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Community Leaders' Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates: Implications for Peacebuilding

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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KEY FINDINGS

- Community leaders experienced high levels of personal victimization by Boko Haram. Roughly 65 per cent reported being personally targeted by the insurgents.
- Greater community member participation in Boko Haram and the experience of being personally targeted by the group appear to be linked to a greater likelihood of community leaders vouching for returnees.
- Community leaders are less accepting of men who were with Boko Haram than of women and are more likely to want punishment for them.
- Survey results reveal a low level of awareness among community leaders about Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), suggesting that there may be an opportunity to improve outcomes by sensitizing community leaders.
- Certain community leaders may be more influential in brokering the return and reintegration of community members. For instance, Bulamas, a tier of traditional leadership with the closest connections to and visibility within local communities, may be especially important to engage.

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

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Background

About MEAC

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

These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank.¹

About this Series

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

About this Report

This report is based on data collected as part of two surveys:² a survey of 275 local community leaders from the Maiduguri Metropolitan City (MMC) and Konduga areas of Borno State, conducted between September 2020 to June 2021, and a phone survey with a sample of 2,963 respondents representative of the population from Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga, which was conducted between December 2020 and March 2021.³ The report focuses on community leaders' receptivity to returning Boko Haram associates. This policy brief focuses on how community leaders' experiences of personal targeting, and the extent to which their community members participated in Boko Haram, affect their willingness to allow former members to return. The findings

¹ The phone survey referenced in this report was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from Mobukar Consultancy. For more information on MEAC partners and donors, see: <https://cpr.unu.edu/research/projects/meac.html#outline>.

² The analysis of these surveys presented in this report omits those who refused to respond to specific questions and those who were not asked specific questions as a result of the survey design and administration. Thus, the summary figures reflect the attitudes of those who were asked specific questions on the survey *and* provided a substantive answer.

³ This research was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from Mobukar Consultancy. For more information on MEAC partners and donors, see: <https://cpr.unu.edu/research/projects/meac.html#outline>.

presented herein may be useful to UN and NGO partners among other stakeholders working in the region to bolster their reintegration programming, as well as efforts to support the communities who receive former Boko Haram associates. These insights are unique as this data is collected in an ongoing conflict, while reintegration is actively occurring in the North East and communities are receiving those who exit Boko Haram and other armed groups. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Community Leaders' Perspectives on the Reintegration of ex-Boko Haram Affiliates

Overview

This report examines community leaders' experiences during the Boko Haram crisis, unpacks their responses to returning ex-associates of Boko Haram and considers how they can impact reintegration and peacebuilding efforts in North East Nigeria. The report primarily leverages a survey of 275 community leaders (e.g., Bulamas, Lawans, camp leaders, chairmen, district/ward heads, and women's leaders) predominantly located in the Maiduguri Metropolitan City (MMC) and Konduga areas of Borno State, conducted between September 2020 to June of 2021. The community leader sample was composed of some referred community leaders who have worked with UN partners (approximately 30 per cent) and community leaders that were identified as part of a randomized participant recruitment campaign in the region. The community leader sample does not represent the full range of community leaders who operate and have legitimacy in the region. The sample is predominantly composed of Bulamas, who represent the tier of community leadership with the closest connections to and visibility within local communities. While this data is now more than a year old, it still offers helpful insights about how community leaders think about the prospects for reintegration of former members of Boko Haram.

In addition to the community leader data, the report presents data on community perceptions based on a phone survey conducted between December 2020 and March 2021, by UNU-CPR and one of its implementing partners in Nigeria – Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). This survey contacted 2,963 people representative of the population from Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga.⁴ The survey sample drew from a larger randomized participant recruitment campaign the MEAC team had run in the region. Respondents were asked a set of questions about their own experiences with the conflict, as well as the experiences of their fellow community and family members. In addition to questions about a generic "man" or "woman" who had been with Boko Haram, the survey also included a series of questions designed to measure differences in people's willingness to receive different types of former Boko Haram associates into their community and to ascertain whether receptivity is influenced by various programmatic interventions. One set of these questions focused on a more detailed fictional profile of a repentant former affiliate and varied his/her gender ("Usman" or "Fatima") and age (12- or 28-years old). In this specific scenario, interviewers

⁴ Ibid.

