

MAY 2019

Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria After Boko Haram

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**This paper is made possible by support from the UK Department for International Development.
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Introduction

In 2019, the conflict in northeastern Nigeria entered its eleventh year. Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency and the government's military response have killed tens of thousands of civilians and displaced millions across the Lake Chad region, which straddles Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. Although major military campaigns in 2015–2016 succeeded in degrading the group's territorial control, Boko Haram has proven remarkably adaptable in its tactics: the end of 2018 once again saw an uptick in attacks in Nigeria's Borno State.¹ As Muhammadu Buhari assumes his second term as president, the conflict in the northeast appears far from resolved.

Since the early years of the crisis, Nigeria's international partners have cautioned that Boko Haram is unlikely to be defeated on the battlefield alone. They have stressed the need for a multidimensional response that tackles the drivers of insecurity in the region, including chronic weaknesses in service delivery, corrupt governance, and environmental degradation. However, the perception of limited leverage over Nigerian counterparts, restricted access to the country's northeast, and a response to the crisis shaped by the U.S.-led Global War on Terror limited donors' focus on these governance dimensions on the ground. In practice, international assistance came late and donors struggled to identify viable national counterparts for stabilization programs. As a result, their efforts centered on supporting regional military efforts and responding to the large-scale humanitarian crisis.

Since early 2017, military gains and improved security in parts of northeastern Nigeria have spurred a greater focus on conflict stabilization measures. At the international level, key donors set up the Oslo Consultative Group on the Prevention and Stabilization in the Lake Chad Region to coordinate their response activities. The Lake Chad Basin Commission and the African Union Commission have adopted a regional stabilization strategy, which highlights short-, medium-, and long-term stabilization, resilience, and recovery needs.² In parallel, donors have also begun expanding bottom-up stabilization programs aimed at addressing the drivers of insecurity at the local level. These efforts have generally fallen into three main categories: programs aimed at strengthening local conflict prevention and mitigation systems, programs aimed at restoring local governance and basic services, and programs aimed at fostering social cohesion and ensuring the reintegration of former combatants.

This paper provides an overview of these local-level efforts and the theories of change that undergird them.³ It highlights initial lessons learned by donors and implementers, as well as persistent tensions between local-level program objectives and higher-level political and conflict dynamics. Most stabilization programs were designed with the assumption that the security situation in northeastern Nigeria would continue to improve, thereby facilitating the gradual return of displaced populations

and local government. Yet in practice, Nigeria's overstretched, under-resourced, and corruption-plagued military has struggled to consolidate its gains. Civilians in many parts of the northeast face ongoing threats from both insurgent attacks as well as counterterrorism operations. Rampant corruption and ineffective coordination have hampered the Nigerian government's civilian response to the crisis, with various federal, state, and local elites benefiting from the continuation of the crisis. Moreover, while international partners stress the need for a regional response to the crisis, the region lacks an effective political infrastructure, and cooperation has been primarily externally driven.

The Nigerian case thus exemplifies the difficulties of implementing effective local-level stabilization efforts while working with a host government that lacks political commitment, transparency, and coordination. While local-level programs have shown positive impacts in various areas, they have struggled to gain wider traction—particularly since donors are often working through or dependent on the government to operate.

- Well-designed conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms have proven effective at the local level, yet they are difficult to scale up. Such programs have helped address local security threats and have improved dialogue between citizens, security services, and the state. Yet to date, efforts to connect these platforms to higher-level political institutions and change top-down decisionmaking have been relatively unsuccessful. As a result, these mechanisms struggle to tackle conflict drivers and structural problems that go beyond the capacity of local governments, including chronic corruption and weak accountability and oversight in the security sector.
- Donor programs have helped restore basic infrastructure and services, but the political end goals of stabilization programming are more uncertain. Some aid providers found that small-scale efforts to bring back local government proved insufficient to address long-standing perceptions of neglect, and shifted to circumventing the government by providing services directly to communities and individuals deemed at risk of extremist recruitment. Other programs combine reconstruction with community-based development, with the aim of improving bottom-up participation in service delivery. Yet systemic governance shortcomings, particularly the lack of local political accountability and weak state incentives to prioritize service delivery, present significant hurdles that need to be addressed in long-term program planning and design.
- Efforts to reintegrate individuals affiliated with violent extremist groups have multiplied, though they remain stifled by the Nigerian government's militarized conflict response. Donors have supported the development of a national framework for demobilization, deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) and funded local-level reintegration initiatives. However, the military maintains tight control over the screening

and vetting of terrorism suspects, a process that lacks transparency and is not subject to civilian oversight. Many detainees have been held for years, despite little to no evidence of ties to violent extremist groups. While a small-scale defectors program exists, it needs to be expanded and to adopt a much more comprehensive focus on reintegration and community consultation in order to be effective. These shortcomings also highlight the need for continued high-level pressure for greater security sector transparency and accountability.

Tracing the International Response

Evolution of the Crisis

In the early years of the conflict, most Western governments saw Boko Haram primarily as a problem specific to Nigeria. The group first emerged as an Islamic reform movement in the northeastern town of Maiduguri in the early 2000s. Its members followed the charismatic Salafi preacher Muhammad Yusuf, who condemned Western-style education and corrupt, secular governance while also cultivating strategic ties to the city's elites. In 2009, clashes between Boko Haram members and police forces escalated into several days of armed uprising in Maiduguri.⁴ The Nigerian government brutally crushed the insurrection, leaving several hundreds dead—including Yusuf himself, who was executed in police custody. The subsequent evolution of the conflict can be roughly divided into three main phases.

Emergence of guerilla warfare and an ineffective initial response (2010–2012)

Following the government's crackdown, Nigerian authorities believed they had successfully quashed the movement.⁵ Yet Boko Haram re-emerged in 2010 under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, carrying out sporadic attacks across the northeast.⁶ Its clandestine tactics gradually grew more sophisticated, but the Nigerian government was slow to recognize the extent of the crisis. Then president Goodluck Jonathan instead framed Boko Haram as a terrorist organization with ties to international jihadist networks, thereby laying the ground for a narrow counterterrorism response.⁷ After some internal debate, both the UK and the U.S. governments followed suit in declaring Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organization. While this designation had little immediate effect on the ground, it weakened the possibility of a political solution to the escalating conflict.⁸ It has also significantly complicated U.S. assistance for reintegration programs in recent years.

Expanding territorial control and military setbacks (2013–2014)

In 2013, the Nigerian military intensified its campaign against Boko Haram. Yet its indiscriminate tactics failed to degrade the group's capacity and deeply alienated the region's civilian population. A state of emergency imposed on Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States only deepened the cycle of violence. In high-level statements and meetings, both the U.S. and European governments stressed

the need to improve civilian protection and address the root causes of violence.⁹ Despite these warnings, Jonathan pushed for more security assistance while downplaying the degree of dysfunction within the Nigerian military and the worsening humanitarian crisis.¹⁰ As a result, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Nigeria deteriorated.

In April 2014, Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 female students from the town of Chibok made worldwide headlines, drawing greater policy attention to the crisis. Several Western governments—including the United States—offered technical assistance and intelligence-sharing to help find the girls. The U.S. State Department formed a Nigeria Planning and Operations Group that brought together technical and regional experts as well as a military liaison to plan and coordinate rapid responses to the crisis. However, concerns over human rights abuses by Nigerian security forces hampered greater cooperation, even as Boko Haram expanded its control of the northeastern countryside.¹¹

Increasingly concerned about Boko Haram's threat to regional stability, the United States as well as France and the UK began shifting their focus to Nigeria's neighbors. Various U.S. agencies began pushing for greater military cooperation between the Lake Chad countries, and the United States leveraged the Global Security Cooperation Fund and the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund to increase security assistance to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.¹² This shift allowed the U.S. government to support military efforts against Boko Haram while circumventing the policy hurdles associated with direct aid to the Nigerian government. In parallel, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) launched several smaller-scale stabilization efforts aimed at increasing community resilience to violent extremism in the wider Lake Chad region.¹³

Regionalization and return to clandestine tactics (2015–present)

In early 2015, in the midst of Nigeria's election season, a renewed military offensive began making headway against the group. After repeated delays, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNTJF)—a loose coalition of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria—seized back most of the territory previously held by Boko Haram.¹⁴ Counterinsurgency operations triggered new waves of displacement as civilians were pushed from the countryside into military-controlled camps in urban centers.¹⁵ Yet the involvement of neighboring countries also sparked an increasing regionalization of the crisis and further militarization of the conflict response. With Buhari's inauguration in May 2015, relations between the Nigerian government and Western partners improved, opening the door to increases in Western security assistance—including the deployment of U.S. and British military advisers and the sale of light attack aircraft in 2017.

