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MEAC Findings Report 5

Volunteer Security Outfits in North East Nigeria

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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Key Findings

- Volunteer Security Outfits (VSOs) are a deeply embedded part of the conflict landscape in the North East of Nigeria, and they play an outsized role in the security architecture, contributing to the protection of local communities from Boko Haram.
- 91 per cent of community leaders surveyed in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga reported having a Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in their community, and nearly half had non-CJTF Yan Gora group(s) as well.
- A significant proportion of community leaders report that the CJTF has harmed their communities (40 per cent), generating significant fear about whether former VSO members might cause harm in the future.
- Often the CJTF did nothing to make amends for perceived harms, but when it did, financial reparations seem to be made mostly at the community-level, while community members are more likely to report receiving apologies.

This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles?

These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected from December 2020 to January 2021, as part of a phone survey with a representative sample of 3,483 community members and a survey conducted with over 215 community leaders (e.g., Bulamas, Lawans, ward chairmen)[1] from November 2020 to February 2021 from key locations in and around the Maiduguri metropolitan area in Borno State, Nigeria.[2] The report presents emerging findings about community experiences with and perceptions of VSOs – and how they differ by gender. This data was gathered to understand the full range of actors involved in the insurgency and support UN partners working in the North East of Nigeria in their efforts to demobilize children from - and support efforts to professionalize - self-defence groups. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

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[1] It should be noted that 208 out of the 215 community leaders interviewed for this particular survey were men. This survey focused on leaders who serve geographically tied communities as compared to thematic ones (e.g., labor, women or youth leaders) The community survey sample was 48 per cent female, and 52 per cent male.

[2] This research was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from Mobukar Consultancy. More information on MEAC partners and donors is available here.

Volunteer Security Outfits

Overview

Volunteer Security Outfits (VSOs) – in the form of ethnic militias, hunter guards, and community self-defence groups - have a long history across Nigeria. With the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, however, there was an evolution in the role, size, and prominence of self-defence groups in the country's North East. This evolution occurred alongside and in reaction to challenges the Nigerian military's Joint Task Force (JTF), which was deployed to fight Boko Haram in the region, encountered from the outset.

The JTF is comprised of troops from across the country – many of which lacked a deep knowledge of the region or were unable to speak the local languages. As such, the JTF increasingly relied on local self-defence groups to operate as their eyes, ears, and even as an extension of them in vetting possible threats and protecting communities. For communities, local VSOs represented – in many cases – their only hope for protection from armed groups. Moreover, membership in these groups was a way to "deflect the security forces' suspicion and retaliation…"[3] and provide "protection from alleged indiscriminate killing and arrest".[4] Indeed, it was the case that "if boys were not part of CJTF they were often suspected of being part of JAS [Boko Haram]", leading participation in community VSOs to become a powerful signalling mechanism to "show their solidarity for those who had been abducted"[5] and avoid being accused of continued association with Boko Haram.[6]

For many, 2013 marked a major shift in the evolution of VSOs in the North East of Nigeria. As more local people visibly played a role in the counterinsurgency campaign – including a well-publicized incident where a local trader in Maiduguri apprehended a Boko Haram gunman armed with only a stick provided by the JTF[7] - VSO recognition from and their relationships with state and federal governments changed. Self-defence groups became increasingly referred to as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – a name that reflected their analogous role to the JTF. Further signaling their acceptance, then president Goodluck Jonathan hailed them as Nigeria's "new national heroes".[8]

While the term CJTF is often used to suggest a monolithic organized force, the reality is different. Today in the North East, there are a wide range of homegrown security actors involved in measures to address the insurgency. The CJTF is comprised of "vigilante and self-defence militias… some armed only with handmade weapons or none at all… [that operate] with varying degrees of formality

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[3] International Crisis Group, "Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram," *Africa Report* 244 (2017), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/244-watchmen-lake-chad-vigilante-groups-fighting-boko-haram

[4] Patricia Donli et al., Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria (Abuja: NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, 2017).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett, "Beset on All Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria," *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* eds. Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018), Pg. 206.

