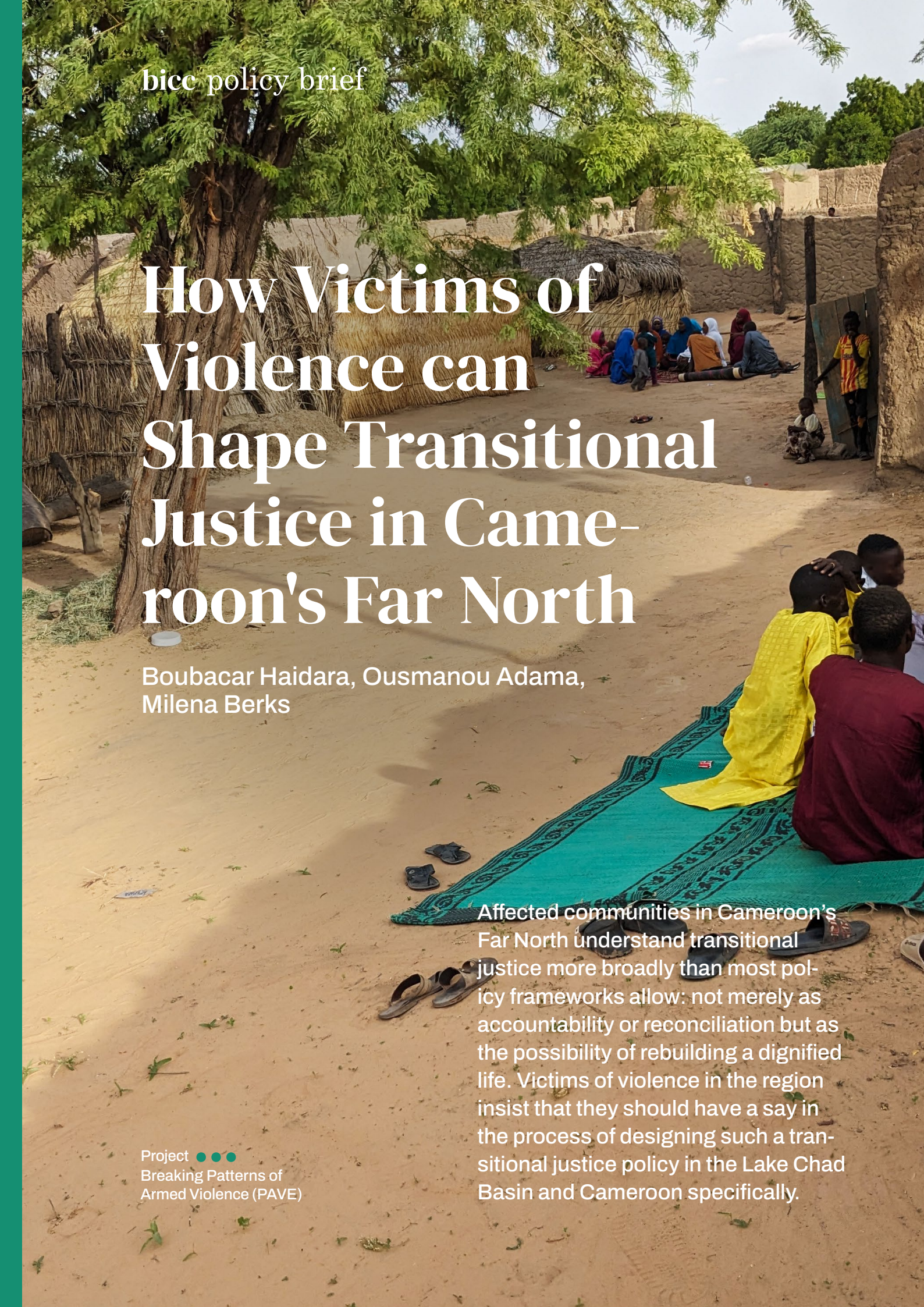




bicc policy brief

How Victims of Violence can Shape Transitional Justice in Cameroon's Far North

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Affected communities in Cameroon's Far North understand transitional justice more broadly than most policy frameworks allow: not merely as accountability or reconciliation but as the possibility of rebuilding a dignified life. Victims of violence in the region insist that they should have a say in the process of designing such a transitional justice policy in the Lake Chad Basin and Cameroon specifically.

