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THEMATIC SERIES
# THE INVISIBLE MAJORITY

This thematic series addresses the gap in awareness, data and knowledge about the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions.



# "ONCE THE ROAD IS SAFE"

Displacement and return in north-eastern Nigeria

AUGUST 2019

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# "ONCE THE ROAD IS SAFE"

## Displacement and return in north-eastern Nigeria

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*Nigerian returnees who had settled in Minawao camp, Cameroon after fleeing Boko Haram violence, queue to receive emergency relief items at a crowded camp in Banki, Nigeria. Photo © UNHCR/Romain Desclous, May 2017*

# SUMMARY

North-eastern Nigeria has borne the brunt of so-called Boko Haram's jihadist insurgency since 2009. More than 1.9 million people were internally displaced as a result of the group's violence as of January 2019, and over 230,000 refugees have sought shelter in Cameroon, Chad and Niger.[1]

This report, which is based on interviews with 345 internally displaced people (IDPs) and returning refugees, examines the drivers of displacement and onward movement within and across Nigeria's borders, provides a better understanding of people's priorities and preconditions for return, and explores obstacles and opportunities for durable solutions. The report is part of IDMC's "Invisible Majority" thematic series, which examines the relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movements. It arrives at the following key findings.

## Most people are displaced more than once

Violent and often indiscriminate attacks against civilians by different factions and splinter groups of Boko Haram are the leading cause of displacement in north-eastern Nigeria. Escalating violence led to a spike in displacement throughout the region in 2014, and people continue to flee five years later. As many as 341,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded in 2018. Many interviewees had been displaced more than once, including some who had returned to their homes only to be displaced again.

## Proximity and social ties facilitate cross-border movements

Insecurity also triggers cross border movement to neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger and Chad. There is a longstanding history of cross-border migration in the region, and for people displaced in Nigeria's border regions it can be easier to seek refuge abroad than internally. That said, some people are unable to leave the country for lack of financial or social capital.

## Unreliable information leads to unsustainable returns

A tripartite agreement between the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon offers a channel for the repatriation of Nigerian refugees, but challenges remain in ensuring that returns are voluntary and sustainable. Harsh conditions in exile and perceived improvements in the security situation in Nigeria combine to encourage premature returns. IDPs too live in poor conditions, and many are anxious to return and re-establish their former livelihoods, but insecurity remains a barrier.

## Returning refugees and IDPs experience similar challenges

Due to destruction of homes and ongoing insecurity, many refugees return to live among IDPs. Fewer than a third of the returning refugees interviewed were living in their areas of origin. Living conditions for people displaced in north-eastern Nigeria are poor and there are few opportunities to generate income. Camps are overcrowded, and access to services and assistance in host communities is limited.

## Durable solutions are overlooked in focus on emergency response

The emergency response to Nigeria's ongoing humanitarian crisis has taken precedence over longer-term development programming, despite the fact that people's lack of livelihoods contributes to displacement drivers in the region. Real investments in adult education, training and employment will be vital in facilitating durable solutions.

# INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has a population of more than 200 million, making it the most populous country in Africa and seventh in the world.[2] Around 47 per cent of Nigerians are living in extreme poverty, which means that the country has more people living in extreme poverty than anywhere else in the world.[3]

A disproportionate number of the country's poor live in the north-eastern states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe, which together account for around a third of Nigeria's territory and 14 per cent of its population. Many people are subsistence farmers, and even during periods of high national economic growth the region's productivity has been low and unemployment high. Illiteracy is widespread, access to healthcare limited and infrastructure lacking.[4]

The north-east has also borne the brunt of Boko Haram's insurgency since 2009, and a state of emergency was declared in all three states in 2013. Part of the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2015, and has since called itself Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA). At least 34,000 people have been killed in attacks and counterinsurgency operations.[5] More than 1.9 million people were internally displaced as of January 2019, and over 230,000 have fled across the border to Cameroon, Chad and Niger.[6] The crisis is now in its tenth year, and around 7.1 million people in the north-east are in need of humanitarian assistance.[7]

Changing climate conditions and recurrent drought have made traditional livelihoods unviable, which in turn has affected food security and fuelled conflict in



*Returning refugees in north-eastern Nigeria, Photo: Hajer Naili/NRC*

the region. At the same time, the conflict has destroyed productive assets, infrastructure and services, which has disrupted essential economic and social systems. All of these factors have combined to increase the region's economic and social marginalisation.[8]

Displacement is ongoing, but the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 1.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees have returned.[9] More than 11,000 refugees returned from neighbouring countries in the first three months of 2019.[10] There is, however, growing evidence to suggest that many recorded returnees are in fact unable to go back to their homes, effectively leaving them internally displaced.

