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Flat-Pack Reintegration? National Ownership, Promises and Flaws in Cameroon's Disarmament and Demobilization Program for Ex-Boko Haram Combatants

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Abstract

This article examines the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program in Cameroon, focusing on former Boko Haram combatants. Based on qualitative research from December 2020 to January 2022, this study includes 37 interviews with former combatants and DDR administrators in three Cameroonian cities. It analyzes the challenges of the national ownership of the DDR programs, emphasizing the role of middle-range actors and local practices in enhancing reintegration efforts. The research highlights the complexities of the DDR process and the need for a coherent framework integrating interdisciplinary insights. By proposing a conceptual framework of dissociation and examining how national appropriation, understood as the process through which state actors take ownership of and implement instruments designed externally, is constructed and enacted, this article aims to contribute to the development of more nuanced, context-sensitive DDR programs tailored to the specific challenges of diverse post-conflict environments.

Keywords: DDR program; violent extremism; appropriation; Boko Haram.

Introduction

The escalation of extremist violence in recent years has necessitated the development of numerous public policies, particularly in an international context, where programs aimed at managing the reintegration of former combatants have gained prominence. In the African setting, where extremist groups like Boko Haram operate, efforts to structure the return and reintegration of individuals who have disengaged from violence are still to be explored. Boko Haram has played a central role in destabilizing the Lake Chad Basin region. The group has inflicted persistent high-intensity violence, contributing to a 33% rise in terrorist attack casualties across several Sahelian and Lake Chad Basin countries over the past year (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). The ongoing violence has killed over 30,000 individuals, while conflict, extreme poverty, and climate change have displaced millions. Designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council on May 22, 2014, Boko Haram further entrenched its international notoriety by pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015.

Against this backdrop, Cameroon introduced a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program as an institutional response to reintegrate former Boko Haram affiliates into civilian life. DDR programs, historically implemented in post-conflict settings, aim to facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants. According to a 2022 report by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, DDR efforts must align with national support mechanisms while adhering to relevant UN Security

Council resolutions and international counterterrorism instruments. This alignment reflects the evolving nature of DDR, moving beyond conventional frameworks to accommodate the complexities of contemporary armed conflicts.

DDR programs have evolved significantly, adapting to the growing complexities of post-conflict transitions. Traditionally, they focused on post-civil war reintegration, consisting of three key stages: disarmament, the collection and disposal of weapons; demobilization, the formal discharge of combatants from armed groups; and reintegration, the social, economic, and political incorporation of ex-combatants into their communities. However, despite relative successes and although nearly two-thirds of African nations have implemented DDR programs, many have struggled to enhance security and rehabilitate combatants effectively (Muggah, 2010). Scholars such as Pugel (2009); Verkoren et al., (2010) have examined the effectiveness of these programs, with some arguing that standardized approaches often neglect local sociopolitical contexts (Munive, 2013). A growing body of research emphasizes the need for DDR programs to go beyond technical disarmament measures and incorporate broader social reintegration mechanisms. A major critique of DDR efforts is their rigid, standardized approaches that fail to address the nuances of hybrid and asymmetric violence (Munive & Stepputat, 2015; Sharif, 2018). In conflicts without peace agreements, defectors still need to be reintegrated, so DDR frameworks that are tailored to the specific situation are very important. Public instruments must also be able to adapt to these needs. While these studies highlight DDR's evolving role, the million-dollar question remains: how can national ownership of DDR instruments aimed at reintegration be effectively ensured for persons associated with extremist and violent armed groups? To address this challenge, a deeper examination is necessary. According to the terms of the Integrated Standards (Interagency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (2019), national ownership of DDR processes implies their alignment with national strategies but, above all, support from a wide range of actors at all levels—national, regional, and local. This article examines the realities of national ownership in the implementation of DDR programs. Criminology offers insights into disengagement, particularly through desistance theories (Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996), which describe the gradual process by which individuals cease engaging in criminal or deviant behaviour through identity shifts, structural opportunities, and social bonds that encourage reintegration. However, an integrated approach is needed to understand the processes of exiting violent groups (Walker et al., 2013). An effective framework can therefore integrate criminology, sociology, and political science to account for the broader institutional and policy dynamics that shape reintegration processes. Anchored in the sociology of public action, this study considers DDR as a public policy instrument: a technical and social apparatus that structures specific relationships between the state and its recipients, shaped by underlying representations and meanings (Halpern et al., 2014). This instrument-based approach fosters dialogue with Southern epistemologies and embraces the decolonial option rooted in pluriversality and alternative narratives (Dimou, 2021; Carrington et al., 2016). It also deconstructs the universalist logic of certain public policy instruments, often shaped by paradigms imported from the Global North, which reinforce coloniality and marginalize the endogenous practices of conflict-affected communities. After presenting the study's methodology, I examine how DDR constructs the category of ex-combatants, before analyzing how national ownership can be redefined to enhance effectiveness in the context of combating violent extremism.

