

# Youths in Peacebuilding: Paths towards Reintegration for Repentant Extremists



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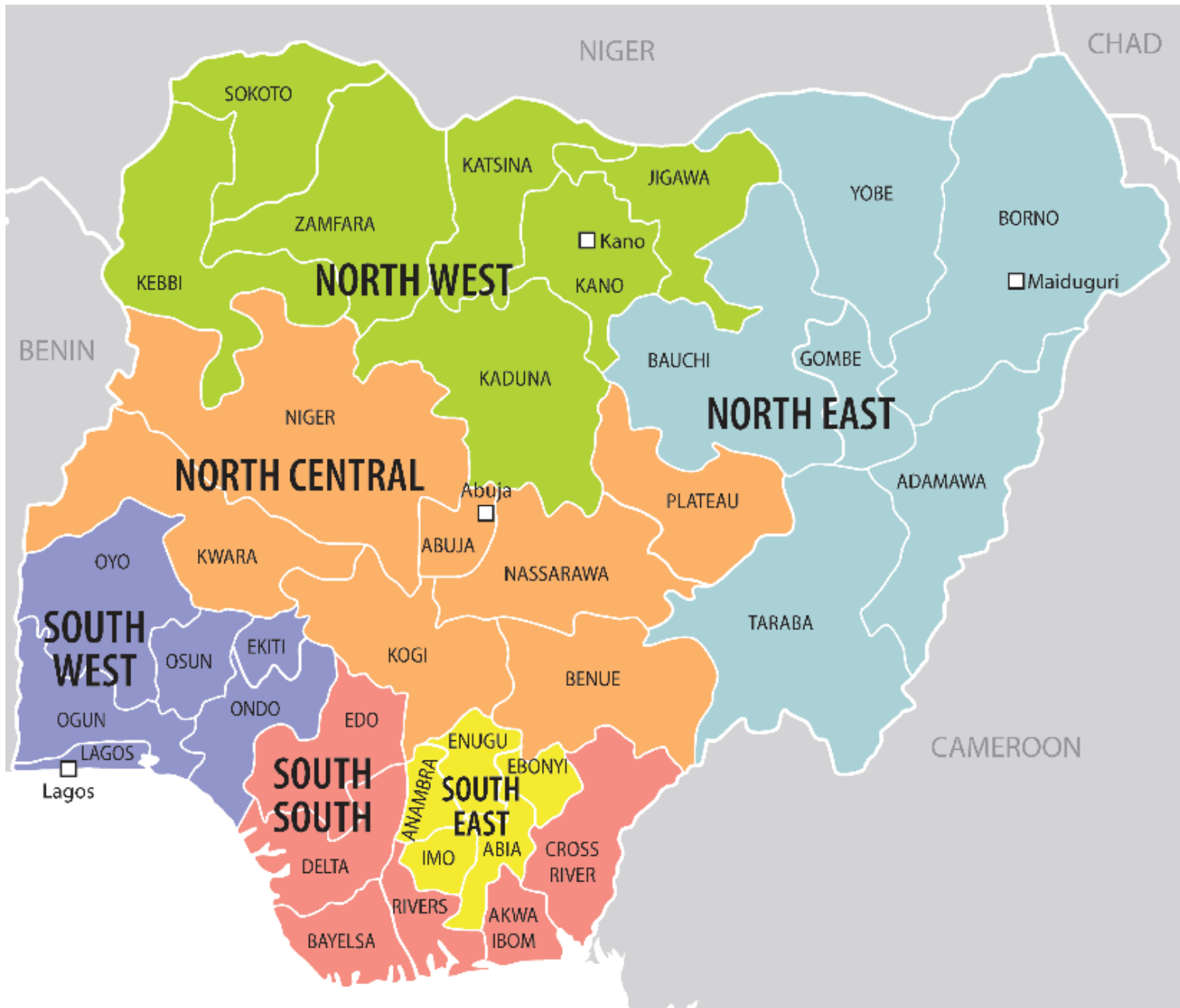


Figure 1: Political Map of Nigeria. Source: Sodipo, 2013

For over a decade and half, Nigeria has been embroiled in a terrorist crisis. Even though this has mostly been concentrated in the northern states, frequent attacks have occurred in the middle and southern states. The terrorist crisis in the country is deeply rooted in the country's internal political dynamics. In addition, the crisis has expanded beyond the political and taken on a deadly Islamic fundamentalist perspective. Policy makers in the country are struggling to deal with the constantly changing dimensions of the crisis which have increasingly shifted from being purely domestic-based (Bamidele, 2013; Adegbulu, 2013) to becoming increasingly regional in nature (Onapajo, Uzodike, & Whetho, 2012). For this reason, the actors involved have accordingly expanded in terms of numbers and age range.

