
THE DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMME IN THE FIGHT AGAINST BOKO HARAM IN THE FAR NORTH REGION OF CAMEROON: UNDERSTANDING THE PEACE BLOCKAGES AND OPPORTUNITIES.

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Abstract:

For several years, the State of Cameroon has been waging a fierce war against the Boko Haram movement, which has quickly gone from a sect with religious motives to a terrorist group with nebulous actors and objectives. In addition, the resilience and the mutation of the war strategies of these thugs who embrace both asymmetry and hybridism undertones, also requires an update of the counterinsurgency mechanisms. The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme is one of the most recent measures to manage the Boko Haram crisis. Decreed in 2018, the latter sets out objectives for the construction of peace in the Far North region as well as the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. However, the applicability of this mechanism, generally dedicated to conventional armed groups, is ambiguous and the results of its implementation remain mixed. This article intends to analyse the challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of DDR in the fight against Boko Haram in the Far North of Cameroon. Furthermore, it offers some recommendations for the strengthening of this process to contributing to lasting peace in the Far-North Region. To do this, it mobilises the structural-functionalism and neo institutionalism theory, as well as the qualitative research method based on semi-structured interviews, focus groups and documentary review.

Keywords: *Boko Haram – Challenges - Demobilisation - Disarmament – Far North Cameroon - Opportunities - Recommendations - Reintegration*

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of security crises in Cameroon, the latest being the *Boko Haram* conflict in the Far North and the secessionist threat in the North-West and South-West regions, have inspired sometimes unusual strategies in the overriding concern to preserve territorial integrity and peace. This is the case of the peace offer accorded by the President of the Republic of Cameroon, Paul Biya in 2018 and reiterated over the following two years; an outstretched hand to terrorist and secessionist fighters, and a call to lay down arms and to be reintegrated into the society. In his oath taking speech on November 6, 2018, he called on "war instigators who undermine our national unity and advocate secession" to "*lay down their arms and find the right path (...)*" (Biya, 2018). The fruition of this appeal was evident on November 30th of the same year through a Presidential decree establishing the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR). For the benefit of those who "*voluntarily lay down their arms*" (Ibid.), the DDR mechanism accords an amnesty to former associates of armed groups, while those who sustain "criminal acts (...)" will be subjected to regular judicial processes (Ibid).

The DDR process is not new in itself in the field of conflict management or peacebuilding. However, it is quite particular when implemented in an active conflict, or when faced with extremists who may sometimes abhor dialogue and negotiations (Saïbou & machikou, 2019, p.3). This explains the turmoil around the political decision of DDR in Cameroon. If its operationalisation seems tolerated in the "anglophone" regions due to the internal nature of the conflict, this is less so with regards to the Far North region, in the grip of a transnational crisis. Indeed, Cameroon's approach to DDR, which announces a pacific mechanism, is a Peacebuilding strategy that contrasts somewhat with the regional-counter-terrorism approach¹ of SPRR (Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration) inspired by 3rd generation DDR (OIM, 2021, p.7). Moreover, it faces a myriad of challenges that complicate its effective implementation. Nevertheless, this does not overshadow the considerable impact that the DDR mechanism has on the peace process in the Far North of Cameroon. Indeed, the wave of surrenders² recorded to date show more than 1,000 ex-combatants in the Méri camp, (CRTV, 2021) which plays an important role in reducing terrorist attacks. A better understanding of this development imposes a reflection on the means of achieving peace in the Far-North Region of Cameroon, through the prism of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goal 16. This also enables a focus on the mechanisms to fight against Boko Haram.

On this premises, this paper shall be analysing the challenges and opportunities of the DDR mechanism in the Far North of Cameroon and proposes peace and security policy options. However, it sets itself the task of presenting the security context of Far North Cameroon, and analyses the context of the emergence of DDR in the region.

