

REQUEST RESPONSE

Improving Resilience and Reintegration for School Kidnap Victims and their School Communities in Northern Nigeria

REQUEST SUBMISSION

FCDO Nigeria has requested a literature review to gather evidence-based best practices and explore potential avenues for coordination and collaboration with other development partners to address improving safety and community resilience in and around schools and reintegration of kidnap victims. The request encompasses four key questions:

1. What evidence exists – from Nigeria and elsewhere – about **the needs of former abductees** (e.g. psychosocial support, social and emotional learning) and the barriers preventing their successful reintegration into school and their communities?
2. What is being done and by whom to **increase school safety and community resilience** to attacks in Nigeria?*
3. What is being done and by whom to **facilitate the reintegration of former abductees** into communities and education systems in Nigeria?*
4. What evidence exists – from Nigeria and elsewhere – about **the effectiveness of existing approaches**? What examples are there of alternative approaches that could be adapted to the context of Nigeria/affected states?

*Responses to questions 1 and 2 include: (i) national/state level policies; (ii) state and NGOs implemented programmes/initiatives; (iii) community-level initiatives, and (iv) systems for coordinating these efforts.

KEY POINTS

- Abductions of students in Nigeria have occurred for political-ideological motivations (primarily by Boko Haram in the North East) and for economic motivations (primarily by 'bandit' criminal groups in the North West). Since late February 2024, several armed groups, both suspected Boko Haram and criminal groups, have abducted hundreds of people in Northern Nigeria. These abductions are the most recent sign of Nigeria's escalating security issue.
- The Nigerian government has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to violence-free schools by signing global declarations, creating national policies and plans, and even committing limited funding towards the implementation of some plans.
- However, it remains unclear to what extent these policies have been implemented and produced change. The evidence suggests the following factors may limit their success in increasing school resiliency:
 - Inadequate dissemination and lack of community awareness
 - Fragmentation and non-coordination of efforts
 - Policy proliferation and monitoring
 - Resourcing implementation
 - Persistent insecurity
- No explicit policies exist around reintegration, and in the few instances where reintegration concerns children, it is usually for children associated with armed groups and framed within Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives.
- Evidence shows greater emphasis seems to be placed on physical rather than psychosocial health despite rescued/released students having psychological problems and comorbidities of depression, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) being the most prevalent. When psychosocial service (PSS) has been present, it is only available in the immediate post-release period. Research advocates for long-term PSS and mental health assessment for returnees, not least because the trauma of kidnapping can increase the risk of future exploitation.
- Evidence suggests the following factors have influence on successful reintegration policies and programmes:
 - Explicit policies about the reintegration of returning abductees
 - Adequate resourcing and capacity-building
 - More evidence on the needs of abductees, and their schools and communities

INTRODUCTION

Amidst pervasive poverty, poor governance, endemic corruption, and resource competition, criminality in Nigeria is at epidemic proportions. Northern Nigeria has been worse hit, plagued by a herder-farmer conflict, the Boko Haram insurgency, and later terrorist activities of its splinter groups and other criminal activity in the form of cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, armed robbery, and village pillaging (Obasi, 2021). While kidnapping for ransom originated in the Niger Delta (Yakasai, Ayinla & Yakasai, 2022), its incidence has mushroomed in various parts of the country in the

past few years. Its scope has also expanded to include school children, a phenomenon that first drew global attention to the country's insecurity challenges with the 2014 abduction of more than 200 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno.

This report presents findings from a rapid review of primarily online resources, including few relevant academic literature around the kidnapping scourge in Northern Nigeria. Databases such as Google Scholar, Inter-agency Network for Educational Emergencies (INEE), UNESCO, Save the Children, the World Bank, Human Rights Watch, and the African Education Research Database were searched for variations of the terms *school kidnapping in Nigeria*, and *reintegration*, with the results bounded by the year 2010 and upwards. Results with abstracts or executive summaries were screened for texts that discussed the history or background of school kidnappings and the physical and psychosocial (PSS) experiences of abductees on the one hand; and the success or failures of kidnapping policies, practices, and interventions on reintegration on the other. After screening, 44 sources were included in this report comprising grey literature, academic articles, and newspaper articles. Sources also included those found from snowballing search results.

Scale and motivation of kidnappings in the North East

The 2014 Chibok abductions were a deliberate act by the leader of the insurgency group, Boko Haram, to command national, and possibly global, attention after the death of the group's founder in 2009, and as part of an ideological campaign against 'Western' education (or *Boko*) more broadly, and women and girls' education more specifically. These attacks on education were carried out alongside a political campaign against the Nigerian state through the destruction of key state infrastructure in the North East (primarily Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa), as well as violence against civilians perceived to hold a secular relationship with state authorities (GCPEA, 2018).