[7] Idayat Hassan and Zacharias Pieri, "The Rise and Risks of Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force: Implications for Post-Conflict Recovery in Northeastern Nigeria," *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines:: Analyses of Africa's Enduring* Insurgency ed. Jacob Zenn (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center, 2018), Pg. 76.

[8] "Updated Timeline of Boko Haram Attacks and Related Violence," *IRIN News*, 12 December 2013, www.irinnews.org/feature/2013/12/12

and varying relationships with the State, leaving observers to disagree over their organizational identities and boundaries."[9] Some use the term CJTF and Yan Gora ("people with sticks" in Hausa) interchangeably, but the MEAC research team finds that local residents of North East Nigeria often distinguish between CJTF – which are seen as having a more formalized membership – albeit with different groupings (e.g., Borno Youth Empowerment Program [or Boyes], Volunteers) and a closer relationship with the state government (often denoted by having uniforms or receiving a stipend or training) - and the broader Yan Gora, which encompasses a varied range of voluntary security actors in the region. In addition, there are hunters and charmers – often referred to today as vigilantes - who play security roles because of the nature of their work: hunters are armed and roam territory tracking animals, while charmers are seen as having spiritual protection against physical harm that puts them in an advantageous position to take on Boko Haram. Rounding out an already quite full picture are the ethnic militias associated with different groups across the region (e.g., nomadic Shuwa Arab groups have kesh-kesh forces).[10] While nearly all the VSOs have grassroots origins and operated for years outside of formal government structures, after over a decade of insurgency, most VSOs have come to have some level of engagement with government in Nigeria – albeit with varying degrees of formality and closeness.

The Ubiquity of VSOs in the North East of Nigeria

It is difficult to provide accurate projections for the number and size of these VSOs. Some recent estimates put the CJTF at around 30,000 members[11] – although estimates place the number of trained CJTF at around 5,000.[12] The countrywide Vigilante Group of Nigeria – a registered NGO that acts as an umbrella organization for many of the local hunter groups across the country – claims to represent over a million members across Nigeria.[13] The latter estimate is extremely high and it is unclear if it is accurate and/or includes additional types of forces (e.g., Yan Gora).

What is clear is that VSOs are ubiquitous in the region. A recent survey of community leaders in MMC, Jere, and Konduga suggest almost all communities have a CJTF: 91 per cent of community leaders, representing at least 70 communities, said they have a CJTF.[14] In another survey of community members in roughly the same areas provided similar information about the presence of volunteer security organizations. The communities represented are largely in and near Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and the headquarters of the CJTF. The geographic focus of the surveys detailed here raises the question of whether the prevalence – and as to be discussed later in the brief, the importance – of the CJTF and other VSOs in this area is reflective of other more rural locations in the North East. One small data point suggests it might be; of displaced community leaders – a small subsample – all of them said their community of origin had a CJTF presence (and nearly half had non-CJTF Yan Gora groups as well). Nearly 90 per cent of leaders representing these communities reported that both the CJTF and Yan Gora there had started without external assistance and only a small minority had outside help in getting off the ground.