1. Methodology and Theoretical Framework of Analysis.

- This article mobilises structural-functionalism (Parsons, 1953) as a bedrock for its analysis. Developed by Talcott Parsons, it presupposes that: any society, any community, any organization is an integrated system of elements. That is to say a relatively stable and permanent system with each of these elements performing a function that contributes to the maintenance of the entire system. This functioning social system is based on the consensus of

¹ SPRR's regional approach stems from the regional stabilization, recovery and resilience strategy for areas of the Lake Chad Basin affected by the Boko Haram crisis, particularly its appendix to the 3rd pillar of intervention.

² The creation of the DDR process is a factor in the disengagement of Boko Haram fighters, but not the only one. Several socio-economic and security reasons motivate the return of the latter.

its members around fundamental values and norms. Emphasizing the balance and maintenance of the social system, it prompts the questioning of the implementation of DDR by the Cameroonian state the efficiency and operational effectiveness of the program. The analysis of the factors limiting the coherent and effective implementation of DDR helps to understand the obstacles to building peace.

Furthermore, it also makes it possible to analyse the local application of DDR according to the regional strategic model, in a logic of common security of the region. In other words, if each State, Cameroon in this case, fulfils its function by disarming, demobilising and reintegrating its ex-combatants in the image of the model of the regional strategy, the hypothesis of a global disengagement would contribute to slow down or curtail terrorism within the region.

On its part, neo-institutionalist theory (Lecours, 2002) gives institutions a prominent place in theoretical and analytical matters. The historical approach on which our analysis is based stipulates that: *"institutions, once created, come to life and give rise to dynamics and situations that often were not wanted or foreseen by then actors. According to this logic, sociopolitical phenomena cannot be explained by the simple will of the actors, nor even by the nature of their relationships, because they are often the accidental product of a macro historical process of institutional development where each configuration conditions the next one."*(Lecours, 2002, P.8).

In this case, the DDR institutions created for the management of ex-combatants is questioned in terms of its effect. This paper analyses the dynamics and situations arising from the creation of the Meri centre for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of Boko Haram returnees. It will therefore identify the challenges and opportunities of the DDR process for peace and security in the Far North region of Cameroon. In other words, the examination of the process will allow us to see if it has produced the results expected at the outset or not.

In terms of data collection, this research employed both primary and secondary sources.

- **Primary sources:** The technique used here is the qualitative method through semi-structured interviews and Focus Groups. A few interviews were held with civil society actors (ALDEPA- Local Action for Participatory and Self-managed Development) and former hostages from the Zamay camp.

-**Secondary sources:** it involved mostly documentary research which contributes to reflections in this article. These are particularly general and specialised works, scientific articles, reviews, theses and dissertations, newspapers, official and private documents, and digital documents.

2. Boko Haram and the Security context of the Far North Region of Cameroon

The phenomenon of conflict mutation, which has grown considerably since the emergence of terrorism in America, has not spared Africa. As proof, the emergence of the Boko Haram movement, which has dictated its law in the Lake Chad Basin for more than a decade is obstructing the climate of peace in the sub-region and causing enormous damage. The Far North region of Cameroon is paying dearly for sharing borders with Nigeria from where the terrorist group emerged. Boko Haram was born in Nigeria in 2002 at the instigation of Mohammed Yusuf; the latter cherished a project of Islamic expansion which enabled him to rally to his cause the socially marginalised, intellectuals and unemployed dissatisfied with the socio-economic living conditions of Nigeria. Also pursuing the dream of creating a caliphate around Lake Chad, it will extend its tentacles from 2014 to three other states in the sub-

region, including Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Until October 2021, which marked the death of Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, the security context was quite disastrous in view of the multiplication of unconventional attacks which is a real challenge for defense and security forces.

Localities plagued by terrorism were thus set on fire and bloodshed, and transformed into *No Man's Land* leading to forced displacements inside and outside the States. According to Human Rights Watch, the conflict has occasioned the displacement of more than 322,000 people in the Far North of Cameroon, and more than 5,000 deaths (Belporo, 2021) since the start of the conflict.

