2016 March, Bajoga, Gombe, Nigeria. Mustafa, 15, stands in front of the house where his family lives since they were forced to flee their home in Yobe. They live in a half-constructed house in Bajoga, ever since Boko Haram killed their father.
Corinna Robbins / Mercy Corps

"MOTIVATIONS AND EMPTY PROMISES"

Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth

APRIL 2016

MERCY CORPS

Executive 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:

1. **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 is unlikely to be successful.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **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.

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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.

Recommendations

To address youth needs in the short term:

› **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.

› **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.

› **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:

› **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.

› **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.

› **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 ways for youth to satisfy their ambitions.

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Introduction

Northeast Nigeria: Youth in Crisis

Boko Haram, one of the world's deadliest terror groups, is waging an extremist insurgency in the name of creating an Islamic caliphate.[2] This violent conflict in Nigeria's Northeast has killed nearly 17,000 people since 2009, displaced nearly 2.2 million people, devastated thousands of Nigerian communities, and slowed the economy.[3] In addition to ground battles, cities in the Northeast have suffered from a spike in suicide bombing attacks in recent years, almost all carried out by youth and children, many female, and some of those girls as young as eight years old.[4] Nigerian and regional forces are progressing against Boko Haram, with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari declaring that the state has "technically won the war."[5] Yet deadly attacks continue. Displaced families are afraid to return home. For most people in the region, a safe and prosperous community seems far from reach.

Boko Haram materialized in 2003-2004 as an anti-government, breakaway Islamic sect, but its rise to prominence came around 2009 after a high-profile attack.[6] In July 2009, after then-leader Mohammed Yusuf threatened an assault on the federal government, a battle between Boko Haram and security forces across six northern states killed more than 800 people. Yusuf was arrested and executed while in police custody.[7] In June 2010, Abubakar Shekau, the former second-in-command, declared that he had assumed leadership of Boko Haram. This event marked a major shift in the group's strategy, as Shekau adopted increasingly strident and violent tactics with the ultimate goal of destabilizing the Nigerian state to make way for a Sharia-based caliphate.[8] After the more violent turn of Boko Haram, some members opted out of the group, and increasing proportions of members were forcibly recruited. While reliable estimates are unavailable, most experts agree that although the total number of Boko Haram members has decreased, fighters still number in the thousands, the vast majority of them youth.[9]

The Nigerian government, non-governmental agencies, and international donors are increasingly turning their attention to addressing the underlying causes of the conflict in the Northeast, in addition to responding to the humanitarian crisis the conflict has produced. An estimated 92%, or nearly 2 million, of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are temporarily living outside of formal camps and are in host communities across 12 states and in Nigeria's capital, Abuja.[10] Tensions are increasing in many directions: between host and IDP communities, Christians and Muslims, returnees and those who stayed behind, and family members of Boko Haram and those

2   Officially the group has referred to itself Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad (JAS) and more recently the Islamic State of the West African Province (ISWAP). For simplicity, we use Boko Haram, which is used most commonly globally and is translated loosely from Hausa as "Western education is forbidden." Institute for Economics and Peace. 2015. Global Terrorism Index. http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf.

3   Amnesty International. 2015. "Stars on Their Shoulders. Blood on Their Hands. War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military." https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/1657/2015/en/. Human Rights Watch estimates the figure more conservatively, at 8,000 total. Human Rights Watch. 2015. "Dispatches: Nigeria's New President, Boko Haram, and Rights." IOM December 2015. Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Round VII Report. http://nigeria.iom.int/dtm. Brown, Stephen. 2014. "Boko Haram to hit Nigerian GDP again, investors resilient-minister." Reuters. http://www.reuters.com/article/nigeria-economy-boko-haram-idUSL6N0PC51N20140701.

4   UNICEF. 2015. "Northeast Nigeria: Alarming spike in suicide attacks involving women and girls." http://www.unicef.org/media/media_82047.html.

5   Corones, Mike. 2015. "Mapping Boko Haram's Decline." http://blogs.reuters.com/data-dive/2015/05/05/mapping-boko-harams-decline-in-nigeria/. Buhari's claim of victory in December 2015: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35173618.

6   Mohammed, Kyari. 2014. "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram." *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*. Ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos. African Studies Centre: Leiden, Netherlands.

7   Reinert, Manuel and Lou Garcon. 2014. "Boko Haram: A Chronology." *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*. Ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos. Africa Studies Centre: Leiden, Netherlands.

8   Pérouse de Montclos. 2014. "Boko Haram and politics: From insurgency to terrorism." B*Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*. Ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos. Africa Studies Centre: Leiden, Netherlands.

9   Amnesty International. 2015. "Nigeria: Abducted women and girls forced to join Boko Haram attacks." https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/nigeria-abducted-women-and-girls-forced-to-join-boko-haram-attacks.

10 IOM. DTM Round VII December 2015.

who have suffered at their hands.[11] State budgets are overwhelmed, particularly as oil revenues drop, rendering already struggling systems unable to provide services to new influxes of people.[12] The challenges bear the hallmarks of a long-term, complex humanitarian crisis.

To end the crisis and support long-term, inclusive development in Nigeria, interventions are needed to help set at-risk youth on a path toward becoming peaceful and productive adults. In the past, many such efforts have been fundamentally flawed. By designing interventions without talking to the youth involved in the violence, governments and practitioners have too often created programs that misdiagnose why youth fight.

Through this research, Mercy Corps has sought evidence that will help prevent this mistake. Building on Mercy Corps' three years of development and peacebuilding work in Nigeria and our longstanding research on youth and conflict globally, this study examined pathways of participation in and resistance to violent extremism in Nigeria. Our aim has been to learn from and support communities that are already successfully steering youth toward peaceful and productive engagement in society. Youth themselves know best why they fight and what it would mean to thrive, but they are rarely asked. By talking to young people closest to the violence, we hope to generate evidence to support Nigerians' efforts to reduce the devastation that violent extremism has brought to their communities, and support a peaceful path forward for all youth.

Research Questions

The goal of this study was twofold: first, to better understand why some youth choose to participate in Boko Haram, and why some resist such participation; and second, to understand what makes youth vulnerable to, or protected from, forced recruitment.

This study set out to fill key knowledge gaps. We sought to interview and learn about both male and female members of Boko Haram, understanding that their pathways to membership may be different—or in some cases more similar than commonly believed. In response to changing Boko Haram recruitment strategies, we wanted to capture the wide range of experiences that lead youth to join: we know simply too little about why a particular youth—and not his neighbor, or her brother—takes up arms. Knowing that the vast majority of youth remain peaceful even amidst great challenges, we also wanted to explore what it means for youth to avoid participating in violence, and how they resist or remain protected. Rather than classifying all youth as "at risk," we sought to understand how best to build on youth's assets and reinforce their positive development.

