Through our eyes
People’s perspectives on building peace in northeast Nigeria
Key findings

1. Communities excluded from decision-making: Local populations feel excluded from national and international responses to the Boko Haram insurgency. They feel their fears, needs and concerns are not properly considered. Communities resent this lack of engagement and feel it leads to ineffective and inappropriate programming that is failing to reach the most vulnerable sections of society, and in some cases is making the situation worse.

2. Dialogue with Boko Haram as part of a peace strategy: The majority of people recognise that a military approach alone will not bring peace to the region and support engagement in dialogue with Boko Haram as part of a multifaceted approach to peace.

3. The risks of ‘imposed’ reintegration: Local populations feel that it is too soon for people associated with Boko Haram to be reintegrated into communities and that reintegration is being ‘imposed’, ignoring their fears and concerns. If this continues, it could lead to widespread reprisals.

4. Proliferation of wider divisions in society: The Boko Haram insurgency has led to wider divisions within society that threaten the long-term prospects for peace and reconciliation in the region. The insurgency has created or exacerbated tensions between different religious and ethnic groups, between Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and host communities, and between returning IDPs and members of their community who did not flee.

5. Public mistrust of government and security actors: Despite an improvement in relations between civilians and government and security institutions since the early years of the insurgency, the relationship is still characterised by high levels of mistrust, fear and suspicion.

6. Concern about the future role of vigilante groups: While local populations are appreciative of the role that vigilante groups – including the Civilian Joint Task Force – have played in improving the security situation, they are fearful that vigilante groups will be unwilling to relinquish their newly acquired status and power and may pose a significant threat to communities in the future. The rehabilitation of vigilantes into civilian life is a priority for local populations.

Recommendations

1. Negotiations: All current and future negotiation initiatives with Boko Haram should be focused on ending the conflict. Any outcomes from the negotiations should be accompanied by a thorough process of community awareness-raising, preparation and consultation.

2. Reintegration: The reintegration of those associated with Boko Haram will be more successful if the strategies are developed jointly with communities.

3. Justice and reconciliation: Developing locally relevant and locally owned restorative transitional justice mechanisms will be critical to satisfying the desire for accountability and justice and must be implemented in conjunction with any reintegration processes.

4. Public trust: Addressing the lack of trust between civilians and government and security institutions should be a first step in developing a longer-term approach to inclusive community security.

5. Vigilantes: Rehabilitating community vigilante groups back into civilian life is a priority for the local population. Rehabilitation programmes must include all individuals and groups involved in community protection and focus on transforming violent attitudes and behaviour, not only livelihood provision.
Introduction

Since 2009, Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunnah li-Da’wati wal-Jihad, commonly known as Boko Haram, has been engaged in a violent insurgency in northeast Nigeria. Boko Haram’s campaign and state responses to it have led to at least 25,000 civilian deaths, the widespread destruction of property, 2.1 million people displaced, 5.1 million people facing acute food insecurity, the crippling of an already ravaged local economy, and what the United Nations (UN) deemed in 2016 to be the ‘worst humanitarian crisis on the African continent’.

Responses by Nigerian, regional and international governments and non-state allied armed groups have focused heavily upon a securitised response to the crisis. While these efforts have led to Boko Haram experiencing significant military losses in recent years, they have also resulted in further loss of life among civilians caught up in counter-insurgency operations. Furthermore, it remains dangerously optimistic to claim, as Nigerian officials have repeatedly done, that Boko Haram has been defeated. Military losses, a decline in funding and internal divisions have seen Boko Haram abandon its attempt to hold territory and return to the low-cost but deadly guerrilla insurgency of the past, in which civilians once again bear the brunt of the violence.

Communities are highly appreciative of the role of security actors in protecting their communities. Seventy-seven per cent of people involved in the research believe the securitised approach has been effective in diminishing Boko Haram. Nevertheless, there remain significant ongoing concerns, anger and frustration about aspects of the response, in particular the ongoing threat to civilians and the lack of alternative, non-military attempts to address the insecurity.

“The government has put soldiers on the street and I thank them for that. But, other than that the government has done very little else... Terrorism is a global phenomenon; if war, bombs and weapons alone were to be used to salvage it, it could have been a thing of the past.”

Market trader, Adamawa State
In addition to the military effort, there has been a large-scale humanitarian response from national and international organisations. While very important, the humanitarian response manages the consequences of the violence rather than finding a durable peace by tackling its drivers. There is a need to shift beyond securitised and humanitarian responses to a more holistic approach that also focuses on peacebuilding, societal reconciliation, reintegration, transforming relationships in society and dealing with the legacies of violence.

