



COVID-19 AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM in the Lake Chad Basin



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Place de la Grande Armée, B.P. 727, N'Djamena, Tchad
Commission du Bassin du Lac Tchad

AUTHOR:

Olawale Ismael

EDITOR:

Chika Charles Aniekwe. PhD

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Executive Summary

This Situational Brief is the third in a series of four rapid assessment briefs commissioned by the UNDP Regional Stabilization Facility for the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) region. It explores the impact of COVID-19 in relation to the risk of recruitment into violent extremism by looking at the known drivers and triggers of extremism in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) region as identified by the 'Journey to Extremism in Africa' report. This report analyzes the changes to these drivers due to COVID-19. Violent extremism here refers to religion-inspired groups that reject or are intolerant of existing religious, cultural and social systems and that use physical and psychological violence in pursuit of religious ideologies and goals. Given the recent history of the LCB region, the focus is on extremism inspired by certain violent interpretations of Islam by groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP.

COVID-19 cases levelling-off in the LCB Region

There is a remarkable slowdown in the rate of confirmed cases of COVID-19 for the entire LCB region and individual LCB territories. Far North Cameroon recorded a 245 percent increase in the period 30 July to 5 October 2020 versus a 7,050 percent increase in the 10 weeks previous to that period; and Borno recorded a 22 percent rise in cases compared with a 161 percent increase in the preceding 10-week period.

COVID-19 coincides with changes in conflict dynamic

The security situation in the LCB region began deteriorating in late 2019, a problem that further accelerated with the onset of COVID-19. Much of the increased fear and perceptions of insecurity were due to changes in tactics by the ISWAP faction of Boko Haram. The onset of COVID-19 coincided with increased attacks against local communities and the killing of Muslim civilians. This is a marked departure from ISWAP's 'Winning Hearts and Minds' (avoiding attacks and providing services to local communities) strategy.

COVID-19 worsens access to education and living conditions in periphery communities

Emerging indicators suggest that COVID-19 and its response strategies have worsened the access to education, quality of civic engagement and overall childhood experiences for the youth living in LCB territories. COVID-19 has affected primary and secondary schooling and religious (Arabic) education across LCB countries, and this has worsened existing challenges to education owing to years of violence and insecurity. The disruption of religious education, in particular, weakens resilience to violent extremism in the region. COVID-19 disruptions will have severe impacts on the socioeconomic and human development opportunities of young people in LCB territories, with long-term consequences.

COVID-19 amplifies misinformation and false religious narratives

The onset of COVID-19 provided opportunities for religious misinformation and false narratives about Islam and COVID-19 by extremist groups in the LCB region. The false narratives included conspiracies that COVID-19 was alien to Africa (LCB region), and that it was brought by outsiders, including aid workers. Boko Haram also has claimed that the virus was a punishment from Allah to the world for its sins; that its own followers, due to doctrine and beliefs, would be immune to infection from COVID-19; and that LCB communities were called to return to Allah by embracing Boko Haram's brand of authentic Islam. Extremist groups used misinformation about COVID-19 and mitigation strategies to undermine governmental messaging and public health measures; for instance, extremist groups claimed that public health measures were actually veiled efforts to prevent Muslims from practicing their faith, including congregational prayers, and pilgrimages to Mecca, and called for Muslims in the LCB region to return to congregational prayers and other group-based religious activities during COVID-19 lockdowns.

COVID-19 triggers new economic crises and the loss of livelihood in LCB territories

Economic slowdowns, including recessions, are the most visible and most serious impact of COVID-19 outside of health issues. The pandemic has forced

a downward revision of national budgets in Nigeria and Cameroon owing to the collapse of crude oil prices, with implications for the capacity to carry out developmental projects that support stabilization across the LCB region. COVID-19 restrictions disrupted the food chain, because they impacted the planting season (preparation of farmlands and the supply of seasonal farm labor by youth) across LCB communities and the seasonal movement of livestock from Chad and Niger to regional markets and cities in Nigeria. This led to increased food insecurity and the loss of livelihoods, especially for vulnerable groups such as youth, young girls and women. According to a recent survey in Diffa, Niger, 68 percent of host communities and 82 percent of internally displaced persons claimed that COVID-19 has affected their livelihoods. Similarly, the economic consequences of COVID-19 appear to impact Boko Haram/ISWAP by depriving them of income collected from levies on traders and farmers and from those involved in the illicit trade in fish and farming. This has diminished the resources and capacity Boko Haram/ISWAP has to meet promises to recruits, and it has increased hunger and disaffection among recruits due to reduced supplies.

COVID-19 weakens social cohesion

Emerging anecdotes point to the negative impact of COVID-19 and its response strategies on cohesion within and among communities and ethnic groups. There are risks and emerging signs of increased stigmatization of returning young people as carriers of the virus, or of at-home youth as prone to criminal activities and recruitment into extremism (e.g., Bulabulin and Ngarannam in Maiduguri); also facing stigmatization are communities (Gworza, Borno) with suspected COVID-19 cases that have been labeled 'red zones', resulting in a boycott of trading activities. In addition, the perceived favoritism in the distribution of government palliatives has increased inter-group tensions (e.g., the Kanuri and Shuwa people in Mafa, Dikwa and Gworza). The August 2020 survey of populations in Jere and Maiduguri metropolitan council (MMC) areas had 29 percent and 54 percent of respondents, respectively, affirming that local conflicts have increased due to COVID-19. There is also a risk that COVID-19-related restrictions (while they lasted) constrained sociocultural events and ceremonies, affected group activities and weakened cultural norms of mutuality and reciprocity. All of this has implications for social cohesion.

COVID-19 interrupts stabilization activities in the LCB territories

COVID-19 and response strategies have interrupted stabilization activities in the LCB through the suspension of the reconstruction of schools, clinics, houses and other types of infrastructure; the reintegration of rehabilitated former members of Boko Haram/ISWAP into their communities; and has halted the return of IDPs to their original communities. The pandemic also constrains national and local capacities for stabilization, hinders international support and disrupts planned community consultations and dialogue. Also, the combination of COVID-19 and changes in tactics by Boko Haram/ISWAP have slowed the return and resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons, especially in Borno, and impacted the reintegration of de-radicalized ex-combatants into society in Nigeria and Cameroon.

COVID-19 erodes trust and amplifies grievances against authorities

The pandemic clearly reduces the resources and capacity of governments to fulfill electoral promises and meet social contract obligations toward citizens and occasions human rights violations by security agencies in the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions. This damages trust, increases frustrations and generates grievances toward state authorities. It also appears to have eroded trust in government due to frustration with the disruptions to food distribution systems and the limited access to social services due to pandemic restrictions; in some cases, these matters have led to tensions and looting. This is most acute in situations in which some people were perceived to be privileged (accessing services), or the government's distribution of palliatives was perceived as unequal or politicized. For instance, an International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey found that around half of respondents in LCB territories in Nigeria had experienced disruptions to food distribution due to COVID-19 restrictions, and this generated anger in some communities. Public anger appears to have increased due to the perceived exploitation of the pandemic by incumbents in power to postpone elections (Niger, Cameroon and Chad), and the insensitivity and exploitation of COVID-19 and its restrictions by security agencies and the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) to arbitrarily detain and extort civilians. The diminished trust and anger against security agencies and the government, in general, triggered the '#EndSARS' protests and attacks (looting)

against government warehouses and other facilities in Nigeria, including Adamawa state, in October 2020.

Opportunities for advancing an agenda to prevent violent extremism (PVE)

The pandemic harbors opportunities to advance the goal of preventing violent extremism (PVE), as the weakened capacity of extremist groups to provide services gives authorities and aid agencies a window to rebuild trust and confidence with vulnerable persons. On the one hand, PVE interventions, including the structures and networks aimed at addressing root causes of violent extremism (e.g., marginalization, inter-communal conflict and inadequate access to services) could be invaluable resources for addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on local communities in the LCB region. On the other hand, the new risk assessments, mapping of new vulnerabilities, the activities of community networks and new collaborations forged in responding to COVID-19 constitute resources that could be adapted to strengthen PVE interventions. Some COVID-19 measures (reducing crowding in prisons and IDP camps) could also cut the risk of radicalization, and some of the lessons (criticisms) of using excessive force by security forces in enforcing COVID-19 could be the basis for rethinking the current militarized approach to de-radicalization and violent extremism (VE) in LCB countries.