The report ends with recommendations that result from the ideas of youth and community members, as well as an analysis of the data.

Existing Theories and Evidence

Despite widespread devastation linked to Boko Haram, lack of access due to insecurity has prevented a deep understanding of participation in the group.[13] Various factors have been cited in global research on participation in violent extremism, and some factors have been explored in the context of Northeast Nigeria. These potential drivers are briefly addressed below, and specifically with regard to Boko Haram where possible.

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11 Mercy Corps. 2015. Adamawa assessment, available upon request.

12 Udo, Bassey. 2016. "Nigeria: Oil revenue down by N28.4 billion, as federal, state govts. shared N387.8 billion in December." *Premium Times.* http://www.premiumtimesng.com/business/197493-nigeria-oil-revenue-n28-4-billion-federal-state-govts-shared-n387-8-billion-december.html.

13 Walker, Andrew. 2012. "What is Boko Haram?" United States Institute of Peace Special Report. No. 308.http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR308.pdf.

Poverty. Macro-level evidence indicates that poorer countries and regions remain exposed to higher risk for conflict because poverty increases the attraction of financial compensation for participating in political violence.[14] In Nigeria, poverty affects the majority of people, with 61% living on less than one dollar a day.[15] Evidence is mixed regarding the relationship between an individual's poverty level and his or her likelihood to participate in violence. For example, a study by Justino found that poorer households have a higher likelihood of participating in and supporting an armed group.[16] Other studies have shown no relationship between poverty and participation in violence, and some have even shown a positive relationship between standard of living and support for armed opposition groups.[17] We found no research to date exploring this relationship quantitatively in Northeast Nigeria.

Inequality. It is widely accepted that inequality can and does contribute to violent conflict, sparked by deep injustices and structural deficiencies that leave groups of people behind.[18] Relative deprivation—or the gap between what people think they deserve, based on what they see others have, and what they expect to get— leads to frustration and increases the chances of rebellion, even when people can meet their basic needs.[19] Existing studies link Boko Haram's emergence with long-standing grievances in the region, manifested in relative deprivation.[20] Within Nigeria, regional poverty indicators vary enormously. More than 76% of the population in the Northeast lives in absolute poverty, compared to 59% in the Southwest.[21] A recent study by the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) showed that inequality of opportunity can make youth vulnerable to recruitment from Boko Haram.[22]

Unemployment. Unemployment has—often wrongly—been linked to participation in violent extremism. In areas where jobs are few, according to this theory, large numbers of unemployed youth form a pool of potential recruits. However, Berman, et al, found a negative relationship between unemployment and violent attacks against the government in Iraq and the Philippines.[23] Blattman and Ralston found that in some conflict settings, successful employment-generating programs did somewhat reduce crime or violence, when that violence was materially motivated; however, this did not apply to many types of rioting, rebellion, and terrorism, where factors other than material incentives drove recruitment.[24] Emerging evidence, based on speaking directly with youth who participate in violence, indicates that the assumed link between unemployment and participation in violent extremist groups is complex at best, and often doesn't hold up to scrutiny in specific conflicts.[25]

Governance. A lack of perceived legitimacy of government, due to weak institutions or repression, may contribute to the rise of armed opposition groups.[26] Berman, et al, found that in the context of Iraq, improved service

14   Collier, Paul. 2007. *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It.* Oxford University Press: New York. Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler. 2001. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." Oxford Economic Papers. Vol 56, pp. 563-595.

15   World Bank. 2014. Nigeria Economic Report. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2014/07/19883231/nigeria-economic-report-no-2. BBC News. 2012. "Nigerians Living in Poverty Rise to Nearly 61%." http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17015873.

16   Justino, Patricia. 2009. "Poverty and Violent Conflict: A Micro-Level Perspective on the Causes and Duration of Warfare." *Journal of Peace Research.* Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 315-333.

17   Krueger, Alan B. and Jitka Maleckova. "Education, Poverty, and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives.* Vol. 17, No. 4, pp 119-144. Blair, Graeme, et al.2013. "Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan." *American Journal of Political Science.* Vol. 57, Issue 1, pp. 30-48.

18   Cramer, Chris. 2003. "Does inequality cause conflict?" Journal of International Development. Vol. 15, Issue 4. pp. 297-412.

19   Gurr, Ted. 1970. *Why Men Rebel.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

20   Agbiboa, Daniel Egiegba. 2014. "Boko Haram and the global jihad: 'Do not think Jihad is over. Rather Jihad has just begun.'" *Australian Journal of International Affairs.* Vol.68(4), pp. 400-417. Agbiboa. 2013. "Why Boko Haram exists: The relative deprivation perspective," *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review.* Vol.3(1), pp. 144-157.

21   BBC News. 2012. "Nigerians Living in Poverty Rise to Nearly 61%." http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17015873.

22   Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme. 2015. "Violent radicalization in Northern Nigeria: Economy and Society."

23   Berman, Eli, Joseph Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro. 2009. "Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Iraq and the Philippines." National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 15547.

24   Blattman, Christopher and Laura Ralston. 2015. "Generating Employment in Poor and Fragile States: Evidence from Labor Market and Employment Programs." *Social Science Research Network.*

25   Mercy Corps. 2015. "Youth and Consequences." https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment-injustice-and-violence.

26   Cristina Bodea & Ibrahim A. Elbadawi. 2007. "Riots, Coups and Civil War: Revisiting the Greed and Grievance Debate." Policy Research Working Paper 4397. The World Bank. Goldstone, Jack, et al. 2010. "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability." *American Journal of Political Science.* Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 190-208.

provision reduced support for armed insurgent movements.[27] This has been reinforced by Mercy Corps research on the links between governance and instability in Iraq. Grievances around insufficient basic services and abuses committed by the state have also been cited as factors in the rise of Boko Haram.[28]

Religion. Though the role of religion and ideology in recruitment to violent extremist organizations is debated, some studies have linked increased religiosity and a strong commitment to religious belief to participation in violent jihadist movements.[29] The lure of fighting against "un-Islamic" elements has been used as a recruitment tool in many places, such as Afghanistan.[30] In Nigeria, some scholars have traced linkages between Boko Haram messaging and the *Maitatsine* uprising in the 1970s and 1980s, in which preaching on the ills of modern Islam attracted a large following.[31] Others label Boko Haram a sect, primarily a religious group seeking to render a "pure" Muslim society.[32] Finally, a link is popularly made between *Almajirai*—a type of Islamic student—and Boko Haram recruitment, but recent research has cast doubt on this relationship.[33]