Throughout the insurgency, the perspectives of local populations have all too-often been overlooked and excluded. Existing ‘community engagement’ has often been limited to consultation with community elders and traditional leaders on the assumption that they represent the voice of their constituents. This has two major drawbacks: many of the elders and leaders are no longer in their communities and are making decisions on behalf of their community when they may no longer have good information; and they have their own biases and prejudices that can exclude certain groups from their decisions.

While it is important to engage with community elders and traditional leaders, the lack of engagement with the wider local population means that communities have not been carried along in the development and ownership of existing response mechanisms. This has impacted upon the appropriateness of the nascent reconciliation, reintegration and negotiation processes and in some cases has even served to exacerbate societal tensions.

This research, conducted in partnership between Conciliation Resources and the Kukah Centre, seeks to capture the local population’s perspectives on existing responses to the violence and their vision for long-term solutions. Between October and December 2017, over 1,000 people – at least 650 men and 350 women – from three Local Government Areas (LGAs) in each of the three most badly affected States – Adamawa, Borno and Yobe – were engaged in a mix of close-ended surveys, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Focus group discussions were conducted in mixed and single gender groups. The findings were validated through a series of engagements with stakeholders. The objective of the research was to bring the voices of local populations to policymakers and to provide broader insights as to how responses to an armed insurgency can be made more inclusive of local stakeholders and more responsive to their priorities, approaches and needs.
Negotiating with Boko Haram is a highly contentious issue in the affected communities. While the majority of people consulted in this research project believe it has a role to play, a smaller section of society vehemently rejects the idea of any engagement with Boko Haram. The latter viewpoint tends to come either from direct victims of the insurgency who view a military victory as the only form of justice, or from people who are less affected by the insecurity on a daily basis – elites or communities less susceptible to attack – who can afford to be more patient in waiting for a military victory.

On the other hand, 60 per cent of those consulted believe that engaging in negotiations with Boko Haram should be combined with a military response as part of a holistic approach to resolving the insurgency as quickly as possible. This viewpoint is similarly shared in private by security actors working in the context of the insurgency:

“We [the military] have done as much as we realistically can now. We have eroded them as much as we can. The only way to bring an end to this conflict once and for all is to now engage the remnants of Boko Haram in dialogue.”

Senior military official, Yobe State

Importantly, community support for engagement with Boko Haram is for negotiating a lasting end to the conflict. Negotiations on other issues, such as humanitarian corridors or the release of prisoners, remain hugely unpopular because they are often viewed as standalone processes that reward Boko Haram and increase the vulnerability of the wider population.

All current and future negotiation initiatives with Boko Haram should be focused on ending the conflict. Negotiation with Boko Haram on other issues such as the release of abductees, humanitarian corridors or ceasefires should only serve as confidence-building measures that make the prospects for ending the conflict possible.

“You should do whatever is necessary for peace. But negotiating with them for prisoners and giving them money and weapons in return for their release, just emboldens them to do it again.”

Civil society member, Yobe State

A tendency within communities to view Boko Haram as a homogenous group reduces the perceived feasibility of negotiations. Local populations, whether in favour or against negotiating with Boko Haram, perceive negotiations with the Abubakar Shekau led faction as futile. However, this should not automatically preclude negotiations with other factions. It is important to better understand the different factions within Boko Haram, their dynamics, their respective leaders and the different opportunities they present for dialogue and mediation, and to share this understanding with local populations.

A lack of reliable information about negotiation processes in the past has fuelled rumours and misconceptions within communities. This has made those who already oppose negotiations more steadfast and those who support negotiations question their position. For example, local populations were angered by the 2017 negotiation processes that resulted in the return of a number of the Chibok girls and other abductees in exchange for the release of jailed Boko Haram members and the rumoured provision of weapons and money. The widespread rumours have increased mistrust and suspicion towards subsequent negotiation processes and threatened the sustainability of the outcomes of these negotiations. The outcome of future negotiation and engagement processes with Boko Haram by government and international actors should be accompanied by a thorough process of preparation, consultation and public awareness-raising in northeast Nigeria so that the outcomes are more widely understood and accepted.

Recommendations

1. All current and future negotiation initiatives with Boko Haram should be focused on ending the conflict. Any outcomes from the negotiations should be accompanied by a thorough process of community awareness-raising, preparation and consultation.
2. The reintegration of those associated with Boko Haram will be more successful if the strategies are developed jointly with communities.