Methodology

This research focused on Cameroon due to its strategic role in regional security and its unique DDR structure operating outside of a UN peacekeeping mission (Non-Mission Settings; NMS). As a key actor in Central Africa, it continues to face Boko Haram incursions, making it a critical case for examining the intersection of DDR and counterterrorism. The findings have implications for similar contexts in the Lake Chad Basin and beyond, where DDR programs must balance security concerns with community reintegration. From December 2020 to January 2022, I conducted 37 interviews across three major cities in Cameroon, engaging with former combatants and administrators of the DDR program. My sample comprised seven women and 30 men, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives by incorporating participants from different sub-groups. The first group consisted of 15 ex-combatants, aged 20 to 35 years, who were supported under the DDR program (ExCo). The second group included 22 institutional actors from civil society and officials responsible for implementing the program. This heterogeneous selection facilitated a comprehensive understanding of both the institutional mechanisms of DDR professionals and the lived experiences of reintegrated individuals.

Participants were selected based on various criteria, including age, religion, personal trajectories, confirmed association with Boko Haram, and marital status. However, certain exclusions were necessary for ethical and methodological reasons. Minors, individuals under judicial investigation, and those suffering from severe post-traumatic stress or psychological disorders linked to their involvement with Boko Haram were omitted from the study. While these exclusions were implemented to ensure ethical research practices and avoid another traumatization, they also present a potential limitation by omitting perspectives that could further enrich the analysis of reintegration challenges.

Given the complexity of reintegration processes, my research employed an iterative approach to data collection and analysis, allowing for flexibility in examining emerging themes over time (Bischoping & Gazso, 2015). The thematic analysis provided a rigorous and systematic framework for identifying, categorizing, and critically analyzing recurring themes within the dataset (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012).

Program Ambitions

In the Cameroonian context, the DDR program is not implemented as part of a peace mission under the aegis of the UN. The National Commission for DDR (NCDDR) was established on November 30, 2018 (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 2018). It is implementing a third-generation DDR program that is intended to operate in contexts where conflict is still ongoing and where there is not necessarily a peace agreement. This committee is responsible for dealing with ex-combatants of Boko Haram and armed groups operating in the English-speaking regions of the country. In terms of disarmament, Decree no. 2018/719 states that the NCDDR's mission is to receive and disarm former Boko Haram combatants and to collect, classify, and store weapons and ammunition voluntarily surrendered by former combatants (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 2018). Secondly, regarding demobilization, the committee is responsible for setting up and managing cantonment sites for ex-combatants, supervising ex-combatants, and providing multidimensional assistance to ex-combatants as part of their preparation for a return to civilian life. Finally, in terms of reintegration, the committee's mission is to take the necessary steps to de-radicalize ex-combatants; raise awareness and provide multidimensional assistance to communities of origin in order to facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants; and help ex-combatants reintegrate into civilian life, in particular through organization, training, the provision of tools or means of production, and assistance with the creation of income-generating activities. In the case of Boko Haram defectors, the reintegration process is further complicated by the ambition to deradicalize former combatants.

While deradicalization entails cognitive and behavioral shifts away from extremist ideologies, its implementation varies across sociopolitical contexts and remains contested. The goal is to neutralize or transform beliefs and behaviors linked to religious extremism or armed struggle deemed illegitimate. Deradicalization programs, implemented in countries like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, aim to reshape individuals' belief systems by steering them away from extremism and toward mainstream values (Rambourg & Brie, 2015). Research on radicalization and disengagement underscores that both cognitive shifts away from extremist ideologies and strong community support are crucial for effective disengagement strategies (Horgan, 2009). Expanding DDR frameworks to include deradicalization remains highly contested, with numerous obstacles hindering implementation and limiting national ownership of such programs, particularly in contexts like Cameroon. Here, deradicalization is framed as the inculcation of republican values and the recognition of state symbols as key to fostering national integration (Kahjum, 2020). However, the implementation of DDR activities, which primarily focus on economic reintegration, encounters numerous challenges.

Findings and Discussion

DDR as an Instrument Reframing Ex-Combatant Experiences: Navigating Tensions and Rationalities

With the implementation of the DDR program, individuals leaving Boko Haram are officially and systematically referred to as ex-combatants. This classification effectively turns the DDR program into a tool for assigning ex-combatants a de facto normative identity. Decree no. 2018/719 does not specifically define the term ex-combatant. While at the outset, defectors were described as "returnees", "defectors", "ex-jihadists", "former hostages", "repentant", or "lost children", the program's underlying ambition was to make them normal, with a transition from combatant identity to (re)accession to civilian status. Looking at the combat experience, the interviews I conducted illustrate the difficult dichotomy between combatants and non-combatants, as well as the overlapping and blurring of boundaries associated with involvement with Boko Haram. DDR instruments impose a normative identity that often contradicts the lived experiences of defectors and communities. I will discuss the notion of ex-combatants here before proposing in the next articulation a terminology that emerges from the data analysis and better reflects the reality on the ground.