Peer Networks. Many experts agree that social networks influence individual participation in violent extremist groups, and that peer pressure is one of the few common factors contributing to participation across contexts.[34] Recruitment through peer networks may cover a number of potential mechanisms making violent extremism attractive, including group bonding and peer pressure.[35] A Mercy Corps study of ISIS foreign fighters originating in Jordan showed that social ties were a strong factor in recruitment.[36] In Nigeria, some research has indicated that friends and other relations "play instrumental roles in the radicalization process by propagating the 'virtues' of the group and normalizing membership within it."[37]

Women and Coercion. Amnesty International reported that 2,000 women and girls were abducted by Boko Haram between the beginning of 2014 and April 2015.[38] Boys and men are also abducted, but the numbers are less forthcoming.[39] Global studies have found common motivations across men and women for joining, though women are more likely to enter the group through their families or through abduction and are often forced to marry fighters.[40] This is the prevailing theory about girls and women in Boko Haram, that they are abducted or forced into the group through their husbands or other family members.

27 Berman, Eli, et al. 2011. "Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought?" *Journal of Political Economy.* Vol. 119, No. 4. Mercy Corps. 2015. "Investing in Iraq's Peace: How Good Governance Can Diminish Support for Violent Extremism." https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/investing-iraqs-peace-how-good-governance-can-diminis support-violent-extremism.
28 Pérouse de Montclos, Marc Antoine. 2014. "Boko Haram and Politics: From Insurgency to Terrorism."
29 Christmann, Kris. 2012. "Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence." Youth Justice Board.
30 USIP. 2015. "Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan."
31 Adesoji, Abimbola O. 2011. "Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic fundamentalism and the response of the Nigerian state." *Africa Today.* Vol. 57(4), pp. 98-119. Pham, J. Peter. 2012. "Boko Haram's evolving threat.: Africa Security Brief. No. 20., http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/AfricaBriefFinal_20.pdf.
32 Pérous de Montclos, Marc Antoine. "Boko Haram and Politics: From Insurgency to Terrorism."
33 Hoechner, Hannah. 2014. "Traditional Quranic Students (Almajirai) in Nigeria: Fair game for unfair accusations?" *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security, and the state in Nigeria.* Ed. Pérous de Montclos, Marc Antoine.
34 Atran, Scott. 2010. "The Romance of Terror." *The Guardian.* http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/jul/19/terrorism-radical-religion. Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2008. "Who Fights? The Determination of Participation in Civil War." American Journal of Political Science. Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 436-455.
35 Christmann, Kris. 2012.
36 Mercy Corps. 2015. "From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups." https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/jordan-jihad-lure-syrias-violent-extremist-groups.
37 Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme. 2015.
38 Amnesty International. 2015.
39 Zenn, Jacob and Elizabeth Pearson. "Women, gender and the evolving tactics of Boko Haram," *Journal of Terrorism Research.* Vol. 5(1), pp. 46-57. Gender-based violence in the region more generally is also documented by Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP). 2012. "Watching us Die on CNN: Report on the Study of Community-Level Conflict Management Mechanisms in the Niger Delta, Middle Belt and North East Zones of Nigeria." Volume 1: Analytical Report. http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org/research/publications/.
40 Ladbury, Sarah. 2015. "Women and Extremism: The Association of Women and Girls with Jihadi Groups and Implications for Programming." DFID.

Methodology

This research was conducted in September through November of 2015 in Borno, Yobe, and Gombe States. Borno and Yobe were both declared states of emergency in May 2013, along with Adamawa State, and represent two of the most conflict-affected states. Neighboring Gombe State, also in the Northeast region, has produced recruits as well and currently hosts a sizeable IDP population. We spoke with 47 people who had formerly participated in Boko Haram as youth. We also spoke with 46 family members and friends of current and former members of Boko Haram, 26 youth who resisted voluntary or forced participation in Boko Haram, and 26 community leaders in the sampled areas.

Respondents were identified through a snowballing technique, with researchers drawing on their own community knowledge to locate and build the trust of respondents, then relying on respondents to refer other interviewees. Although the findings cannot be generalized beyond the group of respondents, they provide valuable insights into why and how young people are drawn into Boko Haram. A team of male and female researchers led the interviews in the appropriate local language, using a common semi-structured interview guide but also probing down unique avenues where possible. No names were recorded throughout the research process to protect the privacy of the respondents.

Below is a snapshot of the former members we interviewed. The Nigerian government's definition of youth is between 18 and 35 years old.[41] We interviewed people outside of these age ranges to ensure a broad range of responses, though the majority of interviewees were youth at the time of their involvement in Boko Haram.

Former Members of Boko Haram (Total: 47)
- ❭ Young men: 26; Young women: 21; Others: 6
- ❭ Median age at time of interview: 27 (Youngest person: 16; Oldest person: 52)
  - ❭ Ages 16-24: 15 youth
  - ❭ Ages 25-35: 26 youth
  - ❭ Ages 36+: 6
- ❭ States: Borno: 26; Yobe: 14; Gombe: 7
- ❭ Joined Pre-2009: 16; Joined Post-2009: 26; Unknown: 5
- ❭ Ethnic Group: Kanuri: 22; Fulani: 6; Hausa: 5; Other: 12; Unknown: 2

Youth Who Did Not Join (Total: 26)
- ❭ Young men: 16; Young women: 10
- ❭ Median age: 28
- ❭ States: Borno: 11; Yobe: 5; Gombe: 10

Family or Friends of Youth Members (Total: 46)
- ❭ Men: 30; Women: 16
- ❭ States: Borno: 28; Yobe: 15; Gombe: 7

Community Leaders (Total: 26)
- ❭ Men: 20; Women: 6
- ❭ Community and youth leaders: 24; Religious leaders: 2
- ❭ States: Borno: 12; Yobe: 6; Gombe: 8

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41   Youth Policy. 2014. Factsheet on Nigeria. http://www.youthpolicy.org/factsheets/country/nigeria/.

We use the word "member" for youth who have self-described as members of Boko Haram at least in some point in time, or who were identified as members by family and friends. They participated in Boko Haram-led activities or took actions that directly support Boko Haram, whether those actions were voluntary or forced. The level of participation across self-described members varied widely: some actively fought in battle, participated in recruiting, and preached to other members, while others cooked and cleaned for militants or traded with the group. Some were full-time members and had lived in camps; others lived in their communities most of the time but were sent on temporary missions; still others worked part-time from their communities and performed roles such as intelligence gathering.

