



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

POLICY BRIEF

Nigeria: Community's Perception of Legitimate Authority Matters for Rehabilitation and Reintegration



 **ICCT** International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

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Summary

In Nigeria, current strategies for the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders—as exemplified by the government-initiated Operation Safe Corridor—have lacked the community support and assistance needed to ensure their success. Through a series of five workshops¹ with traditional and religious leaders and government representatives, conducted across Bauchi and Abuja, as well as an intensive literature review, ICCT has devised a series of policy recommendations implementable by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) centred on community inclusion in Rehabilitation & Reintegration (R&R) programming across Nigeria, and the Sahel. Our research found that the perceived legitimacy of government authorities when it comes of rehabilitation and reintegration differs across various communities in Nigeria. Therefore, it is necessary to include Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)/traditional authorities in R&R programming in certain communities as their perceived legitimacy supersedes that of the government. In addition, inclusion of CSOs in R&R programming is essential in order to increase trust between government and local communities due to the long-standing relationship that CSOs have with those communities. Thus, in the Nigerian context where in most communities CSOs might be the only actors who have access to those associated with violent extremism and who denounce government legitimacy, the CSOs can bridge any interests between authorities and communities.

Introduction

In recent years, the most dominant violent extremist threats in the Sahel have come from two main groups—Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates, and Boko Haram and are considered the most significant threat to [national security](#). As a result, thousands of people have been detained and/or imprisoned for having ties to these terrorist groups, resulting in the [overcrowding](#) of prisons. In order to reduce the strain on the criminal justice systems within Nigeria, the government have developed rehabilitation and reintegration [programmes](#) to deal with violent extremist offenders.

In 2016, the Nigerian government initiated [Operation Safe Corridor](#), a rehabilitation and reintegration [project](#) aimed at low-risk, “repentant”, Boko Haram fighters. Members of this group who are deemed eligible for the project undergo several weeks of religious counselling, vocational training, and psychosocial support. Furthermore, to support broader R&R efforts and initiatives undertaken by Nigerian civil society organisations (CSOs), the Nigerian government implemented a [policy framework](#) and a [National Action Plan \(NAP\) in 2017](#), outlining a “whole-of society” approach for preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE), which placed significant emphasis on creating partners with CSOs, specifically on rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives. Experiences over the years have shown that violent extremist groups tend to thrive in areas where civil society has [limited agency](#) or space to function. In conflict as well as post-conflict communities, where there are long-standing grievances and distrust towards the government amongst community members, CSOs are often seen as the only [legitimate](#) and credible entity due to their long-standing relationship within their community. In the context of rehabilitation and reintegration, CSOs can be the only link that [continues](#) the rehabilitation process from custodial setting to re-entering society. In addition, they can provide services that are beyond the scope of government officials, such as [offer](#) religious counselling, arrange for legal aid, or facilitate access to and involvement of family members while individuals are detained. In Nigeria, where the rehabilitation and reintegration is undertaken by the government (often the military) and run top-down approach, most often the involvement of civil society organisations is seen with suspicion and they are denied credibility as partners in rehabilitation and reintegration. They are either not provided space to operate and in cases where they do, they face [restrictions](#) on accessibility within for example designated camps.

¹ Comprising two kick-off workshops, 1 media presentation workshop, 1 capacity – building workshop, 1 Community dialogue and 1 Policy Dialogue

However, to date, Operation Safe Corridor does not clearly [distinguish between high-risk & low-risk](#) participants. This is a key shortcoming, as a clear and consistent risk assessment should be integral to determining which R&R program participants are cleared for rehabilitation, who is to be detained, and who is to be released without charges being pressed. Another concern arises from the finding that some low-risk detainees have been released into internally displaced persons camps and local communities without any [follow-up](#) strategy being in place.² Post-release tracking of R&R program participants is one of the most crucial elements of any effective rehabilitation and reintegration [strategy](#).

The ICCT research project focused on understanding the mechanisms at work when CSOs take on roles traditionally occupied by the state in rehabilitating and reintegrating (R&R) violent extremist fighters. In analyzing these mechanisms, different actors become more aware of how CSOs can best contribute to legitimate stability in (post-)conflict settings involving violent extremism, through what type of interventions, and why this is so. This research project consisted on six events comprising of two kick-off meeting (Abuja, Bauchi), one community dialogue workshop in Bauchi, one capacity-building workshop, one policy dialogue workshop in Abuja, and one media presentation.

Methodology

To develop policy recommendations laid out within this policy brief, a literature review was initially conducted for the baseline analysis. The literature review found that there are significant gaps within the government run Operation Safe Corridor Scheme, such as the exclusion of CSOs in R&R. These findings were used to inform the development of a questionnaire which was distributed amongst 40³ stakeholders in Bauchi and Abuja during the two kick-off meetings. The stakeholders for the two kick-off meetings were selected based on an initial stakeholder analysis carried out by ICCT's Local partner and co-applicant for the project funded by NWO-WOTRO. The stakeholders had the opportunity to both answer the questionnaires themselves and to provide input on the questions, reflecting local expertise. Thus, these questionnaires were used firstly, to validate the research findings from the literature review, and secondly, to incorporate local knowledge into the research design. This literature review, validated research, and inputs from the two kick-off workshops were then used to design an improved questionnaire to be distributed during the community dialogue & policy dialogue sessions. Survey questionnaire feedback observed existing experiences, challenges, and opportunities inherent to rehabilitation and reintegration and how civil society in Nigeria has been involved in such efforts to date. The final set of questionnaires was then distributed amongst 51⁴ stakeholders during the policy dialogue workshop in Abuja and a community dialogue workshop in Bauchi. These stakeholders were selected based on recommendations made by participants at the two kick-off workshops (Abuja, Bauchi).

