Operation Safe Corridor in Northwest Nigeria

Prospects and challenges



Dengiyefa Angalapu and Titilayo Olaniyan

November 2026

Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la Democratie et Developpent

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Authors

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Published by the Centre for Democracy and Development
Abuja, Nigeria
November 2026

Suggested citation

Angalapu, Dengiyefa, and Titilayo Olaniyan. Operation Safe Corridor in Northwest Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges. Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, 2026.

www.cddwestafrica.org

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ISBN: 978-978-67-4010-2

Please direct inquiries to:

Centre for Democracy and Development
(CDD-West Africa) Research Department
16-20, A7 Street Mount Pleasant
Estate (CITEC) Federal Capital Territory
(F.C.T) Abuja

cddabv@cddwestafrica.org

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Acknowledgements

We thank Dr Dauda Garuba, Director of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa), for his support for this research. We acknowledge Brigadier General Yusuf Ali, Coordinator of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), for the programme's engagement with the study.

We are also grateful to Captain Kingsley Omaka Agha, OPSC's Programme Officer; Yetunde Olobayo, Secretary of OPSC; and Colonel J. Anthony. We thank Buhari Muriki for his support as a research assistant.

We also thank Esther Yusuf, CDD's Head of Administration; Ruth Gyet, Head of Finance; Mary Okpe, Head of Programmes; and Alechenu David, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, for their support. We are grateful to the current and former programme participants, community interlocutors, programme personnel and partners who shared their experiences and insights. Their accounts provided the foundation for this assessment.

We thank the MacArthur Foundation for its support through Phase II of the Nigeria Anti-Corruption Agencies Strengthening Initiative Project (NACASIP II).

Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la Democratie et Developpent

MacArthur Foundation

This publication was produced with financial support from the MacArthur Foundation. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the MacArthur Foundation.

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About the Authors

Dengiyefa Angalapu

Dengiyefa Angalapu is a Research Analyst at the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) and a PhD candidate at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His research focuses on security governance, environmental peacebuilding and extractive industries in Africa.

He uses decolonial approaches to examine how citizens interpret (in)security, environmental change and governance, and how these interpretations shape their responses to institutional authorities. He has served on the OPSC Advisory Committee since 2022.

Titilayo Olaniyan

Titilayo Olaniyan works with the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa), where she supports programme implementation and contributes to research and policy work on peace and security, governance, conflict dynamics and democratic development.

Her work focuses on advancing evidence-based approaches to addressing security and governance challenges in Nigeria and West Africa. She is also a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers Community, contributing to initiatives focused on community development and social impact.

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Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
CDD	Centre for Democracy and Development
CPG	Community Protection Guards
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies
DRR	Deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration
IDDRS	Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad
MDA	Ministry, department or agency
NCTC	National Counter Terrorism Centre
OPSC	Operation Safe Corridor
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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Executive summary

Northwest Nigeria has suffered a protracted security crisis that has made much of its countryside a major theatre of military operations. Armed groups abduct residents, steal cattle and impose levies on farming, mining and trade, while jihadist networks and community defence formations add to an already fragmented conflict. Military operations have rescued captives and killed influential commanders, but the persistence of violence reflects conditions that force alone cannot resolve. Disputes over grazing land, cattle theft, discriminatory treatment and failures of justice have allowed armed leaders to recruit followers and claim to provide protection. Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) can complement military action and judicial prosecution by helping eligible people leave armed networks and sustain a civilian life.

Its extension to the Northwest therefore raises a question of adaptation: how can a programme developed around the Northeast insurgency respond to different armed organisations, livelihoods and expectations of justice?

