Managing Armed Group Defections

Lessons from the Borno Model

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7 Lessons from Borno on the Reintegration of Former Armed Group Associates

1 More humane, less coercive approaches generate higher numbers of defectors.

2 Locally owned, culturally grounded approaches generate improved buy-in from communities and are more agile in adapting to differing needs.

3 Lasting defection processes need local, national and international actors working together on different parts of the problem.

4 Post-release monitoring can be used to design lasting reintegration strategies.

5 Ensuring former associates have meaningful employment prospects is a key part of making the defection process last.

6 Guidance on how defection models work should be clear, transparent and consistent, to ensure systems are understood and can be coordinated.

7 It is not enough to add programming for women and children; instead, their needs must be considered through system design.

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Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin, stretching from Libya in the north to the Central African Republic in the south, has been plagued by armed conflict between Boko Haram factions (the Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, or JAS, and Islamic State West Africa Province, or ISWAP[1]) and state security forces. The fighting is particularly intense in the northeastern region of Nigeria.

Over a decade of fighting has resulted in mass civilian casualties, widespread displacement, economic collapse, deepening poverty, disrupted education and social services, and grave violations of human rights across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.[2] In 2018, these governments changed tack: they swapped out a purely counter-terrorism approach for "a more stabilization and development-oriented approach."[3] A key element of this new approach: disarming and reintegrating people associated with Boko Haram, with many states in the region seeking to improve their defection models to encourage more people to leave the group and its factions.[4]

Regarding defection, Abubakar Shekau's death in 2021 was a watershed moment. The death of this former JAS head triggered an unprecedented wave of voluntary exits by people associated with JAS. Initially, most of them were non-combatants who had been enslaved and forced to labor for Shekau and his fighters. JAS's rival, ISWAP, took over the JAS Sambisa Forest stronghold after Shekau's death and permitted their departure.[5] The vast majority of those who left JAS were from the Nigerian state of Borno; tens of thousands of men, women and children started handing themselves in to the military in Bama, Gwoza, Mafa, Monguno, Ngala, Marte, and other locations on the fringes of Sambisa Forest and Lake Chad.[6] It was a unique moment in the history of the conflict; with the right policies, real change seemed possible. Said policies would have to do more than merely manage the initial wave of defections, but would also need to establish a mechanism for negotiating and attracting further exits, thereby creating an opportunity for conflict transformation. Through mass media and targeted campaigns, and drawing on insights from the initial wave of defectors, the Nigerian government encouraged more defections. The authorities particularly targeted fighters, both by exploiting the mass disillusionment common among insurgents and leveraging the bloody inter-factional battles. These tactics were successful, culminating in 160,000 exits by March 2024.[7] Most defected from JAS, but some were former associates of ISWAP.

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1   The split between the two groups occurred in 2016 following doctrinal differences and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL's) preference for leadership changes.

2   Ahmed Kingimi, 'Nigeria's Boko Haram Making Gains Again in Borno State, Governor Says', Africa, *Reuters*, 9 April 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-boko-haram-making-gains-again-borno-state-governor-says-2025-04-09/; Abi Watson, 'The Two Most Dangerous Self-Deceptions in Security Sector Reform', 9/11 Legacies, 8 September 2021, https://911legacies.com/The%20Two%20Most%20Dangerous%20Self-Deception.htm; *PBF PROJECT DOCUMENT: Strengthening Reconciliation and Reintegration Pathways for Persons Associated with Non-State Armed Groups, and Communities of Reintegration, Including Women and Children, in Northeast of Nigeria* (Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund, n.d.), accessed 6 August 2025, https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2025-05/post_pac_pbf_nigeria_nw_prodoc_final_nce_un_pbso_gw.pdf.

3   Mariana Llorens Zabala, 'A Security Dilemma during Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin', *ACCORD*, 14 March 2024, https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/a-security-dilemma-during-disarmament-demobilisation-and-reintegration-in-the-lake-chad-basin/.

4   Milena Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Bas*in (bicc, 2025), https://bicc.de/Publications/Report/Maximising-Impact-of-Defection-Programming-in-the--Lake-Chad-Basin/pu/14863.

5   Malik Samuel, 'Defections Alone Won't Break ISWAP Terror Group', ISS Africa, 17 April 2024, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/defections-alone-won-t-break-iswap-terror-group.

6   Murtala Abdullahi and Mansir Muhammed, 'The Journey Of Boko Haram Defectors Through Geospatial Lens', *HumAngle*, 8 September 2021, https://humanglemedia.com/the-journey-of-boko-haram-defectors-through-geospatial-lens/.

7   Francesca Batault et al., *Prospects for Dialogue and Negotiation to Address the Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin* (UNIDIR, 2024), https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/24/03.

A Note on Terminology

This report uses several terms to describe (state) activities aimed at getting members of armed groups to put down their weapons and reintegrate into their communities. These include (1) disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), (2) disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and repatriation (DDRR) and (3) disengagement, disassociation, reintegration. and reconciliation (DDRR).[8] The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) commonly uses the term screening, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (SPRR) – the factions of Boko Haram are designated by the UN Security Council as terrorist organizations, thus posing additional legal challenges.[9]

These different terms tend to also entail different theories of change and visions of how such programming should take place, for instance, whether it should be "a more narrow/minimum effort of security promotion, preventing war re-onset and keeping ex-combatants busy" or "a continuous process which is rooted in and feeds into a broader search for peace, stability and development."[10] To avoid getting too involved in these debates and to instead focus on the lessons the Borno Model holds for other countries grappling with the challenges of disengaging and reintegrating former associates of armed groups, we tend to use the term "defection programming." If not, we describe the specific programming activity or process in each case.

The sheer scale and spontaneity of the initial wave of defectors exposed critical gaps in the reception infrastructure throughout the region, but especially in Borno, given the large number of exits that occurred there. Nigeria is a federal republic where defense and the military are strictly under federal control; individual states like Borno do not maintain their own armies, though they exercise some autonomy in internal security through local agencies and state-backed civilian militias. In response to the large numbers of defections, the Borno State government swiftly established a reception and rehabilitation framework that has since become known as the Borno Model, the subject of this briefing. While there has been some discussion on its progress, there have been few substantial examinations of the specifics of its developments, challenges and successes. This policy brief aims to address these open questions. Borno is also useful to look at because it is the epicenter of the conflict, it is where Boko Haram was founded, and now, it receives far more defections than anywhere else. Examining how Borno has achieved successes under such difficult conditions can offer valuable lessons for others.