either provided no additional information, or detailed that he/she had either been cleared by the government after completing a reorientation (reintegration) programme, or that he/she expressed a willingness to publicly apologize and ask the community for forgiveness. After being randomly presented with one scenario, respondents were asked about their willingness to receive the individual back into their community as well as their other criminal and transitional justice preferences.⁵

Findings

Given their position and role in the community, local community leaders are uniquely placed to contribute to reintegration, transitional justice, and peacebuilding efforts in North East Nigeria. Local traditional leaders such as Bulamas play an important role in Borno State, and often intervene in both public and personal matters, such as land disputes and transactions, or conflicts between community members. They can be responsible for a number of individuals ranging from hundreds to thousands. Perhaps their most important role is in acting as a bridge between the people they serve and the government (especially state and local governments), and occasionally between NGOs and international organizations and their communities. They transmit general sentiments around community projects and community needs, while communicating messages and intentions back the other way.

For reintegration, local leaders often serve as the key gatekeepers for returns to their community. At the very least, their acquiescence is essential and they may be asked to broker returns of former associates. As highlighted in a previous report,⁶ they influence their communities' response to those who have come back after being with Boko Haram. When community members were asked whether they would accept Boko Haram associates back if their Bulama vouched for them, acceptance increased.⁷ Previous research underscores that messages from trusted leaders cause significant positive shifts in willingness to accept former associates and can be important to increase and maintain support for reintegration.⁸ As such, the experience of community leaders with the conflict, and how it impacts their openness to reintegration and their preferences for criminal and transitional justice, is important to understand.

While local community leaders like Bulamas may be uniquely placed to facilitate the reintegration of former Boko Haram associates, there is a real question as to whether they would be supportive of such returns. In addition to their visibility on community victimization and a sense of responsibility to protect the people they represent and lead, community leaders might be impacted by their own victimization experience. Since the early years of the group's activities, there have been reports that Boko Haram has specifically targeted religious, hereditary,⁹ and local community leaders who were seen as offering opposing religious views or were seen as supportive of the government.¹⁰ The impact of such targeting on community leaders' reciprocity to returning ex-Boko Haram associates and policy preferences for how to handle those leaving the group will be examined in this report.

⁵ Some of the findings from this survey have previously been published by UNU-CPR - all of the written reports from the Managing Exits from Armed Conflict can be found on the project website: <https://cpr.unu.edu/research/projects/meac.html#outputs>.

⁶ Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "[Social, Economic, and Civic Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 10* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁸ Graeme Blair, Rebecca Littman, Elizabeth R. Nugent, Rebecca Wolfe, Mohammed Bukar, Benjamin Crisman, Anthony Etim, Chad, and Jiyoung Kim "[Trusted authorities can change minds and shift norms during conflict](#)," *PNAS* 118 42 (2021).

⁹ Alex Thurston, "[The disease is unbelief: Boko Haram's religious and political worldview](#)," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper 22* (2016).

¹⁰ Andrew Walker, "[What is Boko Haram?](#)" *USIP Special Report 308* (2012); Human Rights Watch, "[Nigeria: Boko Haram Targeting Schools: Attacks Threaten Children, Undermine Right to Education](#)," 7 March 2012.

When examining the data from the community leader survey, it appears that community leaders are broadly receptive to the return of those formerly with Boko Haram. However, these patterns are affected by the government's endorsement of these returnees, the gender and age of the returnee, and the community leader's own experience during the conflict.

Degree of Personal Targeting Experienced by Traditional Leaders

The survey data confirms that community leaders are victimized at a high rate, providing support for the news reports about their specific targeting by Boko Haram. Community leaders in the survey were asked whether they felt as if they had individually been targeted by Boko Haram. Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of respondents responded in the affirmative. This is significantly higher than the 14 per cent of respondents who reported that they had been beaten, tortured, or shot by Boko Haram in the phone survey conducted in and around Maiduguri between December 2020 and March 2021.¹¹

It should be noted that the community leader sample is primarily composed of Bulamas, reflecting the fact that they outnumber other traditional leadership positions and religious leaders. However, the survey also included Lawans, Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) leaders, camp chairmen, district heads, youth leaders, women's leaders, and other types of community leaders. Across all of these categories, the percentage of leaders targeted was fairly high, suggesting that community leaders were targeted regardless of their role in the community.

