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Reintegrating Ex-Combatants: An Assessment of Operation Safe Corridor

Idayat Hassan[a1]
[a]Director, Centre for Democracy and Development, Abuja, Nigeria

Abstract
This paper presents the findings of an assessment of a government-run deradicalization program called Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) in northeast Nigeria. OPSC is a restricted custodial program through which 900 ex-combatants have passed since 2015. The major aim of OPSC is the deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of repentant ex-combatants in the war-ravaged zone. Using a qualitative research framework, primary data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with stakeholders across Borno, Adamawa, and Gombe, Nigeria. Using purposive sampling, a sample of 122 was drawn from the population of the study. which includes ex-combatants in holding, graduates of the OPSC, staff of the OPSC, community members, government officials, and representatives from the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). A total of 50 KIIs and 6 FGDs were conducted with 72 participants across the three selected states. This was supplemented by a literature review. The findings show that while the OPSC has been lauded in terms of receptivity, deradicalization, and reintegration of ex-combatants, the program is challenged by issues of credibility and acceptance in the wider community. This paper documents the challenges associated with the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-terrorists in the context of ongoing terrorist attacks by their former group, particularly in communities that have been or continue to be affected by terrorism. It presents recommendations to address resentment and grievances in the affected communities, support community participation, and improve communications to combat popular resistance to OPSC.

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Background

The activities of the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Wal-Jihad* (JNIM), popularly known as *Boko Haram*, and its splinter group, the Islamic State for West Africa Province (ISWAP), have resulted in 20,000 to 30,000 fatalities and the displacement of over 2.3 million people since 2009 (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED], 2022). Between 2009 and 2015, the group took control of extensive territories in northeastern Nigeria after an extremely

[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Idayat Hassan, Email: hadizahassan70@yahoo.com, House 16, A7 street, Mount Pleasant Estate (CITEC) Mbora, Abuja, Nigeria.

violent spree in which they destroyed the livelihoods of millions, constituting a significant threat to the integrity of the Nigerian state (Awojobi, 2014). Between 2014 and 2015, the insurgents took over substantial parts of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, including the state capital of Borno—Maiduguri (Hassan & Pieri, 2015). At its peak, the audacious mass abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2015 by Boko Haram drew global attention, propelling the group to overtake the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) as the world's deadliest terrorist group (Pisa & Hume, 2015). Its increasing military raids and attacks, which had spilled into the neighboring states in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB), necessitated the reconstitution of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF).

The MNJTF was originally formed in 1994 by Nigeria's then-military head of state, Sani Abacha, to address the problem of banditry and cross-border crime. The task force was expanded in 1998 to include units from Chad and Niger to facilitate free movement among the member states of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) (Sahara Reporter, 2013). The Lake Chad countries, including the Republic of Benin, came together under the auspices of the African Union (AU) to relaunch the task force in April 2012 to combat terrorism, specifically the Boko Haram insurgency. This is against the backdrop of the complexities inherent to such collaborations between nations, mostly resource-related competition, inconsistencies in commitment, disjointed planning, and challenges to state legitimacy, in addition to shifting alliances within the countries (Ibrahim & Bala, 2018).

Supervised by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and with support from international partners and donors, the MNJTF launched several counter-offensive operations, including *Gama Aiki* (2016), *Gama Aiki II* (2017), and *Amni Faka* (2018), which involved military airstrikes on the insurgent's strongholds, dislodging insurgents, freeing captives, and securing borders. This succeeded in weakening the insurgent's ability to attack towns, and large military installations (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). This collaboration was short-lived due to poor intelligence and the highly adaptive skills of the insurgents as well as a weak Nigerian response resulting from distrust and the delayed delivery of necessary kits for operations. However, it was said to have reduced acts of terror by 75% (Walker, 2017; Matfess, et al., 2016). This facilitated the recapturing of most territories and the delivery of humanitarian aid to communities affected by the insurgency (Brechenmacher, 2019).

However, even though the counter-offensive succeeded in pushing the insurgents out of most of the provinces in the northeast region, it did not stop their operations altogether. The insurgents were still able to recruit, generate funds, acquire weaponry, and regroup (Khalid, 2021; Pieri & Zenn, 2016). Although intra-group tension led to a split in 2016, resulting in the creation of a new faction—the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), this only escalated violence in the region. Following the group pledging its allegiance to ISIS in 2015, the ISIS leadership asked the group to adhere to its principles of not killing civilians, especially women and children. Yet despite several warnings, Shekau—the group's commander who succeeded its founder Muhammad Yusuf, continued killing civilians indiscriminately in addition to unleashing female suicide bombers to attack the public (Brooks, 2014). The split formally happened in 2016 when the ISIS leadership "recognized and appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Yusuf's son as the de facto leader of ISWAP which Shekau refused to accept" (United Nations Security Council, 2008), birthing al-Barnawi's faction (ISWAP). The rivalry between the two factions, ISWAP and Shekau's Boko Haram, escalated violence in the region, with each faction trying to outdo the other.

