

POLICY BRIEF

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DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND REINTEGRATION (DDR): Harnessing Women's Participation in DDR Procedures in the Far North region of Cameroon



Source: Evidence from CSOs consultation

Authors

Christian Achaleke and Ballo Ngomna

Introduction

In the Far North region of Cameroon, the procedures for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration have helped in laying the groundwork for safeguarding and sustaining the communities in the region, where we find ex-combatants of Boko Haram. The success of this process so far has been the outcome of the formal and informal participation of various stakeholders, including women.

Understanding the place of women and women organisations (WOs) in DDR procedures in both the Far North region of Cameroon and the wider Lake Chad Basin (LCB) is crucial to the success of the process. DDR processes have been traditionally male-dominated spaces, making it difficult for women to participate effectively. Nevertheless, the consultation conducted as part of this study captured that, despite the cultural and entrenched exclusion of women in DDR and peace processes, since the outbreak of Boko Haram, women have been the ones leading community-level rehabilitation for young boys and girls by providing them with motherly support, livelihood opportunities, and psycho-social support. This important role of women is highlighted in the [Dutch policy report on](#)

[Gender and DDR](#), which states that; women play a critical role as gatekeepers to their communities and peacebuilders, with their influence over youth being impactful in preventing recruitment into armed groups and fostering disengagement¹.

According to the [Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards](#), and in order to maximize the potential for women to work in DDR processes, gender sensitivity should be part of all stages of the DDR process, including policies, peace agreements, and post-conflict planning frameworks². In line with the Integrated Standards, the Cameroon National Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration Coordinator (NDDRC), developed a Gender Strategy in 2021 which stands as the most viable and comprehensive framework for structured engagement to ensure that women organizations (WOs) have greater roles in current DDR policy and implementation in Cameroon. Unfortunately, this framework has not had the technical and financial resources

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<https://www.oecd.org/derec/netherlands/35112187.pdf>

² <https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-5.10-Women-Gender-and-DDR.pdf>

to fully provide guidance and take ownership of the successful implementation of the said strategy.

In Cameroon, WOs are already well organized at the community level, including; their participation in the DDR-LCB CSO network, and this must be further encouraged and supported to ensure the full implication of

Women are a key player in DDR Processes in the Far North Region

To respond to the rise of violent extremism in the region, women have mobilized themselves to form CSOs in order to collectively channel their energy. During the consultation with 27 women groups, they shared their experiences in advancing DDR within the region. The women noted that they have been a key bridge in mitigating the difficulties that public actors face with regard to effectively communicating with the former fighters in the local communities. “These young people see us as their mothers, and the fact that we have acquired some basic knowledge on how to manage young people like this has made it easy for us to talk with them and understand their needs,” said a female CSO leader. The women attest to collecting feedback and

WOs in local, regional and national DDR initiatives. Despite the marginalization of women in peace mechanisms, women leaders continue to take action to promote peace, and their role cannot be neglected. There are many successful examples in the region where women have been able to mobilize to curb bloody communal conflicts and advocate for peace and peaceful conflict management. identifying those they can respond to as well as share with other actors and government to solicit their response.

Despite the numerous setbacks which women face in DDR processes, the women stated their efforts in organizing capacity-building programs for women groups in the regions to serve as front liners in peace-building and DDR related conversations. Bridging the capacity gap remains an important tool for advancing women's participation in DDR. One of the women shared how she became a peace activist and joined a CSO after participating in one of such women-led capacity-building training. The African Union Commission (2014), improving women's capacity in DDR increases their ability to meaningfully contribute to the community and national-level DDR responses.

“All these young people who return from Boko Haram are going through serious trauma, they have seen terrible things and need someone to confide in,” said one of the women. It's unfortunate that the region has limited healthcare facilities, lack less of experts to respond to the mental health challenges which these former fighters are facing. Many of them who return to the communities either directly or from the DDR centers are not fully healed in their minds. The women groups looking at these voids claim to have been key actors in providing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) to these young people. They claimed that, though with no clinical expertise and capacity in MHPSS, their experiences as mothers had made them naturally capable of dealing with young people. Some of the women groups attested to have collaborated with and received funding from UN Agencies and other International Organisations to provide MHPSS support.

To add, the women shared how their efforts in working with young boys and girls to provide alternatives to violence in terms of education and livelihood training contribute to preventing recidivism and promoting meaningful reintegration. Poverty and the lack of income generating activities are core

drivers to the recruitment of young people of the Far North region into Boko Haram . The women claim that through their organisations, they have been engaged in implementing livelihood training for young people. They highlighted that their training starts with needs assessment which ensures community and individual ownership. Some examples of livelihood training included; cattle rearing, small business and culinary arts..