In the fight against Boko Haram, repressive approaches rooted in counter-terrorism policies have had counterproductive effects, particularly in terms of stigmatization. The measures implemented to neutralize individuals suspected of having joined the organization have led the security forces to have tense interactions in localities close to the border with Nigeria. The interviewees often expressed the feeling that they had no choice but to join Boko Haram, sometimes seeking protection or, paradoxically, to distance themselves from the violence, as Oumarou put it:

> When I joined Boko Haram, you could say it was by force. Boko Haram used to come and gather in the village. They would say: you can't stay here, one day we're going to come and kill you all. If you don't join us, we'll come back and kill you. On the other hand, the Cameroonian soldiers also accused us of having the same mouth with 'the Boko Haram'. They said: 'We're going to finish you off'. In the end, being threatened from both sides, I opted to flee and join Boko Haram, because I could see how they would come back to kill those who didn't follow them! (Interview 24, ExCo, male, Méri)

Against a backdrop of financial drought and a lack of economic prospects, personal motivations, often stimulated by financial gain, have driven some young individuals to become involved in the activities of the terrorist group. Moussa decided to take his first steps in what seemed a promising career:

> My friends told me that instead of suffering here, it would help me and my family to join Boko Haram, that not everyone had to fight. My life didn't work here, that's why I left. I didn't expect to be Islamised and to have to learn about the Koran. But deep down it was my choice. (Interview 36, ExCo, male, Méri)

The category of individuals who turn to the authorities after leaving Boko Haram includes women who are collateral victims, particularly those from the families of men suspected of having links with the terrorist groups or those who have voluntarily joined these groups. The field interviews revealed that, far from the image of women as victims or sexual objects in the clutches of Boko Haram, not all women were "passive radicals". Social norms of masculinity and gender dynamics could shape their association with violent extremist organizations. In some cases, women protected themselves from the insecurity fueled by violent extremist groups. In others, the women who joined the group often did so out of coercion or marital duty, and in others to improve their living conditions. Being a good wife means following your husband, because in this cultural context and in marriage, certain roles are assigned to the woman, who is submissive to her husband (many did not even know their age and had no birth certificate). An interview with an institutional agent revealed that in these groups there were also:

> 'Passive radicalizers', especially women, in accordance with the popular conception that a loyal wife follows her husband at all costs, it's a question of submission as a wife. (Interview 32, Institutional stakeholder, male, Maroua)

Some women had been forced to follow their husbands who had become fighters, while others had been abducted and forced into marriage within Boko Haram to serve as breeders or bargaining chips. An exchange with Annette, a widow, clearly illustrates the complexity of these journeys, which sometimes involve kidnapping and a need for survival, protection, security, or opportunities:

> In my family, my father tried to force me into marriage. He offered me men twice, but I refused, and in the meantime my father became radicalized and joined Boko Haram with my younger brother. Then I was kidnapped and taken there, where I was introduced to my father and brother. And my father told me that, as I had refused to get married here, I would see what I could do. So, the day after I arrived they celebrated my marriage to someone. (Interview 8, ExCo, female, Méri)

Domestic violence motivated Awa's desire to join the group, making her case particularly striking:

> I was so badly treated by my husband that I ran away from home to join the group, and I remarried there. I left voluntarily; nobody forced me. When I came back here, they took me to the chiefdom and asked me to go back to my old home, but I refused. (Interview 28, ExCo, female, Méri)

Other interviewees highlighted the fact that the association with Boko Haram was the result of a well-thought-out family project to start a new life, thanks to the offer proposed by this group. The financial opportunity and the prospect of improving their quality of life by joining the group also motivated some women to join or to convince their husbands to join the group as part of a plan to immigrate to another country:

> Some Cameroonian women left, and it was really organized with their husbands, and they ended up on the battlefield, which means that it was really premeditated. Others who arrived in Sambisa through marriage once their husbands had died in the fighting then became the property of the group. (Interview 5, traditional chief, male, Maroua)

Dia, who fled after two years with Boko Haram, explained why she and her husband joined up:

> Madam, you yourself can see the living conditions here, compared to the Centre. I followed my husband, but first we talked to each other, we agreed together. When we saw the money that the individuals who were with Boko Haram managed to find. We have nothing here, no schools, no future for our children. Even when we were protected from Boko Haram, some areas were completely abandoned, we couldn't work the fields. So, we simply followed what was good for us. On the other

> hand, at first it was acceptable, a little better. But with time and the threats on the Nigerian side too, and my husband having to go and fight, we got discouraged and here we are. (Interview 20, ExCo, female, Méri)

The involvement of some women in Boko Haram, driven by the pursuit of economic stability, can be seen as a quest for financial emancipation and social mobility through various positive power hierarchies (Okech, 2021). This is particularly prominent amongst those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Although they were not "active" combatants, their current status as ex-combatants failed to account for the roles they played within the group or the benefits they derived from the reconfiguration of gender relations and power dynamics.

Unlike other contexts where rigid admission criteria have limited women's access to DDR programs, such as in Liberia, Cameroon's more inclusive approach represents progress. However, social and material barriers persist. MacKenzie (2016) highlights that the reintegration of female ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, Liberia (2003-2009) and South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2004) has been hindered by the lack of tailored training programs, fear of stigma, threats of retaliation, and social exclusion (Coulter et al., 2008). Despite women's significant involvement in conflicts, disengagement, disassociation, reintegration, and reconciliation (DDRR) programs in Liberia failed to provide adequate tools to capitalize on their skills or offer sufficient psychological support in cases of trauma (Basini, 2015). More broadly, persistent gender stereotypes and biases regarding their role in terrorism continue to marginalize their place in DDR policies, limiting the effectiveness of their reintegration. My field research illustrates these paradoxes. While Cameroon adopted a National Gender Strategy in 2022, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN Women received funding from the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) in February 2023 to launch a project dedicated to women.