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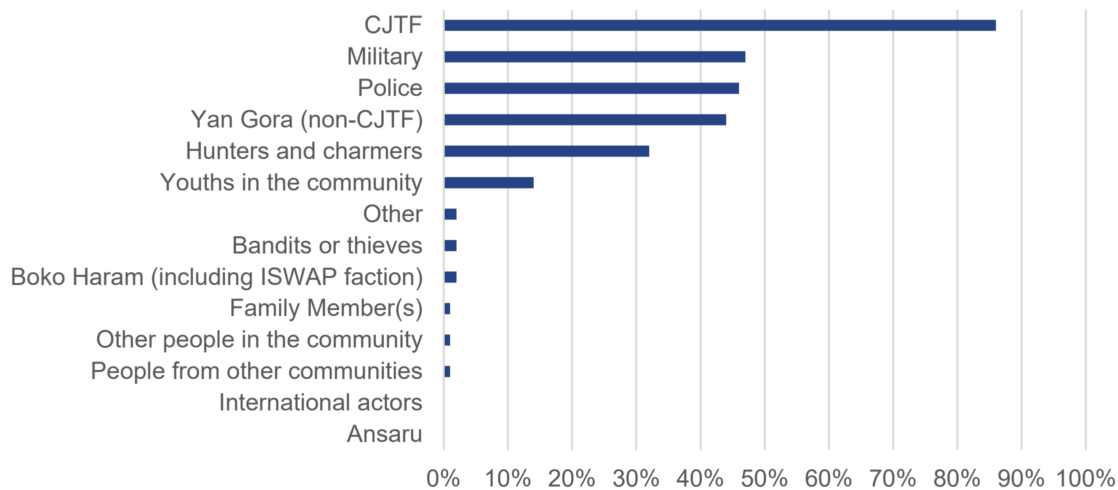
[9] Matfess et al., "Beset on All Sides": 178-179.
[10] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria's North-East: Not Going Away," *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-conflict Transitions* ed. Adam Day (New York: United Nations University, 2020): 79-80.
[11] The CJTF estimates that it currently numbers between 31,000 members, an increase from their 2018 estimate of 26,000. Ibid., 77.
[12] Citing Somoen, the Nigerian military has trained fewer than 5,000 CJTF members, and some analysts estimate that the CJTF has as few as 10,000. Ibid., 78.
[13] Kingsley Nwezeh, "Vigilante Group Canvasses Inclusion in Community Policing," *This Day*, 29 September 2020, https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/09/29/vigilante-group-canvasses-inclusion-in-community-policing/
[14] Note that what constitutes a separate community is not universally agreed, hence the "approximately". Also, there was a small subset of the sample comprised of displaced leaders who were referencing their community of origin (seven total) – Of that group, 100 per cent said there was a CJTF presence and 57 per cent said there was a Yan Gora presence.

Beyond presence, the data suggests that VSOs – of all the security actors present in the region – play an outsized role in providing security services to communities. When asked who the main security providers were in their community, leaders identified an array of actors, but most frequently cited the CJTF above all other groups (86 per cent), followed by the military and police (almost 47 per cent), non-CJTF Yan Gora (44 per cent), and hunters and charmers (32 per cent).

Figure 1: Main Security Providers in your Community



The MEAC survey work suggests high levels of community engagement with VSOs. Community leaders reported a high level of involvement in their communities with VSOs. The questions posed to community leaders about the extent of community involvement with groups like the CJTF, Yan Gora, and vigilante groups were phrased broadly to capture a variety of different relationships and roles: For example, "Today, about how many people in your community are with CJTF?" In response, more than half of those community leaders surveyed (54 per cent) suggested that "many" of their community members were involved with the CJTF, and almost half (48 per cent) described Yan Gora involvement as similarly pervasive.[15]

When asked if they were ever with a VSO if even for a day, 81 respondents (just over two per cent of the sample) said they had been with the CJTF, 126 (almost four per cent) said they were with Yan Gora, and only four respondents said they had been with the vigilantes (hunters and charmers). This question was purposely posed to encompass a wide range of engagement with VSOs – from formal to informal, historical to current. Notably, two of those respondents who said they had been with the CJTF for at least a day were children, and for Yan Gora, the figure was six. Based on the way the questions were phrased, it is not possible to discern if the engagement of these children is current or historical.

There has been significant focus on the CJTF in recent years, especially since the group was listed by the Secretary-General in the Annual Report for Children and Armed Conflict for recruiting and

[15] When asked if "many", "a few", "none" of their community members were involved with different groups, 54 per cent of non-displaced community leaders said "many" of their community members were involved with CJTF; 48 per cent said "many" were involved with Yan Gora.

using children.[16] In addition to these violations, the international community has raised concerns about reports of rights violations by the CJTF[17] and the long-term potential for abuse unless it is further professionalized and subject to oversight. The wider body of VSOs have received less international attention, despite having even less training or supervision. This is particularly true of vigilantes (hunters and charmers), who have increasingly become the local, cross-border partners of the CJTF in the battle against Boko Haram.

