FROM SURRENDER TO SOCIAL SUSPICION. REINTEGRATION, STATE CREDIBILITY, AND HUMAN SECURITY IN BOKO HARAM-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Despite the efforts by the Nigerian government to reintegrate former Boko Haram combatants through the Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) programme and structure a bridge between insurgency and peace, evidence shows that surrender often results in social suspicion and rarely in reconciliation. This study, which adopts a qualitative approach to sample 49 purposively selected community members across the North East, examines the overlap between reintegration and human security. Findings reveal community testimonies explained through the fragile faith of surrender, the constant failure to keep reintegration commitments, the marginalization of victims, and the community's unwillingness towards the reintegration of returnees. Such processes undermine the credibility of states, foster distrust, and compromise security. Rather than promote dignity and trust, OSC reinforces the bias between ex-combatants and their victims, constraining human security of being free of fear and want.

These findings underscore the fact that without state credibility and legitimacy, reintegration is not sustainable. The ideological fanaticism of Boko Haram and the ineffective governance systems that continue to exist in the Northeast of Nigeria complicate the specific situation in Nigeria, hindering its genuine reintegration. This study argues that the concept of reintegration needs to be reconsidered as a human-security initiative based on the principles of rights, justice, and trust-building. Therefore, building credibility on the part of the state and community involvement must come first before reconciliation can take place.

Keywords: Boko Haram; operation safe corridor; reintegration; human security; social suspicion

Introduction

The surrender of thousands of Boko Haram fighters in the past years represents a pivotal point in Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts. However, instead of fostering peaceful coexistence, the surrenders have led to suspicion and distrust among victims of the conflict. At the centre of this is the Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), a deradicalization and

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reintegration initiative introduced in 2016 by the President Muhammadu Buhari administration. The initiative was designed to transform repentant combatants into law-abiding citizens and to reduce the incidence of insurgency. The programme aims to promote rehabilitation by offering ex-insurgents' religious reorientation, psychosocial counselling, and vocational training and in the process, civic education. The initiative is instrumental in light of the aftereffects of the Boko Haram insurgency, which since 2009 has claimed the lives of thousands of individuals, displaced millions[1], and led to a devastating humanitarian crisis in Nigeria and neighbouring countries.[2] Meanwhile, community members in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states have suffered massacres, kidnappings and destruction of livelihood.[3] Thus, reintegration is not merely a technical aspect of disarmament; it is aimed at restoring trust, justice, and dignity in the affected communities. For instance, Boko Haram victims have to live with the fact that the state chooses to support ex-fighters back into their lives, and the offenders get rehabilitation and reinsertion. This balancing game puts the credibility of Nigeria in question: can this state restore insurgents, keep communities safe, and ensure civil rights all at the same time?

OSC was based partly on previous experiences of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) in the Niger Delta. Launched in 2009, the PAP successfully curtailed militancy in the oil-rich region by providing stipends and training to over 30,000 militants, thereby allowing for the stability of Nigeria's oil exports.[4] However, unlike the PAP that dealt with a resource-based conflict based on economic marginalization, OSC deals with a more deeply rooted insurgency that is intertwined with ideology, violence that runs on religion, identity, and a failed state.[5] Compared to the oil militants, numerous Boko Haram members have committed crimes against civilians[6], and this makes them socially unacceptable even after surrendering. Meanwhile, hundreds of former combatants have gone through the OSC rehabilitation camp in Gombe state since its establishment.[7] The advocates of the programme declare it to be an essential channel of interfering with the cycle of violence by Boko Haram through the incentivization of defections and by minimizing the group's capacity. However, the reality presents a more ambivalent situation. Recidivism reports, in which part of the rehabilitated fighters returned to the Boko Haram groups or

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[1] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *Banditry in Nigeria: Insights from Situational Action and Situational Crime Prevention Theories*, "ACCORD", 2022, https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/banditry-in-nigeria-insights-from-situational-action-and-situational-crime-prevention-theories/ (19.07.2025)

[2] Alfred Anthony, *The devastating impact of Boko Haram: thousands dead and millions displaced in Africa's Lake Chad region*, "IPS International", 2023, https://www.ipsinternational.org/the-devastating-impact-of-boko-haram-thousands-dead-and-millions-displaced-in-africas-lake-chad-region/ (12.07.2025)

[3] Yusuf Abdullahi Manu, Muhammad Abdulkadir, Asmau Isyaku Dutse, *Boko Haram insurgency and socio-economic impact on host communities in Adamawa and Borno states, Nigeria*, "Journal of Asian Geography", Vol. 3, No. 1, 2024, pp. 38, https://doi.org/10.36777/jag2024.3.1.5 (12.07.2025)

[4] Mukhtar Ya'u Madobi, *Niger Delta militancy: re-adopting amnesty programs*, "Punch Newspapers", 9 December 2021, https://punchng.com/niger-delta-militancy-re-adopting-amnesty-programmes/ (14.07.2025)

[5] Manzoor Apenna Lawal, Kazeem Dauda, *Religious insurgency and the quest for sustainable peace in Nigeria: the Islamic model as a panacea*, "Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies", Vol. 6, No. 2, 2023, pp. 113, https://doi.org/10.20885/ijiis.vol6.iss2.art1 (12.07.2025)

[6] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *What Is Driving Violence in the Sahel?*, "Africa at LSE", 10 July 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/07/10/what-is-driving-violence-in-the-sahel/ (12.07.2025)

[7] Cristina Krippahl, *Nigeria: ex-Boko Haram fighters face tough path to reintegration*, "Deutsche Welle", 18 March 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/nigeria-ex-boko-haram-fighters-face-tough-path-to-reintegration/a-61169893 (12.07.2025)

participated in criminal activity, do not inspire citizens to trust the program.[1] Meanwhile, community members have expressed opposition to accepting returnees, fearing for their safety, and believe the state favours perpetrators over victims.[2]

However, Boko Haram victims have been getting limited compensation, restitution, and recognition, which further increases a feeling of injustice.[3] These strains highlight a significant paradox: OSC was established to promote peace through rehabilitation, yet in most cases, communities have felt that their rights and security have been compromised (Watson & Adebayo 2025).[4] Since surrender to suspicion, reintegration has become an object of contestation in which credibility of the state is challenged. Communities do not evaluate the government based on how many ex-combatants it puts through but instead on its capability of fulfilling promises, suppressing re-mobilization, and restoring the dignity of the victims. Where such conditions fail, reintegration runs the risk of creating of another wave of insecurity instead of reconciliation.