Before this split, the group had drawn international attention for the audacious abduction of 276 schoolgirls in 2014; in his acknowledgment of the abduction, Shekau also claimed he planned to sell the girls, sparking global outrage (Kutsch, 2014). Protests took place around the world, both online and physically at Nigerian embassies, especially after local and international activists described the government's efforts at rescuing the girls as "tepid" (De Bode, 2014). This description is not far-off, as the use of brute force through military airstrikes and measures such as imposing states of emergency in the three most affected states (Borno, Adamawa, and Yola) had been ineffective at best, harming civilians more than the insurgents. Besides the economic hardship brought by the state of emergency, the military was arresting and detaining civilians due to the lack of intelligence and their inability to distinguish between Boko Haram suspects. This left community members feeling antagonized and endangered.

Faced with local and international pressure, the federal government intensified its counter-offensive, but this time it involved community members to fill the intelligence gap. The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) was a community response to the fight against the

insurgents, wherein vigilante groups were mobilized to join the military forces in ridding the region of the Boko Haram insurgency. This move proved to be a breakthrough as it succeeded in neutralizing many of the insurgents through military raids and took back many of the communities formally captured by the terror group. This effort, although the most successful since the beginning of the war did not last long, as yet another armed militia group was added to the trajectories of violence in the region.

Against the government's premature declarations of victory, which were heavily criticized as unwise, as "there is usually a massacre anytime there's a government statement to that effect" (Campbell, n.d., as cited in Brooks, 2014), the insurgents have proved resilient, claiming the lives of many and causing grave devastation to life and property (ICG, 2022; Felbab-Brown, 2018). According to the US Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence (2011), the target of the insurgents has shifted, as ISWAP is more interested in Western infrastructure and Western targets. However, civilians, especially in rural, hard-to-reach areas with little or no security presence, still bear the brunt of most of the attacks. In 2019 alone, about 2,733 people were killed across communities in the northeast region due to the activities of ISWAP. Over 10,000 people have fled Borno state owing to the activities of the insurgents (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). The resilience of the terror group points to the weaknesses of the use of force in ending the menace.

To complement the kinetic efforts and restore peace in the northeast, the Nigerian state set up Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) as a non-coercive approach to ending the insurgency. Before its formation, several attempts at negotiation were made by the state to persuade the insurgents to cease their violent campaign to no avail, leaving the state with little or no option but to incentivize the insurgents to defect to weaken the group and rehabilitate the defectors. OPSC was the outcome of the National Security Council Meeting held in September 2015. The Nigerian state had no national disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) policy as this was its first time resorting to amnesty peace deals. Nigeria experimented with several DDR programs; the most notable among them was the Post-Amnesty Programme (PAP), currently in its 11th year (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2022). Although the PAP had been successful in achieving disarmament and demobilization, leading

to the reduction of militancy in the Niger Delta, Ikelegbebe, and Umukoro (2016) noted that its design was flawed such that it could not be terminated without the risk of militancy remerging in the region.

OPSC, unlike the PAP, is a comprehensive deradicalization of religion-based terrorists, a component that is relatively new in the implementation of DDR. It is a restricted, custodial program aimed at DDR for repentant, low-risk members of Boko Haram. Under temporary confinement, the aim is to deradicalize former members by providing Islamic reeducation while also equipping them with skills for their reintegration back into the community. In theory, the program is expected to last for 16 to 24 weeks; however, in practice, it takes one year (KII with Mallam Sidi Staff, 2019). Fashioned after global best practices and lessons learned from the PAP, OPSC has been lauded as the most developed DDR initiative among the LCB's national efforts toward addressing Boko Haram. In Nigeria, OPSC is important in facilitating peace and complementing operation *Lafiya Dole* (Peace by Force), the military operation that aimed to end the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast.

As of December 2019, over 1,500 ex-combatants had surrendered to the military. A total of 920 repentant Boko Haram insurgents had passed through the program, of which 872 were reintegrated, and some were repatriated to their countries (GIST, 2021). Despite these success stories, OPSC has continued to generate considerable criticism from the public, especially from the affected communities. In the immediate community, many victims and members of the CJTF perceive it as a plot designed to recycle ex-combatants back into society as Trojan horses for the insurgents; people from the southern part of the country see it as a ploy to circulate the insurgents to the south by integrating them into the military (Ayandele, 2020).

Ugwueze et al. (2021) and Owonikoko (2022), among others, focus on the evolution, design, and implementation of the OPSC program and its reintegration challenges. However, few studies have attempted to determine the success of the program in achieving its mission. This study uses qualitative data from primary and secondary sources to assess the deradicalization and rehabilitation processes in the OPSC program, thus highlighting its challenges and successes while also providing insights into how the community perceives the

ex-combatants. This study was guided by the following questions: How did the clients[2] perceive the deradicalization program? What kinds of change did the staff look out for and what was their definition of success? What practices/programs/interventions did they perceive as effective in achieving these changes? What did they see as constraints to the reformation/deradicalization of the participants? Understanding the program's institutional and legal framework vis-à-vis how it is being perceived by both the clients and staff can stimulate discourse on improving its processes. Lessons learned can inform how subsequent actions regarding current or future programs are conceived of and implemented.

To understand OPSC and the challenges of re-integrating ex-combatants, this article begins by tracing the origin of OPSC to provide context. Subsequently, the methodology employed in the study is outlined. Then, the origin of OPSC is traced to provide context. From the findings of the study, the reasons insurgents consent to participate in the OPSC program are analyzed. This is followed by looking closely at its deradicalization and rehabilitation programs. The challenges related to re-integration are also explained and recommendations based on the findings are provided.