Project ●●●
Breaking Patterns of
Armed Violence (PAVE)

Recommendations

1 Ensure that victims and conflict-affected communities shape the transitional justice process

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the government of Cameroon should adopt a genuinely victim-centred and participatory approach to transitional justice. This includes holding structured consultations with victims' associations, women's groups, displaced persons, youth representatives, traditional and religious leaders, and other community stakeholders before making key policy decisions. By ensuring that conflict-affected populations actively shape both the priorities and the implementation of transitional justice initiatives, the LCBC can significantly strengthen the legitimacy, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of its regional policy.

2 Support locally legitimate pathways to rebuilding trust and social reintegration

Reintegration in Cameroon's Far North suggests that coexistence between communities and returning former combatants and associates does not necessarily entail genuine trust and reconciliation. The LCBC and the Government of Cameroon should therefore encourage communities to define locally acceptable and manageable modalities for reconciliation and social re-acceptance and then support these modalities financially.

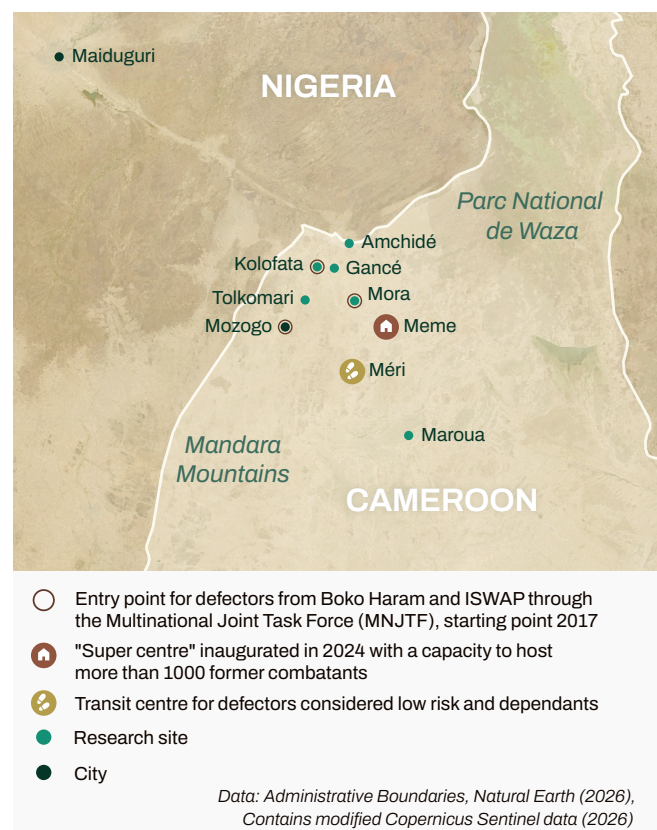
3 Embed transitional justice within local development and recovery initiatives

Many of the factors that contributed to recruitment into armed groups—including economic insecurity, youth unemployment, marginalisation and social injustice—remain present. A transitional justice process should be included in a broader recovery and reconstruction process. The government of Cameroon and the LCBC should therefore link victim-centred transitional justice efforts to local development initiatives, livelihood recovery and youth employment programmes.