Questioning the Status of Ex-combatants: Complexities and Aporias in the DDR Program

While categorizing all DDR participants as ex-combatants legitimizes the development of a public policy instrument aligned with regional and international counterterrorism efforts, the program simultaneously functions as a mechanism that obscures the understanding/ordinary aspect of violence. According to Decree 2018/719 establishing the DDR program, individuals who have left the Boko Haram group are indiscriminately considered to be ex-combatants. The term "ex-combatant" traditionally refers to individuals who have participated in armed hostilities, typically between state or non-state armed groups, whether in international or non-international armed conflicts. However, under international humanitarian law, the legal status and qualification of those engaged in non-international armed conflicts remain ambiguous. This ambiguity is particularly evident in asymmetric or insurgency contexts, where government armed forces are confronted with non-state, rebel, or dissident armed groups or militias (Aivo, 2013). In the joint Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and African Union strategy developed in 2018, the term "combatants" is not defined. However, the document specifies that it refers to individuals "who have participated in battles and know how to use and handle weapons" (CBLT - AUC 2018: 13). The Decree establishing the DDR program in Cameroon designates all participants solely under the official category of "ex-combatant," regardless of their individual backgrounds or roles.

This war rhetoric used as terminology in the Decree, which by default attributes the label of ex-combatant, has several implications. Firstly, it has the effect of standardizing the reality of lived experience and ignoring the complexity and diversity of the trajectories of involvement in Boko Haram. As a result, it contributes to the reification of status and fails to consider the fluidity of the fighting experience. In other contexts, however, numerous studies have highlighted the wide diversity of the fighting experience, which can be diluted and reconstituted between different statuses, such as hero, patriot, resistance fighter, liberator, spoiler, or intermediary. This diversity is also mentioned by Duclos (2010) and Muggah (2010). According to my data, it also seems that the career paths of the individuals I met reveal major differences in terms of temporality. Some had sporadic contact, while others had longer periods of professionalization in an organization with structured leadership. These individuals were recruited through forced mobilization or voluntary commitment, because they espoused an ideology or for financial reasons. The interviews also show the non-linearity and complexity of the commitment and the conditions of these exits. What started as forced recruitment can later become a voluntary commitment, and vice versa.

Research on Boko Haram in Nigeria and other jihadist armed groups operating in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso, highlights how recruits' criminal experience is integrated into terrorist activities (Akinola & Ramontja, 2023). This process relies on operational and logistical transfers, including extortion, theft, and kidnapping, which serve both as financing mechanisms and as instruments of terror. Rather than undergoing a strict ideological radicalization process, many individuals engage in these groups to repurpose their criminal capital (Tanner, 2010). Unlike other African conflict settings, those disengaging from Boko Haram in Cameroon exhibit a more distant relationship with weapons, a less structured ideological commitment, and the absence of a clear political project. This contrasts with Chad, where the relationship between combatants and weapons resembles a profession and even forms a pillar of governance (Debos, 2013), and Côte d'Ivoire, where the ex-combatant status serves as a political bargaining mechanism (Berriault, 2019). However, the standardized application of

DDR programs fails to account for the diversity of individual trajectories. This calls for a deeper examination of the logic underpinning the classification of violent actors as combatants.

An Innovative Conceptual Alternative: Dissociation

The concept of dissociation—severing formal social and psychological ties with a group—is used to give meaning to the participants' experience exiting of Boko Haram in the context of this research. In this section, I return at length to the arguments justifying the choice of this terminology and its relevance in the context of extreme violence. As the field interviews indicate, the DDR program also creates the status of ex-combatant, which has little or no resonance with the experiences in the Far North. The implementation of a formal conceptualization of disaffiliation from a terrorist group is complex due to the absence of a formal process of "organizational disaffiliation", which would allow the phenomenon to be situated more within the logic of disaffiliation. Dissociation is an interesting concept for (re)conceptualizing the process of leaving terrorist organizations. It puts into words the reality experienced by the interviewees in the field, who did not share the feeling of being demobilized ex-combatants, let alone disarmed ones. This is an intentional break in the association with the group (IOM, 2022, p. 9). It may be either an individual dissociation or the community's perception of the individual's dissociation from the group. The concept of dissociation is useful for understanding the process of leaving violent groups. The varying intensity of an individual's commitment should influence how public action is appropriated and implemented. The figure of the dissociated is relevant in the context of violent extremism, to encapsulate the reality experienced by individuals who leave the Boko Haram group. In my view, the dissociated can be considered as individuals who have been voluntarily or involuntarily involved with a terrorist group and who undertake a process of rupture, deliberate withdrawal, and disidentification. Enacted with a view to definitive emancipation and a return to life in the community, this takes place within a well-defined timeframe and is articulated according to the level of participation.