In addition to the death of more than 20,000 civilians and the displacement of more than 2 million (FRN & World Bank, 2015), estimates suggest that between 2009 and 2015, more than 600 teachers were killed and 19,000 displaced by Boko Haram (Human Rights Watch, 2016), with at least 500 girls and women abducted from school and more than 100 boys killed (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Other estimates suggest the group may have abducted up to 8,000 women and girls from schools and other settings during its protracted campaign (UNESCO-IIEP & World Bank, 2021) which continues to the present day. While boys and girls have both been victims of Boko Haram, and boys are usually among the children kidnapped in co-educational schools (e.g., among 300 children abducted at a primary school in Borno in late 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2016)), the group is particularly ideologically opposed to girls' or women's education with girls reportedly having been targeted for wearing trousers or clothing perceived not to adequately cover the female body (GCPEA, 2018, 2019). Moreover, the higher incidence of Boko Haram abduction of secondary school girls also suggests girls were desired for their reproductive (Oketch, 2021; Oriola, 2017), productive, and sexual capabilities due to evidence of the use of girls as sexual slaves (Hassan et al., 2018; UNESCO-IIEP & World Bank, 2021), incidences of sexual violence, forced conversion, and forced marriages (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

As such, while Boko Haram's campaign against schools and learners was both ideological and political, abductions also met the group's functional needs. Some abducted students may have been used for combat purposes, which is further discussed in the section on reintegration of returning students, in addition to Boko Haram's use of female abductees for sexual, productive, and practical day-to-day needs, enabling them to replenish their ranks through kidnappings.

Scale and motivation of kidnappings in the North West

School kidnappings in the North have continued after their Boko Haram peak of 2014-2015, with some estimates suggesting 49 school attacks and kidnappings between 2014 and 2022 in the North West (29 in Kaduna - 17 Kajuru LGA alone; 17 in Katsina, mostly at the secondary level), 11 in the North Central

(primarily Niger), and 5 in the North East (Mamedu, 2023). As this data demonstrates, these occurred predominantly in the North West, amidst a period of heightened abductions and criminality perpetuated by criminal groups commonly referred to as 'bandits'. Some analysts, for instance, suggest the North West experienced some 622 kidnapping-related incidents between 2019 and 2023, compared to 246 in the North East (ACLEd, 2024), though the proportion of school-related events is unclear.

The years 2021 and 2022 were particularly turbulent, with multiple school attacks and kidnappings in Kaduna and Katsina, the two states with the highest incidences of kidnappings. Within the first few months of 2021 (and following the kidnapping of more than 300 school boys in Katsina in December 2020), hundreds of school children were abducted by bandits whose primary criminal activity focused on abductions, as cattle rustling became less lucrative due to depletion of cattle stock and relocation of herders (ACLEd, 2024). Analysts suggest these spates of abductions were carried out with the motivation of ransom payments and the release of accomplices, among other aims (claims by Boko Haram of responsibility for the December 2020 kidnapping were reportedly contradicted by the release of the boys by a different criminal group) (Obasi, 2021).

Moreover, according to analysts, the bandits are primarily Fulani (few ethnically mixed) 'herder allies' who became autonomous. They are neither centralised nor militia-like, and inter-group rivalry is rife and sometimes fatal. Some group leaders have reportedly attributed their emergence to state neglect (of pastoral lives) and abuse (from security forces), eschewing an ideological rationale. Unlike Boko Haram's anti-state grievances manifested through targeting of infrastructure, these groups began by attacking, extorting, and pillaging rural communities. Their attacks have expanded to include schools because schools are poorly secured (few or no fences, poorly trained guards, lack of state security, etc.); school kidnappings attract national and international attention and outrage (thus forcing government to negotiate or concede more quickly); and school kidnappings are financially lucrative (government pays quickly in cash or in kind) (Obasi, 2021). It should be noted that some government officials repeatedly deny making ransom payments though gang leaders themselves have allegedly received ransom payments, while others have been conferred with titles as part of peace-making efforts (Punch Editorial Board, 2022).

Between February and March 2024, Northern Nigeria experienced another kidnapping surge, with estimates suggesting more than 300 school abductions in a series of kidnapping incidents in schools and local communities (ACLEd, 2024). One of these incidents, carried out at a displacement camp and targeting women and children, was reportedly committed by suspected Boko Haram members (Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad or JAS) in Borno, with other incidents carried out by bandits in the North West.

Kidnapping and the terrorism-banditry nexus

As the above demonstrates, the ideological underpinnings of school kidnappings in Northern Nigeria are no longer the exclusive rationale. Moreover, Boko Haram's internal fracture means that different breakaway groups, each with its own operational logic and ideology, are active in Northern Nigeria. An Al-Qaeda-linked group called Ansaru first broke away in 2012. The breakaway group reportedly has a presence in the North West and conducted its first terrorist attack in 2020 in Kaduna state (EUAA, 2021). In 2016, the remaining Boko Haram splintered into Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (JAS), and the Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP). Both JAS and ISWAP predominantly operate in the North East, though JAS reportedly also has bases in Niger state, while ISWAP has a stronghold in Lake Chad and is reportedly building the capacity of radical groups in North West Nigeria (EUAA, 2021). Recent analysis suggests JAS now controls much of ISWAP's territory in the Lake Chad region (Crisis Group, 2024).

