

POLICY BRIEF

Stakeholders' Dialogue on Government Approaches to Managing Defecting Violent Extremists



Centre for
Democracy and
Development



The Federal government of Nigeria, through the Defence Headquarters inaugurated Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) in 2015. The programme's aim is to rehabilitate repentant Boko Haram militants and reintegrate them back into their respective communities as productive law-abiding citizens. The defecting members will acquire vocation training, access de-radicalisation and civics program to become useful members of their society upon release from the program. Since OSC's commencement in May 2016, many have expressed strong reservation and criticism against the programme.

The criticisms and reservations are premised on the opacity of key issues such as the modalities for the implementation of the programme, sundry issues such as where defecting Boko Haram members will be reintegrated, and frustrations of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and other victims affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. Until these criticisms are addressed, OSC is unlikely to be supported by the population and will ultimately be difficult to implement in the Northeast.

In the interest of peace, reconciliation and stability in the Northeast, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) convened a stakeholders'

dialogue on the Boko Haram insurgency and OSC. The dialogue brought together government representatives, traditional and religious leaders, women's and youth groups, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), media, academia, selected civil society organisations at national and state level, Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), the National Orientation Agency, Operation Lafia Dole, and members of Presidential Committee on Operation Safe Corridor, among others. The objective of the dialogue is to create an enabling environment for Operation Safe Corridor Committee and community Stakeholders in Borno to discuss and interrogate rehabilitation and reintegration of repentant violent extremists in the northeast. The meeting was held on Tuesday 12th July 2016 in Maiduguri, Borno State.

This policy brief outlines contributions from stakeholders and demonstrates how dialogue can help foster community understanding of government intervention on reintegration, foster citizenship ownership of government programmes and its many solutions, improve OSC's credibility and assist the government in creating conditions that will reduce Nigeria's susceptibility to future violent extremism.

Key Issues from the Meeting

The following recommendations and opinions were put forward by participants at the meeting:

- Operation Safe Corridor is a vital component of the Nigerian government's strategy for countering violent extremism and is equally important for achieving sustainable peace and normalcy for citizens in Northeast Nigeria.
- The meeting provided an avenue to develop a better understanding of Operation Safe Corridor and offered practical advice on how to improve the programme and make it work at the community level.
- While applauding the OSC, participants were unanimous in their objection to the reintegration of defecting Boko Haram fighters in the near term. They called for a ten-year window before defecting members can be reintegrated into local communities. They argue that this ten-year window is premised on the need to allow time for the local populace to heal after the seven-year insurgency.
- The government should immediately commence rehabilitation initiatives that address local grievances before the rehabilitation or reintegration of defecting Boko Haram fighters is begun.
- At no time should the implementation of the OSC programme affect the welfare of internally displaced persons (IDPs). They argued that OSC should never be implemented at the detriment of those who have been affected by violent extremist activities.
- The design and implementation of any rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration efforts must be inclusive. Relevant actors identified include civil society organisations, religious clerics, traditional institutions and victims.
- The dialogue observed that some members of the public who have been affected by the violence in the Northeast have become radicalised against Boko Haram in its entirety. Government therefore need more community engagement and broad sensitisation through media platforms and traditional and religious structures to de-radicalise such people for effective reintegration of repentant violent extremists.

Causes of Violent Extremism

The dialogue identified some of the initial, and ongoing, causes of violent extremism in the Northeast to include:

- poor leadership and absence of good governance;
- corruption;
- poverty;
- socio-economic challenges;
- initial infiltration of security institutions by militants;
- rivalries between security agencies;
- politicisation and relegation of traditional institutions.
- lack of involvement of relevant scholars and religious leaders at the beginning of the hostilities;
- poor communication between the government and communities;
- poor parental guidance, specifically amongst boys;
- unregulated preaching;
- high-handedness of security institutions and breakdown in the social fabric.

Propositions for Implementing Operation Safe Corridor

The stakeholders' dialogue suggested the following as pathways the OSC could adopt for effective rehabilitation and reintegration of defecting violent extremists in Northeast Nigeria. These pathways include:

- The roadmap for the reintegration of defecting Boko Haram fighters must be inclusive of all relevant stakeholders, vis government, military, NGOs and religious and traditional institutions. This is premised on the recognition that violent extremism cannot be defeated solely by military force. The involvement of the above named stakeholders is crucial for all-inclusive engagement that will eventually culminate in the communities' acceptance to live and work with repentant and reintegrated people.
- The roadmap must emphasise building community cohesion and resilience, with a particular focus on strengthening the role of traditional institutions in the affected communities.
- An effective early warning and communication system should be put in place. Participants emphasised the importance of having an effective communication and coordination network between communities, government and security agencies.
- The importance of accountability for all parties in the insurgency was also emphasised. It was unanimous amongst participants that unless all perpetrators are brought to account, it will be difficult for communities to accept the rehabilitated Boko Haram extremists. Stakeholders advised OSC to utilise counter narratives to violent extremism in the process of de-radicalisation and rehabilitation of violent extremists. Relevant stakeholders such as the Ulamas (religious teachers and preachers) and formal education institutions should be involved in the deradicalisation and rehabilitation process.

