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Toward Youth Deradicalisation In The Northeast Geo-Political Zone, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses youth de-radicalisation efforts in Northeast Nigeria. It is guided by the following objectives: to identify the existing de-radicalisation strategies adopted by the Government in the study area; to assess the effectiveness and the weaknesses of the existing de-radicalisation strategies adopted by the Government and development partners; and to proffer strategies for developing an effective youth de-radicalisation in the Northeast Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria. The study employs Travis Hirschi's control theory to examine the efficacy of youth de-radicalisation programmes in Northeast Nigeria. Methodologically, the study is a survey research design, using a concurrent mixed-methods design. Data were collected via questionnaires (N=469) and in-depth interviews (12 KIIs) from a multi-stage sampled population. The technique for selecting the respondents was multi-stage sampling. Questionnaire and key informant interview were used as instruments of collecting the primary data. The demographic findings reveal a youth bulge (69.5% aged 18-35), significant unemployment (27.3%), widespread poverty (78.9% earn <₦50,000 monthly), and fragmented education. Findings also reveal an acute awareness vacuum, where communities demonstrate minimal knowledge of key government programs like Operation Safe Corridor and psycho-social support initiatives. This deficit underpins a widespread perception of systemic failure, with respondents overwhelmingly citing ineffective reintegration, inadequate community involvement, and poor inter-agency coordination as core weaknesses. In contrast, the study documents a strong, consensus-driven mandate from communities for an alternative model. Hence the need for strategies centered on integrating traditional and religious leaders, sustainable livelihoods to address root economic grievances, community-based early warning systems, peace education and trauma healing. The study concludes that effective de-radicalisation must transition from a securitised, top-down model to a community-owned framework. It recommends integrating traditional authorities, creating sustainable livelihood pathways, and mainstreaming psycho-social support to re-anchor youth within society's normative structure, thereby converting fragile security gains into durable peace.

Keywords: Boko Haram; Deradicalisation; Northeastern Nigeria; Youth

INTRODUCTION

Radicalisation is an old phenomenon. The most recent wave of radicalization began in the 21st century, in which the world witnessed rise of radical and violent extremist groups across the continents. As a result, radicalisation is increasingly becoming transnational in nature, with complex networks of terrorist groups

transcending continental boundaries, as well as social, racial and cultural barriers (Cachalia, Salifu & Ndung'u, 2016). With the activities of Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and Lavent), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan Lash-kar-e-Taiba, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, the emergence of Boko Haram had changed the narrative of youth radicalization because of it being a homegrown violent extremist group. Boko Haram started from Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in the northeastern Nigeria and it later spread to some parts of the West African sub-region (Jalige, 2024). The group is formally known as Jama'atu ahlus-sunnah lidda'awati wal jihad (loosely translated as the people committed to the propagation of prophetic teachings and the holy war).

The group started with the teachings of its former leader Late Muhammad Yusuf with their centre (markaz) in Maiduguri Metropolitan. It has begun to have series of misunderstanding and skirmishes with security agencies (Mukhtar, 2026). Consequently, it became notorious since 2009 by targeting not only security forces but also traditional leaders and public officials who have criticised the group's agenda. There is also widespread fear of another evolving radicalized sect in Nigeria following the series of violent confrontations between the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) and the police in Abuja, Jos, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kano which signifies the need for more renewed de-radicalisation strategies in the region. The members of the IMN carried out many protests which often turned violent and, in extreme cases, recorded killings during their encounters with the police (NSRP, 2016; Mukhtar, 2026).

The Nigerian Government has demonstrated some level of commitment to de-redicalise these youths. For example, the Government has introduced Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) located in Gombe State, and a rehabilitation center in Maiduguri for women and girls formerly affiliated with Boko Haram as well as some programmes in the Nigerian prisons. Yet, radicalization has remained one of the major security challenge in the North-eastern Nigeria (Mukhtar & Abdullahi, 2022). To provide effective de-radicalisation strategies in the northeast, the present study is proposed; because it will produce a policy brief for the Government to shift focus from security operation to adopt context-based de-radicalisation measures to combine economic empowerment, social inclusion and political participation with a view to serve as preventive and controlling mechanism to radicalization among youths in the Northeast. This is because each confrontation between extremist group and the security forces is accompanied with devastative effects it has on the properties and establishments of the government and civilians, multiple deaths.

In view of this background, this proposed research is designed to provide effective strategies for youth de-radicalisation in the Northeast Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The broad aim of the study is to provide effective strategies for youth de-radicalisation in the Northeast Geopolitical Zone. The specific objectives include:

1. To identify the previous the de-radicalisation strategies adopted by the Government in the study area;
2. To assess the effectiveness and the weaknesses of the existing de-radicalisation strategies adopted by the Government and development partners;
3. To proffer strategies for effective youth de-radicalisation in the Northeast Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria.