These Boko Haram splinter groups, alongside other terrorist organisations, are reportedly increasingly active in the North West and potentially supporting bandits, prompting some analysts to suggest that the banditry in the region is actually disguised terrorism (Ojewale, 2021). For others, however, in addition to the banditry motivations highlighted earlier, i.e., ransom and release of accomplices, the surge in primarily school kidnappings in the North West in the first quarter of 2024 is also attributable to the low profitability of individual kidnappings; the opportunity to use Ramadan as a tool to extract government ransom payments; and retaliation for the killing of a bandit leader in February 2024 (ACLED, 2024).

The evidence therefore suggests a multiplicity of motivations for school kidnappings, with those carried out in the North West more likely to be underpinned by an economic rationale, rather than an ideo-political one. Ideo-political rationales are also often accompanied by functional motivations of abductors, e.g., sexual needs, reproductive desires, labour, etc. The extent to which these rationales change where bandits are supported by a terrorist organisation is less clear. Nevertheless, motivations appear to exist on an ideo-political – economic spectrum and may sometimes contain an element of both. Moreover, motivations are likely to be dynamic. What begins as one form of motivation may change with subsequent kidnappings. For example, according to a former Boko Haram soldier involved in the Chibok abductions, while the Chibok incident was fuelled by ideology and a desire to attract widespread attention, the group was able to monetise the attention, and the financial and in-kinds gains incentivised subsequent abductions (Adegoke, 2014).

The table below provides a simple typology of kidnappings in Northern Nigeria grouped according to the period during which they occurred, the motivating rationale, the groups executing the abductions, who they targeted, the location of abductions, the period of captivity, and the relevant reintegration efforts. Further explanation of the three approaches to reintegration is found in Section 3 of this report.

Table 1. Types of abductions in Northern Nigeria, 2010–2024

Period	2010 – present 2024:	2014–2015 (peak):	~2019*– present 2024:
Abduction rationale	Ideo-political; functional	Ideo-political; functional; economic	Economic
Classification	Boko Haram / breakaway group abductions	Older Boko Haram school abductions (limited evidence in more recent surges)	More recent school abductions by bandits
Target	Women, men, school aged boys and girls	Girls, boys, teachers, (school staff as collateral damage) in primary, secondary (limited in tertiary)	Girls, boys, in primary, secondary, and tertiary
Space of abduction	Communities	Schools	Schools
Period of captivity	Weeks; months; years	Weeks; months; years	Days; weeks; months (less common)
Reintegration effort	Potential participation in DDRR efforts	Unclear though evidence suggests Chibok girls received female DDRR with efforts to return to school	Limited reintegration (immediate PSS post release; some physical examination)

*One school ransom kidnapping incident reportedly occurred in Kaduna in 2017 (Mamedu, 2023).

1. What are the needs of former abductees?

Effects of abductions and kidnappings

Limited literature exists on school abductions for ransom, particularly the experience of captivity and the psychological effects this causes. One study of 27 school abductees from Kaduna found that they were exposed to the wild, forced to live in unhealthy conditions, and terrorised (Yakasai, Ayinla & Yakasai, 2022). Those rescued/released had various psychological problems and comorbidities of depression, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) being the most prevalent, irrespective of the duration of the captivity (Yakasai, Ayinla & Yakasai, 2022). Victims also struggled with issues of trust, independence, love, sex, and respect, among others. Not all 27 returned to school and among those who did, feelings of insecurity and tension persisted due to fears of a repetition of their previous ordeal. The study found no significant gender differences between boys and girls, though it suggested women may have longer-term mental health effects than men.

These findings align with evidence around the effects of kidnappings in general, i.e., not just school-related or for ransom. Reissman, Akhter, and Park (2019) suggest that kidnap victims experience both short and long-term psychological effects:

- Short-term effects typically manifest within the first month of freedom and include anxiety and post-traumatic symptoms such as physical tension, insomnia, hyperarousal, and recurring thoughts of the kidnapping incident.
- Long-term effects vary and may be exacerbated by injury and other forms of violence while in captivity. These include cognitive impairment including attention deficits, impaired short-term and long-term memory, dissociative episodes, and derealisation. Symptoms of anxiety may persist along with depressive symptoms such as irritability, anhedonia, and feelings of helplessness. Children, especially young ones, are more vulnerable to emotional and behavioural issues. This includes school truancy and regressive behaviour (i.e., less use of language, increased dependence on parents, and stubbornness), and stoppage of schoolwork and recreational activities.

Physical and psychosocial health needs

Despite the above, greater emphasis appears to be on ransom returnees' physical rather than psychosocial health. For instance, in the study of the 27 kidnapped children in Kaduna state, the authors found that although most of the children were taken to hospital for physical examinations, there was no structured reintegration process which considered children's mental health needs. This was also the case for the 15 students and 7 staff of the Federal University Gusau in Zamfara State who were abducted by terrorists in 2023 and rescued by security agents after 207 days. Upon being rescued, the returnees were profiled at the National Counter-terrorism Centre and examined by the Office of the National Security Adviser Medical Team. According to media reports, three of the returnees were treated for minor bruises and four were diagnosed with malaria and treated (Maishanu, 2024). While none of the females were found to have been molested and tested negative for pregnancy, no mention was made of any PSS support for both male and female returnees. Likewise, Mamedu's (2023) study of school kidnappings across Northern Nigeria, of both the older ideologically motivated as well as the more recent ransom-motivated, found a lack of sustained PSS support beyond what is provided in the immediate post-release period. The study advocates for a 'continuum of care' through long-term PSS and mental health assessment for returnees.