> The sheer scale and spontaneity of the initial wave of defectors exposed critical gaps in the reception infrastructure throughout the region.

While the recent departures are occurring mainly in Nigeria, authorities in Cameroon, Niger and Chad are also seeking to improve their own models.[11] After all, reintegrating former associates of armed groups and stopping them from returning to the conflict is not just a problem in Borno, but for the whole Lake Chad Basin region.[12] What's more, past months have seen ISWAP engage in "a renewed effort against military targets, notably in Nigeria and Cameroon," which risks undoing recent moves towards peace.[13]

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8   Remadji Hoinathy et al., *Managing Exits from Violent Extremist Groups: Lessons from the Lake Chad Basin*, 2023.

9   Jan Jiles Van der Hoeven, *The State of Play Process and Procedures for Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin* (United Nations Development Programme, 2023), https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/state-play-process-and-procedures-screening-prosecution-rehabilitation-and-reintegration-lake-chad-basin.

10   Thorsten Benner et al., *The New World of UN Peace Operations: Learning to Build Peace?* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

11   Hoinathy et al., *Managing Exits from Violent Extremist Groups: Lessons from the Lake Chad Basin*; Jeanine Ella Abatan and Remadji Hoinathy, 'Getting Goudoumaria Right: Are Boko Haram Defectors Reintegrating Safely?', ISS Africa, 8 December 2021, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/getting-goudoumaria-right-are-boko-haram-defectors-reintegrating-safely; Malik Samuel et al., 'Boko Haram Desertions Could Be the Tipping Point', ISS Africa, 18 August 2021, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-desertions-could-be-the-tipping-point.

12   Hoinathy et al., *Managing Exits from Violent Extremist Groups: Lessons from the Lake Chad Basin*.

13   Vincent Foucher, '"Burn the Camps": Jihadist Resurgence in the Lake Chad Basin', *ISPI*, 16 July 2025, https://ww.ispionline.it/en/publication/burn-the-camps-jihadist-resurgence-in-the-lake-chad-basin-214413.

Any lessons that this model can offer other governments in devising better non-kinetic, holistic approaches to reducing the ranks of violent groups are, then, hugely important. This briefing seeks to distill these lessons. It begins by explaining the origins and main features of the Borno Model (how it was developed and how it functions in practice) and then dives into seven important lessons we can draw from it:

1. More humane, less securitized approaches generate higher numbers of defectors.

2. Locally-owned, culturally-grounded approaches not only generate improved buy-in from communities but can also be more agile in adapting to differing needs.

3. Lasting defection processes need work on several fronts, so having a number of local, national and international actors working on different parts of the problem is essential.

4. Post-release monitoring can be used to design lasting reintegration strategies.

5. Ensuring former fighters and associates have meaningful employment prospects is a key part of making the defection process last.

6. Guidelines on how defection models work should be clear, transparent and consistent, to ensure systems are understood and can be coordinated.

7. It is not enough to add programming for women and children; instead, their needs must be considered through system design.

The paper concludes by providing specific recommendations for improving the Borno Model, and notes more general recommendations for those seeking to learn from its development when creating their own models.

As part of the research, one of our team members travelled to Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, in March and June 2025 and to Abuja, Nigeria, in April and June 2025, interviewing experts, officials, practitioners, communities, and former members of armed groups. We were also supported throughout the past year by a practitioner group, a small circle of African and European experts and practitioners, who contributed their insights during a series of consultations (though none bear responsibility for any errors or omissions in this briefing).

What is the Borno Model?

The Borno State government's first formal involvement in managing defectors from the Boko Haram factions came through its role in accepting and reintegrating ex-Boko Haram associates, rehabilitated under the country-wide Operation Safe Corridor (OpSC). OpSC aims to provide recruits with an exit route from Boko Haram through a dedicated rehabilitation facility.[14] It is led by the Nigerian military and is supported by government agencies, international agencies and partners and NGOs.[15] Following Shekau's death and the huge influx of people handing themselves to the military, Borno State got more involved in defection programming, presenting the Borno Model as its non-kinetic contribution to the

14   'An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor | International Crisis Group', International Crisis Group, 19 March 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b170-exit-boko-haram-assessing-nigerias-operation-safe-corridor.

15   Berks et al., Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin.

Federal Government-led and regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) military efforts. Although the model was a response to sudden mass defections (with later exits following the negotiation of terms), it has evolved into something much more comprehensive, and its development has benefited from multi-stakeholder consultations and the support of the UNDP.[16]

> Although the model was a response to sudden mass defections, it has evolved into something much more comprehensive.

Crucially, to ensure the sound rehabilitation of its citizens, the Borno State government negotiated two levels of agreement. Firstly, it provided assurances to the defectors that they would not be taken to the notorious Joint Investigation Centre, an OpSC transit facility known for its harsh interrogation techniques, and that families would be allowed to stay together in camps for defectors (in contrast to OpSC camps, which only host male ex-fighters). Secondly, the state government came to an understanding with the military that those surrendering voluntarily would be transferred to the state program. Following the establishment of a 2022 presidential committee[17] (co-chaired by then-former Vice President Yemi Osinbajo and Borno State Governor Babagana Zulum), this understanding was recognized at the federal level. A de facto defection policy stated that those captured in combat will be processed by OpSC, while voluntary surrenders are managed according to the Borno Model.[18]

Who are these defectors, in broad strokes? While they are far from a monolith, we can make some general observations about the demographics of those exiting Boko Haram. Many were civilians, coerced into life under insurgent control. Others were victims of abduction and forced marriage, including girls previously listed as missing. Some were fighters, others did not have a combat role. Most defectors arrive without weapons, in part because they had not had free access to weapons as insurgents; the Boko Haram faction ISWAP strictly controls arms by confiscating them and only handing them out to rank-and-file fighters between operations.