The degree of recruitment into Boko Haram from the community leader's community seems to be related to their experience of personal targeting. Community leaders who still lived with their community members who reported that no one from their community had been with Boko Haram were targeted at a lower rate (51 per cent), as compared to leaders who reported that a few people had been with the group (67 per cent), and community leaders who had many of their people with the group (80 per cent).¹² These findings are quite similar when community leaders were asked about what proportion of the members of their community were with Boko Haram voluntarily – 46 per cent of those who reported that “none” of the community members with Boko Haram were there voluntarily were targeted by Boko Haram, as compared to 70 per cent of those that reported “a few” were there voluntarily, and 89 per cent who reported that “many” had been voluntary members. The degree of recruitment – either forced or voluntary – into Boko Haram within a community seems related with the personal targeting of surveyed community leaders.

In short, community participation in Boko Haram and targeting of community leaders appear to be associated with one another. The nature of our survey data does not allow us to address what drives this relationship. Certainly, it could reflect that Boko Haram targeted community leaders in areas where they received some support, or concentrated abduction activities. During the early days of the Boko Haram conflict, the government would sometimes ask community leaders to inform on members of the group living in their communities. Not only could they identify the group's affiliates, but they were also in a good position to persuade community members to inform on Boko Haram members living in their community. Thus, the targeting of community leaders by Boko Haram could be a reaction to the cooperation of community leaders with the government, at least early on in the

¹¹ And higher than the 20 per cent of respondents who responded affirmatively to the question “Were you ever beaten, tortured, or shot as a result of the conflict with Boko Haram?”

¹² When considering all community leaders, including those who are not currently living with the communities that they lead because of displacement, these proportions are 50 per cent, 67 per cent, and 78 per cent.

conflict. The targeting of community leaders could also be collateral damage, occurring during Boko Haram's attacks against communities generally. More research is needed to determine the conditions under which community leaders are attacked and the relationship to violence experienced in the community generally. The following section considers how these experiences of being targeted and community participation in Boko Haram affect community leaders' attitudes towards reintegration.

Relationship Between Targeting of Community Leaders and Attitudes Towards Reintegration

A previous survey of community members in Maiduguri found that "there is generally no significant relationship between community or family victimization and respondents' willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates back into their communities."¹³

89 per cent and 95 per cent of the community leaders targeted by Boko Haram would be willing to allow a woman or child (respectively) that had been with the group to live in their community, as compared to 83 per cent and 82 per cent (respectively) of those who were not targeted by the group. In comparison, only 69 per cent of community leaders would allow a man who was with Boko Haram to live in their communities, and this does not vary according to the experience of being targeted by Boko Haram. The lower overall acceptance rates of a hypothetical male former associate as compared to a hypothetical female former associate likely reflect gendered narratives about Boko Haram that emphasize the agency of male associates and the vulnerability of women to abduction by insurgents. Despite Boko Haram's history of abducting men and boys into the group and the coercion that even 'voluntary' male recruits faced to join the organization, these narratives remain a powerful force shaping community attitudes towards reconciliation. This finding also suggests that the government's endorsement of former members of the organization can meaningfully shape men's reintegration prospects, especially for community leaders that were targeted. When asked about a man who had been with Boko Haram, 69 per cent of both targeted and non-targeted community leaders would let them return to the community. When asked about a man whom the government had vouched was no longer a threat, support rose: 16 percentage points for leaders who themselves had been targeted, compared to only five percentage points for those who had not been. Given the greater fear associated with men ex-combatants found in earlier MEAC publications (compared to women and children),¹⁴ such messages appear potentially important for facilitating community returns. It should be noted that the impact of vouching was not as clear or dramatic for other profiles (e.g., woman and child).

The experience of being targeted by Boko Haram may influence the willingness of community leaders themselves to vouch for returnees. While 68 per cent of community leaders that were not targeted by Boko Haram would vouch for a male former member of the group that they believed was no longer a threat, that proportion rises to 84 per cent among community leaders that had been targeted. That pattern does not manifest with respect to vouching for women and children, however. Targeted community leaders reported an overall higher willingness to vouch for children and women that they no longer deemed a threat.¹⁵

¹³ Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, and Mohammed Bukar, "[The Relationship Between Victimization and Receptivity to Returning Boko Haram Associates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 13* (New York: United Nations University, 2021): 7