Recommendations

UNDP (Regional Stabilization Facility and Regional PVE Project Team)

1. Undertake new risk assessments and context analyses to identify new vulnerabilities and vulnerable populations along with the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic to learn how those factors interact with the risks of recruitment into violent extremism. This will also be useful for addressing changes arising from COVID-19 in relation to the Regional Stabilization Strategy for the LCB.
2. Review regional PVE approaches and interventions to reflect COVID-19 operational challenges, opportunities and lessons as a way of increasing the delivery of PVE programs.
3. Integrate a PVE lens into COVID-19 response strategies, including how COVID-19 mitigation strategies affect the risk of violent extremism or strengthen the prevention of violent extremism in the LCB region.



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4. Develop and disseminate programming notes and guidance notes on how to apply a PVE-lens and conflict-sensitive approaches to COVID-19 strategies and, vice versa, to the governments of LCB territories and other stakeholders.

Other Stakeholders

This includes the LCB Commission, governments of LCB territories, civil society groups, aid agencies, donor partners, private sector organizations and members of the P3 countries (the United Kingdom, France, and the United States) working in the Lake Chad Basin area:

1. Reemphasize and monitor human rights-based approaches in COVID-19 responses and the militarized approaches to de-radicalization and PVE in LCB countries.
2. Renew commitments and trust in the state and in democratic governance, as well as civil society groups and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) by advancing service

delivery and the improved delivery of social contract obligations. This will reduce the capacity of extremist groups to use service delivery to tempt vulnerable persons.

3. Leverage existing networks of on-the-ground practitioners working to address drivers of violent extremism in marginalized areas for information spreading on COVID-19.
4. Work to integrate a PVE-lens into COVID-19 responses, and reassess the implications for other existing policy frameworks, including PVE, humanitarian operations and territorial plans of LCB territories. This will be crucial as governments, INGOs and other stakeholders in the LCB region work through reduced resources and new rounds of prioritization because of the economic crisis in the aftermath of COVID-19.
5. Support and promote community-led sensitization and awareness campaigns on COVID-19 in ways that also enhance PVE such as countering misinformation and false narratives and reducing intergenerational and intergroup tensions.
6. Promote increased transparency and accountability in the management and implementation of COVID-19 response strategies, including the distribution of palliatives to reduce misinformation, tensions and grievances that could compound the processes of radicalization into violent extremism.



1. Introduction

This Situational Brief, or report, explores the impact of COVID-19 in relation to the conditions that facilitate recruitment into violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) region. It looks at the potential and emerging nexus between COVID-19 and the risks of violent extremism during the pandemic, including the ways in which COVID-19 responses could potentially contribute to drivers of violent extremism, as well as constitute opportunities for advancing the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) agenda in the LCB region.

This Situational Brief is the third in a four-part series on the rapid assessment of COVID-19 and its impacts on critical aspects of the LCB Regional Stabilization Strategy (RSS).¹ The series traces and analyzes the evolution of COVID-19 and response strategies in the LCB territories of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria and provides initial rapid analysis and assessments of its implications for priority themes of the RSS and the mandate of the Regional Stabilization Facility (RSF).² In view of the evolving nature of COVID-19, the Situational Briefs are based on open source data and targeted interviews with stakeholders where possible.

As of October 2020, it has been more than six months since the index cases of COVID-19 were recorded and mitigation strategies were implemented in LCB territories in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Beyond the immediate health risks, the multidimensional impacts of COVID-19 and their long-term implications are yet to be fully manifested. In fact, the onset of COVID-19 and associated mitigation

strategies (especially lockdowns) coincided with major changes (deterioration) in the security situation in the LCB area due to changes in the strategies and tactics by the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency and counter-offensives by government troops under the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF).³

This Situational Brief builds on the UNDP 2017 seminal study (report) entitled, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa'; it explores the impact of COVID-19 in relation to the risk of recruitment into violent extremism by looking at the known drivers and triggers of extremism in the Lake Chad Basin region as identified in that study on extremism in Africa. It examines if and how COVID-19 triggers changes to drivers of extremism, such as family circumstances and education; religious ideologies; economic factors; and citizenship.⁴ The United Nations Secretary-General for instance, noted the potential for COVID-19 to create or exacerbate discontent with public institutions (further damaging state-citizens relations) if and where "citizens perceive that authorities were mishandling the response or were not being transparent about the scope of the crisis, and for the economic fallout to create "major stressors", especially in fragile and less-developed countries.⁵

Violent extremism is a broad phenomenon and varies across contexts; here, the focus is on religion-inspired groups that reject, or are intolerant of, existing religious, cultural and social systems, and use physical and psychological violence in pursuit of religious ideologies and goals.⁶ Given the recent history of the LCB region,

1 The key priorities of the RSS as contained in the pillars of intervention include political cooperation; security and human rights; DDR and the reinsertion and reintegration of persons associated with Boko Haram terrorists; humanitarian assistance; socioeconomic recovery and environmental sustainability; education, learning and skills development; prevention of violent extremism and the building of peace; and the empowerment and inclusion of women and youth. See AU/LCBC (2018), Regional Strategy: Lake Chad Basin Region, pp. 24-44, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/regional-stabilisation-recovery-and-resilience-strategy-rss-pdf>

2 The four-part series focuses on the impacts of COVID-19 on governance, resilience, violent extremism and sexual and gender-based violence, respectively.

3 ISWAP denotes Islamic State West African Province.

4 According to the 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', "Political socialization [is therefore] the process, mediated through various agencies of society, by which an individual learns political relevant attitudinal dispositions and behaviour patterns. These agencies include such environmental categories as the family, peer group, school, adult organizations, and the mass media". See UNDP, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', UNDP-RSC, Addis Ababa, 2017, p. 18. <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/>

5 United Nations Security Council (UNSC), 'July 2020 Monthly Forecast: West Africa and the Sahel', Security Council Report, New York, NY, 30 June 2020, p. 7. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-07/west-africa-and-the-sahel-4.php>

6 Ibid, p. 19.

the focus will be on “violent extremism inspired by certain distorted interpretations of Islam which are, in reality, attacks on Islam itself.”⁷ This would cover the ideologies and activities of violent jihadi groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP.

In exploring the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism in LCB territories, the Situational Brief reviews the intersection between COVID-19 and the security situation from March through September 2020. As well, the brief analyzes potential and emerging implications of COVID-19 for violent extremism based on the factors highlighted in the *Journey to Extremism*. It reflects on how COVID-19 impacts stabilization activities and compounds the risks of violent extremism in general. It also explores the opportunities for advancing PVE in COVID-19 responses and vice-versa. It ends with recommendations for the UNDP (Regional Stabilization Facility and the Regional PVE Project Team) and other stakeholders about how to respond to and recover from COVID-19 in ways that are both sensitive to and complementary of PVE objectives.