Over the past three years, Boko Haram's decline has been uneven. As the insurgents were pushed back into more remote rural areas, they reverted to earlier tactics, relying on guerilla-style attacks and suicide bombings.¹⁶ Nigerian security forces have struggled to consolidate control over rural areas

and protect urban centers from sporadic attacks. While the number of fatalities associated with the group has declined, the number of attacks has fluctuated, and patterns of violence have remained largely consistent since 2014.¹⁷ The group has splintered into two main factions or cells: a larger faction led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi now brands itself as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), while Abubakar Shekau still commands a group of militants under the group's previous name, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). Over the course of 2018, ISWAP appears to have expanded its reach in northern Borno, reportedly even recapturing a number of towns near Lake Chad previously controlled by the Nigerian military.¹⁸ While some areas—particularly in Adamawa State, Yobe State, and southern Borno—have thus seen greater security and the return of displaced populations, other parts of Borno State still struggle with ongoing military operations and humanitarian crisis conditions.

The International Response Comes Late

The donor community on the ground in Nigeria was late to acknowledge the severity of the crisis, and slow to scale up its response. Several factors explain this pattern. First, in the early years of the crisis, international partners were hesitant to push back against Nigerian authorities' assurances that the conflict response was under their control. In contrast to other conflict-affected states, the Nigerian government wields significant resources and regional power, resulting in a greater stature vis-a-vis international partners. Donor governments thus prioritized working through Nigerian government structures rather than sidestepping local authority, even as bureaucratic obstruction, a lack of committed interlocutors, and in-fighting between different levels of government slowed down the response.¹⁹

Second, donor states and the United Nations (UN) had little political interest in declaring the region a large-scale emergency, which would have required additional commitments of resources in an already crisis-ridden international context.²⁰ For example, in 2014–2015, the UN leadership in the country did little to press for greater international involvement, despite evidence of worsening conditions in the northeast. Western capitals, already preoccupied with crises in Iraq, South Sudan, and Syria, in turn saw Nigeria as a resource-rich country with less need for international aid.²¹ Those donors already present in Nigeria prior to the crisis had mostly specialized in development programs in areas such as health and education, which often relied on close collaboration with Nigerian authorities. Few had a direct presence in the northeast, and those that did worked via partnerships with smaller local groups. However, the scale of these efforts was far below the level of need.²² These dynamics further delayed the transition to a comprehensive conflict response.²³

Lastly, the deteriorating security situation and lack of communication lines with Boko Haram limited access and made it difficult to obtain accurate assessments of the rapidly evolving crisis. Beginning in 2013, the state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States severely restricted

mobility and communication flows in the region. Even as the military began pushing Boko Haram into retreat in 2015, continued insecurity prevented the return of civilian administration, and access beyond Maiduguri remained tightly controlled by the Nigerian military.²⁴ Despite this difficult context, several donors launched small-scale peacebuilding and countering violent extremism (CVE) programs in the northeast, generally centered on Maiduguri. Yet persistent security concerns and access restrictions prevented a rapid scale-up.

Only in mid-2016 did reporting on widespread starvation in Bama, a town in northeastern Borno, trigger a radical increase in the overall donor response.²⁵ International aid organizations thus reached many areas more than a year after they had been retaken by Nigerian military forces. They found people living in devastating conditions, with little access to food or basic supplies.²⁶ Most initial efforts prioritized delivering emergency humanitarian assistance to the newly accessible areas. For example, USAID ramped up humanitarian assistance in Nigeria “from virtually nothing in 2014 to \$291 million committed for fiscal year (FY) 2017.”²⁷

A Contested Shift Toward Stabilization and Early Recovery

As security conditions improved in late 2016 and early 2017, the discourse of both the Nigerian government and its international partners began shifting toward stabilization. The Nigerian government released the so-called Buhari Plan, which outlines its postconflict recovery priorities in the northeast that range from emergency assistance to stabilization and early recovery. A regional stabilization strategy—developed by the African Union and Lake Chad Basin Commission—followed in 2018. Programs aimed at setting the ground for a transition to longer-term development and governance activities began to take shape.²⁸ For example, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) rolled out initial assessments to learn about people’s perceptions of governance in the northeast and displaced communities’ willingness to return to their home communities, which served as a basis to inform their programming.²⁹ In March 2017, the U.S. government finalized a strategy for countering Boko Haram and ISWAP, which states that the United States seeks to ensure that the Lake Chad basin countries, together with local authorities and international partners, are “able to address specific regional and community-level conditions that are drivers of conflict and that make communities vulnerable to violent extremist groups.”³⁰

Yet this shift toward stabilization has also provoked resistance. Humanitarian aid organizations working in Nigeria have argued that it comes too soon, noting that the conflict is still ongoing and hundreds of thousands of people remain beyond the reach of basic emergency assistance. They fear that the language of stabilization is playing into the hands of Nigerian authorities who are eager to emphasize a return to normality and a shift to long-term development assistance while downplaying ongoing crisis conditions. Over the past year, for example, Nigerian authorities have pushed aggressively for displaced civilians to return to their home communities, while Buhari has repeatedly

declared that Boko Haram has been “technically defeated.”³¹ Humanitarian actors warn that a change in donor priorities may lead to aid being allocated based on the Nigerian government’s political priorities rather than civilian needs, thereby leaving vulnerable groups without assistance.³²

The discourse of stabilization itself has been surrounded by conceptual confusion, with different actors using the term to refer to different things. Some donors use the term synonymously with early recovery to describe any activities aimed at supporting the transition from humanitarian aid to long-term development. Others define it more narrowly as encompassing those activities aimed at restoring local governance and state authority. The difference between “stabilization” and “countering violent extremism” also appears unclear in practice, with donors pursuing similar activities under these two headings. These varying uses mirror the broader policy debates surrounding the concept of stabilization, which has long lacked a shared definition and as a result has been used by governments to describe very different approaches.³³

To address this confusion, the U.S. government in 2018 published an interagency Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), which establishes a U.S. government-wide definition of the term and identifies key principles for effective stabilization operations. The SAR also notes the importance of developing a political strategy that outlines clear and achievable end states for all stabilization operations as well as the underlying core assumptions. In order to narrow the scope of the analysis, this paper adopts the SAR’s definition of stabilization as “an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.”³⁴ This definition mirrors the approach outlined in the outcome document of the High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Region held in Berlin in September 2018, which states that “stabilization seeks to enable first steps towards reconciliation between parties to the conflict and to establish social and political consensus as a foundation for legitimate political structures and long-term development.”³⁵ The next section takes a closer look at stabilization activities funded in this vein in northeastern Nigeria, focusing specifically on community-based programs that seek to drive change from the bottom-up.

Typology of Local Stabilization Programs

In northeastern Nigeria, donor-funded local stabilization programs have centered on the following priorities:³⁶

- strengthening local- and state-level conflict prevention and community security mechanisms to help communities prevent and solve emerging conflicts and tensions;
- rehabilitating civilian infrastructure and basic services to strengthen government legitimacy and responsiveness to citizen needs; and

- supporting the reintegration of former fighters, civilian militia, and those associated with insurgent groups, as well as local-level social cohesion more broadly, with a long-term view toward social healing and reconciliation.

While these three categories and the associated theories of change outlined below do not capture the full range and nuances of existing programs, they reflect the dominant approaches among major international donors—which, in northeastern Nigeria, include France, Germany, Japan, the UK, the United States, and the European Commission. In practice, programs often combine multiple types of interventions and theories of change within a larger package, based on the idea that coordinated support will result in greater stability and resilience to external threats. Table 1 reviews these activities in greater detail. It does not include the wider set of early recovery and CVE interventions that do not have direct links to local-level political processes, though it recognizes that these efforts are often interlinked on the ground.

TABLE 1
Programs and Related Theories of Change

Type of Program	Theories of Change
Strengthening local conflict prevention and community security mechanisms	Supporting communities to articulate their security concerns and needs to government and security officials will improve early warning and response mechanisms, build greater trust in security forces, and strengthen coordination among security actors at different levels of governance.
Restoring local government and basic services	Restoring basic local government presence and basic services will help foster greater citizen trust in government and improve perceptions of government responsiveness.
	Involving citizens in decisionmaking around local services and development priorities will foster greater social cohesion within communities, build local demand for better governance, and push government officials to be more attuned and accountable to citizen needs.
	Offering targeted services and interventions to at-risk communities and individuals will make them less vulnerable to extremist recruitment.
Supporting reintegration and social cohesion	Ensuring individuals previously associated with nonstate armed groups are accepted back into their families and communities and that local conflicts are resolved peacefully will foster reconciliation, incentivize further defections, and prevent a return to violence and criminality.