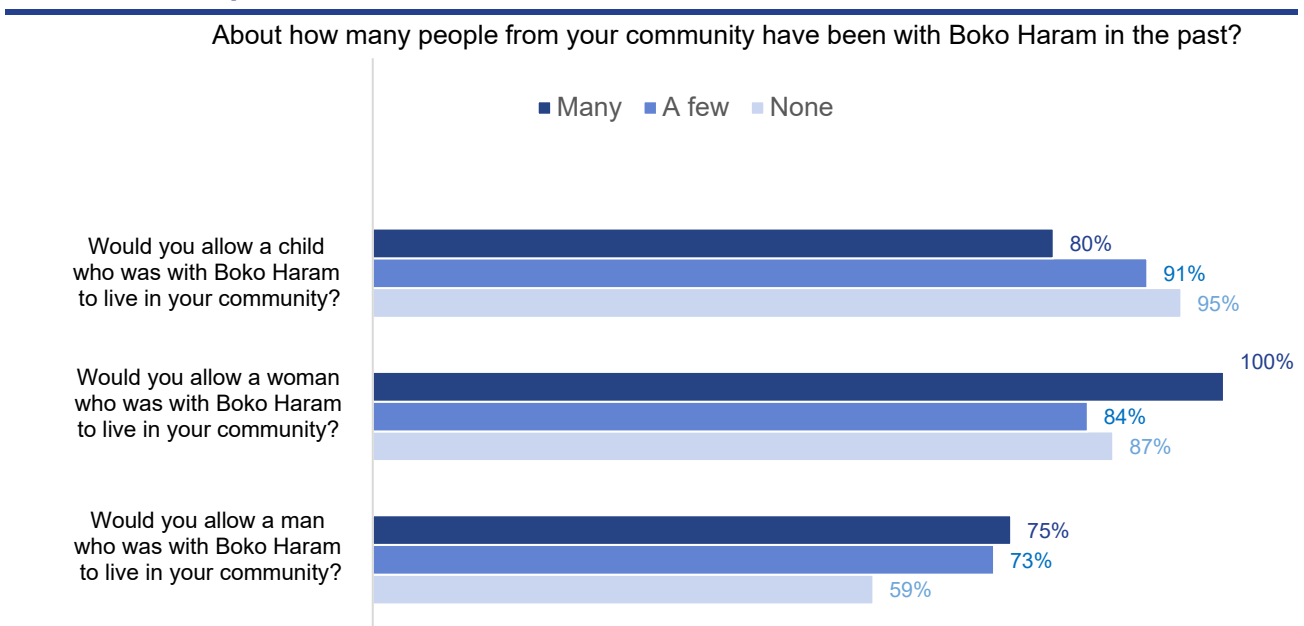
¹⁴ Prior research using data from another MEAC survey has shown that male profiles are responded to with higher levels of fear and anger. See Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Dr Zoe Marks, "[Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

¹⁵ 91 Per cent of community leaders that were not targeted would vouch for a woman, as compared to 84 per cent of targeted leaders; 89 per cent of those not targeted would vouch for a child, as compared to 84 per cent of targeted leaders.

Relationship Between Recruitment from Communities and Attitudes Towards Justice

In addition to the personal experiences of community leaders, the activities and experiences of their respective communities are also related to their attitudes towards reintegration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the relationship between community participation and personal targeting, the frequency with which community members joined Boko Haram seems to influence community leaders' willingness to allow former members of the organization to live in the community. Among community leaders who reported no one from their community had been with Boko Haram, 59 per cent would be willing to allow a man formerly with Boko Haram to live in the community. Among those who reported that "a few" or "many" people in their community had been with the group, this rose to 73 per cent and 75 per cent respectively. Of the community leaders who reported that "none" or "a few" people from their community had been with Boko Haram, 87 per cent and 84 per cent (respectively) would be willing to allow women who were with Boko Haram to live in the community. Among those who reported that "many" people joined, all of the community leaders answered in the affirmative. This pattern did not manifest with respect to children, though overall acceptance rates were higher.¹⁶

Figure 1 – Receptivity to those returning from Boko Haram by community recruitment experiences



¹⁶ Of those respondents who reported that no one from their community had been with Boko Haram, 95 per cent would accept a child living in their community, as compared to 91 per cent of those who reported that "a few" or and 80 per cent of those who reported that "many" members of their community had been with Boko Haram.

This pattern may speak to the extent to which social networks and familiarity with those who became involved with the group can facilitate the return of former members of Boko Haram to their communities. A previous report analysing the community survey data that is noted here, for example, found that community members were much more willing to accept a fictionalized former member when they were provided with a name and age, rather than merely a generic male or female returnee.¹⁷ These findings may also allude to a greater understanding of the circumstances surrounding participation in Boko Haram among community leaders from communities with a greater degree of participation than those from relatively less involved communities. There is a widespread public assumption that Boko Haram responds only to violence and cannot be reasoned with, but that assumption could be questioned by community leaders who have interacted with the group's members and found that to actually not be the case.