The Borno Model recognizes this complexity and seeks to differentiate between high-risk fighters and low-risk "associates," offering distinct processes for each. The model defines three categories of defectors:

1. **Fighters**: Those who held combat roles. While they are allowed to remain with their families, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare coordinates all services for women and children who are connected to those defectors deemed "fighters," including providing food for malnourished children, counselling and reproductive health services. Some high-risk individuals, senior members of the insurgency groups and those who arrive with weapons on their person are managed separately, outside the camp.

2. **Farmers**: People associated with the groups in non-combat capacities. The term "farmers" is used because many in this category resided in the areas controlled by the groups and were forced to farm for them.

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16 'PBF/IRF-521: Strengthening Reconciliation and Reintegration Pathways for Persons Associated with Non-State Armed Groups, and Communities of Reintegration, Including Women and Children, in Northeast of Nigeria | MPTF Office', UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, accessed 8 August 2025, http://mptf.undp.org/project/00140123.

17 Presidential Committee on Repatriation, Returns, and Settlement of Displaced Persons in the North-East, constituted by then-President Muhammadu Buhari on 2 February 2022.

18 OpSC previously included voluntary surrender through a pathway negotiated with some Boko Haram leaders.

3. **Unaccompanied Persons**: Women and children who are not connected to family units. They are either handed over to their families or moved to the Bulumkutu Rehabilitation Centre in Maiduguri for continued support by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare and other aid partners.

After an initial screening to determine eligibility, most defectors are transported to the main transit camp: Hajj Reception Centre in Maiduguri, a repurposed facility previously used as a staging site for Muslims awaiting flights to Mecca. This is where state officials and the Department of State Services (DSS) – Nigeria's intelligence agency – conduct further profiling, screening and verification, with the aim of sorting the defectors into categories, each associated with differentiated support and actions. Authorities seek to verify their membership in Boko Haram through different administrative measures, including their identification by community members, religious leaders and the DSS. Once membership is verified, certain cases may be referred for criminal investigation based on evidence of past crimes.[19]

All arrivals receive a one-time sum of 10,000 Naira (less than 6 euros). Following this, male heads of household receive a monthly allowance of the same amount, along with grains. Women, single and married, receive 5,000 Naira (less than three euros) monthly. Based on their categorization, a package of psycho-social support, deradicalization, literacy and numeracy education, rehabilitation, and vocational training is provided. After an average stay of nine months, most of the defectors are released, with 100,000 Naira (around 56 euros) to their name to restart their lives. Following release, they enter the critical and arguably even more challenging reintegration phase, characterized by continued risk-based assessment of former members and transitional justice efforts, namely truth telling, seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and social healing, rooted in Borno's cultural practices.

Lessons of the Borno Model

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Twenty-five years ago, a review of UN peacekeeping operations already noted that economically and socially reintegrating ex-combatants was tremendously challenging.[20] Since then, efforts in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East, and elsewhere have only further proven the difficulty of persuading former associates of armed groups to put down their arms, commit to peace and integrate back into their old lives, accepted by their communities.[21] Lack of resources, poor coordination, minimal local ownership, intransparency, and short-term thinking have all plagued previous efforts.[22]

Precisely because the Borno Model shares many of these challenges in resourcing and design, studying the model can provide valuable insights into overcoming these common challenges. In this sense, the model can teach us about meaningful opportunities for

19   *PBF PROJECT DOCUMENT: Strengthening Reconciliation and Reintegration Pathways for Persons Associated with Non-State Armed Groups, and Communities of Reintegration, Including Women and Children, in Northeast of Nigeria.*

20   Lakhdar Brahimi, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, A/55/305–S/2000/809 (United Nations, 2000), https://www.unv.org/publications/report-panel-united-nations-peace-operations-brahimi-report-a55305.

21   Anatole Ayissi, 'Three Decades of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Africa: Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead', in *The State of Peacebuilding in Africa: Lessons Learned for Policymakers and Practitioners*, ed. Terence McNamee and Monde Muyangwa (Springer International Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46636-7_9; Sally Sharif, 'A Critical Review of Evidence from Ex-Combatant Re-Integration Programs', Monograph 2, Social Science Research Council (Great Britain), 1 October 2018, http://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/research/politics-of-return.

22   Benner et al., *The New World of UN Peace Operations*.

conflict transformation, especially when evaluated against many of the dominant, often militarized, responses. In this briefing, we outline seven key lessons gleaned from the Borno Model, ranging from (1) the value of humane approaches, (2) the relevance of locally-owned solutions and (3) the benefits of engaging multiple stakeholders to (4) the necessity of adequate investment, (5) the critical role of sustained follow-up after participants exit the program, (6) the requirement for clear and consistent guidance and, finally, (7) the importance of addressing the specific needs of women and children. The paper concludes by examining what exactly is needed to heed these lessons and to improve both the Borno Model specifically and defection programs at large.

Humane Approach

Coercive and abusive methods from state security forces have long proved ineffective in sustainably bringing an end to violent non-state armed groups.[23] That is why Borno Model's normative shift away from the militarized approaches of OpSC is so crucial. Instead, the Borno Model aims to deliver a more dignified and holistic process. Notably, it avoids the use of controversial facilities like the Joint Investigation Centre at Giwa Barracks, Maiduguri, whose arbitrary detentions and abusive interrogation techniques have been extensively documented and condemned by Amnesty International and others.[24]

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In our interviews, we found that the OpSC approach normalized abuse and was rooted in resentment towards individuals from Boko Haram-held areas. One researcher we interviewed told us what a soldier had said to him on a visit to OpSC facility: "We are going to see these guys that we were not allowed to kill on the battlefield."[25] Similarly, when our team was interviewing an OpSC administrator, he claimed that "[t]here is no terrorism detention facility without human rights abuses."[26] Under OpSC, many detainees experienced such harsh conditions that they were traumatized again. The more humane approach used by the Borno Model reduces this risk of re-traumatization.

The Borno Model is also based on voluntary surrenders, meaning it circumvents many of the (mis)steps associated with OpSC's prolonged and arbitrary detention, like random arrests at security checkpoints and false accusations. Eliminating these has lowered the barrier for defections, not only among combatants but (especially) for women, children and other low-risk associates, forcibly conscripted into insurgency.[27]

Importantly, the Borno Model assists the entire household, in contrast to OpSC, which only admits male ex-associates. This inclusivity is one of the things that makes the program

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23   Abi Watson et al., 'Scaling up Insecurity? Risks of the UK's Persistent Engagement Strategy in Kenya and Somalia', Saferworld, October 2022, https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1405-how-to-scale-up-the-ukas-persistent-engagement-strategy-in-kenya-and-somalia.

