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# Risky Business: Engaging Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

Countries in the Lake Chad Basin region benefit from vigilante groups. The risks associated with vigilante operations are borne by the members of these groups and their communities, even when state security forces formally engage vigilante groups. Such a transfer of risk to the groups not only raises ethical concerns but also increases the risk of rivalry and violence.



# Recommendations

## **1 Use (regionally) harmonised clear and transparent rules of engagement**

Uncoordinated and isolated engagement of different vigilante groups across borders can lead to rivalry among these groups, with risks of conflict escalation at the community level. When engaging vigilante groups, actors, such as the state security forces, must use clear, transparent and (regionally) harmonised rules of engagement.

## **2 Improve risk transfer management when engaging vigilante groups**

Vigilante groups are involved in a wide range of tasks/missions in operations against Boko Haram and ISWAP, but state security actors do not recognise or manage the transfer of risk to these auxiliary forces. Rules of engagement must include legal obligations and procedures in the event of injury or death (for vigilante group members and their families).

## **3 Provide comprehensive exit strategies as long-term solutions for members of vigilante groups**

States must develop comprehensive exit strategies for members of vigilante groups, including provisions for income-generating opportunities and guarantees of security, to minimise the risk of them becoming future sources of insecurity.

to-house and village-to-village search operations and night watches as well as administering justice against perceived criminals or violent actors. 'Extreme roles' of vigilante groups include direct engagement in combat with jihadi insurgents with or without state support, going on military patrols and negotiating for the exit of Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgents. For example, during our field research in the Far North region of Cameroon (Meri, Mora and Kolofata) and north-east Nigeria (Madagali, Damask, Ngala), former Boko Haram members, their families and community leaders shared that local vigilante groups, particularly hunters and, in the case of Nigeria, members of the civilian joint task force (CJTF), were involved in negotiating the exit of senior Boko Haram members.

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## Background

Based on empirical quantitative and qualitative research<sup>1</sup> conducted as part of a joint AU/DPO/bicc project, this *policy brief* examines the risks that are associated with the engagement of vigilante groups in the Lake Chad Basin region (LCB) and provides recommendations for risk management and mitigation.

Vigilante groups have a long history in the LCB. They are mostly informal, providers of security, protection and law and order that emerge as a local, civilian response to the ineffectiveness of the state security services or the absence of the state in areas affected by crime, public disorder or conflict. The continued violence perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgents in the LCB region has become yet another source of legitimacy and motivation for the engagement of vigilante groups (UNDP, 2023). Given their relative successes in the fight against Boko Haram and ISWAP, their importance has grown over the years. While security forces in Nigeria and Cameroon are increasingly relying on vigilante groups for security and protection, this is less the case in Niger and Chad.

The **roles and functions** of vigilante groups vary from one location to another. Some vigilante groups are limited to local intelligence gathering, while others carry out crime profiling, community patrols, house-

While there are vigilante groups in all Lake Chad Basin countries, Nigeria and Cameroon have taken a more proactive stance towards officialising and formalising these groups than Niger and Chad. For example, the Regional Decree N°00000019<sup>2</sup> formally establishes vigilante groups in the Far North region of Cameroon, including a broad set of eligibility criteria and a framework of roles and responsibilities.

In Chad, state officials in areas around the Lake Chad Basin in particular have insisted that vigilante groups no longer exist. Our research shows otherwise. In several locations around the Lac province, groups are very much present, in some cases wearing official uniforms and carrying automatic rifles. The groups see themselves as legitimate security providers in the area, carry out control patrols to secure the lake and the surrounding area. As one sector commander told us:

**We are like soldiers. We have ranks and we are organised. [...] We help the army, and they support us with uniforms, equipment and food. There are missions that we do together, and we provide intelligence.** (Interview with vigilante group sector commander, Chad, Lac region, 2023.)

# Vigilante Group Engagement: A Risk for Whom?

Engaging vigilante groups is not without risks:

**First,** it poses enormous personal risks to the vigilante group members themselves. Boko Haram is notorious for kidnapping and killing people who have formed or joined vigilante groups or who otherwise cooperate with security forces. By using vigilante groups, security forces and states deliberately transfer the risk of death and injury to these groups. However, the affected states and security forces do not acknowledge or adequately manage the transfer of risk from national security forces to vigilante groups. While the governments of Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad recognise the successes of the vigilante groups in official statements, they do not acknowledge or exercise any duty of care.