This study draws on 28 stakeholder interviews conducted in Katsina and Zamfara in May 2026, notes from a stakeholder meeting in Zamfara, observations from a visit to Camp Tsafe and published research. It finds opportunities in OPSC's established rehabilitation experience, its relationships with civilian partners and its multi-agency structure. Counselling, education and appropriate livelihood support could help eligible people sustain a decision to leave an armed group. Local mediation institutions also provide experience of settling disputes and negotiating coexistence that can inform reintegration. Representative state committees for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) could connect this work to receiving communities, while federal coordination supports lawful screening, referral and accountability. These prospects depend on decisions that a functioning camp cannot settle by itself. Camp Tsafe needs an explicit mandate identifying the armed-group associates it may receive, the meaning of low risk in this setting and the legal consequences of surrender. A commander's surrender may have security value, but it cannot convert serious allegations into ordinary rehabilitation eligibility. The financial attraction of assistance also varies across an armed network: a subordinate seeking a civilian livelihood faces a different calculation from a leader controlling ransom payments, stolen cattle or mining revenue. Government cannot derive a suitable assistance package from aggregate criminal earnings or assume that vocational training will replace the authority that those earnings sustain.

Victims' protection, recovery and access to justice must remain independent of forgiveness, while rehabilitation certificates should distinguish programme completion from a legal finding. Broken agreements make dependable disarmament and enforcement essential. Several Northwest governments reject negotiations and demand stronger federal military action, even as communities pursue peace deals. OPSC needs a clear place within that response as a lawful route for eligible departures from armed networks. Victims need assistance appropriate to their losses, rather than admission to DDR by default. For households dependent on livestock, rehabilitation must address lawful ownership, animal care and access to work. Clear mandates and credible representation across farming and pastoral communities are essential to these shared responsibilities.

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1. Introduction

Northwest Nigeria has suffered a protracted security crisis that has turned large parts of its countryside into a major theatre of military operations. Bandit attacks and kidnapping coexist with jihadist expansion, armed community defence and disputes over land and livestock. Although the region comprises seven states, the most sustained bandit violence has been concentrated in Zamfara and adjoining parts of Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Kebbi, with connections to Niger State in the Northcentral and across the border with the Republic of Niger.[1]

Reported civilian deaths attributed to armed bandits in the Northwest during 2018–2023 exceeded those attributed to the JAS and ISWAP factions of Boko Haram in the Northeast over the same period.[2] Within this wider conflict, kidnapping provides a particularly visible indication of the threat: between July 2025 and June 2026, SBM Intelligence documented at least 7,825 abducted people nationwide, including 1,921 victims in 236 incidents in Zamfara State alone.[3]

The consequences extend beyond those taken captive, as households sell assets to pay ransom and other residents restrict their movements because they cannot rely on protection. Such restrictions can deprive people of an income even when they retain their land and produce. In May 2025, for example, Amnesty International reported that farmers in Dangulbi in Zamfara State could not take harvested sweet potatoes to market because armed groups had prevented access.[4]

Their inability to realise the value of a crop already produced shows how a community may remain economically active while losing control over the terms of that activity. A reduction in attacks would therefore reveal only part of its security situation if armed actors continued to determine access to livelihoods.

Disputes over land and livestock helped turn local insecurity into a wider conflict in the Northwest. As cattle rustling and robbery intensified, cultivation expanded into grazing areas and livestock routes, sometimes with the support of politicians and traditional authorities allocating land for profit or patronage.[5] The resulting restrictions on pasture and water brought herders into conflict with farmers seeking compensation for damaged crops and protection against theft, while formal justice and local mediation increasingly failed to produce settlements accepted by the parties.[6]

[1] International Crisis Group, Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem, Africa Report no. 288, May 18, 2020, 1–2, https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1277506/download.

[2] Kingsley L. Madueke, Olajumoke Ayandele, Lawan Danjuma Adamu, and Lucia Bird, Armed Bandits in Nigeria, Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa, issue 2 (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and ACLED, July 2024), 3, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Armed-bandits-in-Nigeria-Non-state-armed-groups-and-illicit-economies-in-West-Africa-GI-TOC-and-ACLED-July-2024.pdf.