Literature Review

Many countries dealing with insurgencies have continued to turn to deradicalization programs and initiatives as a counter-terrorism measure (Basra and Neumann, 2020; Khalil, et al., 2019; Club and Tapley, 2018). However, these deradicalization processes vary widely in terms of their forms, procedures, and approaches depending on the nature of terrorism itself and the theory of deradicalization adopted (Koehler, 2017, Barrelle, 2015). Although there is no “one best way” to deradicalize, common themes and problems can be discerned across them (Altier, 2021). The major problem, however, with deradicalization initiatives and programs is the difficulties in ascertaining the appropriate design to be adopted, implementation, and measurement of efficacy (Koehler, 2017). This is mostly related to the lack of coherent theoretical and methodological standards for identifying and applying the appropriate deradicalization methods and a comprehensive evaluation method. The deradicalization

[2] Surrendered ex-combatants are usually referred to as clients to build trust and maintain a neutral relationship.

process is usually a complex and delicate counter-terrorism strategy that requires high operational standards and procedures, expert training, and more importantly identifying the best model for a sustainable disengagement of the target group (Koehler, 2017). Identifying the appropriate technique is crucial, as these lapses run the risk of releasing committed combatants back into society, after wasting resources on deradicalization (Altier, 2021).

Some deradicalization models are more focused on individual risk assessment and motive for accepting to be deradicalized (Altier et al., 2017). Another DDR model is the Pro-Integration Model (PIM) based on a holistic framework, where the community's acceptance through reintegration into mainstream society is the focus of deradicalization (Barrelle, 2015). For such a model, DDR should focus on supporting individual ex-combatant to build functional and meaningful relationships and improving social cohesion instead of behavioral change focusing on the individual. Although Nigeria's OPSC is designed as a nonlinear approach of deradicalization, it is more focused on camp activities, rather than supporting the ex-combatants to build a social identity at the point of reintegration, nor preparing the communities to receive them. Nigeria's OPSC approach to deradicalization is through in-camp refutations, positive illustrations, as well as counter-narratives targeted at religious ideology, political grievances, and post-exit trauma (Asim, 2015).

Silke, et al, (2021) highlighted factors that should be considered when designing or assessing deradicalization programs in their Phoenix Model of disengagement and deradicalization. It is a more generic approach that focuses on identity dynamics as a critical factor in the deradicalization process. While it also supports the development of deradicalization programs, a general identity transformation is also stressed.

Nigeria, DDR, and Boko Haram: An Overview of OPSC

In addition to the resiliency of the insurgency, several other factors accounted for the creation of the OPSC as a sanctioned process through which members of the Boko Haram sect can exit the group. The military lacked well-defined screening criteria for arresting and detaining suspected Boko Haram members and had been indiscriminately arresting people, which led to overcrowded prisons and a judicial overload. Some Boko Haram fighters and associates were

said to have been forcibly conscripted, abducted, and/or blackmailed into the group (Mercy Corps, 2016), which makes surrendering easier for them, especially when presented with incentives. Before that, older members of the sect are said to have even fled their communities when the group transformed its mission from *dawah* (the proselytization of Islam) to destructive jihad (the spread of Islam through unholy war). Following a series of events that led to the death of Shekau, the leader of the JNIM (he is said to have blown himself up during a confrontation with the group's sister faction, ISWAP), members of Shekau's camp were left with little or no choice but to surrender to the Nigerian authority or join the other camp (Daily Trust, 2021). Increased military pressure, closely monitored borders, and the willingness of forcibly conscripted members to escape has led to an increase in the number of ex-combatants defecting from the group. Amidst these, was the recognition of the need to carefully implement conflict management strategies that can provide ex-combatants with routes to demobilize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate as part of the wider counter-insurgency strategy.

From its inception, OPSC was conceived as a counter-terrorism strategy and was initially developed by security services in Nigeria through a convening order issued in September 2015 by President Muhammad Buhari. Over time, other sectors and departments, such as the National Orientation Agency (NOAA), National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), and the Federal Ministry of Human Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development (FMHADMSD), became involved in its implementation. The committee comprised the governors of the three most affected states, namely Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, and members drawn from the security agencies across the three states and the federal territory, Abuja. The OPSC program focuses exclusively on low-level and low-risk Boko Haram members who surrendered during the military onslaught and were conscripted to join the Boko Haram against their will and felt disenchanted with the activities and leadership of the group (GIST, 2021). OPSC is the first multi-agency and state-implemented soft approach aimed at rehabilitating low-risk, repentant ex-insurgents who are deemed eligible following screening exercises conducted by the Joint Investigation Centre (JIC), which comprises representatives of all stakeholders. According to GIST (2021), the defector pathway is a five-step process:

1) Reception of surrendered ex-combatants
2) Documentation and profiling at the camp
3) Implementation of deradicalization and rehabilitation interventions
4) Strategic communication and community/civil-military intervention
5) Further rehabilitation and reintegration of deradicalized clients

The first process involves the reception, disarming, and screening of defectors, who were captured, surrendered, and arrested before they are transferred to the camp. This first screening is conducted by the JIC in Giwa barracks with representatives of the police, Department of State Services (DSS), Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS), Nigerian Commission Services (NCS), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Ministry of Justice (MOJ), CJTF, and community leaders. The investigation is usually done by looking into defectors' backgrounds and their reasons for joining the sect, the outcome which will determine whether the defector is considered high risk, low risk, or innocent. The criteria for a defector to be categorized as low risk are not clear, other than if they are not hardened or committed fighters, which is usually at the discretion of the JIC members. There are reports that some hardened ex-combatants have gotten away with this by providing false or incomplete information (GIST, 2021). Those considered to be high-risk are taken to Kainji prison to await trial, while those who "passed" the screening, after giving their consent, are sent to Mallam Sidi camp.