Communities express extremely strong concerns and fears regarding the reintegration and reconciliation of people formerly associated with Boko Haram. Indeed, 40 per cent of those consulted said that they would never accept a person formerly associated with Boko Haram into their community, while most others felt it far too soon to be thinking about reintegration, even if it may be possible in the future.

“They are trying to return insurgents to communities when insurgents are still out there killing our sons and daughters.”

Retired teacher, Borno State

The pain and suffering experienced by local communities cannot be overstated. It has left deep-rooted scars within society that will naturally inhibit the prospects for the reintegration of people who communities perceive as being responsible for this trauma. Despite this, it is noticeable that existing reintegration programmes – most notably Operation Safe Corridor – tend to focus solely on those who need to be reintegrated and not on preparing the wider community for their return. Reintegration strategies must explicitly prioritise affected families and communities to help them to adjust to the idea of the return of people associated with Boko Haram. Specifically, reintegration programmes must help affected families and communities cope with their own trauma and suffering, while also providing a space to promote notions of coexistence, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The local population feels existing processes for the reintegration of people associated with Boko Haram are being imposed on them with minimal community engagement or consideration of their perspectives, fears or concerns.

“How can people from outside be coming and telling us we – the people who bore all of this conflict – have to accept back these people? They don’t know what we went through.”

IDP from Gwoza currently in Maiduguri, Borno State

The lack of community ownership directly threatens the long-term viability of existing reintegration, rehabilitation and reconciliation processes. It is imperative that the speed, terms of and processes for reintegration of people associated with Boko Haram are decided in consultation with local populations – and not only community leaders. Only through genuine engagement with the local population will an inclusive and locally owned process be developed that takes proper account of the perspectives, fears and concerns of local communities.
A current lack of engagement with communities not only means that existing reintegration processes fail to adequately reflect the grievances of the local population but also that communities tend to have very little information or knowledge about existing reintegration processes. Indeed, in places where people associated with Boko Haram had been returned to their communities, members of the community stated that they had not been informed ahead of time of the plans.

"The first I heard that one of them was coming to this community was when I saw him one day on the streets on my way to market.

Youth leader, Yobe State"

The failure to adequately sensitise communities about existing rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives has led to misconceptions that threaten to derail the entire process. Most significantly, many people assume that individuals returning were voluntary and active Boko Haram combatants and that they pose an enduring threat to the community, despite the focus of existing processes on the reintegration of the most low-risk individuals.

Pervasive misconceptions around the role that individuals undergoing reintegration played in the insurgency is fuelling resistance to reintegration plans as communities believe the individuals pose a greater threat than they really do. To aid the reintegration process, **communities must be informed of the various classifications of people associated with Boko Haram so they understand that not all returnees were active combatants.**

"We aren’t talking about the return of those who’ve been in Sambisa for the last four years. At the moment, the focus is on the return of those we deem to pose limited threat... whether it be people who were arrested but found innocent, people abducted by the group or people who unwittingly provided some small level of logistical support to the group. We aren’t asking anyone to accept Shekau to live next to them.

Borno State Government representative"

Reintegration also needs to take better account of the gendered dynamics of the process. A common view among communities is that men are more likely to have joined Boko Haram voluntarily and women are more likely to have been coerced. Despite awareness of the prevalence of women suicide bombers, communities view men associated with Boko Haram as a greater threat and, as such, are more willing to accept women back into the community. **Community sensitisation and reintegration efforts must acknowledge and directly respond to the greater reluctance among communities to accept men who are associated with Boko Haram.**

Official reintegration programmes similarly succumb to these gendered stereotypes. There should be more recognition of the nuances of women’s participation in the insurgency, and the fact that while many were coerced to join Boko Haram, many others did so voluntarily. **Reintegration processes must respond to the multiple roles played by men and women in the insurgency by ensuring that a structured and thorough process for classification, risk assessment and rehabilitation of suspects is more equally applied to both sexes.**
3. Developing locally relevant and locally owned restorative transitional justice mechanisms will be critical to satisfying the desire for accountability and justice.

The pain and suffering experienced by local communities over the course of the insurgency cannot be overstated. It has left deep-rooted scars within society. Communities firmly believe that perpetrators – even if they are also victims of the violence - need to be held to account for the suffering they have caused.

“People who have committed atrocities cannot get away with it. They must answer for what they have done, they must face justice.”

Community member, Adamawa State

This desire for justice is a powerful emotion and lasting peace will not be possible until it is assuaged. Indeed, the deeply-entrenched belief that existing reintegration, reconciliation and negotiation processes in northeast Nigeria offer impunity for perpetrators and limited justice for the victims is at the heart of communities’ resistance to them. Current discussions and rumours about a blanket amnesty for perpetrators fuels a sense among local communities of impunity for injustices and is therefore almost unanimously rejected. This lack of accountability compounds the existing trauma, loss and sense of exclusion felt by the victims and wider society.