Increased long-term risks for abductees

During the 2021 surge of school kidnappings for ransom, international actors also sounded the alarm, drawing attention to the need to prioritise the provision of long-term measures to restore returnees'

physical and psychological wellbeing (OHCHR, 2021). For them, the trauma of the kidnapping compromises returnees' physical and psychological integrity, placing them at increased risk of exploitation, trafficking, and sexual, gender-based, and other forms of violence. They highlighted the example of the 344 abducted boys in Katsina in December 2020, citing the lack of transparency into the abductions as well as the rehabilitation provided for the children after their release some days later. Their example further stresses the need for reintegration, and not just return, regardless of the duration of captivity, to enable abducted school children to overcome stigma while building renewed social relations with families and communities.

Needs of peer students

Notably, wellbeing considerations exist not only for returnees. They relate to the peers of abductees who either witnessed or heard of attacks. They also relate to learners living in states which have experienced a high frequency of attacks (e.g. Kaduna) or who live in bandit-prone areas. Evidence suggests these learners, particularly those who attend boarding schools and thus live away from home, may also benefit from PSS. A study of kidnapping anxiety among public secondary school students in a 'bandit prone' area of the high-intensity Kaduna state suggests that attention should also be directed to addressing the anxiety among students who perceive or face real threats of school kidnappings (Jibrin, Adamu & Adisa, 2022). According to the study, trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy may be effective in reducing the anxiety levels of learners in high-frequency states or local government areas.

2. What is being done to increase school safety and community resilience?

International commitments and national policies for safe schools

Key overarching educational policies in Nigeria which implicitly guarantee children's right to violence-free education include:

- Constitution, of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999)
- Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004)
- National Policy on Education (2013)
- National School-based Management Policy (2016)
- National Policy on Inclusive Education (2016)
- Child Rights Act 2003, which specifically prohibits abductions and has been signed into law in all states except Gombe (Partners Nigeria, n.d.)
- National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools ([NPSSVFS](#)) (2021) The NPSSVFS is the national articulation of the country's diverse commitments to international efforts to eradicate violence in education.

Safe Schools Initiative

In 2014, Nigeria, along with the UN Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown, launched the €2.5 million two-year Safe Schools Initiative (December 2014 to 2016). This sought to rehabilitate school security infrastructure, including community-oriented security; transfer students to safe schools and provide trauma counselling; and provide education for IDPs in camps and communities. The initiative supported the transfer of more than 2,400 students - 70% of whom are female - to safer schools, and while available reports suggest transferred students received comprehensive support, it is unclear what this entailed (GIZ, 2016). Furthermore, there is an overall lack of evidence around the factors influencing the implementation or impact of this initiative.

Safe Schools Declaration (SSD)

In 2015, Nigeria endorsed the [Safe Schools Declaration](#) (SSD), and in 2019, the government ratified it, thereby declaring its obligation to implement programmes and policies to protect schools and learners. This action was followed by the National SSD Plan of Action 2018–2021 to guide the implementation of the SSD. To oversee the implementation of the SSD, an Inter-Ministerial Committee was established by the country's Education in Emergency Working Group (EIEWG), a group of more than 50 partner organisations created in 2012 to coordinate education response in the North East.

The 2018–2021 Plan of Action was later amalgamated with a policy on violence-free schools to produce the NPSSVFS (August 2021) which provides a holistic framework centred on four pillars: *safe learning facilities; prevention and response to violence against children in schools; school disaster management; and risk and resilience education* (FME, 2021, as cited in Baron & Calaycay, 2024). Later in 2021, a set of minimum standards was developed as a measurement tool for the implementation of the NPSSVFS. The tool assesses the following standards: *building of strong school systems; prevention of violence against children; mitigation of natural hazards; prevention of conflict; protection against everyday hazards; and assurance of safe school infrastructure* (FME, 2021, as cited in Baron & Calaycay, 2024).

Further signalling its commitment, Nigeria hosted the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration in 2021. This was preceded by the launch of the National SSD Plan of Action 2021–2023 seeking to enhance implementation at the local school and community levels. In 2023, a National Plan on Financing Safe Schools 2023–2026, alongside an implementation plan, was developed in consultation with national stakeholders. The plan led to the creation of the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Center (NSSRCC) whose objective is to monitor threats of attack – with the aim of preventing them – and respond effectively in the event of an attack (Save the Children, 2023).

The NSSRCC has a special school safety squad in both the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps and the Nigeria Police Force. However, evidence highlights persistent challenges with security response where lack of real time incidence reporting and response mechanisms potentially contribute to protracted durations of school attacks (Mamedu, 2023). An SSD Trainer's Guide and Participants' manual, launched in 2021 by the Ministry of Defence, is reportedly currently being used to train security agencies and human rights organisations (Save the Children, 2023). It is unclear the extent to which this manual has been harmonised with the SSD Plan of Action 2021–2023 or which specific security agencies are being (or have been) trained.