24   Nigeria: Babies and Children Dying in Military Detention', *Amnesty International*, 11 May 2016, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/nigeria-babies-and-children-dying-in-military-detention/; 'Nigeria: No justice for the 640 men and boys slain by military following Giwa barracks attack two years ago', *Amnesty International*, 14 March 2016, https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/nigeria-no-justice-for-the-640-men-and-boys-slain-by-military-following-giwa-barracks-attack-two-years-ago; 'Nigeria: "If You See It, You Will Cry" Life and Death in Giwa Barracks', *Amnesty International*, 11 May 2016, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/3998/2016/en/; Abdulkareem Haruna, 'From "Enemies" To Neighbours: Borno's Bumpy Peacebuilding Journey', *HumAngle*, 9 May 2024, https://humanglemedia.com/from-enemies-to-neighbours-bornos-bumpy-peacebuilding-journey/.

25   Interview, Abuja 31st March 2025

26   Interview, Abuja, 21st June 2025

27   Samuel et al., 'Boko Haram Desertions Could Be the Tipping Point'.

attractive to defectors and has enabled it to better reflect the social realities of the armed conflict, where women and children often accompany (or are forcibly attached to) fighters. The model also includes a pathway for those in the "farmer" category to be returned to their families upon surrender and initial documentation.

Despite some remaining challenges (discussed below), community feedback has shown a certain level of optimism regarding the Borno Model. Most communities appear to support the model, believing it could help reduce insecurity and promote stability, especially in those cases where the defectors had been forcibly conscripted or recruited as minors and had not committed serious atrocities.

Locally-Owned Approach

As has been well documented elsewhere, local communities often have the most effective and sustainable solutions for addressing conflict drivers.[28] Previous Institute for Security Studies (ISS) research has argued that defection programs fail because "communities aren't centrally involved in reintegration processes, even though they facilitate disengagement and are the first point of contact for ex-Boko Haram associates."[29] This assessment was based on the previous practice where the Nigerian government engaged communities only shortly before individuals were reintegrated, often with limited success. And in many cases, people were handed over to their families without any community engagement at all. By contrast, the Borno Model has shown how engaging with communities can improve chances of integration and enable a more adaptable model.

The Borno Model recognizes the relational dynamics of reintegration vis-à-vis transitional justice; acceptance is not guaranteed by policy but must be socially negotiated by continual engagement with those most impacted. One of the model's major strengths is its recent pivot toward regular and community-centered reintegration. As well as facilitating twice-weekly trust-building interactions,[30] Borno State works with local traditional and religious leaders and local non-profits, such as the Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development (ALFOPED) and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), to facilitate spaces for dialogue, forgiveness and restorative justice.[31]

This regular engagement with the community reduces suspicion of defectors, creates space for dialogue and gives community members time to process, ask questions and prepare emotionally and socially for the return of former associates of armed groups. Early signs of increased acceptance by communities, including anecdotal shifts in sentiment from hostility to cautious welcome, show that such sustained engagement is essential. For instance, as one of our interviewees, a community member from Askira Uba, Southern Borno, told our research team, "We now don't have a problem accepting them back because they are our children. So, if they have realized they're in the wrong and can come back, we accept them."[32]

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28   Watson et al., 'Scaling up Insecurity? Risks of the UK's Persistent Engagement Strategy in Kenya and Somalia'.

29   Akinola Olojo et al., 'Why Effective Handling of Boko Haram Deserters Matters', ISS Africa, 30 March 2021, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/why-effective-handling-of-boko-haram-deserters-matters.

30   Families and community stakeholders are engaged twice a week at the Hajj Camp transit centre in Maiduguri, where issues of truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation are discussed, according to officials. At a stage, families and communities are also allowed to visit and interact with their respective ex-associate to prepare ahead of reintegration.

31   'Transparency & Accountability', CDD, 25 October 2024, https://www.cddwestafrica.org/activities/transparency-accountability/.

32   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

Wider surveys across the Lake Chad Basin are corroborating our findings, indicating that communities are generally becoming more open to reintegrating former associates of armed groups, but that skepticism still stalls progress in some areas.[33]

The sheer number of ex-associates coming (back) to Borno makes community-based approaches all the more important. A Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (bicc) report estimated Borno's caseload at around 400 times the size of OpSC's,[34] highlighting that effective, responsive mechanisms over heavily burdensome and bureaucratic approaches are imperative. This, then, is another benefit of the Borno Model's locally-built approach: its embeddedness within local dynamics allows for quicker and easier feedback loops that create further opportunities for learning, adaptation and improvement. This adaptability is demonstrated, for example, in how the model switched from only engaging with communities right before the release of ex-associates to twice-weekly meetings.

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Of course, there are still challenges in reintegrating former associates of armed groups back into the community. One major roadblock is insufficient resources, which means that the preparatory meetings (which are intended to be twice weekly) are often less frequent than they should be. There are also still cases of abuse against people who have returned from Boko Haram-held areas, though Borno State has made a conscious effort to correct this. Despite these ongoing challenges, the model demonstrates how a subnational response to insurgency defections can serve as a scalable platform for broader peacebuilding. The Borno Model can also be used as a template for successful reintegration in areas where it is inherently controversial and often opposed. Finally, the Borno Model has shown how defection processes can serve as active conflict transformation mechanisms, gradually pulling armed group members off the battlefield, while building trust in civil alternatives.

Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Reintegration programs involve a great variety of initiatives, including trainings for income generation, vocational training, labor-intensive public works, healthcare, cash payments, in-kind compensation, as well as psychosocial counseling. Such a wide array of reintegration programs cannot be carried out by a single actor; the Borno Model is no different.[35] Although it was initiated under urgent conditions, it is now evolving into an important pillar of a much broader, multi-sectoral and internationally-supported framework that complements the broader aim of holistically addressing the conflict. UN agencies,[36] NGOs (such as CDD and ALFOPED)[37] and bilateral donors have supported various aspects of the model, from funding skill centers and deploying psychosocial and healthcare resources to advising on policy. The openness to multi-dimensional partnerships creates room for further support and improvements.