[3] SBM Intelligence, "The Economics of Nigeria's Kidnap Industry, 2026," August 27, 2026, https://sbmintelligence.substack.com/p/the-economics-of-nigerias-kidnap-0a6.

[4] Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Mounting Death Toll and Looming Humanitarian Crisis amid Unchecked Attacks by Armed Groups," May 29, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/nigeria-mounting-death-toll-unchecked-attacks-armed-groups/.

[5] Peer Schouten and James Barnett, Battle for the Bush: Banditry and Violent Agrarian Change in Northwest Nigeria, DIIS Working Paper 2025, no. 12 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2025), 7–13, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/27732748/Battle_for_the_bush_DIIS_WP_2025_12.pdf.

[6] Idayat Hassan and James Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem: Explaining the Conflict Drivers (Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, February 2022), 8–11, https://www.cddwestafrica.org/uploads/reports/file/Conflict-Dynamics-and-Actors-in-Nigerias-Northwest.pdf.

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July 2025–June 2026.
Source: SBM Intelligence, The Economics of Nigeria's Kidnap Industry, 2026.

Pastoral youths organised in formations known as kungiyar gayu, or youth associations, claiming to defend herders and recover stolen livestock. Community self-defence gained support among farming settlements too, but deepened the conflict when responsibility for an offence was assigned through ethnicity or occupation. Yan Sakai, informal volunteer guards commonly associated with Hausa farming settlements, became implicated in such attacks on Fulani people, while the killing of the pastoral leader Alhaji Isheyyi in Dansadau in August 2012 became a rallying point for reprisals against Hausa villages.[7] Through these reprisals, an injury to one person could become a justification for punishing others who had no part in the original offence. Farmers seeking protection from raids and pastoralists fearing retaliation consequently came to regard one another's protectors as threats, creating fears that armed leaders could exploit even while stealing from or attacking the people they claimed to defend.

Bandit power in the Northwest is often organised around a kachalla, a commander whose influence depends on followers, weapons and resources rather than a fixed rank in a unified organisation. The title may describe a small camp leader or someone whose authority extends over subordinate commanders. A daba is the camp around which such a following is organised, although some associates may be away herding the leader's cattle, managing farms or obtaining supplies. A larger formation may divide responsibility for weapons, intelligence and captives, while a smaller group combines those functions in the same people.[8]

These differences matter for any surrender initiative because an influential kachalla may be able to facilitate contact without being able to bind everyone who has fought alongside him. Associates can move between commanders or alternate farming and herding with participation in raids. These movements connect the armed camp to people who identify potential victims, negotiate releases or take stolen property to markets. Their involvement may arise from profit, threats against themselves or their families, or a changing combination of coercion and voluntary participation. An ordinary ruga, a pastoral Fulani camp or settlement, is part of this wider social environment and cannot be treated as an armed camp simply because its residents have contact with a bandit group.[9]

[7] Hassan and Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem, 12. Schouten and Barnett, Battle for the Bush, 12.
[8] Kingsley L. Madueke, Olajumoke Ayandele, Lawan Danjuma Adamu, and Lucia Bird, Armed Bandits in Nigeria, Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa, issue 2 (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and ACLED, July 2024), 18–21, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Armed-bandits-in-Nigeria-Non-state-armed-groups-and-illicit-economies-in-West-Africa-GI-TOC-and-ACLED-July-2024.pdf. Peer Schouten and James Barnett, Divided, They Rule? The Emerging Banditry Landscape in Northwest Nigeria, DIIS Report 2025, no. 7 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2025), 12–18, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/27760817/Divided_they_rule_DIIS_Report_2025_07.pdf.
[9] Adam Higazi and Idayat Hassan, Conflict Analysis and Assessment of Potential Support to Transitional Justice in Northwest Nigeria (European Resources for Mediation Support III and Facility on Justice in Conflict and Transition, January 2022), 72, glossary, https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/140651770/EU_NW_Nigeria_Report_Final_January_2022_revised_and_edited.pdf.