Similarly, the women claimed that they have been strong advocates within communities to ensure that former fighters are reintegrated into communities. Mobilizing community acceptance of former fighters is a very difficult and critical part of the DDR process. Communities usually stigmatize former fighters or hate them due to the pain the fighters caused. The women stressed that Boko Haram fighters have killed over 3000 people and destroyed a lot of properties . When people think about this, it makes it hard for them to forgive them and accept them back into society. The consultation revealed that some former Boko Haram associates, specifically those from the locality of *Amchide* in the *Kolofata* subdivision express the desire to return the bush and join their former colleagues because they do not feel comfortable and safe in their centers; they feel

threatened and marginalized. The women claimed they have been using their demographic power and the soft spot they hold in communities to carry out campaigns to call on people to accept the former fighters. They use different social cohesion tools to

Women's Efforts in the region remain stifled

Despite the contributions made by women to enhance the DDR mechanism, their exclusion from formal and informal DDR processes remains a major challenge. The women claim they are excluded from these processes due to the fact that their communities traditionally do not put women at the forefront of the processes.

The Far North region is traditionally a patriarchal region. In this regard, the women also claim that state actors also consider the DDR process to be a typical military process. These women stated that they were hardly consulted in the design and implementation of DDR responses. Many of them highlighted how they were not aware of the NDDRC efforts and its Gender Strategy. This systematic exclusion of women has made it difficult for the efforts of women to be recognised, valorised, and supported.

encourage living together, strengthen trust and collaboration amongst communities receiving ex-combatants. “We organize prayer cells, thanksgiving masses and educational talks every weekend for the benefit of residents in DDR centers” one of the women revealed.

Adding to this, the women claim that despite coming together to form CSOs and their participation in the CSO Network on Inclusive Reintegration, they do not have specific cluster groups for women to learn and share positive practices among themselves. They claim the absence of such a platform has made it difficult for them to effectively advocate for their rights and also to develop a common front for resource mobilization and policy change.

In addition, women groups raised the challenge of the lack of capacity and resources. They claim they could do better if they had the funds and technical skills to continue engaging with their community projects. They claim funds are too centralized and do not prioritize female actors. Most of the women claim they have never participated in formal training on DDR and other related training. They claim to only hear about these things after they happened. Therefore, they expressed the wish to be supported technically

and financially to attend training in world-recognised centres as well as provided with the resources to train their peers after and to enhance a spillover effect.

Making Women the Centerpiece of DDR in the Far North Region

Trying to understand how to improve women's participation in DDR in the Far North region of Cameroon has become a growing concern for women as well as development stakeholders. During the consultation, the women's groups were keen on addressing their recommendations targeting the government, International Organisations and women towards ensuring their meaningful participation in DDR.

What government should do

- Implementation and localisation of the National Gender Strategy on DDR.; The women recognised the importance of an existing strategy but stated that it will be worthy to localize and ensure that its implementation is done. The women suggested the state uses its decentralization tools to ensure that community women own this strategy and lead its implementation.
- Create a woman's advisory group for the NDDRC; The women suggested that, in

order for the perspectives of women to be addressed in the national process, having an advisory group of women CSO experts will be critical. They claimed that as CSO actors; they are connected to the field and are in the best position to represent the perspectives of women and children undergoing DDR processes in local communities.

What International and National Organisations should do

- Create an opportunity for Capacity building; The women groups believe that international and national organizations are key partners when it comes to building capacities and creating awareness. They recommended these organizations create women specific training as well as opportunities for women to participate in other training programs in Cameroon and abroad.
- Improve opportunities for experience sharing; These women expressed the need to learn from other women in other regions of Cameroon, the LCB region and from other conflict and post-conflict settings. They believe these opportunities will help them learn positive practices and strategies which will influence their activities on the field.

- Provide financial and technical resources to support women organisations; The women believe international and national organizations are in the best place to provide financial and technical resources to support their actions. They proposed that these stakeholders could directly fund their projects or collaborate with them as implementing partners. They also suggested that the stakeholders provide them with technical expertise to help strengthen the operations of their CSOs.
- Support women-led and women centered research in DDR; The women expressed their desire to tell their stories around DDR but lacked the necessary technical support and opportunities to contribute to knowledge building in this domain.
- Join women in the advocacy for their inclusion in formal and informal DDR processes in the region; The women believe that if other stakeholders join them in calling for the inclusion of women in DDR processes, government and traditional stakeholders might heed to their request.

Conclusions:

What women should do

- Women should not be discouraged by the bottlenecks surrounding their actions on the field but rather work with their peers to become solution providers. The women CSOs expressed their willingness to accompany and strengthen the capacity of more women.
- Women should respect public institutions and also make efforts to collaborate with government led processes . The women groups believe shying away from government processes will rather make it harder for women inclusion.
- Women should focus on collaborating with each other and ensure they seek knowledge as much as they can.

The importance of women in DDR processes in the Boko Haram affected Far North region of Cameroon cannot be overstated. Women, through CSO, are serving as community mobilizers and interlocutors with former fighters. Also, women are serving as front liners in capacity building, MHPSS and livelihood support for communities and former fighters. Their effort in mobilizing, sensitizing and convincing communities to receive former fighters have contributed to the reintegration process.

Unfortunately, women groups are still faced with the challenge of exclusion, especially as

DDR is seen as a predominantly government led mechanism within the community . Consequently, the lack of technical and financial assistance of women groups is a key setback to the contributions women are making in the DDR process. Nevertheless, women groups hope that government, international and national organizations and women groups take into consideration their recommendations, aimed at improving women's role in DDR processes in the Far north region .

Readings

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