

Case 7: Finding a New Sense of Purpose through Psychosocial Therapy



Country	Nigeria	Thematic Areas		
Organization	Neem Foundation	Policy	Security	Ideology
Programme	The Yellow Ribbon Initiative	Psychology		

Summary

The Neem Foundation has worked for the last seven years on understanding the driving forces of radicalization and what motivates people to join Boko Haram and other extremist groups. With specialties in psychological and mental health services, the team developed a deep understanding of violent extremism. They help former fighters with the process of deradicalization. They now collaborate with the government of Borno State to offer a holistic programme of psychological counselling, faith-based services, vocational training, education, sports, and food to former members of violent extremist groups.

Context

Boko Haram has terrorized Nigeria for the last two decades and sent thousands of Nigerians, accused of affiliation with this group, to prison. Boko Haram has killed more than 20,000 people, abducted thousands, and displaced over two million people in the North East and thousands more across the country. In this humanitarian crisis, children have been separated from caregivers, and their education and livelihoods disrupted. Women have played many roles within Boko Haram, including as fighters, wives, and mothers. When they return from Boko Haram, they often become heads of households, with little socioeconomic or societal support. These women and girls have experienced extreme trauma and report facing sexual violence, rejection, stigma and immense poverty. After being part of Boko Haram and bearing children, they are rejected by community members. Any service provision that focuses on the special needs of women and girls is currently mainly provided on a very ad hoc basis by CSOs.

In 2013, the government of Nigeria passed an Anti-Terrorism Bill to stop terrorist financing and started coordinating counter-terrorism networks. They established a federal Counter-Terrorism Office under the Office of the National Security Adviser to address terrorism; however, they didn't acknowledge women or children as specific categories. They do not have a systematic categorization or robust mechanisms for collecting intelligence on terrorist suspects. Thousands are detained on suspicion of terrorism, but many are released when they come to trial because of lack of legal evidence. The Federal Ministry of Justice is currently evaluating various models for the release and reintegration of terrorist suspects—as there is currently no system of probation or parole, most will either face jail time or be released directly into communities. The government does run a small deradicalization programme for about 85 former terrorists who have surrendered to authorities.

While women have many different pathways to and experiences of terrorism, there has only been one state-backed programme for them in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the programme was ended in 2017 without proper assessment of risk or community-based tracking mechanisms. Some women have found themselves in IDP camps and with no legal framework; thousands remain in prisons or detention centres.

Nigeria passed a national health bill in 2014, which integrated mental health for the first time. Federal medical centres have few psychiatrists or psychologists, and in general the lack of practitioners limits services. However, in 2014 there was a recognition of the need for mental health services for serving members of the armed forces, especially in conflict zones. The military developed a mental health policy and created three centres which provide trauma counselling. Additionally, Neem Foundation is working with several federal agencies including the Ministries of Interior and Health and the National Primary Care Development Agency, as well as the Nigerian Psychological Association, to develop a framework for mental health response in emergencies.

OBJECTIVES	STAKEHOLDERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide psychological and rehabilitative services for those returning from violent extremist groups as well as victims of violence ■ Build capacity of other CSOs to provide psychosocial support ■ Collaborate with the government in scaling mental health services and fostering reintegration of women and girls from violent extremist groups ■ Develop basic competencies and standards in mental health service provision ■ Provide training for first responders in emergencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Neem Foundation ■ Ministry of Health ■ Ministry of Interior ■ Ministry of Justice

Strategy and Implementation

Neem Foundation works in geographic regions beyond the reach of international NGOs, trains and builds the capacity of local CSOs, and collaborates with the government regarding policies which affect their work. Since 2012, they have developed expertise in deradicalization, providing psychological services to those who suffer from depression, anxiety, and trauma, including those involved with violent extremist groups, and last year they established a specialized children’s trauma service to provide counselling to children under the age of 14. Their training centre enables a wider reach to others and there they have developed curricula on lay counselling, child mental health and trauma, psychological first aid, psychological assessment techniques and other topics relevant to the local context on the ground.

The “Counselling on Wheels” programme is a community-based service that addresses the trauma needs of communities displaced by the insurgency. Neem provides comprehensive psychological services for up to 1,250 beneficiaries a month. Signs of trauma, including PTSD, are quite common, and the Neem Foundation has learned that more tailored approaches are required for survivors of gender-based violence. Returnees also need to process what their experiences mean for their identity, and how they can forgive themselves for past actions, in order to determine how they best reintegrate and relate with other community members.