Already used in other contexts in the fight against terrorism, dissociation is the fruit of an Italian legal invention that the government made official through legislation on February 18, 1987 (Sommier, 2000). In a way, this category was intended to reward and encourage individuals who distanced themselves from their organization, acknowledging all the crimes and offences attributed to them and undertaking to moderate or prevent the next ones within the Red Brigades. At the end of the leaden years, between 1960 and 1980 in Italy, two new figures emerged to initiate reconciliation. These were the *repentants*, who could have their sentences reduced or forgotten in exchange for information about their organization. The *dissociated* individuals, for their part, agreed to admit to all the offences they were accused of and renounce violence as a means of political struggle in exchange for a reduced sentence. It is interesting to note that in the context of Operation Safe Corridor in Nigeria—an initiative designed to reduce the threat posed by Boko Haram—the program aligns with the *Three-Year Action Plan for Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR)*. Adopted in December 2017 with support from the IOM, this framework guides the reintegration of individuals formerly associated with Boko Haram (IOM, 2019). Similarly, in Niger, the return program is structured around DDRR (Akum et al., 2021; Morier, 2019;). Cameroon, however, remains the only state in the sub-region that focuses solely on a DDR program, without incorporating a disassociation component or traditional community-based practices that foster reconciliation. The data analysis reveals that the DDR program, in both its pragmatic orientation and its instrumentalization, functions as a technology of power that organizes and classifies the actors, practices, and logics that shape responses to the disengagement of members from armed groups labelled as terrorist organizations.

If I develop a similar analysis to understand the conditions under which the Boko Haram exits were supervised, the dissociated figure will represent the normative category that best characterizes the exit experience. The data from my research highlight the different degrees of association with Boko Haram and indicate the group's integration into individuals' lives at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, to better reflect the diversity of experiences. Inspired by the public health prevention model:

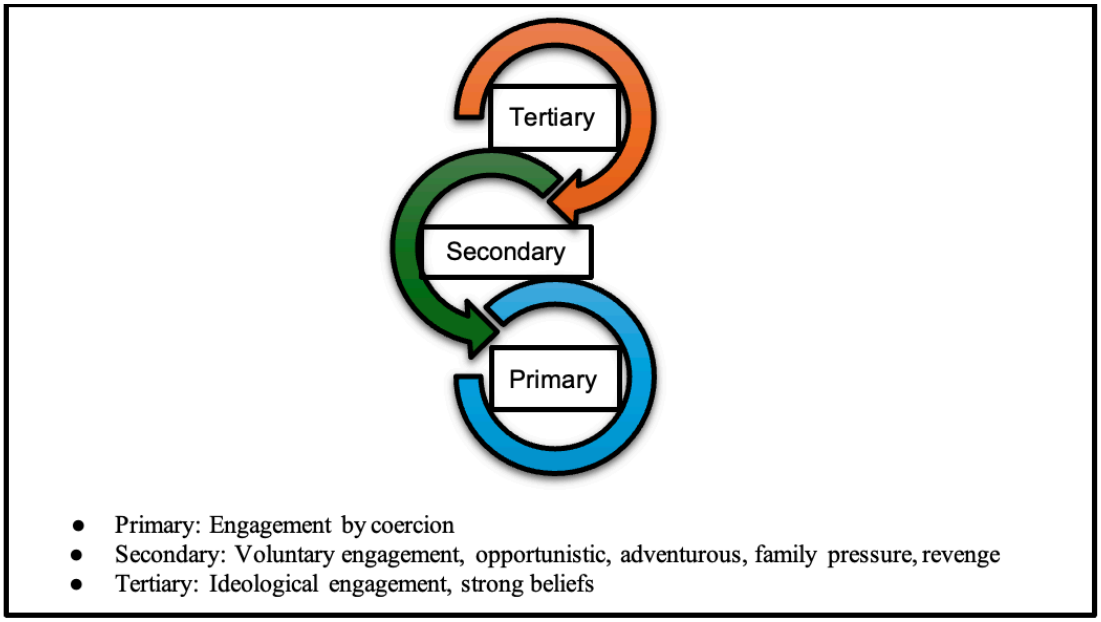
> Prevention can target the general population not identified as being at risk (primary prevention), individuals or groups considered to be at risk or who find themselves in the initial stages of this process (secondary prevention) or individuals or groups who are already involved in this process in the final stages, who belong to an extremist group or who have committed acts of radicalization and violent extremism (tertiary prevention). (Bencherif et al., 2022, p. 14)

The levels of prevention are therefore established according to the specific group targeted by radicalization prevention initiatives and programs. Similarly, by transposing the levels of intervention, the process of dissociation can take place at different scales. At the primary level, it can be designed for individuals who have been led to join Boko Haram by coercion, by a desire for revenge, or to protect themselves and their families. These individuals would benefit from primary dissociation measures focused on developing psychological resilience to address the traumas they have experienced. In contrast, secondary level dissociates who voluntarily joined Boko Haram through opportunism, family pressure or network influence would require measures centered on creating economic opportunities. Finally, the tertiary level dissociates would be the ideological

individuals committed to Boko Haram in the service of the cause who decide to break with the armed groups due to changes in ideologies, value systems, or internal disagreements within the organization.

Figure 1

Levels of Dissociation, According to the Level of Engagement with Armed Group Designated as a Terrorist Group in NMS



Consistent with the analysis of Lascoumes and Le Galès (2005), this study also supports the argument that the instrument does more than merely shape a specific problematization of the issue. It also establishes a hierarchy of variables and defines a particular sequence of public action that does not always align with on-the-ground realities.