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Women and children may occupy different positions as victims, relatives, providers of labour or other associates, none of which can be inferred from residence alone.[10] Concentrating only on visible gunmen can leave much of a network intact, while treating every trader, relative or pastoralist as an accomplice extends the collective suspicion on which armed mobilisation has drawn. Individual conduct has to be established within these relationships.

Coercive control over rural production and trade gives bandit groups sources of income beyond raids and abductions. Motorcycle raids, cattle theft and attacks on travellers have been supplemented by mass abductions, hostage holding and repeated demands for access to land or economic activity. Although forests and routes across state borders provide refuge and movement, the income generated through such activities depends on markets and settlements where goods, payments and information circulate.

Armed groups in Zamfara and Kaduna have generated revenue from livestock theft, kidnapping, artisanal mining, transport and levies imposed on farming communities, including forms of forced labour.[11] By drawing on several sources, an armed group can survive disruption of one activity and may develop an interest in keeping production going wherever it can extract part of the proceeds. This produces a form of control, less visible than a raid, under which people continue to farm, herd or trade on terms imposed by those able to punish refusal. Disrupting that authority therefore requires attention to the markets, payments and supply arrangements that sustain coercion beyond any particular attack.

[10] Higazi and Hassan, Conflict Analysis and Assessment, 21–24.
[11] Madueke et al., Armed Bandits in Nigeria, 27–39.



A farmer works the land in northwest Nigeria, where insecurity threatens agricultural livelihoods and economic recovery.

Photo credit: The New Humanitarian, 2023.
Source: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/01/30/Nigeria-banditry-Zamfara

Jihadist organisations seeking influence beyond the Northeast have become both partners and rivals of bandit groups in the Northwest. Ansaru, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad (JAS), one of the principal Boko Haram factions, and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have established ties with bandit groups that combine tactical cooperation with competition over authority, followers and conduct towards civilians.[12] The March 2022 attack on the Abuja–Kaduna train illustrates both the operational value and the limits of such cooperation: a JAS-linked faction conducted the attack with bandit support, but subsequent disputes between the allies showed that joint action had not established permanent organisational unity.[13] Similar care is required in interpreting the label Lakurawa in parts of Sokoto and Kebbi, where militants have developed relationships with communities and other armed actors without necessarily sharing a uniform affiliation across all locations.[14]

The adjoining Niger–Kwara forest belt provides another illustration through Mamudawa, the label associated with Mallam Mahmuda's network around Kainji. Field research records changing cooperation and conflict with bandit gangs, while the network's wider affiliation remains contested. Police reporting has also used the Mamudawa label in Kebbi.[15] These variations make the Northwest difficult to interpret as either an extension of the Northeast insurgency or a conflict governed entirely by criminal profit. Religious commitments, the pursuit of wealth and claims to collective defence can overlap within a locality or an individual career. Assessing a prospective participant therefore requires attention to the role they performed and the authority they recognised, alongside the name used to describe their group.

The government's response to banditry and jihadist activity in the Northwest has relied heavily on successive ground and air operations, deployments to affected communities and support for local security formations. Such measures can rescue captives, disrupt camps and remove influential leaders, yet the removal of a leader does not necessarily prevent a network from reconstituting itself. Surviving commanders can assume authority within armed networks after a leader's death.[16] Weapons, income and local relationships can remain available to a successor while followers disperse or seek another command, leaving unresolved the disputes through which people came to regard armed protection as necessary. That dependence may deepen where operations involve indiscriminate suspicion or abuse, particularly when civilians also face community defence formations whose conduct varies. Yan Sakai, the volunteer guards, and Yan Banga, local vigilantes whose organisation and recognition vary, have different histories and relationships with the state. Formally established corps such as Zamfara's Community Protection Guards add an additional institutional layer.[17] Their local knowledge can assist security operations, but their behaviour also affects whether civilians trust the response and whether someone leaving a bandit group can return without

[12] James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?," CTC Sentinel 15, no. 1 (January 2022), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/. James Barnett and Umar Musa (pseudonym), "Kachallas and Kinship: Understanding Jihadi Expansion and Diffusion in Nigeria," CTC Sentinel 19, no. 1 (January 2026), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/kachallas-and-kinship-understanding-jihadi-expansion-and-diffusion-in-nigeria/.