Strengthening Local Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms

First, across the northeast, international donors have identified restoring local-level conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms as a central priority. While programs vary in their design, they are based on the basic theory of change that supporting communities to better articulate their concerns and needs to government officials and security agencies—and training the latter to listen to these concerns—will help ensure more effective responses to local-level threats, build popular trust in security forces, and help manage future tensions and shocks.³⁷

Even before the onset of conflict, citizen trust in formal security forces had eroded due to corruption, inefficiency, and weak accountability. Insufficient coordination between security actors often resulted in delayed and heavy-handed responses to local security threats—a problem not unique to the northeast, but prevalent across Nigeria.³⁸ The insurgency dramatically exacerbated these challenges. The military's inability to protect civilians in the early years of the conflict generated widespread resentment. Communities accused security forces of targeting the population, collaborating with the insurgents, and prolonging the fighting for financial gain. As Boko Haram has been pushed back, relations between citizens and security forces have improved in some localities. Yet fear and mistrust are still pervasive, and civilians often prefer turning to community militia—such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)—for protection.³⁹

At the same time, the conflict has weakened the authority of traditional and religious leaders, who have historically played central dispute resolution roles. Many left their communities during the conflict; others were deliberately targeted by insurgents for refusing to collaborate. Some community elders have also seen their authority challenged by youth militia formed during the conflict. Together, these developments have created a local leadership vacuum at a time when the risk of land and property-related conflict is particularly high.⁴⁰ Disruptions in grazing routes and decreases in arable land have exacerbated conflicts between farmers and herders, while protracted displacement has caused friction between internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, and host communities.

In response, several donors—including the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union (EU), and the U.S. Department of State—have funded “upstream conflict prevention” programs focused on strengthening dialogue and coordination between communities, local authorities, and security actors. Some programs bring together civilians and security personnel to monitor, report, and discuss local security problems and jointly plan responses, and provide training for community leaders and members in peaceful dispute resolution.⁴¹ Others have created permanent forums and information channels across multiple levels of governance. For example, they combine community-level peace monitors tasked with identifying emerging security threats with platforms that bring together key stakeholders at the community or local government area (LGA) level to address these reports. Many include a specific focus on integrating women and girls into

discussions of security challenges and improving reporting on gender-based violence. Some programs, including DFID's Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) and its follow-up, the EU-funded Managing Conflict in North East Nigeria program, also feature state-level forums tasked with tackling challenges that rise beyond the local level. Part of the objective of these programs was to bridge gaps between Nigeria's multiple and often competing security institutions, including the military, the National Police Service, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, the Federal Road Safety Corps, and the CJTF.

Restoring Civilian Administration and Services

A second priority area has been the return of basic services and civilian administration to conflict-affected communities. Even before the Boko Haram insurgency, northeastern Nigeria had the lowest human development indicators in the country. Eight years of violence have further devastated the region's social infrastructure: 45 percent of all health facilities have been destroyed, as well as an estimated 75 percent of all water and sanitation infrastructures; damages to schools have left 2.9 million children without access to education.⁴² Boko Haram specifically targeted local government officials and civil servants, pushing many to seek refuge in Maiduguri or other states. Efforts to address this immense challenge have been guided by several theories of change, resulting in somewhat distinct approaches.

Restoring services to build trust in government

A first theory of change is that restoring local government and basic service delivery will help foster greater citizen trust in government and improve perceptions of state responsiveness. Prevailing accounts of the conflict suggest that government neglect and weak service provision across the northeast were key factors driving community support for Boko Haram.⁴³ The idea that frustration with dysfunctional governance made communities vulnerable to extremist recruitment has led donors to invest in local government infrastructure in conflict-affected areas, particularly in the early years of the international response. For example, in late 2014, OTI refocused its program from radio messaging to a larger effort to help restore civilian government administration and services in LGAs that had been secured by Nigerian security forces.⁴⁴ By rebuilding police stations and other facilities and bringing back civil servants (including judges and police services), the program aimed to tackle the pervasive sense of marginalization in the region.⁴⁵

Restoring services to foster participation and accountability

A second theory of change guiding service rehabilitation efforts centers on citizen participation: by involving communities in decisionmaking around local services and development priorities, programs will foster greater social cohesion and government accountability, in addition to delivering positive socioeconomic outcomes.⁴⁶ This approach is premised on the idea that unaccountable, top-down governance has been a key driver of conflict. Survey research commissioned by USAID for

example found that across many LGAs in northeastern Nigeria, citizens—particularly women or youth—feel unable to approach local government officials and sense that they are being treated unfairly.⁴⁷

To address this gap, several programs integrate community-based planning into service delivery. Such efforts typically include trainings for local and state government officials on the importance of community input, as well as participatory processes in which representatives of different groups—including women, youth, and traditional leaders—together decide on their ward-level reconstruction priorities. Some international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) have adopted a very similar approach to CVE programs: community representatives get together to discuss the local drivers of extremism and identify the interventions that would help address them.

Programs designed in this vein often have a dual objective. At a basic level, they hope to improve social cohesion by giving citizens a forum to work together and come into contact with local government officials.⁴⁸ In the long run, they typically have the more transformative goal of empowering citizens vis-a-vis the state. The German development agency Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), for example, is implementing a community-based development program in Adamawa and Borno States that eventually aims to connect locally formulated development plans to state budgeting processes, thereby ensuring that the state government allocates the resources necessary to fund local priorities. Another program in Borno State similarly aims to feed locally designed CVE plans into the budgeting priorities of LGA and state government officials.⁴⁹

Providing services to counter violent extremism

The third theory of change is focused more squarely on countering violent extremism. The growing success of ISWAP in particular has spurred new U.S. efforts to use targeted service provision as a means of countering recruitment by violent extremist groups in more remote areas. In contrast to the Boko Haram faction led by Abubakar Shekau, news reports suggest that ISWAP has tried to win the support of local communities by digging wells; providing fertilizer, seeds, and pastures for herders; and focusing their attacks on hard targets, such as government and security personnel.⁵⁰ In order to counter this strategy, USAID since September 2017 has moved away from its previous focus on restoring local government presence and challenging extremist messaging to a more targeted CVE approach that is directly aimed at denying violent extremists the space to operate.⁵¹ Programming now centers on providing ward- or community-level interventions to address the needs of those deemed most at risk of recruitment, with the aim of offering a clear alternative to violent extremist groups before they are able to seize new territory. Projects have focused on building boreholes, offering livelihood support and cash transfers, and restoring market places, among other priorities.⁵²

Supporting Reintegration and Social Cohesion

The third category of interventions focuses on reintegrating individuals affiliated with violent extremist groups back into communities, ensuring the peaceful mediation of local disputes, as well as securing opportunities for youth who joined community defense militia like the CJTF during the conflict. These programs aim to help individuals find their way back into civilian life, thereby reducing the likelihood of a return to violence or criminality and preventing the emergence of future conflicts.

There are two main reasons why the reintegration of former Boko Haram members has become a key international priority. First, given the unlikelihood of a peace agreement, incentivizing the defection and rehabilitation of low-level fighters has emerged as a potential mechanism to weaken the capacity of violent extremist groups. Second, those individuals who have already returned to their communities—after passing through a government rehabilitation program or being released by the military—have often been met with stigmatization, mistrust, and even violence. Communities are understandably reluctant to welcome those associated with violent extremist groups back into their fold, particularly as long as the victims of the conflict have yet to receive adequate support.

Stigmatization affects not only former combatants but also relatives of suspected fighters, women and girls abducted by Boko Haram, those who were living in Boko Haram–controlled areas, as well as children born out of forced marriages within the group.⁵³ As a result, there is a high risk that the return of former Boko Haram members could cause new tensions, and that some returnees could even return to violence if they struggle to find acceptance. The same risk surrounds local vigilante groups: while they are generally celebrated for providing protection to civilians during the height of the crisis, communities now worry about the likelihood of future violence associated with their politicization, turn to criminality, and intergroup rivalries.⁵⁴

International donors have responded to these challenges in two main ways. At the local level, they have funded programs that seek to provide psychosocial and livelihood support to Boko Haram victims and returnees and bridge intercommunal divisions. These efforts include community dialogues and family support sessions, direct support to returnees (especially women and girls abducted by Boko Haram), trainings for community leaders on reconciliation and conflict resolution, and radio programs that try to build support for the reintegration process.⁵⁵ They have also supported the Nigerian government’s small-scale defector program for repentant low-level combatants, called Operation Safe Corridor, and a rehabilitation center in Maiduguri for women and girls formerly affiliated with Boko Haram. In parallel, some donors—most prominently USAID, the International Organization for Migration, and the UN Development Program (UNDP)—have worked with the Nigerian government to develop a legal and policy framework to guide further

reintegration efforts, and to harmonize procedures for screening, detaining, rehabilitating, or prosecuting suspects with neighboring countries.

Overarching Challenges

Several overarching challenges have complicated local-level stabilization efforts over the past two years. Ongoing insecurity presents the most immediate challenge, particularly in Borno State. Recurring attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP as well as ongoing military operations have delayed the return of displaced populations, prolonged humanitarian crisis conditions, and made it difficult for aid organizations to reach vulnerable communities. Second, donors have struggled to work through and with the Nigerian government, whose conflict response has been plagued by weak coordination and corruption. Difficulties in locating effective counterparts create a classic dilemma for external actors: work through the government and risk bureaucratic delays and political obstruction, or bypass it to the extent possible and risk creating parallel structures that fail to strengthen host government capacity. Lastly, weaknesses in regional cooperation present another significant hurdle. From reintegrating ex-combatants to preventing farmer-herder conflicts and rebuilding rural economies, many of the issues facing the Lake Chad region require cross-border approaches. To date, coordination efforts remain largely externally driven, and progress in implementation has been slow.