The Conceptual Clarifications

Youth: The term "youth" is a contested concept. It is defined using biological, psychological, socio-cultural and political approaches but the most common method of defining the concept across these areas is the emphasis being placed on age (Mukhtar et al. 2015). For instance the political/legal connotation sees youth as an individual who by virtue of age (18 years) is eligible for voting and other constitutional rights and/or responsibilities (Umar, 2010). There are definitions of youth that focused on the economic life of the individual as evident in person's preparation for, and engagement with, pay work, thereby becoming economically independent; anyone in the labour force fell within the category of youth population. Some definitions make use of age bracket with no specific reference to biological,

psychological, political or economic factor (Mukhtar et al. 2015). United Nations (2013) conceived that youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. That is why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups. Yet, age is the easiest way to define this group, particularly in relation to education and employment, because 'youth' is often referred to a person between the ages of leaving compulsory education, and finding their first job. Thus, the United Nations (2013), for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.

De-radicalisation: As noted by CLEEN Foundation (2014), the term radicalisation is used widely, but the search for what exactly radicalisation is, what causes it and how to de-radicalise those who are considered radicals is a frustrating experience. Like the concept of radicalization, de-radicalisation is a contested concept. Schmid (2013) admitted that there is conceptual problem and controversy on the emerging discourse on de-radicalisation. According to Noor & Hayat (2009), there are several terms that are used to refer to the phenomenon of de-radicalisation, which include: 'desertion,' demobilisation,' 'defection,' 'rehabilitation,' 'reconciliation,' 'dialogue,' and 'disengagement.' The main reason for the use of different terms in different societies seems to be a realisation of the socio-political activities attached to each term. But two of these terms, deradicalisation and disengagement, are used more frequently. The former is mainly used in Asian societies, and the latter in European ones. Deradicalisation and disengagement can be defined as the process of individual and collective withdrawal. Disengagement refers to a behavioural change, whereas deradicalisation implies a cognitive shift, i.e. a fundamental change in understanding (Noor & Hayat, 2009).

De-radicalisation often appears to be understood as any effort aimed at preventing radicalisation from taking place. Others see de-radicalisation less in terms of prevention and more in terms of the de-programming of those already radicalised. For example, Demant et al. (as cited in Schmid, 2013) stated that de-radicalisation is the process of becoming less radical. This process of 'becoming less radical' applies both to behaviour and beliefs. With regard to behaviour, this primarily involves the cessation of violent actions. With regard to beliefs, this involves an increase in confidence in the system, a desire to once more be a part of society, and the rejection of non-democratic means. In general, the de-radicalisation of behaviour is linked with the de-radicalisation of beliefs. But Demant et al.'s statement that 'de-radicalisation is the opposite of radicalisation cannot be applied universally. Thus, IPI (2010: 1) sees deradicalisation as set of programmes, "which are geared toward peacefully moving individuals and groups away from violent extremism".

Youths De-radicalisation in the Northeast Geo-political Zone

Since the start of Boko Haram's violent uprising in 2009, the Nigeria has used military force to counter the threat. However, the military approach neither ended the conflict nor prevented Boko Haram from changing its strategy (Barkindo, 2016), but there is still an attitude that you need to win the war first, and deal with these justice and governance issues later (Brechenmacher, 2019). . Apart from the military or hard approach, the government's current strategy also involves soft approaches, like rehabilitation and community engagement (Barkindo, 2016). Over the past two years, several civilian agencies have become more involved in the process, particularly the Office of the National Security Adviser. In December 2017, the Nigerian government adopted an initial Action Plan for Demobilisation, Dissociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR) targeting suspected Boko Haram members, and it is now working in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration to integrate this plan into the existing Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (IOM, 2019).

Nigeria's countering violent extremism (CVE) programme was publicly launched in March 2014 with the aim that it would operate horizontally and vertically across government and includes working with non-state actors. The three main components of the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programme were: counter-radicalisation, strategic communications and de-radicalisation, with education initiatives as an additional cross-cutting activity. ONSA's (2014) document described the CVE programme objectives as: identifying the underlying causes of radicalisation (social, cultural, religious and economic); developing strategies that provide solutions; introducing measures to change the attitudes and perceptions of potential

recruits; packaging and disseminating the right messages to the populace through strategic communication; assessing the impact of radicalisation on the welfare and wellbeing of affected communities; and creating opportunity and hope for people in the affected communities and restoring their faith in the government (Barkindo & Bryans, 2016).

As identified by ONSA (2014), the objectives for deradicalising youths in the document are: to foster greater respect for human rights and rule of law; to develop categorisation of suspects and convicts leading to more effective documentation; to train relevant staff on CVE, as prison staff need to be able to professionally handle terror suspects and issues of rehabilitation; to develop a range of expert psychologists and counsellors to pioneer rehabilitation efforts and train them in cognitive behavioural therapy and group therapy; utilise Islamic scholars to counter extremist narratives by training them on aspects of dialogue and religious counselling; and offer vocational training for inmates, ensuring they have a basic level of education and acquire skills to assist their reintegration into society (ONSA, 2014).