Like the majority of residents of Damasak in Borno state, Lami (pictured on p.6) fled to Niger with her husband and five children when Boko Haram attacked the town in November 2014. They crossed the Yobe river on foot. When they returned to their home earlier this year, only the walls were still standing. Until their home was rebuilt, they lived in a makeshift shelter made of four planks, a large plastic sheet, bits of rope and a bed cover.

Lami's story is far from unique. Returnees, whether refugees or IDPs, face many challenges in re-establishing their lives in their places of origin, but information gaps prevent them from being effectively addressed. With this in mind, this study examines the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions in north-eastern Nigeria. Its objectives are:

| To examine the triggers and drivers of displacement, including onward movements within and across borders

| To establish a better understanding of the preconditions and people's priorities for voluntary return

| To examine obstacles to durable solutions for returning refugees and IDPs, and assess the risk of further displacement

# METHODOLOGY

This study draws on the results of a survey conducted among IDPs and returning refugees in Borno state in early 2019. A total of 345 interviews were conducted, supplemented by a literature review and additional qualitative interviews to validate findings.

## Sampling strategy

Given insecurity and access challenges in Borno, a non-probability sampling technique was adopted. Respondents were identified through a convenience sample, drawing on the local knowledge of researchers, partners and participants. Fieldwork locations were selected based on accessibility, the presence of NRC or partners and the potential risks to researchers and participants. Various locations in Borno were included to enhance the diversity of the sample, and data collection took place in both camps and host communities.

*An interview in Gajiganna host community. Photo: Micah Mendie, 2019.*

## | Data collection

Data collection took place in March and April 2019. Interviews were conducted by local enumerators in Hausa and Kanuri using KoboToolbox, developed by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative for research in challenging environments. The enumerators underwent two days of training on the objectives and wording of the survey, use of the software and data collection techniques. Staff with IOM's displacement tracking matrix (DTM) conducted additional interviews in hard-to-reach border areas, bringing the total to 345 interviews.

The survey questions varied somewhat depending on the type of respondent, but were as standardised as possible to enable comparison across the different population groups. The survey included demographics, an overview of causes of displacement and journeys undertaken, conditions in host communities and communities of origin as well as barriers and opportunities for durable solutions.