**Second,** members of vigilante groups also expose themselves, family members, relatives and even entire communities to revenge attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP. During our field research in the Far North region of Cameroon, for example, one village-based vigilante expressed his fear of revenge attacks on his family for his role in providing vital information

about a Boko Haram member whose family still lived in the community. In Geidam district (Nigeria), in a community bordering Niger, a study participant reported that Boko Haram had targeted vigilante members and village heads, as they saw them as traitors for collaborating with the state military. The insurgents attacked these districts on two separate occasions between November 2023 and January 2024, resulting in civilian casualties.

**Third,** there are medium- and long-term risks for states that choose to use vigilante groups to provide security. In the medium term, vigilante groups risk further delegitimising the state as the guarantor of law and order while establishing an informal security system. In this sense, there is an amalgamation between the private and the public through the privatisation of security and law, posing long-term risks in contexts of crisis and protracted states of emergency and exception that perpetuate arbitrary law and lack of accountability.

Given that vigilante groups are already an integral part of the security response in the Lake Chad Basin, the key question is how to mitigate the associated risks. The following sections recommend possible responses.

## Need for Clear Rules of Engagement and Accountability Mechanisms when Dealing with Vigilantes

Despite their prominent role in providing security, vigilante groups are not trained in the same way as members of the formal security sector are. Training to strengthen the code of conduct, accountability and human rights considerations of vigilante group members has only been provided on a case-by-case basis<sup>3</sup>. The Lake Chad Basin Commission's Regional Stabilisation Strategy for the Lake Chad Basin indicates that

**vigilantes who will continue to provide security services to their communities will require more formal training and accountability processes to avoid human rights abuses** (LCBC, 2018, p.28).

In Nigeria, the DFID-funded Justice for All project has developed guidelines for the voluntary policing sector (vigilante groups), which outline the structure, code of conduct and accountability mechanisms for vigilante groups (UNDP, 2019). It remains unclear whether this document is widely used and mandatory for engaging with these groups. In addition, general considerations, such as child recruitment, identified in many settings, have only been addressed in a piecemeal manner. In 2017, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Nigeria signed an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children (UNICEF, 2017). Other groups must urgently address the issue.

In addition to training, there is a lack of monitoring and oversight structures, as well as sanctioning mechanisms for abuses and crimes committed by members of the groups. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2349 "urges relevant national and through them local

actors, to develop and implement appropriate plans for the disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, and where appropriate prosecution of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other community-based security groups” (UNSC, 2017, p.7). In areas where vigilante groups are seen as heroes, victims are often afraid to report abuses, creating an atmosphere of impunity for vigilante actors.

In addition to managing risk transfer, state security forces should establish clear rules of engagement when working with vigilante groups in the context of terrorism and crime, including:

- Clear delineation of **roles and responsibilities** in the context of military operations.
- **Legal obligations for the protection of vigilante group members** and associates, including their families, who may be at risk as a result of vigilante deployment.
- **Legal obligations and procedures in the event of injury** or death. There are reported gaps in the provision of financial assistance to injured vigilante members and to the families of vigilante members killed in the fight against Boko Haram.
- **Rules and regulations for the transfer of equipment, handover and management of weapons and ammunition** (for instance in situations where vigilante groups support military operations and equipment is handed over).
- Independent structures in the civil justice system to deal with **cases of transgression and criminal offences** committed by members of vigilante groups.

Closely linked to this, there is an urgent need to address weapons and ammunition management considerations in the context of engaging vigilante groups in a systematic way that goes beyond sensitisation and awareness-raising efforts:

This includes provisions for physical security and stockpile management (PSSM) of weapons and ammunition at the local and community levels, including community-based storage facilities, separate storage of weapons and ammunition, community-based registration and record-keeping mechanisms in accordance with national weapons and ammunition regulations, as well as structural support for basic WAM capacity, including safe and secure handling and temporary storage (UNIDDRS, 2022). Oversight

structures, including roles and procedures for access and storage management, by qualified personnel are essential. Transfer of lethal materials should not be considered in contexts where security and qualified handling cannot be ensured.