The Far North region has a precedence of insecurity due to the phenomenon of Zarguina or *coupeurs de route*³; which ultimately predisposed it to the terrorist activities of Boko Haram. This is further amplified by the border porosity, the illicit circulation of small arms, the socio-ethnic composition of the cross-border populations, or even the insufficiency of checkpoints and border security (Tagou & Tchouamou, 2016). The locality has a surface area of 34,263 km with nearly 3,933,007 inhabitants. It is particularly characterised by underdevelopment, which is materialised by infrastructural and financial deficits. Poverty rate in the region is higher than the national average and estimated at about 74.3% (European Union, 2016). Indeed, most households suffer from malnutrition, while the youths face education and employment challenges. This factor has also favoured the recruitment of several young people into Boko Haram groups.

Though the conflict has been raging on for the past decade, it also experiences lull moments which are exploited by Boko Haram to refine its strategies. This probably explains its renewed activity since December 2021, (Anadolu Agency, 2021) even if the frequency of attacks is lower than in the past⁴. Rather, we note the emergence of non-state armed groups (OCHA, 2022) which also carry out attacks on the ground, thus creating confusion with Boko Haram.

This most worrying situation raises questions about the effectiveness of the strategies and mechanisms deployed concerning the rising threat. Beyond the military force which constitutes the means of counter-attack mainly exercised by the target States, the process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration was created not only to organize the return of ex-combatants-and-associates to civilian life, but also for the purpose of increasing defections from enemy camp. The analysis of its evolution provides information on the beginning of the process shortly before its creation.

3. The evolution of the local implementation of DDR in the Far North of Cameroon

DDR is a process of transitioning armed combatants from military to civilian life. Douglas Ian & al (2006, pp.41-63) define the conceptual trio as follows:

-Disarmament: the process by which the weapons of combatants are handed over to the authorities who are responsible for their safe storage, their redistribution, or even their destruction.

-Demobilisation: Dismantling of an armed unit, reduction of the number of fighters within an armed group, or an intermediate step before the assembly of a regular army or not.

³ Rural armed gangs who attacks motorists on the roads.

⁴ This situation is largely due to the death of former leader Abubakar Schekau.

-Reintegration: Process by which ex-combatants regain their status as civilians and gain access to work and income in civilian life.

The various speeches of President Paul Biya underlie the political and legal framework of DDR in the Far North of Cameroon: His inaugural speech of November 6, 2018, the message delivered on January 18, 2019 during the graduation ceremony of the 36th batch of trainees of the Yaoundé Combined Services Arms Academy (EMIA Unity and Diversity batch), the speech announcing the Major National Dialogue of September 10, 2019, and finally the message of February 10, 2020 on the occasion of the National Youth Day. Though the Decree of November 30, 2018 establishing the National Committee for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration set a formal framework for the management of returnees from Boko Haram, the government of Cameroon had already started welcoming them long before. This exercise actually commenced in 2017 as the government of Cameroon received some ex-combatants of Boko Haram (Saïbou & Machikou, 2019).

The operational approach was based on deradicalisation, socialisation and a fight against brainwashing (Issa & Machikou, 2019, p.4). Public repentance ceremonies in which returnees swore on the Koran were usually organised as a prelude to their reintegration into the communities (Ibid). Some were admitted after sorting, to the camps for displaced persons or to the Headquarters of the Multinational Mixed Force pending the establishment of a more elaborate mechanism. After the creation of the national committee for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration which overlooks the centres located in the three target regions, including the Far North, measures were taken to provide "*multidimensional assistance to ex-combatants in the context of their preparation for a return to civilian life*", and help their reintegration through "*organisation of trainings, provision of tools or means of production; and assistance in the creation of income-generating activities*"⁵. While the institutional framework is relatively well developed, the operational dimension is less rosy given the shortcomings noted so far.