Upon arrival at the camp, the low-risk ex-combatants are subjected to further scrutiny and medical assessments. They go through drug tests and further profiling based on their degree of engagement with the group and level of radicalization, and their needs are then assessed. Contrary to their abhorrence of Western education and things that are related to the West, narcotics and condoms have been found on several occasions at destroyed insurgent camps, showing that they are abusing drugs (Omonobi, 2013). Additionally, in September 2015, the third Division troops intercepted and seized cargo belonging to the insurgents containing drugs, sex-enhancing stimulants, and fuel (Yahoo News, 2015). The relationship between mind-altering substances and terrorism has long been established; drugs not only fund terrorism, but they are also propellants of crime and criminality, especially of the

heinous acts and the lack of remorse that comes with terrorism (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). The drug assessment is an essential part of ex-insurgents' rehabilitation, and other assessments are done to inform the design of their customized program at the camp. Those admitted undergo several weeks of religious reeducation and vocational training and receive psychosocial support at a military-run facility.

The defectors are re-educated and equipped with the necessary skills to become useful members of society upon release from the program. The OPSC Camp was established in April 2016 with an initial deployment of officers, men, and civilian personnel from all branches of the armed forces. However, the camp personnel were drawn from across 17 ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), including imams and psychologists, supported by agencies and NGOs, including UNICEF, the CDD, and the Northeast Regional Initiative (NERI), to handle implementation. This set the stage for the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants. The OPSC Camp was set up at the former National Service Commission Corps (NYSC) camp in Mallam Sidi Community, Gombe state. Originally built for NYSC Orientation, the camp was extensively renovated to include security provisions that house those enrolled in the program until they are deemed suitable for release (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019).

There are differences between OPSC and other amnesty programs such as the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) for ex-militants in the Niger Delta region. To differentiate them, the commandant of the DDR, Brigadier-General Musa Ibrahim was quoted as saying, "What we are doing in OPSC has no basis for comparison. When you are rehabilitating, deradicalizing, and reintegrating. Others are just disarming and resettling" (Bamas & Okafor, 2020). Ex-combatants are re-educated in terms of their ideology, trained in vocational skills, and weaned off drugs at the same time; they are also given therapy to overcome their trauma. However, despite its successes, several lapses have been identified in the program, especially in its reintegration process. There are difficulties in measuring behavioral change. Further, there is no consensus on how deradicalization is defined. Experts have argued that there is no universal path to deradicalization, as the process of radicalization is, in itself, highly individualized (Vidino, 2010). This brings to the fore the question of whether the curriculum is sufficient to hinder recidivism. Coupled with this is a lack of clarity

on the eligibility of ex-combatants for reintegration and reintegration strategies. While the authorities insist that the criteria are quite clear, as only low-risk combatants are qualified, the definition of who qualifies as a low-risk combatant is quite ambiguous. The screening by the JIC segregates the hardened insurgents to be prosecuted from the low-risk ones that are to be enrolled in the OPSC program. However, the criteria for what should be considered "low risk" is not clearly defined. At one end are the ex-fighters, whose low-risk status depends on first, their reasons for leaving the group, whether they were forcibly conscripted, and their level of radicalization. They are assessed through interrogation and cross-checking of information regarding their radical beliefs, reasons for joining the group, and the role they played during their active days (Owonikoko, 2022). The major problem with this categorization is the lack of a reliable method of verification. Recall that before the intervention of the CJTF, the military was engaging in arbitrary arrests, especially around communities suspected to be harboring the insurgents for the same reason. Many of those arrested are still in detention despite having no connection to the group. How reliable are these subjective assessments? There are allegations that some ex-combatants distort their stories to earn sympathy. Additionally, the reasons for exit are complex and personal. For example, many women are reported to have escaped because of the deplorable conditions of the insurgents' camp, not because of their repentance. Women are mostly categorized as unwilling associates and therefore sent to the Bulumkutu Transition Camp or directly to camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri. All these points highlight the need for a more objective screening process to ensure reliability and consistency—as opposed to depending on human subjectivity, which is prone to oversights and errors.

In line with global best practices, reintegration involves ex-combatants who have accepted a peace deal and are ready to go through a reparations process. In this type of conventional DDR, reintegration is usually offered after ex-combatants have been offered and have accepted amnesty by the government. These agreements usually spell out the criteria for screening and eligibility. For example, in the Republic of Niger's DDR, only defectors who willingly surrendered are eligible for rehabilitation and reintegration, and only after a transitional reparation process for victims. According to Brechenmacher (2018), this allows smooth reintegration by ensuring that victims get justice. This is not the case with the DDR

for Boko Haram insurgents who have repeatedly rejected peace deals and negotiations by the Nigerian government. The DDR was established to incentivize defectors after efforts at peace deals failed. This has created suspicion around and mistrust of OPSC among the wider community, with many viewing it as promoting impunity and denying justice to the victims (Odita et al., 2021). A related issue is the problem of limited community involvement: ex-combatants are prepared for reintegration, but community members often feel "forced" to buy into the program. The program is also said to lack political buy-in, with major political figures criticizing it openly.

