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MEAC Findings Report 2

Exiting Armed Groups: Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre Baseline Findings

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

CONTENTS

KEY FINDINGS

- Of the Bulumkutu residents interviewed, most want to return to their home communities, but a sizeable minority do not (24%). More study is needed to better understand why some individuals prefer to relocate and the potential programmatic implications this may have.

- When asked why they wanted to go to their preferred destination, most of the respondents cited personal and familial relationships as motivating factors.

- There was a significant focus on learning a skill – particularly tailoring – as part of respondents' economic strategies for returning to civilian life.

- Somewhat counterintuitively, a significant majority of respondents did not anticipate major challenges to returning to their communities. This raises questions about why concern about stigma or insecurity did not register with the majority of respondents, and requires additional study.

- Of the support received, respondents identified basic needs provision (e.g., food, shelter) as having the greatest positive impact on their lives to date.

Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups – and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and UNDP, and is being run in partnership with DPO, UNICEF, IOM, and the World Bank.

About this Series

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

About this Report

This report is based on data collected in late 2020 as part of a baseline registration survey of 27 women, three men, seven girls, and five boys residing at the Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre in Maiduguri, Nigeria. This report focuses on this cohort's hopes for the future and concerns for after they leave the Centre, and ends with the examination of a few key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

The report will be updated as additional survey data is collected on these topics from other baseline registration interviews at this and other transit centres. Additional analyses will be produced as MEAC follows up with this particular group of women and children after they return to their communities.

Life After Armed Group Association

Overview

The Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre in Maiduguri, run by the Borno State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development with UNICEF financial and technical support, receives children, women, and historically, men deemed low risk, who have been alleged to have been associated with Boko Haram. Some individuals arrive at the Centre directly after they surrender to the Nigerian military, while others have come to the Centre following a period of detention. Residents at the Centre are provided with a basic reinsertion support package including medical and psychosocial services, education and/or livelihood skills training while they wait to be resettled or reunited with their families.

In late 2020, senior researchers from MEAC's Maiduguri-based team interviewed 42 residents at the Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre (27 women, three men, seven girls, and five boys). The purpose of this first round of interviews was to establish a first contact with the respondents, introduce the MEAC project and its enumerators, and gather baseline information from this cohort before they leave the Centre. This information will serve as mini-baseline for further follow-up on their progress, living conditions and experiences once they return home or relocate to other communities. This survey represented the first time MEAC conducted interviews in the Centre. To build trust and confidence in the process, MEAC chose to administer a smaller subset of the baseline survey. Additionally, in coordination with the Centre Director, the team returned a few days later to express their gratitude to the respondents.[1]

The sample from which the findings below are derived includes respondents ranging from 12 to 38 years old.[2] Most of them grew up in Nigeria, while a few indicated they grew up in Chad or Cameroon. Most respondents have children (62%) and are married (67%). Of those who are married, 43 per cent indicated that their marriage was forced.[3] The majority of respondents did not have formal education (e.g., only 29% indicated they had received some level of Western education).[4]

Where Do We Go from Here?

To truly exit an armed group and reduce the prospects of re-recruitment, individuals formerly associated with armed groups need to transition to a life that is not oriented to the conflict, a life where their identity, meaning, social and economic wellbeing are not contingent on fighting. This can be very difficult in contexts of ongoing conflict. Even when the conflict wanes, moving on after a period of association with an armed group does not happen in isolation. Successfully integrating into civilian society hinges on recipient communities as much as on the individuals making the transitions. As much as an individual is ready to embrace civilian life, how she or he is perceived can make that transition difficult. UN actors have long expressed concern that the stigma of association would haunt

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[1] This first survey did not include any questions about armed group association or conflict experiences. Those will be gathered in the follow-up surveys.

[2] MEAC does not interview children under the age of 12. The MEAC survey was developed with expert input to ensure it was appropriate and accessible for children ages 12-17.

[3] The survey did not ask whether the relationship started during their time with the armed group or beforehand.

[4] Children were more likely to have western education than adult respondents (33% v. 27%).

those leaving – particularly women and girls[5] –, increasing the chances for family rejection and thus making it harder to integrate into the community and economy.

With this in mind, MEAC researchers asked residents of Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre about what they anticipate their lives will look like after they leave the Centre. This limited survey focused primarily on where residents wanted to go after they left the Centre and what they want to do with their lives moving forward. They were also asked about challenges they anticipated after they left and what types of support have been the most helpful to them to date.