Somewhat different patterns emerge when considering the degree of voluntary recruitment from a community. Of the community leaders who reported that “none” of their community members joined Boko Haram voluntarily, 88 per cent would allow a woman formerly with the group to live in their community compared to 85 of those that reported that “a few” in the community were voluntary recruits and 91 per cent of those who said “many” were voluntary recruits. However, the relationship between voluntary recruits and willingness to allow men to return does not hold. While 70 per cent of leaders who reported that “none” of the community members were with Boko Haram voluntarily would allow a male returnee to live in their community, this proportion rose to 76 per cent among those who reported that a few of their community members with Boko Haram were voluntary recruits, but falls to 46 per cent of those who report that many of their community members with Boko Haram were there voluntarily. Again, this finding may reflect a gendered standard at play in communities' willingness to accept returnees. The attitudes of community leaders seem to mirror those of their community members, who are less likely to be willing to engage with male former associates. Although generally supportive of reintegration, community members view male former associates differently and with greater suspicion.¹⁸ Also, because women are generally not expected to make major decisions on their own and to obey their husbands and other older male members of their families, people might doubt that they could have joined entirely voluntarily. When considering willingness to accept children, the overall rates were higher, but a greater degree of voluntary recruitment from a community was not associated with a greater likelihood of acceptance.¹⁹

Punishment Preferences

The experience of being personally targeted by Boko Haram also appeared to shape community leaders' preferences regarding punishments. Prior to delving into these preferences, it is worth noting that the question about preference regarding punishments was asked in an open-ended way, and enumerators classified respondent answers against a list that included classic criminal justice punishments and obligatory transitional justice or reintegration programming. While not all of the responses may be considered punishments by the Nigerian Government or humanitarian community (e.g., mandatory reorientation and public apologies), they represent what people in Maiduguri reported as preferred punishments. Furthermore, questions about punishment were randomized, meaning that only a portion of the total survey population was asked about the punishment of men

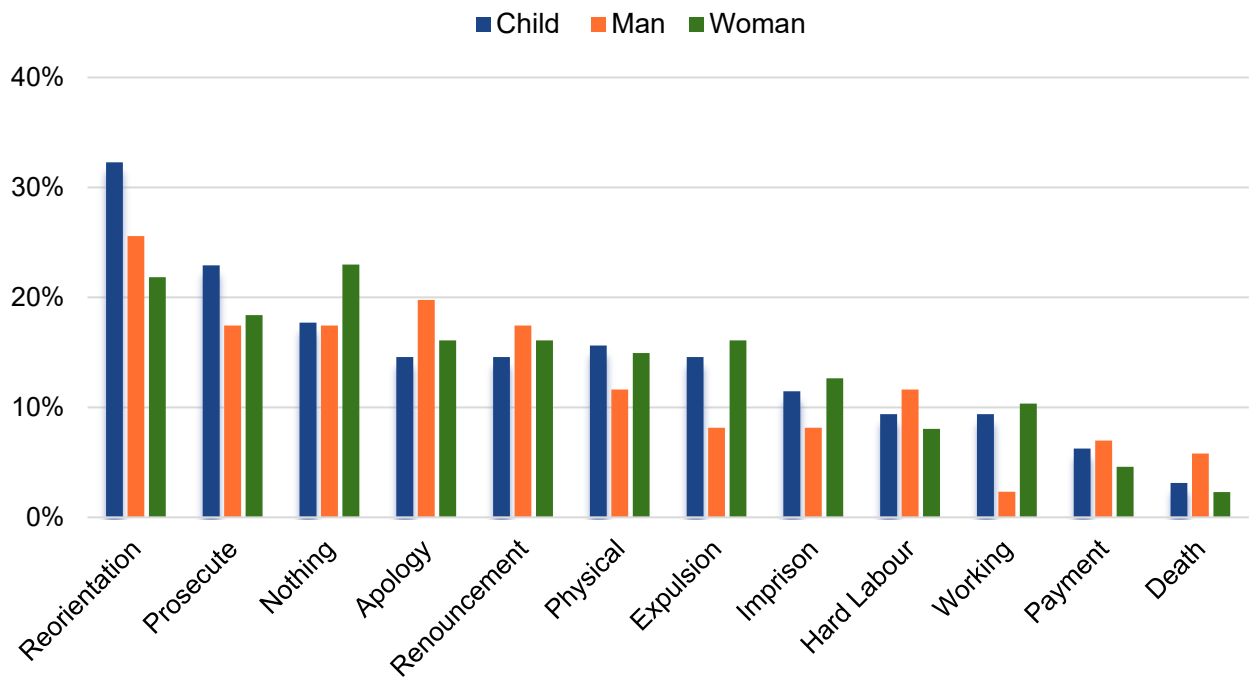
¹⁷ Rebecca Littman et al., “[Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