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7 UNDP, 'Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa: A Development-led Approach', 2018, p. 7.
<https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/library/reports/preventing-and-responding-to-violent-extremism-in-africa--a-deve.html>

2. Update on COVID-19 and Mitigation Strategies in LCB Region

In line with the broad trends of COVID-19 cases in most African countries, the reported cases and deaths from the pandemic in LCB territories are leveling-off as of early October 2020. As indicated in Table 1 below, the rate of confirmed cases for the entire LCB region and individual LCB territories has been slowing remarkably. Cumulatively, the LCB region recorded 1,761 cases as of 5 October which is a 60 percent increase over the 1,100 cases recorded at the end of July 2020. The rate of increase slowed from the 248 percent in the previous 10-week period (21 May – 30 July).⁸

A similar pattern is observable in LCB territories for which there is comparable data; for instance, Far North Cameroon recorded a 245 percent increase in the period 30 July- 5 October versus a 7,050 percent increase in the previous 10 weeks; and Borno recorded a 22 percent rise in cases compared with a 161 percent increase in the preceding 10-week period. Moreover, the LCB territories in Nigeria recorded no new cases for the first five days of October 2020.⁹

The response strategies across the LCB territories have changed over time; the curfews, closures of borders, suspensions of markets and public gatherings, and national lockdowns introduced at the start of April were progressively eased beginning in May 2020. Officially, social distancing, handwashing, face masks, restrictions on vehicle occupancy, testing procedures, and other

personal hygiene measures are still being implemented in varying degrees in LCB territories.¹⁰

In addition to government-led responses, the United Nations, through the relevant country offices, launched initiatives to provide financial, logistical and programmatic support to national response efforts. For instance in Nigeria, the One Un COVID-19 Response Plan was launched in March 2020 to “coordinate and align UN’s efforts and leverage partnerships with the government, development partners, foundations, CSOs and the private sector to increase the availability, accessibility, affordability, adaptability and acceptability of COVID-19 response interventions in Nigeria.”¹¹ The initiative included representations from the relevant government agencies, the United Nations agencies and donor agencies, and it provided support to the national response effort (Presidential Taskforce). The range of support includes financial allocation from the United Nations COVID-19 Response Basket Fund, support with analytics (through the UNDP Knowledge Hub Team), the mobilization of resources¹² and the development of accountability tools for procurement processes.¹³ In particular, the UNDP injected a conflict sensitivity (PEV-lens) approach into policy debates and programming processes, as evidenced by its four policy briefs on the pandemic in Nigeria in April-May 2020.¹⁴ For instance, one of the briefs explored the potential impact of the pandemic and its response strategies on the Northeast,

8 It is vital to emphasize that the individual and collective data for LCB territories may not reveal the full picture of COVID-19 cases in the LCB region, especially with limited testing capacities and question marks over the integrity of official data.

9 Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), ‘COVID-19 SITUATION REPORT SITUATION REPORT 220’, 5 October 2020, <https://ncdc.gov.ng/diseases/sitreps/?cat=14&name=An%20update%20of%20COVID-19%20outbreak%20in%20Nigeria>

10 For guidelines in Cameroon, for example, see <http://covid19.minsante.cm/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/point-de-presse-du-23-juillet-2020.pdf>

11 <https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/coronavirus/support-to-national-response.html>

12 For instance, as of July 2020, the One UN COVID-19 Response Basket Fund, managed by UNDP, had mobilized US \$63.8 million, including US \$54.6 million from the European Union (EU); US \$2.2 million from UN agencies; US \$4 million from the private sector (Dangote US \$ 3.8 million and AP Maersk US \$ 0.2 million); US \$0.4 million from the Government of Switzerland; US \$ 1 million from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; US \$400,000 from the MacArthur Foundation; US \$1,050,000 from Government of Norway. See <https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/coronavirus/support-to-national-response.html>

13 According to the UNDP, “as of June 2020, the Project Board had allocated US \$ 42,767,450.16 for response interventions to be undertaken by Participating UN Organizations (PUNOs) covering the following areas: Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE); Strengthening State-level Operational Capacity in Surveillance, Infection Prevention, and Control; Building Capacity of Healthcare Workers in Case Management and strengthening hospital capacities to respond; and, engagement with Civil Society Organizations to reverse the negative impact of COVID-19 on equal access to essential health services”. See <https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/coronavirus/support-to-national-response.html>

14 The briefs include those assessing the country-level socioeconomic implications, impact of lockdown policies on poverty and well-being, citizens’ perceptions and the secondary impacts of COVID-19, and the potential impacts on the Northeast region.

highlighting ways it could impact peace and security, IDP camps and livelihood and food security.¹⁵

As of November 2020, empirical data indicate that daily lives, including social gatherings, religious services and trading activities are getting back (almost fully back) to normal across the LCB region. The easing of lockdowns was informed by socioeconomic exigencies, including access to food, livelihoods and social services.¹⁶ As

analyzed in the Situational Brief on Resilience, national and territorial governments and non-governmental bodies initiated socioeconomic protection measures, including the distribution of food, cash transfers and the suspension of payment for utilities to cushion the effects of COVID-19 mitigation strategies. Section 3 of this report explores the impact of these interventions on the risk of violent extremism.

TABLE 1:
COVID Cases and Deaths in LCB Territories May-Oct 2020.¹⁷

Country	Territory	COVID-19 as of 21 May 2020 ¹⁸		COVID-19 as of 30 July 2020		COVID-19 as of 5 Oct 2020 ¹⁹	
		Cases	Deaths	Cases	Deaths	Cases	Deaths
Cameroon	Far North	2		143	6	494	10
	North	12	1	132	13	192	13
Chad	Lac	4		N/A ²⁰	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Hadjer-Lamis	0		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Niger	Diffa	6		6	0	6	0
Nigeria	Borno	235	24	613	35	745	36
	Yobe	32	1	66	8	76	8
	Adamawa	26	1	140	9	248	17

15 UNDP, 'The Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: Potential impact on the North-East - Brief 2', 3 April 2020.

<https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/library/the-covid-19-pandemic-in-nigeria--potential-impact-on-the-north-.html>

16 Telephone interview with a resident of Maiduguri, Borno, 30 September 2020.

17 Data for this data is from a variety of sources, including Africa CDC (<https://africacdc.org/covid-19/>); Nigeria CDC (<https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/>); and Chad CDC (<https://www.covid19-tchad.org/>).

18 The data for Far North and North regions in Cameroon were as of 22 July 2020. See 'Cameroon: Rapport de situation COVID-19', No. 40, Période du 16 au 22/07/2020, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/cmr_covid19_sitrep40.pdf

19 Data for LCB territories in Cameroon are for the period up to 23 September 2020. See "Cameroon: Rapport de situation COVID-19", No 49 Période du 17 au 23/09/2020, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/cmr_covid19_sitrep49_.pdf

20 This means data is not available.

3. COVID-19 and Changes in Conflict Dynamics

The security dynamic in the LCB region continues to be dominated by the Boko Haram insurgency. The two factions of Boko Haram, namely, the Shekau faction (based in the Sambisa Forest) and the ISWAP faction (based in and around Lake Chad), continue to engage in asymmetrical warfare with state forces, exercising control over remote villages and islands of Lake Chad and filling gaps in service delivery to cultivate civilian support.²¹

Globally, the net effect of COVID-19 on the quantity of security events and political violence broadly is inconclusive; extant data indicate a 10 percent decrease in the number of violent events, a 30 percent drop in the number of demonstrations and increases in COVID-19-related violence against civilians by state forces in the months after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.²²

However, COVID-19 does have context-specific, qualitative impacts on security in the LCB region.²³ As noted in the previous Situational Briefs on Governance and Resilience, the deterioration in the security situation in the LCB region that had started in late 2019 further accelerated with the onset of COVID-19. Much of the increased fear and the perceptions of insecurity were

due to changes in tactics by the ISWAP faction of Boko Haram. The onset of COVID-19 coincided with increased targeting of military convoys and facilities, government activities, the operations of local and international aid and humanitarian agencies and attacks against local communities by ISWAP faction.

