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Dealing With Boko Haram Defectors in the Lake Chad Basin: Lessons From Nigeria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How to deal with defectors from extremist groups is an urgent question across the globe. In the Lake Chad Basin, the four countries of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad are tackling the scourge of the extremist group Boko Haram, which has been terrorising the region for nearly a decade. As more and more ex-fighters turn themselves in, there is a pressing need for effective programmes that can reverse the destructive process of radicalisation that led them to sign up to a deadly global movement.

Countries in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond should draw on the experience of Nigeria's deradicalisation programmes, which offer important lessons for the global challenge of dealing with former fighters of extremist groups.

This paper reviews the deradicalisation programmes in these four countries, before homing in on the experience of Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). Nigeria has the most developed approach to deradicalisation in the region and should lead as an example for others in the fight against Boko Haram. Chad, Cameroon and Niger have less developed approaches so could learn from OPSC, as they all face the same challenge of violent extremism. Western countries can also draw lessons from Nigeria, not only because Nigeria, like the West, has suffered from home-grown terrorism, but also because the country has huge experience of dealing with returning fighters.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Nigeria’s deradicalisation programmes form an instructive case study for neighbouring countries.** Nigeria has three programmes, each handling a different group of participants. OPSC deals with male fighters who have willingly surrendered—a challenge that Nigeria’s neighbours are also grappling with.
- **OPSC addresses three core elements of deradicalisation.** In working with its participants to move them from a closed- to an open-minded worldview, the programme focuses on religious ideology, political grievances and post-exit trauma.
- **Reintegration of former fighters is a key challenge in Nigeria.** Reinsertion of ex-fighters is mainly aspirational, because communities are generally not willing to accept them back, and little, if anything, is done to prepare the communities. While OPSC is not directly engaged in reinsertion, there is no institution designated with the task of preparing communities.
- **Male-dominated programmes neglect the needs of women and children.** All the participants in Nigeria’s OPSC are men, yet women and children are also involved in fighting for Boko Haram. Although there are questions about each participant’s level of willingness to engage in combat, it is important for deradicalisation programmes to consider the requirements of all those affected.
- **Measuring success is one of the hardest but also most important aspects of deradicalisation.** Ensuring and proving positive impact is a key part of any programme, but the lack of a clear definition of radicalisation—and therefore of deradicalisation—makes this a complex task. This challenge is compounded by a gap between theories of deradicalisation and its implementation on the ground.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these challenges, deradicalisation programmes should:

- **Address ideology, structural grievances and post-exit trauma**

together. To effectively deradicalise former Boko Haram fighters, programmes must take a leaf out of OPSC's book by adopting a holistic approach that addresses religious ideas, political and economic grievances, and defectors' traumatic experiences. This requires working with imams, deradicalisation experts, psychologists, education experts and other professionals.

- **Cater for women and children returnees.** Deradicalisation of former Boko Haram fighters must not only focus on men. This could mean either incorporating women and children into existing schemes or setting up new ones specifically for them. In either case, programmes must be sensitive to the culture and religion of the area and provide experts and facilities to suit the specific needs of women and children.
- **Establish monitoring and evaluation from the start.** OPSC and other programmes need to articulate a system of evaluation that measures and demonstrates the impact of the programmes on participants in a scientific way. Other deradicalisation programmes, behavioural sciences, criminology and post-conflict studies can offer some insights.

More broadly, governments in the region should:

- **Establish a regional working group to increase cross-country learning beyond military collaboration.** Governments in the Lake Chad Basin should extend their current military cooperation in response to Boko Haram to soft approaches such as deradicalisation. There is a need to articulate a regional strategy or protocol on dealing with non-citizen defectors.
- **Designate a specific government body with the mandate of reintegration.** Each country in the region should task a specific government agency with the responsibility of preparing communities to receive deradicalised fighters. This would require rebuilding communities and their livelihoods, and establishing a framework for truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation.

INTRODUCTION

The global challenge of how to deal with former fighters after a conflict has never been so widely debated and relevant. Cases such as Shamima Begum and Hoda Muthana have repeatedly hit the headlines in recent months as the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and other Western countries grapple with the legal and security ramifications of allowing foreign ISIS members back. Begum and Muthana, born in the UK and the US respectively, left their countries to join ISIS, started families but have since sought to return to their countries of nationality. Mostly, conversations about returning ex-fighters have rested on the legality of stripping people of their citizenship rather than considering what would happen on their return.

Difficult questions abound. Is it possible to screen individuals adequately to measure their threat level? Can the courts give people a fair trial when most of the incidents occurred in war zones and lack evidence? What should authorities do with those demonstrably associated with ISIS, al-Qaeda or other violent groups but against whom there is not enough evidence to convict? Should former fighters go free or undergo some scheme to—at least—dilute their poisonous ideology before returning to communities? How can others, who would be exposed to the returnees in prison or in the community, be stopped from going down the same road and being radicalised too?