Researchers interviewed members who had joined before the significant uprising in 2009 as well as afterward, when the movement became more violent. While this report does not intend to provide a historical account of shifting Boko Haram strategy and composition, we intentionally interviewed members from both before and after the 2009 juncture to understand how motivations and recruitment tactics changed as the group changed, and the range of historical factors that may still influence today's recruits.

Our researchers spoke only with youth who left Boko Haram, and all but one of these respondents had left the group voluntarily. These findings, therefore, do not claim to represent the experiences and motivations of other types of members, those who remain devoted to the movement and its aims, and those who might escape but don't have the ability. The highly sensitive topic also meant that some respondents might have been unwilling or unable to share their complete stories. Whether through fear of reprisal by Boko Haram members, being punished by the government authorities, Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), or vigilantes, or being scorned in their communities, many reasons exist to explain why respondents might hesitate to share information or modify their responses. We also learned that the degree to which youth participated directly in violent acts may affect whether and how their communities accept them once they return from Boko Haram; thus, they were likely less open to speaking about their roles within the group.

Members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) leave to pursue members of Boko Haram after an attack on Molai village in Borno State.

Ballama Mustafa for Mercy Corps

Key Findings

Vulnerabilities: Youth Who Join

There is no demographic profile of a Boko Haram member.

Members we interviewed came from a variety of economic, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. We found no relationship between membership and being poor or relatively comfortable. Nor did we find a relationship between employment status and participation. Prior to joining, some members were formally employed, some were self-employed or performed odd jobs, and others had no work. No pattern existed with regard to level of education or type of education, whether religious or secular. Roughly one out of three respondents had completed secular secondary school, and about the same number had completed some sort of Islamic schooling, whether *Tsangaya* or *Islamiyya*.[42] A few had dropped out of school, secular or religious. Some had university degrees, and a few had no schooling at all.

About half of former members we interviewed were ethnically Kanuri, the largest ethnic group in Boko Haram-affected areas, and the other half from 11 other ethnic backgrounds. While the proportion of Kanuri is significant, Boko Haram's messaging clearly resonates across diverse ethnic groups. Some members were married, and some were not. Some members were popular and well respected, while others were living on the margins of society. All members we interviewed practiced Islam as their faith; religion was at the foreground for some, and for others it was merely a backdrop to their lives.

The paths that youth take to joining Boko Haram defy neat categories of "voluntary" and "forced."

We found that most youth fall on a spectrum between having been forced to join Boko Haram and having joined of free will. News of abductions—highlighted by the widely covered story of the "Chibok girls"—and tales of gruesome kidnappings dominate news coverage of Boko Haram. Indeed, this is too often true. We met youth who had been forced to join or be killed, who were made to watch as family and friends were killed for resisting. One male youth from Yobe described his experience, saying,

"[Boko Haram] invaded our village and asked all the youth to come out and follow them or be killed. Initially we intended to resist, but after they killed the first person who complained of this, we all followed them."

Abduction into Boko Haram occurs both for young men and for women, who may find themselves vulnerable to abduction if their village is targeted. However, young women were more likely to join through the forced rather than the voluntary end of the spectrum. One young woman from Borno described what happened when she and her daughter were abducted, saying,

> *"I was forced to join them with my only daughter…and up until now I don't know if she is alive. They came and took us on our farm, and because my daughter is young, she was put in a different vehicle and we were taken to different places. I was threatened and shot at, and [my husband] was also killed."*

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42 Tsangaya is a type of Islamic schooling in which students, *Almajirai*, are often sent to live with their teachers. Islamiyya schooling generally takes place in evenings or outside secular school hours, within communities.

Researchers also encountered youth at the opposite end of the spectrum, who chose to join for clearly articulated ideological or personal reasons. Particularly from the pre-2009 period, youth had joined because they believed in the movement, and many joined after attending preachings led by Boko Haram members in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. One male youth in Yobe described being drawn to the revolutionary aspect of Boko Haram. He said,

> "I thought it was a revolution to sanitize the system of government. I expected to be recognized in my community, and my expectations were not made. The opposite was the case."

Most youth, however, fall somewhere in between the ends of the spectrum. We heard stories that blended elements of coercion and elements of volition, and very often, it was a series of small events or circumstances that led a youth to become part of the group. The graphic below illustrates the spectrum of participation we discovered.

Forced ← - → **Voluntary**				
Abducted	Coerced	Pressured	Circumstantially motivated	Intrinsically motivated
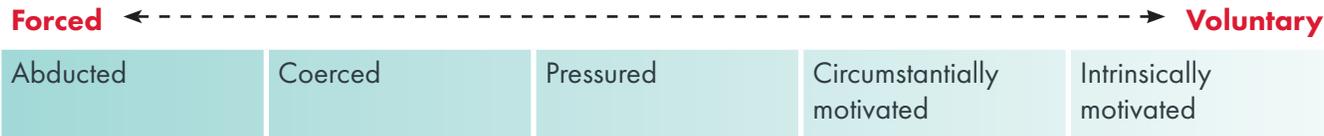
In between the extreme ends, about half of the youth were coerced or pressured to join, or perceived joining Boko Haram as the least bad option to address a challenge given their circumstances. For example, a male youth in Borno joined to protect himself and his family, and to enable freedom to pursue his livelihood. He said,

> "I officially joined them when they started killing indiscriminately in Bama [Local Government Area]. Because I needed an identity to remain safe, I decided to pledge my allegiance to them. At that time I needed protection and immunity from persecution by them so I could continue with my business. When they attacked Bama and took over the military barracks and burned all the houses in our community, my family's house was spared."

Others shared stories of social pressure or coercion. Some young women said they felt obligated to join their husbands in the movement, even if their husbands hadn't threatened them or forced them to join. Young men described complicated business relationships in which they felt compelled to start attending Boko Haram preaching or listen to audio cassette tapes because of pressures put on them by buyers of their product or their bosses. Finally, others were coerced through the provision of loans that resulted in forced recruitment into Boko Haram if youth were unable to repay.

These complex ways of entering Boko Haram—that live in the gray space between forced and voluntary participation—characterized many of the stories we heard and are woven throughout the findings below.

Influence from social and business peers is a key factor in recruitment.