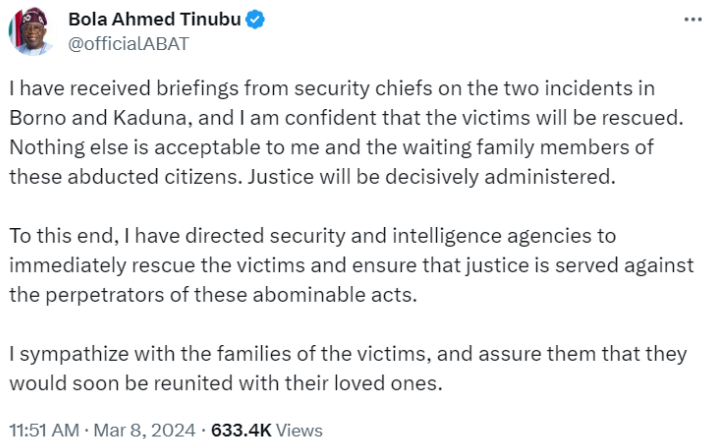
UNESCO School Safety Manual

In addition to these national policies, in 2018, UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICPA) published a School Safety Manual for teachers in Africa (UNESCO-IICBA, 2018). The report includes a section on 'attacks on the school and kidnapping' and notes that schools should provide psycho-social services in the event aftermath. It is unclear the extent to which this Manual is integrated into Nigeria's national SSD process, nor the SSD plan into this manual, as they were published at similar times.

Terrorism (Prevention) Act

At the political level, in 2022, the federal government passed the *Terrorism (Prevention) Act 2013 (Amendment) Bill* which criminalises the paying of ransom to criminals. This followed admonitions of state governments' ransom payments by then President Buhari; and the repeated declarations of the governor of Kaduna, the worst hit state in 2021, that he would not pay ransom even if his own son were kidnapped (Lere, 2021). Like his predecessor, the current President recently declared on Twitter his

intention to pursue military rather than economic or perhaps dialogic responses to school kidnappings:



As the data demonstrates, the government's position has little deterred the bandits, and school and other kidnappings continue unabated. Moreover, the federal stance is not shared by all state governments given reports of negotiations with bandits in Katsina, Niger, and Zamfara (Lere, 2021). The stance itself is not consistent with federal practice. For instance, the federal government is purported to have paid ransom, not only for the Chibok girls but also for the Dapchi girls who were kidnapped in 2018. Other analysis suggests that more than \$18 million have been paid by families and governments between 2011 and 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2022). The policy and posture of non-payment is evidently unpopular with families and relatives who want their loved ones back and not always tenable amidst national, and sometimes international, outrage.

Box 1. Community-based approaches to school resilience

Community-based approaches to raising awareness about the SSD have been highlighted as critical to its successful implementation (Save the Children, 2023), and thus for the prevention of violence against schools. In Nigeria, groups such as the Children's Parliament have been part of the SSD dissemination processes, though challenges remain with local community and school level dissemination.

Efforts to engage communities to prevent violence against education have been reported in other parts of West Africa. In Burkina Faso, local organisations are reportedly involved in monitoring and reporting processes, while civil society organisations regularly participate in discussions with their national SSD steering committee. In Mali, awareness raising efforts have been directed at armed groups and other actors. In both countries, international development partners such as Save the Children have supported the dissemination of the SSD and its guidelines in communities and with other conflict stakeholders. In Mali, this led to communities leading informal negotiations with armed groups which in turn led to the reopening of a few schools in the region of Mopti. Local civil society organisations, supported by development partners, worked closely with communities and were thus critical in these efforts.

These efforts fall within the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack's (GCPEA) continuum of community engagement for children's wellbeing (2014): community-initiated, community-implemented, community-inspired, and community-involved.

The GCPEA model also highlights the need for efforts to be contextualised as well as responsive to the dynamic needs of education in settings of attack. Its specific recommendations for community action to prevent or respond to attack include recruiting 24-hour guards, escorting children/teachers to school, creating (early) warning systems, involving local authorities in protection plans, condemning attacks publicly, and identifying temporary learning spaces (UNESCO-IICBA, 2018).

3. What is being done to facilitate reintegration of former abductees?

Across the region, including Nigeria, evidence is typically focused on reintegration efforts for ex-combatants, not school abductees specifically.

Government reintegration policies and programmes

The policy landscape around violence against schools focuses on prevention of, and protection from, violence but is relatively silent on reintegration. The search process revealed no explicit policies around reintegration, and while the NPSSVFS minimum standard of violence against children includes an assessment of the extent to which schools address concerns around children's wellbeing, it is not clear whether this includes reintegration of former abductees, particularly of abductions stemming from more economic rationales.

