

Realizing a Whole-of-Society Approach to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in the Far North Region of Cameroon

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From 2017 to 2022, the Global Center on Cooperative Security worked with local, national, and regional partners in Cameroon to strengthen the country's response to terrorism in the Far North Region. Building on that engagement, the Global Center partnered with the Centre for Peace, Security and Integration Studies (CERPSI) of the University of Maroua to organize a roundtable discussion on 9–10 March 2022 reflecting on national- and community-level efforts to support the reintegration of former associates of Boko Haram in Cameroon. The roundtable followed an earlier meeting in April 2020 titled “Developing and Implementing Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Strategies” and consultations with a broad range of actors, including administrative, traditional, and religious authorities from affected communities; judicial and law enforcement officials; civil society actors; and representatives of international organizations on the role of and ways to deepen engagement by different stakeholders in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts.¹

Based on those discussions, this brief presents recommendations for a whole-of-society approach to the reintegration of former Boko Haram associates in Cameroon. The Cameroonian case offers a window into the roles of different stakeholders in shaping and implementing efforts to reintegrate ex-associates and the challenges they face. This brief emphasizes the need to adapt to local specificities and to place communities at the heart of the process, which is particularly important in nontraditional DDR contexts such as the Lake Chad Basin, where peace agreements are absent and conflict is ongoing.

BACKGROUND

The death of former Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021 ushered in a wave of defections and surrenders across the Lake Chad Basin. In the Far North Region of Cameroon, hundreds of individuals formerly associated with Boko Haram, including women and children, have surrendered to national authorities. Meanwhile, in the Anglophone South West and North West regions, the number of casualties from five years of civil conflict continues to rise.

¹ In a DDR process, members of armed forces and groups are supported to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life. The DDR process comprises political, security, social, and economic dimensions and aims to create an environment in which a peace process, political and social reconciliation, and sustainable development can take place. For additional information, see UN Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, “Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards,” n.d., <https://www.unddr.org/the-iddrs/> (accessed 16 October 2022).

A presidential decree on 30 November 2018 created the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) to manage and implement a DDR process in Cameroon.² The committee is responsible for organizing, supervising, and managing ex-associates of Boko Haram and armed separatist groups operating in the North West and South West regions. Although the decree encourages the committee to cooperate “as necessary” with relevant stakeholders, including governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and international partners, the absence of an integrated national strategy leaves the modalities of the rehabilitation and reintegration process and the role of each actor in its development and implementation unclear.³

The DDR process in Cameroon raises critical questions about the role of communities in peace-building. Rather than looking to the national government, communities in Cameroon tend to rely on traditional leaders, vigilante committees, and other local actors to provide security and stability. Together, these local actors play an important role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of persons formerly associated with armed groups. The management of these individuals and their reintegration into society thus demand more than a top-down, government-led process. It requires a whole-of-society approach that draws on the unique capacities and buy-in of communities, civil society organizations, and the public and private sectors to address the core grievances that fuel violence. Such an approach depends on the intentional engagement and leadership of community leaders and civil society actors.

Several recent national and regional initiatives provide a framework for such localized interventions. At the national level, the Major National Dialogue held in October 2019 between the government of Cameroon and opposition parties to resolve the Anglophone crisis issued recommendations to accelerate local governance and decentralization. Notably, this led to the promulgation in December 2019 of Law 2019/024 on the General Code of Decentralized Local Authorities. The proceedings of the dialogue also spotlighted effective reintegration measures such as the provision of psychosocial support and the financing of youth projects in the NDDRC centers.⁴

At the regional level, the third Lake Chad Basin Governors’ Forum, in October 2021, focused on the contributions of civil society to regional stabilization, including the rehabilitation and reintegration of former associates of Boko Haram. The final report of the forum also recommended prioritizing transitional justice as part of broader reconciliation and reintegration efforts to complement judicial approaches in a manner that “promotes community recognition, [and] acceptance and reduces chances of stigmatization of ex[-] and repentant associates.”⁵ This perspective is in line with the 2018 Regional Stabilization Strategy for the Lake Chad Basin, which calls for restorative justice or the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large.⁶

At the March 2022 roundtable, the Global Center and CERPSI convened key stakeholders to discuss pathways to sustainable peace and the importance of a whole-of-society approach to reintegration of former associates of Boko Haram in Cameroon. The event

2 The Presidential Decree of 30 November 2018 created the NDDRC, which has authority to manage and implement the DDR process in Cameroon. The committee is responsible for organizing, supervising, and managing ex-associates of Boko Haram and armed groups operating in the North West and South West regions of the country. It has focused its efforts on accelerating the construction of adequate facilities and a deradicalization training program.