Background

For more than a decade, the Far North region of Cameroon has been at the forefront of the conflict involving Boko Haram and its splinter groups operating across the Lake Chad Basin. Since the first attacks on Cameroonian territory in the early 2010s (Kendhammer & Ousmanou, 2019), communities in the region have experienced repeated cycles of violence, including killings, kidnappings, forced displacement, destruction of property, loss of livelihoods and widespread insecurity. The consequences of the conflict have extended well beyond the immediate humanitarian toll. Years of violence have profoundly transformed social relations, weakened local institutions, generated deep psychological trauma and reshaped the relationship between citizens and the state.

MAP 1: DDR CENTRES IN CAMEROON'S FAR NORTH AND RESEARCH SITES



In response to the crisis, national, regional and international actors have implemented a wide range of interventions, from military to humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts. National armed forces carried out military operations, specifically under the umbrella of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)'s regional ad hoc security mechanism, aimed at containing the threat posed by Boko Haram and ISWAP, while humanitarian organisations delivered emergency assistance to conflict-affected populations. More recently (from late 2018 onwards), stabilisation efforts have increasingly focused on supporting the return and reintegration of former combatants (those with active roles within the group) and associates (those with auxiliary roles) of Boko Haram and ISWAP through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes (National DDR Strategy of Cameroon, 2026). These efforts underscore the necessity of rebuilding social cohesion and restoring trust within communities also through civilian means.

AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF PERSISTENT GRIEVANCES AND UNMET EXPECTATIONS AMONG CONFLICT-AFFECTED POPULATIONS, THE LCBC'S EFFORTS TO DEVELOP A REGIONAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE POLICY PRESENT A CRUCIAL STEP FORWARD.

At the same time, a recurrent concern among interviewees encountered¹ was that former members and associates of armed groups are often prioritised over victims of armed group violence themselves. While reintegration programmes assist the return of former members and associates into (their) communities, many victims continue to struggle with unresolved trauma, destroyed livelihoods, displacement, and limited access to support services. This perceived imbalance has become an important source of frustration and, in some cases, resentment.

Against this backdrop of persistent grievances and unmet expectations among conflict-affected populations, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)'s efforts to develop a regional transitional justice policy intended to support peacebuilding, reconciliation and social recovery across affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin present a crucial step forward. Important headway has already been made with a regional study on transitional justice in the Lake Chad Basin, validated by LCBC member states, and the adoption of the Transitional Justice Policy Framework Guidelines in 2024 (AUC & LCBC, 2024). The next step of developing a regional policy opens a genuine opportunity to address some of the long-term consequences of violence and to contribute to more sustainable pathways towards peace. At the same time, it raises questions regarding the objectives, priorities and implementation of transitional justice in contexts where insecurity and armed violence persist. A core dilemma is how to bridge regional concerns with local needs—and how to design a regional transitional justice process in a way that is perceived as relevant, legitimate and responsive to local realities.

1 Ensure that victims and conflict-affected communities shape the transitional justice process

While acknowledging the need to support the reintegration of former combatants and associates of Boko Haram and ISWAP, interviewees consistently expressed concerns about how communities perceive current DDR-related programmes. One women's rights activist explained: "Many victims ask why the state has built infrastructure for former associates while some victims do not even have a place to live" (interview with an NGO representative in Maroua; bo04020257ca). This perception has become a significant source of frustration and risks undermining the legitimacy of both DDR and transitional justice efforts.

Respondents distinguished between "coexistence" and "reconciliation." While many appeared to accept the return of former associates into their communities, they often described this acceptance as fragile, incomplete and even imposed by the authorities. Several interviewees emphasised that rebuilding trust required more than administrative reintegration procedures or material assistance. It requires meaningful dialogue, recognition of victims' experiences, opportunities for truth-sharing and locally legitimate processes through which communities can gradually restore confidence in those who return.

Respondents also expressed a clear wish to play an active role in shaping how reconciliation and reintegration take place. Across interviews, they highlighted the importance of community-based approaches to forgiveness and social reintegration. Existing experiences demonstrate that such mechanisms can contribute significantly to rebuilding trust. In Mora, for example, community dialogue committees involving traditional authorities, religious leaders and local dignitaries were credited with helping reduce tensions and improve relations between communities. As a secondary school teacher from Mora noted: "With the establishment of these dialogue committees, we gradually observed an improvement in the situation" (bo04040222ca).