The fight against terrorism perpetrated by Boko Haram has migrated from the local level to a more global scale. The transnational nature of the threat has led States of the Lake Chad Basin to join efforts to overcome the Islamist movement. Thus, the repression and the military counter-offensives were jointly carried out by these States, in particular within the framework of the operations *Gama Aiki and Lafiya Dole* of the Joint Multinational Force. This collective action played an important role in the dismantling of the Boko Haram fighters and caused, in turn, multiple defections within their ranks. Therefore, in order to receive these returnees, each State has set up care programmes. While this initiative was determined in the light of the local context of each country, it should nevertheless be noted that a regional strategy was also designed to strengthen the stabilisation and development of the Lake Chad Basin Community. It proposes a roadmap that frames, among other things, the process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. The annex of the said strategy presents a more adapted approach to the terrorist threat centred on screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration (SPRR) (Saïbou & Machikou, 2019, p.3).

The common implementation of this strategy is far from obvious insofar as each State had already developed its own public policy in this area. Indeed, there are disparities in the implementation of DDR by the states of the region (Ibid.) even though the regional strategy annex document recommends harmonised screening and prosecution operations, as well as

⁵ Article 2 paragraphs 2 and 3 of Decree No. 2018/719 of November 30, 2018 establishing the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration.

rehabilitation and reintegration that adopt a common regional approach (Union Africaine, 2018).

In the Lake Chad Basin Community, Cameroon is the last to have officially set up a national DDR strategy. The creation of the CNDDR came a few months after the aforementioned regional strategy. Based on a Peacebuilding approach which advocates the acceptance and to a certain extent – which remains to be clarified – the forgiveness of terrorists who have laid down their arms, as well as their social reintegration, it differs from the SPRR approach which provides for prosecution of high-risk terrorists.

The implementation of the DDR process suffers from numerous irregularities both institutionally and operationally, which constitute an obstacle to the construction of peace in the Far North of Cameroon.

4. The institutional and operational challenges of implementing DDR for peacebuilding in the Far North region of Cameroon.

The presidential decree establishing the DDR in major conflict-prone areas of Cameroon was a new initiative in the management of the Boko Haram war activities for nearly a decade. It has so far contributed to many surrenders in the locality.

As much as DDR is a public policy with a dual scope of security and peacebuilding, its failure is perilous for peace. The DDR program has an ambivalent scope: well designed and implemented, it can guarantee and restore peace. Otherwise, it would be a factor in the resurgence of conflicts. Many examples in Africa, including the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire say a lot about it. To paraphrase Prosper Zena, an incomplete or insufficiently organized DDR can leave a great source of latent instability (Nkani, 2013). The institution of DDR in Cameroon presents a huge challenge as to its applicability given the context and circumstances of its advent. Apart from the local mechanisms for the reintegration of ex-combatants, the regional strategy agreed by the African Union and the Lake Chad Basin Community provided for a process adapted to the situation (SPRR) in the light of which structural and operational efforts were required from the Cameroonian State. If the creation of the CNDDR one month after the development of the regional strategy appears as a response from Cameroon to the expectations of its fellows, apart from its internal security plan, it is not less tainted with deficiencies.

According to Cornelis Steenken (2018, p.XII), the success of any DDR process is closely linked to the political, economic and security situation of the country where it is implemented, and to its ability to be carefully planned and executed. This actually affects the institutional and operational aspects of the process. Each DDR institution play its role to correct the prevailing systemic security weakness. However, in Cameroon, the institutional and operational framework of the DDR suffers from problems obstructing the construction of peace in this northern region.

5. The embryonic or incomplete nature of institutions, mechanisms and infrastructures – a factor in the escape of ex-combatants.