Extant literature on the subject matter underscores these ambiguities. The initial works were related to the deradicalization approaches of the programme and the importance of Islamic clerics in reforming the extremist ideology.[5] Others placed OSC within the broader context of counterterrorism and highlighted its non-kinetic nature as an alternative to military action.[6] Others have questioned its legitimacy, especially in light of the victims' lack of justice and the mistrust in society.[7] Although these studies are essential, they viewed reintegration as a security tool or a policy design dilemma, overlooking its impact on civil rights and human security. Not enough attention is paid to how the lack of credibility of the state in affected communities are the culmination of broken promises, poor monitoring, and lack of concern with the needs of victims. This study contributes to the literature by placing OSC in the context of human security which broadens the understanding of security to include the freedom of individuals who are not state-related and their freedom of fear, freedom of want, and safeguarding of dignity.[8] In this sense, reintegration does not merely entail reducing the number of insurgents, rather, it is the process of integrating both victims and offenders into a civic order that would not violate rights but maintain peace.

Arising from the above, a plausible process of reintegration should achieve three interdependent goals including:

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[1] Usman Abba Zanna, *Surrendered terrorists evade official rehabilitation programme, reinfiltrate Nigerian communities*, "Pulitzer Center", 30 January 2025, https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/surrendered-terrorists-evade-official-rehabilitation-programme-reinfiltrate-nigerian (13.07.2025)

[2] Abi Watson, Taiwo Adebayo, *Ask the experts: lessons for regional stability in the Lake Chad Basin*, "GPPI", 21 August 2025, https://gppi.net/2025/08/21/ask-the-experts-lessons-for-regional-stability-in-the-lake-chad-basin (14.07.2025)

[3] Anneli Botha, Martin Ewi, Uyo Salifu, Mahdi Abdile, *Understanding Nigerian citizens' perspectives on Boko Haram*, "Peacemakers Network", 2025, https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Understanding-Nigerian-Citizens-Perspectives-on-Boko-Haram-2017.pdf (11.07.2025)

[4] Abi Watson, Taiwo Adebayo, *Op. cit.*, p. 2

[5] Mustapha Salihu, *An analysis of youth deradicalization programs in Northeast Nigeria: a study on Boko Haram*, "European Scientific Journal", Vol. 17, No. 13, 2021, pp. 23 https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2021.v17n13p21 (12.07.2025)

[6] Samuel Ezeanyika Ezeanyika, Emmanuel Ogueri Ibekwe, Juliana Uju Adigwe, *Assessment of the non-kinetic approach and the fight against terrorism in West Africa*, "Administratio Publica", Vol. 33, No. 1, 2025, pp. 179, https://doi.org/10.61967/adminpub.2025.33.1.9 (12.07.2025)

[7] Anneli Botha et al., *Op. cit.*, p. 1

[8] UNDP, *Human development report*, "UNDP", 1994, https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr1994encompletenostats.pdf (16.07.2025)

1. the fulfilment of state commitments of rehabilitation and livelihoods;
2. the protection of rights and dignity of victims, including restitution and recognition; and
3. the establishment of trust in community-level mechanisms of security and justice. Any failure on these fronts poses the risk of repeating insecurities that the process of reintegration is supposed to overcome. As a result, this study questions OSC in terms of the state credibility and community suspicion. It poses the following question: what has the Operation Safe Corridor done to human security in Boko Haram impacted societies, and what does the debated legitimacy of the operation tell us about the connection between state power, reintegration, and civil liberties? Rooted in the use of primary data triangulated with secondary data, the study contends that reintegration in conflict regions should be perceived as a civil rights intervention more than a security action. It is only when both the rehabilitation of the perpetrators and the justice of the victims are addressed that OSC would have a chance to convert the surrenders to real ways of achieving peace instead of roads of suspicion and insecurity.

Literature Review

The extant literature on Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) highlights the intricacy of transforming ex-combatants to become peaceful civilians after violence. Although DDR has become an institutional component of post-conflict peacebuilding since the 1990s, empirical evidence shows that the consequences of this initiative have significantly different effects based on the capacity of the state, their credibility, and acceptance by the community.[1] Comparative studies in Africa and Latin America indicate that the DDR programmes are often effective in the short term to curb the violence. However, they often fail to achieve long-term reintegration and rights-based outcomes among the perpetrators and victims.[2]

The experience with demobilization and reintegration of combatants in Sierra Leone was overseen by the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR) and involved over 70,000 combatants between 1998 and 2004. Humphreys and Weinstein observed that while DDR reduced the chances of insurgents remobilizing, the outcomes of reintegration varied by community.[3] The experience of stigma by former combatants, and the unequal access to reintegration benefits reinforced inequality. In a similar case, the DDR programme in Liberia in 2003 treated more than 100,000 combatants well; however, the gross mismanagement of resources resulted in high levels of dissatisfaction and intermittent violence in reinsertion towns.[4] These experiences underline the significance of the credibility of the programmes and provision of benefits to the success of DDR.

Another case outside Africa involves FARC fighters in Colombia since the 2016 peace accord. The inability of the state to provide promised economic prospects created a

[1] Mark Knight, Alpaslan Özerdem, *Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion of Former Combatants in Transitions from War to Peace*, "Journal of Peace Research", Vol. 41, No. 4, 2004, pp. 502, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304044479 (12.07.2025)

[2] José Miguel Rodríguez-Castellón, *Evolution and Challenges of DDR: A Policy Review through the Prism of Colombia's DDR Experience*, "Heliyon", Vol. 10, No. 13, 2024, pp. 4, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e33361 (12.07.2025)

[3] Macartan Humphreys, Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Demobilization and Reintegration*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution", Vol. 51, No. 4, 2007, pp. 535, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707302790 (12.07.2025).