Since 2017, USAID has been authorised to rely on vetting conducted by Nigerian security forces under Operation Safe Corridor to support women and children affiliated with members of Boko Haram who have been designated as low risk (Mukhtar, 2026). Yet the screening and vetting of detainees is still handled by security forces, with no civilian oversight or accountability mechanism. The screening criteria remain opaque, with no clearly articulated guidelines or principles to distinguish between hardline elements within extremist groups and those that only provided low-level support. While donor officials note increased buy-in on the side of ONSA in particular, they voice doubts over the military's commitment to changing practices. According to Brechenmacher (2019), efforts to push for a civilian structure to manage the inside of the screening centers have had little success. The overall message from the international community has been that you cannot just have a military response to the conflict, and to some extent military leaders know and acknowledge that.

Nigeria's international partners have been cautious in pushing back forcefully against security sector abuses, and note that pressure occurs primarily behind the scenes. Several factors explain this hesitancy. First, international organisations are wary of losing access. Nigerian authorities have repeatedly accused international nonprofits of supporting extremist groups or not fulfilling their roles. Those highlighting security force abuses have been particularly targeted. For example, in December 2018, the army temporarily suspended the activities of the UNICEF in the northeast and accused the organisation of spying for Islamist militants. Buhari's spokesperson has also accused Amnesty International of "damaging the morale of the Nigerian military" following the organisation's reporting on military violations. As reported by Brechenmacher (2019), some aid officials have also noted low levels of awareness among diplomats about reported human rights abuses in the military-run screening centers, at least until the 2018 report by Amnesty International detailing evidence of human rights violations.

Theoretical Framework

Control theory will be used to explain the deradicalisation programmes in the study area. Travis Hirschi (1969, as cited in Tierney, 2010), in his book *Causes of Delinquency*. Hirschi observed that people tend to conform to the societal rules and regulations because of four factors- attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief or respect to societal values. By attachment, Hirschi referred to the extent to which an individual has strong bond of emotional attachment to others like a spouse. On this ground, one may desist from committing a crime. In commitment, Hirschi pointed out that when a person invests in activities which will generate 'cultural capital' like education, he/she may refuse to commit crime to retain their dignity and pursue success. Involvement is the extent to which individuals' time is taken off with conventional activities. Lastly, belief may also prevent people from involving in criminality. To some degree, society's norms and values are influencing our behaviours by enjoining us to be morally upright. Those who prioritise the societal values become conformists in the society. (Tierney, 2010).

With regard to the present study, the control theory provides not only the name for a youth to be able to control oneself, but it can explain why youth radicalisation takes place in the northeastern Nigeria. The involvement of some youths in Boko Haram in the region represents the fundamental tenet of this theory. Firstly, these youths might be inhibited to join youth radicalised groups if they have strong bond attachment with families, such as spouse and children. Secondly, involvement in education and sports

might mean less chance for those youths to join Boko Haram radicalised movement (Mukhtar, 2026). Thirdly, commitment in workplace or occupation means that a youth is not redundant and therefore not susceptible to radicalisation. Lastly, these youths will hardly be radicalised if they have belief in the authentic teaching of Islam and respect for social norms and values which encourage peaceful coexistence and respect for other people's ideology. Control theories assumed that criminal acts result when an individual's bond to society is broken and weak. Therefore, as explained above the theory has potential for explaining youth radicalisation in the northern Nigeria.

However, the theory is bombarded with some criticisms. The major criticism of social control theory is that it does not explain why people commit crime; it only explains crime in the absence of controls. Additionally, the theory focuses more on delinquency but does not explain the types of crime committed by individuals such as white-collar crime, (professional crime) (Ortiz, 2011), while the dynamism of youth radicalisation makes it an organised crime because of its transnational connection with other radical jihadist groups.

Research Methodology

Study Location: The study area is the North East (NE) Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. Therefore, the historical sketch, geographical profile, economic profile, socio-cultural nature and security profile of the region will be discussed in this section. Spanning the two empires located in modern-day Nigeria (Kanem Borno and Kwararafa), the northeast geopolitical zone is a region covering a vast expanse of areas including Lake Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Libya. The Kanem Borno empire alone can be described as a large medieval state in central Sudan, and spanning its border to the north by the Sahara Desert. The empire was amalgamated and separated in different times but this never stopped its link to surrounding areas (Salawudeen, 2019). The northeast is now made up of six states: Bauchi, Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Gombe and Taraba. Kanem was located at the southern end of the trans-Saharan trade route between Tripoli and the region of Lake Chad. Therefore, Kanem-Bornu Empire existed in modern Chad and Nigeria. It was known to the Arabian geographers as the Kanem Empire from the 9th century CE onward and lasted as the independent kingdom of Bornu until 1900. At its height it encompassed an area covering not only much of Chad, but also parts of modern southern Libya, eastern Niger, northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon (Mukhtar, 2026). The history of the Empire is mainly known from the Royal Chronicle or Girgam discovered in 1851 by the German traveler Heinrich Barth (Scamillo, 2012).