Supporting global research on violent extremism, this study finds that connections with key individuals heavily influenced whether youth participated in Boko Haram. Almost all former members cited friends, family members, or business colleagues as having joined, and many outright said their contacts' support for Boko Haram activities affected their own choices. In many communities, individuals in the youth's *majalisa*, the Hausa word for "council" that is used commonly to describe a formal or informal peer group, would impact that youth's decision to join. Family members, too, played a role in influencing youth to join. What matters most, from these stories, is whether that person was influential in the youth's life, rather than the number of people in a youth's network who joined. This distinction has important implications for efforts to leverage social connections to counter violent extremism.

Business contacts are important in influencing youth to join, though the line between friends and business colleagues was at times indistinct. For some, the power that a business colleague—particularly a buyer or boss—wielded compelled youth to explore the messages of Boko Haram and the prospect of joining. Perhaps because business ownership is an important part of identity in Nigeria, and because the dominant informal economy blurs business and personal life, we heard many youth describe their colleagues as influential in introducing them to, convincing them, or at times coercing them (see more below) into joining Boko Haram.[43]

Youth see in Boko Haram an opportunity to get ahead, hanging their futures on the promise of business support.

Boko Haram has deftly exploited the ambitions of youth in this region, to get ahead and distinguish themselves in their communities. Inequality between the Northeast region and the rest of the country, as well as localized inequality between the poor majority and the few elites in the Northeast, means that many youth dream of more than they have. Youth described scarce formal employment opportunities, but for many, successful business ownership is seen as a clear way to advance in society.

Many youth reported that they either accepted loans prior to joining or joined with the hope of receiving loans or direct support to their businesses. Almost half of the youth interviewed ran businesses, all of these informal, small or micro-businesses. These entrepreneurs ranged from small-scale petty traders to bigger inter-city traders, from shop-owners to tailors to salon-owners to butchers. They described having few options without powerful "godfathers" to support them by providing capital for their businesses, or small cash transfers to buy new equipment or goods. Boko Haram, therefore, is filling a critical gap in financial services, as most youth cannot provide collateral and lack the skills to provide a business plan required by formal institutions. These youth often already had businesses that they wanted to expand or improve. Some had regular employment but also wanted support for businesses they were running on the side, indicating that not only the unemployed or the abjectly poor pursue better economic opportunities through Boko Haram. One young man from Borno State was a butcher and an inter-town trader, and saw an opportunity to expand his business, using additional money from Boko Haram to start buying and selling goods the group needed.

The lure of business support is also a trap, and some youth were willing to take great risks to benefit from the loans offered by Boko Haram. We heard variations of this story from several youth: *A male youth is running his business—struggling, perhaps—and is approached by a generous benefactor. Maybe he's seen this person around the community, or he has a mutual friend. The benefactor offers a business loan to the youth. Later, he comes back, demanding repayment. If there is no money, the youth is forced to join Boko Haram or be killed.* The tactics practiced by Boko Haram resembled organized criminal gangs and their practice of doling out favors, only to demand repayment at a high cost. Either not fully aware of the unspoken conditions or willing to take the risk, these youth were drawn into a dangerous situation with the promise of support to their business.

❯ *Myth #1: Poor, Uneducated, and with Nothing to Do*

Why do youth fight in Boko Haram? "Because they are poor." "Because they are ignorant." "Because they are idle." These explanations have proliferated far beyond Nigeria's borders and are applied to violent extremism worldwide, though development actors are increasingly challenging these direct linkages. We found no detectable relationship between self-described poverty and vulnerability to participation. Former members of Boko Haram —and youth who resisted participation—described themselves in turn as worse off, the same as, or better off than their neighbors. Many youth who were attracted by business loans already were entrepreneurs or had jobs, and were seeking to improve their relative status or expand their business opportunities.

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43   BBC News. 2015. "Nigeria's enterprising five-to-nine work ethic." http://www.bbc.com/news/business-31536706.

Broad frustrations with government created initial community acceptance of Boko Haram.

Boko Haram took advantage of deeply held grievances around government inadequacies to gain a foothold in communities. Without access to or interaction with public officials, and thus little opportunity to express grievances, request services, or affect the political debate, many communities initially supported the idea of an opposition to what they considered an ineffective government. About half of former members said their communities at some time supported Boko Haram, believing it would help bring about a change in government. One young woman from Borno said,

> "The community perception about [Boko Haram] was that…they are a new sect that is coming in peace because at the beginning they showed love and concern, and [they] provided things to needy people of the community."

In the context of a government perceived to be largely absent from community life—with no or very few services cited by all respondents—negligence, on the whole, characterized the relationship between government and constituents. As one former female youth member from Borno said, "We have lost confidence in any government assistance." In addition to negligence, youth cited frustration with government corruption; they had been overlooked for government jobs because of nepotism, or perceived crippling unfairness in political processes.

Security abuses were a source of frustration in communities that Boko Haram exploited. Scanty policing or patchwork vigilante groups were considered sufficient for some communities before Boko Haram began its insurgency. However, after the advent of Boko Haram, either lack of security became a significant liability, or a new heavy-handed security response began to breed active resentment. Some former members had known of friends or family who had been unlawfully arrested or abused. According to community leaders and members, as the conflict has unfolded, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and vigilante groups also began to commit more injustices against suspected Boko Haram members and their families. Youth who did join Boko Haram at times grouped government and vigilantes when speaking of injustices. Most youth described how community support waned as Boko Haram's tactics became more violent, but by then, the atmosphere of acceptance had already helped Boko Haram to bolster their membership among frustrated youth.

The road to Boko Haram is paved with religion and ideology.

Religion was a thread that ran through many stories of youth choosing to join. Many recruits spoke about wanting to become more devout, or being drawn to a promise of paradise, while some youth became more interested in religion after joining. A male youth from Yobe, who joined after the 2009 juncture, said, "They were preaching for jihad and faith. Their words are strong and convincing. They will attract you with reward of jihad, which, according to them, is paradise." In some instances, Boko Haram's recruitment tactics explicitly called on youth to save Islam from decline. Another male youth from Yobe said, "They told us that it is the role of youth to protect the religion of God."

❯ *Myth #2: Almajirai to Fighters*

A commonly held belief is that traditional Islamic *Tsangaya* schools serve as an informal feeder system, a ready pool, for Boko Haram recruitment. *Almajirai*—the name for the students of this Islamic education system in which children or youth are often sent to stay with the teachers—are already stigmatized in Nigerian society and assumed to be violently predisposed because their upbringing differs from others. While a few youth had been drawn into the teachings of Boko Haram through their *Tsangaya* teachers, we found no relationship between experience in either *Tsangaya* or more traditional *Islamiyya* schools and participation in Boko Haram. This reinforces the growing body of evidence that refutes the *Almajirai*-Boko Haram link.