[4] United Nations, *The Story of UNMIL [Book]: DDR Lets Ex-Combatants Find New Lives*, "United Nations Peacekeeping", 16 April 2018, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/story-of-unmil-book-ddr-lets-ex-combatants-find-new-lives (12.07.2025)

state of profound disillusionment in ex-combatants, as some of them ended up in criminal networks.[1] This indicates that despite the sound levels of community involvement, the process of reintegration tended to replicate the tensions in cases where the results of justice were uneven. In the Colombian case, there was also community suspicion, which was a reflection of the Nigerian case which made victims feel marginalized as the perpetrator's benefits. This shows that DDR is not a technical exercise but rather a political and moral project where the credibility of the state, justice and human security are intertwined.

The DDR experience in Nigeria began with the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). PAP was aimed at demobilizing Niger Delta militants who had been disrupting the oil production by attacking oil pipelines and kidnapping people to provide stipends, vocational training and educational scholarships to over thousands of former combatants. Quantitative assessments indicate stabilization: in the middle of 2009, the oil production dropped to 700,000 barrels per day, but by 2010 it was almost 2.2 million barrels per day.[2] However, subsequent studies demonstrate that there are still structural flaws. Stakeholder Democracy Network asserts that the use of stipends as a strategy of PAP did not address the fundamental issues of environmental degradation and underdevelopment in the region.[3] Meanwhile, Okonofua avers that elites' acquisition of benefits exacerbates inequality.[4] In the short run, empirically, PAP was able to achieve short-term success but failed in attaining long-term reintegration and socio-economic justice.

Based on the partial success of the PAP, the Nigerian government launched Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) aimed at former Boko Haram fighters in the North-East. Similar to PAP, OSC integrated material support with rehabilitation; but as compared to PAP, OSC was subordinated to counter-terrorism and not to resource politics. OSC had developed a rehabilitation centre in Gombe State, whereby the participants were reoriented religiously before undergoing vocational training and psychosocial counselling before reinsertion. Some scholars are optimistic about the prospects of OSC to decrease the number of insurgents but finds fault in the improper consultation with the communities affected by it as a serious flaw.[5] Meanwhile, a large number of civilians perceived OSC as favouring the perpetrators without considering the victims and thus causing mistrust.[6] The lack of systematic reparations and poor victim recognition is also reported as promoting community opposition toward

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[1] Oliver Kaplan, Enzo Nussio, *Explaining Recidivism of Ex-Combatants in Colombia*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution", Vol. 62, No. 1, 2016, pp. 66, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002716644326 (12.07.2025)

[2] *Eurasia Review, Nigeria Energy Profile: Development Constrained by Instability in Niger Delta – Analysis*, "Eurasia Review", 25 August 2011, https://www.eurasiareview.com/25082011-nigeria-energy-profile-development-constrained-by-instability-in-niger-delta-analysis/ (16.07.2025)

[3] Stakeholder Democracy Network, *Nigeria's Presidential Amnesty Programme: Untangling the Dependencies That Prevent It Ending*, "Stakeholder Democracy Network", 2021, https://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/PAP-financial-dependencies.-Report.-2021-23.08.21-DT.pdf (14.07.2025).

[4] Benjamin A. Okonofua, *The Niger Delta Amnesty Program*, "SAGE Open", Vol. 6, No. 2, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016654522 (12.07.2025)

[5] Idayat Hassan, Laura Routley, *Operation Safe Corridor: The Deradicalisation and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants*, "Centre for Democracy and Development", 2021, https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/file_store/production/287017/B8E45ED0-9D78-4607-B9DC-83A74A402B5D.pdf (12.07.2025)

[6] Tarela Juliet Ike, Dung Ezekiel Jidong, Evangelyn Ebi Ayobi, Christopher Francis, *Victims of Affected Communities' Experiences of a Legal Education plus Trauma-Informed Therapy Compared to a Media Orientation Intervention to Improve Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Members in Nigeria: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, "African Identities", 2025, pp. 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2025.2548899 (12.07.2025)

accepting returnees. Investigating the facts of recidivism, it is suggested that monitoring serves as a weak instrument in ensuring sustainability at OSC due to inconsistent funding. These results resonate with the shortcomings of PAP, as the credibility of states and the legitimacy of communities remain weaknesses in DDR in Nigeria.

A dominant theme in the literature on OSC is the breakdown of state promise-keeping. There are instances of fighters who had been rehabilitated and gone back to violence after being promised vocational kits and employment opportunities had not been realized.[1] Meanwhile, corruption and mismanagement undermine the credibility of OSC and leave the participants frustrated and societies suspicious. The credibility of the state is particularly unstable in the North-East of Nigeria, where decades of disinterest and violence have undermined the belief in the government.[2] When the government makes promises of rehabilitation and fails to fulfil them, the ex-combatants as well as the victims take this as a demonstration of lack of reliability on the state.

Another weakness of OSC is the absence of strong monitoring mechanisms. Although the Gombe centre offers organized rehabilitation, there is no supervision during reinsertion. Numerous returnees perfectly evade supervision, which increases the risks of recidivism. Meanwhile, critiques of OSC point to the systematic failure to consider the rights of victims.[3] According to Amnesty International, survivors of the Boko Haram atrocities such as abducted women, displaced families, and victims who lost relatives hardly get compensated, receive justice or psychosocial support.[4] These oversights promote the view that the state is prioritizing ex-fighters over victims. This feeling of injustice lies at the foundation of communities' unwillingness to reconnect to the broader community.