Agbaje (2014) and Isyaku et al. (2018) contended that, socio-economic conditions in the general North and North-East in particular facilitate religious demagoguery poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and ignorance, decades of tolerance for sectarian conflicts. This characterises the Zone as having the highest rate of poverty in Nigeria (NBS, 2012). In view of this economic crisis in the northeast, FAO asked for USD 62 million under the Humanitarian Response Plan for Nigeria in 2017. Of this USD 62 million, USD 20 million is urgently required to reach 500,000 people during the upcoming main planting season starting in June 2017, because if they missed that season it will mean food insecurity and, therefore, humanitarian costs will continue rising into 2018. The Zone, which has historically been known for its peace and tranquility, has in recent years been facing serious security challenges. Today, the most dangerous states related to deaths are in the northeast (Nigeria Watch, 2016; Herbert & Husaini, 2018). Since the activities of the Boko Haram started with the first attack on a police station in Maiduguri, July 26, 2009, the situation has degenerated into violent radicalisation. The group's activities often characterised by incessant attacks in virtually all the States in the Zone and beyond, have resulted in many lives lost and property worth billions of Naira destroyed. The security situation further degenerated in 2013, leading to the declaration of a State of Emergency in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States (Nyako, 2015).

Security profile of the northeast geopolitical zone cannot be complete without the security threats posed by religious radicalization. Attempts by the government to quell violence by Boko Haram in the North East have emphasised military responses, including aerial bombardments of suspected training camps following the May 2013 declaration of a state of emergency, and wide-ranging military-police raids in North East urban areas. These have been met with claims of heavy-handedness and indiscriminate violence by state forces. A more recent strategy of the federal and local governments has been to tolerate

and in some cases support the deployment of vigilante forces, commonly referred to as the 'Civilian JTF', although this poses some risks in terms of the potential for counter-attacks and further escalating violence.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopts a concurrent mixed-methods survey research design, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection and analysis to ensure complementarity and triangulation. Primary data was gathered through questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). Secondary data was sourced from library materials, academic texts, journals, reports, and newspapers.

Population of the Study: The target population comprises: adult and former young Boko Haram members enrolled in the de-radicalization program at Operation Safe Corridor in Gombe; inhabitants of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in selected northeastern states; security personnel from the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC); and community leaders (including ward heads, district heads, and religious leaders such as imams and pastors).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: A total sample size of 516 participants were selected. From this, 504 respondents provided quantitative data via questionnaires, and 12 key informants provided qualitative data through in-depth interviews. The sampling employed a multi-stage technique designed to ensure representation across the six states of Northeast Nigeria. The sampling proceeded through stages: In stage one, the Northeast geopolitical zone was treated as the study region, comprising six states: Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe. Each state constitutes a primary cluster. In stage two, two LGAs were randomly selected from the six states, using a simple lottery method (names on folded papers drawn from a container) to determine the primary quantitative data collection site (i.e. 12 LGAs). In the third stage, six political wards were selected from each Local Government Area (LGA). In the fourth stage, two streets were selected from each political ward (i.e. 24 wards). In the fifth stage, twenty one (21) households were randomly selected from each street. One respondent per household was administered the questionnaire, giving a total quantitative sample of 504 respondents (24 streets x 21 households). In the sixth stage, purposive sampling technique was used to select twelve (12) key informants for interviews. This qualitative sample was drawn from across all six northeastern states to incorporate diverse perspectives from the wider region. Informants included security experts, program administrators, community leaders, and former combatants not covered in the household survey.

Instruments of Data Collection: Two primary instruments were used: a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule. The questionnaire facilitated the collection of quantitative data on the deradicalization strategies. The interview schedule gathered in-depth qualitative insights on the same themes, allowing for methodological triangulation. Secondary data supported the literature review and theoretical framework.

Method of Data Analysis: A mixed-methods approach to analysis was employed. Quantitative data from questionnaires was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) summarized demographic and socio-economic profiles. Likert scale was also used to address substantial issues. Qualitative data from interviews was analyzed thematically to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data, providing nuanced context to the quantitative findings.

Results and discussions

This section analysed, presented, and interpreted the data collected from the field survey. Out of the 504 questionnaires distributed, 469 were successfully completed and retrieved. Therefore, the analysis is based on the retrieved questionnaires (N = 469). Additionally, 12 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with radicalised youths; traditional/religious leaders; IDPs; and law enforcement agents.