Policy Implications to Decolonize Reintegration Instruments: The Principles and Operational Model for Genuine National Ownership

Interviews have shown that the issue of national ownership lies at the very heart of the process of supervising exits from violent extremist groups. Questioning the ways in which the role of combatant is defined led us indirectly to highlight the performative properties of the system and its ability to structure power relationships. It is therefore essential to analyze the strategies and allow the actors mobilized in these local contexts room to maneuver within the logics of appropriation. The concept of local appropriation is widely invoked in the implementation of public policies shaped by international influence. Von Billerbeck's research (2017) on the evolution and discourse of local ownership demonstrates that international actors often view it to enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of peacekeeping efforts. However, they often see it as a technical solution and therefore neglect the underlying normative beliefs. The overused local concept has been criticized for its application in the field of peacebuilding. Mac Ginty criticizes the excesses of a "romanticization" and suggests that "the local is remade and negotiated through the daily actions of inhabitants, but also those of exogenous and institutional actors" (2015, p. 851). In this respect, to get a more sophisticated view of the local, there is a need to look at the perceptions and expectations of individuals on the ground.

The UN Integrated DDR Standard 3.30 state that, at local levels, ownership implies the buy-in and participation of local authorities, communities, women's groups, religious leaders, and other local non-state actors in the implementation of DDR processes. In addition, these standards define the guiding principles that apply to national, provincial, and local ownership of DDR processes, in both mission and non-mission contexts. More specifically, these principles include unconditional release and protection of children; gender sensitivity and inclusiveness; conflict sensitivity; adaptation to the specific context; and flexibility, accountability, and transparency. At the regional level, the African Union Commission's DDR Capacity Building Program of 2014 emphasizes that national ownership ensures an intervention informed by an understanding of the local context, conflict dynamics, and relations between ex-combatants and the local population. Building on this foundation, this research proposes a model for ownership of DDR programs. Based on its research objectives and findings, this study recommends

adopting a conceptual model of national ownership to reframe DDR as a dynamic and context-sensitive process. This requires strategically mobilizing local tools and engaging with community-driven mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness and adaptability of reintegration strategies in complex security environments. I propose to apprehend appropriation, in the context of exiting a terrorist group, as a process of reception and implementation of public action. This involves an organic and contextual translation (domestication) of policies aimed at rebuilding social links between dissociated individuals and communities through the active involvement of intermediary actors and the use of local practices. The study states three key components that can make national appropriation more effective: the actors, the practices, and the spaces defined while considering the geopolitical context.

Actors

The players and individuals who are still on the periphery of power (considering their different levels of involvement—primary, secondary, and tertiary) should be placed at the heart of the system. Their commitment must be ensured not only at the design stage but also during implementation. These results suggest that ownership of the instrument transcends economic needs and extends to the community. This community-based approach to social reaction offers a way out of the individualism that underpins punishment and towards a response that involves the community. Criminologist Nils Christie has already defended the idea that the state system takes advantage of conflicts, rather than allowing citizens to seize the opportunity to change and develop by taking responsibility and ownership of their conflicts and personal history (1977). The instruments used to manage the emergence of groups from violent extremism must therefore go beyond this paradigm. The community violence reduction approach is a DDR tool that aims to manage the presence of active or former members of armed groups. It promotes activities aimed at security and stability, both for ex-combatants and for the communities in which these programs take place. Over the past three years, the LCBC has engaged local Civil Society Organizations in implementing the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience through political advocacy and UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) engagement. This has culminated in the Council of Ministers endorsement of the LCBC Community-Based Reconciliation and Reintegration Policy in February 2025 for individuals associated with Boko Haram. However, its integration remains fragmented and as indicated, the centralization of institutional actors limits the real inclusion of the intermediary actors that were specifically identified. Intermediary actors can be considered as individuals who are likely to have an indirect impact on the process of dissociation from terrorist groups. Traditional chiefs, religious authorities, and mothers play crucial roles in disengagement from Boko Haram. Mothers, as seen in the case of Moussa and others, have helped publicize the DDR program and advocate for their children to abandon violence and pursue peace (Belporo, 2025). The communion approach that emerged specifically from the analysis of the interviews shows that terrorist group exits must be developed and implemented from a perspective that materializes the (re)positioning of the community at the centre. The damage caused by violence is collective, and healing is an act of communion (hooks, 2000). Etymologically, the notion of communion refers to deep agreement. Thus, the importance of the community, such as faith leaders and mothers, and the indispensable role of traditional leaders in community policing (Zikhali, 2019) must be considered. Furthermore, the community's therapeutic capacities emerge in the analysis of the interviews, even as the marginalization of these same local actors becomes apparent. This article therefore highlights the need for any instrument aimed at dissociation in the context of terrorist group exits to be built around a system of inclusive, collaborative social control through a bottom-up approach. This will encourage the restoration of social ties at both individual and community levels.