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33   Hoinathy et al., *Managing Exits from Violent Extremist Groups: Lessons from the Lake Chad Basin*; Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin*.

34   Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin*.

35   Benner et al., *The New World of UN Peace Operations*.

36   Namely UNDP, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

37   CDD West Africa [@CDDWestAfrica], 'Earlier today, our team was at Bulumkutu community of #Maiduguri for our monthly #Sulhu community dialogue, bringing together stakeholders to discuss how to foster social cohesion and promote reconciliation in communities affected by #BokoHaram insurgency. https://t.co/vzHtpvPR97', Tweet, Twitter, 26 September 2021, https://x.com/CDDWestAfrica/status/1442203148152627200.

The driving force behind the Borno Model's international engagement is Borno State governor, Babagana Zulum. In 2015, during his tenure as Commissioner for Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Resettlement, Zulum's team introduced the idea of community-based reconciliation and reintegration, with the support of the UNDP and European Union.[38] Since taking on the role of governor, he has regularly presented on the Borno Model internationally, including at the UN in Geneva[39] and at the program's launch at the Governors' Forum of the Lake Chad Basin.[40] A particularly important moment in these efforts to rally international support came in May 2022 when Secretary-General António Guterres visited the camps in Maiduguri and stated publicly that he was impressed with the policies put in place, declaring that "Borno is now a place of hope."[41]

Zulum's support has not stopped at lobbying for international funding; he has worked toward leveraging support from other parts of the Borno State apparatus to address larger socio-economic issues.[42] Large swathes of the region remain without functioning infrastructure (including education, health, electricity, and government services), and over two million internally displaced people (IDPs) live in camps.[43] As spelled out in its development "10-Year Strategic Transformation Plan and 3-Year Durable Solutions Strategy for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) (2025–2027)," Borno State has strategized to ensure reintegration does not happen in isolation but is connected with state-led investments in housing, education, infrastructure, and health.

This strategic plan goes a long way to address one of the main points of critique that many local communities in the Lake Chad Basin voice: many feel that defection models are unfair and overly favor former fighters, at the expense of communities. They claim that those returning from Boko Haram-held areas get financial support to start their lives again, while those who stayed in their communities have nothing.[44] There are multiple documented cases of retaliatory behavior against ex-associates: derogatory comments, wider social ostracism, vigilante violence, and the exclusion of their families from social services.[45] Investing to solve these structural issues could go some way to addressing these grievances. Better public resources within communities would also reduce the risk of former associates returning to armed groups.

Sufficient Investment in Livelihood

Economic stability and employment are important when trying to keep defectors from re-joining armed groups. Since many associates of armed groups joined at a young age and had not yet acquired any economic skills, building sustainable programs is key to preparing them for economic sufficiency in their new communities. In this realm as in many others, the

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38   SINL Nigeria, *Borno Model Transforms to Regional Policy -Gov Zulum -*, 31 January 2025, https://sinlnigeria.com.ng/borno-model-transforms-to-regional-policy-gov-zulum/.

39   Tomi Lala, 'UNDP Hosts Zulum in Geneva as Sec-Gen Wants Borno's Humanitarian Model Adopted by UN', *Sahel Standard*, 17 June 2023, https://sahelstandard.com/news/17/undp-hosts-zulum-in-geneva-as-sec-gen-wants-bornos-humanitarian-model-adopted-by-un/.

40   SINL Nigeria, *Borno Model Transforms to Regional Policy -Gov Zulum -*.

41   'Activities of Secretary-General in Nigeria, 3-4 May', UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 11 May 2022, https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgt3313.doc.htm.

42   Aryn Baker, 'Boko Haram Left It in Ruins. Now, This Nigerian Village Is Making a Comeback', TIME, 29 June 2017, https://time.com/4801625/nigeria-boko-haram-village-ngwom-maiduguri/.

43   Baker, 'Boko Haram Left It in Ruins. Now, This Nigerian Village Is Making a Comeback'.

44   Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin*.

45   Haruna, 'From "Enemies" To Neighbours'.

resources available for livelihood programs lag far behind what would be needed to cover the number of people requiring access to defection programs. GPPi's work has documented this gap for Sierra Leone and Liberia (2002-2003) and Afghanistan and Iraq (2010s).[46] ISS's work shows how the problem continues to plague other programs across the Lake Chad Basin.[47]

The Borno Model has created a couple of successful efforts to help its ex-associates economically reintegrate into society post-camp, including its livelihood programming in the Hajj Camp, where ex-associates spend nine months. A tiny but functional market has emerged inside the camp, where former insurgents engage in trading items and services, such as cooking ingredients. This economic microcosm not only restores defectors' agency and offers them a civil routine but also simulates the conditions of self-reliance they will face upon reintegration. Vocational workshops within the camp teach practical skills that align with local market demands, including tricycle repairing, pottery, tailoring, auto mechanics, building block making, welding, vulcanizing, carpentry, plumbing, and barbering. These efforts present a shift from the earlier years of traditional DDR programming, which tended to be characterized by reliance on one-time or periodic cash payments. Before the establishment of the Borno Model, OpSC had instigated such a shift (supported through the UN's International Organization for Migration), focusing on vocational training and skill support.

This lack of socio-economic support not only perpetuates cycles of poverty but also increases the risk of renewed engagement with armed groups.

Unfortunately, Borno Model still has to contend with under-resourcing; most training – whether it be trauma-informed care, deep ideological transformation or livelihood support – is heavily underfunded. Interviews with former associates of armed groups reveal that the vocational training offered by the model is inadequate.[48] Ex-associates we spoke to in March 2025 also complained that the limited financial support provided (the 100,000 Naira, mentioned above) is insufficient to start any meaningful enterprises or rebuild livelihoods. This means ex-combatants often exit the program without employable skills, start-up capital or links to viable economic networks, rendering them socially and economically vulnerable.[49] After spending nine months or more in rehabilitation facilities, many former combatants report feeling confused about their next steps, lacking guidance on economic integration, social reintegration or personal development. Moreover, while vocational training may provide skills but it does not set former associates up with tools – like clippers for barbary or sewing machines for dressmaking – upon their release from the camp.