Long before the creation of the CNDDR, the Cameroonian State through the intervention of the Multinational joint Task Force proceeded by three stages to welcoming ex-combatants of Boko Haram: reception and identification, interrogation and screening, de-radicalisation and reintegration. This enabled the authorities to classify the returnees and engage in an adequate follow-up. As the screening process was not systematic, this necessitated a more elaborate mechanism which paved the way for the creation of the CNDDR. Unfortunately, screening is still realised on an informal basis (Saïbou, p.7), which raises questions about the effectiveness

of this process and the accuracy of its results. Moreover, while some ex-members of Boko Haram are registered in the camps, many return to their communities without going through the required procedures. This stems from the absence of local reception structures in certain localities, which effectively prevents the alert and identification system from retaining all returnees. For example in Mayo Tsanaga while ex-combatants are relatively tolerated by the population, local authorities have not fully organised their examination before reintegrating them into the communities as required. (Mbarkoutou, (2020, p.135),

A UNDP study quoted by Mbarkoutou Mahamat reports 3,000 ex-hostages joined the communities on the Zamay site. It also reveals the return of several individuals rightly or wrongly considered ex-combatants in localities such as Mokolo, Koza, Mozogo, Hidava (PNUD, 2019) etc. Through a focus group carried out with 20 ex-hostages from camp B in Zamay (including ex-members of Boko Haram), it appears that the narrowness of the Meri center and the precarious living conditions push many returnees to desert the camp. Some integrate the Zamay camps or return directly to the community, while others return to factions of Boko Haram (Saïbou & Machikou, 2019, p.7). These uncontrolled returns are not without risk; but constitute factors of new conflicts within the host community insofar as nobody is prepared to welcome them. During an interview with the project manager of the Non-Governmental Organisation, ADELPA, in Maroua (*Action for Local, Participative and Self-managed Development*), it became clear that that ex-members of Boko Haram suffer rejection within the population because of several factors including resentment, mistrust, and conflicts over resources. Locals also take a negative view of aid given to returnees when they do not enjoy the same privileges⁶. Furthermore, the lack of support infrastructure, or the absence of equipment, are also obstacles to the success of the reintegration of ex-combatants (PNUD, 2019).

6. The slow operationalisation of mechanisms and procedures

Though the reintegration of ex-combatants requires stages within a reasonable time, on the field a considerable slowness in the activities is observed. For example in 2019, the screening process for Multinational Joint Task Force detainees and their transfer was slow to take-off due to the pending construction of the Mémé camp. Several Cameroonian returnees waiting to be screened and identified were kept in isolation. Though the construction of the camp was inscribed in the budget for the 2019 fiscal year, it is in November 2021 that the project was launched (Cameroon Tribune, 2021). Although the Méri transit camp serves as a profiling base for several returnees, it is not spacious enough to contain the numbers of defectors who join the camp for rehabilitation. The configuration of the Méri centre does not offer viable living spaces with privacy, and a challenging atmosphere for learning and supervision. This gives the impression of a confinement centre coupled with insecurity (Saïbou, 2020, P.152). The urgency of decongestion then becomes necessary (Cameroon Tribune, 2021).

In addition to this, some other factors stand as roadblocks to the effective implementation of the DDR program in the Far North of Cameroon: it concerns the problem of competency of agents responsible for the DDR management, the structural disorder in the implementation, the gap between the Cameroonian and regional strategies of DDR, and the

Please write a transitional sentence here to introduce the points below. E.g, below are some of the roadblocks to the effective implementation of the DDR program in the Far-North Region of Cameroon.

⁶Interview conducted with Mrs. DIYA Clémence, project manager at the NGO ALDEPA –Maroua, on May 12, 2022 at 11:20 a.m.