Findings

Reasons for Consenting to Participate in the OPSC Program

OPSC is like internment under a non-international armed conflict, although the individuals involved partake voluntarily. In such cases, the government must observe all international laws and customs vis-à-vis the procedures for internment in a non-international armed conflict, such as the Boko Haram insurgency. Internment refers to the non-criminal detention of a person based on the serious threat that their activity poses to the security of a detaining authority vis-à-vis an armed conflict. When deprivation of liberty reaches a certain temporal threshold or is motivated by the seriousness of the security threat they pose, the risk of arbitrariness must be mitigated by clarity on the grounds for internment and necessary procedures. The OPSC program is restricted and involves the custodial confinement of ex-combatants. However, it breaches neither the Nigerian constitution nor international laws, as the restrictions on the liberty of those participating in the program are based on their voluntary surrender and consent to the program.

OPSC involves individuals who consent to participate in the program, meaning that it is not detention in a facility. However, the legal provision is that there must be informed consent, meaning that the individuals must be informed of their rights. Participants must also understand what they are consenting to (e.g., the objectives, content, risks, benefits, time frame for the program, and the process after the conclusion of the program and any legal implications such as pardon/amnesty), and they must understand their alternatives and the

risks and benefits of those alternatives. The information provided during interviews with ex-combatants showed that they had consented to participate for various reasons. The reasons for their defections were similar to those for their cooptation into the group in the first place. The terror group was described as diverse in its recruitment strategies, often targeting *Madrassas*, markets, and family connections. Most interviewees said that they were drawn to economic incentives, a promise of regular income, and trade opportunities. Others were ideologically driven; still, others joined for security, and some even mentioned being forcibly recruited. Most ex-combatants defected for the same reasons: fear of risking their lives, inadequate income, poor living conditions, and disenchantment with the ideology. An ex-combatant was forced by his brother to join the group. He said, "Most youths in my village (*Dunga)* are Boko Haram members, I have to associate with them because I am a trader. They buy foodstuff from me" (KII with ex-combatant, 2019). Another recounted his decision to leave as follows:

> Many of us listened to radio stations like BBC and VOA…. I listened to these radio stations frequently to the extent that when I went to sleep, I would think of all that I had heard. I realized that all our activities were evil. We killed, stole, and dispossessed people of their properties in the name of religion. But what we did was not religion! Finally, I got fed up with the group. (KII with ex-combatant, 2019)

Deradicalization and Rehabilitation

When asked about the DDR program, most clients were happy with their decision and were positive about its outcome. At the time of data collection, 251 ex-combatants who joined the program in the first and second cohorts had completed and commended the program. They said that they had good living conditions and enjoyed economic empowerment and religious counseling. The interviewees said that this alone, when compared to the deplorable conditions in the forest, had the potential to make more of them disengage. They kept referring to recreational activities, such as football matches, watching movies, playing music, and acting, as the highlights of their stay. One respondent recounted how acting on stage was his fondest memory. These positive camp experiences as reported by ex-combatants overshadowed their

experiences in the Sambisa Forest: “It is right to assume that the experience in the camp is a taste of freedom that some had never experienced before!” (KII with ex-combatant, 2019).

The respondents were happy with their newly acquired skills, such as phone repair, carpentry, and the like. Others expressed concerns regarding opportunities for personal development, as it related to their ability to cope with the outside world. For instance, two young men interviewed could barely comprehend conversation in English let alone string whole sentences together on their own. They were skeptical about how they would find work once they graduated, even though parts of the curriculum included basic literacy and numeracy in English. This raises important questions on how intensive the skills acquisition courses are and whether they target available jobs outside the camp. At graduation, the clients are given a starter package containing some startup capital and some of the equipment they will need to kickstart their acquired skills. However, some graduates complained that it is not enough to sustain a source of livelihood.

Recreation, group entertainment, and skills acquisition were some of the most impactful aspects of the program, as identified by the beneficiaries. From their explanations, these aspects of the in-camp activities remained etched in their memories partly because they were a source of escape from their traumatic and regimented lifestyles with the Boko Haram. The convivial peer environment, which had been lacking for many of the ex-combatants, especially those who were forcefully conscripted, presented a relaxing environment that helped them lay down their guard. Many ex-combatants were taken in their early teen years and had been deprived of a natural, risk-free environment with the latitude to make mistakes and grow organically. The environment within the DDR camp offered them a similar experience. One respondent said,

> I cannot forget the time we spent on recreational activities such as playing football with my former colleagues, watching films, playing music, and dancing. I also love stage drama performances. These were often recorded and played back to us. (KII with ex-combatant, 2019)

When asked to name the part of the in-camp program they enjoyed more than the recreational activities, several respondents said that they liked the deradicalization sessions. Citing spiritual counseling and *Sulh* narratives as eye-openers that countered Boko Haram narratives, several ex-combatants felt that they had acquired a better understanding of the Quran. While this may speak to the criticism of the use of a uniform curriculum on deradicalization, it did not present a problem at the time of data collection. The staff did not report any recidivism. One of the graduates explained how the deradicalization program had made him change his mindset, saying,

> When I was in Gombe, the experts told me everything I needed to know. The teachings and orientation I received made me more aware, and today, I feel sick when I think of my earlier views and beliefs! I hate Boko Haram. (KII with Mallam Sidi graduate, 2019)