Given that community acceptance is one of the pillars of reintegration, its failure will impede the reintegration process. As Knight and Özerdem point out, where the local legitimacy is not present, DDR initiatives face the risk of remaining as top-down impositions instead of an effective tool of peace-building. Evidence in Nigeria has shown that the community is resistant to OSC returners.[5] According to Krippahl, some communities are not willing to accept returned ex-combatants. Others socially isolate them, and this is due to fear of still being victimized, and the feeling that there are victim issues that the government has failed to address.[6] Meanwhile, the violence is complicated by the fact that it involves trust-building. Boko Haram fighters due to the indiscriminate massacres and abductions, were engaged in deep psychosocial scars, unlike the Niger Delta militants. This historic trauma makes forgiveness a tedious journey, and it strengthens the social distrust.

However, the Boko Haram war in Nigeria is unique in three ways. To begin with, the Boko Haram ideological nature makes the process of deradicalization more difficult; when the resource issue mobilized Niger Delta militants, Boko Haram followers promote a

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[1] Usman Abba Zanna, *Op. cit.*, p. 1

[2] Ariane Lignier, *Nigeria: High Level of Insecurity in the North-East Region Dramatically Affecting Children, despite Concrete Measures Adopted by the Government*, United Nations, 2024, https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2024/08/nigeria-high-level-of-insecurity-in-the-north-east-region-dramatically-affecting-childre n-despite-concrete-measures-adopted-by-the-government/ (13.07.2025)

[3] Usman Abba Zanna, *Op. cit.*, p. 1

[4] Amnesty International, *"Help Us Build Our Lives": Girl Survivors of Boko Haram and Military Abuses in North-East Nigeria*, "Amnesty International", 10 June 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/ar/documents/afr44/7883/2024/en/ (11.07.2025).

[5] Knight and Özerdem, *Op. cit.*, p. 503

[6] Krippahl, *Op. cit.*, p. 2

religiously framed refusal to accept the Nigerian state,[1] which makes the reorientation of ideologies more essential but more vulnerable. Second, the lack of state capacity in the North-East of Nigeria exacerbates credibility shortcomings.[2] Third, Nigeria has not put transitional justice in balance with reintegration. OSC has no institutions to recognize the suffering of victims but is characterized by a lack of justice, creating a sense of suspicion. Unlike previous studies on the subject matter, this study positions OSC in a human security framework by focusing on suspicion and credibility of the state. It underscores the rights of the victims and dignity of the community as well as the responsibility of the state to fulfil its promise. The study argues that reintegration in the Boko Haram-affected communities should not be viewed only in the context of reducing insurgents but also promoting civil liberties and building trust.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study is anchored on the human security paradigm and is supplemented by the theory of state legitimacy and the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) frameworks. These theories provide the analytical framework to underscore how reintegration programs like Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) go beyond being security tools, instead serving as a civil rights, dignity, and state-society intervention in Boko Haram-impacted communities. The human security framework was introduced in the UNDP Human Development Report 1994 as a paradigmatic shift from state-based concepts of security to a people-based idea of security.[3] In contrast to traditional approaches, which put the focus on territorial integrity and military capacity, human security focuses on the security of individuals on several levels, namely, on the freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the security of dignity.[4] Empirical evidence has since proven that peacebuilding operations made during post-conflict situations are more sustainable when they are not only working on stopping violence but also restoring livelihoods, justice and civil liberties.[5]

The human security approach is relevant in the case of Boko Haram. For instance, mass killings, displacement, abductions, and economic collapse have been experienced in the communities of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. Security among these groups does not necessarily mean military victory over Boko Haram, but rather an assurance of safety, livelihood, justice, and socially acceptable reintegration without loss of dignity. When human security is applied to OSC, it becomes clear that the programme has added interests in that not only will the reduction in insurgent workforce influence the credibility of reintegration but also the preservation of civil rights and the restoration of community trust.

However, the theory of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) is one of the secondary pillars of this study. In classical models of DDR, the process is broken down into three phases that include the disarmament of combatants, breakdown of armed

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[1] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *A Theoretical Assessment of Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria from Relative Deprivation and Frustration-Aggression Perspectives*, "African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research", Vol. 1, No. 2, 2020, pp. 92, https://doi.org/10.31920/2732-5008/2020/v1n2a5

[2] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *Banditry in Nigeria: Insights from Situational Action and Situational Crime Prevention Theories*, "ACCORD", 2022, https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/banditry-in-nigeria-insights-from-situational-action-and-situational-crime-prevention-theories/ (19.07.2025)

[3] UNDP, *Op. cit.*, p. 12

[4] United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, *Human Security Handbook*, "United Nations", 2016, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/h2.pdf (11.07.2025)

[5] Kazushige Kobayashi, Keith Krause, Xinyu Yuan, *(Re)Setting the Boundaries of Peacebuilding in a Changing Global Order*, "Contemporary Security Policy", Vol. 46, No. 2, 2025, pp. 228, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2025.2466287 (11.07.2025)

forces and reintegration of ex-fighters into civilian life.[1] Even though the concept of DDR has become a blueprint of peacebuilding interventions in various parts of the world, critics argue that it often focuses on technocratic indicators, including the number of people who will be disarmed or money paid, which overlooks the social, political and moral aspects of reintegration.[2] This objection is supported by comparative evidence. The Sierra Leone DDR programmes handled thousands of fighters but failed to address the stigma and victim grievances, resulting in a weak reintegration.[3] In Colombia and Rwanda, reintegration was sabotaged as victims felt perpetrators were being rewarded as justice and restitution took a back seat.[4] Such examples show that reintegration is not a material exchange only, but a socially and politically mediated procedure that is determined by trust, legitimacy, and recognition. Operation safe corridor reflects the potential and the traps of DDR. Although it has received over many ex-combatants, it has not been able to meet its obligations on strong monitoring, failed promises and ignoring the rights of the victims. The placement of OSC into the DDR theory highlights the key idea of this study, which is that reintegration cannot be simplified to a technical response of counter-terrorism, rather it is the area of negotiation between civil rights, justice, and human security.