The data was cleaned and then analysed using Stata statistical software. Simple descriptive statistics are employed in the presentation of findings.
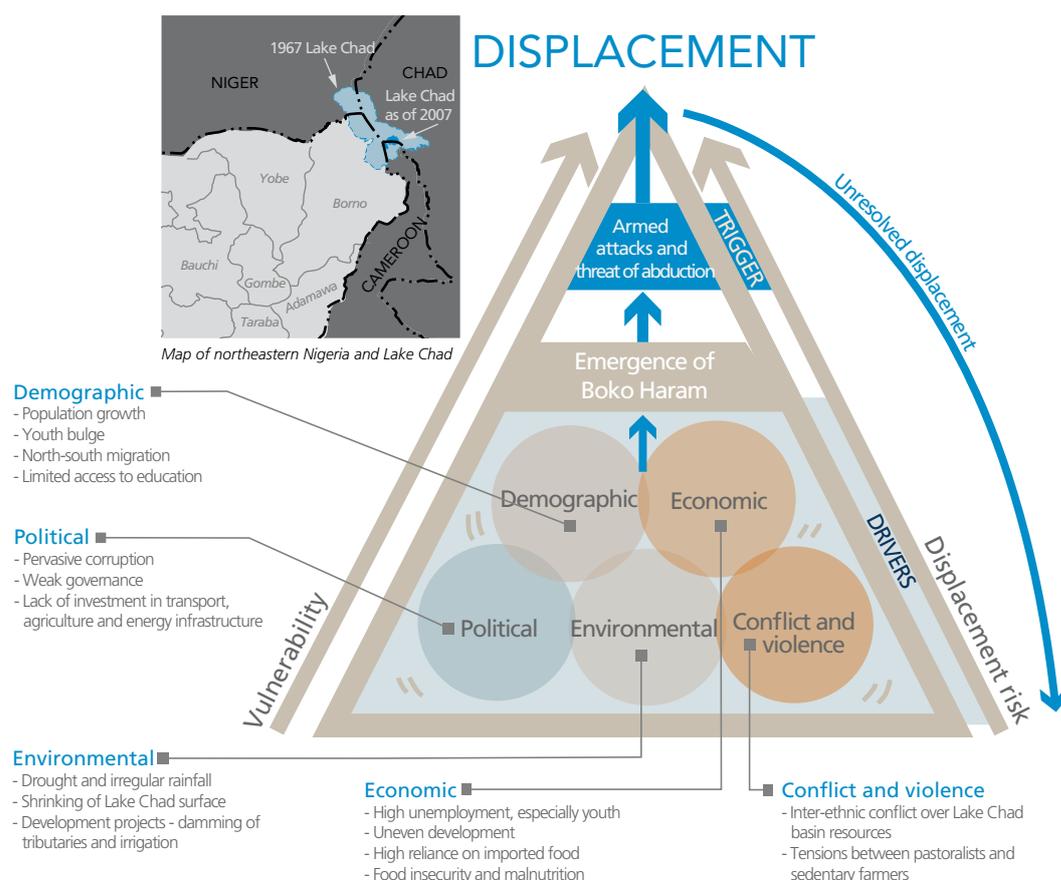
## LIMITATIONS

The sample for the study was non-representative, and the precarious security situation limited the geographical scope of the research, which does not include areas under Boko Haram control. As such, it is not possible to extrapolate the findings to apply to all displaced people in north-eastern Nigeria.

Quality assurance processes facilitated by Translators without Borders also revealed significant discrepancies between interview transcripts and survey data, which raised concerns about the quality of the data collected. To offset this, survey findings were triangulated against the results of other assessments and corroborated by key informants and external sources whenever possible.

Concerns over data quality raise questions about whether survey-based research approaches are appropriate methods in low-capacity environments. This also underscores the value of quality assurance processes, including audio recordings.

# 'BOKO HARAM CHASED US OUT': CAUSES AND PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

FIGURE 1: Causes of displacement in north-eastern Nigeria[11]



DISPLACEMENT

**Demographic**
- Population growth
- Youth bulge
- North-south migration
- Limited access to education

**Political**
- Pervasive corruption
- Weak governance
- Lack of investment in transport, agriculture and energy infrastructure

**Environmental**
- Drought and irregular rainfall
- Shrinking of Lake Chad surface
- Development projects - damming of tributaries and irrigation

**Economic**
- High unemployment, especially youth
- Uneven development
- High reliance on imported food
- Food insecurity and malnutrition

**Conflict and violence**
- Inter-ethnic conflict over Lake Chad basin resources
- Tensions between pastoralists and sedentary farmers

Armed attacks and threat of abduction

TRIGGER

Emergence of Boko Haram

Unresolved displacement

DRIVERS

Vulnerability

Displacement risk

Demographic · Economic · Political · Environmental · Conflict and violence

1967 Lake Chad · Lake Chad as of 2007

NIGER · CHAD · CAMEROON · Yobe · Borno · Bauchi · Gombe · Adamawa · Taraba

*Map of northeastern Nigeria and Lake Chad*

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND VIOLENT ATTACKS

It is no coincidence that Nigeria's marginalised north-east has been the stage for Boko Haram's insurgency. Factors including deep social and economic disparities, weak governance and high unemployment have fuelled resentment and radicalisation, particularly among disenfranchised young men.[12]