Apart from the terrorist crisis in the country, Nigeria has experienced different types of conflict or situations in which arms have been used by organised groups during particular points in its history. The country has grappled with religious armed conflict, fundamentalism, terrorist insurgency, civil war and banditry. A prevalent phenomenon in these settings has been the use of children or young people as actors in the conflicts. While there are commonalities in how children are deployed in armed conflict situations, these varied depending on the typology of the conflict, as well as the geopolitical zone in which the conflict occurs.

As part of the broader country study, the aim of this paper is to highlight the involvement of children and the youth in armed conflict in Nigeria. This will include their association with these armed forces or armed groups, with particular emphasis being placed on the roles they play or played. In addition, the paper studies the gender dimension of these roles. Many of these youths, over time, leave these armed forces/groups voluntarily or forcefully. The paper therefore assesses their paths towards reintegration into civil communities, how these young people have been used for peacebuilding, and establishes ways in which their roles can be strengthened.

The research uses both secondary and primary materials collected over a three-month period between July and September 2021. The research team interviewed youth leaders, community leaders, religious and security personnel in Nigeria. Additionally, key informant interviews were held with experts who have considerable experience on the subject.

## Nature and history of armed forces and armed groups in Nigeria

As with most countries in West Africa, the northern sectors are often more impoverished than the south. People in the south have more economic opportunities than northerners, while infrastructure and other public services are often more advanced in the south than in the north. This is the legacy of colonialism in Nigeria, the same colonial administration governed the country with different policies. Oyovbaire argues that while most of the southern societies were undergoing fairly rapid social, economic and material changes, most of the north was more or less kept rigidly under the colonial umbrella state (Oyovbaire, 1983)

Crisis Group also notes that “bad governance, sustained economic hardship, rising inequality and social frustration fostered the growth of radical extremist groups” (Crisis Group, 2014, p. 1). This assertion is supported by Solomon who suggests that part of the “reason for the conflict-ridden nature of African politics is that a tiny elite has often been allowed to monopolise the wealth of the nation — giving precious little back to ordinary citizens” (Solomon, 2013, p. 430).

When young people are despondent and do not see themselves improving their economic outlook, armed groups and non-state armed forces become attractive as violence promises them riches they would not otherwise have attained. Their participation in kidnappings for ransom, bombings and attacks on security services are rewarded. Young people, therefore see a brighter future for themselves in the structures that armed groups provide, than in a non-functional State, in which their future is bleak. Irrespective of their violent nature, some terrorist and armed groups have in effect replaced and taken over the functions of the State. It is for these reasons that extricating youths from such groups is a complex endeavour, such that once the task is achieved, these young people need to be re-engaged in more positive endeavours.

Apart from the Biafra civil war of July 1967 to January 1970, two major crises have resulted in the prolonged resort to arms. These are the crises in the Niger Delta state and the violent extremism mostly concentrated in the northern states. The Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED) asserts that in the “late 1990s, a mosaic of diverse civil groups including:

community-based organisations, environmental rights groups, advocacy groups, ethno-cultural and youth groups had emerged which began to champion the cause of the people in the Niger Delta region. The militant agitation was a forceful attempt to compel oil-based benefits, redress grievances and seek self-determination” (CPED, 2017). Many of the groups resorted to the use of force to push through their grievances to elicit responses.

The second major crisis that Nigeria has faced in the last decade has been terrorist groups who have mostly been based in the north eastern

states. Boko Haram and their offshoots have attacked Nigeria through kidnappings, bombing of national installations, shooting and other extremist fundamentalist tendencies. In all these crises, young people have been classified under the categories of victims and perpetrators. Yet, it is important to understand the specific roles that they play in order to get a more nuanced understanding of their perceived guilt or innocence. Boys and girls have been used for particular gendered roles, mirroring society in general.