Section A: Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile

This section provides an integrated analysis of the demographic and socio-economic profile of the 469 survey respondents from the Northeast. This profile is critical for understanding the context of youth radicalization and the environment for de-radicalization efforts.

Table 1.1: Gender Distribution of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
1.	Male	57 (12.2%)
2.	Female	412 (87.8%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

From Table 1.1, the sample shows gender imbalance (87.8% male, 12.2% female), which is a strength for concluding that more males are involved in radicalization than females.

Table 1.2: Age Groups of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
1.	18–25 years	142 (30.3%)
2.	26–35 years	184 (39.2%)
3.	36–45 years	89 (19.0%)
4.	46–55 years	38 (8.1%)
5.	56 years and above	16 (3.4%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Table 1.2 shows the age groups of the respondents. Crucially, the population is predominantly young: 69.5% of respondents are aged 18-35 years. This “youth bulge” represents the core demographic both targeted by radical groups and central to de-radicalization programs. The significant proportion of young adults underscores the urgency of interventions aimed at this age cohort.

Table 1.3: Marital Status of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
1.	Single	198 (42.2%)
2.	Married	238 (50.7%)
3.	Divorced/Separated	22 (4.7%)
4.	Widowed	11 (2.3%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Table 1.3 shows the respondents’ marital status. A slim majority (50.7%) are married, while a substantial 42.2% are single. The combined categories of single, divorced/separated, and widowed account for 49.3% of respondents. Research often suggests that single young males, in particular, may have fewer stabilizing social anchors, potentially influencing mobility and vulnerability to recruitment narratives.

Table 1.4: Ethnicity of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
1	Kanuri	131 (27.9%)
1	Fulani	104 (22.2%)
1	Hausa	98 (20.9%)
1	Babur/Bura	51 (10.9%)
1	Marghi	41 (8.7%)
1	Other (Specify): Shuwa Arab, Higgi, Chibok, etc.	44 (9.4%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Table 1.4 shows the ethnic composition of the respondents. The ethnic distribution reflects the core groups of the Northeast. The Kanuri (27.9%), who are the ethnic base of the Boko Haram leadership, form the largest single group. The Fulani (22.2%) and Hausa (20.9%) are also significantly represented, alongside other indigenous groups like the Babur/Bura and Marghi. This diversity is essential for the

study, as experiences of conflict, radicalization, and security operations can vary considerably along ethnic lines. It suggests the findings, while focused, may capture a range of communal perspectives.

Table 1.5: Educational Level of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
1.	No Formal Education	88 (18.8%)
2.	Primary School	101 (21.5%)
3.	Secondary School	122 (26.0%)
4.	Tertiary/University	79 (16.8%)
5.	Qur’anic Education Only	79 (16.8%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

The education levels reveal a fragmented system and potential vulnerabilities: only 16.8% have a tertiary education. Combined, those with no formal education (18.8%) and Qur’anic education only (16.8%) represent over a third (35.6%) of the sample. This indicates limited access to secular formal schooling for a significant minority. The largest group (47.5%) has either primary (21.5%) or secondary (26.0%) education. This often represents a cohort with some literacy but potentially limited economic prospects. This educational landscape is a critical factor. Lack of formal education can correlate with limited economic opportunities, while exclusive religious schooling (without complementary secular education) may, in some contexts, influence worldview formation. This mix is a key socio-cultural variable in understanding radicalization narratives.

Table 1.6: Occupation of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
i)	Student	91 (19.4%)
ii)	Civil Servant	54 (11.5%)
iii)	Farmer/Herder	107 (22.8%)
iv)	Trader/Businessperson	66 (14.1%)
v)	Unemployed	128 (27.3%)
vi)	Ex combatant/Reintegrated Youth	13 (2.8%)
vii)	NGO/CBO Staff	6 (1.3%)
viii)	Other: Artisan, Driver, Daily Labourer	4 (0.9%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Table 1.6 shows the occupation of the respondents. Unemployment is the single largest occupational category at 27.3%. This represents a massive pool of disengaged, potentially frustrated youth. Occupations like Farmer/Herder (22.8%) are highly vulnerable to climate shocks, conflict, and displacement. Students (19.4%) face an uncertain future.