For some, the goals of protecting religion and improving the state were complementary. Some youth spoke about establishing Sharia law, or creating in Nigeria a better Islamic state, marrying the religious and political goals espoused by Boko Haram. A male youth from Yobe said,

> *"I joined in the name of protecting the religion of Allah... They convinced me through exposing the injustice of the government."*

Prior to 2009, the religious and ideological aspects attracted a higher proportion of youth than after the group turned more violent. Youth described decreasing support for the religious and ideological aims because they rejected violent means of achieving a truer religious state. What emerged from stories of former members is that little religious or ideological indoctrination occurred, at least on a systematic level. Thus, while some youth were drawn to the group for religious purposes and to further their religious study, they were not ultimately convinced that the Boko Haram brand of Islam was the right one. The youth we spoke to left disillusioned, whether because the violent tactics were too extreme or because their personal expectations were not met.

Boko Haram offers young women unique opportunities.

Linked to the religious factors cited above, many women saw an opportunity in joining, mostly through learning the Quran. In a typical example of a woman who joined voluntarily, a young woman from Borno said, "I didn't have many expectations. I just wanted to learn more of the Quran and my religion." Even some members who were forced to join cited the opportunities to acquire knowledge, to memorize the Quran, and to learn about Islam more deeply as positive components of their experience in Boko Haram. Although both young men and women are obligated to learn the Quran if possible, this appeal was particularly salient for women who may have had limited opportunities to fulfill this obligation in their communities. For many women who had either dropped out of school very early due to marriage or other factors, or who had experienced no schooling at all, the constant studying of the Quran allowed them the chance to learn, and in some cases increase their appetite for further education, religious or secular.

In some cases, women's roles afforded them opportunities for higher status. Both men and women were involved in recruiting members of their own sex. Women were sometimes tasked with burning homes during attacks, and girls and young women, as per the media headlines, were reported as having to carry out suicide attacks, many of them forcibly. While their roles were most often confined to cleaning and cooking in the context of forced marriage, after joining, some women were able to become teachers and preachers to other women.

> ### *Myth #3: The Powerless Wife*
>
> Women involved in Boko Haram are typically cast as helpless wives of members or as kidnap victims, and as possessing little to no agency of their own. While many young women are indeed and unfortunately forced to join either through abduction or through their husbands, we spoke with other women whose own motivations or circumstances led them to Boko Haram. One young woman in Borno, who was a member for five years, said, "My friends approached me. They used to come to my place for their *lalle* (Henna Tattoo) and seeing my condition they convinced me to join." Other women who engaged in meaningful dialogue with their husbands either were persuaded by them to join—because of ideological or personal motivations—or in some cases were the ones to persuade their husbands to join.

Life after Boko Haram: An uncertain way forward

As youth leave the seemingly porous Boko Haram, the issue of how to integrate these former fighters back into their communities is polarizing. For earlier members, leaving the group mostly meant ceasing attending preaching sessions and meetings, and could be done with few consequences. Post-2009, many youth said they decided that life in Boko Haram was too violent, the risks too great, or the reality too far from their expectations. Eager to return, these former fighters faced great challenges. Most former members we interviewed described a harrowing process of escaping the group, either fleeing during the chaos of battle or slipping out at night. Many worried they would be killed in the process, and spoke soberly of companions who tried unsuccessfully to escape. One male youth from Yobe described his experience escaping, saying,

> *"We were asked to get water, so I excused myself from the guard to go to the toilet from there. Then there was a shooting, and as they concentrated on the shooting, I went into the bush to escape. It took me three days to return. I only moved in the night and climbed trees during the day. If they caught you trying to escape, they slaughtered you."*

For those who did make it out, they returned to unpredictable circumstances. Some went back to their communities, particularly if they were known or perceived to be someone who had not killed others. One female youth from Borno who was abducted said she would be accepted into her community again because, "[Community members] know I was not involved in anything and I have never left them to do anything. We are now together with them in the [IDP] camp, and I will follow them back to my community when it is safe from Boko Haram."

Some felt it was not safe to return to their communities due to fear of their communities or retaliation from the CJTF, vigilantes, or military, and relocated to a third place. Others had no community to return to, with a majority of their fellow community members still displaced. Some did return but at a high cost, suffering from suspicion and surveillance by the CJTF or vigilantes. One male youth from Borno described having to stay close to his house and being watched by a wary CJTF member. Researchers also heard stories of people who did return being summarily killed by the CJTF or vigilantes.

Many community leaders were strident about keeping watch on former members who had returned, saying they needed 'constant monitoring' to ensure they no longer posed a danger to the community. The returning youth have a different idea. With big dreams, they imagine a life after Boko Haram in which they can prosper. Roughly a third of youth who had escaped spoke of returning to secular school, going for the first time, or going to university, to pursue a new livelihood. Others spoke of continuing their businesses or starting new ones, becoming traders, lawyers, mothers, and fathers. They hope not only to survive, but to thrive. Unfortunately, the current approach to handling former fighters is preventing them from reaching their goals and risks pushing them back into violent activity.

Protective Factors: Youth Who Resist

Youth who had not joined Boko Haram were as diverse as members themselves. Some were uneducated, some were highly educated, some had been *Almajirai*, while others did not have religious schooling. As with the members of Boko Haram, those who chose not to fight were both unemployed and employed. Almost all had the opportunity to join, either through direct recruitment tactics or through knowing members of the group. So what makes these youth stand apart from the others? Three unique protective factors ran through the stories of many of these resistant youth.

Local counter-narratives on the hypocrisy of Boko Haram are working.

More than half of the youth who resisted joining shared a narrative of Boko Haram as a corrupt, greedy organization focused on enriching its leaders and, at times, members. One male youth from Borno who had refused to join Boko Haram said, "All I know is that the leaders were always collecting money from the followers and while they were living in luxury, they made sure that all the followers were living in poverty." Other youth cited the religious goals as a front for criminality and looting. This counter-narrative of Boko Haram as an organization characterized by corruption is a powerful message for youth who might otherwise be drawn to a fight against injustice or to a movement to right the ills of a government they perceive to be enormously corrupt.[44]

Traditional and religious leaders are often the messengers of these key counter-narratives, and while it was not always safe to do so, some leaders braved disseminating strident anti-Boko Haram messages. One village head from Borno described a message he shared many times in his community, saying, "These who have participated in [Boko Haram] are all ungodly people and have been deceived, especially those who joined pre-2009 who thought it was a religious sect... It was the desire for money, power of oppression, and other personal desires that were driving them." Post-2009, leaders described how Boko Haram was still trying to use religion as a "strategy" to gain support. Another leader from Borno said that in conversations in his community he told youth, "[Boko Haram] people are only deceivers and will only make money from your effort as they will never be killed. But innocent people like you who join later [will be killed]." Those types of messages, it appears, are sticking.