[13] Barnett and Musa, "Kachallas and Kinship."

[14] Barnett and Musa, "Kachallas and Kinship."

[15] Barnett and Musa, "Kachallas and Kinship," section "The Mahmuda Group." Binta Aliyu, "Kebbi Police Report Major Security Gains, Rescue Kidnap Victim," Voice of Nigeria, June 17, 2026, https://von.gov.ng/kebbi-police-report-major-security-gains-rescue-kidnap-victim/.

[16] Schouten and Barnett, Divided, They Rule?, 17–18.

[17] Hassan and Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem, 24–26. Zamfara State Government, "Northwest Governors Storm Zamfara, as Gov. Dauda Lawal Unveils Community Protection Guards (CPG)," January 31, 2024, https://zamfara.gov.ng/2024/01/31/northwest-governors-storm-zamfara-as-gov-dauda-lawal-unveils-community-protection-guards-cpg/.

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retaliation. A military advance therefore needs to be followed by arrangements that reduce recruitment, protect people who leave armed networks and address the disputes awaiting them.

OPSC's extension to the Northwest responds to this need to connect military pressure with a route back into civilian life. Established in 2016 in response to the Boko Haram insurgency, the Defence Headquarters-led programme combines secure rehabilitation with psychological care, education, vocational preparation and religious engagement. Its multi-agency structure has been publicly described as bringing together about 17 ministries, departments and agencies.[18] Access to this support is governed by a publicly stated rule restricting ordinary admission to people assessed as low risk and legally eligible following security and Ministry of Justice review.[19] The Northwest extension took institutional form on 13 February 2025, when the Zamfara State Government announced the handover of a facility in Tsafe for the programme's regional headquarters.[20] The extension adds a route for eligible individuals to leave armed networks, complementing military operations against active groups and judicial proceedings where offences are alleged. Its value therefore depends on how rehabilitation can contribute where armed groups remain fragmented, criminal income is substantial and communities have their own histories of negotiation and betrayal. OPSC describes its rehabilitation work as deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (DRR), within the wider DDR response. Within that response, surrendering weapons, withdrawing from an armed organisation and establishing a civilian livelihood involve connected responsibilities that rehabilitation can support but cannot discharge alone. This study therefore examines the prospects for OPSC in the Northwest alongside the difficulties that must be addressed if individual departures from violence are to become sustained civilian transitions.



Zamfara State Government officials during the February 2025 handover of a facility in Tsafe for Operation Safe Corridor's Northwest headquarters. The initiative represents an expansion of Nigeria's rehabilitation and reintegration programme to address the region's security challenges.

Photo credit: Zamfara State Government, February 2025.
Source: https://zamfara.gov.ng/2025/02/13/operation-safe-corridor-unconditionally-surrender-your-weapons-before-its-too-late-gov-lawal-warns-bandits/

[18] International Crisis Group, An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor, Africa Briefing no. 170, March 19, 2021, 3–10, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/b170-safe-corridor%20%281%29.pdf. Linus Aleke, "CDS: Disarmament, Reintegration of Repentant Terrorists Stop Violence Circle," THISDAY, February 20, 2026, https://www.thisdaylive.com/2026/02/20/cds-disarmament-reintegration-of-repentant-terrorists-stop-violence-circle/. Yusuf Ali, "Demand for Names of Reintegrated 744 'Repentant Terrorists' Misplaced — Safe Corridor Coordinator, Brig Gen Yusuf Ali," interview by Daniel Ayantoye, PUNCH, May 10, 2026, https://punchng.com/demand-for-names-of-reintegrated-744-repentant-terrorists-misplaced-safe-corridor-coordinator-brig-gen-yusuf-ali/.