The third theoretical viewpoint is state legitimacy theory as it is expressed in governance and peacebuilding fields. Weberian explanations of state power focus on the monopoly of legitimate power, but legitimacy is also based on the ability of the state to keep its promises, deliver justice, and be trusted among the citizens.[5] Credibility of the state is of particular importance in weak and conflict-prone settings because the citizens evaluate the state authority based on real experiences of security delivery and guardianship of rights.[6] Regarding the North-East of Nigeria, OSC acts as a state credibility litmus test. The lack of credibility by the state increases as ex-combatants are being offered vocational kits, financial assistance, and safe reinsertion, and these promises are not fulfilled, creating a lack of trust in the community and suspiciousness. On the same note, failure to include the victims in the compensation programs leaves the state to be biased towards the perpetrators at the expense of the victims.[7] Such an inability to balance reintegration and justice renders OSC and the state itself illegitimate. In this way, the state-credibility model is directly associated with human security: in the case when the state cannot fulfil its promises, the results of human security decline. Societies are still languishing in terror and poverty, and reintegration is viewed as an insecurity factor as opposed to a reconciliation factor.

This study conceptualizes the path of surrender to social suspicion using a synthesis of these strands in two interdependent channels. First is the state credibility channel whereby

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[1] Knight, *Op. cit.*, p. 504

[2] Robert Muggah, Chris O'Donnell, *Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*, "Stability: International Journal of Security and Development", Vol. 4, No. 1, 2015, https://stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.fs (11.07.2025)

[3] Humphreys and Weinstein, *Op. cit.*, p. 505

[4] Kaplan and Nussio, *Op. cit.*, p. 66

[5] Stergios G. Mitas, *Beware the 'Normative Void': Revisiting Max Weber's Conception of State Legitimacy*, "Kritike", Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, p. 99, https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_29/mitas_december2021.pdf (11.07.2025)

[6] Dhikru Adewale Yagboyaju, Adeoye O. Akinola, *Nigerian State and the Crisis of Governance: A Critical Exposition*, "SAGE Open", Vol. 9, No. 3, 2019, p. 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019865810 (11.07.2025)

[7] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *Identity Politics, Conflict, and National Integration in Nigeria: The Youths' Perspective*, "African Identities", February 2024, p. 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2024.2319582 (11.07.2025)

reintegration results are reliant on the capacity of the state to provide material assistance, surveillance, and justice consistently and transparently. Failure to keep promises or laxity in monitoring undermines the legitimacy of the state, and makes communities lose faith in the goodwill of the surrender. Second is the community legitimacy channel wherein reintegration relies on how communities are prepared to take ex-combatants back, and the perception of fairness, reparation, and acknowledgement of victims influences this. Otherwise, under such circumstances, the surrender is redefined and becomes impunity, which creates social suspicion and resistance.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design with a focus on the narratives of the community members and victims to understand the perception of reintegration, its contestation, and its legitimate nature. In so doing, it questions the social senses of giving up and under what circumstances reintegration breeds trust or mistrust. The study adopts purposive sampling to select voices that play a central role in the reintegration process such as community members, victims of abduction and youth representatives. To this end, 49 individuals selected across the Boo Haram-affected communities in the North East participated in the study. The study relies on both primary and secondary data. The primary data are based on interviews held in the Boko Haram-affected communities in North-East Nigeria. Findings from the interviews was supported by secondary data sourced from journal articles, newspaper articles, reports and internet sources. The NVivo 12 qualitative software was used to systematically organize, code the data and generate themes. Meanwhile, since the Boko Haram insurgent is sensitive, the study adhered to the ethical standards by informing participants that they would be participating in interviews, while pseudonyms were used to safeguard their identities.

Findings and Discussion

Among the dominant strands that emerged from the interview is general skepticism about the legitimacy of Boko Haram defections under Operation Safe Corridor (OSC). Community members were always in doubt as to whether giving up was a sign of true repentance or just a survival mechanism. This effect correlates with the credibility issues in the ideological struggles in the DDR literature: insurgents acting on religious or political ideological grounds usually do not succeed in proving genuine disengagement, in contrast to resource-based rebellions.[1] Some of the participants expressed outright doubt in the process. One of the respondents said, "These people are not really sorry for what they did. They came out because they are tired, because the army is chasing them, not because they believe in peace." Another community elder observed: "We cannot say they have truly changed. Many of them will still go back if they see the chance. They hide their mind, but we know they are not with us." These testaments highlight the mistrust that reintegration takes on a very dark shade. Giving up is not seen as a moral case but a strategy. This opinion is supported by a commentary by one of the young participants: "When they come, they laugh and eat with us, but later we hear them saying they will rejoin their people. How can we trust that?"

The above is captured in the literature, highlighting some cases of OSC graduates who have reverted to banditry and insurgency.[2] Similarly, the absence of long-term surveillance of

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[1] Humphreys and Weinstein, *Op. cit.,* p. 505
[2] Zanna, *Op. cit.,* p. 1

returnees contributes to doubts about the sustainability of repentance.[1] In human security terms, the undermined sincerity is a direct contradiction of the absence of fear. Societies are also still fearful of coexisting with ex-insurgents who might go back to violence. In contrast to the Niger Delta amnesty, when it was possible to trace the fighters to specific grievances and demands, the ideology of Boko Haram is rooted in religion, which makes it even more challenging to check the repentance. As such, communities will not readily accept the returnees as they view them as dormant dangers, instead of reintegrated citizens. Thus, the disputed genuineness damaged trust in both areas, which caused returnees to be stigmatized by their communities. Participants take the idea of surrendering as an opportunity, rather than as a transformation. This mistrust, combined with the failure of states to monitor and deliver justice, confirms that even the process of surrender does not lead to reconciliation, but rather guarantees the reproduction of insecurity.