“We have lost everything. We are not living as we should, we are just existing in this camp. We have a little food and basic services but nothing else. But the people who did this to us are in a rehabilitation camp, drinking clean water, eating regularly, getting healthcare and sleeping under nets.”

IDP from Dikwa LGA currently in Maiduguri

The frustration and anger felt by local communities at the perceived inability of official processes to hold perpetrators to account means there is, and will continue to be, a persistent threat of retributive violence.
I will never forget the face of the man who killed my father and if he returns to my community, I’m expected to live next to him? No, never! If I ever see him, I promise you I will lynch him. And because this is a lawless society, I and many others know we will get away with it.

Community Elder, Borno State

This anger is primarily directed towards people associated with Boko Haram, however it also applies to anybody who is perceived to have contributed to the harming and traumatisation of an individual or community over the course of the insurgency. Those consulted felt that justice must be served to all perpetrators, whether they be ex-combatants, vigilantes, Nigerian security forces, the Multinational Joint Task Force, government officials or civilians who are deemed to have collaborated or sympathised with the direct perpetrators of violence.

People were informing the authorities saying this person or that person was a Boko Haram member but they knew full well they weren’t. People saw it as a way of getting revenge so were just picking people they didn’t like or had fallen out with and were getting a little payment in return. There are a lot of things that happened like that and that has left a lot of anger. People are just waiting to go back to the communities, where there will be fewer authorities watching, to seek revenge.

IDP in Bama LGA, Borno State

While the efforts of the Nigerian Government and international donors to strengthen formal state justice systems are welcome, it is clear that these mechanisms alone will never be able to deliver the justice that the local communities need and desire. Formal justice mechanisms can only deal with a fraction of those who the community see as perpetrators. In addition, it was clear from those consulted that, given the lack of public trust in formal state justice mechanisms, any verdict delivered by these mechanisms that is contested by communities is unlikely to be accepted. The development of relevant, locally owned restorative transitional justice mechanisms is imperative. Realistic expectations and timeframes for such processes need to be set. The immediate goal should be to enable peaceful coexistence and provide the basis for deeper reconciliation processes that will be required to gradually restore dignity, heal wounds and foster reconciliation over years to come.

Those consulted believe that the local population would mistrust any transitional justice mechanism associated with the government. It is commonly felt that it would be weak, under-resourced, inefficient, highly centralised, prone to corruption and, above all, highly politicised.

A government process won’t work. The affected communities and victims would never see or hear from it. It would be some high-level process in Abuja and if it did reach the northeast it would only get as far as Maiduguri. It would do nothing to help the people in a small village in Monguno or Dikwa LGA that has been decimated by this violence.

Civil society member, Borno State

The scale of the trauma, the long-term approach required and the mistrust of government-led processes means the success of future transitional justice mechanisms is dependent upon them being driven by the community. Local civil society should be supported to build community capacities and to lay the groundwork for community-wide design of and participation in transitional justice processes. Sharing lessons from transitional justice practices elsewhere could help in this process. Communities could identify from others’ experience what would be appropriate in their own context.

Finally, it is important that community driven transitional justice processes build upon but are not overly reliant on or synonymous with existing traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms are not only unaccustomed to and ill-suited to dealing with such a severe sense of injustice, but according to those consulted, they have lost legitimacy among sections of the community due to perceived inaction and ineffectiveness in preventing violence during the insurgency.
4. Addressing the lack of trust between civilians and government and security institutions should be a first step in developing a longer-term approach to inclusive community security.

It is critical that response programmes focus on further improving relations between civilians and government and security institutions to enable a more collaborative, mutually beneficial and sustainable response to the insurgency.

Despite perceived improvement since the beginning of the insurgency, civilian–government/security relations are characterised by high levels of mistrust, fear and suspicion, which limit prospects for joint working. The persistent mistrust is caused by:

- Security agencies’ perceived inability and/or unwillingness to protect local communities. Such perceptions are based on their apparent failure to act on information received.
- The difficulties civilians face in accessing and engaging with government and security institutions.
- Perceived corruption and diversion of resources intended for humanitarian and military efforts.
- The legacy of experiences from the early years of the insurgency.
- Accusations of ongoing human rights abuses and sexual violence (particularly during aid distribution).