The OPSC Camp staff considered the DDR program successful because there has been little or no recidivism since its inception. Although this has been discarded as a means of measuring the success of any DDR program (Clubb & Tapley, 2018), the findings show a consensus that the lack of recidivism proves all aspects of the programs had contributed to its effectiveness. However, they singled out drug rehabilitation, spiritual deradicalization, and one-on-one counseling and psychotherapy as highlights of the rehabilitation process. There was also a consensus among the respondents (both clients and staff) that the ex-combatants tended to develop a new understanding of Islam during their time in the Gombe camp. The respondents explained that during their stay, imams that visited refuted the Boko Haram narratives by deconstructing their content and replacing it with meaningful text in a manner that made sense to them. One respondent said, “After attending the religious classes in the camp, my beliefs and sympathy for the Boko Haram ideology were reversed” (KII with ex-combatant, 2019). The respondents said that the program had given them a better understanding of what *Boko* (Western education) means. One noted how he had embraced the concepts of democracy and “one Nigeria” and said, “I feel more positive toward Nigeria and her leaders” (KII with ex-combatant, 2019). However, despite the glowing review, some staff

and clients were of the view that it would be better if there were fewer beneficiaries as the classes were overcrowded.

Reintegration

The reintegration process is an important part of the OPSC program. With this goal in mind, the program equips its clients with vocational and life skills and civic education to prepare them for life outside the camp. Their family members can visit them during the program. The clients can also maintain contact with religious and community leaders ahead of reintegration. The OPSC program organizes a graduation ceremony where clients swear an oath of allegiance before a High Court judge, saying,

> I swear that I will obey the rules and regulations of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and that I was formerly a Boko Haram member but have now sincerely repented and promised to totally disassociate myself in any way whatsoever from the group and that I will be dutiful to my country and contribute to its development, so help me God (KII with Mallam Staff, 2019).

The OPSC officials map out possible communities where clients can be reintegrated, from which the ex-combatants are usually asked to choose. Most ex-combatants tend to want to resettle in communities where they have families. However, some were unsure whether returning to communities where their families lived was a good idea. When asked to explain, one respondent said, “We know the community members are afraid of us, and they don’t believe that we have changed, but that is the only community we know” (KII with ex-combatant, 2019). From the Mallam Sidi camp, only two Chadians had graduated from the program at the time of writing and had been repatriated to their country. As the staff explained, after the community is mapped out, sensitization and stakeholder meetings are held in the community with religious leaders and traditional rulers. This is to create awareness and to prepare the communities for the reception of the ex-combatants. The traditional leaders are key in these meetings as they are the custodians of the community and can intervene to ensure that the ex-combatants are well-received and settled. This contradicts the claims in the

literature that communities are not prepared to receive ex-combatants. Perhaps this assumption is based on the fact that OPSC is not directly involved in this sensitization, rather it is supported by the CDD and the Northeast Development Commission (NEDC). The sensitization meeting is designed to engage, inform, and prepare the affected communities ahead of the ex-combatant's reintegration. After sensitization, the clients are handed over to the state government for reintegration into their communities. However, some community members, during the FGDs, expressed their resentment toward the OPSC program. Most opposed reintegration for several reasons, the most significant of which were the absence of justice and reparations for victims, mistrust of the motives behind the defection, disbelief that Boko Haram can be deradicalized, and fear of violence from the ex-combatants. Most community members are still reeling from the trauma of Boko Haram's actions and thus expressed anger toward the OPSC program. A traditional leader asked why he should persuade people to accept their assailants back into their community:

> …why should I allow your so-called repented Boko Haram members back into my community? Among the first batch of OPSC graduates is a young man, who butchered my brother in broad daylight, and I saw him doing so. How can I handle the issue of reconciliation and reintegration when I am still healing from these wounds and the perpetrator is being taken care of by the state? (CDD community sensitization visit, November 2018)

Other community members also had similar views and expressed their anger at the injustice of being forced to live with their former tormentors. One participant recounted how he lost about 29 members of his family to the insurgents. He asked, "How do you expect me to live in peace with the so-called 'deradicalized' Boko Haram?" (FGD with male community members, Maiduguri, 2019). For the community members, accepting former Boko Haram members, even if they are repentant, is risky as they may take up arms again, "I won't feel safe anytime I come across them (ex-combatants) on the street, I will be thinking they are about to launch an attack" (KII with female 32-year-old, IDP camp Maiduguri, 2019). The FGD participants also expressed concerns over the lack of clarity on the criteria for

establishing that a Boko Haram member was repentant, which they considered an opening for the insurgents to recycle themselves back into society. Many believe that some of the ex-combatants are not truly repentant, rather they are just coming back to spy or rebuild ways of expanding the sect. Generally, participants believed that the ex-combatants used the OPSC program for their own gain, mostly to access the starter package provided by the program. During the FGD sessions, one participant said: "A Boko haram (member) is like a leopard that can never change its spots, they can pretend today, but they will always go back to their group" (FGD with community members, Yola, 2019). This sentiment was echoed among some governmental officials, who corroborated the community members' statements and the claims of analysts highlighted earlier, that OPSC does not connote political buy-in. A senior government official during the KII said, "Boko Haram cannot be trusted, they love money so much, so some of them joined the OPSC program just to get money and gather intelligence for their members in the bush" (KII with a government official, Maiduguri 2019).