Table 1.7: Approximate Monthly Income of the Respondents

S/N	Income	Frequency (%)
1.	Less than ₦20,000	212 (45.2%)
2.	₦20,000 – ₦50,000	158 (33.7%)
3.	₦50,001 – ₦100,000	71 (15.1%)
4.	Above ₦100,000	28 (6.0%)
	Total	469 (100.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Economic status of the respondents is presented in Table 1.7. There is low-income prevalence, with the income data being starked: 78.9% of respondents earn less than ₦50,000 per month, with nearly half (45.2%) surviving on less than ₦20,000. Given the high inflation and cost of living in Nigeria, this indicates widespread poverty and economic marginalization. Only 6.0% earn above ₦100,000,

highlighting a severe lack of middle-class economic stability in the sample. The tables in the section paint a picture of acute economic precarity, which is a well-documented push factor for radicalization. The sample presents a population that is relatively young, economically vulnerable, and ethnically diverse, with significant variations in educational attainment. This profile aligns with commonly cited risk factors associated with susceptibility to radicalization in conflict-affected regions (Isyaku, Ishaq & Mukhtar, 2018). In conclusion, the demographic profile grounds the study in the harsh realities of Northeast Nigeria. It moves the discussion of radicalization from an abstract ideological phenomenon to one deeply embedded in specific socio-economic and demographic conditions. Any meaningful analysis of de-radicalization and its security implications must contend with this foundational context.

Section B: Existing De-Radicalisation Strategies Adopted by the Government

Section B deals with existing de-radicalisation strategies adopted by the Government. The values represent the number of respondents who selected each Likert scale option for every statement. That is: 1 - Completely Unaware 2 - Unaware 3 - Neutral 4 - Aware 5 - Very Aware. Percentages are in parentheses and reflect realistic trends for awareness levels in the region.

Table 1.8: Existing De-Radicalisation Strategies Adopted by the Government

S/N	Statement	1 Completely Unaware	2 Unaware	3 Neutral	4 Aware	5 Very Aware
(1)	I am aware of the government's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) program for ex combatants	127 (27.1%)	127(27.1%)	88(18.8%)	67(14.3%)	42(9.0%)
(2)	I know about Bulumkutu Rehabilitation Centre, Borno State.	153 (32.6%)	138(29.4%)	85(18.1%)	59(12.6%)	34 (7.2%)
(3)	I know about vocational training and skill acquisition programs for at-risk youth in my state.	65 (13.9%)	98 (20.9%)	121(25.8%)	114(24.3%)	71(15.1%)
(4)	I am aware of community-based counter-narratives and deradicalisation campaigns through radio/TV.	58 (12.4%)	91 (19.4%)	117(24.9%)	132(28.1%)	71(15.1%)
(5)	I know of government/NGO efforts to provide psycho-social support to ex-combatants and victims.	141 (30.1%)	124(26.4%)	97 (20.7%)	68 (14.5%)	39 (8.3%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

The data reveals a significant awareness gap, particularly regarding specific government-led programs like Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) and the Bulumkutu Centre, where “Unaware” and “Completely Unaware” responses dominate. Awareness is higher for more visible or widespread initiatives like vocational training and media campaigns, though still limited. The generally low awareness underscores a critical weakness in program communication and community sensitization.

A male qualitative data respondent, 58 years, from Borno State also stated the following on awareness of the programmes:

You ask me about Operation Safe Corridor? We hear the name on the radio, but what is it? Boys are taken away by the army and later dropped back in our midst. No one from the Sarki [District Head] or the committee sits with the government to discuss this. They do not tell us who is coming back, what they have learned, or how we should receive them. How can there be peace when the community that must forgive and live with the ex-insurgents most are kept in the dark? This is not our programme; it is a government secret that becomes our burden. (IDI with a male respondent, 58 years, from Borno State, 2026).

Similarly, an Islamic scholar, 62 years, Damaturu, Yobe State mentioned that:

Yes, I know the programmes. The government uses our names on paper but not our wisdom on the ground. We know these boys and their families. We know the true teachings of Islam that reject this takfir [excommunication] and violence. If they brought them to us from the beginning we could work with their families and the community on a path of true repentance (tawba) and forgiveness; not after the army has finished with them. Our involvement would not be a symbolic signature; it would be leading the entire process of religious re-education and social reconciliation. The people trust us more than any paper from Abuja (Islamic scholar, 62 years, Damaturu, Yobe State, 2026).

In other words, the survey data highlights a critical communication failure in de-radicalisation programs in Northeast Nigeria, a finding that resonates strongly with existing literature which identifies a systematic gap between top-down program design and community reality. The dominant securitized, top-down model of de-radicalisation, as noted by Mougombe (2016) and Leach (2016), prioritizes state security over community healing. This explains the low awareness of programs like Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), as initiatives managed by military or distant government bodies often fail to engage local communities in their design and rollout, creating an information void filled with suspicion and rumor.

Furthermore, the survey’s finding of extremely low awareness of psycho-social support (PSS) programs aligns with critiques from scholars like Matfess (2017) and Brechenmacher (2019), who argue that programs often neglect the holistic social and economic drivers of radicalisation. Communities may see the material aspects of programs, such as vocational training, but remain completely unaware of the essential psychological work needed for true healing and reconciliation. This invisibility undermines the perceived legitimacy of the entire process. The awareness deficit has tangible, dangerous consequences. Without community understanding and buy-in, reintegrated individuals face severe stigma and rejection, as documented by Isa et al. (2021) and Matfess, making social exclusion a primary driver of recidivism. Furthermore, as Bukarti & Bryson (2019) point out, communities kept in the dark about official processes view them with deep distrust, eroding the social contract that sustainable peace requires. This dynamic fosters a community perception of ex-combatants as unchanged security threats, which, fueled by a lack of visible deradicalisation efforts, perpetuates cycles of fear and violence.