Even when you have security information you cannot confidently approach the military or the police because of their hostility.

Young man, Gujba LGA, Yobe State

I don’t truly believe they want this to end. They are profiting too much from it, there is a lot of money still to be made.

Keke Napep driver, Borno State

I was with them [military officials] every day and thought I knew them. But when Boko Haram appeared they were the first to flee and left us to our fate. Once you experience that, it is hard to forget it. You see them for what they really are and it will be hard to ever trust them again.

IDP from Mubi, Adamawa State

Local, national and international actors should be applauded for their work in addressing some of these grievances, which has led to an undeniable improvement in civilian–government/security relations in recent years. However, it is clear that whatever new trust has been established remains very fragile. Experience shows that one fresh incident or rumour of negligence or abuse brings back past ill-feeling and can quickly return trust to levels which prevailed in the early years of the insurgency. In February 2018 alone, communities directed their anger and frustration towards the government over:

- A perception that there was deliberate misinformation about and a slow response to the kidnapping of over 100 school girls in Dapchi, with accusations that nothing has been learnt from the Chibok kidnappings, and;
- Widespread public rumours that a temporary halt in a military operation allowed Abubakar Shekau to escape.

Supporting further trust-building programmes between communities and local and state-level government and security representatives will reinforce the progress that has already been made and enhance the social transformation process of the region. In particular:

- Provision of safe, open and neutral spaces for interaction between communities and their local government and security representatives to address misconceptions and facilitate the two-way flow of information for early warning and early response.
- Establishing an accessible mechanism for citizens to raise cases of abuse by government and security actors and a government framework that systematically and transparently investigates cases to ensure effective redress.
- Provision of psychosocial support and trauma healing for state security personnel who have also experienced significant traumas during the insurgency in order to ensure that these experiences do not adversely impact their ability to protect civilians and to allow them to reintegrate into civilian life after the insurgency.
- The working and living conditions of the military, police, State Security Service, and other state security agencies must be improved to maintain their motivation and minimise their incentive to exploit the communities they have been deployed to serve.
5. Rehabilitating community vigilante groups back into civilian life is a priority for the local population. Rehabilitation programmes must include all individuals and groups involved in community protection and focus on transforming violent attitudes and behaviour, not only livelihood provision.

While the majority of the local population are highly appreciative of the role that the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other vigilante groups have played in stemming the violence, there are growing tensions between communities and vigilantes. There is resentment around incidences of abuse of civilians and fears that vigilante groups will be unwilling to relinquish the status and power that they have achieved in recent years. Since these groups are familiar with the use of weapons and militarised tactics, communities fear that they will resort to violence to maintain their position. Communities are particularly fearful of the potential mobilisation of vigilante groups for violence in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2019 Presidential and Gubernatorial elections.

The future of vigilante groups has been identified by the national government and international donors as a pressing priority. To date, efforts have focused on providing community vigilante groups with sustainable livelihoods. While this is important and will decrease the risk that vigilante groups could become ‘guns for hire’ to the highest bidder, the livelihood opportunities provided are relatively low-status positions within society – farming, tailoring or mechanics for example. This means that existing programmes are doing little to compensate for the potential loss of status and power on leaving a group. Instead, programmes targeting the rehabilitation and reintegration of community vigilante groups must take a holistic approach that focuses on transforming attitudes to violence and encouraging peaceful pathways to achieving status.

Importantly, programmes to date have almost exclusively targeted the rehabilitation of the CJTF and have been relatively small scale. While an emphasis on the CJTF is understandable as they represent the largest and most powerful single group, it is important that rehabilitation efforts are made much more widely available and include the myriad other vigilante, hunter and informal community watch groups that have played a role in community protection. The desperate need for programming to reach a wider section of those involved in vigilantism underlines the importance of moving away from relying solely upon relatively high-cost sustainable livelihoods programming.
Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a three-year research programme which generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas.

Funded by UK aid from the UK Government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict.

This policy brief was written by Daniel Tucker and Janet Adama Mohammed for Conciliation Resources with editorial support from Teresa Dumasy and Felix Colchester. It was produced by Conciliation Resources in partnership with The Kukah Centre, a Nigeria-based policy research institute with a focus on interfaith dialogue, public participation and good governance.

More information on The Kukah Centre can be found at: www.thekukahcentre.org

Conciliation Resources is particularly grateful to Father Atta Barkindo, Executive Director of The Kukah Centre, for coordinating the research teams whose findings inform this policy brief, and for his expert input to the policy brief itself.

The views expressed and information contained in this document are not necessarily those of or endorsed by the UK Government which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.