[19] Yusuf Ali, "General Yusuf Ali: Operation Safe Corridor Not Designed to Prioritise Ex-terrorists over Victims," interview by Linus Aleke, THISDAY, April 11, 2026, https://www.thisdaylive.com/2026/04/11/general-yusuf-ali-operation-safe-corridor-not-designed-to-prioritise-ex-terrorists-over-victims/.

[20] Zamfara State Government, "Operation Safe Corridor: Unconditionally Surrender Your Weapons before It's Too Late, Gov. Lawal Warns Bandits," press statement, February 13, 2025, https://zamfara.gov.ng/2025/02/13/operation-safe-corridor-unconditionally-surrender-your-weapons-before-its-too-late-gov-lawal-warns-bandits/.

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2. Methodology

We conducted qualitative fieldwork in Katsina and Zamfara in May 2026, interviewing 28 stakeholders drawn from community members, government officials, security personnel and vigilantes, academics, civil society representatives and experts. Their accounts were complemented by a stakeholder meeting in Zamfara involving these categories of actors and a visit to OPSC Camp Tsafe, both additional to the interview count. The analysis considers how participants' experiences of local peace arrangements, perceptions of OPSC and concerns about victims and institutional responsibilities bear on the adaptation of a federal rehabilitation programme. The authors work with CDD-West Africa, which supports OPSC, and one has served on OPSC's Advisory Committee since 2022. We interpret these accounts alongside historical and field-based research on Northwest armed groups, studies of rehabilitation in Nigeria, relevant legislation and United Nations DDR standards.

Fieldwork in two states cannot establish how widely a view is held across the Northwest, nor does it provide a representative profile of prospective participants. To protect participants in a setting of continuing insecurity, the report withholds names and identifying details. Codes INT01–INT07 connect the cited interview passages to the underlying research materials. Footnotes give broad participant descriptions and the interview month without identifying individuals. Direct quotations retain the speaker's wording; unclear passages and material without a suitable basis for quotation have been excluded. The interviews and supplementary research notes provide evidence of stakeholder experiences and perceptions, including concerns about institutional mandates and representation. They do not independently verify every incident, allegation or committee's composition.

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Stakeholder interviews

2 States

Katsina and Zamfara

May 2026

Fieldwork period

1 Meeting

Stakeholder meeting in Zamfara

1 Visit

OPSC Camp Tsafe

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3. Prospects for Operation Safe Corridor in the Northwest

Military pressure and individual disengagement

Military operations have demonstrated the state's ability to remove influential bandit commanders. Kaduna authorities confirmed the deaths of Boderi Isyaku in February 2024 and Buharin Yadi in June 2024, while Halilu Sububu was killed in September of that year.[21] Other commanders have nevertheless assumed influence after leadership losses, with Najaja and Dullu taking over parts of Sububu's former sphere.[22] Continuing recruitment limits the effect of those losses: "we can continue killing them, but they will continue recruiting more people".[23]

Weapons, income and protection can remain available within these networks even after a leader's death, allowing followers to move to another commander or establish smaller groups. Reducing that capacity requires a way for existing associates to leave as well as measures to prevent their replacement.

OPSC could make departure more credible when military pressure unsettles those arrangements. A subordinate who has lost confidence in a leader, a coerced associate seeking escape or someone exhausted by life in a camp may be prepared to leave before the organisation is willing to negotiate. A lawful route for such departures can operate while military pressure continues against active groups and justice institutions examine prosecutable allegations. Their willingness will nevertheless depend on what they expect after surrender, since remaining with armed associates may appear more predictable if there is no known route to lawful assessment, protection and continuing support. By receiving eligible people into a process that extends beyond their initial approach to the authorities, OPSC could reduce the number available for regrouping or recruitment. Military pressure and rehabilitation would then reinforce one another through departures that remain protected even while other groups continue fighting.