The recorded instances of increased targeting of military convoys and facilities include the attack against a Chadian military base in Boma on 23 March (killing 98 soldiers); an attack against a Nigerian military convoy in Gorgi, Yobe State, on 24 March, (killing 47 soldiers);²⁴ among other instances. Some of the high-profile attacks against humanitarian agencies include the 13 June 2020 attacks against humanitarian facilities in Goni Usmani Village, Ngala and Monguno (killing over 120 people),²⁵ and an attack against a United Nations helicopter in Damasak (Borno).²⁶ The increased targeting of civilians has resulted in attacks in Gubio, Nigeria (killing 81 civilians) in early June²⁷ and Gworza in August (killing 75 civilians)²⁸; and attacks against civilians in Nguetechewe, Mora and Goldavi in Far North, Cameroon in early August (killing 46 civilians in total).²⁹ These attacks triggered new waves of displacements, especially as the targeted communities

21 International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram', Africa Report No 275, 21 May 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/275-returning-land-jihad-fate-women-associated-boko-haram>

22 Pavlik, Melissa, 'A Great and Sudden Change: The Global Political Violence Landscape before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/04/a-great-and-sudden-change-the-global-political-violence-landscape-before-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/>. See also, de Bruijne, Kars, and Bisson, Loïc, 'States, Not Jihadis, Exploiting Corona Crisis in West Africa', ACLED, 28 May 2020, p. 2, <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/28/states-not-jihadis-exploiting-corona-crisis-in-west-africa/>

23 For instance, based on ACLED data, the UNDP estimates that Nigeria recorded 154 incidents and 830 fatalities in Jan-June 2020. The number of attacks from violent extremist groups during the first half of the year has been adjudged deadlier in comparison to the same time period in 2014, and the fatalities recorded have been the highest since its peak year in 2015. At the same time, and against the backdrop of COVID-19 and restrictions in movement and perhaps due to security forces' capacities stretched thin, defensive attacks against BH have significantly decreased. See UNDP, 'PVE Regional Project: Bi-Annual Narrative Report: Nigeria,' Jan-June 2020, p. 2.

24 UNDP, 'COVID-19 and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Africa', 14 April 2020 (internal document).

25 UNSC, 'July 2020 Monthly Forecast: West Africa and the Sahel', 30 June 2020, p. 13. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-07/west-africa-and-the-sahel-4.php>

26 UNDP (2020) PVE Regional Project: Bi-Annual Narrative Report: Nigeria Jan-June 2020, p. 3. Council on Foreign Relations (2020), "ISWA's Recent Attacks Could Signal a New, Deadlier Approach in Nigeria", 19 June 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/iswas-recent-attacks-could-signal-new-deadlier-approach-nigeria>

27 Council on Foreign Relations, 'ISWA's Recent Attacks Could Signal a New, Deadlier Approach in Nigeria', 19 June 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/iswas-recent-attacks-could-signal-new-deadlier-approach-nigeria>

28 Abu-bashal, A., 'Boko Haram kills 75 elders overnight in Nigeria', Voice of America (VOA) News 27 August 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/boko-haram-kills-75-elders-overnight-in-nigeria/1954534>

29 Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Cameroon: Boko Haram Suicide Bombers Strike Displacement Site', 25 August 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/25/cameroon-boko-haram-suicide-bombers-strike-displacement-site>. See also, Kindzeka, E., 'Boko Haram Attacks Leave Cameroon Villagers in Need of Aid', VOA News, 8 September 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/boko-haram-attacks-leave-cameroon-villagers-need-aid>

were mostly hosting IDPs; for instance, the attack on Mora displaced over 7,000 civilians.³⁰

The kidnapping and killing of Muslim civilians represents a major departure from ISWAP's 'Winning Hearts and Minds' strategy targeted at the provision of security and social services to Muslims, in particular, and other local communities in areas under its control.³¹ Some of the possible reasons for the change in tactics include retaliation for communities that pushed back against ISWAP or vigilantes working with government forces, changes within ISWAP's leadership to a more hard-line approach, including an escalation in the use of brutality against uncooperative communities, and a show of force stratagem to vitiate the government's claim of battlefield successes against the group.³²

Reports also appear to indicate the Boko Haram/ISWAP effort to widen the conflict theater by expanding to other areas, including urban centers, in Nigeria. For instance, in September 2020 the Nigerian Customs Services released a report that indicated the establishment of new camps by Boko Haram in areas around Abuja (capital city) that were preparatory to launching attacks.³³ The United States also flagged the issue, "Al-Qaeda and ISIS are looking to make an inroad into Southern Nigeria...Al-Qaeda has started penetrating the north-western part of the country."³⁴

Overall, while the frequency of attacks has hardly increased, the patterns of violence, kidnapping and strategic strikes point to calculated advances to exploit opportunities and vulnerabilities presented by COVID-19.³⁵ Extremist groups sought to use COVID-19 to validate their narrative and enhance

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their position as alternative providers of services in LCB territories. In fact, ISWAP, through an editorial in Isil central's biweekly Arabic language magazine, celebrated recent attacks in the LCB region, noting that COVID-19 was an opportunity to expand its activities by exploiting the economic downturn, diverting the attention of governments and reducing the capacity of governmental and non-governmental agencies to deliver services, and increasing fragility across communities in the LCB region.³⁶

30 Relief Web, 'Cameroon: International NGOs call for immediate scale-up of the humanitarian response amid soaring needs in the Far North Region', 24 September 2020,

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ingos_statement_release_on_the_situation_in_the_far_north_of_cameroon-1.pdf

31 Council on Foreign Relations, 'ISWA's Recent Attacks Could Signal a New, Deadlier Approach in Nigeria', 19 June 2020,

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/iswas-recent-attacks-could-signal-new-deadlier-approach-nigeria>. See also UNDP, 'PVE Regional Project: Bi-Annual Narrative Report: Chad', Jan-June 2020, p. 4.

32 Council on Foreign Relations, 'ISWA's Recent Attacks Could Signal a New, Deadlier Approach in Nigeria', 19 June 2020,

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/iswas-recent-attacks-could-signal-new-deadlier-approach-nigeria>

33 This Day, 'FG on Red Alert as Boko Haram Lays Siege on Abuja', 6 September 2020,

<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/09/06/fg-on-red-alert-as-boko-haram-lay-siege-on-abuja/>

34 Vanguard, 'ISIS, al-Qaeda planning to penetrate Southern Nigeria, US warns',

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/08/isis-al-qaeda-planning-to-penetrate-southern-nigeria-us-warns/>

35 Dahir, I., 'Extremism, Displacement, and COVID-19 in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin', IPI Global Observatory 1 September 2020, p. 1.

<https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/09/extremism-displacement-covid-19-sahel-lake-chad-basin/>

36 Bukarti, B., 'A deadly alliance: coronavirus makes Boko Haram more dangerous than ever', The Telegraph, 7 June 2020,

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/deadly-alliance-coronavirus-makes-boko-haram-dangerous-ever/>

4. COVID-19 and the Risks/Drivers of Violent Extremism

a. COVID-19 worsens living conditions and quality of life in periphery communities

The 'Journey to Extremism in Africa' report concluded that family circumstances, childhood experiences and the limited education available to young people living in periphery communities, often borderlands that have experienced generations of neglect and marginalization across sociopolitical and economic spheres, has allowed the narratives of extremist groups to take root. Persons from such remote communities tend to lack a basic education, and literacy and also demonstrate a low level of civic engagement from childhood, factors that significantly increase their susceptibility to recruitment.³⁷

Emerging events suggest that COVID-19 and its response strategies have worsened the access to education, quality of civic engagement and overall childhood experiences for young persons in LCB territories.³⁸ For a start, COVID-19 has disrupted primary and secondary schooling across LCB countries, including an estimated 46 million in Nigeria alone.³⁹ The COVID-19 restrictions also affected religious education, as mosques and madrassas (Arabic schools) were closed between April and June 2020. This could contribute to poor theological knowledge of Islam, a situation that increases the risk of extremism. COVID-19-related disruptions compound existing challenges with education, owing to years of violence and insecurity; Boko Haram's rejection of western education meant targeted attacks against schools, and the displacement of communities disrupts education, notwithstanding the best efforts of local and international humanitarian agencies. For instance, the United Nations has stated, "the protracted conflict in the north-east [Nigeria] has had devastating impacts on education. From 2009

until December 2018, 611 teachers were killed and 910 schools damaged or destroyed. More than 1,500 schools were forced to close and some 4.2 million children in the north-east are at risk of missing out on an education."⁴⁰