## Long-term Solution to a Short-term Measure: Comprehensive Exit Strategies for Members of Vigilante Groups

UN Security Council Resolution 2349 and the Regional Stabilisation Strategy of the Lake Chad Basin Commission refer to the need “to develop and implement” appropriate plans for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of vigilante groups (UNSC, 2017; LCBC, 2018)<sup>4</sup>. However, as outlined above, divergent positions on the officialisation and formalisation of groups across LCBC countries have led to equally strong divergent positions on how and whether or not to consider these groups for DDR in the different conflict contexts.

In Nigeria, in the absence of a comprehensive strategy, various exit options have been offered to sections of the vigilante groups. The most prominent of these is the Civilian Joint Task Force, elements of which have been trained and integrated into the state security sector, particularly the army (Agbana, 2023). The United Nations Development Programme has also supported training measures (UNDP, 2019) and has been involved in training members of the CJTF in socio-economic profiling and income-generating activities.

**Streamlined approaches should include clear expectation management through clear eligibility criteria, for instance for integration into the security forces, as well as forms of livelihood support.**

In Cameroon, despite greater formalisation of vigilante groups, support to the groups has been as rudimentary as in other contexts except for a few selected training measures. As reintegration support for former

members of armed groups is lacking generally, livelihood support for individuals opting to leave vigilante groups is also missing<sup>5</sup>.

In 2019, UNDP Cameroon carried out a profiling study of vigilante committees in Blangoua, Fotokol, Kolofata, Mayo Moskota and Mora, which was an important step towards designing comprehensive DDR support measures for former vigilante members and their communities (UNDP, 2019). However, in clear contradiction to the recommendations of the RSS, very little or no activity has been directed towards vigilante groups, leaving them in limbo.

**To avoid perpetuating states of exception and, by extension, the existence of vigilante groups, countries and partners should focus on more, streamlined engagement of vigilante groups as beneficiary groups in DDRR efforts.**

The same is true in Chad, where members of vigilante groups report that some smaller groups have received training and have been allowed to integrate into the army, but that they have now received livelihood support or the prospect of socio-economic support. Chad has just developed a disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation (DDRR) strategy for former associates of Boko Haram and ISWAP. However, there is a strong focus on those returning from armed groups designated as terrorist organisations while members of vigilante groups are not taken into consideration. DDRR has been streamlined in all LCB countries with a similar focus and theory of change, mainly supported by the International Organization for Migration. Our research points to several dangers of ignoring vigilante groups for DDR:

- **Piecemeal approaches to DDR** of former members of vigilante groups have led to situations of rivalry and fierce competition with risks of conflict entrenchment and escalation at the community level.
- Ongoing risk transfer and direct involvement of vigilante groups in military operations have led to serious mental health issues among vigilante group members, including **trauma and substance abuse**. This poses significant risks to communities, particularly in settings where vigilante groups carry weapons of war. The recruitment of children is also a common phenomenon that needs to be urgently addressed.

- By acting as a link to the communities for the security forces, vigilante groups have **helped to build and restore trust** between the state security forces and the population. Failure to consider exit strategies for vigilante group members risks reversing this trust-building momentum.

To avoid perpetuating states of exception and, by extension, the existence of vigilante groups, countries and partners should focus on more, streamlined engagement of vigilante groups as beneficiary groups in DDRR efforts. Streamlined approaches should include clear expectation management through clear eligibility criteria, for instance for integration into the security forces, as well as forms of livelihood support.

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## Footnotes

- 1 bicc and its local partners conducted field research between June and November 2023 within the joint AU/DPO/BICC project on 'Regional approaches to dealing with armed groups in the Sahel.' Research was conducted in 20 border provinces, involving 40 border localities in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon, resulting in 316 interviews and a data set for which 4,795 individuals were interviewed.
- 2 Arrêté Régional N° 0000019 AR/K/SG/DPOA of 2014.
- 3 See for instance trainings in Nigeria: <https://www.undp.org/nigeria/news/undp-trains-vigilantes-and-civilian-joint-task-force-members-human-rights-and-leadership>; <https://punchng.com/312-kaduna-civilian-joint-task-force-personnel-receive-training-at-police-college-chairman/>.
- 4 See RSS Strategic Objective 7: "Management of Vigilantes" (p. 29) and Strategic Objective 12: "Reinsertion and Reintegration" (p.32).
- 5 The authors are aware that vigilante groups are community-based and would hence not need "formal reintegration"; in this context, however, the authors' take on reintegration" refers to livelihood support through income-generating activities and job training offers, for instance.

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