Boko Haram has also capitalised on livelihood challenges and competition over resources aggravated by serious climate variations and the disappearance of the Lake Chad, the surface area of which has shrunk by 90 per cent in less than half a century, exacerbated by poor water resource management. These factors have increased migration from rural areas to saturated urban centres, "into the waiting hands of groups that promise them better livelihoods in the face of economic hardships".[13]

Boko Haram is notorious for extreme acts of violence, including suicide bombings involving children and

indiscriminate attacks against civilians. Its violence intensified and displacement peaked in 2014, with 975,000 new conflict displacements recorded throughout the year.[14]

Most of the research participants were displaced in 2014 (see figure 2), and all said violence was the main cause of their displacement. Many fled when Boko Haram attacked their villages. "We only escaped with the clothes we wore at that time," Esther said. "I was missing a shoe." More than 40 per cent of respondents had been displaced more than once, a finding corroborated by IOM's figure of 41 per cent for IDPs in Borno.[15] Around a third said they had tried to return to their homes, only to be displaced again by further violence.

**FIGURE 2:** Year of displacement
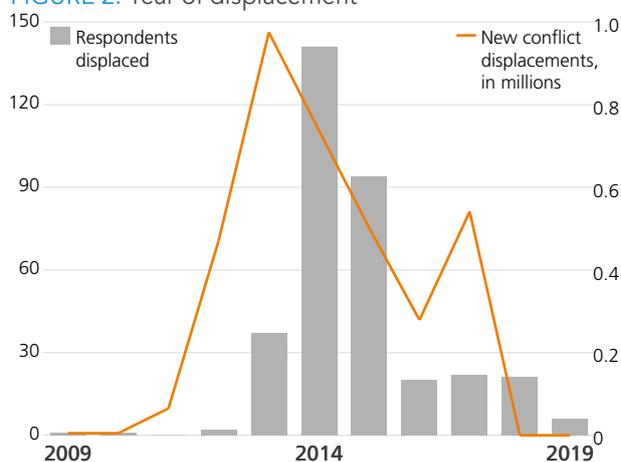


*"We were told Boko Haram had left, and our town is nice so we went back. But after a few days they returned and chased us out of town. When they left, we went back again. That was the routine, until one day they came and took the town for good."- Joy*

*"Boko Haram chased us out, and we fled to Cameroon. When we came back, they chased us out again. The third time we escaped and we never returned." - Grace*

# REFUGE IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Many people have also fled abroad to neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger, which between them host more than 230,000 refugees.[16]

Such movements are particularly common among people who live in border areas, for whom it is often easier to seek safety abroad than internally.

Clashes between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram in December 2018 and January 2019 in the town of Rann, eight kilometres from the border with Cameroon, forced around 40,000 people to flee across the border.[17] Research participants reported similar movements in other border areas: "We started to hear gunfire from all sides and then we ran into Fotokol in Cameroon", said Emmanuel from the town of Gamboru.

Cross-border movements across the Lake Chad region are not new. The region has a long history of cross-border trade, predominantly focused on agricultural produce and fish. The former colonial powers also divided the region up arbitrarily, resulting in "strong ethnic and family links that span across borders" which have encouraged migration.[18]

There are nonetheless a number of obstacles to seeking refuge abroad, particularly for people who live further away from border areas. Some are simply unwilling to leave Nigeria, but the cost involved and the absence of social networks in potential host countries prevent many from doing so.

*"We did not leave Nigeria because it is too expensive and we don't have any family or relatives there. We thought maybe life would be very difficult for us there." - Rose*

*"We do not have people there. We go to places where we have relatives." - Michael*

Such testimonies point to social capital being as important as financial capital in people's decisions about whether or not to migrate. This is supported by research which suggests social networks play a role "in initiating spatial mobility and in the choice of destinations for many migrants … as well as in processes of integration/assimilation in the new society of residence".[19] This is likely to be true not only of cross-border movements, but also internal rural to urban migration and displacement.

# 'WE HAVE NOTHING AND OUR HEARTS ARE SHAKING': CONDITIONS IN DISPLACEMENT

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## COPING IN NIGERIA

Displaced people in north-eastern Nigeria face similar challenges whether or not they have previously sought refuge abroad. Living conditions are generally poor, particularly in camps, and many displaced people have no running water or toilet facilities. More than half of the survey respondents said they were living in tents or makeshift shelters.