And on the other hand national lockdowns, including school closures, "will have a severe impact on young Africans, with long-term consequences. Female students in particular are at risk; for many of them, a few months' absence from school could mean the end of their education."⁴¹ It is important to note that educational institutions across LCB territories have been shut since April 2020, with staggered resumptions planned for October 2020. The change in tactics by ISWAP since March 2020 also has hindered the educational prospects of young people in the LCB. Recent attacks on humanitarian hubs in Monguno and Ngala (in Nigeria) and Mora (in Cameroon) triggered a new wave of displacement, including among children. The United Nations also notes that some schools in LCB territories are reported to have been repurposed as markets, military bases, camps for IDPs and, most recently, as isolation centers for COVID-19 victims.⁴²

b. COVID-19 intensifies misinformation and false narratives

The suddenness and associated confusion at the onset of COVID-19 provided opportunities for religious misinformation and false narratives about Islam and COVID-19 as pushed by extremist groups in the LCB region. The false narratives include conspiracies that COVID-19 was alien to Africa (LCB region), and that it was brought by outsiders, including aid workers. This view was particularly rife in April 2020 when the index case in the LCB was reported among international aid

37 UNDP, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', 2017, pp. 5 and 33.

38 UNSC, 'Report of the Secretary-General: Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel', S/2020/585, 24 June 2020, p. 5, <https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sgreportwestafrica.pdf>

39 Vanguard, 'UN urges Nigeria to prioritise school safety, learners' protection', 8 September 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/09/un-urges-nigeria-to-prioritise-school-safety-learners-protection/>

40 Ibid. See also United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Education at risk for more than 3.5 million school-aged children in the Lake Chad Basin', press release, 3 September 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/wca/press-releases/education-risk-more-35-million-school-aged-children-lake-chad-basin>

41 UNDP, 'COVID-19 and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Africa', UNDP internal document, 14 April 2020.

42 Vanguard, 'UN urges Nigeria to prioritise school safety, learners' protection', 8 September 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/09/un-urges-nigeria-to-prioritise-school-safety-learners-protection/>

workers in Borno, a situation that created apprehension among aid agencies and displaced persons in camps.⁴³ Boko Haram/ISWAP used COVID-19-related misinformation to undermine governments' messaging and public health measures and to reinforce its own extremist ideologies. For instance, the Shekau faction of Boko Haram claimed in an April 2020 video message that the virus was a punishment from Allah to the world for its sins, except for followers of the group who, due to their doctrine and beliefs, will not be affected and will be saved from infection by COVID-19. It also branded public health measures as veiled efforts to prevent Muslims from practicing their faith, including congregational prayers and pilgrimages to Mecca.⁴⁴ Shekau also claimed that the only cure for COVID-19 was a return to Allah (Boko Haram's brand of authentic Islam) and the return to congregational prayers and other religious activities.⁴⁵

The religious misinformation was amplified by the coincidence of COVID-19 restrictions and the Islamic Holy Month of Ramadan (April-May 2020). COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings, including congregational worship in mosques during Ramadan, denied the predominantly Muslim populations across the LCB region the spiritual benefits of group activities. The restrictions negatively impacted the theological education of the Muslim population, and historical antecedents in the LCB region and experiences from other hotspots of extremism suggest that low religious (theological) literacy increases vulnerability for violent extremist ideologies.⁴⁶

The impact of religious misinformation cannot be underestimated, as most of the local population in

the LCB during the first three months of the pandemic rejected and resisted governments' public health messages and awareness campaigns about COVID-19.⁴⁷ For instance, Niger experienced major public protests by Muslims in April 2020 over COVID-19 restrictions, including overnight curfews and the ban on congregational worship.⁴⁸ Also, the Deputy Governor of Borno lamented in May 2020 that "...despite the increasing rate of spread of COVID-19, many people still disobey the social distancing rule by participating in burial ceremonies and observing congregational prayers."⁴⁹

c. COVID-19 triggers new economic crises and the loss of livelihoods in the LCB communities

Economic factors related to poverty, unemployment, underemployment and the loss of livelihoods are cross-cutting drivers of recruitment (as sources of frustration) into violent extremism in Africa. These drivers can be especially acute in the poorest and most deprived regions such as LCB territories. Vulnerable individuals are drawn to extremist groups by the narratives of economic injustice and promises (sometimes partially fulfilled) of salaries, access to food and other pecuniary advantages.⁵⁰

Economic slowdowns, including recessions, are the most visible and most serious impact of COVID-19 outside of health issues. The immediate impacts of the pandemic include the disruption of agriculture, trade and commercial activities, and drops in the flow of remittances and investment.⁵¹ This triggers the collapse of global demand and commodity prices, the loss of jobs and livelihoods, the loss of revenues for

43 Carsten, Paul, 'UPDATE 1-Aid worker with coronavirus dies in Nigeria's troubled northeast', Reuters, 20 April 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-nigeria-msf/update-1-aid-worker-with-coronavirus-dies-in-nigerias-troubled-northeast-idUSL8N2C82F5>

44 Bukarti, Audu, 'How Is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 20 May 2020, <https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>

45 Bukarti, B., 'A deadly alliance: coronavirus makes Boko Haram more dangerous than ever', The Telegraph 7 June 2020.

46 UNDP, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', 2017, p. 51.

47 Surveys of local communities in LCB territories in July-August suggest that most inhabitants had accepted (believed) in the scientific explanations of COVID-19. See survey by OKAPI Consulting, 'Conflicts and COVID-19 in Niger, Nigeria, Chad: July-August 2020.

48 Garda World, 'Niger: Residents in Niamey protest COVID-19 measures', 20 April 2020, <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/334861/niger-residents-in-niamey-protest-covid-19-measures-april-17-19-update-3>

49 The Cable, 'Our people don't believe COVID-19 is real, says Borno deputy gov', 3 May 2020, <https://www.thecable.ng/our-people-dont-believe-covid-19-is-real-says-borno-deputy-gov>

50 UNDP, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', 2017, pp. 5 and 59.

51 The UNECA estimates that COVID-19 could trigger a fall in remittances to West Africa and the Sahel from \$35.5 billion in 2019 to an estimated \$27.3 billion in 2020, and also reduce income from tourism by 25 percent (as was the case during the Ebola crisis), or even reach a drop of 50 percent. See UNSC, 'Report of the Secretary General: Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel', S/2020/585, 24 June 2020, p. 5, <https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sgreportwestafrica.pdf>

businesses and governments and even declines in the flow of development aid and assistance. This has direct and multiplier effects on the economic conditions of individuals and communities in the LCB region with implications for the risk of recruitment into extremism.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimates that due to COVID-19, African countries will experience an average loss of public revenue of 5 percent, a fall in the GDP of 1.4 percent and a contraction of the economy of up to 7.8 percent.⁵² Another estimate suggests a 35 percent drop in trade over 2019 levels, amounting to a loss of US\$270 billion; as well, COVID-19 worsens the plight of 80 million young people who are in vulnerable employment situations and may make life more difficult for an additional 110 million across Africa who do not contribute to the economy.⁵³ The pandemic has forced a downward revision of national budgets in Nigeria and Cameroon owing to the collapse of the price of crude from US\$60 to less than US\$30 per barrel. Cameroon reduced its initial budget by 11 percent or CFA franc 542.7 billion in absolute terms,⁵⁴ and Nigeria reduced its 2020 budget by N71.5 billion and reduced the overhead and capital costs of agencies (except security and health institutions) by 17 percent and 25 percent, respectively.⁵⁵ The World Bank notes that Chad's economy is projected to decline sharply from 3.2 percent in 2019 to 0.8 percent in 2020 due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.⁵⁶

The grim economic outlook is expected to hit the poorest and most disadvantaged regions, such as the LCB, the hardest due to preexisting multidimensional poverty, government neglect and successive socioeconomic shocks. The loss of revenue by national

governments and the broader economic impacts of COVID-19 have major implications for the governments and communities in the LCB territories. The first impact is the negative effect on the capacity to carry out developmental projects that support peacebuilding across the LCB region.