3 Decree No. 2018/719 to establish the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee (30 November 2018), art. 9.

4 NDDRC centers have been established in Bamenda and Buea in the South West and North West regions and in Meri in the Far North Region. A fourth center in Meme in the South West Region is expected to be completed in 2022.

5 Lake Chad Basin Commission, “3rd Meeting of the Lake Chad Basin Governors’ Forum of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC): Official Report,” p. 63, <https://cbt.org/download/reports-on-annual-governors-forum/?ind=1638183705283&filename=3rd%20Meeting%20of%20the%20LCB%20Governors%E2%80%99%20Forum%20Yaounde%20Cameroon.pdf&wpdmdl=3039&refresh=634c62b5de0ea1665950389>. The meeting took place in October 2021.

6 Lake Chad Basin Commission, “Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery & Resilience of the Boko Haram-Affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region,” August 2018, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/regional-stabilisation-recovery-and-resilience-strategy-rss-.pdf>. See in particular Strategic Objective 10 on transitional justice and Pillar 3 on disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, reinsertion, and reintegration (DDRRR).

brought together NDDRC officials; administrative, traditional, and religious authorities from affected communities; civil society actors; representatives of international organizations; and subject matter experts. Participants addressed opportunities for deepening their engagement in the process and elaborated a set of recommendations to support DDR processes in Cameroon.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Advance community-based approaches to reintegration developed and led by community leaders

In Cameroon, many stakeholders perceive reintegration as falling exclusively under the purview of the NDDRC. Community-based approaches to DDR issues, however, require broad-based public participation and support. As part of a whole-of-society approach to peace and reconciliation, it is incumbent on the NDDRC to involve all stakeholders, including traditional and religious authorities; administrative authorities, including from decentralized territorial communities; vigilante committees; development partners; civil society leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and other community-based actors; and members of affected communities, including the families of victims of terrorism and families of ex-associates.

In some communities, traditional and religious authorities could act as community representatives and mediators. Under Cameroon's decentralized governance framework, municipal actors play a central role in planning and allocating budgets for local infrastructure and services critical to DDR processes. Civil society actors are a crucial source of technical expertise in reintegration programming and assist by training community mediators, accompanying individuals at transfer centers, raising awareness of key issues among governmental and community stakeholders, creating income-generating activities, providing psychosocial and other forms of support, monitoring the treatment of ex-associates to prevent abuse, and strengthening public participation and social inclusion. Establishing local-level working groups with all actors involved in

the reintegration process could help ensure stakeholders are working together from the bottom up.

2. Build broad support for a national, multi-stakeholder DDR strategy that includes civil society

It is crucial that stakeholders recognize the critical role that each of them play in the DDR process and their respective responsibilities as part of a broader set of actions and interventions. This requires a cohesive, publicly developed and promulgated national strategy and action plan developed through broad-based stakeholder engagement and public consultation. Although not without challenges, such an approach is necessary to ensure broad-based support, harmonize and coordinate initiatives at the grassroots level, mobilize key partners, address the fears and concerns of host communities, and build trust in the process among all stakeholders.

Although the NDDRC has undertaken some efforts to coordinate the many actors involved in the DDR process, it has faced considerable barriers, including the government's high degree of centralization and the lack of trust among key stakeholders, in particular the armed forces, the security forces, and civil society. In its public messaging, the NDDRC should emphasize that reintegration does not begin when the NDDRC steps in; it is a multi-stakeholder process that begins as soon as ex-associates surrender. Moreover, the absence of a systematic follow-up process and the slow progress on reintegration require the NDDRC to work with other stakeholders to define mechanisms for managing ex-associates who return to their community without going through the NDDRC centers or who surrender outside of designated sites.

3. Develop an inclusive national communication strategy to broaden support for reconciliation and reintegration

The DDR process needs to be backed by a national communications strategy to increase public understanding of and support for reconciliation and reintegration efforts. As part of this strategy, DDR stakeholders should craft counternarratives to

convince young people to lay down their arms and to dissuade them from taking up arms again. The language adopted by public authorities should foster appeasement, not stigmatization and discrimination. For example, they should use “ex-associates” to refer to the large class of returnees. Public messaging also should be sincere and acknowledge the often-difficult realities of reconciliation and reintegration.