Conceptualisation of reintegration efforts

All rescued and returning children require reintegration, regardless of the motivation for their abduction, i.e., classification or type of returnee. However, one of the factors influencing the success of reintegration efforts, especially for kidnapped students, is how it is conceptualised. Reintegration, as currently understood and practised, responds to kidnappings underpinned primarily by ideological and political rationales, and where abductees are used or trained for combat among other uses. It is described as the process of "turning a child soldier back into a child" (Singer, 2005) and typically occurs as part of a Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) process which entails removing child soldiers or combatants from the combat environment, followed by physical and psychological rehabilitation and reintegration. Former child combatants are usually in poor physical condition and have psychological trauma as a result of their combat service and age (Ibid.). Their reintegration with families and the community is therefore expected to include sustained follow-up support.

At the international level, recognition of the reintegration needs of ransom abductees appears to be increasing, although the emphasis is still primarily on more ideologically motivated kidnappings and child victims of armed conflict more generally. For instance, in a recent report on Nigeria, the UN Security Council (2023, p. 4) underscores "the importance of sustainable, effective and gender-sensitive reintegration of all children released through family- and community-based reintegration programmes, as well as the provision of educational, health, mental health and PSS support programmes to all children affected by conflict". However, though the report mentions the expansion of Boko Haram-affiliated and splinter groups' activities in the North West, particularly around kidnappings for ransom, it appears particularly concerned with the use and violence against *children in armed conflict*. In addition, the report employs the term *children in armed conflict*, a descriptor which suggests abductees from the older form, ideo-politically motivated kidnappings.

Reintegration as part of DDR

Limited reintegration programmes exist for children, and these are typically for non-combatant children (Onapajo, 2020). In general, programmes are directed toward adult ex-combatants as part of DDR processes. In armed conflicts, DDR programmes assist conflict resolution and peacebuilding. They focus on transforming individual extremist beliefs and include strategies to prevent radicalisation and to successfully reintegrate into society. Such programmes aim to reduce the chances that combatants return to violence (Onapajo, 2020). Most literature on reintegration found for this research review focuses on ex-combatants and, to a lesser extent, on internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Adefowokan, Holler & Andrews, 2019; Adekola, Cirella & Brownell, 2024).

In the few instances where reintegration concerns children, it is usually children associated with armed groups. These include children who were kidnapped or who voluntarily joined armed groups (including Civilian Joint Task Forces) and engaged in combat and non-combat activities, including forced marriages (UNIWGDDR, 2006). In the context of this report, for simplicity, children associated with armed groups are classified under the older, Boko Haram style kidnappings which occurred within and outside schools (typically in communities), and primarily for ideological and political (ideo-political) reasons.

Operation Safe Corridor (OSC)

The main DDR programme in Nigeria is Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), established in 2016 to rehabilitate, reintegrate, and reconcile repentant, surrendered ex-combatants affiliated with Boko Haram and splinter groups, which may possibly include children from the first phase of Boko Haram abductions (CPS & OTI, 2021). Given the reconciliation element, the Nigerian DDR is typically referred to as DDDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation). The programme is led by the Office of National Security Advisor (ONSA)'s civilian office and co-led by the military.

The OSC combines vocational training, psychosocial therapy, and religious re-education and targets former combatants categorised as low risk and eligible for reintegration. The main OSC facility is located in Gombe state and serves men. The OSC programme includes two rehabilitation centres in Maiduguri. One is the Bulumkutu centre for women and children, which some suggest mainly focuses on women rather than children (Onapajo, 2023) and the other, Shokari, for men. Reports suggest that though women receive medical and psychosocial services (PSS) through Bulumkutu, their time at the centre is short, and they receive a more limited suite of support services compared with their male counterparts in the OSC (CPS & OTI, 2021). They typically end up in an IDP camp without the opportunity to graduate, something from which OSC male graduates reportedly derived a sense of credibility and achievement.

National DDDR Action Plan

In 2018, the government endorsed an official national DDDR Action Plan, and a recent evaluation suggests more than 853 persons have been reintegrated to date through the OSC (CPS & OTI, 2021). The DDDR Action Plan comprises four elements: legal and policy issues; technical support to the government; individual case management; and community-based reintegration and reconciliation.

Despite not all elements of the DDDR Action Plan applying to school-abductees – particularly those kidnapped for ransom – there is also no evidence on the extent to which the reintegration element is implemented or adapted to fit this group of abductees. Reintegration efforts for school abductees have only been reported for the rescued Chibok girls, albeit to varying degrees (Adegoke, 2024), and it is unclear how what is being implemented for the girls aligns with the reintegration element of the DDDR.

Reintegration of rescued Chibok girls

Reports suggest that a specific rehabilitation programme was set up for the first group of girls released in October 2016, and those released in May 2018 were included in the same programme which sought to address each girl's specific counselling needs, provide access to quality education, provide access to sexual and reproductive health care and sexual wellbeing, and enrol them in a skills acquisition programme (UN News Centre, 2017).

Evidence from reflective sessions or action learning group discussions with the girls, held as part of the government sponsored university preparatory programme at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), suggests that they valued the space and opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences as well

as traumatic experiences of captivity (Ogun et al., 2020). The study's finding of the importance of therapy (to address psychological trauma), the opportunity for course assessment, and culturally sensitive and responsive pedagogy holds implications for the reintegration and re-education of kidnapped school children. Nevertheless, such reintegration efforts appear largely unavailable to children kidnapped for ransom, particularly efforts coordinated or led by governments. Notably, one of the Chibok girls spoke about her struggles with the AUN curriculum (Adegoke, 2024), highlighting the need to accurately assess returnees' learning levels and provide appropriate learning support.