The second impact is the disruption to the food chain, which occurred because the COVID-19 restrictions coincided with the onset of the planting season and disrupted the preparation of farmlands, the availability and supply of seasonal farm labor (by youth) across communities and led to restricted access to farm inputs (including seedlings).⁵⁷ Similar impacts applied to the seasonal movement of livestock from landlocked countries (Chad and Niger) to regional markets and cities in Nigeria. At the same time, Boko Haram/ISWAP sought to exploit the socioeconomic and food security challenges experienced as a result of COVID-19 restrictions by delivering letters and offering large sums of money to tempt vulnerable persons and communities in Jere and Monguno.⁵⁸ The risk of increased vulnerability is further heightened by the "uncertainty of future impacts of the pandemic combined with restrictions on movement, soaring unemployment, limited access to food, and the erosion of already fragile livelihoods may generate discontent, fueling violence and conflict."⁵⁹

As noted in the Situational Brief on Resilience, COVID-19 has slowed trade and economic exchanges, including cross-border crossings and the movement of animals, fisheries and other agricultural goods, and this has resulted in the loss of livelihoods for vulnerable groups such as youth, young girls and women. According to a recent survey in Diffa, Niger, 68 percent

52 Gondwe, G., 'Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Africa's Economic Development', UNCTAD/ALDC/MISC/2020/3, July 2020, p. 1. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aldcmisc2020d3_en.pdf

53 UNDP, 'COVID-19 and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Africa', UNDP internal document, 14 April 2020.

54 Mbodiam, Brice R., 'Cameroon reduces its 2020 budget by over CFA542 bln', Business in Cameroon, 5 June 2020, <https://www.businessincameroon.com/public-management/0506-10392-cameroon-reduces-its-2020-budget-by-over-cfa542-blm>.

55 Adebayo, Taiwo-Hassan, 'EXCLUSIVE: Buhari's 2020 budget cuts affect National Assembly, federal jobs, capital expenditure', Premium Times, 6 May 2020, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/391602-exclusive-buharis-2020-budget-cuts-affect-national-assembly-federal-jobs-capital-expenditure.html>

56 World Bank, 'Chad: Country Overview', 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/chad/overview>

57 Bisson, Loïc, and Thea Hambleton, Clingendael (2020) 'COVID-19 Impact on West African Value Chains', Conflict Research Unit (CRU) of Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, July 2020, p. 5, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Policy_Brief_COVID-19_Impact_on_West_African_Value_Chains_June_2020.pdf

58 Nagaranja, C., 'Research Report: The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in Northeast Nigeria', Managing Conflict in Nigeria/British Council, July 2020, p. 19, <https://www.justice-security.ng/research-report-impact-covid-19-conflict-gender-and-social-exclusion-north-east-nigeria>

59 FAO, '2020 Global Report on Food Crises', p. 13. https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC_2020_ONLINE_200420.pdf

of host communities, 82 percent of IDPs, 81 percent of refugees, and 91 percent of returnees among respondents claim that COVID-19 has affected their source of revenue (livelihoods).⁶⁰ All this contributes to price fluctuations (up to 50 percent inflation), heightens food scarcity, reduces the purchasing power of local communities in the LCB region and increases anxieties about future livelihoods.⁶¹

Finally, it is not impossible that the economic slowdown also impacts Boko Haram/ISWAP by depriving them of income from the illicit trade in fish and farming and the collection of taxes from farmers, pastoralists and transporters. The result has been a diminished capacity (resources) to meet the promises made to recruits and an increase in hunger and disaffection among recruits due to reduced supplies.⁶² For instance, some members of Boko Haram/ISWAP that surrendered to government forces in Mora in Cameroon in July 2020 claimed to have done so due to poverty and failed promises of providing a motorcycle.⁶³

d. COVID-19 weakens social cohesion

The 'Journey to Extremism in Africa' report observed that family and community life is at the core of socialization processes; childhood experiences (happiness) could be a factor in vulnerability to extremism; and the relationships that young people have with their families and communities can be a catalyst for a search for new group identities that could lead to radicalization.⁶⁴ Emerging anecdotes point to the negative impact of COVID-19 and its response strategies on cohesion within and between communities and ethnic groups. All this may translate into childhood unhappiness and poor relations between young people and community leaders. This appears to be manifesting in three ways.

First, there are risks and emerging signs of increased stigmatization and intergroup tensions because of COVID-19. For instance, communities and local government areas with cases of COVID-19 appear to



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have been labeled 'red zones', and they faced boycotts in trade and other sociocultural exchanges from adjoining communities in the LCB region. This was the case in some communities in Adamawa and Gworza in Borno in April 2020. This is reported to have led to an exodus of people to other communities and led the

⁶⁰ OKAPI Consulting, 'Conflicts and COVID-19 in Niger, Nigeria, Chad: July-August 2020, p. 5.

⁶¹ Nagaranja, C., 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria', Managing Conflict in Nigeria programme, July 2020, pp. 11-12.

⁶² Kola, Olarewaju, 'Nigeria: Surge in Boko Haram attacks derails return of refugees', Anadolu Agency (AA) News, 29 August 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/nigeria-surge-in-boko-haram-attacks-derails-return-of-refugees-/1957061>

⁶³ Kindzeka, M., 'More Than 100 Boko Haram, Captives Surrender Along Cameroon-Nigeria Border', VOA News 7 August 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/more-100-boko-haram-captives-surrender-along-cameroon-nigeria-border>

⁶⁴ UNDP, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa', 2017, p. 36.

population in neighboring Damboa to become wary of transacting business with people in Gworza over fears of contracting COVID-19.⁶⁵ Some communities in Borno and Adamawa were also reported to be “unhappy about access to health being conditional on having attended the COVID-19 clinic first and denial of choice of how to bury family members during the pandemic.”⁶⁶

In other instances, COVID-19 appears to have damaged intergenerational and intergroup relations. For instance, there are reports of suspicion and stigmatization of young people (economic migrants) returning to their communities as potential carriers of COVID-19. Moreover, the closure of schools raises concern and panic about increases in ‘idle youth,’ a matter that may lead to more crime and gang activities and the risk of recruitment into extremism, especially in communities perceived as having high numbers of Boko Haram/ISWAP sympathizers (such Bulabulin and Ngarannam in Maiduguri).⁶⁷

The pandemic and responses to it, especially the distribution of government palliatives, increases intergroup tensions. According to a July-August 2020 survey of populations in Jere and Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC) areas, 29 percent of respondents and 54 percent of respondents, respectively, claimed that local conflicts increased due to COVID-19 and responses to it.⁶⁸ There are reports of increased tensions between some Kanuri and Shuwa people in Dikwa and Gworza with the stigmatization of particular persons and communities said to be laden with stereotypes.⁶⁹ Also, in Mafa tension was reported between people of Gamargu background, and Kanuri and Shuwa, with the former reported to be complaining of ethnic discrimination by the latter in the distribution of food and other palliatives.⁷⁰

In all, the pandemic and misperceptions about the response to it could trigger intergroup, anti-elite and anti-government sentiments (extremism), especially in situations in which the distribution of government palliatives was perceived to be politically motivated or where political elites and wealthy persons were perceived to be exempted from COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., given official pass to move freely).⁷¹

e. COVID-19 interrupts stabilization activities

COVID-19 has interrupted stabilization activities in the LCB through the suspension of the reconstruction of schools, clinics, houses and other types of infrastructure; the reintegration of rehabilitated former members of Boko Haram/ISWAP into their communities; and the return of IDPs to their original communities. The pandemic also has constrained national and local capacities for stabilization and has hindered international support and disrupted planned community consultations and dialogue.⁷² Delays and the failures of governmental authorities to fulfill promises and meet the expectations of displaced communities are routinely exploited by extremist groups, such as Boko Haram/ISWAP, in framing and spreading false narratives; this increases the risk of radicalization and recruitment of vulnerable persons into violent extremism.⁷³

The combination of COVID-19 and changes in tactics by Boko Haram/ISWAP have slowed the return and resettlement of refugees and IDPs, especially in Borno. The pandemic also has slowed government reconstruction of communities, and some IDPs have been returned to their communities without the necessary access to services.⁷⁴ For example, there are reports that some recently resettled IDPs (e.g., in Kukawa, Borno) lacked access to basic assistance

65 Nagaranja, C., ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in Northeast Nigeria’, 2020, p. 18.

66 Ibid., p. 14.

67 Ibid., p. 18.

68 Ibid., p. 9.

69 For instance, rumors around COVID-19 may overlay narratives around the Kanuri people being more likely to be linked to Boko Haram/ISWAP.