## Gendered Roles/Abuse of Children in Armed Conflict

Gender	Males	Female
1.	Surveillance	Surveillance
2.	Sex slaves	Sex slaves
3.	Entrapment	Entrapment
4.	Slaves	Slaves
5.	Banditry	Wives/concubines/sexual gratification
6.	Suicide bombers	Suicide bombers
7.	Foot soldiers	Cooking and other domestic duties
8.	Catchers (lure opponents into an ambush)	
9.	Weapon Carriers	Weapon carriers

Table 1: Gendered roles of children in armed conflict

Table 1 demonstrates that while similar functions are performed by both boys and girls in the armed groups, there are some variations. For example, the girls are more often used as sex slaves and for domestic functions. Their sexuality also allows them to perform the roles of spies, and for entrapment of enemies. This demonstrates that association to armed groups mirrors societal functions played by males and females. Similarly, the boys also play masculine roles such as surveillance, banditry, active fighters and weapon carriers.

Acknowledging the roles played by both male and females in armed groups is important to identifying

the factor that push young people to associate with armed groups, and most specially to designing the appropriate interventions needed for their reintegration back into their communities.

### Factors pushing children to voluntarily enrol/join armed groups

#### Socio-economic circumstances

In north-eastern Nigeria, armed groups, banditry, Islamic fundamentalism and insurgency are being

festered by the socio-economic circumstances of families, with a direct effect on children. More than 13.5 million children are out of schools, many of whom are illiterate and with little means of survival. The social circumstances of these children do not augur well for them as they have little parental support. Beyond its spiritual importance, a key phenomenon pushing young people into the arms of armed groups has been attributed to the almajiri system prevalent in northern Nigeria. This is the system where children as young as four years are removed from the home and sent to the Imams for Islamic education. With little financial means to support these children, the Imams in turn send the children to beg in the streets. Little attention is thus paid to these children by both parents and the spiritual fathers. This has resulted in several thousands of children without care, consequently, making them easy targets for recruitment by armed groups.

## Power and influence

Belonging to armed groups also evokes feelings of power and importance to some young people. Within the armed groups are ranks through which they get power to control resources, weapons and other children. Wielding guns and other weapons also give young people a sense of power that they would normally not have. Therefore, extricating such young people from armed groups has become increasingly difficult. For some young women, their roles as wives also brings them power, especially when they are the wives of leaders and commanders of unit. This means all the other women are subservient to them and they get access to resources and other commodities they would ordinarily not have. There have therefore, been occasions where freed victims of kidnapping have voluntarily returned to the armed groups from which they were rescued.

## Money and fame

For most young people engaged with armed groups, the spoils of 'war' are an important pull factor. Banditry, armed robbery and kidnapping for ransom bring them great financial rewards. Their purchasing power increases and their ability to afford perceived luxury items like shoes, clothes and phones gives them a sense of importance. It has become a symbol of power for the youth as it has positive economic consequences for them. Money and fame has therefore become a reference point for other youths, leading to a cycle of truancy, moral decay and crime.

## Violence begets violence

One of the major consequences of terrorism and violent extremism has been the closure of schools and other recreational centres for the youth. This has been a deliberate strategy of extremist groups who perceive formal education as an abomination and have thus waged a war against educational institutions. Schools have been attacked, children kidnapped, and physically threatened. The effect of this is the closure of several schools in the north; and in places where schools are open, the children are reluctant to attend for fear of attacks. The rippling effect of this is that children have extra time on their hands to engage in all kinds of nefarious behaviours and violence.

## Impact of conflict on education and socio-economic development

For young people, the most significant impact that conflict brings to their lives is in their education and the long and short term effects on their socio-economic development. For the conflicts that have taken place in Nigeria (in the south-south, Niger Delta and the North East), the affected communities experience a reduction and virtual loss of economic empowerment. These indicators worsen during periods of instability. Illiteracy rates increase; banditry and criminality boom, while there is a major destruction of infrastructure. For these reasons, business opportunities are lost. Significantly also, there is a major increase in the number of internally displaced persons who become a burden on the state and their host communities. Another major consequence of conflict is the reduction and outright loss of the voices of women in public spaces. When a society is stressed, the "lesser members" of those societies suffer the most. Women and girls' prospects have reduced significantly as a result of the conflicts in these communities. For these reasons, any initiatives to return young people to some degree of normalcy needs to be nuanced, taking into account the different needs of both males and females.