Importantly, these messages are being crafted at the very local level and speak to communities' existing concerns about corruption of leaders in government. These messages also seem to take root because Boko Haram itself seems to lack a coherent narrative, unlike other violent extremist organizations, such as ISIS, which has a clear strategy and messaging apparatus. The success of these counter-narratives—as evidenced by their citation among youth who did not join—provides promise for further work in countering the narratives of Boko Haram.

Family dialogue influences youth not to join.

Youth who did not join Boko Haram but had the opportunity to do so cited strong family influence, particularly of parents. Parents and other elder relatives or respected figures in youth's lives who talked openly about Boko Haram and discussed it with their children seemed able, in some cases, to influence their decisions. Some parents used news about Boko Haram attacks as an opportunity to reinforce key messages of the Quran or talk about the role of Western education in their community.

A female youth from Gombe said, "My father always talked to us about the negative impact of the sect and essence of Western education. We used to discuss and debate with [family members] and they know I will not join them." In some cases, family and respected relatives were instrumental in bringing youth out of Boko Haram even

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44   Nigeria ranks 136 out of 174 countries in the 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International. http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results.

after they had joined. A male youth from Yobe said he escaped from Boko Haram after returning home to visit his family, when they shared their suffering and talked about the hypocrisy of Boko Haram.

Diverse social connections protect youth from recruitment.

Peer influence can clearly have either a positive or negative effect on youth's decision to join. Some youth who had strong social networks, particularly meaningful connections that transcended their immediate community, were more likely to resist the pressures of Boko Haram. Youth cited external connections—perhaps through trading with outside communities, by having close friends or relatives outside of their immediate communities, or through school or religious groups—as a common thread in their stories of resistance. Many youth said they had lived outside of their community, with relatives or friends, at least for some period of time and for various reasons. In addition to providing them an additional source of protection and a place to go during dangerous times, this outside connection is one channel in which youth can broaden their perspectives and potentially resist tacit or explicit messages reverberating in their communities.

Relatedly, those with robust social connections, including diverse relationships with peers and with elders, were able to resist the attraction of Boko Haram. One male youth from Borno, chairman of a community youth group, said he was targeted several times but the support of his group allowed him to resist. Another male youth from Borno, a transport worker, said, "Our elders have also been warning us to be careful with them as they are deceiving. As a person with many friends, I did not like their life of staying away from people." That joining Boko Haram would have weakened his social connections indicates the strong relationships he enjoyed and that the attractiveness of keeping his friends outweighed any potential benefits of joining the group.

Community members outside of the gate of a secondary school in Maiduguri, Borno State, which is now a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), serving displaced people from Bama and other areas.

Mustapha Shettima for Mercy Corps

Recommendations

A toxic mix of factors creates an atmosphere where the odds are stacked against youth in Northeast Nigeria. Despite the considerable media and political attention violent extremism commands, too few initiatives are underway to implement longer-term development and peacebuilding programs that could address the underlying drivers of this violence. Punitive law enforcement and military approaches consume the vast majority of domestic and international spending to counter Boko Haram, leaving root causes to persist. This must change to achieve comprehensive and sustainable gains in stability. Without a strategy to tackle underlying causes of violence, other groups may emerge to challenge Nigeria's stability and may once again find a steady stream of recruits.

Below are key recommendations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to support evidence-based programming that will proactively facilitate pathways towards peace and productivity for youth in Nigeria's Northeast.

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 faces both the challenge and opportunity of building trust with communities and showing that it can effectively address their needs. This is a long-term pursuit and needs to include a clear role for youth (see below). The government should start the process of relationship-building now, by providing services in an inclusive way that takes communities' priorities into account and begins to address grievances. Until recently, the Nigerian government and the international community have dedicated almost all of their political attention and resources to military efforts to counter Boko Haram. Focus is now shifting to reconstruction plans—in particular, physical reconstruction of buildings and roads. While this type of brick-and-mortar reconstruction is indeed necessary, the government and multilateral agencies supporting it should also promote human development, social cohesion, and opportunities for youth to thrive.

   The first step of long-term government-led redevelopment is to meet the needs of those most affected by the conflict. The strategy for reconstruction in the Northeast, managed by the President's Committee for the North East Initiative (PCNI), should include a provision that affirms the government's unequivocal support for efforts to address the self-identified protection, livelihood, and social inclusion needs of communities affected by Boko Haram violence, including IDPs. Throughout all rebuilding efforts, community-driven development models can ensure that youth participate in decision-making, benefit from the initiatives, and strengthen joint community-government action in the future.[45] This will help set a foundation for long-term improved governance and development. Involving youth can help avoid perpetuating the conditions that have left them feeling alienated and without opportunity, factors that drove their recruitment into Boko Haram in the first place.

2. **Prepare for comprehensive reintegration of former members.** Planning for justice must be prioritized to facilitate a peaceful transition into a post-conflict environment in the Northeast. Some youth who have escaped Boko Haram are already returning to their home communities. Seemingly arbitrary decisions around the fate of returning youth, including, in effect, 'house arrest' for indefinite periods of time, stand to deepen grievances of former fighters. While some communities may determine punishment based on perceptions of whether a participant was voluntary or forced, we now know that the line

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45 Mercy Corps. 2007. "Sustainability Field Study: Understanding What Promotes Lasting Change at the Field Level." http://www.mercycorps.org/files/file1206487637.pdf.

between those two categories is largely blurred.

Civil society organizations and religious leaders must facilitate dialogue processes as soon as possible at local levels, so communities can provide input into how to disarm, reintegrate, and rehabilitate former fighters. Supporting structured integration activities with youth who fought and youth who did not will help to forge stronger social ties, making it harder to re-recruit those who left.[46] Mercy Corps has found in Colombia a viable avenue for young people to have a second chance. A community-based rehabilitation model for former child soldiers combines dialogue, psycho-social support, life skills training, and opportunities for youth to contribute to the community, while educating adults about what youth need. As a result, communities are better able to reap the benefits of reintegration and are more supportive of returning combatants.[47]

Furthermore, abuses committed by the swelling CJTF and vigilante groups speak to concerns over what will happen to thousands of youth who have taken up arms. These youth will also need skills other than fighting to succeed and cultivate a lasting peace and should have access to the same opportunities provided to reintegrated former members and other youth.