-Lack of competence of DDR agents and structural disorder: a “kill-trust” vis-à-vis returnees from Boko Haram

According to a study by the United Nations Development Programme, the reintegration process for ex-combatants is limited by some factors linked to operational agents' skills and the structural framework of DDR. First of all, the laxity and amateurism of the agents result in the absence of adequate support for returnees, and the poor use of funds hinders peace building efforts. Indeed, the actors responsible for supervising reintegration operations are accused of corruption and embezzlement of public funds which is followed by inconsistent and sloppy training of ex-members (UNDP, 2019, p.37). Although the precarious economic situation of the Far North region is not very favourable to the reintegration of repentant fighters. Despite these lacunae, the government of Cameroon is making efforts with the support of international organisations and civil society to make the process a success. Moreover, the circulation of arms and the impunity of some ex-combatants show the weaknesses of the institutional framework for the full application of the disarmament phase of DDR. These elements further limit trust among defectors and population with regards to the government and are likely to delay the successful implementation of the DDR program.

- The institutional and structural gap of Cameroonian DDR compared to the regional strategic model

If Steenken Cornelis believes that "*there is no single model or blueprint for DDR programs*" (Steenken, 2018, p.XII) – the Cameroonian model makes a departure from usual practices. It must however be recognised that the transnational context of the terrorism threat requires concerted responses and strategies. On these premises, President Paul Biya, speaking to diplomats in Yaoundé argued that "*To global threat, global response*" (Biya, 2015) which represents a call for joint action in the fight against terrorism, not only internationally, but also regionally. Though the collective military approach has registered some successes, its limitations are a signal for more concerted sustainable strategy. Nonetheless, in practice, locally construed DDR strategy is still being applied in Cameroon above regional or international frameworks. For example, while the regional DDR strategy targets all Boko Haram associates, the Cameroon system focuses on ex-combatants (Saïbou & Machikou, 2019). Moreover, the respect and the realisation of the different processes are very relative, due not only to institutional and structural defaults, but also to the absence of a clear and precise framework of the DDR programme. It should also be noted that the type of DDR applied by Cameroon comes from a Peacebuilding approach. President Paul Biya has constantly called on combatants to lay down their arms without fear of reprisals. In his message to the nation on September 10, 2019 announcing the Major National Dialogue, the latter declares that he "*(...) is able to exercise a right of pardon. It is also on the strength of this authorisation that I addressed during my recent swearing in, an offer of peace to the members of the armed groups (...)*" (Biya, 2019). This justifies the absence of the Ministry of Justice among the members of the DDR committee, which generally focuses on the prosecution of suspected terrorists according to the anti-terrorism law of December 23, 2014. The Cameroonian mechanism thus distances itself from the regional approach of SPRR which advocates the prosecution of high-risk combatants at the end of screening. Moreover, the respect and the realisation of the different processes are very relative, due not only to institutional and structural flaws, but also to the absence of a clear and precise framework of the DDR program.

-A DDR management not yet inclusive enough

The particular nature of the Cameroon DDR programme imposes a strong managerial principle sourced from past experience. It should be noted that Cameroon is experimenting this mechanism for the first time, which so far oscillates between the SPRR and the local model. The Presidential Decree establishing the DDR in principle places full responsibility for the mechanism in the hands of the head of the centre who collaborates with the administrative entities to which he is affiliated, including the board of directors and the national coordination. The recorded surrenders are undoubtedly the resonance of the operationalisation of the process by the DDR cell though multiple gaps exist. Problems related to the implementation of DDR result from many factors, including the insufficient inclusion of other actors. Article 9 of the Decree provides that "*the committee cooperates as necessary with the competent administrations, NGOs and national and international partners, in particular the UN*" (Presidential Decree, 2018). While it is true that the DDR centre cooperates with international partners, including the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the fact remains that it shuns collaboration with other partners. Some civil society organizations decry the centralization of decisions by the hierarchy of the Regional centre as well as the lack of communication⁷. They criticise the non-inclusiveness of CSOs, which could nevertheless contribute to the implementation of the programme. Their proximity to the population enables a close contact with reality, and therefore propose solutions that are adapted to the key issues.