Practices

The results of my fieldwork highlight the potential for local approaches to be overshadowed by the DDR system, particularly in terms of spirituality and beliefs. As the spiritual and ritual dimension is inherent to the context studied, it seems appropriate to include it among the key variables for the appropriation of this type of system. The symbolic capital of religious and traditional actors is crucial for better appropriation of the system. The interviews carried out in the field showed that spirituality is a key factor in resilience, in an exit program with unclear procedures and an uncertain future. This need for connection around spirituality also emerged from the communities. Through *spiritual (re)communion or connection*, a community commits itself to rebuilding positive links by drawing on ritual or spiritual principles and local practices prior to the introduction of formal approaches to exiting terrorist groups. From the point of view of the individuals dissociating from Boko Haram, there is a need for a meeting place to rebuild broken links and to receive forgiveness from the victims. Although it is undeniable that their presence in the areas where Boko Haram was operating does not automatically guarantee their involvement in the violence, they feel the need to seek forgiveness from the affected communities. Cases of violence, summary and extra-judicial executions, torture, and murder have left a deep mark on the communities, as described by the interviewees. Boko Haram's strategy for retaining its clientele and maintaining the loyalty of its members also involved inciting them to attack their villages. Several interviewees who had left Boko Haram expressed these needs:

> You can't know what's in someone's heart. If we are released even today to stay in the community, we can also go and see the village chief and ask if it's possible to hold a meeting with the whole village population? Or even go and see the canton chief if he can even give us soldiers to accompany village by village to ask for their forgiveness too. That's what we said, to ask for forgiveness. The past is the past, you must forgive us! It's true that we did bad things, but we must be forgiven. (Interview 36, male ExCo, 30, Méri)

> Now if there was even someone who had a problem with me, as I spent time here in the DDR program, himself can now forgive me. But to be sure, I need to meet these individuals first so that they can see me and so that I can talk to them too. We hear that activities are carried out in the villages to raise individuals' awareness, but it's not others who have to go and speak, it's ourselves. My mother advises me to be patient, but it isn't easy. (Interview 21, male ExCo, 23, Méri)

It should be noted that, on the ground, initiatives related to the DDR program are funded by certain UN agencies. These include awareness-raising activities, educational talks, and capacity-building workshops on reintegration and peace in certain communities. Despite these efforts, there is a widespread feeling that these activities are perceived as secondary, and therefore less important than the official DDR components. This lack of integration of a forgiveness and reconciliation component leads to a lack of national ownership of DDR. The interviews revealed that the mystical/spiritual dimension is a missing component that leads to limited appropriation of the terrorist groups' exit strategies. A local traditional chief whose village had seen several incursions by the group recruiting young individuals backed up his comments by recounting key events:

> In 2009, when the first elements of Boko Haram came back after their first attempts to recruit young individuals in 2007, this time they came with suitcases, clothes, they shared, shared with individuals and money at the same time. They say that even when you wear this outfit, your mind changes. (Interview 5, Traditional Chief, Maroua)

This limited incursion can be explained, according to the players on the ground, because of the import of an approach to dealing with crime that is not specific to the societies where these processes are established. In addition to these approaches, other actors involved in community outreach have developed strategies to circumvent the rigidity of the DDR program. These actions revolve around the use of biblical principles to raise awareness of forgiveness and reconciliation in communities, whether predominantly Christian or, where residents are often unfamiliar with the DDR program, in part because it has not, for example, been translated into local languages. Before the official launch of the DDR process, public forgiveness ceremonies were held before administrative and traditional authorities. During these sessions, former combatants were required to swear on the Quran to seek forgiveness and be reintegrated into their communities. These ceremonies provided an opportunity for former members to demonstrate their sincerity and formally renounce any collaboration with Boko Haram. However, these initiatives were discontinued following the official introduction of the DDR program. Overall, the marginalization of these practices and actors necessitates reflection on the means needed to promote national, or even local, ownership of the program to disengage terrorist groups in NMS.

An institutional actor and a community mobilization agent described in their own terms the marginalization of practices caused by the introduction of the DDR program:

> The DDR is part of a very Western approach to ending the crisis. But we have our own customs and means that could enable us to move forward more quickly. Many of the individuals who joined the extremists were manipulated by marabouts. We therefore need to take these variables fully into account if we want DDR to be effective and rooted in our realities. (Interview 30, Institutional stakeholder, Cameroon and Chad)

> The spiritual dimension and faith leaders or even traditional practitioners are rarely considered or formally integrated in this process in Cameroon because this would not attract the funding, we so covet from the donors we know. The consequence is that we don't do things our own way. Many important players are not really considered in this highly centralized DDR model. All decisions are made in the capital, leaving others as mere executors. (Interview 25, Community engagement officer, Maroua)