Harmful or Heroic? Perceptions of VSOs

Community perspectives on VSOs – and those of community leaders – are at times incongruous. The presence of the CJTF in a community increases the likelihood that community members trust in the CJTF.[18] Overall trust in the CJTF is high (as is the presence of the CJTF in the area surveyed). Of the community leaders interviewed, 95 per cent said they trusted the CJTF. Community members registered similar levels of trust (93 per cent). It seems natural that people are more likely to trust forces that are closely tied to their particular community, especially given the nature of the work of the CJTF. Those who do not have a local CJTF presence in their community and who lack such close bonds may have a more distant relationship with the CJTF.

The surveys asked broad questions about perceptions of VSOs. In response, almost 90 per cent of community members responded that the CJTF had protected them from Boko Haram and other threats.[19] Similarly, community members had positive impressions of the Yan Gora - almost 90 per cent of respondents characterized them as good.

Despite seemingly high levels of trust, there is evidence that communities have mixed feelings about VSOs. For example, 40 per cent of community leaders said their communities had been harmed by the CJTF, whereas only nine per cent of community members registered the same experiences (see Figure 2). "Harmed" was kept vague in this survey question to allow for a variety of experiences. When asked if they had personally been the victim of violence related to the conflict,[20] a small number of community members went on to identify the CJTF or Yan Gora as the perpetrators (about one per cent of victimized respondents for each, only eight and seven respondents, respectively).[21] When asked if their family members had been victimized, almost two per cent of community members surveyed said the CJTF had been the perpetrators.[22] The survey did not ask respondents

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[16] United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General: Children and armed conflict," United Nations, 20 April 2016, A/70/836-S/2016/360: 40.

[17] For example, CIVIC's work on the subject found that civilians in North East Nigeria "pointed to ways in which community militias have harmed civilians – particularly the Yan Gora, who have been accused of assaulting and killing civilians suspected of being associated with AOGs [Armed Opposition Groups]. Members have detained individuals without trial; restricted freedom of movement, ostensibly for security reasons; engaged in sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse; intimidated and physically harmed civilians; and committed extortion and theft, including of humanitarian aid. They have also employed punitive justice measures and have been used to settle personal scores." Chitra Nagarajan, *To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria* (New York: CIVIC, 2020): 2, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf

[18] Based on a logit model examining the impact of different measures of victimization by and interaction with the CJTF on the following dependent variables: 1. trust in the organization and 2. fear of what former CJTF members will do in the future controlling for respondents' basic demographics: age, gender, income and tribe. The model specification was performed using a backward selection approach. All the variables that were theoretically assumed to affect the dependent variables were plugged in and the variables with the highest p-values were removed till reduced model was selected so that it explains the dependent variables efficiently and maintains a reasonable AIC. The effect of CJTF presence on trust in the organization is statistically and substantively significant with a coefficient of 2.84 and significance level of 0.1 per cent (p-value ~ 0.000).

[19] In the local MEAC team's experience, community members are less likely than government and international actors to draw strong distinctions between different armed groups and factions (e.g., JAS, Ansaru, ISWAP), and often broadly focus on Boko Haram.

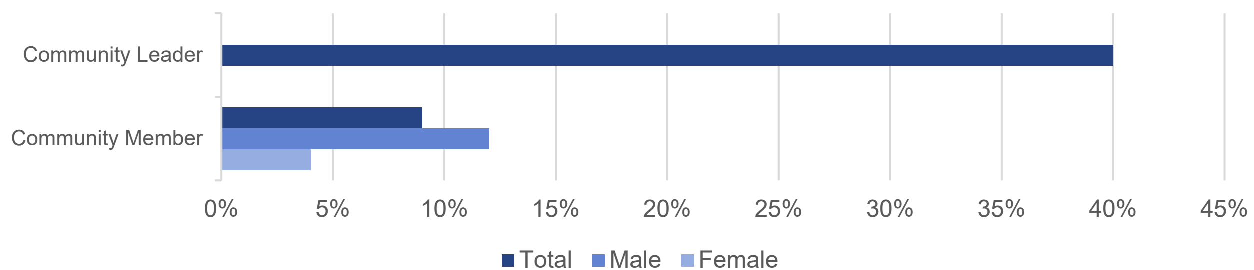
[20] In response to the question, "Were you ever beaten, tortured, or shot as a result of the conflict with Boko Haram?"