Authorities should employ a wide variety of communications channels adapted to the target communities, including radio, songs, and videos. They could also use posters or comic books on deradicalization, tolerance, and other issues, particularly when dealing with young or illiterate populations. National and international actors, however, may not always be well suited to build support for reconciliation and reintegration. Community leaders, given their proximity to the population and their concerns, are often more credible messengers.

4. Deconflict legal frameworks for the effective operationalization of DDR processes in the whole of Cameroon

Cameroon’s DDR process uses a single framework to address two separate conflicts: the Boko Haram crisis in the Far North Region and the Anglophone crisis in the South West and North West regions. Given the absence of a peace agreement or a national strategy for the two crises, the traditional preconditions for DDR activities are not met in Cameroon, which creates a host of challenges. These challenges are reflected in the national DDR framework established by the 2018 presidential decree, which created the NDDRC. This framework does not include judicial actors or mechanisms or a formal screening process, which limits the assistance that international actors can provide. It also does not align with the regional stabilization

strategy, which advances a framework for screening, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration,⁷ or with Cameroonian law, particularly the obligation to prosecute under the 2014 antiterrorism law and the 2016 penal code.⁸ Although these national laws legally supersede the 2018 presidential decree, in practice the decree remains the main national legal instrument governing the DDR process. These gaps and inconsistencies in the DDR framework create ethical, legal, and operational blockages. They also accentuate challenges for involving the diverse stakeholders that need to be engaged in the process, including administrative, traditional, and religious authorities from affected communities; judicial and law enforcement officials; civil society actors; and representatives of international organizations. To be effective, sustainable, and inclusive, Cameroon needs a comprehensive and cohesive national DDR strategy that reflects the recommendations from the Major National Dialogue on decentralization.

5. Create NDDRC focal points in localities that are principal points of entry for surrendering ex-associates

In Cameroon, Boko Haram defections have been concentrated in localities bordering Nigeria. The returnees and their families are expected to be profiled by the Cameroonian army in these border areas before being handed over to the appropriate NDDRC center to receive rehabilitation assistance. Local partners have highlighted the challenges of this procedure, which places the military and the Multinational Joint Task Force at the forefront. There have been reports of poor detention conditions and mistreatment of ex-associates, which may be exacerbated by linguistic and cultural differences. These challenges create barriers to effective reconciliation and reintegration.

7 The language surrounding DDR has been regularly reevaluated since the 1990s. The UN counterterrorism architecture proposed the concept of prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (PRR) based on Security Council resolutions addressing the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, although the links between PRR and DDR remain unclear. See UN Security Council, S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014; UN Security Council, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017. More recently, counterterrorism actors adopted the framework of screening, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration, which was the framework used in the 2018 Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience of the Boko Haram-Affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin in place of DDRRR.

8 Law No. 2014/028 on the Suppression of Acts of Terrorism, 23 December 2014, art. 2; Law No. 2016/007 Relating to the Penal Code, sec. 102.

The appointment of NDDRC focal points at mass-entry locations could help create a clearer path for the handling of ex-associates from their point of arrival to their reintegration into communities. The focal points could facilitate the intervention of appropriate actors such as civil society actors, psychosocial experts, and community members as soon as ex-associates surrender, thus ensuring that returnees are enrolled in the DDR process and adequately monitored.

6. Better resource and equip NDDRC centers and standardize their administrative processes

Cameroon currently maintains three NDDRC centers, with an additional one under construction. They vary significantly in size and condition. For example, the NDDRC center in the North West Region, which opened in Bamenda in 2021, features several modern amenities and houses 277 individuals (192 men, 55 women, and 30 children)—well below its 500-person capacity.⁹ The Mora center near the northern border with Nigeria, on the other hand, is a converted prison facility housing 1,637 ex-associates of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, including 268 women and 545 children, all residing together in overcrowded and unsanitary quarters.¹⁰

In addition to gross disparities in conditions and resources, the centers are each administered by different regional coordinators who apply inconsistent policies and procedures on issues such as drug use and smuggling and the separation of children from adults. Despite some security risks, most centers offer a degree of freedom to their residents, such as permitting them to go to the market or visit relatives. Yet, there have been no formal reintegration processes at any of the centers. In the Mora center, for example, facilities and equipment are inadequate to hold regular trainings or rehabilitative activities. Without a formal process for

reintegration, cases of spontaneous community reentry have been reported.