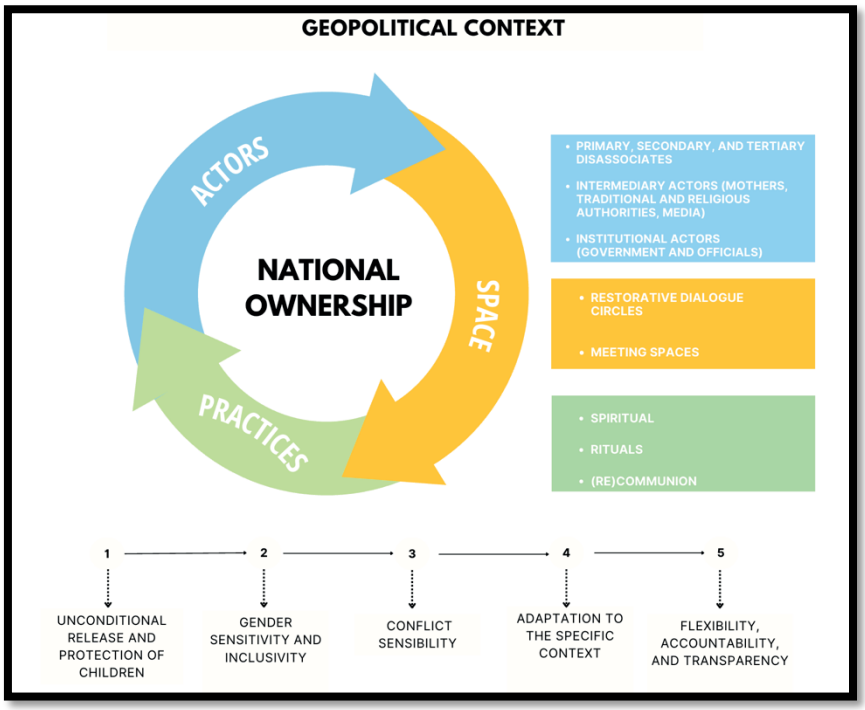
Colonial approaches to justice can therefore be critiqued for devaluing and, in some cases, co-opting African spirituality. This observation reinforces the criticism made by Tauri (2016) in the context of settler-colonial states. He highlights the negative impacts of the omission of the omnipresent spiritual aspect in indigenous restorative practices by Western capitalism and the justice system. The results of this research show that the communion approach also makes it possible, in an original way, to deconstruct the compartmentalized empirical boundaries between economic approaches and the real needs of the communities in which these returns must take place. This analysis calls for a rethinking of institutional frameworks and intervention instruments for exiting radicalization to ensure they do not replicate global hierarchies (Agozino, 2004). Integrating the ritual and spiritual dimensions, which are central to the studied context, enables the "de-Westernization" of such a framework.

Spaces

Lastly, this research supports the argument that the instrument for exiting terrorist groups should be better owned through the creation of a meeting place that establishes circles of restorative dialogue. Dialogue generally refers to a framework of exchange in which the restoration of social ties and the resolution of conflict are encouraged. As it occurs at the same time as dissociation, it becomes relevant for transcending violence and creating the conditions for dialogue, forgiveness, and peace for community cohesion. The integration of the ritual and spiritual dimensions, central to the context studied, makes it possible to "de-Westernize"/decolonize such a system. The meeting places for restorative dialogue should not be set up after the DDR program but at the same time and in coordination with it. The fragmentation of DDR initiatives, which remain scattered, accentuates the absence of a strategic vision in terms of both practices and the structuring of spaces. Restorative approaches have already been used in the fight against terrorism. For example, meetings have taken place between families or between representatives of Jewish and Muslim communities in Israel or in the Basque Country (Soulou, 2018). In the context of terrorist group exits, these spaces could both create the conditions for dialogue and give new meaning to *togetherness* by reaffirming the role of community practices and players. It is in this interstice that we must look for the keys to a new foundation by proposing that the various components of the appropriation model be integrated to operationalize terrorist group exits in a context of violent extremism.

Figure 2

Proposed Model for National Ownership in the NMS Terrorist Group Exit Process



Conclusion

In post-transition contexts, particularly in NMS, restoring national ownership is essential. This requires careful consideration of who participates in shaping and implementing policy and the continued integration of marginal practices in these tense environments. DDR instruments must be adapted through strategic and transformative rationality to ensure they contribute meaningfully to peace. Rather than confining public action within the formal DDR framework in NMS, these approaches should be embedded in the dynamics of surrender, allowing for greater flexibility and responsiveness to local realities.

Standardized IKEA peace models, flat-packed prepackaged template-based interventions, are ill-suited to addressing the complex, context-specific dynamics of violent extremism. Instead, DDR programs must create space for alternative and reflective approaches that incorporate organic, local, traditional, or indigenous contributions (Mac Ginty, 2008, p. 145). While DDR is not a foolproof remedy, it has the potential to reduce delays and costs, foster reintegration at both individual and community levels, and mobilize a wide range of actors to support sustainable transitions. Positioned at the intersection of

community needs and peacebuilding aspirations, such an instrument in the context of violent extremism offers an opportunity to enhance reintegration processes and ensure long-term stability. This reflection is particularly timely given the increasingly complex security landscape, shaped by the rivalries between Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), which directly impacts both the surrender of combatants and broader reintegration dynamics. This study reinvests in debates surrounding Southern epistemologies and criminology, which call for alternatives to dominant paradigms. Furthermore, this innovative framework offers a valuable opportunity to enrich discussions on criminology and alternative peacebuilding approaches in the Global South. The proposed model of national ownership, with its multiple dimensions, requires further empirical testing and refinement. By proposing this model, this research contributes to the development of more nuanced and context-sensitive DDR programs that address the specific challenges of societies in the Lake Chad Basin and beyond. The proposed reconceptualization moves beyond an economic-centric approach to reintegration, shifting the focus from mere citizenship restoration through civilian reintegration to a more holistic framework that acknowledges diverse reintegration pathways. Within the volatile context of the Lake Chad Basin, where security concerns intersect with transitional justice and community reconciliation, this research underscores the need to develop locally anchored DDR strategies for a paradigm shift that prioritizes national ownership, cultural relevance, and sustainable reintegration.

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