[21] Only one person identified vigilantes as responsible.

[22] Only four people (0.2 per cent) said the Yan Gora was responsible, and no one blamed the vigilantes.

when that harm had occurred, so it is unclear whether these experiences were recent or several years ago. Some have suggested that as ties with state and the federal governments have been established and strengthened with VSOs, abuses may have waned. Future research will track changes in the levels of harm reported from VSOs. When asked about incidents of sexual violence that they were aware of, a small number of community leaders who were aware of such crimes identified the CJTF and Yan Gora (just under five per cent each) and vigilantes (less than a per cent) as responsible.[23] Community members identified the CJTF (seven per cent), Yan Gora (five per cent), and vigilantes (two per cent) as perpetrating sexual violence at similar rates.

Figure 2: Harmed by the CJTF[24]



Several factors appear to influence trust in the CJTF and fear in its former members. First, as could be expected, those community members who felt harmed by the CJTF are significantly more likely to feel afraid of former CJTF members.[25] Second, Boko Haram violence against the community also appears to impact trust and fear in the CJTF. Respondents whose community had been occupied by Boko Haram were less likely to trust the CJTF and more likely to be afraid of former CJTF members. Similarly, respondents whose communities had been extorted and harassed by Boko Haram had higher levels of fear of former CJTF members.[26] Interestingly, having more community members abducted in your community is likely to slightly increase trust in CJTF.[27] The disconnect between these findings may be related to the perception that Boko Haram's broader advances against the community signaled a failure of the CJTF – or even call into question whether they were colluding with the group – whereas individual abductions, even in high numbers, may not result in a loss of faith – but indeed increase reliance on the CJTF.

The two surveys revealed an interesting disparity between community leader perceptions and those of community members. While community leaders were only asked about their community being harmed, community members were asked about themselves or the community – a seemingly more expansive category – and yet perceptions of harm are far lower. It is possible that community leaders may be referencing a larger population when answering the question than individual community members. Interestingly, when disaggregated by gender, this was the one question about VSOs that showed a significant difference: only four per cent of women and girls in the community felt harmed

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[23]Specified as "forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar".
[24] Community leaders were asked "Are there people in your community who think the CJTF has harmed them in some way?" Community members were asked "Has the CJTF ever harmed you or your community in some way?"
[25] Using the same model cited in footnote 15, the effect of perceived CJTF harm on respondents' fear of CJTF former members was significant to an 0.1 per cent level (p-value ~ 0.000) and with a coefficient of 1.96
[26] Using the same model cited in footnote 15, the effect of Boko Haram's harassment on the respondents fear of CJTF's former members was significant to a 1 per cent level(p-value = 0.001)and with a coefficient of 0.7.
[27] Using the same model cited in footnote 15, the effect of Boko Haram abductions of community members on respondents' trust in CJTF was significant to a 5 per cent level (p-value = 0.02) and with a coefficient of 0.12.

by the CJTF, but more than 12 percent of men and boys did (the aggregate figure of 9 per cent is reported in Figure 2 below). This differential may reflect the role of CJTF in communities and its particular focus on – and assumptions around – men and boys in its efforts to root out Boko Haram members.

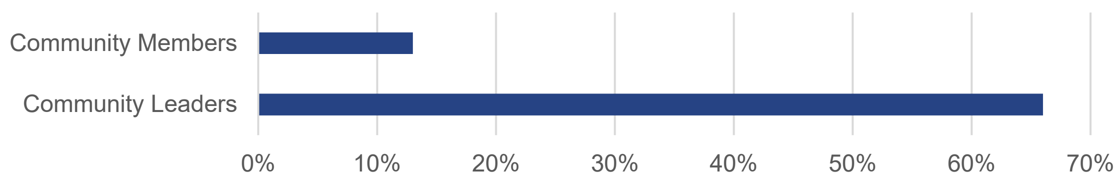
There was no specific question on the ways in which the CJTF harmed the community, but some respondents took the opportunity in the open-ended question about amends to highlight specific abuse such as arbitrary detention of family members, stealing NGO-provided food aid, and physical violence against the population during routine interactions. NGOs have identified the lack of oversight and formal reporting mechanisms for abuse claims as problematic for the effective and sustainable development of VSOs.[28]

Beyond allegations of abuse – and even war crimes,[29] there is also concern that members of VSOs are engaging in an array of other criminal activities, such as extorting money and sex from vulnerable populations, thefts, and other economic crimes.[30] When asked broadly about crimes in the community and who was perpetrating them, a notable minority of community leaders identified the CJTF (17 per cent) and Yan Gora (13 per cent).