These findings are corroborated by UNHCR, which found: "Displaced populations are living in squalid conditions characterized by overcrowding and limited access to safe, sanitary and dignified accommodation."[20]

Living conditions of displaced people in host communities are somewhat better than for those in camps. Since many humanitarian interventions focused on camps however, they may struggle to access services. Key informants even spoke of host community members setting up makeshift shelters in camps to access services there.
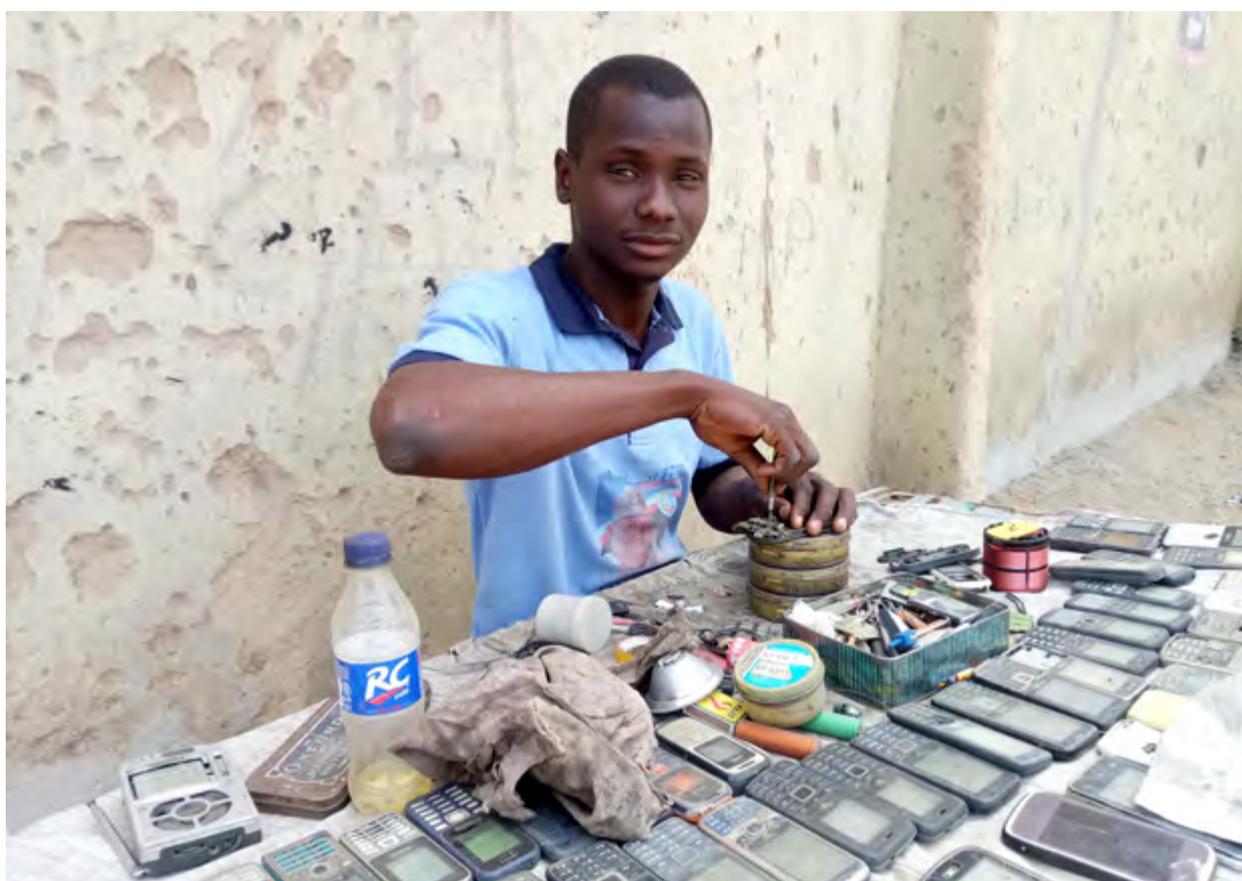