Ongoing Insecurity and Displacement

Community stabilization programs rest on the assumption that communities are, in fact, to some degree stable, rather than experiencing temporary displacement or being at high risk of renewed displacement. Yet in northeastern Nigeria, and particularly in Borno State, ongoing insecurity has repeatedly delayed the return of displaced communities and triggered new population movements. As of October 2018, over 2 million individuals remain displaced, a number that has once again increased over the past year.⁵⁶ Ongoing military operations around Lake Chad continue to force more people to leave their homes and drive others into secondary displacement, particularly due to the Nigerian military's ongoing practice of clearing rural villages by pushing civilians into IDP camps in nearby towns. Some refugees that had fled to Cameroon have been forced to return to Nigeria, further adding to the complexity of the situation.

This fluidity has disrupted any linear pathway from conflict to stabilization to early recovery in many areas. Reviews of stabilization assistance in other conflicts indicate that such programs are usually most successful in places where residents can count on basic levels of physical security and nonpredatory security provision.⁵⁷ The worst-affected parts of Borno State still do not meet these

criteria. While security forces retook control of most LGA headquarters in 2015, they have struggled to hold on to the surrounding rural areas. Repeated attacks and suicide bombings have led the already thinly spread armed forces to prioritize securing urban centers, leaving rural communities and smaller towns with limited protection.⁵⁸ International organizations estimate that around 800,000 people are still stuck in areas in northern Borno that are beyond the reach of humanitarian assistance, with little information available about their profile and needs.⁵⁹ Even urban areas have not been fully secured: in the lead-up to the 2019 elections, militants launched a new spate of attacks on several northeastern towns, forcing more residents to flee.⁶⁰

As a result, most local-level stabilization efforts have centered on more secure areas, such as Maiduguri, Mafa LGA, and Biu LGA in Borno and parts of Adamawa and Yobe States. Aid organizations have had to choose their target areas based on where they have access rather than on conflict dynamics.⁶¹ Programs intended to cover all of Borno State have been restricted to those local government areas where fewer people have been displaced or more have already returned. “Everything hinges on security, as all of our work requires access,” notes one UNDP official charged with implementing an integrated community stabilization program. “Our first question is: is the community accessible? Second, have people returned? If so, how many? Is the situation stable? Only once the number is sizable and the situation has become more stable can you start thinking about stabilization and governance.” In some cases, governance-focused programs have been delayed because the target community has not yet fully returned or remains in precarious living situations, which makes it difficult to start programming on citizen-state relations and service delivery.⁶² Instead, interventions remain more short-term and relief-oriented, focused on addressing immediate local needs. Some donors have relied on local partner organizations and informants to reach more remote communities and carry out smaller-scale, flexible interventions. Yet even these activities depend on the Nigerian military ensuring access to key roads, and often pose significant risks to local staff.⁶³

Lack of Federal-Level Coordination and Commitment

In addition to ongoing insecurity, donors highlight the need to work through Nigerian government structures as a significant challenge. This problem was particularly acute in the early years of the crisis, when the Nigerian government under Goodluck Jonathan pursued a highly militarized response, and donors struggled to find viable counterparts for civilian stabilization efforts. Under Buhari, the Nigerian government has somewhat diversified its response operations: in 2016, it turned to the World Bank and the European Union to conduct a comprehensive Recovery and Peace-Building Assessment (RPBA) in the northeast, which informed the development of the so-called Buhari Plan that lays out a blueprint for postconflict stabilization and recovery. The Office of the National Security Adviser has emerged as a federal-level partner for international donors on civilian protection and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) issues.

Yet while Buhari has publicly declared the northeast to be in a “post-conflict stabilization phase,”⁶⁴ coordination between the various civilian institutions charged with leading the civilian response is still weak. This list of institutions includes the Presidential Committee on the Northeast Initiative (PCNI), the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), an Inter-Ministerial Task Force charged with coordinating humanitarian relief operations, the Victim’s Support Fund, the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement in Borno, as well as state-level emergency management agencies. Many of these institutions have been marred by corruption, while institutional rivalries and overlapping mandates impede collaboration, obscure lines of accountability, and result in ad-hoc interventions.⁶⁵ As one EU diplomat put it, for international partners, “it is in many cases completely unclear who has the authority to make decisions and who is supposed to take the lead.”⁶⁶ On paper, the PCNI, inaugurated by Buhari in October 2016, was meant to serve as the primary strategy and coordination body. Yet the initiative was slow to get started, and its actual role on the ground has been limited. State- and local-level actors have often felt insufficiently consulted or involved in its activities.⁶⁷ In Borno, the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement has taken on a central role, yet its leadership has shown little interest in engaging with donors that are seeking to improve transparency in relief and recovery activities.⁶⁸

In addition, policymaking at the federal level is not always aligned with the priorities of the state governments. In the early years of the insurgency, political tensions between Jonathan and the governors of Borno and Yobe States (who belonged to the opposition party) exacerbated already weak coordination.⁶⁹ Even today, diplomats and donor agencies in Abuja face a constant balancing act between different levels of governance. As one foreign embassy representative notes, “it is striking how different the discourse is at the local level than it is in Abuja. . . . There is much less recognition that there are continued challenges [in Abuja], whereas the local-level actors react more speedily.”⁷⁰ At the same time, state governments are reluctant to give up control over resource flows and interventions: for example, the Borno State government has resisted the PCNI’s efforts at response coordination.⁷¹ For donors seeking to engage on policy questions, this often means having to build support and seek influence across multiple levels while navigating conflicting information, political divides, and different degrees of reform commitment.

Lastly, across all levels of governance, corruption and mismanagement directly undermine the conflict response. Under Goodluck Jonathan, humanitarian aid delivery was highly politicized, and projects for the northeast’s economic recovery launched by the Presidential Initiative for the North East (PINE) existed mostly on paper. While Buhari was first elected on the promise of fighting corruption, he has failed to follow through on many of his reform commitments. A 2016 Senate investigation into PINE uncovered large-scale corruption that continued into Buhari’s first term in office, including questionable payments to contractors, money spent on shelters that never

materialized, and over \$7.9 million in funds that could not be accounted for.⁷² There have been few investigations or prosecutions of corruption cases, and the government's use of security votes—which are opaque discretionary funds provided to certain federal, state, and local government officials for security-related expenses that serve as de facto slush funds—dramatically increased between 2016 and 2018.⁷³

On the ground, reports of government officials, traditional leaders, and local politicians diverting aid abound. Both NEMA and its state-level counterparts have been led by political cronies who have been accused of diverting millions of aid dollars into private hands.⁷⁴ For local-level stabilization efforts, the scale of corruption poses multiple challenges: it undermines citizen trust in the recovery process, risks worsening perceptions of government neglect, and draws money away from urgent reconstruction and service delivery needs. It also perverts political incentives: as long as certain federal, state, and local actors are benefiting financially from ongoing insecurity and the continued influx of resources into the northeast, they have little interest in seriously tackling the crisis and its drivers.

Civil society groups in the northeast are concerned that the Nigerian government's move toward stabilization and early recovery will further worsen corruption. Its approach to stabilization so far has centered heavily on the return of displaced populations and infrastructure reconstruction, which has already attracted large amounts of funding from international development banks. Ahead of the 2019 presidential election, reconstruction activities appeared to be focused on demonstrating visible progress in the fight against Boko Haram, at the expense of careful planning and preparation. This became particularly evident in the rushed return of IDPs to their home communities over the course of 2018, an issue explored in further detail below. Peacebuilding organizations also highlight the risk of reconstruction resources being used to benefit politicians' economic interests while the needs of local communities are sidelined.⁷⁵

Many interviewees on the ground criticize the government's reconstruction efforts for insufficiently involving local communities, and prioritizing those areas with political connections or rich in symbolism. A focus on political drivers of the crisis is conspicuously lacking. "The government is trying to resolve things faster than the conflict allows for," says one local nonprofit worker. "They recognize the issue of underdevelopment and poverty, but they haven't really acknowledged the governance dimension. We feel that there is a real risk if they fail to listen to the people who are affected. It is the first thing that gets cut."⁷⁶

Insufficient Regional Cooperation

Lastly, stabilization efforts to date have been stymied by weaknesses in regional cooperation. Although Nigeria has been most severely affected by Boko Haram's violence, the crisis spans the

entire Lake Chad basin. Challenges such as the return of displaced populations, the reintegration of Boko Haram members, and socioeconomic recovery in rural areas require cross-border approaches. Given the porousness of borders in the region, a lack of coordination risks simply displacing the conflict from one country to the next. Yet to date, political and civilian cooperation has lagged behind joint military action.