Any programme that addresses rehabilitation and reintegration should be implemented

simultaneously with programmes addressing poverty, the plight of IDPs and malnutrition in the Northeast.

Any attempt to reintegrate repentant Boko Haram fighters back into communities that remain negatively affected by Boko Haram's violence will be met with staunch resistance and may lead to subsequent violence. Particular care must be taken on this issue.

The dialogue made the following recommendations about the role of various stakeholders in OSC including the government, security agencies, religious and traditional institutions.

The Government:

- Ensure effective education and public awareness about OSC, particularly at the community level. OSC will succeed only if communities are willing to support it and assist in the reintegration of former Boko Haram fighters. The following were identified as immediate concerns from communities in the Northeast:
 - a. Where are the rehabilitation programmes/facilities going to be located?
 - b. What is the specific process of rehabilitating a repentant Boko Haram fighter?
 - c. What safeguards are the government taking to ensure that those released back into the society do not revert to violent extremism. Where will the rehabilitated Boko Haram fighters be relocated?
 - d. How will the government ensure criminal opportunists from neighbouring countries do not abuse Operation Safe Corridor?
 - e. Many opine that the 12-week timeline established for rehabilitation is too short.
- Operation Safe Corridor should be carried out in phases.
- Participants identified the radio, television, social media platforms are the most effective communication tools for awareness about reintegration.

- Government was advised to provide economic empowerment and rehabilitation programmes for both rehabilitated ex-violent extremists and people in communities that are affected by Boko Haram activities, and where reintegration will take place.
- Ensure continuous dialogue and coordination amongst all stakeholders. Operation Safe Corridor will only work if everyone involved maintains communication and is able to adjust the programme to fit the individual needs of each surrendered militant and community members who will assist in the reintegration process. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach will not work with regard to OSC.
- Stakeholders think that rehabilitated violent extremists will only be accepted back into the communities where they come from, as other parts of the country will not accept them. Even so, they also encouraged government to take advantage of OSC to improve national peace education and carry out re-orientation programmes nationwide that would make people more interested in the pursuit of peace.
- Use traditional and social media to counter violent extremist narratives and educate the population on the necessity and importance of OSC for political stability, human and national development and security and peace in the Northeast in particular and Nigeria in general.
- Encourage community members to participate in the full reintegration process for community legitimacy, acceptance and ownership. Government should ensure inclusive governance that provides all community members with a voice.
- Government should carry out broad sensitisation that targets every possible means of reaching everyone in the Northeast. Sensitisation should address peaceful coexistence and the mutual benefit of reintegrating rehabilitated violent extremists.
- Strengthen independent traditional institutions in the Northeast so that they are able to provide community cohesion, sensitisation and education for the acceptance of rehabilitated repentant violent extremists in affected communities.

- The rehabilitation programme must be employed simultaneously with efforts to address the many grievances the public have against Boko Haram as a result of their violent destruction of lives and property in the Northeast and beyond.

Security agencies:

- Build inter-agency synergy and coordination amongst all security organisations for effective community intelligence that will aid reintegration plans and strategy.
- Ensure adequate intelligence gathering and sharing that authorities can use to inform decisions in the holistic implementation of OSC in the Northeast.
- Improve the capacity of all security agencies to address violent extremist threats that might hamper the efforts of government through OSC to rehabilitate, empower and reintegrated repentant violent extremists.

The Judiciary:

- Ensure fair and equitable justice for all Nigerians as a way of building confidence and trust in government and OSC
- Provide timely and lawful dispensation of justice for those who violate the law as a measure for instilling law and order in the Northeast and for the safe return of repentant violent extremists.

Politicians:

- Ensure non-interference in the affairs of traditional institutions for their independent role in the reintegration of rehabilitated repentant violent extremists.
- Stay clear of politicising the OSC mandate and tasks for genuine implementation and achievement of the set goals.

Traditional Institutions:

- In collaboration with government, restore traditional conflict resolution mechanisms to serve as preventive measures against future violent extremism and for reconciling societal objection to the reintegration of repentant Boko Haram extremists.

Religious Institutions:

- Religious leaders should be at the centre of sensitising and de-radicalising members of the public in the Northeast.
- Religious leaders and scholars should take the lead in developing counter narratives to violent extremism and partner with OSC to de-radicalise surrendering violent extremists.

Conclusion

The dialogue presented an opportunity for stakeholders at the community level to interact with government on approaches to OSC and the deradicalisation and rehabilitation of Boko Haram

insurgents. This resulted in a critical interaction between community-level stakeholders and government representatives at state and federal level and provided an opportunity for the development of sound approaches to reintegration and resettlement through OSC. The causes and effects of the conflict in the Northeast were discussed in detail.

More importantly, the dialogue produced tangible ideas and strategies for a holistic approach to ending the conflict and ways to suppress future violent extremist organisations from emerging. Stakeholders who attended the meeting also developed a better understanding of Operation Safe Corridor and offered practical advice on how to improve the programme and make it work at the community level.