¹⁸ Rebecca Littman et al., “[Social, Economic, and Civic Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 10* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

¹⁹ Of those respondents who reported that no one from their community had been with Boko Haram voluntarily, more than 96 per cent would accept a child living in their community, as compared to 91 per cent of those who reported that “a few” or “many” members of their community had been with Boko Haram.

and women. Of those that were asked, some declined to answer, further reducing the pool of responses to analyse. As such, these estimates should be treated tentatively. Because participants could select multiple responses, the numbers presented below will not add up to 100 per cent.²⁰

Figure 2 – For a [man/woman/child] who was with Boko Haram, what kind of punishment do you think they should receive?



As Figure 2 illustrates, the gender and age of the individual in question appear to also exert an influence over what punishments are preferred for returning Boko Haram associates. Obligatory reorientation is a popular option, especially for children formerly associated with Boko Haram. Interestingly, “nothing” was the most common response when considering punishments for women formerly associated with Boko Haram, slightly edging out obligatory reorientation.

Despite being generally supportive of the reintegration of former members of Boko Haram, community leaders frequently want justice, accountability, and amends from returning former armed group associates. Being personally targeted by Boko Haram was associated with less support for imprisonment (only 10 per cent of targeted community leaders compared to 17 per cent of non-targeted leaders). Similarly, being personally targeted is associated with higher levels of support for prosecution – which should be considered a prerequisite step to imprisonment²¹ – among the

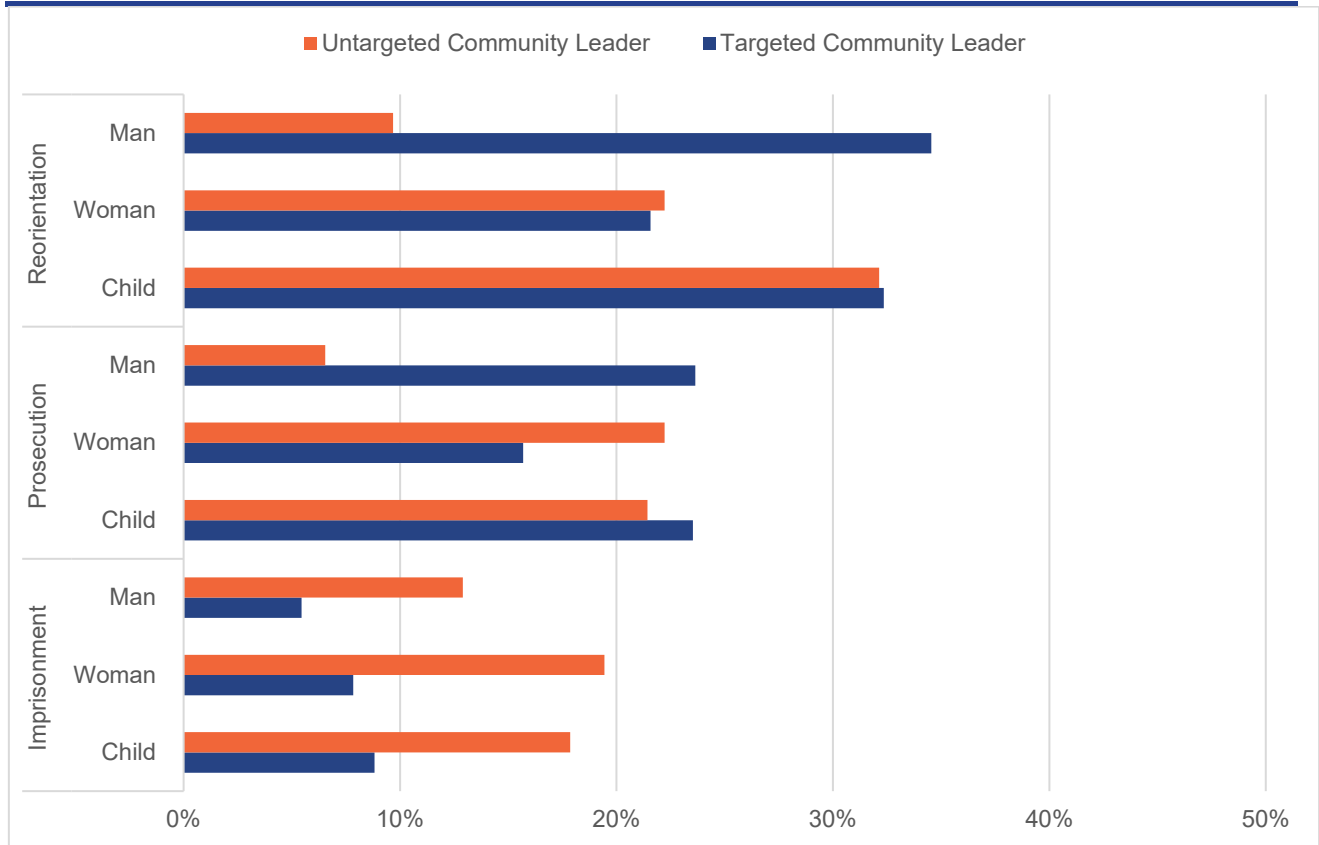
²⁰ Additionally, it is worth noting that the numbers presented below reflect the answers of those community leaders who responded to the question about personal targeting; those that refused to answer the question and whose experience was unclear were dropped from our sample.