Given this is a global issue, lessons learned must be shared on a global level. As a case study to draw on, this paper analyses Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) deradicalisation programme, using primary data collated in fieldwork in Abuja and Gombe, northeastern Nigeria. Located on the outskirts of Gombe, OPSC is a programme for members of extremist group Boko Haram who have willingly surrendered and are repentant. The programme aims to demobilise and deradicalise former Boko Haram fighters in preparation for their reinsertion into the community.¹ Several batches of former fighters, termed 'clients', have passed through the programme, and many lives have been turned around.

1 Atta Barkindo and Shane Bryans, "De-Radicalising Prisoners in Nigeria: Developing a Basic Prison Based De-Radicalisation Programme", *Journal for Deradicalization* no. 7 (2016), <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/56>.

Boko Haram has been wreaking havoc in the Lake Chad Basin for nearly a decade. The group's violence has led to the deaths of over 50,000 people, displaced over 2.5 million and triggered a large-scale humanitarian crisis across the region.² In response, in addition to deploying their national armies, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria formed the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to fight Boko Haram. Hundreds of members defected from the group in each of these countries before a joint onslaught against it by MNJTF troops in 2015; following the offensive, more fighters turned themselves in. Consequently, alongside security and humanitarian responses, the countries in the Lake Chad Basin started facing the need to develop strategies to handle former fighters and reintegrate them into communities in a way that would encourage more to surrender.

Very little is known, internationally or domestically, about Nigeria's approach to deradicalisation. This paper explores how Nigeria's approach was developed, what method it takes, what model of deradicalisation it employs, how radicalisation or deradicalisation is measured, how successful it is, how men are dealt with in comparison with women, and how people are integrated back into society. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with experts who designed the programme, management and administrative staff, experts running the scheme on the ground, religious leaders and topic experts.

A recent report by the Royal United Services Institute investigated why former al-Shabaab fighters enlisted in the group, how and why they disengaged and their experiences of post-exit reintegration. The research used empirical evidence from interviews with 129 current and former residents of the Serendi Rehabilitation Centre in Mogadishu, which supports low-risk former members of al-Shabaab.³ By contrast, this paper investigates only how OPSC works: how it is designed and operates in practice, with a focus on its approach, clients, curriculum, experts and facilities. It does not

2 John Campbell, "Nigeria Security Tracker", Council on Foreign Relations, last updated 1 March 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>.

3 James Khalil et al., "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation", RUSI Whitehall Reports, January 2019, https://www.rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190104_whr_4-18_deradicalisation_and_disengagement_in_somalia_web.pdf.

assess the success or failure of the scheme from the perspectives of the ex-combatants.

Nigeria is a prime case to learn from. Not only does it have the most developed programme, meaning it has had the longest time to refine its approach and learn from mistakes. But also, Nigeria's unique approach, which focuses on Boko Haram's noxious religious ideology while targeting other factors such as unemployment, is unique: some countries focus exclusively on ideology, whereas others ignore it altogether.

Although Niger, Cameroon and Chad have not done as much, the trio have now started making efforts to articulate and implement a deradicalisation strategy. These countries can learn a lot from one another when it comes to handling ex-combatants, for three reasons. First, each of these nations' programmes deals with people who were motivated by similar religious doctrines and pushed by similar socio-economic, historical, military and political factors to fight for the same group. Second, these individuals may have gone through similar experiences in their journeys to and with Boko Haram. Third, these countries' military coalition, the MNJTF, has been relatively effective against Boko Haram and they would do well to extend their cooperation to a soft approach to the group.

Western countries struggling with the challenge of returning fighters can also learn from Nigeria. Extremism is a shared problem worldwide, and countries can learn from each other's experience. Even as contexts differ, jihadi groups are built on a similar worldview based on perversion of Islamic teachings that sees others as enemies worthy of death.

DERADICALISATION PROGRAMMES IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

Deradicalisation, as important as it is in the discussion on violent extremism, does not have a universally accepted definition. As a new addition to the mainstream political and scientific landscape, this term has many imprecise definitions.⁴ In this paper, deradicalisation refers to programmes and techniques designed to reverse a process—radicalisation—in which a person or group engages with, adopts or develops extreme views or actions.

This chapter outlines the various deradicalisation programmes in operation in the Lake Chad Basin. Nigeria’s, Niger’s, Cameroon’s and Chad’s approaches to this challenge are at different stages of development. Of the four, Nigeria has been running deradicalisation programmes for the longest time and has many lessons to share with the other three.

NIGERIA

In Nigeria, three deradicalisation programmes are in operation: one in a prison, one in communities and one at a temporary facility, Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). Each programme serves a specific type of participant and was developed by a different organisation (see table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Deradicalisation Programmes in Nigeria

4 Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, tools and programs for countering violent extremism* (London: Routledge, 2017), 66; Alex Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review”, International Center for Counter-Terrorism, March 2013, <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>.