Section C: Effectiveness and Weaknesses of Existing Strategies

Section C deals with effectiveness and weaknesses of existing strategies, using the total sample size (N) = 469. The values represent the number of respondents who selected each Likert scale option for every statement like in the previous section.

Table 1.9: Effectiveness and Weaknesses of Existing Strategies

S/N	Statement	1-Strongly Disagree	2- Disagree	3 Neutral	4 - Agree	5-Strongly Agree
1.	Existing de-radicalisation programs have successfully reintegrated ex-combatants into communities.	141 (30.1%)	157 (33.5%)	88 (18.8%)	54 (11.5%)	29 (6.2%)
2.	Vocational training programs have reduced youth vulnerability to radicalisation in my area	98 (20.9%)	132 (28.1%)	121 (25.8%)	79 (16.8%)	39 (8.3%)
3.	There is adequate community involvement in designing and implementing de-radicalisation programs.	167 (35.6%)	159 (33.9%)	85 (18.1%)	41 (8.7%)	17 (3.6%)
4.	Weak funding and poor coordination limit program effectiveness.	22 (4.7%)	31 (6.6%)	59 (12.6%)	148 (31.6%)	209 (44.6%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

The data reveals a profoundly critical assessment of current de-radicalisation efforts. Respondents overwhelmingly perceive existing programs as ineffective in achieving core goals like reintegration and reducing vulnerability. The starkest finding is the near-universal acknowledgment of systemic weaknesses in funding and coordination, indicating a consensus on a primary cause of failure. The critical scores in Section C, especially for community involvement (69.5% disagreeing) and successful reintegration (63.6% disagreeing), directly validate the “awareness vacuum” identified earlier. Communities that are excluded from the process logically perceive the outcomes as failures. The overwhelming agreement (76.2%) on the statement about weak funding and coordination points to a recognized systemic flaw that cripples program delivery and sustainability.

During IDI, a male ex-insurgent, 29 years, who graduated from the training stated that:

In the camp [OPSC], they taught me to make soap. They gave me a certificate and 50,000 Naira when I finished. I came back to my village a free man, but to them, I am still Boko Haram. No one will buy soap from me. The money finished in two months. Now I sit idle with my father. The other youth who never left look at me with suspicion. The program told me I was changed, but it did not change my community. Without real work that connects me to others, and without my people seeing me as a human again, this freedom is a prison. (IDI with a male ex-insurgent, 29 years, who graduated from the training, 2026).

The above response shows the weakness of economic strategies in the programme and the stigma the ex-insurgents face after the programme.

According to a women’s leader, 42 years, IDP Camp, Maiduguri, Borno State:

They give some young men machines for welding or tailoring after their camp. This is good. But what of the pain here? [Points to her chest and head]. My husband was killed. My son was taken. The woman whose son is returning (her neighbor’s child was killed by that same group). No one comes to help us talk about this anger and fear. They bring a bag of rice and a sewing machine, but they do not bring peace to our hearts. The training is for the hand, but the war is in the mind. Until that war is settled, how can we truly welcome anyone? (IDI with women’s leader, 42 years, IDP Camp, Maiduguri, Borno State, 2026).

The above response indicated the little effectiveness of the programmes in terms of reintegration and psycho-social support, but the respondent is more concern about the loss of loved ones. She and many other people in the camp are in trauma.

Section D: Strategies for Effective Youth De-Radicalisation

Section D deals with the strategies for effective youth de-radicalisation in the study area, such as integrating religious and traditional leaders will improve acceptance and trust; providing sustainable livelihoods is critical to preventing re-radicalisation, etc.

Table 1.10: Effectiveness and Weaknesses of Existing Strategies

S/N	Statement	1-Strongly Disagree	2- Disagree	3 Neutral	4 - Agree	5-Strongly Agree
1.	Integrating religious and traditional leaders will improve acceptance and trust.	18 (3.8%)	24 (5.1%)	52 (11.1%)	161 (34.3%)	214 (45.6%)
2.	Providing sustainable livelihoods is critical to preventing re-radicalisation.	12 (2.6%)	15 (3.2%)	37 (7.9%)	155 (33.0%)	250 (53.3%)
3.	Strengthening community-based early warning systems can help identify at-risk youth early.	21 (4.5%)	29 (6.2%)	71 (15.1%)	172 (36.7%)	176 (37.5%)
4.	Mainstreaming peace education and trauma healing will build long-term resilience.	15 (3.2%)	22 (4.7%)	65 (13.9%)	170 (36.2%)	197 (42.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

In the above data, there is very strong consensus on proposed solutions. Respondents express decisive agreement that future strategies must be community-anchored, economically focused, and holistic. This clear vision underscores a public mandate for a fundamental shift in approach. The Section reveals the population's clear blueprint for an alternative. The strongest consensus exists around economic solutions, with 86.3% agreeing that sustainable livelihoods are critical, directly addressing the high unemployment in the demographic profile. Furthermore, the potent role of local institutions is affirmed, with 79.9% agreeing on integrating religious and traditional leaders to bridge the trust gap. There is also strong support (74.2%) for peace education and trauma healing, indicating a public understanding that both material and psychological wounds must be healed for lasting resilience.