In the early years of the crisis, international donors lacked a clear regional approach to the crisis. The U.S. government, for example, proceeded primarily on bilateral lines, with the aim of targeting the unique vulnerabilities of each of the Lake Chad countries. Only as the conflict expanded and as the government of Goodluck Jonathan proved to be an unwilling partner did donors' focus shift to a regional response. The U.S. government created or adapted various structures to better coordinate U.S. activities across countries, including USAID's West Africa Regional CVE Unit (based in Accra) and an interagency coordination structure within the State Department headed by a senior coordinator on Boko Haram, established in 2015. These initiatives proved fairly successful in ensuring greater alignment and better information-sharing between agencies.⁷⁷

Yet on the ground, several factors have stood in the way of closer collaboration. First, the region lacks an effective political infrastructure. It is divided between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which includes Niger and Nigeria, and the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), which includes Chad and Cameroon. A history of interstate conflict—while not as devastating as the region's civil wars—exacerbates these divisions. The Lake Chad Basin Commission, which formally hosts the Multinational Joint Task Force, lacks funding and capacity, and has little experience dealing with peace and security issues. Its capacity to manage a conflict response operation of this scale has therefore been doubted from the outset.⁷⁸

Second, none of the states in the region has a strong track record of effectively addressing governance issues in its peripheries. In Chad and Cameroon, authoritarian continuity has hollowed political institutions and conceals significant fragility. In Niger, the Boko Haram crisis hit at a time of political transition and uncertainty. All three governments have prioritized security imperatives, often at the expense of civilian protection. Chadian authorities have cracked down on the communities around Lake Chad for allegedly supporting Boko Haram, thereby threatening their livelihoods.⁷⁹ In Niger, security forces have pushed communities suspected of harboring insurgents into displacement, a tactic that has stoked up intercommunal tensions and conflicts over resources.⁸⁰ All three governments have lashed out at civil society activists critical of their management of the crisis.⁸¹ Rather than pushing against these tendencies, Western security assistance has reinforced this militarized approach.⁸² The risk is that in the long run, this strategy may end up fueling the very grievances at the root of the crisis by helping to bolster regimes that face significant internal legitimacy challenges. As noted by the International Crisis Group, violent extremist groups like Boko

Haram have proven very adept at capitalizing on state crises caused by “exclusive, destabilizing patterns of rule.”⁸³

Attempts to devise a regional approach to stabilization in the Lake Chad region have gained some momentum since 2017. In the aftermath of the Oslo Humanitarian Conference on Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, key international stakeholders established a consultative group aimed at deepening cooperation and mutual consultation on preventive action and stabilization measures. The United Nations has supported the African Union and the Lake Chad Basin Commission in developing a Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected areas in the Lake Chad basin.⁸⁴ On the ground, UNDP with the support of the German government has launched an Integrated Regional Stabilization of the Lake Chad Basin initiative, which tries to circumvent some of the blockages at the national level by focusing more on subnational and local coordination—for example, the program facilitated the establishment of the Lake Chad Basin Governors’ Forum in May 2018 and also foresees additional support for cross-border processes of reconciliation and prevention of violent extremism. Yet aid officials characterize these efforts as largely donor-driven, and remain skeptical that political declarations will lead to tangible policy changes on the ground.⁸⁵

Local-Level Challenges and Dilemmas

In addition to these overarching difficulties, international donors funding local-level stabilization programs in the northeast have faced a number of program-specific challenges and dilemmas. Some are far from unique to Nigeria, but instead reflect the inherent difficulties of designing politically smart interventions in a fluid conflict environment. Others are more specific to the Nigerian context. The following section examines these challenges in greater detail, focusing on donor adaptation over time.

Strengthening Community Security: Lack of Higher-Level Responsiveness

Programs focused on strengthening community security through dialogue mechanisms, peace clubs, and early warning systems have generally worked best among local actors who are close to the issues at hand. For example, the British-funded NSRP found that local-level platforms that brought together LGA officials, religious leaders, traditional authorities, community members, and formal and informal security forces to discuss and respond to local security threats achieved the greatest impact in terms of conflict prevention and response, especially compared to similar platforms at the state and federal level.⁸⁶ Such community mechanisms have proven particularly effective if they are broadly inclusive, convene regularly, reach the right government and security stakeholders, and are adequately prepared.⁸⁷ In some localities, for example, they were able to reduce tensions between

host communities and IDPs, address cattle rustling, and draw up local agreements to prevent clashes between farmers and herders, thereby contributing to a reduction in violence.⁸⁸

These programs operate in a complex security and political environment, which inevitably creates implementation challenges. As one DFID evaluation notes, “there is a trade-off between the need to work where conflict is more intense to prepare for stabilisation and post-conflict recovery, and the fact that operations in these violent contexts are more costly and achieve lower impacts.”⁸⁹ Building the necessary support among local gatekeepers and military decisionmakers took time, and certain security challenges went far beyond the capacity of local-level platforms to address.⁹⁰ Changing security conditions also meant that program activities could not cover all of Borno State—instead, they were confined to those LGAs with reasonable safety guarantees and access.

Several donors ended up implementing very similar conflict management programs in the same localities, which then operated “in isolation with varying scopes and coverage, and under limited collaboration or coordination.”⁹¹ This lack of joint planning led to unnecessary duplication and undermined programs’ horizontal reach. Setting up effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks also proved challenging: the monitoring tools used often could not parse out whether improvements in security in a given locality could in fact be traced back to program activities or were due to broader political dynamics.⁹² Some evaluations indicated relatively little awareness of program activities beyond the immediate group of participants, indicating weaknesses in wider community engagement.⁹³

Perhaps the most significant challenge has been to bridge gaps between different levels of governance, and ensure higher-level political responsiveness to local mechanisms. Programs designed to improve communication flows between communities, LGAs, and the state government found that issues that went beyond the capacity of community leaders were not always fed into higher-level discussions. If they were, state-level forums often failed to communicate their feedback or responses to security concerns. “As opposed to the intended design, issues are not cascading across the levels,” found one evaluation. “Actors mostly provide individual responses according to their mandates. . . . Many of the community observers interviewed do not get feedback from the LGA and State level rungs.”⁹⁴

At the state level, platforms were able to play a convening and mediation function, though they could not necessarily counteract competing political incentives to ensure consistent follow-up to the items raised. This convening function can be significant in a context of violent conflict: for example, participants in the Borno State Conflict Management Alliance funded by NSRP assessed the forum as useful, despite limited evidence of direct impact on conflict prevention or resolution.⁹⁵ At the same time, the body proved ill-equipped to address controversial issues, particularly military abuses

against civilians.⁹⁶ “If you raised the issue, the military would simply issue denials,” one aid official noted.⁹⁷

Based on these findings, the EU’s most recent conflict management program shifted its focus primarily to the community and LGA level, noting that the impact on citizen security would likely be higher.⁹⁸ As security has improved, coverage has increased—as of November 2018, the program covered fourteen out of twenty-seven LGAs in Borno State.⁹⁹ However, the narrower local-level focus also creates problems of scale. While the platforms can serve an important role in helping to address local tensions that have been triggered or exacerbated by the crisis, particularly conflicts over land and resources as well as gender-based violence, they are not set up to address broader political and security challenges. Certain drivers of insecurity, such as continued security force violations and corruption, the reintegration of civilian militia, escalating drug abuse, and the political marginalization of some communities, will require complementary efforts to change federal- or state-level incentives and drive top-down policy change.

The long-run sustainability of donor-funded dialogue platforms also remains an open question. Past programs have insufficiently accounted for longevity in their design: for example, they often operated in parallel to traditional conflict management systems, depended heavily on local political champions, and did not plan for a gradual phase-out and institutional takeover toward the end of the program cycle. It is of course possible that a donor intervention can change local perceptions, attitudes, and relationships in ways that outlive a particular platform or mechanism—however, this proposition remains largely untested to date.

Rehabilitating Civilian Infrastructure and Services: Uncertain Political End Goals

Progress in restoring civilian authority structures and basic services has varied by locality. In northern and central Borno State, reconstruction of public infrastructure has proceeded slowly, and the return of civilian administration remains incomplete. In parts of southern Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, where reconstruction and recovery is more advanced, donors have started turning to longer-term development and governance interventions. As a result, programs aimed at strengthening local governance and services have faced different challenges depending on the region. The common thread has been the challenge of defining a clear political end goal for these programs. In areas still affected by conflict, donor efforts have clashed with the Nigerian government’s push to concentrate displaced populations in urban centers without a parallel investment in restoring public infrastructure and civilian administration. In more secure areas, bottom-up efforts to strengthen citizen participation and government accountability, while still small-scale, have shown local-level successes—yet it is unclear to what extent they will be able to impact countervailing political and institutional incentives at the local and state government level. While acknowledging the political

roots of the crisis, donors have generally been cautious in raising the need for more systemic political reform, which is considered a sensitive issue.

Restoring or bypassing government?