	Prison Programme	Yellow Ribbon Initiative	Operation Safe Corridor
Location	Prison in Kuje, Federal Capital Territory	Communities in Borno state	Temporary facility in Gombe state
Organiser	Nigerian government	Neem Foundation	Nigerian government
Establishment	2014	2017	2016
Participants	Fighters convicted of violent extremist offences, or inmates on or awaiting trial	Women, children and young people associated with Boko Haram	Boko Haram combatants who have surrendered
Timeframe	Depends on time spent in prison	One year	In theory, 16 weeks; in practice, one year
Programme philosophy	Combating religious ideology and offering vocational training	Providing psychosocial, behavioural and reintegration training	Combating religious ideology, grievances and trauma

These three programmes are largely independent from each other and do not habitually share information. If information sharing occurs, it is spontaneous and unstructured. As the programmes handle specific types of participant, were set up by different agencies and operate in particular locations, the distinct nature of each is understandable and has a certain benefit. However, as they all deal with the same challenge of deradicalising former Boko Haram members and reintegrating them back into

society, sharing lessons learned and good practice is vital to improve each programme further.

NIGER

In Niger, as of November 2018, there was a camp that housed 132 former Boko Haram fighters who are referred to as “the repentant ones”.⁵ The US State Department is billed to invest millions of dollars into a deradicalisation, reintegration and reconciliation programme started by a Nigerien governor. Like OPSC, that programme promotes defections and aims to deradicalise former members of Boko Haram. However, a Nigerien military officer confessed that while the programme is designed to effectively deradicalise and then reintegrate former militants into their communities, the camp where defectors are kept is like “an oven” in which they are “forgotten about”.⁶

The major roadblock to the programme’s success is a legal matter. After over a year, the Nigerien government in March 2019 passed a law sanctioning deradicalisation. This legislation provides immunity from prosecution for ex-fighters who have turned themselves in and against whom there is no evidence of homicide, and lesser sentences for those convicted of murder.⁷ With the passage of this law, aspects of the programme that required a legal framework will be able to move forward and thus the programme will become fully operational.⁸

CAMEROON

In Cameroon, the army announced an amnesty and gave the Boko Haram militants in the country a deadline of 31 December 2017 to surrender before a new offensive by the Nigerian and Cameroonian

5 Max Bearak, “Boko Haram brought terror to Niger. Can a defectors program bring peace?”, Washington Post, 20 November 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/11/20/feature/boko-haram-brought-terror-to-niger-can-a-defectors-program-bring-peace/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0c69dea30764.

6 Ibid.

7 Telephone interview with national prosecutor on 27 March 2019.

8 Ibid.

armies. Two hundred militants surrendered between October and December 2017. Despite this, and although others may have done so since, the Cameroonian government lacks a clear policy on how to deal with the militants, according to an International Crisis Group report.⁹

At the start of 2018, the government formed an inter-ministerial committee on deradicalisation. Questions that the committee needs to think through include how to reintegrate the militants, what punitive responses are required (if any) and which department is responsible for this.

CHAD

The situation in Chad is not as developed even as that in Cameroon. Between January and March 2016, some elements of Boko Haram, mainly Chadians, gave themselves up to Chadian authorities. Since the end of July 2016, due to sustained pressure by MNJTF troops, surrenders by Boko Haram fighters have increased to more than 1,000 as of March 2017. Most of those who have surrendered are women and children who were reintegrated into their communities under the supervision of district administrators.

However, authorities have struggled to develop a real strategy to deal with male defectors. As of March 2017, around 300 men are thought to be in internment camps near the western Chadian town of Baga Sola, without any clear strategy for what do with them.¹⁰

⁹ “Cameroon’s Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram”, International Crisis Group, report no. 263, 14 August 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/263-extreme-nord-du-cameroun-nouveau-chapitre-dans-la-lutte-contre-boko-haram>.

¹⁰ “Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures”, International Crisis Group, Africa report no. 246, 8 March 2017, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/246-fighting-boko-haram-in-chad-beyond-military-measures.pdf>.

THE CASE OF NIGERIA: OPERATION SAFE CORRIDOR

Having given a brief overview of the deradicalisation schemes or plans in four countries in the Lake Chad Basin, this paper now explores Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) in depth. The OPSC was chosen as it focuses on fighters who have willingly surrendered and defected, and the question of how to deal with such individuals is a challenge that Nigeria shares with Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

In the authors' interviews with Boko Haram and deradicalisation experts in Nigeria who do not work on OPSC, it became clear that little is known, even domestically, about the operation. This chapter therefore gives a brief historical overview of the scheme, then presents the structure and curriculum of the programme. The aim is to share the lessons learned so that others in the Lake Chad Basin and beyond may glean from Nigeria's experience.

BACKGROUND AND DESIGN

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari entered office in May 2015 on the back of three campaign promises, one of which was to fight Boko Haram. Continuing his predecessor's declaration of amnesty to willing members of Boko Haram, Buhari publicly reiterated his government's openness to the scheme in April 2018, after the release of 105 girls who had been abducted a month earlier by a faction of the group. Buhari said, "We are ready to rehabilitate and integrate such repentant members into the larger society".¹¹ Amid renewed military pressure, tightened borders, diminished supply routes, internal divisions in the group and a willingness by forcibly conscripted members to escape, some Boko Haram fighters started turning themselves in to the military. As a result, Abuja began exploring how best to encourage more such fighters to surrender and how to handle them.