Experts emphasized the importance of the NDDRC developing partnerships with a wide range of private and community actors to supplement its capacity and support its reintegration efforts. These may include partnerships with nonprofit organizations for the provision of educational materials and activities, living spaces, meals, medical services, sanitary kits, and other forms of support.

7. Promote victims' access to justice, including through transitional and traditional justice mechanisms, to foster reconciliation and reintegration

Victims of terrorist activities should be at the center of all decisions affecting the management of ex-associates and their reintegration. In centering the victims of terrorism, it is important also to recognize the victimhood of individuals detained, often en masse, on the mere suspicion of being associated with an armed group and held in extended pretrial detention. Providing programs, resources, and support to ex-associates of armed groups that are unavailable to the wider population, however, particularly those most harmed by those very groups, undermines the validity of the DDR process. If a DDR process is perceived as granting impunity or preferential treatment to demobilized ex-associates and suspected terrorists, it can generate new grievances within host communities. It is therefore important that host communities are also provided incentives and support to reintegrate ex-associates.

To manage community perceptions, the NDDRC has developed a communications strategy to sensitize the population and share updates on the DDR process. Overall, however, justice for victims of terrorism seems

9 Choves Loh, "Bamenda: Ultra-Modern DDR Centre Ready for Use," *Cameroon Tribune*, April 13, 2021, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202104130625.html>.

10 In recent years, an offshoot affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) called the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA, ISIS-WA, or ISWAP) has established itself as the stronger faction and one of the most active ISIL affiliates globally. In May 2021, IS-WA militants killed Boko Haram leader Shekau, prompting thousands of people, including former Boko Haram fighters, their families, and civilians fleeing Boko Haram-held zones, to surrender to Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities. A number of Boko Haram commanders reportedly joined IS-WA following Shekau's death.

sidelined in the DDR process. Justice serves not only a repressive purpose but also a restorative one; it is crucial to the promotion of peace, which is the primary objective of Cameroon's DDR process. Building on Cameroon's long tradition of providing justice through traditional rulers and community-based court systems, transitional and traditional justice mechanisms could be promoted as avenues to increase victims' access to justice. This echoes the recommendation from the third Lake Chad Basin Governors' Forum to prioritize understanding of how traditional and transitional justice could be mainstreamed into reconciliation and reintegration processes in line with the regional stabilization strategy.¹¹

8. Support the role of traditional and community leaders as mediators of conflict within their communities

Traditional leaders play an essential role in peacebuilding in many communities as mediators of local disputes, project coordinators, and moral authorities. Yet, the security crises in the Far North Region have tarnished the authority and respect these leaders once enjoyed. Boko Haram has attacked their standing, and according to experts, the population increasingly feels that traditional authorities are being used as governmental mouthpieces and do not represent the communities' interests.

For their part, traditional leaders reported that they do not have clear authorization to deal directly with ex-associates, which makes it more difficult for them to resolve conflicts such as land disputes involving ex-associates through customary and traditional justice mechanisms. Their place in Cameroon's governance structure is also unclear. Traditional chiefdoms were legally recognized in 1977 but are not part of the decentralized administrative framework established by the constitution. Cooperation should thus

be encouraged between municipal and traditional authorities to ensure that their development priorities and approach to reintegration are consistent. The personal safety of traditional authorities should also be ensured, given that they have been the direct target of attacks by Boko Haram.

9. Better integrate the particular needs of women and children into the DDR process

Returnees differ in age, gender, background, socioeconomic circumstances, exposure to violence, and involvement with the conflict, all of which affect how they should be managed throughout the DDR process. Boys, girls, and women, in particular, require special consideration given their specific risks and needs. Boko Haram has kidnapped and exploited thousands of children and has recruited women and children, particularly as suicide bombers.¹² There is broad recognition that returning women face compounded vulnerabilities based on their gender and on their status as ex-associates. Assistance should thus differentiate among the specific needs of girls, boys, women, and men who have disengaged from violent extremist groups.