## Reintegration Programmes

One of the key reasons attributed to the growth of Boko Haram in Nigeria has been the treatment meted out to perceived fighters and sympathisers of the group when they are arrested. There was no concerted effort to apply a human approach to people associated with the groups to determine their

culpability or otherwise, and to design appropriate frameworks for their re-insertion back into society. After several unsuccessful initiatives, Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) was introduced in September 2015, with the objective of rehabilitation and reintegration of former fighters of Boko Haram. A key term used to describe the beneficiaries is 'repentant fighters.' The repentant fighters are taken to a military barracks in Maiduguri for screening procedures such as their physical wellbeing, their health and their biometrics are also taken. Some key programmes undertaken as part of the rehabilitation programme include psycho-social support and therapy, vocation training, religious education and formal education.

This programme, however, according to Ugwueze et al, has major challenges that threaten its effectiveness. "First, there is a paucity of political buy-in among elected politicians to the philosophy of the programme; second, there is a lack of consultation of members of the receptor communities in the design; and third, there is no restitution for the victims in the programme delivery. These factors could perpetuate rather than vitiate the structural grievances and post-exit trauma that distinguishes Nigeria's OSC from others" (Ugwueze, Ngwu, & Onuoha, 2021).

This assertion resonates with data collected from the field as OSC is considered as more of rehabilitation programme than reintegration because Operation Safe Corridor has placed a greater emphasis on the demobilisation and rehabilitation of the youths. However, reintegration poses particular challenges, as these communities are not willing to accept the young people back. They would have committed a lot of abuses and atrocities against these communities. While they are given support, the communities in which they will be re-integrated receive little support. For example, some of these communities do not exist at all as due to the activities of the armed groups large segments are in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. A respondent clearly articulated that "not everyone should be re-integrated. Some should be made to pay for the crimes they had committed". For the larger society that has borne the brunt of the armed group's operation, it is difficult for them to accept the programme being initiated for perpetrators, while victims continue to suffer. This accounts for the major failure of the programme, similar to the Niger-Delta Post-amnesty deal. These programmes are characterised by a lack of accountability from the responsible state agencies. There are allegations of mismanagement, lack of transparency, misappropriation of funds, and an unwillingness to ensure oversight. For example, in the Niger Delta, people who were not part of the

armed groups paid to be registered so they could access the programmes and the benefits therein. When criminality becomes so enterprising that people are willing to pay bribes to be registered as militants, that demonstrates the general decay in the society.

## Challenges faced by the youth/ Barriers to inclusion

In spite of these challenges, there are still young people who are willing to leave their past lives behind, forge ahead and make a meaningful contribution to their communities. However, they face major challenges in this endeavour. Deservingly, most of the young people have been neglected by their families due to their association with the armed groups. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that their acceptance back into their communities produces mutual benefits when youths are used for productive ventures. For the females, returnees are faced with social stigma, especially in cases where they return with children born during their stay with the armed groups. This humiliation, and oftentimes, death threats, compel some of the returnees to regress and often causes their return to the armed groups. It is therefore important for the traditional and religious authorities to be made part of the rehabilitation programmes so they can guarantee a more sustainable reintegration of former fighters. Additionally, lack of empowerment, such as educational opportunities, leads to retrogression. Therefore, beyond the vocational training provided, repentant members need to be given access to formalised education.

If these and other measures are taken, young people can play meaningful roles in peacebuilding in their local communities and at the national level. Many African societies tend to be ageist and this translates into peacebuilding, as youths are often alienated from such processes. However, several measures can be put in place to ensure the meaningful involvement of repentant or former members of armed groups in peacebuilding.

## Conclusion: Youth in Peacebuilding

In order to achieve this, there needs to be counter-narratives against all kinds of destructive ideologies in the society; in schools, at community centres and playgrounds. Young people formerly associated with armed groups

can also be used as community youth volunteers, educating others on the pitfalls of membership of such group; as peer mentors supporting their community projects with free/cheap labour; and essentially as reformed citizens giving back to their communities. Furthermore, they could be used as Peace Ambassadors, such as is being done in communities in Jos, Benue and Kaduna. This should be replicated in other communities. To ensure political buy-in at the highest level, it is important to have

state and federal policies that encourage youth participation at the national level. This entails the creation of specific roles for the youth in national policies, backing these policies with the financial wherewithal, and following through with monitoring and evaluation.

Finally, in peace-time, young people should be given the right education to build their values and support systems to improve their resilience to conflict and other war-related stresses.

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