Another overarching theme in the data is a strong belief that the state is not living up to material and institutional commitments that form the basis of reintegration. Among the respondents, there is a tendency for discussions about government rhetoric on employment, training, and rehabilitation to be widely publicized. In contrast, the actual execution is considered weak or non-existent. When commitments are not kept, the respondents project failure to be a direct result of continued insecurity- ex-combatants who are not offered livelihoods they can effectively engage in can be characterized as prone to relapse. Communities respond to not honoring promises as a sign that the state cannot be relied upon. This dynamic is attested to in several consistent ways in the transcript. An example is a respondent narrating about the practical outcome of not keeping promises simply: "Those Boko Haram that are coming to the town, the promise of the government that is not achieved, he decided to back to the normal act that had been doing."

There is equally another strong issue identified in the transcript that victims of the Boko Haram are selectively ignored when compared to the consideration extended to repentant fighters. This disproportion, in which reintegration is given to perpetrators but survivors are not assisted, was a fundamental wrongdoing reported by participants on numerous occasions and legitimizes Operation Safe Corridor (OSC). One of the female respondents wrote vividly the following:

> *The problem is that those who are the victims of this Boko Haram, some of them were abducted, some of them were kidnapped, and they are still in the trauma of what has happened to them… The government should have looked at the victims. They did not help them, they did not even remember them.*

Meanwhile, another participant made a direct moral analogy between the treatment of insurgents and the lack of attention to victims: "When you bring those that killed people, you give them food, you give them clothes, you give them everything. But the victims, the government forgets them completely." Also, one of the youth interviewees emphasized the role of such a lack of balance as a source of resentment: "Most of the victims are not happy with what the government is doing, because they give all the attention to Boko Haram and leave the victims suffering."

These statements portray how OSC, which is seen as a way of promoting peace, is construed by community members as an encouragement of violence and disregard of justice. The emphasis on the integration of ex-combatants is viewed as a zero-sum game: limited funds are spent on the reintegration of perpetrators who committed atrocities, whereas

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[1] Idayat and Routley, *Op. cit.,* p. 2

survivors of killings, kidnappings, and displacement end up without psychosocial support systems, income, and property. Such perception is a direct failure of the human security paradigm, which ascertains that peace should ensure that every citizen is free of fear and is also free of want.[1] The testimonies of the victims reveal that they do not feel either. Rather, reintegration is considered to be an exclusionary process that adds to their insecurity. From the perspective of state legitimacy theory, this imbalance erodes the moral foundation of state authority. Mitas believe that legitimacy is based on perceptions of fairness. Having communities see people who perpetrate crimes being reintegrated and empowered, and the victims suffering in anguish and poverty, the credibility of the state as a guarantor of rights is severely undermined.[2]

Moreover, the social suspicion is exacerbated by the negligence towards victims. Communities do not view returnees as reformed citizens but rather as an indication of a state that safeguards individuals who have wronged victims. By so doing, OSC unknowingly instills a justice gap, a cause of resentment that can disrupt reintegration efforts. Thus, the repetition of the focus on victim neglect shows that the reintegration cannot be perceived in Boko Haram-impacted communities in terms of the resettlement of fighters. In the absence of conscious victim-centered policies, such as psychosocial support, economic support, and social recognition of the victimhood, reintegration would become an exercise in inequality and mistrust. This not only negates civil rights, but also the chance of restoring the trust between communities and the Nigerian state.[3]

Another theme from the transcript is the widespread societal hostility to receiving back Boko Haram extremists, based on the profound suspicion of society of the goodwill and equity of the government policies. The communities are unlikely to readily accommodate even those fighters whom OSC has already successfully processed as repentant. Such skepticism is not an abstract phenomenon, but a lived one, in the sense of the refusal of contact, the dread of fresh bloodshed, and the feeling of unfair treatment. One of the respondents had summed up the unwillingness of the community to co-exist with ex-fighters: "Some people don't want them in the community because they are still afraid… they say, 'these people have killed our families, how can we eat or live with them?" And another interviewee emphasized the emotional weight of communities: "People cannot forget what happened. When they see them, it brings back the pain. The government may say they are repentant, but the community does not believe it."
This suspicion was voiced even more crudely by a participant: "We cannot trust them. They may pretend, but at night they still meet with their people. That is why we don't want them around us."

Through these statements, it becomes evident that reintegration is not merely an administrative or security process, but rather a social bargaining of legitimacy. Reintegration policies are not given to societies passively; their acceptance or rejection of returning persons is a decisive factor. The transcript claims that the ratio is more consistent with rejection in the areas under Boko Haram control. Fear, resentment, and mistrust generate resistance, which makes reintegration precarious. The literature highlights the importance of community

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[1] UNDP, *Op. cit.,* p. 9

[2] Stergios G. Mitas, *Beware the 'Normative Void': Revisiting Max Weber's Conception of State Legitimacy*, "Kritike", Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, p. 101, https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_29/mitas_december2021.pdf (11.07.2025)

[3] Tope Shola Akinyetun, Abiodun Fatai-Abatan, Nife Ogunbodede, *Heated Environment, Armed People: Between 'Climate Change Conflict' and 'Fragility Conflict' in the Sahel*, "Journal of Asian and African Studies", 2024, pp. 6, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241285108 (11.07.2025)

legitimacy as a precondition of successful DDR.[1] Without community buy-in, the ex-combatants will be ostracized, and this restricts their ability to achieve employment, marriage, or even socialization, which may push them back into armed groups or into criminal acts. According to the human-security view, resistance on a community level accentuates the inability to ensure freedom from fear. When people are unable to sleep well or share common spaces due to the presence of reinserted individuals, the reintegration process has not achieved its primary goal of restoring peace. Resistance is also a sign of a gap between the language of the government (repentant fighters as reformed citizens) and the perception of the community (fighters as untrustworthy subversives) in the context of state legitimacy. When communities believe that government acts have little bearing on their actual circumstances, the state's authority is delegitimized.