RESPONDENTS ALSO EXPRESSED A CLEAR WISH TO PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN SHAPING HOW RECONCILIATION AND REINTEGRATION TAKE PLACE.

Importantly, many interviewees argued that communities themselves should be involved in defining the conditions under which former associates are accepted into the community (see Recommendation 2). According to an officer working in the DDR process, some communities traditionally organise ceremonies in which individuals publicly commit not to engage in violence again. Such practices often enjoy stronger local legitimacy than purely institutional arrangements and can

therefore play an important role in rebuilding trust. However, a combination of institutional and traditional efforts could be the most effective approach.

In this regard, the role of local actors and institutions is crucial for transitional justice processes. In many parts of the Far North, formal judicial institutions remain remote, difficult to access or insufficiently trusted by local populations. Consequently, traditional authorities, religious leaders and community-based mediation structures and mechanisms remain key in managing disputes and promoting social cohesion across much of the region. Their continued importance reflects, in part, the limited accessibility of formal judicial institutions and the fact that these institutions are not always perceived as sufficiently responsive to local realities. For many respondents, justice includes recognition of suffering, psychosocial healing, restoration of dignity, support for victims, rebuilding of homes and livelihoods and creating conditions that reduce the risk of future violence.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN CAMEROON'S FAR NORTH IS NOT ONLY ABOUT DETERMINING WHICH MECHANISMS TO ADOPT BUT ALSO ABOUT DECIDING HOW THESE MECHANISMS SHOULD BE DESIGNED AND IMPLEMENTED. QUESTIONS OF LEGITIMACY, PARTICIPATION, TRUST AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP EMERGED REPEATEDLY THROUGHOUT THE INTERVIEWS.

Furthermore, many respondents felt that current efforts toward reparation and reintegration were largely carried out by state institutions and international actors rather than by former combatants themselves. They expressed a strong expectation that former combatants play a more visible and active role in acknowledging responsibility for past harm and contributing to redressing the harm done to victims and affected communities.

In addition, interviewees repeatedly stressed that many of the factors that contributed to the conflict remain present today. From their perspective, addressing past harms without addressing ongoing socio-economic vulnerabilities would do little to prevent future instability. These findings point to a broader lesson: Transitional justice in Cameroon's Far North is not only about determining which mechanisms to adopt but also about deciding how these mechanisms should be designed and implemented. Questions of legitimacy, participation, trust and local ownership emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews.

Respondents consistently emphasised the importance of symbolic recognition, psychosocial support, housing reconstruction, livelihood recovery and the restoration of dignity. For many interviewees, justice begins with acknowledging what people have lost and helping them rebuild their lives. A secondary school teacher from Mora described transitional justice as "an instrument of reparation" (bo04040222ca). Similarly, representatives

of women's organisations in Maroua repeatedly stressed that many survivors continued to suffer from severe psychological trauma and that access to psychosocial care—especially for women—remained extremely limited despite enormous needs.

For these reasons, the LCBC should adopt a genuinely victim-centred and participatory approach to transitional justice. This should include structured consultations with victims' associations, women's groups, displaced persons, youth representatives, traditional authorities, religious leaders and other community stakeholders before key policy decisions are made. It should also involve community validation workshops, participatory monitoring mechanisms and regular feedback processes throughout implementation. By ensuring that conflict-affected populations actively shape both the priorities and the implementation of transitional justice initiatives, the LCBC can signif-

2 Support locally legitimate pathways to rebuilding trust and social reintegration

icantly strengthen the legitimacy, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of its regional policy.