²¹ Prosecution and imprisonment overlap but are not necessarily the same. The enumerators noted prosecution when it was clear the respondent wanted the former associate in question to go through a criminal justice process. Imprisonment was noted when the connection to a process was not specified. It is possible that respondents who answered imprisonment could have meant either administrative

community leaders who were personally targeted (21 per cent) versus those who were not (17 per cent). Of all the options, however, obligatory reorientation is the preferred “punishment” among both community leaders who were personally targeted (30 per cent) and those who were not (21 per cent).

In the following figure, there are some interesting patterns with respect to which types of punishments are preferred for men, women, and children.

Figure 3 – Type of preferred punishment for a man/woman/child who was with Boko Haram based on the personal targeting of the community leader.



Overall, many community leaders expressed trust in the ability of the judicial system to administer justice to former members of Boko Haram. The degree of trust also appears to be related to the experiences of community leaders. Of those community leaders targeted personally, 79 per cent trust the courts to try Boko Haram members, in contrast to 72 per cent of those who were not targeted.

In comparison, a previous MEAC study of residents in and around Maiduguri found that victimization at the personal, community, and familiar levels were not generally associated with a greater desire

detention in the absence of a criminal justice process or imprisonment as the result of one. It is not possible to discern based on the way the answers were recorded.

to punish a fictional male or female former member of Boko Haram. The report found three exceptions to this general trend: "Those who were personally abducted were more likely to want punishment for former Boko Haram associates. Likewise, respondents who know about a community member who has returned from Boko Haram, and those who heard about a former associate who has returned and been a problem in the community, were more likely to want punishment."²²

Assessing the Influence of Community Leaders over Reintegration Attitudes

The survey data suggests that community leaders are cognizant of their influence over the communities they lead. Of those surveyed, 83 per cent reported a belief that if they vouched for a former Boko Haram associate, the community would accept them. Examining only the responses of Bulamas in the survey of community leaders, 91 per cent report that their community would accept a former associate they vouch for. When examined next to the community survey data, there is also evidence that community leaders' perceptions of themselves are well-calibrated to their degree of influence in the community. In the community survey, 94 per cent of respondents reported they were willing to accept a hypothetical woman exiting Boko Haram that their Bulama vouched for and 93 per cent reported they would accept a hypothetical man their Bulama vouched for. These findings also suggest that Bulamas may be particularly critical community leaders to incorporate into reintegration activities.