This lack of socio-economic support not only perpetuates cycles of poverty but also increases the risk of renewed engagement with armed groups. In fact, it even seems to be affecting defection numbers. A former associate of an armed group (who is now helping the Nigerian government bring others out of the forest) stated that exits have considerably reduced because the government isn't fulfilling its promises on the socio-economic and livelihood benefits of demobilizing.[50] This issue is not unique to Borno; similar patterns have been observed in Cameroon, Niger and the Democratic Republic of Congo.[51] In many of these areas,

46   Benner et al., *The New World of UN Peace Operations*; Erica Gaston, *Legal Pluralism and Militia Regulation in Afghanistan* (GPPi, 2019), https://gppi.net/2019/04/29/legal-pluralism-and-militia-regulation-in-afghanistan; Erica Gaston et al., *Militias or Partners? Local, Hybrid and Sub-State Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq*, GPPi, accessed 20 September 2023, https://www.gppi.net/issue-area/peace-security/militias; Philipp Rotmann, *Men with Guns: Political Economy Lessons for Disbanding or Integrating Hybrid Security Forces,* Global Pulic Policy Institute (GPPi), 12 September 2019, https://gppi.net/2019/09/12/men-with-guns-political-economy-lessons-for-disbanding-or-integrating-hybrid-security-forces.

47   Abatan and Hoinathy, 'Getting Goudoumaria Right'; Olojo et al., 'Why Effective Handling of Boko Haram Deserters Matters'.

48   Interviews, Maiduguri, March 2025

49   Baker, 'Boko Haram Left It in Ruins. Now, This Nigerian Village Is Making a Comeback'.

50   Interview, Maiduguri, 19th June 2025

51   Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin*; Gelila Enbaye et al., *Gaming the Political*

"re-recruitment is ongoing and partly linked to disillusionment with the rehabilitation and reintegration process, unmet expectations and difficulties for former Boko Haram associates in sustaining their livelihoods after defection."[52] Boko Haram faction JAS, on its part, offers protection, incentives and ideological reassurances to encourage former members to rejoin their ranks – a shift from previous practices that punished defectors harshly.

In its 2025 budget, the Borno State Government allocated 7.458 billion Naira (4.177 million euros) to "Livelihood Support for Repentant Boko Haram (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration - DDR)." This could be a promising step toward addressing some of the issues stemming from a lack of resources (although much more money would be needed to adequately fund support). However, as recent criticisms of these investments have already shown, it is important that implementing such investments be mindful of how local communities perceive the money, lest they feel it is unfairly or overly favorable to former fighters.[53]

Effective Follow-Up

The Borno Model was born because of the huge number of defectors handing in their weapons and wanting to be reintegrated into society. However, Governor Zulum and his government cannot rely on the continued flow of people from Boko Haram-held areas, especially as it already looks like this is slowing down. In stark contrast to earlier statements, Zulum announced on April 8, 2025, that authorities were "losing ground" against Boko Haram factions after their renewed military offensive.[54] In these political circumstances, it is incredibly important to ensure that those who defect do not rejoin Boko Haram because of the resource shortfalls undermining the defection and reintegration model. Sustaining adequate support is essential to continuing to convince former armed group members to give up arms. Without it, recent successes are likely to be lost to Boko Haram.[55] Zulum is mindful of this dynamic; in March last year, he said: "We need to move away from the immediate solutions to medium- and long-term durable solutions, because once we don't take care of the IDPs, we will be at risk of them returning to the fighters in the forest."[56]

> Governor Zulum and his government cannot rely on the continued flow of people from Boko Haram-held areas, especially as it already looks like this is slowing down.

One way to support a more durable approach is by tracking ex-associates post-release. Current efforts remain limited. In interviews with camp officials in Maiduguri (June 2025), they explained their current case-study approach to following the post-camp trajectory of a few individuals – showing the example of one, who now serves as a bike repair trainer in the camp – rather than systematically tracking all enrollees and patterns. The same is true for

Economy of Conflict: A Practical Guide (Global Public Policy Institute, 2024), https://gppi.net/2024/04/22/gaming-the-political-economy-of-conflict.

52 Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin.*

53 hausawa1, 'Hausawa on Instagram: "BORNO STATE GOVT BUDGETS ₦7.45 BILLION FOR BOKO HARAM In its 2025 budget, the Borno State Government LED BY Professor Babagana Umara Zulum @ProfZulum allocated a staggering ₦7,458,000,000.00 (Seven Billion, Four Hundred and Fifty-Eight Million Naira Only) under the title: 'Livelihood Support for Repentant Boko Haram (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration - DDR)' Sowore"', Instagram, 11 July 2025, https://www.instagram.com/hausawa1/p/DL-13kbRhhW/.

54 Foucher, 'Burn the Camps'.

55 ADF Staff, 'With "Borno Model," Nigeria Hopes to Encourage Defections, Protect Civilians to Undermine Extremist Groups', *Africa Defense Forum*, 7 May 2024, https://adf-magazine.com/2024/05/with-borno-model-nigeria-hopes-to-encourage-defections-protect-civilians-to-undermine-extremist-groups/.

56 ADF Staff, 'Nigeria Struggles to Keep Ex-Boko Haram Fighters in DDR Program', *Africa Defense Forum*, 26 March 2024, https://adf-magazine.com/2024/03/nigeria-struggles-to-keep-ex-boko-haram-fighters-in-ddr-program/.

other efforts across the Lake Chad Basin.[57] If these efforts were improved to track defectors at a greater scale, post-release monitoring could effectively inform risk-based assessments and improvements to screening and camp programming tools. By monitoring their reintegration trajectories – Are defectors employed? Do they face discrimination? Do they exhibit signs of re-radicalization? – officials could obtain useful data to refine screening criteria and design more effective interventions and support packages for different categories of ex-associates. If properly institutionalized, this could underpin a data-driven policy framework that strengthens defection programming not only in Borno but across the Lake Chad Basin.