As noted in the first part of the paper, some donor programs were designed to bring back civilian government presence to areas newly liberated by military operations in 2015 and 2016. The hope was that these programs would help address local perceptions of government neglect. However, evaluations of these efforts found that restoring local government presence did not improve citizens' trust in government in those communities. Small-scale infrastructure projects simply proved insufficient to alter long-standing perceptions of government predation and neglect.¹⁰⁰ "We tried to ensure that it looked as if it was the government that delivered the service, but that didn't work—people knew it was not the government," says one local implementer working on the program.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the sheer size of the region meant that it was difficult for these projects to gain visibility. Corruption and continued abuses by security forces also worked against their intended effects.¹⁰²

These challenges mirror findings from other conflict contexts: in Afghanistan, for example, stabilization programs were most effective at reducing support for the Taliban when multiple projects were clustered in the same area over time. In contrast, one-off interventions in different villages—which were far more common than sustained stabilization programming in one locality—proved far less likely to change local perceptions of government legitimacy.¹⁰³ Existing research also highlights that the relationship between service delivery and government legitimacy is far from linear: instead, service delivery is just one of many factors shaping people's perceptions, and not necessarily the most central one—particularly compared to broader structural and political changes.¹⁰⁴

Faced with evidence of limited impact, USAID in Nigeria adjusted by moving away from the objective of restoring local government presence. Instead, over the course of 2017, it refocused its efforts on targeted community-level interventions that try to address specific local-level needs in areas most vulnerable to extremist recruitment by ISWAP, particularly along the Borno corridor stretching from Maiduguri northward to Lake Chad. Rather than channeling services through the Nigerian government, USAID is providing direct assistance to individuals and communities.¹⁰⁵ One official says, "we scaled our interventions down from the LGA to the ward-level/village-level, and try to address the main source of vulnerability: maybe there is no water supply, or no economic opportunities in those places. We try to provide an alternative to the extremists."¹⁰⁶

The advantage of this shift is that it allows political nimbleness: rather than being tied to the Nigerian government's timeline for returning civilian administration and services, the program can adjust quickly based on changing conflict dynamics, and reach more remote and vulnerable communities. However, these efforts have little connection to local- or state-level governance, and

thus are not clearly working toward a defined political end state. As such, they may be contributing to community resilience in the short run, without directly addressing the deficiencies in local governance that have characterized the region.

A missing political framework

Over the past two years, other programs aimed at rehabilitating basic services and addressing experiences of government neglect have nevertheless expanded across the northeast. However, the incomplete return of local government and civil servants in many parts of Borno State has proven a significant challenge. In some LGAs, local government officials are back at headquarters, although with limited resources and capacity. In others, officials visit only periodically, but are still based in Maiduguri. In some places, donors have rebuilt public infrastructure such as schools, markets, and health facilities through cash-for-work interventions, but health workers and teachers have yet to return.¹⁰⁷ The primary reason for these delays is insecurity: as long as the military forces struggle to consolidate their gains and protect urban centers and rural outposts from attacks, government officials and civil servants are reluctant to return. The problem also extends to the police force. While the police have been ordered to redeploy to some recaptured towns, they have at various times resisted doing so, arguing that they lack the necessary resources, equipment, and training.

Yet some aid officials also note that the government has not sufficiently prioritized the return of civilian authority structures or incentivized local officials to return. In Borno, the state government has pursued a stabilization approach centered on concentrating civilians in so-called garrison towns: LGA headquarters ringed by a narrow perimeter of farmland and protected by Nigerian security forces. Authorities have argued that concentrating people in urban centers will ensure greater safety and facilitate better service delivery.¹⁰⁸ Yet many of these towns still lack basic infrastructure. Reconstruction has stalled, and services are primarily delivered by already overstretched international aid organizations. In Dikwa, for example, aid providers observed people sleeping outdoors, without any shelter or assistance.¹⁰⁹ “According to the Buhari Plan, a lot of money was supposed to go to reconstruction,” says one aid official. “Yet in places like Dikwa and Damasek, buildings have only been rebuilt along the road; it’s only a shell. They haven’t had the money to complete it. This raises the question: where has all the money gone?”¹¹⁰

The town of Bama is a case in point. Bama, which had been retaken by Nigerian security forces in March 2015, was identified by Nigerian authorities as a “pilot initiative” for stabilization and rehabilitation. Following several months of reconstruction, the Borno State government in April 2018 began the return of IDPs with the promise that their homes had been rebuilt. Yet many found their shelters still destroyed or lacking electricity, and no ambulances in the town.¹¹¹ The security situation has also remained volatile, with new attacks by armed groups occurring in July and September.¹¹²

Residents of many of these “garrison towns” currently have few means of rebuilding their livelihoods. They can typically only leave with a military escort and cannot access farmland beyond a narrow corridor surrounding the city.¹¹³ As a result, they remain locked in a cycle of dependency on humanitarian aid delivery. In IDP camps, the military and the CJTF still fill important policing functions, and typically control entry to and exit from the camps—which heightens the risk of civilian abuse, particularly of women and girls.¹¹⁴ The government so far has not devised a coordinated plan to manage and resource the transition from military to civilian policing in LGAs beyond Maiduguri. The military therefore remains the dominant security actor across large parts of Borno State, despite already being overstretched.¹¹⁵

The lack of a clear political framework or vision became particularly apparent over the past year, when the Nigerian government began pushing for the rapid return of IDPs to their home LGAs without a comprehensive plan to ensure the towns in question were ready for their arrival. The government’s strategy appeared to be driven by political objectives rather than realistic political and security assessments: in the lead-up to the 2019 elections, politicians faced heightened pressure to demonstrate progress against Boko Haram by pointing to the closure of government-run IDP camps.¹¹⁶ Yet many IDP returns seemed not to be voluntary or were based on misleading information.¹¹⁷ Some people were told that their aid would be cut off if they refused to leave, while others were told that they could return to farming in their home communities. In reality, many IDPs returned to towns that were still destroyed and insecure, struggling to accommodate the needs of new arrivals. For example, in the aftermath of Operation Last Hold, a Nigerian military effort launched in May 2018 to facilitate the return of more displaced communities to northern Borno, some IDPs were sent back to Guzamala and Marte LGAs, areas around Lake Chad that aid organizations still considered dangerous and hard to reach.¹¹⁸ In September 2018, Boko Haram staged a major attack on the headquarters of Guzamala LGA, forcing many returnees to flee once again.¹¹⁹

Following coordinated international pressure, Nigerian authorities agreed to temporarily halt returns to northern Borno. In August 2018, the governor of Borno and the UN humanitarian coordinator signed a Return Strategy and Policy Framework aimed at ensuring future relocations would be voluntary and coordinated with humanitarian partners.¹²⁰ The policy aims to clarify which conditions need to be in place for returns to be safe and dignified, including freedom of movement, access to basic services, deployment of civil authorities, and livelihood opportunities.

Yet many aid officials on the ground remain cautious about the implementation of the policy in practice.¹²¹ Some note that the policy should have focused more explicitly on long-term solutions to displacement rather than returns: surveys show that most displaced households have no active plans to return and cite ongoing insecurity and lack of access to services such as food, health, and education as their main reasons for staying away.¹²² Other donors highlight competing directives and

goals among different arms of the Nigerian government. “We are trying to build the political will to have a more managed transition,” explains the stabilization adviser of a European embassy in Abuja. “But the governor of course does not have the authority to direct the military, so we have to work with the military to see what the coordinated approach could look like. We need to continue to chip away at these broader structural issues.”¹²³ The issue of IDP returns thus epitomizes the tensions between local-level programs and the Nigerian government’s stabilization approach, which has tended to overstate the return to “normality” in the northeast while downplaying the need for a coordinated political framework for restoring governance, services, and access to livelihoods in areas secure enough for people to return.

The Limits of Bottom-Up Approaches

Even in more secure areas, weaknesses in local governance capacity have created challenges for programs aimed at improving accountability relationships between citizens and local officials, and strengthening government capacity to deliver services. Programs to date have primarily focused on bringing people together to discuss their needs and communities, bridging gaps between different local-level leaders (including traditional leaders and local government officials), and creating forums for citizens to voice their concerns to local officials. Initial outreach efforts have focused on building relationships with state-level officials and raising their awareness of participatory development approaches. Efforts to connect these processes to planning and budgeting processes are still at an early stage. In the short term, donors have often provided the funding for locally determined projects, with the aim of meeting people’s immediate needs and delivering quick wins.¹²⁴ As outlined in one UNDP project document, the hope is that this approach of bringing people together to articulate their needs will help “rebuild the social fabric . . . [from the] bottom-up, while state-level social service capacities are gradually rebuilt.”¹²⁵

In the long run, however, these bottom-up approaches face institutional hurdles that go beyond the immediate impact of conflict. Comparative research on donor-induced participatory interventions at the local level indicates that such programs work best if they are supported by a responsive state—if “higher-level institutions of accountability function well and communities have the capacity to effectively monitor service providers and others in charge of public resources,” as Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao write.¹²⁶ However, across Nigeria, local governments suffer from major accountability shortcomings. On paper, they are meant to be run by elected councils and to serve as the primary interface between citizens and the state. In practice, many states have not held local government elections in years. In the northeast in particular, governors have used insecurity to justify repeated delays. Instead, they have preferred to put in place appointed caretaker chairmen who are political allies, often with a statutory six-month term of office. Borno State, for example, has held only two local elections since the end of the military dictatorship in 1999, one in 2003 and another in 2008.¹²⁷

While the situation varies from place to place, the irregularity of local elections means that citizens do not have a direct mechanism to hold local government accountable. “Local government officials participate in our meetings, but their hands are tied,” notes the head of a religious peacebuilding organization in Maiduguri. “When we challenge them on certain issues, they start defending the government interests. They are trying to protect the image of the government rather than helping.”¹²⁸ Holding local elections would not necessarily solve this problem: the State Independent Electoral Commissions lack independence from state governments, and local election processes are often marred by irregularities that typically benefit the ruling party.¹²⁹ Not surprisingly, a recent study by ODI found that those Nigerian states that held LGA elections experienced similar patterns of corruption as those that did not.¹³⁰ “The key issue is the credibility of local elections,” affirms one pro-democracy activist in Borno State. “You would have to change the laws to get the national election commission to oversee the polls. But these are very political issues, and it is difficult for donors to address them.”¹³¹ In Borno, where many voters are indirectly or directly dependent on the state government or live in government-controlled IDP camps, the ruling All Progressives Congress has been able to deepen its political control, winning federal and state elections with over 90 percent of the vote.