At the time of the survey, the majority of the interviewed residents did not know when they would leave the Centre (79%). When asked about their plans for the future, several findings stand out. First, the majority of the respondents indicated that they wanted to go back to their community after leaving the Centre (76%). A sizeable minority (24%), however, indicated that they did not want to go home.

Figure 1: Do you want to go back to your community after this?
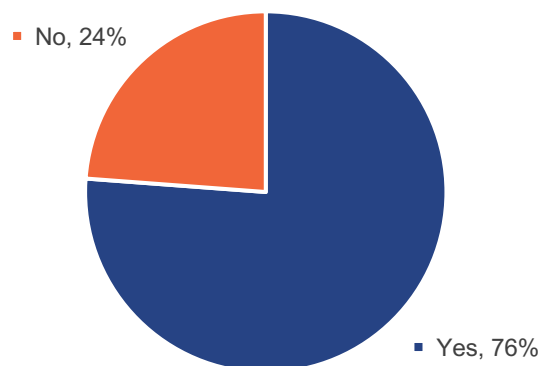
When asked about the reasons for wanting to go to their preferred location, the majority of respondents cited personal relationships – including being with family members and reuniting with spouses or children. Interestingly, only 25 per cent of children – compared to 63 per cent of adults – said they want to return to be with their parents. This somewhat counterintuitive differential may be due – at least in part – to the fact that several of the child respondents were at the Centre with their mothers and whether they returned to their community with them was not in question. Important motivations noted by children were the desire to go to school, reunite with other relatives, or be with a spouse. Of the adults interviewed, the draw of reuniting with a spouse or other relatives was also important at 27 per cent each.

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[5] Human Rights Council, "Report of the Special Rapporteurs on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences on their joint visit to Nigeria", 16 June 2016, A/HRC/32/32/Add.2, and International Alert and UNICEF, *Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria – Research Summary*, February 2016.

Figure 2: Why do you want to go there?*
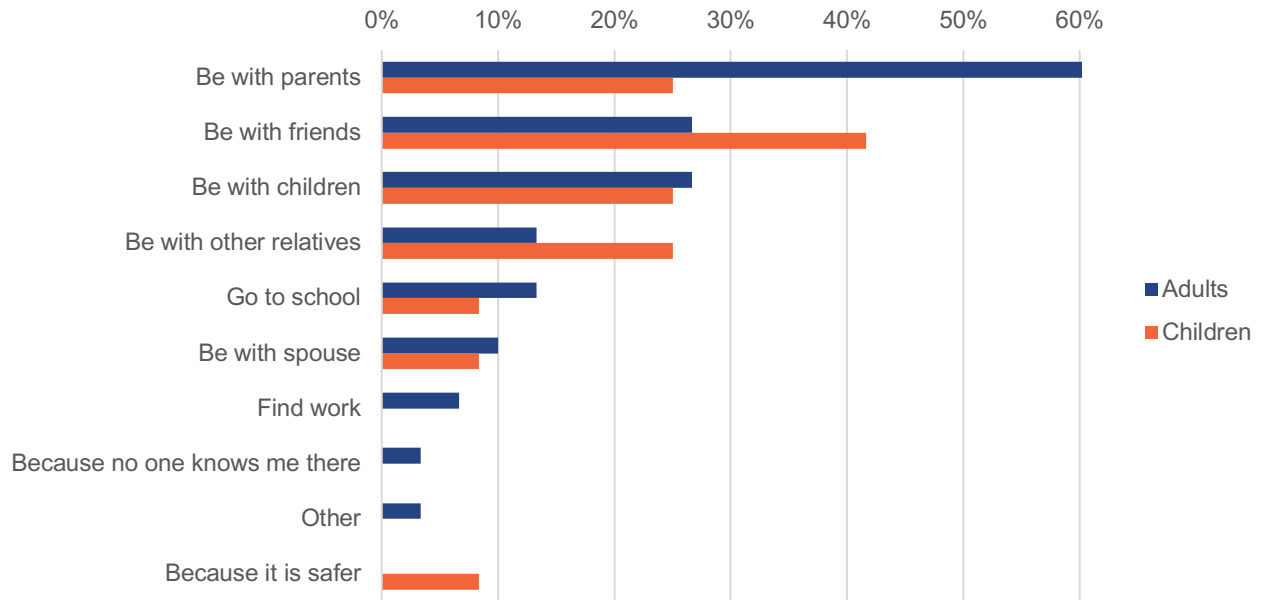
*Multiple response selections possible

When asked about what the respondents want to do with their lives after leaving the Centre, the responses focused on learning a skill, finding work, and/or starting a business. An open-ended follow-up question inquiring about the type of skill or business highlighted a focus on tailoring and sewing clothes. A quarter of the children surveyed mentioned tailoring as well. Only two of the twelve children mentioned school. Children's goals oscillated between the accessible (e.g., petty trading) to the hopeful aspirations of young people with their lives ahead of them (e.g., pilot, room designer).