Clear and Well-Communicated Guidance

For defection models to gain legitimacy amongst communities and to be better coordinated with other efforts, their processes need to be clearly communicated to communities and other authorities. There should be standardized and predictable processes in place for the reception and screening of defectors (based on standard reception-screening-profiling mechanisms).[58] Creating procedural clarity is especially crucial given the particularities of this case. For one, there are no full, formal agreements between Boko Haram factions and governments. Even more importantly is the UN Security Council's listing of Boko Haram as a terrorist organization, which puts ex-associates in a precarious legal position after defecting and makes it more difficult for NGOs and international organizations to work with them or support their reintegration.[59]

> "The problem is how do you certainly determine 'this one is a low-risk farmer associate' and 'this one is a combatant,' when they make claims?"

Unfortunately, the Borno Model lacks clear operational guidelines, which opens the door to procedural exploitation and (possibly major) inequalities in the system. Categorizing defectors is not an easy process, and the lines can be blurry. Interviewees told us about "fighters" falsely claiming to be mere "farmers" under Boko Haram control, allowing them to skip the deradicalization processes and move straight back into communities. As an official from an international organization told us: "The problem is how do you certainly determine 'this one is a low-risk farmer associate' and 'this one is a combatant,' when they make claims? So, a lot of combatants are evading the full process, roaming the streets, for example, in Bama, which creates another kind of insecurity in the community."[60]

This interviewee pointed out that this dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that "the government's system is lax."[61] The processes of screening, profiling, categorizing, and trying ex-associates are applied inconsistently, and much of it is still unclear for defectors and communities about how it works. For instance, the government has not yet provided clear information on how Borno State cases will be referred to the Nigerian federal government for prosecution and judicialization, leading to the perception that fighters get handed a de facto blanket amnesty.[62] In an interview, an OpSC administrator noted the dangers of such an approach: "Terrorism is a crime in this country, and you can't allow terrorists to dictate to you."[63]

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57   Abatan and Hoinathy, 'Getting Goudoumaria Right'.

58   Olojo et al., 'Why Effective Handling of Boko Haram Deserters Matters'.

59   Kristina Roepstorff et al., 'Counterterrorism Measures and Sanction Regimes: Shrinking Space for Humanitarian Aid Organisations', *Centre for Humanitarian Action*, 27 February 2020, https://www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/counterterrorism-measures-and-sanction-regimes-shrinking-space-for-humanitarian-aid-organisations/; Van der Hoeven, *The State of Play Process and Procedures for Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin.*

60   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

61   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

62   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

63   Interview, Abuja, 21st June 2025

We also heard that, in some cases, high-profile commanders were deemed "too big" for camps; instead, the government rented them houses and paid them 130,000 Naira a month – nearly twice the national minimum wage.[64] According to officials we spoke to in June of 2025, the reason for this special treatment is quite simple: the government wants to encourage higher-ups to defect, as it helps encourage more exits, and they can serve as intelligence sources. Unfortunately, these justifications are not being made publicly, and the system remains opaque.

Intransparency, in turn, can undermine public trust in the system. A study by the bicc noted that the lack of transparency in defection programs across the Lake Chad Basin can lead to more fear and rumors within local communities.[65] Currently, there is not much public knowledge of the various programmatic streams available to defecting Boko Haram associates, which makes it difficult to understand what it means to "graduate" from them and to trust in the process.[66] Without sufficient communication to the receiving communities, the perception that the Borno Model is overly sympathetic to perpetrators will perpetuate.[67] While distrust and fear cannot be solved through better communication alone, it would certainly help.

This lack of clarity within the Borno Model can also be disadvantageous for former associates. When an ex-associate passes through the OpSC's rehabilitation, they receive a certificate that would prevent them from being prosecuted elsewhere in the country; as one interviewee said, "they have seen hell already."[68] By contrast, the Borno Model's administration produces no such certificate. As this interviewee put it, "what happens in the Borno Model ends in Borno State. If they step out of that state, they can be arrested and made to face justice."[69] One way to solve this issue would be by harmonizing "the programs under Federal Government regulations, while still ensuring context-fit approaches from state to state," though this seems unlikely to happen anytime soon, given delays in the development of national-level guidelines and a continued failure to bridge the difference between national and local approaches.[70]

Centralizing Women and Children's Needs

Programs must be tailored to the specific needs of different groups and individuals, including those of women and children, who make up most of the departures.[71] Women are particularly at risk of abduction and, once taken, are often forcibly married off to fighters. Thousands of cases of sexual abuse committed by Boko Haram against women and girls continue to be documented.[72] Many women and girls who defect continue to be at risk of further abuse in the reintegration camps, where they are often forced to live side by side with former Boko Haram fighters who may have previously abused them.[73]

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64 Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

65 Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin*.

66 Chika Charles Aniekwe, 'Receptivity and Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram Associates in the Lake Chad Basin Region', *ACCORD*, 30 March 2023, https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/receptivity-and-reintegration-of-ex-boko-haram-associates-in-the-lake-chad-basin-region/.

67 Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin*.

68 Interview, Maiduguri, March 2025

69 Interview, Maiduguri, March 2025

70 Interview, Maiduguri, March 2025

71 Samuel et al., 'Boko Haram Desertions Could Be the Tipping Point'.

72 Hoinathy et al., *Managing Exits from Violent Extremist Groups: Lessons from the Lake Chad Basin*.

73 Haruna, 'From "Enemies" To Neighbours'.

The Borno Model takes women's and children's needs into consideration in a number of ways. Not only does it offer them a space in the defection camps (which is more than many other programs can say), it houses a UNICEF-built Women and Children Centre. This center has established dedicated facilities to meet their distinct needs, offering child-friendly spaces, a women's and girls' safe space, and other services including early childhood education, gender-based violence (GBV) case management and referrals, anti-malnutrition and Ready-to-Use Food (RUF) programs, psychosocial and trauma counselling, and literacy and informal education support. The model also offers vocational training for women and adolescent boys and girls (in tailoring, catering, knitting, shoemaking, and hairdressing); most other vocational workshops are reserved for adult men.

These services not only promise immediate relief but also lay the groundwork for long-term resilience and agency. On average, 30 people engage with each skills training unit daily, and outreach teams proactively conduct sensitization in the camp to ensure uptake.[74] This integrated approach offers a model of how gender-sensitive reintegration can be structured effectively in conflict-affected settings. One official in Hajj Camp told our team that "the GBV facility is particularly helpful in the cases of underage wives. We have many cases of new arrivals, being minors forced into marriage, and they require special services, including counselling and trauma management."[75]

Despite the improvements made in the Borno Model, women and girls remain under-supported; structural issues have led to women not using the resources that do exist.[76] As one camp official in Hajj Camp told our team, it is hard to get women involved in the programming because "it is still challenging, [to help them be] available for services and [to separate them] from the men they arrived with."[77] Similarly, only about 25 percent of the children in the camp attend school.