7. A CONTROVERSIAL DDR PROCESS WITH A SURPRISING IMPACT: OPPORTUNITIES

- A catalyst for surrender and a *strategy of denying* (Olinga, 2020) the terrorist fight

The Cameroonian DDR undoubtedly presents many irregularities, however its impact on the management of returnees and the construction of peace in the Far North is not the least. Although the military reprisals of the Multinational Joint Task Force have caused defections from the ranks of the enemy, it must be said that the Cameroon Presidential Decree has contributed to the return of many Boko Haram ex-combatants. As of April 2021, the Méri transit camp recorded nearly 200 people, bringing their number to 571 (Cameroon Tribune, 2021). A statistical study by IOM on the number of returnees in November 2021 counts around 1,114 repentant fighters at the Meri transitional centre. In February 2022, it estimates the overall number of returnees in the Far North of Cameroon at 130,690 (OCHA, 2022).

Though it may seem contradictory and complex, the DDR presents a military but non-violent strategic mechanism. Indeed, it weighs the balance on the Cameroonian side in terms of military personnel and decreases the Boko Haram fighters' workforce while those of Cameroon remain intact. Its effect is the same as that of military strikes; that of neutralizing and ousting the threat. But instead of multiplying killings, the DDR recovers the "lost children" and gives them a second chance. In regard to the change in Boko Haram's strategies, which indirectly suggests a change in counter-attack, the DDR mechanism plays an important role.

Analysing the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of ex-combatants of Boko Haram requires presenting the statistics recorded in the Méri camp in the Far North of

⁷ Interview with Ms. Diya Clémence, project manager in Adelpa, Antenne de Maroua, conducted on May 12, 2022 at 11:20 a.m.

Cameroon. Therefore, the first table below shows in figures the situation of returnees by gender as of November 2021.

▪ **Table 1: Situation of Repentant Boko Haram Fighters in the transitional center of Meri (Far North Cameroon)**

Situation of repentants	
Men	290
Women	272
Boys	297
Girls	255
Total	1,114

Source: OIM, 2021.

The second table below provides an overview from a humanitarian perspective of the situation of victims and displaced persons of the Boko Haram conflict. The last column shows the total number of registered returnees or ex-combatants up to February 2022.

Table 2- Humanitarian situation of victims and displaced persons due to the conflict.

People in need	People targeted	Internal Displaced Persons	Refugees in camps	Refugees outside camps (rural area)	Returnees
1.2 Million	764,000	377,877	71,756	47,330	130,690
Source : Overview of humanitarian needs 2022	Source : Humanitarian response plan 2022	Source : IOM DTM N°24-February 2022	Source : Statistics of persons of concern to UNHCR /Government of Cameroon - April 2022	Source : Statistics of persons of concern to UNHCR/Government of Cameroon March 2022	Source : OIM DTM N°24 - February 2022

Source: (OCHA, 2022)

As mentioned above, the previous tables provide an overview of the situation of Boko Haram ex-combatants in the Meri camp. More clearly, the first table presents statistics by gender, namely, the number of girls, women, boys and men associated with Boko Haram who have deserted the movement and entered the DDR camp in the month of November 2021. While

the total number of returnees is 1,112, it can be observed that the number of men/boys is significantly higher than that of women/girls.

The second table shows the status of people in need, target people, IDPs, refugees inside and outside the camp, and Boko Haram returnees. These statistics show that the number of ex-combatants recorded since the creation of the Meri camp in 2018 until February 2022 (by the International Organization for Migration) is far from negligible. Indeed, more than 130,690 ex-combatants occupy the said camp in 2022. This figure is much higher than the number of internal refugees or those outside the camps, hence the need to decongest the Meri camp in order to properly reintegrate the ex-combatants.