Research findings: ensuring legitimacy of R&R Actors

Most importantly, it has shown how cooperation between CSOs and governments on the topic of R&R can be optimised without jeopardising each other's separate functions. Through the policy dialogues in Abuja with R&R actors, as well as community dialogues with traditional authorities/religious leaders in Bauchi, it became evident that community's own belief about and perception of authority's trustworthiness matters when it comes to R&R interventions. Through such beliefs about authority, locally tailored interventions could be developed that also involves actors deemed as a legitimate authority within such communities.

The ICCT-WANEP project produced two key findings:

² Author's focus group discussions with CSO representatives, religious leaders and traditional leaders at a workshop in Abuja, March 2019.

³ 15 female, 25 Male participants from the international and national level including Police force, Office of the vice-president, Office of the National Security Advisor and other government representative.

⁴ 19 Female; 32 Male participants from local and regional Non-governmental organisations, Civil Society Organisations, traditional leaders, religious leaders and local government officials.

1. All participants at the various workshops in the North Eastern state of Bauchi and in Abuja agreed that legitimacy to them meant some form of association with the government, however, this was not the case in other states.⁵ In countries like Nigeria, communities' own beliefs about who they perceive as a legitimate authority when it comes to R&R matters, as the long-standing perception of neglect by the Nigerian government has resulted in a lack of trust within different communities. Having said that, all parties agreed that CSOs might be better placed to collect information about local grievances, perceptions of government-led rehabilitation, and reintegration programming. They often have insight on local drivers leading to grievances and how recruitment and radicalization take place and may offer ways to facilitate pathways to disengagement and rehabilitation and reintegration.
2. Operation Safe Corridor currently places significant emphasis on the perpetrator and the rights of victims and citizens are placed in competition with the rights of former violent extremists. This most often results in law-abiding community member, particularly those who are financially struggling, becoming resentful of those who are receiving livelihood support and/or other forms of government assistance. Such feelings of injustice and unfair treatment may fuel further violence and community discord and might incentivize individuals to join Boko Haram.⁶

Policy recommendations for the Dutch MFA on effective R&R process in Nigeria

Based on the outcome of the questionnaires, the various feedback and discussion sessions, and the literature review undertaken at the project's start, several policy recommendations for the Dutch MFA can be made.

How to support the efforts of local Civil Society Organisations in Nigeria:

- During policy dialogue sessions, CSO participants identified that policy makers should support interventions that integrate CSOs in the design and implementation of national rehabilitation and reintegration frameworks, plans, and policies;
- Both the Nigerian government officials, as well as CSO and traditional leaders, during the community dialogue sessions, stated that the goal of a successful rehabilitation and reintegration programme must be to address a wide range of needs, including psychosocial, vocational, financial, educational, legal, religious, familial, and communication needs, available not only to the returnees/perpetrators to be reintegrated but also to the victims and the members of the broader community in order to prevent feelings of injustice;
- Through the kick-off meetings in Bauchi and Abuja, government and non-government stakeholders stated that to guarantee local ownership of rehabilitation and reintegration programming, sustainable, long-term funding should initially be provided to trusted local CSO partners to address emergent threats;
- Through a survey questionnaire shared with stakeholders during the final policy dialogue in Abuja, it was observed that there is a need to invest in sustainable long-term projects whose goal is to address local perceptions, and attitudes towards the legitimacy of various authorities in the community; these projects must take into consideration the local dynamics of the community in which they are implemented, such as by assessing the legitimacy of different actors;
- Through the capacity building session workshop participants underlined the importance of developing and investing in organizational and staff capacity of the CSOs as well as the government in designing and implementing R&R programming within their communities to increase effectiveness and sustainability, such as interventions that helps enhance coordination between the police, local government officials and officials at the federal level;

⁵ Discussions with NEEM foundation revealed that through their project in Borno state, they found that community's distrust of the government was quite evident and any associations with the government will be seen as illegitimate by the community in Borno state.

⁶ Author's Skype interview with a fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2019.

How to support the efforts of the Nigerian government in its R&R initiatives:

- During the capacity building workshop and through various survey questionnaires distributed to stakeholders, emphasis was placed on the need for donors to facilitate programmes with the goals of providing training for frontline staff (police officers and prison personnel) on R&R, including how to best involve CSOs, religious, and traditional leaders. Such training would contribute to making R&R initiatives more locally driven and that will, in the longer-term, improve communication and coordination between different actors and built trust among them and within the wider community.

Collaboration with Civil Society and Beyond:

- As a result of the distrust towards government in certain Nigerian communities, it may be beneficial for local CSOs to get support from established regional and international think tanks to exchange information, coordinate activities, and cooperate on implementation, rather than from the national government;
- During the media presentation workshop, the audience argued that new approaches should focus on collaboration with journalists and/or media actors in order to help raise awareness and build support for rehabilitation and reintegration programs within the wider Nigerian population.

Conclusion

It is very important that in Nigeria a context and conflict specific R&R interventions are implemented through stakeholders that are perceived legitimate by the community. However, even before any interventions are being implemented, perception of legitimate authority within the target communities must be first taken into consideration.