It is evident that OSC has underestimated the social aspect of reintegration. Whilst concentrating on the individual level of vocational training and deradicalization, it has overlooked the collective level of reconciliation and trust-building at the community level. Rituals of justice, recognition of the victim suffering, and the involvement of the community in decision-making make the reintegration appear to be pushed down. One of the respondents recapped it thus: "Government just brings them back and tells us to accept them. But they don't ask the victims, they don't ask the people. That is why we resist." This quote is representative of the matter of social suspicion: communities consider reintegration as unfair and dangerous; thus, they either resist it directly or indirectly. Unless OSC addresses these perceptions, the chances are that the reintegration will only continue to foment insecurity and not overcome it.

The foregoing highlights how contested sincerity of surrender, broken promises of the state, neglect of victims, and resistance in the community, form a clear cycle, which helps clarify why Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) has not succeeded in converting surrender into sustainable reintegration. The program has been caught in a game of suspicion that is eroding the legitimacy of states as well as human security within the communities affected by Boko Haram. Community members do not believe that Boko Haram defectors are serious repenters, as participants emphasized over and over again. Surrendering is a concept with multiple interpretations, not necessarily as a moral change but as a survival mechanism under military pressure. This foresight scepticism paves the way to distrust further. Once broken promises compound this scepticism, the credibility of the state is further eroded. According to the responses, they were promised jobs, stipends, or a vocational kit, but these promises were rarely kept, therefore some of them "reverted to the normal act that had been doing." Returnees become frustrated when they believe that government representatives announce plans but never carry them out, and the community becomes suspicious that the project is not being taken seriously. The reaction of one of the participants was: "You cannot say you do this and when it comes to implementation… there is nothing there." In this regard, surrender emerges as a gateway rather than a gateway into citizenship, which strengthens insecurity.

Over these failures is the uncaring nature of the victims, which adds to the feeling of injustice. In the transcript, abduction, displacement, and murder survivors complained that they are forgotten as abusers are dressed, fed, and trained. This ethical inequality makes reintegration a show of impunity: "When you bring those that killed people, you give them food… but the victims, the government forgets them completely." To the communities, this negligence sends a message to the state that the perpetrators are more critical in the eyes of the state than those who complied with the law and suffered at the hands of Violence,

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[1] Knight Özerdem, *Op. cit.,* p. 503

undermining the authority of the OSC and that of the state. Therefore, community members become resistant as a result of these interactions. The village residents reject returnees because they are traumatized, fearful, and resentful of them. The responders stated that "People cannot forget what happened" and "we don't want them around us." This resistance is a rational response to the state's shortcomings, unresolved trauma, and unresolved insecurity; it is not illogical. Reintegration is therefore opposed not by communities being against peace, but simply because communities feel it is unsafe, unjust, and forced.

The above point to social mistrust and subjugation. Instead of serving as a springboard for peace, the act of surrender serves as a source of distrust since it lacks community legitimacy, governmental credibility, and victim justice. This demonstrates the drawbacks of DDR theory's technocratic approaches, which are limited to training and disarming. Concerning human-security, it emphasizes how peace processes must establish dignity, justice, and trust to ensure freedom from fear and want.

National Reconciliation Efforts: Measures and Gaps

This study not only recognizes the shortcomings of Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) but also examines the overall environment of state-initiated reconciliation policies in Nigeria. In this section, we examine the role that community-based skepticism and the political economy of reintegration, in general, play in national reconciliation. Aside, the OSC program, Nigeria has participated in peace and rehabilitation programs, including the formation of the Presidential Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the Northeast as well as the Recovery and Peace Building Assessment (RPBA).[1] However, despite these measures, there has been partial implementation of these reconciliation measures. One of the major causes of the limited development is the selective practice of the policy of reconciliation which prioritizes ex-combatants ahead of the victims. Failing to offer psychosocial support and economic aid to victims by the state results in a perception of unfairness which negatively affects the credibility of government-led reconciliation efforts. The lack of the government in its response to the needs of the victims and at the same time providing incentives to former insurgents is regarded as moral injustice[2], as corroborated by the community members in the study. This unequal distribution of resources also cultivates bitterness and gives rise to social suspicion.

Therefore, the lack of equitable policies that engage victims and perpetrators in the reconciliation process is one of the factors that result in the failure of OSC. In addition, a more profound problem of poor governance and lack of long-term commitment by the state leads to the partial implementation of reintegration programs. Programs like OSC have been facing the issue of sustainability because of the inability to fulfil the promise of providing employment, vocational training, and rehabilitation.[3] In cases where these promises are not kept, they strengthen the perception of betrayal by ex-combatants and communities, which increases the level of mistrust. The repetitive cycle in the unfulfilled promises and the lack of

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[1] International Crisis Group. *Restoring Nigeria's Leadership for Regional Peace and Security*, "International Crisis Group," December 11, 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b203-restoring-nigerias-leadership-regional-peace-security (11.07.2025)

[2] Tarela Juliet Ike; Dung Jidong, and Evangelyn Ebi Ayobi. *Improving Affected Victims and Community Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Terrorist Defectors in Nigeria: A Community-Informed Participatory Action Research*, "Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict," Vol. 18, No. 1, 2024, pp. 103-118, doi:10.1080/17467586.2024.2407937

[3] Celestina Atom, *Nigeria's Boko Haram Rehabilitation Efforts Ignore the Emotional Trauma of Soldiers: Why This Matters*, "The Conversation," October 2025b, https://theconversation.com/nigerias-boko-haram-rehabilitation-efforts-ignore-the-emotional-trauma-of-soldiers-why-this-matters-267023 (11.07.2025)

a well-developed monitoring and evaluation framework bring about the futility of reintegration efforts.[1] The data from the interviews represents a reflection of experienced life, and it is imperative to incorporate the experiences in the scope of the national policy discourse. The results of the study highlight a profound gap that exists in the reconciliation process, that is, the lack of connection between national policies and the lived realities of the communities which have been affected. The cynicism expressed by community members about the authenticity of the repentance of ex-combatants is an outcry of the distrust of the locality rather than a reaction to the insincerity and absence of transparency at the state level in the reintegration process.