The result of these deliberations was OPSC. The programme started with a nine-man committee that worked out the modalities for implementing the programme's mandate, including developing

¹¹ Editorial Board, "Amnesty for Boko Haram", *Guardian*, 20 April 2018, <https://guardian.ng/opinion/amnesty-for-boko-haram/>.

the framework of a deradicalisation programme. This committee engaged national and international experts and studied existing deradicalisation programmes in countries such as Colombia, Saudi Arabia and Somalia.

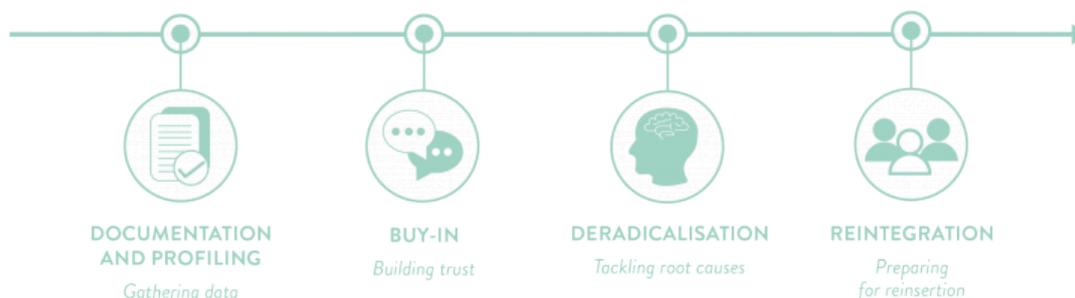
At the conception of both OPSC and the Kuje prison programme, international partnerships were established to ensure lessons were learned from elsewhere. For OPSC, that involved working with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). This collaboration is limited in that the IOM is not engaged in the delivery of the deradicalisation programme, nor is it involved in the assessment of participants or evaluation of the programme.

The nine-man committee extensively helped shape the programme at the outset, but its continued involvement is low. It appears that there is little, if any, consultation on the programme with local and external experts from a broad array of pertinent fields. External advice and analysis would not only help improve the programme but also enhance the image of OPSC. At present, with so little known about OPSC, some experts interviewed are sceptical about the nature of the programme and its importance. Yet this analysis found OPSC to be a promising and instructive programme for the global community, so it is essential to share lessons learned.

OPSC'S FOUR-STAGE PROCESS

OPSC comprises four broad stages: documentation and profiling, buy-in, deradicalisation, and reintegration (see figure 2).

Figure 2: OPSC's Four-Stage Process



It was originally planned that clients would complete all four stages in 16 weeks—a longer timeframe than Saudi Arabia's six-week programme.¹² However, it was discovered in the process of implementation that even 16 weeks was insufficient, especially because the experts found they needed more time to tackle the religious ideology. Consequently, a proposal has been forwarded to Nigeria's chief of the defence staff to make the scheme a one-year programme. This is still under consideration, although in practice one year has become the norm.

Documentation and Profiling

OPSC is open only to "willing, repentant and surrendered" Boko Haram fighters "who have been cleared of all encumbrances by appropriate government agencies", according to General B.M. Shafa.¹³ Fighters who have surrendered are first debriefed by officials of Operation Lafiya Dole (which translates as "Peace Is a Must"), the army unit fighting Boko Haram. At this stage, fighters are profiled to assess their risk level and ensure that they are not among the 353 members wanted by the authorities.¹⁴

12 Marisa L. Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment", Council on Foreign Relations, 22 January 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/saudi-deradicalization-experiment>.

13 Bamidele Shafa, "Brief on Operation Safe Corridor", paper presented at Experts' Meeting of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States held on 20 June 2018 in Algiers, Algeria.

14 Ndahi Marama, "Army releases fresh list of wanted Boko Haram terrorists", Vanguard, 22 November 2016, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/11/army-releases-fresh-list-wanted-boko-haram-terrorists/>.

On the participants' admission into the camp, officials collect and store clients' personal information. The OPSC clinic conducts a comprehensive medical check-up, and each client's DNA is recorded. These data are used for effectively running the programme and for potential follow-up after the defectors' reinsertion into the community.

To help build relationships, the programme leaders refers to participants as clients, rather than labelling them prisoners or ex-combatants. As of November 2018, 101 clients had graduated from the OPSC scheme since its inception, and 157 were undergoing deradicalisation. All 157 are male and aged between 16 and 57. Around 30 are under 18, and many of the others joined Boko Haram or were forcibly conscripted before turning 18. Most of the clients are from the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, but seven are from Chad.

Buy-in

The second stage aims to build clients' trust in the programme and the staff running it. Anecdotal evidence from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan indicates that fostering trust between clients and staff can increase the likelihood of positive ideological and behavioural change. At this stage of OPSC, all the experts engage all the clients in a multi-purpose hall (see figure 3). This phase begins with lectures on atonement and redemption. Experts also explain the aim of the scheme and their roles, and assure clients that their confidentiality is guaranteed and that no criminal proceedings will be taken against them.

Figure 3: OPSC Clients in the Multi-Purpose Hall



This is followed by team-to-group engagement, in which a group of experts (an imam, a psychologist, a drug counsellor, a social worker and so on) engage with about 30 clients to further personalise the process. This stage enables greater interaction and better observation of the clients and their needs.