-Practices of reconciliation deemed effective at the local level

Though the reintegration phase of Meri's ex-combatants has not yet effectively started, some returnees have integrated the local community through traditional reconciliation practices. The operational results presented in a UNDP study in 2019 show that among the 61% of returnees who participated in the process, 95% testified to its effectiveness. Some indigenous practices of reconciliation stand out for their particularity and their favourable impact: in this case, we can raise the *Dia*, which is a compensation indemnity by an alleged criminal; the *Kuli*, a rite of forgiveness practiced in the Mafa and Mefou community during which *bil-bil*⁸, water and goat are used for the ceremony; and the *Mpil Dimblom*, which refers to a rite of purification of the village (UNDP, 2019). Even though these practices are not developed by the national DDR mechanism, they embrace its vision and contribute to its effectiveness. The decrease in Boko Haram attacks in the Far North of Cameroon can be linked to some extent to the implementation of DDR, if we refer to the favorable results it produces. With the above, we now arrive to the logical conclusion of this study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this study was to examine the challenges and opportunities of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process for Boko Haram ex-combatants on peace in the Far North region of Cameroon. While the implementation of this mechanism has achieved considerable results in the region, including the defection of a large number of ex-combatants, there are serious shortcomings in the mechanism that are slowing down the peace process in the Far North region of Cameroon.

The idea of setting up a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme took a while to start in Cameroon. However, its materialisation has been welcomed in the light of the prevailing operational peace challenges. The fight against Boko Haram is a long-term fight that has already inspired a myriad of asymmetric conflict management strategies and mechanisms. The DDR was decreed in a political logic targeting mainly the two major security crises in Cameroon, however, its establishment in the Far North of Cameroon responds more to a regional need than a national one because of the trans-nationalisation of the threat. If it serves as a receptacle and framework for dealing with defections from Boko Haram, this can also be translated as a mechanism to restore peace which is currently a luxury in the region.

The effectiveness of DDR can be increased if its implementation framework is consolidated. The ideal solution lies in the development of a clear and specific programme that combines the orientations of the regional strategy and the proven local community experiences. In general, it is imperative to assign to institutions actors with the skills required for each process

⁸ A local drink in the Far North Region of Cameroon

or sector of activity. For example, in terms of screening in the regional strategy, as suggested in the appendix, a multidisciplinary structure bringing together personnel with various skills must be defined. The composition of the screening units in the transit centres and permanent centre should therefore be reviewed. This may enable the inclusion of the Military, Religious and Traditional authorities, Vigilante committees, and Experts or agents trained in the processes. The roadmap, objectives, mechanisms and method must be clearly defined in advance in the program to expedite the process. The consolidation of the structural framework with regard to professional agents is also a very important measure not only to activate the confidence of the populations and associates, but also for the success of any DDR operation. Therefore, the deficiencies generally noted in the context of the functional exercise must be anticipated by rigorous control and sanction mechanisms. Furthermore, the communication of decisions and measures taken at the local level in terms of DDR should be done immediately at the regional level to harmonise the fight against Boko Haram. The proper functioning of institutions and therefore the dynamism, integrity and coordination efforts of their actors are the perfect cocktail for the success of peace building in Far-North Cameroon and the Lake Chad Basin.

In essence, we recommend the following peace and security policy options:

-The structuring of a clear and specific DDR program, delimited in time, which takes into account the realities of the Cameroonian context, but also respects the regional strategy of SPRR. Cameroon is in-between these approaches, however it is time for more clarity and precision in the institutional and operational framework of this mechanism in Cameroon.

-In relation to the acceleration of DDR activities in order to increase its impact in the fight against Boko Haram and the consolidation of peace in the Far North Region of Cameroon, deadlines should be set for each activity and adhered to.

-The recruitment and training of real experts in DDR, combined with the fight against socio-economic scourges.

-The consideration of the gender aspect during the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-associates of Boko Haram; which will increase the impact or effectiveness of the process. This requires adaptation to gender-specific needs of returnees.

-The integration of local population into the DDR process, both in the proposal of solutions and access to the privileges granted to ex-members. A balanced reintegration that benefits the whole community is essential. This will avoid frustrations and will encourage the welcoming of repentant fighters.

- The inclusion of civil society organisations and experienced local actors in the management of the DDR process. This requires communication and sharing of responsibilities. Collective action is likely to produce greater results.

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