70 Nagaranja, C., ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in Northeast Nigeria’, 2020, p. 18.

71 Ibid., p. 14.

72 Ebiede, T. M., ‘International support is hindered by measures to contain the virus’, African Arguments, 15 May 2020, <https://africanarguments.org/2020/05/15/local-ownership-of-peace-processes-in-african-countries-in-times-of-covid-19/>

73 This is because unfulfilled promises and a slow-down in stabilization activities are predictive factors in radicalization and violent extremism. Insight provided by the UNDP Project Specialist Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), Regional Service Centre, Ethiopia, 20 October 2020.

74 For instance, the Governor of Borno was attacked by extremists in July and twice in September with several fatalities recorded. BBC News, ‘Nigeria’s Boko Haram crisis: ‘Bomb on donkey’ used to ambush Borno governor’, 28 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54331260>

or protection services with some humanitarian partners calling for the Borno State Government IDP Resettlement Taskforce to halt its aggressive IDP resettlement plan.⁷⁵

By extension, COVID-19 has also impacted the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration (SPRR) of deradicalized former combatants, a component of the Regional Stabilization Strategy. For example, Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor paused its planned reinsertion of some de-radicalized ex-fighters into their communities due to COVID-19 restrictions.⁷⁶ In addition, the pandemic raised the possibility of communities rejecting children associated with (rescued from) Boko Haram/ISWAP due to fears of infection. Moreover, the increased power given to members of the yan gora (the civilian joint task force members, CJTF) to enforce COVID-19 restrictions is seen as a disincentive for children associated with such groups to reintegrate into civilian life.⁷⁷

f. COVID-19 and the erosion of trust and amplification of grievances against authorities

Extant research pinpoints that citizens' build-up of grievances and widespread disaffection for and limited trust in the state and its officials, including security forces, the loss of faith in democratic processes, the lack of inclusive governance, and fractured state-citizens relations may heighten the risk of recruitment into extremism in Africa.⁷⁸ The pandemic clearly reduces the resources and capacity of governments to fulfill electoral promises and meet social contract obligations toward citizens, and this may damage trust and generate grievances. Some recent developments point to this occurring in the LCB, including the following four examples.

First, the emergence of COVID-19 and the restrictions that resulted appear to have further eroded trust in government due to frustrations with disruptions in food distribution chains and limitations on accessing social services; this, in turn, led to tensions and looting in some cases. This reaction has been most acute in situations in which some people were perceived to be privileged in accessing services, or where the government's distribution of palliatives was perceived as unequal or politicized. For instance, an International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey found around half of respondents in LCB territories in Nigeria had experienced disruptions to food distribution chains due to COVID-19 restrictions, and this generated anger in some borderland communities. In Mafa, due to only one INGO distributing food, there were allegations of the diversion of aid and three instances of looting of humanitarian cargo. Conversely, a survey in four local government areas in Borno found that only 18 percent of men and 4 percent of women appreciated the government more (thanks to the distribution of palliatives) during the pandemic.⁷⁹

Second, public anger appears to have increased due to the human rights violations and discrimination by security agencies and the CJTF. For instance, the growing distrust and anger against human rights violations by security agencies and dissatisfaction with the government's distribution of COVID-19 palliatives in Nigeria reached a crescendo in October following youth-led '#EndSARS' protests⁸⁰ and the attacks (looting) of government warehouses. The #EndSARS protest was a demonstration of public anger and disapproval of the heavy-handed enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions by security forces and long-standing complaints against the culture of brutality among security forces in Nigeria. Furthermore, the way security forces and the yan gora enforced COVID-19 restrictions, often involving arbitrary detention and

75 OCHA, 'Nigeria Situation Report: 23 September 2020', p. 3, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Nigeria%20-%202014%20Sep%202020.pdf>

76 The Cable, 'DHQ: Fleeing Boko Haram insurgents abandoned 72 family members', 15 May 2020, <https://www.thecable.ng/dhq-fleeing-boko-haram-insurgents-abandoned-72-family-members>

77 Nagaranja, C., 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in Northeast Nigeria', 2020, p. 17.

78 UNDP, 'The Journey to Extremism in Africa', 2017, p. 68.

79 Nagaranja, C., 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in Northeast Nigeria', 2020, pp. 11-17.

80 The '#EndSARS' protest was initially an organized protest against police brutality, especially by the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of young Nigerians. It snowballed into a general protest against the government's alleged poor distribution of COVID-19 palliatives and poor governance in general. It started off in Lagos at the start of October 2020 and subsequently spread to other parts of Nigeria towards the end of October, especially after the use of violence by security forces to dislodge protesters. For a timeline of the protest, see Ukpe, William, '#EndSARS: A day by day timeline of the protest that has brought Nigeria to its knees', Nairametrics, 25 October 2020. <https://nairametrics.com/2020/10/25/endsars-protest-a-timeline-of-all-the-major-events-from-october-3rd/>

extortion, drew allegations of human rights violations and a slide into authoritarianism. For instance, IDPs in camps in Ngala had their movements restricted for 48 hours without prior notice; this caused anger, as it affected the collection of firewood and water. As well, tensions erupted between road transporters and security forces in Monguno over the interpretation of restrictions on road travel.

Public trust is also damaged by allegations of the government's distribution of COVID-19 palliatives being politicized – seen as favoring Muslims and members of the ruling APC party in LCB territories in Nigeria. A resident of Borno stated, “People see aid as insufficient – too late, too little – and this reinforces the perception that the government does not have the interests of the people in mind – making sensitization around COVID-19 ineffective as government are the primary messengers.”⁸¹

Third, public anger and grievances also grow in situations in which a government (and its security agencies) is perceived as exploiting COVID-19 and its mitigation strategies to gain economic as well as political advantages. One example can be found in Borno metropolis and intercity roads and border crossings, where “security agents, immigration agents, and customs agents are also seen as benefitting as they open borders at night for trade – for a fee. Some soldiers and yan gora members allow inter-state travel in exchange for payment.”⁸² There are reports of tensions between the police and the yan gora in Borno over the policing of pandemic restrictions.⁸³ Moreover, President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger is perceived to have exploited the pandemic to suspend voter registration in June 2020, raising fears that the December 2020 presidential poll may be postponed.⁸⁴ Cameroon and Chad also cited COVID-19 as the reason for postponing indefinitely their local and legislative

elections originally planned for April and December 2020, respectively.⁸⁵

Finally, COVID-19 restrictions, like those used to combat Ebola, tend to disproportionately impact vulnerable populations living in borderlands, especially women and youth. The mix of new COVID-19-induced shocks and preexisting multidimensional poverty, historic neglect by and grievances against the state, and a perceived lack of fairness in the response strategies to the pandemic could worsen the vulnerability of particular individuals, especially young people.⁸⁶ In Adamawa state for example, protesters attacked the warehouses of the Rice Farmers Association and the North East Commodity Association and carted away tonnes of rice, beans, maize, sorghum and millet; seeds and other farm inputs for the dry season farming; and 110 tractors and other farm implements.⁸⁷

All this could translate into increased dissent and further erode credibility and faith in democratic governance in ways that could validate the narratives of extremist groups among vulnerable populations. This potentially allows extremist groups to gain competitive advantages, especially if they provide food and health services.⁸⁸

81 Ibid, p. 14.

82 Ibid, p. 17.

83 Ibid, p. 16.

84 ACLED, 'States, Not Jihadis, Exploiting Corona Crisis in West Africa', ACLED, 28 May 2020, p. 8, <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/28/states-not-jihadis-exploiting-corona-crisis-in-west-africa/>

85 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 'Elections Postponed Due to COVID-19 - As of August 25, 2020', https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections_postponed_due_to_covid-19.pdf

86 UNDP, 'COVID-19 and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Africa', 14 April 2020, p.2.

87 Emenike, Chidi, '#EndSARS protest: Hoodlums loot 110 tractors in Yola', Nairametrics, 27 October 2020, <https://nairametrics.com/2020/10/27/endsars-protest-hoodlums-loot-110-tractors-in-yola/>

88 Ibid.

5. Conclusion: COVID-19 Compounds the Risk of Violent Extremism in the LCB Region

The full socioeconomic, political, environmental and security impacts of COVID-19 are yet to fully manifest; however, emerging events and anecdotes suggest that COVID-19 worsens the structural conditions (push factors) of extremism. The pandemic also provides new opportunities for extremist groups to spread misinformation and false narratives, including presenting those groups as sources of security (prevention and cure) against the pandemic. There are three dimensions to this.