Many individuals stressed the importance of the imam as an “arrowhead” when it comes to buy-in. For those who had been motivated, even in part, by religious reasons to join Boko Haram, engaging with someone who has religious legitimacy and does not work for the military or the police is key for building bridges. The imams are central with regard to religious literacy, as they help authoritatively rebut the violent interpretations of Islam that Boko Haram espouses.

Deradicalisation

OPSC’s approach to deradicalisation is holistic in that it targets three key issues: religious ideology, structural or political grievances and post-conflict trauma (see figure 4).

Figure 4: OPSC's Threefold Approach to Deradicalisation



To refute Boko Haram's **religious ideology** through counter-messaging, imams engage in dialogue with clients on religious concepts. Mostly, the imams focus on Islamic textual authorities that relate to forbidding violence and enjoining peaceful and harmonious co-existence. This takes place after each of five daily prayers and once a week in the multipurpose hall.

To address **political grievances** such as poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and illiteracy, clients are trained in rudimentary vocational skills training by officials of Nigeria's National

Directorate of Employment. This scheme provides participants with alternative ways of seeking their livelihoods after reintegration. Clients are given several options to choose from, including carpentry, tailoring and shoemaking (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Shoes Produced by Former Fighters



The programme organisers see vocational training as vital. OPSC provides economic empowerment for its clients and offers them hope for when they return to their communities. The organisers think that if the clients have an opportunity to make a living, their chances of returning to Boko Haram are slimmer. Also, many of the clients who joined Boko Haram at a young age never had the opportunity to develop employable skills.

Participants are taught basic literacy, numeracy and civic education to equip them to understand better how governments work, and to teach them ways of participating in the political system and channelling grievances to appropriate authorities.

For the **trauma** that most of the clients have faced as members of Boko Haram by participating in or witnessing gruesome events, they are offered therapies such as psychotherapy, psycho-spiritual

counselling, art-therapy interventions, social therapy, drug-use intervention and recreation. There are weekly psychotherapy sessions for clients suffering from psychological disturbances, emotional difficulties, stress and related issues. Drug experts and social workers help clients with drug addiction issues, and sports and leisure activities are used to relieve withdrawal symptoms.

Although experts targeting the three key aspects—ideology, grievances and trauma—usually run separate sessions, they work very closely together to reinforce each of the other aspects, because OPSC’s logic is that no element can be adequately addressed in isolation. Sometimes the experts work together at the same time on the same case. For example, one distressed client who was struggling with nightmares after murdering his mother asked an expert, “Will Allah ever forgive me after such a heinous crime?”.¹⁵ In this case, at least the trauma and the religious ideology need addressing. While psychologists can help with the fear, a cleric needs to handle the question of God, forgiveness and redemption. In situations like this, imams and psychologists work together to achieve the desired result.

Nigeria’s approach to deradicalisation differs from nongovernmental programmes such as EXIT Sweden or the French government’s deradicalisation programme in prisons, which deliberately exclude ideology for legal and practical reasons.¹⁶ By contrast, Middle Eastern and South Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, like Nigeria, make tackling ideology a central thesis of their deradicalisation programmes.¹⁷ Western countries should take a cue from Nigeria

15 Interview with the only female expert in OPSC, October 2018.

16 These include the difficulty of measuring behavioural change. Furthermore, not only do many governments consider engaging with religious ideology to be outside their remit, but also governments are often sceptical of the role religious ideology plays in radicalisation in the first place. See Damien Sharkov, “France to begin new prison anti-radicalisation programme”, *Newsweek*, 19 February 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/france-begin-new-prison-anti-radicalisation-programme-308052>; Tina Wilchen Christensen, “How extremist experiences become valuable knowledge in EXIT programmes”, *Journal of Deradicalisation* 3 (2015), 92–134.

17 Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 83; Bulama Bukarti, “Making Peace with Enemies: Nigeria’s Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Fighters”, *War On the Rocks*, 27 March 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/making-peace-with-enemies-nigerias-reintegration-of-boko-haram-fighters/>.

and other Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, which can better understand jihadi groups' exploitation of Islamic teachings, by incorporating tackling ideology in ongoing or future deradicalisation programmes.¹⁸

Reintegration

Reintegration of former fighters into society is an important part of any deradicalisation programme. If participants are not prepared to re-enter society, or if their local community is not ready to accept them back, all the progress made in the programme could unwind.

OPSC experts prepare clients for their return by running seminars on the challenges they can expect when they leave and by giving them skills to set up a new life. Before leaving the camp, clients sign attestation forms and pledge in the presence of a judge to be law-abiding citizens. This process is led by Nigeria's Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development.

The clients choose where they want to be relocated, and often this is a place where they have family members. These family members are then contacted to obtain their consent, after which community and religious leaders are brought in to prepare the community for the clients' reinsertion. Clients are enrolled into skill-acquisition centres to further their skills and improve their ability to make a living.

On participants' reinsertion into the community, parole officers are assigned to monitor the clients for at least six months. This is to reduce the threat of the clients falling back into old practices with former connections.

Reintegration of OPSC's clients faces tumultuous challenges, mainly because communities are unprepared to receive deradicalised fighters.¹⁹ The members of batches A and B, who completed their courses in 2017, were kept in so-called transit camps after leaving OPSC because of pushback from communities.