The Neem Foundation conducted research in 20 communities affected by Boko Haram, from which they developed an index of radicalization. In Nigeria, they understand that people join extremist groups for a variety of reasons. The factors of ideology, identity, economics, lack of belonging, and sense of purpose can all influence one’s motivation. Many women and girls join Boko Haram for power, status, and economic reasons.

Neem Foundation runs a rehabilitation programme for 1,500 young people who were associated with armed groups. They are assessed on a number of risk factors that include identity, ideology, psychology, economic and social factors, problem behaviours, and community ties. Neem Foundation has developed a comprehensive programme providing work skills training, psychological counselling, faith-based intervention, food, and health care to returning members of violent extremist groups. The partnership with the government has facilitated



Sports can be a method of rehabilitation and reintegration

access to the military who can hand over returnees to civil society programmes. The Neem Foundation collaborated closely with imams to understand the religious factors that contribute to radicalization. Through their work with members of violent extremist groups, they discovered that those with knowledge of the Qur'an would use select interpretations to further their recruitment goals. Young people with limited religious understanding, critical thinking skills, and education were particularly vulnerable to recruitment. For this reason, the Neem Foundation developed an educational curriculum to foster the imagination and dreams of youth that strengthens the educational system.

Working in 20 at-risk communities in three states, the Neem Foundation has developed mechanisms to identify signs of early radicalization. Through monthly training workshops, they share the signs of radicalization with community members. As a result, community management teams, consisting of representatives from the security sector, traditional and government institutions, faith leaders, and youth and women's groups, have formed. They communicate with each other regularly regarding unusual behaviour within the community. In this way, they can function as an early warning system. The Neem Foundation works with community leaders to sensitize them to the needs of women and girl returnees in particular, to enhance social cohesion and security.



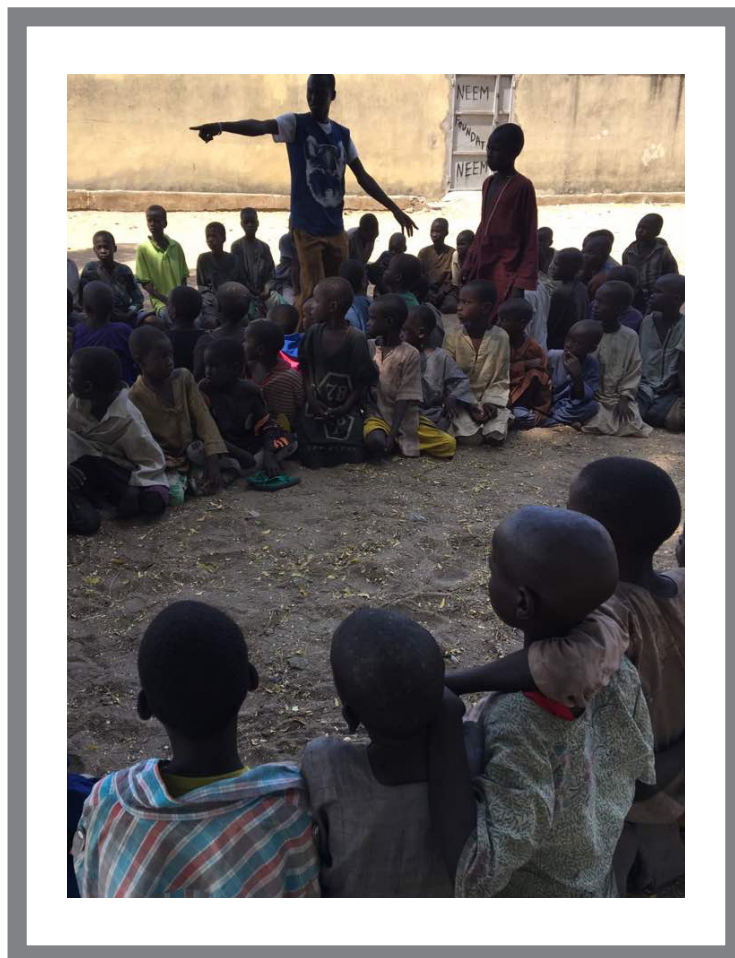
Participants of a Neem Foundation rehabilitation and reintegration program

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- More specific therapy is required for survivors of gender-based violence
- Secondary trauma is prevalent, thus support for front line staff should be factored into programme planning
- Livelihoods are an integral part of rehabilitation
- Reintegration programmes must address the root causes of violent extremism; this would include engagement on an ideological front, religious engagement, teaching of critical thinking, values, inclusion and peace studies, sports, trauma counselling and livelihood support

Sustainability and Potential Application

Partnership with the government and military assists CSOs to scale up their work, which they would not be able to do independently.



*Children gathered for an activity
in northeast Nigeria*