However good this new programming is, it can do little to deal with original design issues that failed to place the needs of women and children at its center. The most pressing issue within the Borno Model is the assurances it makes to defectors about keeping their families together in the camps. This risks forcing the reunification of women with former captors under the guise of "family reunification." French newspaper Le Monde documents how Ya, a young woman who was forcibly married twice to Boko Haram fighters, was forced to join her "husband" in the Hajj camp. This was just one of 20 forced marriages arranged between former fighters and female survivors that the magazine had heard about in these camps. This was all done with the support of the Nigerian Ministry of Women's Affairs, to "appease Boko Haram fighters."[78] While seeking non-military, holistic ways to end the conflict, this practice puts the very people the Borno Model promised to protect in harm's way.

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74   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

75   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

76   Berks et al., *Maximising Impact of Defection Programming in the Lake Chad Basin.*

77   Interview, Maiduguri, June 2025

78   Par Coumba Kane, 'La double peine des survivantes de Boko Haram', Le Monde, 10 June 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/06/10/la-double-peine-des-survivantes-de-boko-haram_6238353_3212.html.

Recommendations for the Borno Model

This briefing has been careful not to present the Borno Model as a perfect defection model, with its shortcomings being as illustrative to others as its successes. Some of the model's limitations are being addressed at the time of writing; Borno State has invested serious money in defection programming and in local communities, and Governor Zulum is continuously working toward building international support for the Borno Model. Even still, there are enduring issues with the Model that need to be addressed for it to effectively deliver durable peace.

Recommendations for Borno State:

- **Strengthen screening and accountability procedures**: Public confidence in the program depends on its capability to ensure high-risk combatants do not evade rehabilitation and deradicalization exercises by posing as low-risk "farmers." In place of de facto blanket amnesties, Borno State should adopt a tiered framework that preserves incentives to defect, while ensuring clear pathways for accountability, transitional justice and proportionate sanctions for serious crimes.

- **Improve communication on investments and processes**: The state should scale up strategic communication, combined with clear, consistent guidance detailing the program's scope, safeguards and objectives.

- **Improve post-release tracking**: There should be effective post-release tracking to monitor social, economic and psychological reintegration outcomes and avoid re-engagement where possible.

- **Improve system design to center women's needs**: While the promise to keep families together is important, it must not be applied universally. Instead, there must be a proper assessment to ensure women are not being handed back to their captors.

- **Expand and equalize livelihood support to prevent recidivism and sustain reintegration**: Borno must scale up livelihood support for ex-associates, but ensure it is balanced with investment in their communities to avoid resentment – an important step toward creating lasting stability.

Recommendations for the Nigerian Government:

- **Create a national legal framework for defection programming**: The Nigerian government should create a legal and policy framework that sets minimum standards for defection and reintegration, covering accountability, transitional and restorative justice, screening criteria, and post-release tracking. This framework should differ from previous harmonization efforts that lacked a statutory basis.[79] While ensuring rigor, such a framework must allow flexibility for context-fit local adaptation.

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79   For example, the February 2022 presidential committee.

- **Ensure national recognition of Borno Model's outcomes**: Under the recommended national defection and reintegration framework, the government should ensure that those who have been through the Borno Model are recognized as deradicalized and can enjoy freedom nationwide.

Recommendations for Regional and Multilateral Organizations:

- **Work with Borno State to address gaps in the current model**: International organizations should not try to re-invent the wheel but should listen to local partners about where and how to invest.

- **Ensure lessons learned are being shared regionally**: The Lake Chad Basin Commission and other regional bodies should draw on the lessons of the Borno Model and explore what it could offer other areas facing similar problems.

Recommendations for Those Seeking to Learn from the Borno Model

As states across the African continent grapple with the challenge of reintegrating former members of non-state armed groups, the experience of Borno State offers valuable – albeit difficult and complex – lessons. In the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram's continuing presence remains a potent reminder that insurgencies do not end with battlefield defeat alone.[80] Unless former associates of armed groups, and the communities they return to, gain access to sustainable livelihoods, basic services, security, and the possibility of peace, prospects for durable stability remain slim.

The Borno Model represents not only a pragmatic response to this challenge but also a rare opportunity to shift the trajectory of conflict management in the region. In particular, the model offers seven important lessons that should be properly considered by others seeking to develop and improve their own programming:

1. The Borno Model's normative departure from coercive and abusive approaches of the past has both lowered barriers to defection and improved the treatment of those who do defect.

2. The model's grounding in local ownership offers an adaptable, scalable and flexible model, able to quickly pivot operations based on new learnings. As such, it is much more likely to build a sense of legitimacy and acceptance among local communities.

3. Governor Zulum's efforts to develop a multi-stakeholder approach have improved the state's ability to deal with the herculean task of delivering an effective defection program. These efforts have benefitted the pursuit of sustainable peace in the region.

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80   Foucher, 'Burn the Camps'.

4.   The model's focus on livelihood recovery and proper investment in the receiving communities is a promising step toward preparing ex-associates for civilian life, while aiding community acceptance of their continued reintegration.

5.   While many defection programs rely on case-study models, which can provide some information about individual pathways to reintegration, more systematic approaches to tracking ex-associates' trajectories would be much more effective in developing improved, longer-term programs.

6.   The guidance surrounding processes must be clear, transparent and consistently applied across the board (regardless of the status of any defector). This enables community acceptance and better coordination with other programs (including at the national level).

7.   Projects specifically aimed at women and children are essential to address their specific needs, but they can do little to address systematic failures in design. The unique needs of women and children must be a central consideration when designing defection programs.

By taking stock of its limitations as much as its gains, the Borno Model becomes not just a case-study in innovation under pressure, but a blueprint for progress. As conflict-affected states look to balance security and reconciliation, Borno's experience offers critical guidance on how to chart a more humane, locally-grounded path forward.

Acknowledgments

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