Community responses to reintegration

Community responses to reintegration arise through their responses to returnees within their community, particularly where they may have had little say in decisions to use their communities or camps as hosts. Among DRRR reintegrated ideo-political returnees, challenges exist around engagement with the receiving or host communities, especially concerning the acceptance of rehabilitated combatants or abducted women and children. Despite empathy from some community members, the general attitude is typically one of fear, suspicion, and discrimination because of the perception that radicalisation persists and poses a threat (Onapajo, 2020). However, reports suggest communities are more accepting of returnees perceived to have been coerced into joining insurgency groups and who did not engage in 'outright violence or destruction', while community trust appears to increase the longer returnees reside in the community (CPS & OTI, 2021, p. 4).

Stigma and social exclusion from family and the community are particularly severe for girls or women who return with children born from sexual violence amidst fears of their radicalisation in captivity (International Alert/UNICEF Nigeria, 2016). The situation at the community level is different for ransom returnees, given perceptions of their radicalisation are likely to be lower and while girls may experience sexual violence, their lower time in captivity makes it less likely that they return with children of 'bandits'. Limited evidence exists on the experiences of returned abductees, be it in school, in the community or at home.

Other community responses include the actions of parents and relatives of abductees themselves. For instance, while some state governments may be compelled to fund the release of large groups of abducted children, parents and relatives are usually left to find the means to pay for the release of their children, particularly those who do not make it to the news. Once children are released, parents and relatives take them to hospitals for check-ups and to provide support (Yakasai, Ayinla & Yakasai, 2022). Although children are reunited with their families, scholars suggest little awareness exists of the mental health implications of children's experiences of captivity, and relevant institutional mechanisms do not presently exist to meet children's PSS needs towards reintegration (Yakasai, Ayinla & Yakasai, 2022).

4. What is the effectiveness of existing approaches?

Factors contributing to the success or failure of resiliency policies

The array of committees, policies, and implementation guidelines signal a commitment to violence-free education in Nigeria. While evidence remains limited on the implementation and effects of these policies, research suggests the following factors may limit their success:

Inadequate dissemination and lack of community awareness

Some civil society groups have critiqued what they perceive as the exclusivity of knowledge about the SSD among select civil society organisations instead of wider public dissemination (Erunke, 2023). This is corroborated by evidence of the lack of community and school-level awareness of the SSD, even among members of School-Based Management Committees

(Mamedu, 2023). **Greater community and school level awareness is therefore required, as is the need to build adequate school and local capacities to move from awareness to implementation.**

Fragmentation and non-coordination

Policy proliferation poses the risk of fragmentation where the locus of implementation is unclear or where the same policies have competing requirements for implementation. This potentially limits the effectiveness of these policies given choices must be made about where, rather than how, to allocate resources. **Moreover, greater coordination is needed between national civil society groups, and between these groups, schools, communities, and security agencies to strengthen community resilience and to respond to incidents of violence.**

Policy proliferation and monitoring

While the NPSSVFS and the SSD are complementary, each has its own implementation framework: the NPSSVFS minimum standards and the SSD Plan of Action respectively. Without sufficient local school and community level capacities, implementation of these policies is likely to be obfuscated at these levels. **Sensitisation of the SSD and associated implementation plans should include clarity on the specific requirements of implementation and assessment, by which actors, and at which levels. Efforts must also be made to ensure consistency of assessment tools.**

Amongst the SSD's key objectives is the collection of data on attacks on learners and facilities as well as military use of schools during conflict. Reports suggest the existence of an incident reporting tool for violence on education in the North East, though this data is only shared with key stakeholders (Baron & Calaycay, 2024). The data is expected to be consistent with existing Education Management Information System (EMIS) codes to enable integration with Federal Ministry of Education data, and efforts are reportedly underway toward this end.

Alongside this, various guidelines exist around the type and form of data to collect on school safety/violence, e.g., the GCPEA's Toolkit for collecting and analysing data on attacks on education; the NPSSVFS' Implementation Guidelines on the collection of data on safety, security, and violence in schools; and the NPSSVFS Minimum Standards' data collection tools for internal and external assessment. To create consistency, the EiEWGN has reportedly established a technical working group to harmonise existing data collection tools and create a single data collection questionnaire which will be piloted and disseminated, with data fed into a publicly available national dashboard (Baron & Calaycay, 2024). The extent to which this tool is currently widely adopted is yet to be determined. For instance, it is unclear whether the July-December 2023 UNICEF monitoring exercise of the minimum standards (UNICEF, 2024) was carried out using this EiEWGN tool.