¹⁸ Sara Brzuszkiewicz, "Saudi Arabia: the de-radicalization program seen from within", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 28 April 2017, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/saudi-arabia-de-radicalization-program-seen-within-16484>.

¹⁹ Bukarti, "Making Peace with Enemies".

More recently, at least some members of these batches have been reintegrated in a piecemeal way, because it was discovered that there is more resistance when reintegration is done in larger groups. Clients are now reintegrated with the support of the IOM and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). But members of batch C, who graduated in November 2018, are struggling to be reinserted due to security concerns and elections.²⁰ OPSC leaders also deem reinsertion to be outside their mandate: they make only initial preparations and hope that state governments will take on the bulk of this step. However, state governments have indicated little willingness to do so.

Reintegration of the wives of Boko Haram commanders and leaders would be particularly challenging, according to Dr Fatima Akilu, a psychologist, former director of behavioural analysis and strategic communication at the office of Nigeria's national security adviser and executive director of the Neem Foundation. This is because these women, as wives of Boko Haram elites, were empowered by status, choice and ability to make decisions over other women. They would thus struggle to fit back into the bottom of highly patriarchal communities.²¹

There is evidently a need for governments and partners that have started working on reintegration, such as IOM and UNDP, to articulate and implement a plan of action for this final stage of deradicalisation. What is clear on the ground is that clients' families and communities do not follow OPSC's process. Reintegration could happen through town-hall meetings with members of affected communities, to engage with traditional leaders and liaise with local councils. It is important to do this well, because peacefully accepting a person who may have caused atrocities against a community while with Boko Haram is a real challenge.

The importance of reintegration to a deradicalisation process cannot be overemphasised. Through OPSC, clients gain skills and education that those who did not join Boko Haram may never have received. This stark inequality could incentivise some people to sign up to Boko Haram, in the hope that they may later gain these benefits on leaving the group.

²⁰ E-mail correspondence with an official on condition of anonymity, April 2019.

²¹ Telephone interview on 9 April 2019.

STAFF AND FACILITIES

The OPSC staff comprises over 380 people organised into two main sections: those who ensure the site is secure and others who engage with the clients directly. The security team is led by the military and includes the police, the department of state services (intelligence) and other paramilitary institutions. The team that works directly with the clients runs the deradicalisation programme. It comprises around 180 experts who specialise in different areas: representatives from the Nigerian prison services, about a dozen imams, psychologists, doctors, teachers, drug experts, social workers, artists, interpreters and officials from other departments and agencies.

The military's involvement in OPSC raises questions of legality and expertise. In interviews, legal experts contended that the army has no legal backing to undertake a deradicalisation programme and OPSC is therefore extra-legal, if not illegal. The army claims that the programme is a part of Nigeria's war against Boko Haram and legally falls within its jurisdiction, only that it is a softer approach than military exercises. The army further maintains that its role in OPSC is merely administrative and for security purposes, and does not concern the deradicalisation of the clients, which is run by other experts. The debate over OPSC's legality negatively affects perceptions of the programme and has made some international partners and donors wary of working with it.

During the authors' visit, the clients appeared to be cared for and in a good condition: they were well fed, had been given uniforms and had mattresses to sleep on. Many interviewees stated the importance of servicing the needs of the clients. In the words of an OPSC camp commandant, "if someone has toothache or a headache, or isn't sleeping, there is very little chance of engaging them in the deradicalisation process. We must meet their physical needs as well as their mental needs."²² This approach enables a healthy relationship between the experts and the clients.

²² Interview with Colonel B.M.G. Martins, OSCE camp commandant, Gombe, October 2018.

OPSC is an expensive programme to run. Not only is the staff-to-participant ratio very high, but to ensure the required level of security, staff training, conditions and materials, a lot of financial backing is also required. The Nigerian military, which primarily funds the programme, is aware of the importance of thoroughly addressing deradicalisation and is currently willing to financially ensure OPSC's continued existence. The staff-to-client ratio affords experts the opportunity to pay individual attention to the clients and ensure the security team can secure the facility. However, maintaining such a high level of individual attention will only become harder as the intake is expected to increase by about 200 per cent with the next new cohort in 2019.

THE CHALLENGES OF MEASURING SUCCESS

Ensuring and proving positive impact is an important aspect of any programme, but it is one of the most difficult and complex components, especially when human behaviour or belief is involved. It is particularly crucial in deradicalisation because it is such a nascent field and a data-driven evidence base needs to be established.

Saudi Arabia's deradicalisation programme shows how lessons learned help refine a programme. Initially, the Saudi rehabilitation programme focused primarily on religious dialogue, but over time it has integrated a more behaviour-focused approach as well, incorporating education, vocational training and a targeted effort towards reintegration.²³

The complexity of measuring deradicalisation is clear from the beginning. Questions such as "What is deradicalisation?", "What are its goals?" and "What does success look like?" have divided observers into two broad groups.²⁴ One maintains that the goal of deradicalisation should be to convince people to renounce violence in the present, arguing that encouraging them to reject violence in

23 Marisa L. Porges and Jessica Stern, "Getting Deradicalization Right", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-05-01/getting-deradicalization-right>.