*Samuel repairs mobile phones in Old Maiduguri host community. Photo: Micah Mendie, 2019.*

Education is a particular concern. The group has deliberately targeted teachers and students, including the abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014, and such tactics have led to school closures and falling attendances. Cost is also a significant obstacle. "There's a school nearby and it's a very good one", said Stephanie. "But the children don't go to school because we can't afford to enrol them." Many go instead to religious schools that focus largely on learning and reciting the Qur'an, and are often more accessible to poor households.[21]

Low education levels undermine access to employment in a region where job opportunities are already scarce. Survey participants primarily rely on day labour and informal micro-businesses to get by. Samuel, pictured on p.11, repairs mobile phones in Dalori camp.

In many cases "men have to go to the bush to get firewood to get money to feed their families", said Esther. Grace's family sells humanitarian assistance items: "We sell what was distributed to us as aid and buy charcoal and soap. We buy clothes for our children, we buy shoes and solve our daily needs", she said. The lack of income-generating opportunities has also led some to resort to negative coping strategies including child labour and begging.

*We make moi moi for our kids for breakfast. We sell the leftovers and use the money to buy other things like water. If there are no leftovers, our kids will go out on the streets to beg. - Mercy*

*Moi moi is a protein rich steamed pudding made of black-eyed peas*

Eighty-five per cent of respondents said they sometimes felt hungry. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) also reports that many IDPs face emergency or crisis levels of food insecurity, and that famine is a risk in the region.[22]

# SURVIVING ABROAD

As difficult as conditions may be for people displaced in north-eastern Nigeria, they are perhaps harsher still in neighbouring countries. Poverty was already endemic and development indicators low in areas that now host Nigerian refugees. Seventy-four per cent of the population in the Far North region of Cameroon live below the national poverty line, and the net academic enrolment rate is only 23.5 per cent.[23]

Cameroon's formally established Minawao camp, which hosts 57,000 refugees, has limited water supply, insufficient infrastructure, and public health concerns. Refugees receive only 11 litres of water per person a day, below the standard of 20.[24] In the informal camp set up to accommodate refugees from Rann, the figure was a low as seven.[25]

Access to shelter is also a significant challenge. Three-quarters of the returning refugees surveyed said they had been living in tents or makeshift shelters, and some said they had no shelter at all. This is corroborated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which found that many of those who fled Rann into Cameroon were forced to sleep in the open.[26]

*"When we left Nigeria and moved to Cameroon, we were separated and just looking for safe place … Nobody had a shelter, and the rain was pouring on us … We experienced all kinds of ordeals. When someone died, we didn't even have anything to use as a shroud … There was not enough food, we used to go to sleep hungry … We took our children out begging … If we didn't get anything, we just went back and went to sleep." - Grace*

# 'ONCE THE ROAD IS SAFE': PRIORITIES AND PRE-CONDITIONS FOR RETURN

1.5 million returnees are recorded in the north-east of the country. Alongside returning IDPs, this includes a small percentage of returning refugees: in Borno State, two per cent of recorded returnees have returned from abroad. [27] Actual numbers are likely to be much higher, because many returning refugees end up in camps where they are counted instead as IDPs.

The results of this study echo previous findings by Refugees International which suggest that poor living conditions in areas of displacement and inaccurate information about conditions in areas of return are key drivers of all-too-often premature returns.[28] IDMC identified similar trends in Iraq and Colombia.[29]

## VOLUNTARINESS IN QUESTION

UNHCR and the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon signed a tripartite agreement for the voluntary repatriation of Nigerian refugees in 2016.[31] The agreement focuses on voluntariness, but numerous incidents of forcible return have been reported.[32] An estimated 10,000 people are thought to have been forcibly returned from Cameroon since January 2018; UNHCR estimates that 15 per cent of the returns that took place between January and March 2019 were involuntary.[33] According to key informants, few returns had yet taken place under the auspices of the tripartite agreement.