Figure 3: What do you want to do with your life after you get out of here?*
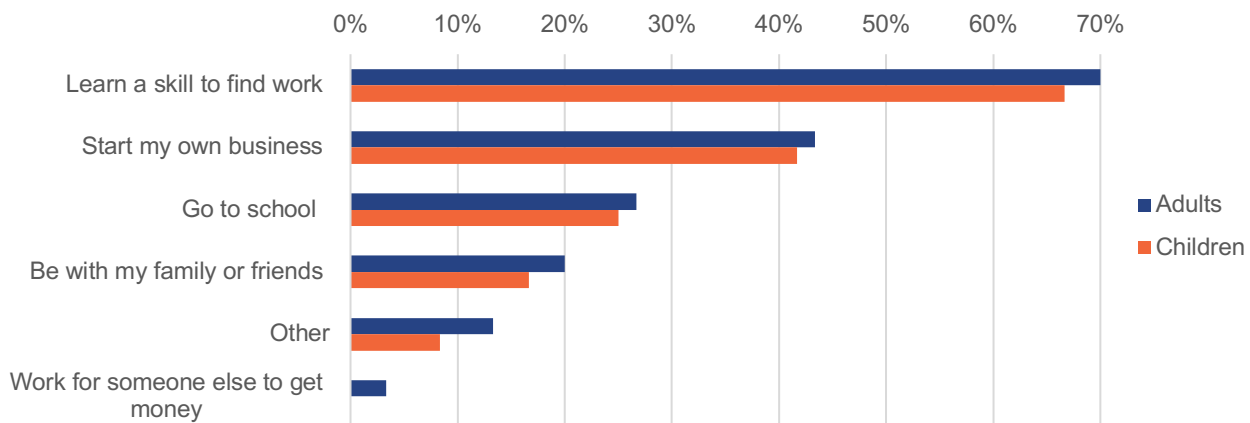

*Multiple response selections possible

Expected Challenges

When asked about the challenges they anticipated after they left the Centre, a significant majority (76%) did not anticipate any challenges on integrating back into the community. Only 14 per cent explicitly stated being concerned about not being accepted by their families or communities. For example, two young women expressed concern about whether their families would accept them now that they are returning with children. A small number of respondents indicated facing different challenges (e.g., parents being abroad, or finding a job). Not a single respondent mentioned concerns about security challenges, which is surprising given the current environment in Borno.

**Figure 4: What challenges are you concerned about for your life after you get out of here?**
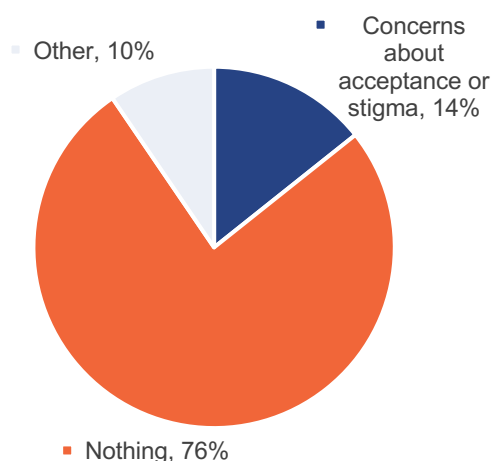
Valued Support

In thinking about what the respondents want to achieve in the next chapter of their life, we asked about what support they received before they arrived at the Centre and what type of support had been most helpful to them thus far. Of those surveyed, 40 per cent said they had received nothing before they arrived at the Centre. Nearly 48 per cent of respondents said they had received basic needs support, with smaller percentages citing material goods (26%), skills training (21%), and medical care (19%).[6] Figure 5 shows how respondents registered the value of different types of support. The ratings roughly correlate with provision, but the ratio of value to receipt is highest with basic needs support (e.g., food, shelter), which may reflect living conditions due to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the region, or the dire conditions that respondents were living in prior to arriving at the Centre. Of the respondents, a sizeable minority (38%) said they had been with an armed group right before they arrived at Bulumkutu, and 33% said they were in detention.

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[6] "Before you arrived here, did you receive any of the following things from the government, international organizations or NGOs?" allowed for multiple answers. Some mentioned cash or reorientation programming (14% each), education (12%), and/or art activities or employment (5% each).

