fight against violent extremism. Local vigilante groups for instance remain essential in providing security forces with intelligence on what deviates from "normal," thus assisting security forces in the early detection of potential Boko Haram threats. Traditional, religious and community leaders can also support the reconstruction and security of interregional corridors that are essential for boosting economic trade between Boko Haram-affected communities in strengthening economic development (LCBC and UNDP, 2019). However, these groups need the co-ordinated support of the LCBC and other partners in improving their capabilities to respond to local conflicts

early and in building trust between the military and local populations in areas affected by violent extremism. Military approaches should therefore be operationalized side-by-side with the non-military measures promoted by community members and civil society representatives, not after the fact in boosting stabilisation and recovery efforts.

To reduce the increasing competition between member states of the LCBC and G5 Sahel, the LCBC can also embark on public information campaigns that promote regional collaborative mechanisms. Certain countries like Niger and Chad are involved in both the LCBC and the G5 Sahel. However, the increasing competition between the above regional bodies can result in feelings that those countries' loyalties are divided, affecting the Strategy's implementation. These campaigns must therefore be grounded on commonalities where member states in the Lake Chad and Sahel regions see themselves as West African states first, and not as Francophone and Anglophone countries or separate regional bodies in implementing effective military and non-military measures that are able to counter the threats from VEOs.

Additionally, to improve collaboration and co-ordination between the two sub-regional bodies, the LCBC Secretariat can increase data management and data sharing capacity of the Strategy. Through the open exchange of information, government and nongovernment stakeholders in the Lake Chad region and beyond will be able to share experiences as well as identify new opportunities and potential collaborative actions that can further advance security, stability and development.

The establishment and implementation of a regional Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation (DDR) framework remains key to the stabilisation and recovery to the region. Boko Haram ex-combatants have been able to take advantage of variation in policy by only voluntarily surrendering in areas where they are more likely to go through a DDR program versus areas that encourage repentant militants to surrender in exchange for reduced or commuted sentences. To ensure local ownership, member countries may tailor their DDR policies. However, there should be an agreement on the underlying framework and principles that will inform the uniform reintegration of ex-combatants into their local communities. The framework can be overseen by a DRR regional officer under the civil-military co-operation cell of the MNJTF. Such reintegration efforts should also provide support and resources to communities that have been most affected by the Boko Haram-ISWAP insurgency in facilitating changed behaviour towards fighters.

Conclusion

The crisis in the Lake Chad region is multifaceted and will take time to address. Past efforts at stabilizing the region have mostly been on the Lake Chad region's terrorism component even though the stabilisation and recovery of the region requires addressing the many complex root causes that have resulted in the rise of Boko Haram and its splinter group ISWAP. Nonetheless, the recent establishment of the RSS is illustrative of a development model of stabilisation that can complement military efforts as well as address the root causes of the Lake Chad crises. Indeed, the Strategy's inclusive approach has been essential in highlighting and developing infrastructure in Boko Haram-affected areas in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. It is also more ambitious when compared to short-term military approaches with respect to building state legitimacy in order to undercut support for violent organisations.

However, how much confidence member states have in the non-military regional strategy will determine the RSS's adoption and its successful implementation in the future. Current challenges faced by the Strategy require increased financing to scale up support and the LCBC Secretariat's sustained engagement with local and international partners. Implementation of the Strategy so far has remained slow. Nevertheless, the Strategy represents a sustainable framework from which scholars and practitioners can learn. It incorporates into its framework, the important roles of non-military actors in shaping regional security strategies that can consolidate the gains of security forces as well as address the root causes of the Lake Chad crises.

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Non-Military Actors as a Regional Strategy in the Lake Chad Region

This paper examines the current regional strategies employed to counter extremism in the Lake Chad region between Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Particularly, it examines the current collaborative mechanisms with non-military actors implemented by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) under the Regional Stabilisation Strategy (RSS) for the recovery and resilience of Boko Haram-affected areas. Although there has been considerable attention by scholars and policy practitioners on the LCBC's increased commitment to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in encouraging regional co-operation for counterterrorism offensives, there remains limited information on the Commission's Strategy created in 2018. This paper therefore aims to shed light on LCBC's non-military measures and the evolving dynamics of regional strategies in countering extremist violence in the Lake Chad region. It highlights the scope and priorities of the Strategy, the means of implementation, and the roles of civil society and international partners in stabilisation efforts. It also examines the challenges faced in implementing the Strategy along with opportunities for member states and international partners in leveraging the framework of the RSS to promote community-based approaches for multifaceted crises.

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