In addition, local governments lack financial autonomy from state governments, which contributes to weaknesses in service delivery across the country. Local governments receive most of their funding through a State and Local Government Joint Account that is shared with the state government, through which the federal government distributes resources (including national oil revenues).¹³² Yet in practice, state governments deduct significant shares of these allocations at the state level, with little transparency or attention to community needs. The residual funds released to LGAs mostly go toward paying the salaries of civil servants and political appointees.¹³³ Civil society organizations in Borno underscore the pervasive lack of local government capacity to carry out local recovery projects or adequately address peacebuilding priorities. “Everything is basically up to the governor: [if] he wants to carry out a project in a given community, it will happen,” one civil society representative notes.¹³⁴ The state governments’ discretion over local appointments and finances also opens up opportunities for corruption, particularly the practice of disbursing money to local government officials without budget justification.¹³⁵

Some donors view the postconflict recovery phase as an opportunity to reshape the role of LGAs and to push for more bottom-up planning and accountability. They point to initial successes in Yobe and Adamawa States, where parts of the state governments have indicated greater interest in supporting local-level development planning. “Adamawa has fewer emergency organizations than Borno, and has felt a bit neglected in the conflict response,” notes one donor official. “As a result, they are now very open to long-term development programming.”¹³⁶ One strategy that has proven effective is to foster allies in interested offices and departments, such as the Planning Commission and the Ministry of Information, to gradually build pressure on actors with countervailing political interests

(such as, in some instances, the Ministry for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs).¹³⁷ In several other Nigerian states, traditional governance programs such as DFID's Partnership to Engage, Reform and Lean program have had some success in improving budget transparency and citizen oversight at the state level, which could offer lessons for the northeast.¹³⁸ Yet the particular political context in Borno State is undeniably more challenging. The mass influx of federal and international funding has further lowered the incentives for state government officials to improve transparency or devolve decisionmaking over resources.¹³⁹ Without broader reforms, there is a significant risk that the government will continue allocating insufficient resources to funding local services and development priorities.

So far, only a small number of aid providers have initiated programs that focus on strengthening local governance in the northeast as a core objective. Most donors view the question of local government autonomy as highly complex and politically sensitive.¹⁴⁰ There is also a risk that pushing for greater decentralization would only make monitoring corruption more challenging, particularly in the absence of effective local-level democracy.¹⁴¹ "Working on livelihoods and economic empowerment is much easier, because you work directly with local beneficiaries and do not have to deal with local politicians," notes one aid official. Existing national-level democracy and governance programs have largely remained divorced from the conflict response. Many focus on strengthening electoral processes and anti-corruption institutions and supporting civil society. While donors note that these programs should eventually help address contributing causes to the insurgency, they were generally not designed with a conflict perspective in mind.

Supporting Demobilization and Reintegration: Overcoming Militarized Conflict Responses

One of the biggest complicating factors in local-level stabilization efforts is that Nigerian security forces have themselves been sources of insecurity, displacement, and radicalization for local communities. During the early years of the insurgency, the military heavily relied on a strategy of collective punishment of villages suspected of harboring Boko Haram fighters. As security forces recaptured territory, they treated all men, women, and even children found in those areas as potential Boko Haram members. Screening procedures aimed at determining individuals' affiliation with violent extremist groups routinely involved family separation, arbitrary detention, ill treatment, and even torture. Thousands of civilians were forced to relocate from rural areas into military-controlled satellite camps in recaptured towns. Between 2009 and 2015, Amnesty International documented at least 20,000 arbitrary arrests, as well as widespread cases of extrajudicial killings.¹⁴² These blatant abuses further weakened those communities that had already suffered from Boko Haram's violence. They also impeded U.S. security assistance, as the Leahy Amendment made it difficult for the U.S. government to provide training or equipment to military units suspected of being involved in human rights abuses.

Over the past three years, these brutal tactics have become less common. Buhari's election appeared to indicate a shift in approach: he spoke out against corruption and abuses in the security services, and showed greater willingness to engage with international partners. As a consequence, U.S. military assistance has increased: the Department of Defense restarted previously suspended infantry battalion training and sent a small U.S. Special Operations Forces team to Maiduguri to assist Nigerian counterparts with counterterrorism operations.

Yet many core challenges remain. First, security forces continue to treat civilians trapped in Boko Haram– or ISWAP-controlled areas as likely terrorist suspects, and they starve the countryside to deprive Boko Haram of its resources. They have restricted international organizations' access to areas that are not under full government control, and dismissed estimates of the number of civilians stuck in these inaccessible areas as inaccurate.¹⁴³ However, four years after the military recaptured most of the northeast, the strategy of emptying the countryside and cutting violent extremist groups off from potential revenue sources has failed to eliminate the threat of guerilla-style attacks while it has inhibited people's ability to rebuild their livelihoods.¹⁴⁴ In some places, farmers are still unable to grow tall crops as they obstruct ongoing security operations; the military has also limited the sale of fertilizers and fuel. Cross-border trade has suffered, while accusations of military corruption abound. Fishermen and traders around Lake Chad have accused soldiers of seizing their deliveries and working with local authorities to collect illicit taxes.¹⁴⁵ These practices cut directly against efforts to rebuild communities' economic resilience.

A second hurdle has been the lack of civilian oversight over detention and screening facilities, and the difficulties of establishing a workable legal and policy framework for the demobilization and reintegration of Boko Haram members. Donors seeking to support the defection and rehabilitation of low-level Boko Haram members early on recognized the need for a broader policy to guide these efforts. In contrast to programs targeting community security and local governance, which at least in the short term can proceed without federal action, community reintegration depends on national guidelines that clarify who is eligible for rehabilitation and under what conditions.

Recognizing this challenge, USAID in 2016 began working directly with the Nigerian military on the development of a national DDR framework. To do so, the agency—with the support of the State Department—had to gain authorization from Congress, using a specific appropriations rule for the use of foreign assistance to support DDR programs. After lengthy consultations, they agreed on a solution, with the State Department and USAID working together to select and vet prospective military counterparts.¹⁴⁶ However, progress on developing a framework was slow: lacking a civilian counterpart with authority over the process, USAID struggled to engage Nigerian military leaders.¹⁴⁷ In addition, prohibitions on providing material support to designated terrorist organizations and U.S. Treasury sanctions made it difficult for the United States to provide direct support to

Operation Safe Corridor and those already cleared by Nigerian security forces to undergo deradicalization and reintegration, as any such assistance required time-consuming interagency coordination and vetting.¹⁴⁸

Over the past two years, several civilian agencies have become more involved in the process, particularly the Office of the National Security Adviser. In December 2017, the Nigerian government adopted an initial Action Plan for Demobilization, Dissociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation targeting suspected Boko Haram members, and it is now working in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration to integrate this plan into the existing Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.¹⁴⁹ Since 2017, USAID has been authorized to rely on vetting conducted by Nigerian security forces under Operation Safe Corridor to support women and children affiliated with Boko Haram who have been designated as low risk.