24 Gordon Clubb, "De-Radicalization, Disengagement and the Attitudes-Behavior Debate", in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, ed. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Gordon Clubb and Simon Mabon (London: Sage, 2015), 258–266.

the future may be too high an expectation and may block the window for initial engagement. Supporters of this approach measure success as securing mass defections or signing peace deals or cessations of hostilities.

The other group contends that deradicalisation should aim not only to dismantle radical behaviour but also to counter the ideology behind it. Proponents of the second approach measure success according to indicators such as whether the radicalised extremists provide intelligence to authorities and encourage other extremists to leave the group.²⁵

Another factor contributing to the challenge of measuring success is the gap between academic theories and the implementation of deradicalisation. Most deradicalisation programmes, especially those run by security agencies, block access for external researchers, possibly because their clients are considered security risks. It may also be because some programmes use questionable political or tactical moves.²⁶ This gap between theory and practice makes it difficult for academics to understand the intricacies on the ground and come up with improved practical tools. It also makes it hard for experts to implement suggestions developed by academics. This, in addition to the difficulty of measuring behavioural change, makes measuring and evaluating deradicalisation a complex task.

What makes monitoring and evaluation harder for OPSC is that it does not have an articulated assessment procedure to measure the impact of the programme on its clients. Experts rely on their observations of clients to measure change and participants' requirements, but more is needed. The scheme has been neither internally nor externally evaluated throughout its three years of existence. The lack of a formal curriculum or step-by-step guide on how to deradicalise someone makes it extremely difficult to measure and evaluate success.

In the case of OPSC, is surrendering, giving up on Boko Haram, repenting and willingly enrolling in a state deradicalisation

25 Angel Rabasa et al., "Deradicalising Islamist Extremists", RAND, 2010, 41, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG1053.pdf.

26 Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 164.

programme enough to suggest a change of tune? If so, the question arises of whether there is any need for a formal process. Our analysis is that surrender is not enough, especially in the case of Boko Haram. Combatants may be forced to surrender by a number of factors, such as military pressure or a lack of supplies. In such situations, there is still an evident need for deradicalisation. Even if the surrender is entirely voluntary, defeating violent Islamist groups also requires tackling the ideology and socio-economic grievances that drove fighters to Boko Haram—something that can happen on the programme.

Realistically, however, having a step-by-step guide to deradicalisation may dehumanise a process that is very personal. In OPSC, although there are no clear stages that each person must reach to prove deradicalisation has occurred, there are signs of improvement. More often than not, clients on the programme have an established unfavourable perspective of the state and anything connected to it, such as prison staff, the military, police and others. This negative outlook is established by the ideology of Boko Haram—which views the state as taghut (a false god) and treats obedience to, or dealing with, it as disbelief—and by possible mistreatment by the military.

For a person who has been taught to never trust or engage with the state, the fact that those at OPSC learn to trust the military and experts is noteworthy. Singing the national anthem, studying what is considered to be Western education (such as numeracy and literacy) and studying the Quran in a way that denounces violence, when Boko Haram explicitly forbids all of these, may indicate a change in participants' behaviour and belief system. Anecdotal evidence from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Singapore suggests that one-to-one relationships between clients and staff “encourage detainees to reconsider the negative opinions of government officials that, in many cases, contributed to their initial radicalization”, according to researchers Marisa L. Porges and Jessica Stern.²⁷

Both Kuje prison and OPSC plan to scale up their programmes in 2019—the former to open more deradicalisation facilities, the latter to admit up to 500 more participants. While it is important to scale

27 Porges and Stern, “Getting Deradicalization Right”.

up programmes to cater for the need, it is also vital to measure and evaluate these schemes before expanding them, to determine strengths to build on and areas to improve.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN

All of the clients on the OPSC programme are men. In several interviews, people running the scheme stated that three or four women had begun the programme at OPSC but had been swiftly moved to another location. Interviewees noted that the women had been vastly outnumbered by the men and the staff did not have the capacity to engage with the women in a meaningful way. In our field research we came across no official documentation that backed these statements up. On further questioning, there was little clarity on where exactly those women had been and what programme they had been on, if any.

Nigeria is unique in that large numbers of men, women and children are all involved in fighting for an extremist group.²⁸ While there remain major questions about the level of willingness of each participant in Boko Haram's activities, there is no doubt that every person requires attention on leaving the group. But the male-dominated programme at OPSC neglects the female former members of Boko Haram who have willingly surrendered.

Almost all interviewees confirmed that there are such women and girls who require attention. Yet at present, neither OPSC nor the Kuje prison scheme caters for women or girls, even though they were designed with men and women in mind. Both programmes have a stated willingness to focus more on female participants, but there is a pressing need for more capacity, facilities and resources to do it well.

A programme designed for women would need to consider aspects such as:

- the presence of children and how to cater for them while the

²⁸ Rachel Bryson and Bulama Bukarti, "Boko Haram's Split on Women in Combat", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 17 September 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/boko-harams-split-women-combat>.