As shown in Figure 3, almost 13 per cent of community members said they were afraid of what former CJTF members would do in the future. Interestingly, fear was much greater among community leaders, 66 per cent of whom registered concerns about former CJTF members. This huge differential reflects a similar gap around the recognition of harm noted above, whereby community leaders were more than four times more likely to say that the CJTF had harmed their community than individual respondents. It may also hint at particular tensions between different leadership structures operating in the community, especially if a VSO is seen as unmandated or overlaps with the mandates of existing leaders. More work is needed to further explore this topic.

It is also important to note that the survey did not ask about fear of current CJTF members. Whether there are particular concerns with former members – due to their current line of work or lack thereof, or because they are untethered to any organizational constraints or rules (even if they had fallen short of international standards) – or if respondents do not make strong distinctions between current and former members of the CJTF is unclear.

Figure 3: Fear of Former CJTF Members



For those community members who said they or their communities had been harmed by the CJTF, the survey asked what the CJTF had done – if anything – to make amends. Figure 4 highlights a

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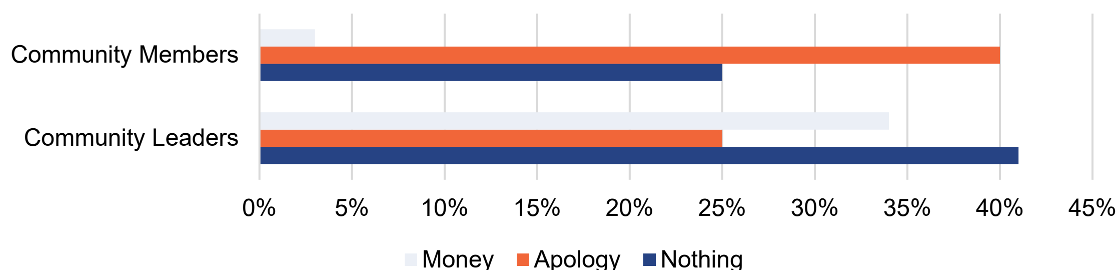
[28] Nagarajan, *To Defend or Harm?*
[29] "Nigeria: Gruesome Footage Implicates Military in War Crimes," Amnesty International, 5 August 2014, https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2014/08/nigeria-gruesome-footage-implicates-military-war-crimes/.
[30] Ed Cropley, "On Boko Haram front line, Nigerian vigilantes amass victories and power," *Reuters*, 15 June 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-security-vigilantes-idUSKBN1960FK.

possible difference in how the CJTF responds to community leaders compared to individual community members. Many community leaders (40 per cent) and community members (25 per cent) said the CJTF did nothing to make amends. Some leaders (24 per cent) and community members (40 per cent) said the CJTF apologized. Interestingly, there is an even larger discrepancy when it comes to financial reparations: 34 per cent of community leaders said the CJTF paid money in response, but only 3 per cent of community members said the same. This may suggest financial reparations are typically made at the community – not individual – level and that community members are not aware of them or do not feel as though they redress the wrong done to them. It is worth noting, that a very high percentage of community members refused to answer this question (31 per cent), raising questions about whether this one made people hesitant to respond or a significant proportion of the sample were unaware of any attempts by the CJTF to redress wrongdoing.

Interestingly, respondents who believe violence is necessary for political change were more likely to fear what former CJTF members will do in the future.[31] The question about the utility of violence for achieving political change was asked to gauge community norms about the use of violence. The local MEAC team thought the relationship between viewing violence as necessary for political change and fear of former CJTF members might be related to the perception that former CJTF members often find work providing security for politicians. More investigation is required to better understand this relationship.