Yet the screening and vetting of detainees is still handled by security forces, with no civilian oversight or accountability mechanism. The screening criteria remain opaque, with no clearly articulated guidelines or principles to distinguish between hardline elements within extremist groups and those that only provided low-level support. While donor officials note increased buy-in on the side of ONSA in particular, they voice doubts over the military's commitment to changing practices. Efforts to push for a civilian structure to manage the inside of the screening centers have had little success.¹⁵⁰ "The overall message from the international community has been that you cannot just have a military response to the conflict, and to some extent [military leaders] know and acknowledge that," notes one embassy official. "But there is still an attitude that you need to win the war first, and deal with these justice and governance issues later."¹⁵¹

Nigeria's international partners have been cautious in pushing back forcefully against security sector abuses, and note that pressure occurs primarily behind the scenes. Several factors explain this hesitancy. First, international organizations are wary of losing access. Nigerian authorities have repeatedly accused international nonprofits of supporting extremist groups or not fulfilling their roles.¹⁵² Those highlighting security force abuses have been particularly targeted: for example, in December 2018, the army temporarily suspended the activities of the UN Children's Fund in the northeast and accused the organization of spying for Islamist militants. Buhari's spokesperson has also accused Amnesty International of "damaging the morale of the Nigerian military" following the organization's reporting on military violations.¹⁵³ Some aid officials have also noted low levels of awareness among diplomats about reported human rights abuses in the military-run screening centers, at least until the 2018 report by Amnesty International detailing evidence of human rights violations.¹⁵⁴

Increases in Western military assistance—despite a lack of clear commitment on the side of Nigerian authorities to investigate and prosecute cases of high-level military corruption and abuse—have sent a conflicting message to the Nigerian government. While in the early years of the crisis, evidence of human rights abuses by Nigerian military units did impede U.S. assistance in particular, the United States has proven more willing to sidestep these concerns under President Muhammadu Buhari’s leadership. For example, U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration in April 2017 decided to reactivate the sale of twelve A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircraft to Nigeria—a deal that had been stalled due to human rights concerns. Yet Buhari’s government so far has done little to prosecute anyone involved in the widespread human rights violations that occurred and continue to occur in the northeast; nor have the army and air force taken tangible steps to improve transparency. So far, Nigeria’s Western partners have not made continued training and equipment transfers contingent on broader efforts to improve the military’s human rights deficiencies and accountability.

Conclusion

In late 2016 and early 2017, military advances against Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria spurred a greater international focus on local-level stabilization efforts to address root causes of insecurity in the region. Three main areas of priority have emerged:

- strengthening local security mechanisms;
- restoring civilian administration and basic services; and
- supporting the reintegration of former fighters and others associated with nonstate armed groups.

Many of these stabilization programs were designed with the underlying assumption that the security situation would continue to improve, thereby facilitating the return of displaced populations and local government. For many donors, the overarching objective was to help Nigerian civil and military authorities re-establish a government presence in recaptured areas and begin the programming aimed at preparing the ground for longer-term recovery and development. Yet in reality, Nigeria’s overstretched and corruption-plagued military has struggled to consolidate its gains. Over the past year, security has again worsened in parts of Borno State, thereby preventing the scale-up of many programs. While the Nigerian government has been eager to demonstrate progress in reconstruction, donors point to the longer-term threat of ISWAP gaining a greater foothold in the rural areas around Lake Chad. Local-level programs rely heavily on the theory that they will create “islands of stability” that will eventually forge connections with each other. Yet it is unclear if this assumption holds true in a context of continued insecurity.

The Nigerian case highlights the challenges of implementing effective local-level stabilization efforts while working with and through a host government that lacks political commitment, capacity, and coordination. Particularly in the early years of the crisis, donors struggled to identify effective counterparts for nonmilitary conflict responses. While the situation has improved over time, challenges of coordination persist. Donors particularly point to the duplication of emergency response bodies with overlapping mandates and the severe lack of transparency in Nigerian response operations as a persistent challenge.

While the government under Buhari has emphasized physical reconstruction and socioeconomic recovery programming, which holds the promise of further resource transfers, it appears much less committed to addressing the governance dimensions of the crisis or to ensuring citizen involvement in and oversight of the recovery process. In the lead-up to the 2019 presidential elections, for example, it pushed for the rapid return of displaced populations to urban centers that were neither secure nor ready to accommodate new arrivals—thereby risking renewed instability for the sake of political symbolism. The mass influx of aid and security resources into Borno State in particular has shifted political incentives. As long as actors at different levels of governance benefit financially and politically from the crisis, donor-funded stabilization efforts that seek to empower citizens vis-a-vis state actors will struggle to gain wider traction.

While these challenges are not unique to Nigeria, the regional dimension of the crisis adds additional complexity. Effectively addressing the root causes of insecurity will require a regional approach, particularly in order to ensure the reintegration of low-level Boko Haram members and affiliates, support the return of basic services and trade to the rural areas surrounding Lake Chad, and tackle environmental degradation and resource conflicts. While donors have supported the development of a regional stabilization strategy, organizations on the ground note that these efforts are still in their infancy, and have so far not been sufficiently felt by local communities. The region lacks an effective political infrastructure, and political commitment to a common approach has so far been relatively weak.

Despite these overarching difficulties, donor-funded local-level stabilization programs have shown positive impacts in some areas—though they also face a number of program-specific challenges.

Conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms have proven effective at the local level, yet their reach is limited. If well-designed and coordinated, such programs have helped address local sources of insecurity, and improved communication flows between citizens, security officials, and local government. Given that the conflict has heightened the risk of intercommunal as well as property and resource disputes, such mechanisms can play an important role. Going forward, it will be essential for donor-funded efforts to better integrate local communities beyond a narrow group of stakeholders and to plan for long-term sustainability rather than creating parallel structures to

traditional mechanisms that risk disappearing once funding runs out. The broader challenge remains scaling up: to date, it has proven difficult to connect local conflict resolution platforms to higher-level structures at the state and national level. As a result, these local efforts are not well-equipped to tackle broader conflict dynamics that go beyond the capacity of local governments, including issues of security sector accountability. A longer-term shift toward community-oriented policing will require complementary programming that targets state- and federal-level reform incentives in the security sector.

Donors have made progress in restoring basic infrastructure and services, yet political end goals remain uncertain. As the military made progress against Boko Haram in 2015 and 2016, some donors focused on rapidly bringing back civilian government structures to newly liberated areas. Yet it quickly became clear that these small-scale efforts were insufficient to address long-standing perceptions of government neglect, particularly in a context of ongoing crisis. As a result, USAID decided to shift toward a more targeted approach, which focuses on competing with violent extremist groups by directly providing services to individuals and communities deemed at risk of recruitment. This approach, while enabling greater flexibility and potential short-term gains, does not necessarily work toward a clearly defined political end state.

Some programs have sought to couple infrastructure reconstruction with community-based development efforts that seek to restore ties between citizens and government officials, with the long-term aim of improving bottom-up participation and accountability in governance and service delivery. Yet the incomplete return and weak capacity of civilian administration to many parts of Borno State remains a significant hurdle. Programs that seek to rebuild citizen-state relationships have proceeded locally, and shown some positive results in terms of bringing people in the community together, giving them space to collectively articulate their needs and often enabling direct contact and communication with government officials for the first time. At the same time, these programs rely heavily on a notion of bottom-up empowerment, without directly addressing the fact that absent free and fair local elections and greater transparency and accountability in state budgeting, blockages in service provision will likely persist in the future.

Some donors note that the conflict represents an opportunity to rebuild local government in northeastern Nigeria in a way that better serves the needs of local communities. Yet in practice, these governance priorities risk being sidelined, particularly given the Nigerian government's focus on socioeconomic recovery and the political sensitivities surrounding the question of decentralization. A few programs have begun tying local community development efforts with coalition-building and strategic outreach to reform-minded officials in state governments. Others should build on and expand these efforts, and integrate lessons learned from governance programs in other parts of the country—with the recognition that restoring effective local government is a deeply political rather than technical endeavor.

Lastly, **while efforts to support both a national DDR framework and local-level reintegration have intensified, they remain stifled by a predominantly militarized approach to the conflict.** The U.S. government began pushing for a DDR framework starting in 2015, creatively using appropriation rules in order to work directly with the Nigerian military. Yet U.S. officials struggled to identify committed counterparts, and the process moved slowly. Since then, the government's buy-in into nonmilitary approaches to incentivizing the defection and ensuring the reintegration of low-level fighters has increased.

The Nigerian government has launched Operation Safe Corridor, a small-scale defectors' program, and developed a national DDRR Action Plan. Yet donors note that the military maintains tight control over the process: the screening and vetting of detainees is still not subject to civilian oversight, and many Boko Haram suspects arrested in previous years remain in detention, despite little to no evidence of ties to violent extremist groups. As a result, it is unclear to what extent current efforts truly incentivize defection, while poorly prepared reintegration efforts risk creating further instability and resentment.

Moreover, while the government has paid lip service to the need for a multidimensional conflict response, it has failed to systematically investigate and prosecute security sector corruption and abuses. Nigeria's international partners should continue to push for greater civilian oversight of the military's screening processes and detention facilities, building on the coordinated pushback against premature relocations of IDPs. At the same time, expanding community-based and gender-sensitive programs aimed at addressing the stigmatization of those released from Boko Haram and ensuring their rehabilitation should remain an essential priority.

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The author wishes to thank Frances Z. Brown, Tom Carothers, and Matthew Page for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper, and Gareth Fowler and Kathleen Nganga for their research assistance. She would also like to thank the many government officials, researchers, aid workers, and advocates who shared their contacts as well as their experiences and insights.

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