The DDR process also needs to manage the growing number of children born into armed groups who do not have birth certificates or identification documents, which they are not provided until after their reintegration is completed. Some have suggested that these children should be given a special status and managed through a separate process. At the very least, strategies should be developed to ensure the protection of these and other children, and they should receive care through child-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches. Juvenile justice standards must serve as the foundation for the detention, rehabilitation, and reintegration of all children, who enjoy a protected status under the law.¹³

11 Lake Chad Basin Commission, "3rd Meeting of the Lake Chad Basin Governors' Forum of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)."

12 The use of children in so-called suicide attacks has been identified as a defining feature of the Boko Haram conflict. UN Children's Fund, "Silent Shame: Bringing Out the Voices of Children Caught in the Lake Chad Crisis," 27 April 2017, p. 3, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/silent-shame-bringing-out-voices-children-caught-lake-chad-crisis>.

13 See Global Center on Cooperative Security, "Rehabilitating Juvenile Violent Extremist Offenders in Detention: Advancing a Juvenile Justice Approach," December 2016, <https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/GCTF-GCCS-ICCT-Policy-Brief-on-Rehabilitating-JVEOs.pdf>.

10. Implement psychological, medical, and security-based screening processes at NDDRC centers

Despite the government's reluctance to adopt a more formal DDR framework that could involve the justice system, a robust, evidence-based process for screening risks and needs is critical for effective rehabilitation and reintegration. With the exception of an initial registration process to identify individuals coming into the NDDRC centers, ex-associates are not being screened in a comprehensive or uniform manner, raising several political and practical concerns. The regional stabilization strategy specifically calls for an initial intake assessment for individuals under the custody of authorities to recommend follow-up action, including further investigation or prosecution or participation in a rehabilitation or reintegration program.¹⁴ Although prosecution is at odds with the Cameroonian approach of forgoing legal sanctions to encourage defections, standard intake assessments are necessary to establish an initial profile and respond to immediate medical and psychological needs and potential security risks.

After the intake assessment, there are also gaps in procedures for monitoring ex-associates. In the Far North Region, for instance, there have been reports of ex-associates returning to Cameroon after being transferred to the Nigerian authorities, who left them unmonitored. A more detailed and regularly updated risk and needs assessment is critical to ensure the safety of staff and other ex-associates in the NDDRC centers and to ensure that individuals do not pose a security risk once they leave the centers. Regular medical and psychological screening is also important to assess the general health and well-being of residents of the centers, set out rehabilitation plans and measure progress, and determine individuals' potential for reintegration.


11. Strengthen psychosocial services in NDDRC centers and for affected communities

Stakeholders emphasized the need for NDDRC centers to have a permanent staff of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other experts, which most of them currently lack. There have been some efforts to fill this gap. For example, the NDDRC center in Mora, with assistance from UN agencies and nonprofit organizations such as Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré, provides psychosocial services and literacy programs. The University of Maroua is opening a new department to address the shortage of personnel specialized in providing psychosocial support. In recognition of the role religious actors can play in supporting the mental and spiritual well-being of individuals, the Buea and Bamenda NDDRC centers hold regular religious sessions for their residents. NDDRC centers also need to offer specialized psychosocial services for children, including through institutions such as the Institution Camerounaise de l'Enfance in Maroua. Beyond the NDDRC centers themselves, psychosocial services are needed in the host communities to help residents address their own trauma and support the reintegration of ex-associates.

CONCLUSION

Reintegration is the cornerstone of a successful DDR process. The challenges that have emerged in Cameroon's DDR efforts are, in many ways, a product of a highly centralized approach. Given the diversity of stakeholders and interventions, reintegration needs to be reframed as a whole-of-society, bottom-up endeavor. This requires developing a comprehensive and cohesive national DDR strategy that is based on broad stakeholder engagement and public consultation and in line with ongoing decentralization efforts and the recommendations emerging from the Major National Dialogue.

14 Lake Chad Basin Commission, "Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery & Resilience of the Boko Haram-Affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region" (Strategic Objective 8 on promoting human rights).



This national strategy should be framed within the broader socioeconomic context. It needs to address the structural conditions that are conducive to violent extremism, including by repairing relationships among governmental actors, civil society, and communities and addressing inequalities, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. The authorities managing the DDR

process should also be guided by good governance principles and should support and coordinate closely with local actors in rebuilding their communities and livelihoods and establishing a framework for truth-telling, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

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