FIGURE 3: Returnees in north-eastern Nigeria[30]
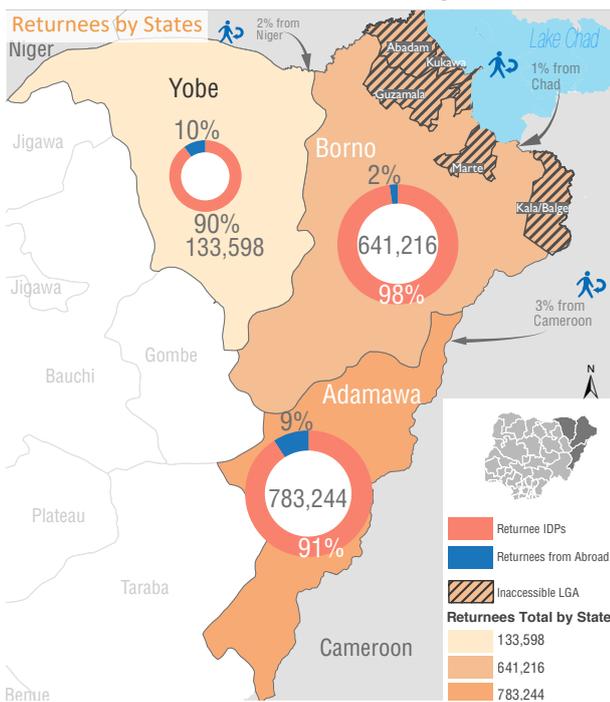


## INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION

The information that refugees and IDPs receive about conditions in their areas of origin plays a significant role in determining whether or not they decide to return. Less than half of the respondents in this study, however, considered themselves well informed in this sense, which increases the likelihood of premature returns and further displacement.

Refugees International found that political pressure to return has included misinformation about reconstruction and safety in areas of origin, and the spreading of rumours about camps being closed and assistance curtailed.[34] The calls for return associated with the

*A makeshift shelter in Dalori camp. Photo: Micah Mendie, 2019.*

much-publicised reconstruction of Bama town, for example, have been criticised as premature.[35]

Scepticism limits the impact of such misinformation. Information is not always trusted as reliable, even when provided by family or friends: "Some will say Maiduguri is very peaceful, there's food and the government will take care of you, while others will say not to go to Maiduguri, there's no accommodation and Maiduguri will be captured," said Grace.

## DIFFICULT CONDITIONS IN DISPLACEMENT

Confronted with harsh living conditions in neighbouring countries, many returning refugees believed they would be better off in Nigeria, where they could try to re-establish their former livelihoods and be reunified with family and friends. "We were in critical conditions," said Emmanuel. "There was shelter and water, but there was no food." More than 70 per cent of the refugees surveyed in Cameroon's Minawao camp in 2016 said they wanted to return to Nigeria when conditions allowed.[36]

Similar factors motivate IDPs to try to return to their areas of origin. Nearly 70 per cent of those who participated in this study said they wanted to do so. "If my village were good now, I would pack and go back there immediately", said Daniel. "I feel much freer in my village. I have my farmland, I have an occupation and I go fishing."

Insecurity is the main barrier to return. "You can see your town up there but you dare not to go because you can hear the sounds of Boko Haram," said Grace. Patience has also refrained from returning. "Boko Haram will chase you away with their guns," she said.

# 'THEY BRING AID': DURABLE SOLUTIONS, OR LACK THEREOF

## RETURNING TO DISPLACEMENT

Given that armed attacks are the main cause of repeated displacement, providing a secure and stable environment for returnees is an important precondition for the achievement of durable solutions. Even in the absence of insecurity, the sustainability of return can be undermined by lack of housing, infrastructure, services and livelihood opportunities.

The majority of refugees who return to north-eastern Nigeria do so to a life of internal displacement, illustrating that conditions are often not right for return. Less than a third of returning refugees who took part in this study were living in their areas of origin, and nearly two-thirds were living in tents or shelters. This correlates with IOM's finding that 63 per cent of returning IDPs and returnees in Borno state live in makeshift shelters.[37]

"I don't have a house to live in, I don't have a job or a source of income and Boko Haram is still there," said Joy, who has been living in a camp in Maiduguri since her return from Cameroon.