3. **Amplify local counter-narratives already working to prevent recruitment into Boko Haram.** Robust, locally-led counter-narratives are helping to prevent youth from joining Boko Haram. The counter-narratives we heard are largely built around communities' concerns about corruption. They appear to work because they are localized, tailored to community and youth interests, and disseminated by trusted religious leaders and elders. Local counter-narratives should be amplified so that more youth hear them from people they trust, in particular religious and traditional leaders. The task for civil society actors now is to identify these local leaders who are best positioned to deliver resounding anti-violence messages, and support them to amplify the effective messages they have already created, while preserving local voices.

Another potential reason counter narratives are effective in Nigeria is that Boko Haram's message does not resonate deeply with the local populations. Without a substantial external military intervention, Boko Haram has not been able to generate a strong narrative against an external threat, unlike Al Shabaab or ISIS.[48] As donors and implementing partners advance counter-narrative strategies globally, they should consider the strength of the violent extremist groups' narratives and the presence of external militaries.

To address youth needs in the medium and long term:

1. **Develop opportunities for youth and government to engage meaningfully and improve their communities together.** A wide gulf exists between government and communities, where decisions about local services are usually made without the input of ordinary citizens, least of all youth. The result is both a vacuum of services and an overly severe security response that fuels governance grievances. That these grievances helped give rise to Boko Haram is a worrying prospect, given these conditions are replicated in other parts of Nigeria. Insecurity already plagues the Middle Belt, where communities also hold the government accountable for a lack of development. Furthermore, Boko Haram has shown an ability to recruit outside of core areas, perhaps because similar governance grievances

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46   Humphreys and Weinstein found having friends who were combatants increased the likelihood that people would voluntarily join militant groups. While the converse has not been empirically tested, research has shown that peers have a strong influence on young people's behavior. Therefore if the majority of their peers are non-combatants, they may be less likely to join militant movements. Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy M. Weinstein, 2008.
47   Mercy Corps. 2011. "Youth and Conflict Best Practices." http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/youth_and_conflict_best_practices_-_hi_res_final.pdf.
48   Western support to the Nigerian and regional forces, through equipment, training, and other support, complicates this narrative. But absent an active 'boots on the ground' scenario, the primary agent responsible for defeating Boko Haram is local.

touch many Nigerian youth in the same ways. Transparency and participatory processes that allow government officials and community members to communicate on a regular basis will be fundamental to an improved governance system.

Civil society can work with government to help youth form advocacy groups through which they connect with Local Government Authorities and State Governors' offices on a regular basis to find joint solutions around issues of collective grievances. Through this engagement, youth and government officials can jointly create initiatives to increase entrepreneurship opportunities, for example, and advocate for increased budget resources from state and federal ministries to address what citizens perceive as their most pressing development needs. Dialogue-based open meetings where youth can share their concerns should be paired with action initiatives in which government representatives and youth work side-by-side to address problems in their 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 their positive social connections, in terms of both peer groups and positive role models. Cultivating ethnically and religiously diverse youth groups—that cross community lines—may help provide youth with wider social connections and the broader perspective they need to resist Boko Haram recruitment. Forming activity clubs both within school systems and in informal or non-school settings will help strengthen youth's social networks and provide opportunities for continued learning. For young women in particular, these groups can help provide safe spaces to strengthen in- or out-of-school learning options, comparatively reducing one of Boko Haram's sources of appeal.

    Inter-generational and peer mentoring opportunities will help provide youth with positive role models who can influence their decisions. Involving religious and traditional leaders in youth-focused programs can connect moderate leaders to youth and ensure that communities are jointly working to protect youth, create places for dialogue, and provide opportunities for positive social interaction. Focusing on already influential youth who have the potential to dissuade their peers from joining has worked in other contexts, helping youth reduce their acceptance of violence as a way to manage conflict.[49] Finally, educating parents on how to talk to their children about violent extremist groups will also help families cultivate ongoing, productive dialogue to prepare youth to resist potential recruitment schemes.

    Importantly, profiling based on demographics, such as type of educational background, poverty level, or ethnicity, should not be used when targeting participants for social support or other interventions. For example, profiling *Almajirai* as members or potential members would risk further alienating these already marginalized youth. Interventions should be aimed at entire communities, where community members can help youth resist the pull of Boko Haram. Friends and families are best positioned to identify youth most at risk and, with the help of planned community interventions, can support them to reduce underlying grievances.

3. **Help youth achieve their ambitions, starting with increasing their access to financial and business services.** Mercy Corps joins the chorus of voices challenging the assumption that idle youth will be more likely to join violent extremist movements. As employment and vocational skills training programs dominate discussions at a national policy level, we risk falling into old traps that solely promote jobs for peace. This study found an importantly nuanced relationship among conflict, ambition, and entrepreneurship. In Nigeria, many youth see entrepreneurship as their ticket to getting ahead—to getting

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49 Paluck, Elizabeth, et al. 2015. "Changing Climates of Conflict: A Social Network Experiment in 56 Schools." Proceedings from the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. http://www.pnas.org/content/113/3/566.full.pdf.

what they think they deserve. In the context of a highly unequal, capitalist society where youth want to climb the economic ladder, supporting youth to become the successful entrepreneurs of their aspirations could help fill a gap that, until now, Boko Haram has exploited effectively.

While there may be other ways that programs and government can help youth achieve their ambitions, this study found that Boko Haram's use of financial services in particular, in the form of loans and cash to support their businesses, has successfully drawn youth to join. Improving youth's access to business support or financial services throughout the most conflict-affected areas will help youth feel like they have a viable alternative to the informal—and risky—financing scheme on offer by Boko Haram. While more exploration is needed into what programming packages are most likely to succeed, agencies should explore informal financial solutions for young business owners, such as village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) or savings and credit cooperative societies (SACCOs). These groups can be supported and tailored to specific communities to allow youth to save money and also borrow to expand their businesses when necessary. In the long term, NGOs and government should work with financing institutions and banks to explore appropriate, Islamic-compliant products that will support small- and micro-business owners. Other entrepreneurial alternatives, such as cash injections or capital, may help youth get the support they want. Further research and improved dialogue with local populations should begin now to determine which financial or business services will best serve their needs.

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