While most community members believe that it is impossible to deradicalize Boko Haram members, they are, however, willing to excuse those who were forcefully conscripted. "It is possible to deradicalize ex-combatants who were forced to join, but it will be difficult to do so with those who joined voluntarily" (FGD with male community members, Maiduguri, 2019). There is a near consensus among community members from the FGDs that only former Boko Haram members who were conscripted should be reintegrated into the communities. This perspective is framed within a religious understanding as those who joined the sect voluntarily are considered people without "faith" and cannot have true repentance. Those conscripted, however, are considered capable of repentance. Thus, deradicalization for many community members is equal to repentance.

The OPSC clients (defectors) were apprehensive about their reintegration and mostly concerned about starting afresh. They were particularly concerned about the applicability of their newly acquired skills and the availability of jobs on the outside. To understand this better, the graduates, while sharing their experiences, mentioned the problems they faced with the starter package; their relationships with the CJTF, who acted like their parole officers; and the community response to their reintegration. First, it takes time for the starter package to arrive, and when it does, the content in most cases is not sufficient. This poses a problem as

there is a higher likelihood for ex-combatants to return to their old ways if they do not have work. One respondent said that he had a cordial relationship with his CJTF, unlike others who had strained relationships. His main challenge, however, was the issue of acceptance from his new community. He complained of low patronage for his business and noted that people preferred to ignore him rather than buy his products. Such resentment and animosity were mostly fueled by the lack of justice for victims and perceived injustice around seeing ex-combatants gaining economic benefits as part of DDR. It was a sensitive topic for the community members during the FGDs, as it usually brought up points on how the ex-combatants were merciless. The lack of reparations for victims is a serious impediment to reconciliation and sustainable reintegration. This confirms the fear among the community, indicating that more needs to be done to ensure that the community is also on board. However, the NEDC and CDD have done a lot to bridge this gap, especially with the CDD's *Sulhu Alheri*, and its support for the Kabara transitional justice system in Adamawa state, all of which are targeted at community involvement in the process and ensuring transitional justice.

One other challenge relating to reintegration as observed by the staff of the OPSC program was the delay in relocation. In most cases, delays are caused by the reluctance of states to accept ex-combatants. In their defense, there are a lot of politics and pressures associated with accepting ex-combatants owing to the lack of community buy-in. While this is obvious to the staff, clients consider it a deception, which affects their hard-earned trust in the program. Trust is an integral part of the program, which is built painstakingly throughout the process of deradicalization and rehabilitation. The staff feared losing their client's trust. The findings show that reintegration is a problem and suggest the need for a more holistic framework involving reconciliation and reparations.

Challenges with the OPSC

The data show the following challenges: gaps in communication, problems with staff capacity and coordination, problematic screening and categorization, lack of accountability, poor community participation, and funding gaps. Each of these is examined below.

Communication

OPSC targets fighters and encourages them to surrender; it also targets communities to show them that the fighters are repentant. This has been an ongoing process. However, the data show that the program has not been successful on either end. Affected communities have a wrong idea about the program and perceive it as enabling injustice. Media campaigns often showcase ex-combatants enjoying the DDR program, eating good food, and sleeping in good conditions, which most victims and affected communities lack. According to one respondent, "The OPSC videos show the former fighters learning a trade and getting good food, whereas these are not available in the IDP camps. They get economic incentives to begin a business after exiting the program!" (KII with a 33-year-old male, IDP Maiduguri, 2019). This has been fueled by misinformation and fake news, especially through social media, which often portrays ex-combatants as being rewarded for committing such atrocities. It is also not effective in incentivizing fighters to defect. During the KII, a graduate of OPSC also faulted the campaign strategy, citing the need for it to be conducted in Kanuri and Hausa languages, and calling for greater emphasis on how defectors are disengaged.

> Most of the fighters want to defect but are scared. Some of these videos are shown in English, but not many people understand that. They should be making videos in Hausa and Kanuri. Another thing is the video does not provide information on the surrender and what will happen after. You can't expect me to come forward if I don't know what will happen to me. (KII with Malam Sidi graduate, 2019)

Another graduate explained that despite the threat of death at the Boko Haram camps if they escaped or surrendered to the Nigerian authorities, many insurgents are afraid to surrender due to fear of not knowing what would happen to them. One said: "There have been several allegations of extrajudicial killings of surrendered defectors. A frequently cited example is the alleged murder of a young man by soldiers after he tried to surrender in Gwoza, Borno State" (KII with Malam Sidi graduate, 2019). Regardless of the accuracy of such stories, it is a hindrance to the program. The program must ensure that accurate information is given to the public and that advocacy material speaks more about the

categories of people in the program and the processes that are taking place than anything else. OPSC must build a robust strategic communication program to encourage acquiescence by the public and ensure that defectors know the program's objectives.