Figure 4: CJTF Amends[32]



Policy and Programmatic Implications

NGOs and IOs have long sounded the alarm about community reliance on VSOs that lack professional standards, training, command structures, and oversight. There have been numerous efforts to professionalize some of the CJTF troops in recent years. These are vital efforts and it makes sense to invest in them now, rather than wait until the conflict is over and problematic cultures and structures have become entrenched. Yet, it is likely the case that the countervailing forces in an active conflict zone can make it difficult to advance these efforts. The attention and focus of VSOs are on defeating Boko Haram, which can make it difficult to prioritize a variety of capacity development options including human rights training and the creation – or in some cases

[31] Using the same model cited in footnote 15, the effect of believing that violence is necessary for political change on respondents' fear of former CJTF members was significant to a 0.1 per cent level (p-value = 0.0002) and with a coefficient of 0.76.
[32] Very small percentages of respondents said "something else" in each survey – just under three per cent in the community survey, and just over one per cent in the community leader survey.

operationalization – of a comprehensive and effective system for reporting and addressing alleged abuses.

Moreover, while there is real value in creating off-ramps for those who may seek to demobilize from VSOs, there may be social pressures and personal protection considerations that make it difficult for individuals to access them while insecurity remains high and opportunities for income-generating activities low. Even if they are not optimized today, investments in establishing off-ramps and incentivizing alternatives will likely pay off once the conflict begins to wane. Given the scale and the proliferation of VSOs in Nigeria, there will be large numbers of people who have either drawn some salary or become accustomed to policing their communities who will need to find sustainable alternate livelihoods and transition out of those roles.

In addition to establishing and creating off-ramp pathways, efforts to: a) reconcile any past differences with the community, b) offer human rights training, c) creating systems for reporting violations and increasing accountability could help prevent some of the harm reflected in this data, as well as the reported fear of former CJTF members and their potential role in the future. Given the dynamics of ongoing conflict, it will be important to take into account that harm to communities could foster further frustrations and push people to join an armed group, or take justice into their own hands if systems do not exist for reporting, adjudication and other community-sanctioned alternative dispute resolution practices.[33]

Relatedly, the legal status of the CJTF and other VSOs as auxiliary security forces remains purposely questionable.[34] While encouraged and provided limited support by different levels of government, the CJTF still does not have the federal legal status – and the guaranteed financial backing this would bring – from the federal Government. There is increased coordination between the CJTF and vigilante groups. Despite calls for more integration of VSOs into the standing security forces in Nigeria, notably from the head of Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN),[35] the NGO that serves as their umbrella organization, these groups have even weaker standards, control structures, and oversight. There are several benefits – and certainly pressure from the international community and from groups themselves who want to be paid regularly – to integrating and further professionalizing VSOs. It must be noted, however, that the flexibility that comes with a tolerated but unofficial status – not to mention the low cost (as most Yan Gora and vigilantes are not paid) – may be seen as advantageous in the fight against Boko Haram in the short term. It will therefore be important to not focus exclusively on professionalizing the CJTF, but also to include the other volunteer outfits when designing programmes to encourage other avenues.

Future analyses of MEAC data in this space will examine experiences in VSOs and transitions out of self-defence groups. Particular attention will be paid to young people who have been associated with these organizations and the experiences of girls and women, who are often overlooked for their role.

[33] Felbab-Brown, "Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria's North-East".
[34] "The activities of vigilante groups are largely obscure because they operate without a legal mandate. The VGN officially registered on February 18, 1999, with the Corporate Affairs Commission Companies and Allied Matters, the federal agency charged with registering not-for-profit organizations. The status of the VGN as a not-for-profit organization reflects the perception of the group as a social welfare organization rather than as an auxiliary state security agency. In the absence of formal recognition by the state, the VGN gained some legitimacy with its not-for-profit status, even as the actions of some VGN actors in regard to alleged human rights violations continues to undermine its status." Ernest Ogbozor, *Understanding the Informal Security Sector in Nigeria: Special Report*, (Washington DC: USIP, 2016).
[35] Kingsley Nwezeh, "Vigilante Group Canvasses Inclusion in Community Policing," *This Day*, 29 September 2020.

MANAGING EXITS
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