Though community leaders seem well-poised to influence acceptance of returnees, a surprisingly low proportion (61 per cent) of community leaders were aware of the government's rehabilitation effort through Operation Safe Corridor. This is significantly higher than the proportion of citizens who reported being aware of Operation Safe Corridor (23 per cent).²³ Given the importance of community leaders in linking citizens to the Nigerian Government and in shaping community attitudes towards reintegration, the lack of awareness about Operation Safe Corridor suggests that there is a need to promote awareness among community leaders about this programme. The sensitization of community leaders about the programme and its participants could improve reintegration outcomes.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

With their close relationships, visibility on community matters, and intermediary role between local communities and the state and federal governments, local community leaders like Bulamas are well-positioned to help facilitate the reintegration of individuals returning home after armed group association. There are efforts to engage local populations in this regard to help ease the return of former associates, but evidence suggests that enhancing and expanding such engagement may be helpful in further promoting reconciliation and building peace in the North East.

To ensure such engagement has the intended impact, however, it is important to recognize that the type of community leader, their individual experiences during conflict, *and* the experiences of their community during the crisis are likely to shape both their influence on the community and the position they take on returning armed group associates. These experiences influence preferences in ways that are not always expected.

²² Rebecca Littman et al., "[The Relationship Between Victimization and Receptivity to Returning Boko Haram Associates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 13* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

²³ Rebecca Littman et al., "[Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

First, community leaders are generally receptive to returnees and exercise considerable influence over their community members. Data from the community survey suggests that Bulamas are well-placed to influence community opinions and broker the returns of ex-associates. While working to integrate Bulamas and other community leaders in reintegration efforts, programmatic efforts should also be aware of the potential risk that community leaders face and their personal histories with being targeted by Boko Haram. Taking on a role in the reintegration process may affect community leaders' relationship with their communities, and policymakers must ensure that they avoid creating additional risk and do no harm.

In addition, experiences with the Boko Haram conflict differ between communities. For example, the impact of the conflict on economic circumstances and access to basic services will differ across communities. In the more negatively impacted communities, community members may question whether it makes sense to prioritize reintegration, and community leaders' involvement could cost them their standing in the community they are leading.

Secondly, both the personal experience of being targeted by Boko Haram and the experience of community members participating in the organization seem related to community leaders' receptivity to returnees. Greater exposure to Boko Haram's activities is often associated with a greater willingness to accept returnees – though this shows some gendered patterns. This counterintuitive result may suggest that such leaders are more resigned to the inevitability of reintegration after armed group association given the magnitude of recruitment and abductions from their communities. Conversely, knowing so many people who became involved – seemingly of their own volition or under threat – may make the issue of reintegration more personal and enhance empathy to those returning.

In addition, the stakes for peace might be highest in those communities that were impacted the most. What exactly is driving the high receptivity from such leaders is unclear at this point. Given that returns have been happening for some time, however, such receptivity to reintegrating ex-associates bodes well for peacebuilding (e.g., reduced likelihood of revenge attacks or stigmatization when leaders are welcoming). Given their experiences, targeted leaders who are supportive of reintegration may be uniquely placed to engage with other local leaders who are resistant to returning former Boko Haram associates, and engagement strategies that bring these community leaders together may be useful.

Third, surveys with local leaders and the members of their communities make clear that knowledge of Operation Safe Corridor, the government's demobilization and reintegration programme, is low (61 and 21 per cent respectively). Not knowing about the process, its requirements, and metrics, likely undermines support for reintegration. Given that local leaders serve as the conduit between government policies and communities, enhancing their knowledge in the government process for assessing those exiting Boko Haram and reintegrating back into their communities would likely have a positive impact on community members' knowledge and confidence. Enhanced familiarity and confidence in exit and reintegration processes will likely impact community acceptance of returning former associates.

Lastly, the evidence suggests that both personal victimization and gender impact community leader preferences for how former Boko Haram associates are handled. The age and gender of returnees impacts community leader receptivity to their return and their preferred set of punishments. Community leader receptivity to returnees is a complex dynamic, reflecting the individual experiences of the leaders, the community's experience during the Boko Haram crisis, and the demographics of the returnees. Men, in particular, seem to face a greater degree of stigma or

scepticism than women or children do. This may speak to a pressing need to make communities and local leaders sensitive to the coercion that men and boys faced to join Boko Haram. More broadly, the gendered and age-related patterns regarding preferences for punishment and general receptivity to returnees suggest that policymakers may need to take different approaches to the reintegration of men, women, and children formerly associated with Boko Haram. Better understanding of how defector and reintegration processes work and what obligations are associated with them might assuage the concerns of community leaders, helping facilitate reintegration both through their receptivity and the model they provide for the community members they serve.

**MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT**



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