OPSC's rehabilitation work in the Northeast developed partly in response to people escaping coercion and seeking a return to civilian life. By bringing psychological support, learning and vocational preparation into a common setting, it established a basis for addressing difficulties that do not end when a person leaves an armed group.[24] Comparable needs may arise in the Northwest where departure involves trauma, dependence on a protector, interrupted education or substance-use problems. Time and assistance to address

[21] Chimezie Enyiocha, "Kaduna Govt Confirms Killing of Notorious Bandit Kingpin Boderi by Military," Channels Television, February 22, 2024, https://www.channelstv.com/2024/02/22/kaduna-govt-confirms-killing-of-notorious-bandit-kingpin-boderi-by-military/. Chimezie Enyiocha, "Troops Kill Notorious Bandit, Buharin Yadi, 35 Others in Kaduna," Channels Television, June 13, 2024, https://www.channelstv.com/2024/06/13/just-in-troops-kill-notorious-bandit-buharin-yadi-35-others-in-kaduna/. Schouten and Barnett, Divided, They Rule?, 17.

[22] Schouten and Barnett, Divided, They Rule?, 15–18.

[23] INT01, journalist, interview by the authors, May 2026.

[24] International Crisis Group, An Exit from Boko Haram?, 3–10.

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these needs could help participants prepare for life outside the network, while their treatment and eventual return would also influence the decisions of relatives and intermediaries considering whether to assist someone else. A departure followed by lawful treatment and a safe return could encourage such assistance, whereas unexplained detention or renewed danger could discourage it. Care inside the facility is therefore connected to the programme's credibility outside it, giving OPSC a reason to plan rehabilitation and reception together from the outset. This work need not await a region-wide agreement, as the UN approach permits reintegration support and community violence reduction during continuing conflict.[25]

> "We can continue killing them, but they will continue recruiting more people"
>
> Interview INT01, journalist, May 2026

Addressing grievances over protection and justice

Fear of cattle theft, collective punishment and discriminatory treatment helped some early bandit formations recruit within pastoral communities. Families provided cash, cattle or a relative to armed groups, sometimes in the hope of protection and sometimes under pressure. Those contributions did not reliably protect the donors, and pastoralists themselves remained major victims of cattle rustling.[26] Households in rural Zamfara could also face demands to supply a recruit under threat of attack: "Any household that did not present, they would attack that household."[27] These experiences explain how support for an armed leader could arise from insecurity even as the group acquired a criminal livelihood. They also show why the conflict cannot be reduced to a choice between grievance and profit: a claim to defend a community can attract recruits, justify reprisals and help sustain an organisation that subsequently exploits the same population.

Herders' grievances have included exclusion from grazing land and water, cattle theft without effective redress, extortion when seeking help from public authorities, and attacks in which guilt is assigned through ethnicity. A demand for proof of livestock ownership at a market can become an occasion for extortion, with herders pressed to "give out money to get themselves set free".[28] Such encounters could turn a journey to earn a living into another experience of insecurity. Accounts of Yan Sakai killings of suspected bandits in Shinkafi markets, including people identified through their Fulani background, show how an ordinary place of exchange could become dangerous for herders. Likewise, Hausa farming communities exposed to raids and abductions have sought protection through local defence formations.[29]

[25] United Nations, "The UN Approach to DDR," Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, module 2.10, November 19, 2019, 10–15, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IDDRS-2.10-The-UN-Approach-to-DDR_19-Nov-2019.pdf.
[26] Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, "I Am a Bandit": A Decade of Research in Zamfara State Bandit's Den, 15th University Seminar Series, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, September 9, 2021, 15–18, https://fudeco-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/I-Am-A-Bandit-A-decade-of-Research-in-Zamfara-State.pdf.
[27] INT02, community practitioner working in Zamfara, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[28] INT03, civil society representative in Katsina, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[29] Hassan and Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem, 13, 24–26.

