

“MOTIVATIONS AND EMPTY PROMISES”

Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth

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Research Summary

Boko Haram, one of the world’s deadliest armed groups, is waging an insurgency in the name of creating an Islamic caliphate. This violent conflict in Nigeria’s Northeast has killed nearly 17,000 people since 2009, displaced nearly 2.2 million people, devastated thousands of communities, and slowed the economy.¹ For most people in the region, a safe and prosperous community seems far from reach.

Interventions are urgently needed to help counter violent extremism and to create environments for all youth to become peaceful and productive adults. In the past, by designing interventions without talking to the youth involved in the violence and analyzing the drivers, governments and practitioners have too often misdiagnosed why youth fight and what they need to thrive. For this study, Mercy Corps interviewed 47 former youth members of Boko Haram to understand their choices to join or what made them vulnerable to forced recruitment. We also talked to 26 youth who resisted Boko Haram’s recruitment efforts, which provided insights on protective factors. We found much cause for hope. In the midst of challenges, the local strategies to prevent violence and support youth exercised by so many communities can form a strong foundation for the future of youth and stability in Northeast Nigeria.

Key Findings

- **There is no demographic profile of a Boko Haram member.** Members we spoke to came from diverse backgrounds. Some had jobs, and others did not. Some had attended secular school, others Islamic school, and others had dropped out. Profiling in youth interventions based on demographics or other assumed risk factors is unlikely to be successful.
- **Influence from social and business peers is a key factor in recruitment.** Almost all former members cited a friend, family member, or business colleague as a factor in their joining Boko Haram. That person’s influence in the youth’s life mattered more than the number of people in a youth’s network who joined.

¹ Officially the group is Jama’atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda’awati Wal Jihad (JAS), or, more recently, the Islamic State of the West African Province (ISWAP). For simplicity, we use Boko Haram, which is used most commonly globally. Institute for Economics and Peace. 2015. Global Terrorism Index. Amnesty International. 2015. “Stars on Their Shoulders. Blood on Their Hands. War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military.” IOM December 2015. Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Round VII Report. Brown, Stephen. 2014. “Boko Haram to hit Nigerian GDP again, investors resilient-minister.” Reuters.

- **Youth see in Boko Haram an opportunity to get ahead through business support.** Boko Haram has exploited common desires of youth in this region, to get ahead economically and distinguish themselves in their communities. Many youth described either accepting loans prior to joining or joining with the hope of receiving loans or capital for their mostly small, informal businesses.
- **Broad frustrations with government created initial community acceptance of Boko Haram.** Boko Haram took advantage of deep grievances around government inadequacies and security abuses to gain a foothold in communities. About half of former members said their communities at some time generally supported the group, hoping it would bring a change in government. That support later waned as Boko Haram's tactics became more brutal.
- **Local counter-narratives on the hypocrisy of Boko Haram are working.** Youth who resisted joining shared a narrative of Boko Haram as a corrupt, greedy organization focused on enriching its leaders. These messages are being crafted by religious and traditional leaders at a very local level and speak to community members' existing concerns about corruption and unresponsive governance.

Recommendations

To address youth needs in the short term:

1. **Build trust in government by addressing the needs of conflict-affected youth and communities.** The Nigerian government's new strategy for reconstruction in the Northeast, led by the Office of the Vice President and the President's Committee for the Northeast Initiative (PCNI), provides a key opportunity to rebuild trust with communities by effectively implementing community-driven recovery and development initiatives. The strategy should focus on assistance to meet communities' and youth's self-identified needs for protection and livelihoods support, including both internally displaced persons and host communities, and set a foundation for long-term improved governance and development.
2. **Prepare for comprehensive reintegration of former members.** Some youth who have escaped Boko Haram are already returning to their home communities. Civil society and religious leaders should facilitate dialogue processes quickly between communities and former members of Boko Haram to understand how to best disarm, reintegrate, and rehabilitate former members, and ensure that vigilantes and Civilian Joint Task Force members also have access to social and economic opportunities.
3. **Amplify local counter-narratives that already work to prevent recruitment into Boko Haram.** Influential local leaders, particularly religious and traditional leaders, are best positioned to deliver resounding anti-violence messages. Government and donors should support locally rooted NGOs and religious and media organizations to amplify effective messages.

To address youth needs in the medium and long term:

1. **Develop opportunities for youth and government officials to improve communities together.** A wide gulf exists between government and communities – at all levels. Civil society should support youth to form advocacy groups and regularly connect them with Local Government Authorities and the Governors' offices so officials and young people may jointly take actions to improve communities.
2. **Facilitate connections to role models and support family dialogue on violent extremism.** A key strategy to prevent youth from joining violent extremist movements is to reinforce positive social ties and connections to role models. Civil society can support families to talk to youth about resisting recruitment schemes, cultivate diverse youth groups, and connect youth to elders, including religious and traditional leaders and other role models.
3. **Help youth achieve their ambitions, starting with increasing their access to financial and business services.** Boko Haram's use of financial inducements, in the form of loans and other business support, successfully incentivized youth to join because entrepreneurship can help them fulfill their desire to get ahead. Exploring options for youth grow their businesses, such as identifying and providing informal and formal financial services that are youth-friendly and Islamic-compliant, may provide safe alternatives for youth to satisfy their ambitions.

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