Meanwhile, the number of IDPs in Maiduguri fell from more than 445,000 to around 263,000 between January 2017 and January 2019, but insecurity is thought to have prevented many of those who left from returning to their villages of origin. Instead, they effectively live in secondary displacement in their home areas' urban centres.[38]

The availability of housing in areas of origin is a significant challenge. "We don't have any shelter, our homes were burned down. If we go back now, we will have nowhere to stay," said Grace. Boko Haram's attacks often involve the destruction of whole villages, as evidenced by satellite imagery of Rann (see figure 4). More than 80 per cent of owners surveyed for this study said their property had been damaged or destroyed. UNHCR put the figure at 97 per cent among refugee households who returned to Nigeria between January and March 2019.[39]

Reconstruction of housing and infrastructure alone, however, is no guarantee of sustainable return. Poor and very poor displaced households in Borno spend over half of their income on food, and it is estimated that sixty percent of IDPs in Borno are in debt.[40] In the absence of livelihood opportunities, these households are unlikely to be able to rebuild their lives.

The absence of accessible mechanisms to acquire documentation is another concern. While such mechanisms are theoretically in place, accessibility is extremely limited outside of state capitals. More than 60 per cent of survey respondents said they did not have all the documents they needed to access services. The majority had lost them during their displacement. "When we were fleeing, we didn't have the mind to look for a card," said Patience. Lack of documentation affects people's legal status and residence, movement and employment rights. As such, it also a significant barrier to the achievement of durable solutions. Efforts to provide replacement documentation to displaced people, however, are limited.

FIGURE 4: Satellite imagery of Rann before and after Boko Haram's attack [41]



## EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The government has been responding to the challenges created by the conflict in north-eastern Nigeria at both the state and federal level. Key stakeholders include the National Emergency Management Agency and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons. More than 60 partners including UN agencies, government entities and national and international NGOs were operating in Borno as of April 2019.[42]

The 2016 Buhari plan, which the government describes as "the blueprint for the comprehensive humanitarian relief and socioeconomic stabilization of the northeast", is the main framework for response. It includes an entire volume on development strategies, covering infrastructure development, the revitalisation of agriculture, health sector reform, educational transformation and entrepreneurship and job creation.[43]

The need for emergency responses to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, however, makes it difficult for stakeholders to concentrate on longer-term sustainable development and durable solutions. Up to 7.1 million people are considered to be in need of life-saving assistance in north-east Nigeria in 2019.[44]

Given the scale of the crisis, the humanitarian community provides only basic assistance for day-to-day survival, with very little focus on longer-term access to livelihoods. Women, girls, and the elderly, perceived as most vulnerable, receive the bulk of assistance. Male youth, in contrast, are receiving very little support and have no access to jobs or steady income. In the absence of development-oriented programming, these disenfranchised youth are finding violent alternatives to lives of poverty and idleness in the ranks of Boko Haram or opposing militias such as the Civilian Joint Taskforce. Most of the members of such groups are young unemployed men.[45]

# CONCLUSION

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Boko Haram has taken advantage of socioeconomic marginalisation and increasing environmental stresses in north-eastern Nigeria to fuel an armed insurgency that has forced millions of people to flee their homes. Insecurity prevents most returning refugees from going back to their homes, consigning them instead to living as IDPs.

Given the scale of the ongoing humanitarian crisis, both government and international stakeholders are focussed predominantly on basic emergency responses. Little if any attention is paid to livelihoods, which increases the likelihood of disenfranchised young men joining armed groups. This in turn contributes to the drivers of displacement, prolonging what is already a protracted crisis.

The crisis has implications beyond north-eastern Nigeria, fueling regional instability in the wider Lake Chad Basin. The humanitarian emergency in the region is considered one of the most severe in the world. Nearly ten million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger.[47]

At the same time, the economic cost of internal displacement is likely to amount to a significant share of Nigeria's GDP, undermining national development in a country already struggling with widespread poverty and inequality.[46] Beyond humanitarian assistance, longer-term development investments are needed to resolve the crisis and achieve stability and prosperity in the region.



*A man looks at houses destroyed by Boko Haram in the town of Garaha, Adamawa state, Nigeria. Photo © UNHCR/George Osodi, May 2016*

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