While the return of former combatants and associates has become an important component of stabilisation efforts across the Lake Chad Basin, the interviews conducted in Cameroon's Far North suggest that social reintegration remains one of the most fragile dimensions of the recovery process. Across interviews, respondents consistently distinguished between the physical return of former combatants and associates of Boko Haram and ISWAP and their social acceptance within communities. Although many of those who returned from the armed groups now live alongside other community members, trust often remains limited and reconciliation incomplete.

REBUILDING TRUST REQUIRES APPROACHES THAT GO BEYOND STANDARDISED REINTEGRATION MODELS. MANY COMMUNITIES ALREADY POSSESS LEGITIMATE MECHANISMS FOR FACILITATING RECONCILIATION AND RESTORING SOCIAL COHESION.

Several respondents described reintegration as a process that cannot be reduced to administrative procedures or material assistance alone. While DDR programmes have contributed to preparing former associates for civilian life through training, psychosocial support and economic assistance, these measures do not necessarily address the social consequences of violence at the community level. In many communities, victims and former combatants and associates continue to interact with caution, and memories of past violence remain vivid. As one

respondent—a farmer from Kolofata—explained: “Tolerance exists, but it remains fragile. They are among us, but we are not sure that they have completely severed ties with Boko Haram. We are even certain that some of them are still in contact with those who remain in the bush” (bo03302751ca).

Rebuilding trust requires approaches that go beyond standardised reintegration models. Many communities already possess legitimate mechanisms for facilitating reconciliation and restoring social cohesion, including traditional ceremonies, community mediation practices, public commitments and religious rituals. Because these mechanisms are deeply rooted in local histories, cultural norms and religious traditions, they vary across contexts. Supporting communities in defining and implementing such approaches can help foster more sustainable and meaningful reintegration processes. A recurrent expectation among victims is that former associates demonstrate a more visible commitment to rebuilding relationships with affected communities. Many respondents rejected the idea of reconciliation as something delivered by external actors, arguing instead that returnees should actively contribute to rebuilding trust. Some suggested forms of community service, participation in collective reconstruction activities or public acts of acknowledgement that would demonstrate a genuine willingness to repair relationships and contribute positively to community life. As one civil society actor observed, “victims need to see a concrete commitment on the part of the perpetrators if reconciliation is to be meaningful” (interview with the head of a women's aid NGO; bo04020257ca).

THE LCBC SHOULD AVOID PROMOTING A SINGLE MODEL OF RECONCILIATION ACROSS THE REGION. INSTEAD, IT SHOULD PROVIDE GUIDANCE TO HELP COMMUNITIES IDENTIFY AND IMPLEMENT LOCALLY LEGITIMATE PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE AND TRUST-BUILDING.

For these reasons, the LCBC should avoid promoting a single model of reconciliation across the region. Instead, it should provide guidance to help communities identify and implement locally legitimate pathways to social acceptance and trust-building. This may include community mediation initiatives, dialogue processes, public acts of acknowledgement, religious commitments, customary ceremonies or other mechanisms local populations deem credible and meaningful. Attention should nevertheless be paid to local power dynamics to ensure that such practices remain inclusive and do not reinforce existing forms of discrimination or exclusion, particularly against women. By supporting reconciliation processes that communities themselves consider legitimate, the LCBC can help transform coexistence into genuine social reintegration and strengthen the long-term sustainability of peacebuilding efforts across the Lake Chad Basin.

3 Embed transitional justice within local development and recovery initiatives

Many of the conditions that contributed to the conflict have not disappeared. While levels of violence have declined in many areas of Cameroon's Far North, economic insecurity, unemployment, social marginalisation, displacement and social injustice continue to shape the daily lives of large segments of the population. Several respondents emphasised that these structural vulnerabilities remain particularly acute among young people and continue to create conditions that armed groups often exploit. It is therefore crucial to address these issues to create an opening for a transitional justice process to take root. In this regard, the challenge is not either/or but one of creating conducive conditions for such a process by addressing the primary needs of the communities affected by conflict in northern Cameroon.