Staff Capacity and Coordination

Capacity gaps were identified as a major factor, with most deployed staff lacking capacity in DDR techniques. The responsibility to provide training for the staff deployed to the DDR program lies with the MDAs in charge. However, most of the staff lacked the requisite capacity before arriving at the camp. OPSC made provisions for initial rounds of capacity building for new staff with support from the CDD, International Organization Migration (IOM), and NERI. There is, however, a need to engage further and expand the scope and structure of the training. This problem is complicated by the fact that the staff tenure is just six months. Though renewable, in most instances, the staff are transferred back to their own MDAs to be replaced by new and inexperienced ones. Language was also a barrier as many staff did not speak Hausa or Kanuri, which made communication with the clients difficult. Engaging interpreters was problematic as they were not familiar with the language of the clients and the DDR process. This often left the clients feeling confused. Respondents pointed to instances, where the meaning and understanding were lost during interpretation. Beyond that, interpreters were also in short supply: only four interpreters were available for 509 clients at the time of data collection. This challenge has since been addressed, as permanent staff who speak both languages had been employed, and the camp had begun engaging federal and state medical hospital staff, especially the local ones, to provide health services. Finally, the lack of coordination among different MDAs participating in the program was a cause for concern. This challenge stemmed from the tensions between civilians and the military in the camp, with the former complaining that they had been sidelined by the latter. Coupled with inter-agency rivalry and overlapping responsibilities, the effective implementation of the program was adversely impacted. However, at the time of data collection, this challenge was addressed through strategic communication within the camp.

Problematic Screening and Categorization

The lack of clarity on assessing low-risk ex-combatants and poor communication led to mistrust in the process within the wider community. Respondents from several agencies, all of whom preferred to remain anonymous for security reasons, said that there were deficiencies in the screening process. They noted that the screening process lacked modes of corroborating and verification, which made it difficult to differentiate between low- and high-risk ex-combatants. Some respondents felt that ex-Boko Haram members had even perfected a means of going through the profiling process. Many believed that the screening was not foolproof. This was coupled with confusion in categorization. The program is built in such a way that after screening, those cleared as "non-associated persons" are sent for two weeks to DDR before reintegration. Those identified as high-risk, based on their involvement in the Boko Haram activities and level of violence, are sent to the Kainji or Giwa detention centers to await prosecution. Finally, those identified as low risk are transferred to the deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) camp. The communities were concerned that some of those who were supposed to be prosecuted had managed to evade it.

Absence of Justice

OPSC is criticized for the absence of justice. During the FGDs, community members explained that it was the main reason for their opposition as the absence of justice was seen as a promotion of impunity. Members felt that DDR should involve transitional justice. Whereas ex-combatants were being reintegrated with economic incentives, there were no opportunities of this kind for victims and their communities. This was perceived as injustice and created resentment and undermined the entire essence of the DDR process. In the eyes of some community members, their former assailants were now better off. The example that kept recurring during data collection was the Kabara model that was practiced in *Duhu* District, in Adamawa State. The Kabara transitional justice system provided reparations and sanctioned the perpetrators, while also calling on them to swear under oath to avoid future occurrences. Respondents recommend community service and the payment of *Diya* (money paid for taking a life according to Islamic injunctions), to be added to OPSC to make up for transitional justice, especially for those who were forcefully conscripted. They strongly felt that Boko

Haram members who committed gross human rights violations had to be held accountable, regardless of how they joined Boko Haram.

Limited Community Participation

Community members felt that they were forced into accepting ex-combatants and thus, did not feel any ownership over the process. The communities complained that at the beginning of the program, there was no effort to consult with the communities on their needs and expectations before the ex-combatants were released into their midst. They were only approached through community sensitization initiatives when graduates were ready to be released. A lot of people were thus against the program, especially the reconciliation component. They commended the new approach toward allowing ex-combatant's family members and some community leaders to see them in the camps. However, this was not considered a sufficient description of the entire DDR process. To ensure that the DDR process remains sustainable, it is necessary to secure community buy-in. The program must consider the fact that most traditional leaders were also victims, some even having abdicated their thrones to take refuge in their state capitals. The respondents noted that the lack of local ownership was not limited to the communities. State governors did not feel involved in the program and complained of the lack of synergy, consultation, and involvement in the implementation process. OPSC must cultivate ownership at the national, state, and local levels for sustainability purposes.

Funding Gaps

There were very few sources of funding for the OPSC program, partly because it was widely considered a military-led operation. The NEDC has been supporting the program since the first quarter of 2019; however, several important areas remained unaddressed owing to inadequate funds. For instance, more psychosocial support is necessary as the program takes in more defectors, which requires funding for the staff. Additionally, the staff-to-client ratio also needs to be increased as more defectors come in, especially if their deradicalization is to be tailored to fit their individual requirements.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nigerian government designed the OPSC program as part of its counter-insurgency strategy to defeat Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria. At the time of writing, the project was in its fourth year and had graduated four cohorts. The program continues to evolve, learning from some of its teething problems. However, a series of challenges continue to plague the credibility of the program. For instance, the absence of a transparent framework has affected the acceptability of the program among the community at large. The absence of justice and reconciliation is a major challenge to the success of the program. There is a need to engage in effective communication and tackle misinformation to educate community members on DDR and encourage more defections, which, in turn, can ensure sustainability. There is a need to refocus the program on transitional justice by making sure that reparations are provided. Efforts should be made toward building civil society's capacity to actively engage in the reintegration program. These efforts should promote a sense of ownership in the DDR process for both locals and ex-combatants and provide support for communities where ex-Boko Haram fighters are reintegrated to address resentment and grievances.

Study Limitation

One of the limitations of this study is the access to information, especially from the security operatives working with the OPSC due to the sensitivity of that information. The study only analyzed data from other stakeholders which hinders providing a holistic perspective of the implementation of the OPSC program. Additionally, data were collected in 2019, which limits some of the findings such as the number of graduates in that period. Other than that, there was no conflict of interest nor bias that the author is aware of.

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