First, the pandemic potentially weakens the sources of resilience for individuals and communities, at least over the short- and medium-term. Disruptions, including lockdowns, are not new to the LCB region; however, COVID-19 and its restrictions represent a new experience, a new ‘low’, for the LCB territories. The pandemic has hampered access to humanitarian services, disrupted formal and Arabic (religious) education, harmed livelihood opportunities and constrained the capacity of governments to meet developmental obligations.

Second, COVID-19 and the enforcement of its restrictions appears to generate new grievances, amplify old frustrations and further erode trust in state authorities. This can especially be seen in the ways in which palliatives have been distributed, the pandemic has been exploited by politicians, and the security forces and the *yan gora* have conducted themselves. The flip side of this is the pull factor of extremist groups offering vulnerable persons alternative visions of society, governance, provision of services, livelihoods and new status and privileges. This could induce some rational calculation, potentially tipping the scale toward extremism among vulnerable persons. An August 2020

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Finally, and in the dimension of responses, the coincidence of COVID-19 and its restrictions with major changes in the conflict dynamic provide a challenge to support resilience-building against violent extremism at the community level.

survey on whether COVID-19 responses, including lockdowns and restrictions, may have increased vulnerability to recruitment into violent extremism found that 21 percent (Jere) and 8 percent (MMC) of respondents indicated they affirmed the nexus.⁸⁹

Finally, and in the dimension of responses, the coincidence of COVID-19 and its restrictions with major changes in the conflict dynamic provide a challenge to support resilience-building against violent extremism at the community level.⁹⁰ The restrictions on social gathering, sociocultural events and ceremonies and trading practices are new ‘lows’ for efforts to support the well-being and development of vulnerable persons and communities in LCB territories. The onset of an economic crisis (loss of revenue) could also affect the financing of security forces and counter-terrorism operations among LCB countries.⁹¹ As the health and security crises seem to have interacted, they triggered new vulnerabilities, safety and operational guidelines and other operational challenges for LCB authorities and development and humanitarian agencies.

89 OKAPI Consulting, *Conflicts and COVID-19 in Niger, Nigeria, Chad: July-August 2020*, p. 9.

90 Relief Web, ‘Cameroon: International NGOs call for immediate scale-up of the humanitarian response amid soaring needs in the Far North Region’, Relief Web, 24 September 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ingos_statement_release_on_the_situation_in_the_far_north_of_cameroon-1.pdf

91 UNDP, ‘PVE Regional Project: Bi-Annual Narrative Report: Nigeria Jan-June 2020’, p. 3.

6. COVID-19 and Opportunities for PVE

It is not all doom and gloom in relation to COVID-19 and extremism in the LCB region; the pandemic also harbors opportunities to advance the goals of preventing and responding more effectively to violent extremism.

Below are the potential opportunities for PVE:

- a. The pandemic appears to have also impaired the capacity of violent extremist groups to provide services, raise resources and fulfill promises to its recruits.⁹² This could be a window for authorities and aid agencies to step-up service delivery and rebuild trust and confidence with vulnerable persons and communities in the LCB region. This can also be a disincentive for would-be recruits, as much as an incentive for those already recruited to voluntarily surrender (abandon the group).
- b. COVID-19 has triggered new risk assessments and safety routines, reviews of operational templates, identification of new vulnerabilities, and a deeper understanding of how social networks mobilize in response to a new kind of crisis. This constitutes a pool of new ideas and resources that could strengthen PVE programming and interventions. For instance, those trusted (if new) to distribute palliatives and coordinate COVID-19 mitigation strategies at community levels could become useful in PVE interventions.
- c. Some COVID-19 mitigation measures have emerged to have a dual use, and they may yield practical results in support of the prevention of violent extremism. For instance, the decongestion of prisons and camps for IDPs and refugees reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, as well as cut the risks of radicalization toward violent extremism within prison populations.
- d. PVE interventions, including the structures and networks aimed at addressing the root causes of violent extremism (e.g., marginalization, intercommunal conflict and inadequate access to services) could be invaluable resources for addressing the medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on local communities in the LCB region. Similarly, some of the new ways of working developed during COVID-19, including new lines of communication and coordination among governments, civil society groups and development and humanitarian agencies, could provide new clues and tools for strengthening PVE interventions.
- e. There are opportunities to apply or adapt the lessons and best practices from PVE interventions within the COVID-19 response strategies and activities to mitigate increases in the risk of extremism.⁹³
- f. Some of the lessons (criticisms and tensions) of using excessive force by the police, and the use of the military in enforcing COVID-19 restrictions, could be the basis for rethinking the current militarized approach to counter terrorism in LCB countries.⁹⁴

⁹² This is based on the reasons (failure of extremist groups to fulfill promises made to members) given by former members of Boko Haram/ISWAP that surrendered in July 2020 (see section 5d, footnote 57).

⁹³ UNDP, 'COVID-19 and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Africa', 14 April 2020.

⁹⁴ This includes Cameroon's Center for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, and Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor.

7. Recommendations

UNDP (Regional Stabilization Facility and Regional PVE Project Team)

1. Undertake new risks assessments and context analyses to identify new vulnerabilities and vulnerable populations, the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and how it interacts with the risks of recruitment into violent extremism. This will also be useful for addressing changes arising from COVID-19 in relation to the Regional Stabilization Strategy for the LCB.
 2. Review regional PVE approaches and interventions to reflect COVID-19 operational challenges, opportunities and lessons as a way of increasing the delivery of PVE programs.
 3. Integrate a PVE lens into COVID-19 response strategies, including how COVID-19 mitigation strategies affect the risk of violent extremism or strengthen the prevention of violent extremism in the LCB region.
 4. Develop and disseminate programming notes and guidance notes on how to apply a PVE-lens and conflict-sensitive approaches to COVID-19 strategies and vice versa to the governments of LCB territories and other stakeholders.
1. Re-emphasize and monitor human rights-based approaches in COVID-19 responses and the militarized approaches to de-radicalization and PVE in LCB countries.
 2. Renew commitments and trust in the state and democratic governance, and civil society groups and INGOs by advancing service delivery and improved delivery of social contract obligations. This will reduce the capacity of extremist groups to use service delivery to tempt vulnerable persons.
 3. Leverage existing networks of on-the-ground practitioners working to address drivers of violent extremism in marginalized areas for information spreading on COVID-19.
 4. Work to integrate a PVE-lens into COVID-19 responses and reassess the implications for other existing policy frameworks, including PVE, humanitarian operations and territorial plans of LCB territories. This will be crucial as governments, INGOs and other stakeholders in the LCB region work through reduced resources and new rounds of prioritization because of the economic crisis in the aftermath of COVID-19.
 5. Support and promote community-led sensitization and awareness campaigns on COVID-19 in ways that also enhance PVE, such as countering misinformation and false narratives and reducing intergenerational and intergroup tensions.
 6. Promote increased transparency and accountability in the management and implementation of COVID-19 response strategies including the distribution of palliatives to reduce the misinformation, tensions and grievances that could compound processes of radicalization into violent extremism.

Other Stakeholders

For stakeholders such as the LCB Commission, governors of LCB territories, civil society groups, aid agencies, donor partners, private sector organizations and members of the P3 countries (the United Kingdom, France and the United States) working in the Lake Chad Basin area:



Lake Chad Basin

Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience (RSS)-Secretariat
Place de la Grande Armée, B.P. 727, N'Djamena, Tchad

Commission du Bassin du Lac Tchad



Federal Foreign Office



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