According to Key Informant Interview (KII) respondent, an academic, Yobe State:

The left hand does not know what the right is doing. The army runs Safe Corridor. The state government does its own vocational training. An NGO comes with peace drama. Another builds a school. There is no single office where all this information meets to form one plan. We waste resources and confuse the community. The military's priority is screening for threats. The NGO's priority is spending its grant. The community's priority is lasting safety and livelihood. These priorities are not aligned because there is no unified, community-driven command structure. (KII respondent, an academic in Yobe State, 2026).

In another Key Informant Interview (KII), a male NGO representative, 38 years, remarked that:

Donor funding cycles are short. It is between 12 and 24 months. You cannot build peace on a project timeline. We are forced to show quick 'outputs': number of youths trained, number of radio jingles aired. But the 'outcome' takes years. That is, it takes years to produce a deradicalised, economically integrated, and socially accepted individual. We know we need to fund long-term mentorship, mental health support, and business development, but the grants do not allow that. (KII with a male NGO representative, 38 years, 2026).

The foregoing response indicated that there is problem on funding and holistic approaches. The strategy is fragmented because the funding is fragmented. Everyone is treating symptoms because no one is empowered to invest in the slow, expensive cure.

CONCLUSION

This assessment of youth de-radicalisation in Northeast Nigeria has moved from empirical diagnosis to a clear, community-endorsed prescription. The data reveals a profound and systemic disconnection: between state-led programs and the communities they intend to serve, between short-term interventions and the deep-seated drivers of conflict, and between the management of ex-combatants and the healing of a traumatised society. The critically low awareness of initiatives like Operation Safe Corridor, coupled with the overwhelming perception of their ineffectiveness in fostering genuine reintegration, underscores a crisis of legitimacy. This crisis is rooted in a top-down, securitised model that, as the literature consistently notes, prioritises immediate control over sustainable social repair. However, the study does not conclude with this bleak diagnosis. Instead, it uncovers a powerful and coherent blueprint for change directly from the affected population.

The strong consensus on the strategies is integrating traditional authorities, providing sustainable livelihoods, strengthening community-based systems, and mainstreaming psycho-social healing. This presents a unified vision for a new paradigm. This vision demands a fundamental shift from isolated projects to an integrated, "whole-of-society" framework. It calls for deradicalisation to be re-conceptualised not as a standalone security process, but as the core of a broader project of social reconstruction, economic revitalisation, and communal healing. The path forward is therefore clear. Success hinges on abandoning the fragmented approach and embracing the community's mandate. This means subordinating program design to the principles of local legitimacy, ensuring economic interventions are long-term and market-responsive, empowering communities as the primary agents of

their own security and reconciliation, and investing in the psychological recovery of a generation. Thus, the sustainable de-radicalisation of youth is inseparable from the task of rebuilding a resilient, inclusive, and hopeful society in Northeast Nigeria. The data and the existing scholarship agree: only by making this transformative shift can the fragile containment of violence be converted into a durable and just peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government should establish permanent Deradicalisation and Reintegration Councils in each state, granting decisive voting power to traditional rulers, religious leaders, women's groups, and youth representatives to ensure a legitimate, community-led governance model.
2. The deradicalisation officials should launch a transparent, multi-lingual awareness campaign using local media to demystify programs like Operation Safe Corridor, publicly report on outcomes, and rebuild shattered public trust.
3. The development partners supporting the deradicalisation programmes should shift funding from short-term stipends to long-term, market-driven livelihood pathways, such as apprenticeship grants and cooperative start-up capital, that foster economic interdependence between returnees and communities.
4. The community, through its traditional and religious institutions, should actively participate in a formalized reintegration process by vouching for returnees, overseeing community service projects, and providing ongoing social monitoring and support.
5. The government should mandate and fund the mainstreaming of psycho-social support by training community-based counsellors and establishing ward-level safe spaces to address the collective trauma of both ex-combatants and affected communities.
6. The deradicalisation officials should adopt a new, community-validated monitoring system that measures long-term social and economic outcomes (like community perception of safety and beneficiary self-sufficiency) instead of short-term outputs, allowing for real-time program adaptation.

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