THE FINDINGS SUGGEST THAT TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS PART OF—AND EMBEDDED WITHIN—A BROADER RECOVERY PROCESS IN A CONTEXT WHERE INSECURITY PERSISTS.

The findings suggest that transitional justice should be understood as part of—and embedded within—a broader recovery process taking place in a context where insecurity persists. As one respondent involved in the implementation of DDR programming in the region noted: “We are in a situation where it is necessary both to manage the emergency and prepare for the future” (interview with a DDR officer in Maroua; bo03283155). This requires approaches that simultaneously address the legacy of past violence and the conditions that continue to undermine stability.

Affected communities often understand transitional justice in broader terms than those commonly reflected in policy frameworks. For many respondents, transitional justice is not limited to accountability or reconciliation. It is also closely linked to the possibility of rebuilding a dignified life. Victims repeatedly referred to the loss of homes, livelihoods, education opportunities, family members and social stability. One respondent—a displaced person in Mora—argued that a genuine reconstruction policy was needed, including the rebuilding of destroyed villages, housing, infrastructure and means of subsistence (bo03314453). For many affected communities, recovery and transitional justice are deeply interconnected dimensions of a broader reparation and healing process.

Reparation also requires addressing the psychological consequences of violence. Several interviewees described communities where trauma remains largely untreated and where survivors continue to live with profound emotional and psychological distress. A secondary school teacher from Mora observed that

many victims have never truly processed what they experienced and remain “deeply affected, morally and psychologically weakened” (bo04040222ca). Women's organisations similarly emphasised the scale of unmet psychosocial needs, particularly among women who survived abduction, displacement, sexual violence or the loss of family members. Yet access to mental health and psychosocial support remains extremely limited across much of the region, despite ongoing efforts by national and international actors.

Finally, economic vulnerability and recruitment into armed groups are closely linked. Respondents consistently pointed to unemployment, lack of opportunities and economic hardship as important drivers of recruitment, particularly among young people. As one interviewee explained, some individuals joined armed groups because they saw no viable alternative. Others were attracted by the prospect of resources, status or belonging. These identity-related dynamics are also central to social reintegration. Although recruitment dynamics have evolved over time, many of the structural factors that facilitated mobilisation remain present today.

For these reasons, the LCBC must adopt a long-term and comprehensive vision of transitional justice—considering primary needs related to economic and psychosocial reparations and healing of communities in conflict—that extends beyond narrowly defined legal or reconciliation measures. A transitional justice process supported by the LCBC, led nationally and informed and guided locally, should be linked to psychosocial support services, livelihood recovery programmes, youth employment initiatives, local development efforts and broader community recovery mechanisms. Such an approach would not only help address the enduring consequences of violence but also contribute to reducing the vulnerabilities that continue to fuel instability. By connecting justice, recovery and prevention, both the LCBC and the government of Cameroon can strengthen the relevance and sustainability of a regional transitional justice policy.

CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES HAVE CLEAR, ACTIONABLE VIEWS ON WHAT JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION AND RECOVERY SHOULD LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE.

The effectiveness of the LCBC's future transitional justice policy will depend not only on its substantive content but also on the extent to which conflict-affected communities are meaningfully involved in shaping its priorities and implementation.

Conflict-affected communities have clear, actionable views on what justice, reconciliation and recovery should look like in practice. Far from being passive recipients of externally designed interventions, victims, displaced persons, women's organisations, traditional authorities, community leaders and community members articulated a coherent set of priorities that should inform the design and implementation of the LCBC's regional transitional justice policy.

Endnote

- ¹ This *bicc policy brief* is based on qualitative field research conducted in Cameroon's Far North between March and April 2026. The project team conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with victims of conflict, women, traditional authorities, former associates of armed groups, civil society representatives, a lawyer, a journalist, a university professor and DDR practitioners in Maroua, Mora, Kolofata, Amchidé, Gancé and Tolkomari.

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