Resourcing implementation

Inadequate funding for implementation and SSD committees remains a real constraint (Save the Children, 2023), particularly given existing education sector needs in Nigeria. For instance, the National Plan on Financing Safe Schools 2023-2026 was costed at N144.8 billion Naira, with the federal government earmarking N13.6bn for 2023 and the rest sought from state governments, development partners, and the private sector (Tunji, 2022). It is unclear how much state governments and partners have allocated to date. A recent UNICEF (2024) monitoring exercise of the school level implementation of minimum standards in more than 12,631 schools across 10 states found that only 17% of monitored schools achieved a compliance level of 70%. **Funding deficiencies were particularly noted around school systems (infrastructure),**

everyday hazards, and prevention of conflict, with the report highlighting a critical need for funding for schools with the most urgent need.

Persistent insecurity

The country's persistent security challenges jeopardise the success of existing policies on safe or violence-free schools. Security challenges are themselves linked to broader social, economic, and political challenges whose pervasiveness will continue to create motivations for criminality and enable impunity. **Although one of the indicators of the NPSSVFS minimum standard on conflict is to 'continue education during armed conflict and situations of violence', local communities and schools are likely unable to do this without adequate protection from security agencies.**

Factors influencing the success of reintegration policies and programmes

Explicit policy around reintegration of ransom school abductees

Apart from the DDDR Action Plan, no specific plan exists for the reintegration of returned school abductees, particularly those kidnapped by bandits for ransom. An explicit policy and plan serve a symbolic purpose by publicly signalling the importance of the issue for this specific group of abductees. **Given current evidence about the lack of recognition of the issue at the community level, an explicit policy or plan may be further used as a sensitisation tool to help increase schools' and local communities' awareness of the need for reintegration for ransom abductees.**

Resourcing & capacity

Reports illustrate that lack of funding and capacity are challenging the success of the existing DDDR programme in Nigeria, leading to protests and, even worse, recidivism (ADF, 2024). Similar challenges of resources have been reported in relation to the reintegration programme for the released Chibok girls, particularly for girls with children born in captivity who report insufficient financial support for themselves and their children (Adegoke, 2024). While issues around the absence or insufficiency of individualised payments may be less relevant for ransom abductees, the overall lack of an integration plan for this group means that no budget currently exists or is sought for their reintegration.

Funding issues are, moreover, related to capacity. Not only the capacity to monitor and assess the effectiveness of relevant plans but also the capacity to provide the requisite PSS support services for abductees through mental health institutions and professionals. Capacity is likewise needed to train school administrators and teachers to support abductees upon return to school – for instance in trauma-informed pedagogy – as well as to support peers experiencing kidnapping anxiety in schools which have experienced kidnappings or are in high kidnapping frequency areas.

Insufficient funding poses a challenge for existing DDDR programming, and a reintegration plan will be needed to secure adequate future funding. Relatedly, investments are needed to build capacity both for monitoring and assessment as well as providing trauma-informed support services.

Further evidence around the needs of abductees

Limited evidence exists around the experience of ransom abductees. Ethically sensitive research is thus urgently needed around the experiences of abductees in captivity to inform their PSS

support and mental health needs upon return to communities and schools. The extent to which such support may need to be gendered or age-specific would be particularly critical to enhance the relevance and appropriateness of reintegration efforts. Research is also needed around returnees' experiences in their families, communities, and schools to inform how schools and communities may be best positioned to support abductees' mental health needs.

Likewise, urgent research is needed on the effect of ransom abductions on teaching and learning. For example, research suggests kidnappings have resulted in longer school completion periods; widespread withdrawals of children by parents; teacher resignations; compressed syllabi (due to a rush to complete in a shorter time span); loss of learning time (due to early school closures); and transportation challenges with school relocations (Mamedu, 2023). Greater evidence is required about the scale and scope of these effects on learning itself.

Additional research is needed to fill the evidence gaps around the experience of abductees in captivity; the experience of returning to their families, communities, and schools; and the effect of ransom abductions on teaching and learning overall.

CONCLUSION

Despite global and national efforts, Northern Nigeria's educational challenges have persisted and, in some cases, worsened, with the North West becoming the new frontier in violence against education. Unlike the North East's ideological and politically motivated school abductions carried out by Boko Haram, abductions in the North West are perpetrated by criminals (who may or may not be supported by Boko Haram and its breakaway groups) who exploit the region's weak security architecture to ravage villages, pilfer cattle, and abduct civilians, all for monetary gain. These groups have increasingly turned their gaze towards school kidnappings, incentivised by the reward of ransom paid by families and relatives who desperately want their children home, and governments who wish to calm outrage.

The Nigerian government has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to violence-free schools by signing global declarations, creating national policies and plans, and even committing limited funding towards implementing some plans. However, challenges remain with local community and school level awareness of and capacity to implement and evaluate the impact of these plans. Moreover, the ambitious plans require significantly greater resources than currently allocated or committed.

In addition to these and other challenges, reintegration of ransom school abductees remains virtually non-existent. Ransom abductees are typically held captive for shorter periods than more ideologically motivated abductees, e.g., the Chibok girls. As such, they are perceived to have limited to no need for psychosocial and mental health support.

The report highlights the need for explicit, visible commitment to the reintegration of ransom abductees, accompanied by adequate financing and greater evidence on the mental health and psychosocial; relational; and teaching and learning needs of abductees, and through dimensions of gender, age, ethnicity, etc.

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