The interviews also showed that the communities view reintegration as a kind of state-sponsored impunity, and much consideration is given to the trauma and injustices experienced by victims. These observations are in line with the general critique of state-based peace processes, where victims are frequently moved to the fringes, and complaints of the affected communities are never heard. Including such community insights into the overall reconciliation paradigm, one can clearly recognise that national reconciliation cannot be finalised only by the top-down method of reintegration programs like OSC. The qualitative approach used in the study offers a deep, bottom-up approach that brings out the social aspects of reintegration and the necessity of inclusion policies that consider both victims and offenders. Nonetheless, the voices must be put in perspective of the bigger national process of reconciliation that is not merely an issue of the physical reappearance of ex-combatants but a process that involves restoring faith, justice, and dignity to all concerned parties. The cynicism of community members is to be interpreted as one of the manifestations of the overall inability of the state of Nigeria to keep its word to the ex-combatants and the victims, not as a local issue.

National Reconciliation: Beyond Operational Efforts

Reconciliation in most post-conflict environments such as Nigeria is not simply about re-uniting ex-combatants in society but also about restoring social trust, acknowledging the rights of victims, and coming up with inclusive governance. The concept of Human Security, as defined by the United Nations adopted as the theoretical framework, focuses on the significance of treating not only the physical but also the psychological facet of security. This is not limited to a close-ended view of military defeat, but it is important to guarantee the freedom of fear and want to every member of society, including both victims and returnees. This study maintains that the inability of the Operation Safe Corridor to consider the issues of the victims and concentrate on the reintegration process alone is part of the larger failure of the human security paradigm. It is not as much a failure of operations as it is chaotic–a failure that weakens the legitimacy of Nigeria. When the state is unable to deliver justice to the victim yet give the offenders second chances, the state loses its moral authority, creating a social fracturing circle.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the contradictions inherent in the reintegration processes within communities impacted by Boko Haram, specifically under Nigeria's Operation Safe

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[1] Celestina Atom, *Guardians of Peace, Victims of Betrayal: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Military Personnel Navigating Scepticism, Trust, and Hope in Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor*, "Journal for Deradicalization," 2025a, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 87-124, https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/1105 (13.09.2025)

Corridor (OSC). Using qualitative data collected from community members and victims of the insurgency, the findings show a notable discrepancy between the goals of reintegration and the realities that people face. Although designed as a route from insurgency to peaceful coexistence, the program has inadvertently fostered an environment of distrust that jeopardizes human security and civil liberties. Interlinked dynamics shed light on this pattern. First, the process of deradicalization is widely viewed as insincere, prompting communities to doubt whether ex-militants have really left Boko Haram. Second, the state's persistent failure to deliver promises, be it training equipment and livelihoods support, undermines confidence and sours communities. Thirdly, the lack of victim oversight produces a lack of justice, in which violence survivors feel neglected while offenders are catered to. Lastly, these conditions spawn community resistance, with feelings like fear, sadness, and resentment translating into communal rejection of returnees. Together, these results support a crucial lesson for scholarship and policy: reintegration is a highly politicized and moral process that depends on victim justice, community legitimacy, and state credibility rather than being merely a technical exercise in disarmament and training. In the absence of such conditions, surrender becomes re-envisioned not as reconciliation but as a threat, producing mistrust instead of confidence. From the human security perspective, OSC has failed to provide the freedoms that it promises. Communities remain without freedom from fear, in doubt whether returnees can recover, and without freedom from want, since victims and returnees are afflicted with poverty and unfulfilled aspirations. Dignity also remains unrepaired: survivors go unnoticed, and ex-combatants are stigmatized. These outcomes are the root cause of concern regarding the upholding of civil rights and the legitimacy of the Nigerian state in the post-conflict dispensation.

The following specific recommendations are proffered based on the findings to promote human security, ease reintegration, and restore state trust in Boko Haram-affected communities. These suggestions are for policymakers, civil society actors, and external partners concerned with the administration of post-conflict environments in Nigeria. First, the highest-priority need is for the government in Nigeria to perform reliably in delivering reintegration promises. To guarantee their efficacy, livelihood packages, monetary aid, and vocational kits promised to returnees must be given out and monitored. To show accountability, transparency mechanisms like electronic tracking of reintegration aid or community-based follow-up committees must be institutionalized. Reliability in delivery would disprove widespread beliefs of having been left behind and diminish motives for re-recruitment. Second, reintegration cannot be credible without strong victim support. OSC should be accompanied by a victim assistance program which includes psychosocial assistance, economic assistance, and reparations for survivors of Boko Haram atrocities. This would remedy the justice deficit in community testimonies and balance the moral economy of reintegration so that peacebuilding does not appear to be reciprocating with perpetrators while leaving survivors behind. Third, community opposition to reintegration highlights the importance of intentional community engagement. Before the resettlement of returnees, local consultative forums, forums for truth-telling, and reconciliation ceremonies should be held so that victims can express concerns and communities can co-design reintegration plans. Involving traditional leaders, religious leaders, and women's organizations would augment the legitimacy and integrate reintegration into local sociocultural practices.

Fourth, establishment of community monitoring networks with the help of civil society organizations can allow tracking of reintegration among returnees, assistance in early signs of recidivism, and continuation of support after initial transfer. Comparative experience in the process of DDR suggests that continued monitoring reduces recidivism and creates

confidence in the program. Fifth, reintegration must be incorporated into a larger plan for human security. This includes restoring local bazaars, schools, and health facilities in impacted areas so that victims and returnees can experience the tangible benefits of peace. Connecting OSC with community-wide development would also avoid making reintegration only a right for the perpetrators and cultivate mutual ownership over peace. Lastly, Nigeria should combine OSC with transitional mechanisms for recognizing harm, imposing responsibility, and allowing channels for restitution. The truth commissions or community forums can also minimize the gap in the state's expressions of regret and the community's experience of trauma. In the absence of such mechanisms, scepticism shall ever haunt capitulation, regardless of material reintegration benefits

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