Figure 5. Of the support you've received, what had the most positive impact on your life today?*
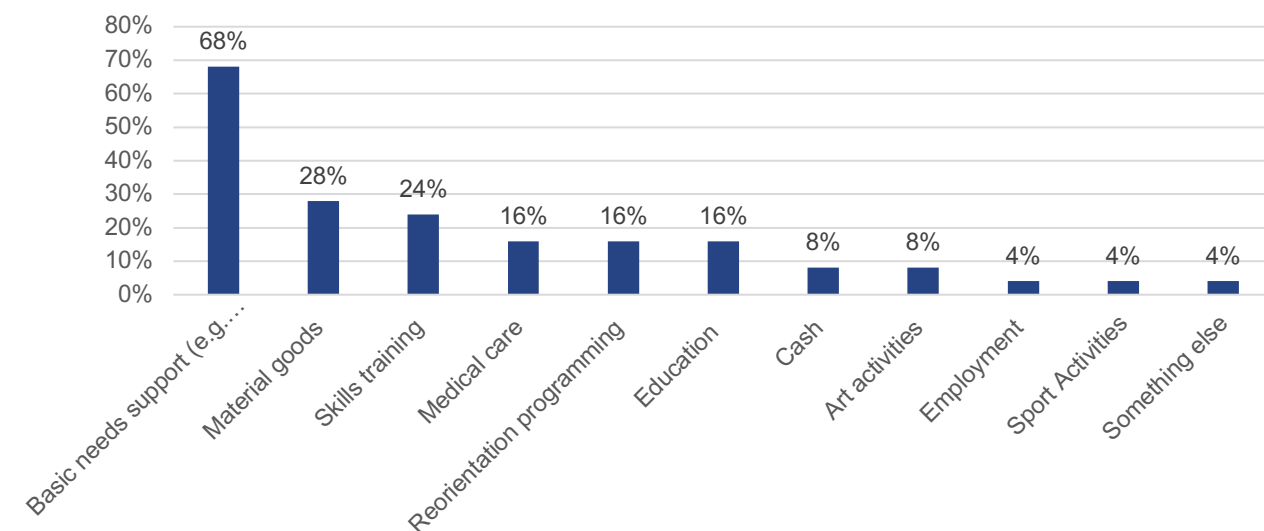
*Multiple response selections possible

Policy and Programmatic Implications

While the survey was limited in scope and sample size, it does highlight some potential implications for programming with individuals formerly associated with Boko Haram in the region.

In contrast to the international community's concerns about stigma from home communities, most respondents signaled an interest in going back to their communities and the majority did not identify concerns about possibly being rejected by their families. More research is needed to better understand why that is. Given that most of those interviewed said they did not know when they would return home (a timetable that could be delayed due to family tracing challenges or be contingent on the release dates of their husbands), it is possible that societal stigma may not rank high on their list of current concerns. The widespread humanitarian crisis in the region may lead to respondents focusing on more acute concerns like food and shelter, which would align with the importance placed on this kind of support (see Figure 5). Alternatively, despite the very real concern international organizations express about the potential for stigma and rejection, it may not be anticipated as a significant problem or, perhaps, the survey responses reflect a positive experience at the Centre and/or confidence in Ministry/UNICEF's outreach and sensitization efforts. It could also be due to the fact that they do not expect their association, or level of association, to be well known to the other members of the communities they intend to return to. Since many other community members were displaced by the conflict and are now returning, it may be reasonable to assume they will be able to settle back in without much scrutiny. Moving forward it will be interesting to compare the data collected with this cohort to data collected from others who are closer to an impending reunification date to see if there are differences. Likewise, it will be interesting to see if the predictions match the subsequent experiences from this cohort once they leave the Centre.

Many of the respondents' geographical destinations appear motivated by familial and personal relationships – the need to be reunited with family, spouses, and/or children. Whether these bonds will prove sufficient to sustain them there will be important to understand, especially if they find it

difficult to find a source of livelihood. Given that this group is predominately female, it will be insightful to examine this data against the motivations expressed by men and boys exiting transit centres in the region. This emerging finding would also suggest that it could be useful to target the entire family unit for reintegration support instead of just those individuals exiting armed groups. Given familial and personal relationships may be key to facilitating social, political, and economic integration into the community, interventions aimed at these units may ease broader reentry into civilian life.

Figure 5 highlights the relationship between goods and services provided to the respondents and the value assigned to various types of support. Of all the support cited, the one with the greatest payoff ratio appears to be basic needs provision (e.g., food, shelter). It will be interesting, when following up, to determine if there are shifts in the value assigned to various types of support as individuals resettle and begin to rebuild their civilian lives.