- client is on site;
- the need to provide separate accommodation for men and women;
- the need for adequate numbers of male and female staff for a given cohort of clients; and
- the need for vocational training for the women to fit into the cultural norms in society, so they are not ostracised further on their return to the community.

These are just some elements that must be considered and implemented if women are to be incorporated into a programme. To do this effectively, the international community must come together to share experiences, as there are so few cases to learn from. One such case is Somalia's deradicalisation facility in Baidoa, which was established with a female-focused component for women who worked for al-Shabaab.²⁹

Safe House was a programme for women and children only, initiated by the Borno state government in 2017. It was dismantled after one year, in which it dealt with 63 women, including families of senior commanders.³⁰ But there are reports of some 500 women and girls who have been screened and enrolled into a scheme specifically designed for them at the Borno State Rehabilitation Centre in Maiduguri. This scheme is led by the Borno State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, with the support relevant United Nations (UN) agencies, the World Food Programme, the IOM and the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, this scheme appears not to be as well organised or as funded as OPSC or the Kuje prison programme. There is therefore a need for a well-run scheme for women in detention and those who have willingly surrendered. Such a programme should take into account the religious, cultural and gender sensitivities of the affected communities.

29 Stig Jarle Hansen, "Empowerment, Militarization, CVE and Deradicalization (The Case of Kenya and Somalia)", 2017, <https://nai.uu.se/events/2017/african-security-and-unbr/papersnov2017 uppsala/Hansen.pdf>.

30 Telephone interview with Dr Fatima Akilu on 9 April 2019.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This paper has outlined Nigeria's approach to deradicalisation, homing in on the case of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). OPSC is a well thought-through programme that seeks to tackle not only ideology, grievances and trauma but also multiple aspects of its clients' needs, from medical requirements to education and vocational training. OPSC has clear strengths, many of which should form best practice worldwide, but there are also several important areas where the programme can improve.

OPSC aims to help its clients go from closed- to open-mindedness. This is achieved through the programme's engagements on religious and secular education—specifically, numeracy, literacy and civic education. OPSC seeks to provide its clients with alternative definitions of key political concepts such as democracy, education and government, all of which they formerly attacked fiercely. The programme aims to use its vocational training scheme and events run by social workers to provide its clients with alternative ways of living and of seeking their livelihoods. Psychospiritual and drug interventions aim to help clients overcome fears, ideological misunderstandings and drug issues.

If successful, OPSC will offer its participants a more positive approach to solving problems and a more optimistic vision for the future. There are thousands of Boko Haram suspects in custody, but there is insufficient evidence to convict many of them.³¹ While detaining these people indefinitely cannot be justified, setting them free may be dangerous not only because they may be easily re-recruited back to Boko Haram but also because their victims may resort to self-help. Thus, OPSC may be the best path to peace but must be further improved in the areas highlighted above.³²

This also applies to other countries in the Lake Chad Basin and Western countries facing a similar challenge. Chad, Cameroon and Niger should draw on Nigeria's experience as they are dealing with a similar threat, and it is vital that lessons are shared across the region. These countries have an opportunity to learn from a case study with geographical proximity and considerable experience.

31 Bukarti, "Making Peace with Enemies".

32 Ibid.

There is a clear case for a soft regional approach to the challenge of Boko Haram, and learning across borders must increase.

Specifically, deradicalisation programmes across the region should address ideology, structural grievances and post-exit trauma together. To effectively deradicalise former fighters, programmes must learn from OPSC by adopting a holistic approach that addresses religious ideas, political and economic grievances as well as defectors' trauma. This means working with imams, deradicalisation experts, psychologists, education experts and other professionals.

Programmes should also do more to cater for women and children returnees, either by incorporating them into existing schemes or creating bespoke ones for them. In either case, programmes must be sensitive to the culture and religion of the area and provide experts and facilities that suit the needs of women and children.

Deradicalisation programmes should establish monitoring and evaluation from the start. OPSC and other schemes need to articulate a system of evaluation that measures and demonstrates impact in a scientific way. Other deradicalisation programmes, behavioural sciences, criminology and post-conflict studies can offer insights.

More broadly, governments in the region should establish a regional working group to increase cross-country learning beyond military collaborations. Countries in the Lake Chad Basin should extend their current military cooperation in response to Boko Haram to soft approaches such as deradicalisation. There is a need to implement a regional strategy or protocol on dealing with non-citizen defectors. The Lake Chad Basin Commission and the African Union Commission have developed a Regional Strategy for the Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin. In this strategy, there is a pillar on reintegration, which envisages exchanges of non-citizen defectors. But this strategy, especially the aspects dealing with deradicalisation and reintegration, remains mostly on paper.

Finally, governments should designate a government body with the mandate of reintegration. A specific government agency should

be tasked with the responsibility of preparing communities to receive deradicalised fighters. This would require rebuilding communities and livelihoods, with some form of framework for truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation. The activities of local and international organisations that have recently started working in the reintegration field should be well regulated, coordinated, synergised and monitored.

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Countries in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond should draw on the experience of Nigeria's deradicalisation programmes, which offer important lessons for the global challenge of dealing with former fighters of extremist groups.

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