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OPSC's counselling and dialogue could help participants examine how injuries experienced in this setting became justifications for violence against others. Religious engagement could challenge claims that revenge against a whole community is a legitimate response to an individual wrong. The credibility of that work would depend on whether complaints about stolen cattle, threats at a market or an attack on a village could be addressed after return without another armed confrontation.

OPSC could help rebuild confidence in civilian institutions by connecting rehabilitation to practical remedies for theft, extortion and disputes over land. A herder who encounters extortion while trying to recover animals, or a farmer whose complaint about crop destruction produces no remedy, has practical reasons to distrust a general appeal to obey the law. Disputes over land use and the weakening of mediation between pastoral leaders and village heads contributed to this loss of confidence.[30] Rehabilitation could help participants identify where to seek redress, while receiving states and local institutions make those routes usable through land mediation, livestock recovery and dependable protection. Because victims, displaced producers and young people outside armed groups may face similar barriers, access to these services would need to extend beyond the admitted population.

Their inclusion would give residents a reason to support a transition that improves their own safety and livelihoods, while reducing the impression that participation in violence offers privileged access to government. As civilian remedies become more dependable, they could also weaken the authority of armed patrons who present themselves as the only people capable of resolving a dispute or protecting an income. The benefit of rehabilitation would thus depend partly on relationships with institutions through which the wider community can obtain assistance.

Local mediation and transitional justice

Pastoral leaders, village and district heads, religious figures and emirate institutions have long provided local means of negotiating disputes in the Northwest. An ardo, a leader within a pastoralist community, and a village head could historically reach a settlement between herders and farmers, with each helping secure acceptance among those they represented.[31] Their involvement mattered because the parties needed to continue living and producing alongside one another after a disagreement. Although the erosion of this authority helped conflicts escalate, local knowledge of negotiation and fair remedy remains a resource for a broader transitional justice response concerned with addressing serious harm and reducing its recurrence. OPSC could draw on that resource by connecting rehabilitation to the recovery of property, recognition of injury and reconciliation where desired. Religious leaders could support the process through ideas of sulhu, or reconciliation, while helping relate individual change to obligations between neighbours. Reliance on these practices would not require an exclusive choice against formal justice: the same complainant may seek a local settlement over crop damage and approach the police over an abduction. Connecting those routes would preserve familiar ways of resolving disputes while leaving access to the institutions competent to investigate serious allegations.

[30] Hassan and Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem, 8–11.
[31] Hassan and Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem, 11.

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Farmers and herders participate in a peacebuilding initiative promoting dialogue and reconciliation in Adamawa State.

Photo credit: Mercy Corps / EU COMITAS Programme, 2022.

Source: https://nigeria.mercycorps.org/research-resources/peace-farmers-herders-adamawa

A dispute between farmers and herders, recorded in a 2023 community assessment in Katsina, shows why mediation may need to continue after an initial agreement. After cattle entered a sweet potato farm, a dispute drew farmers from Kasai and Fulani herders into confrontation, prompting the Magaji of Wagini to mediate an agreement. That initial settlement did not end the matter, because some youths subsequently destroyed the pond used by the herders' cattle. When the herders returned to the traditional leader, he resumed mediation and promised reparation.[32] The account shows how damage arising after an agreement could reopen a dispute by threatening access to another resource. Stopping the immediate confrontation would consequently need to be followed by a remedy for the loss and an understanding of how the parties would resume their livelihoods. For OPSC, this experience points towards a practical connection between rehabilitation and local mediation: a participant may learn to pursue a disagreement without violence, but neighbours still need to negotiate the obligations that make coexistence possible. Extending such practice to armed-group return would require protection for complainants and public support where a mediator cannot secure compliance, so that continued engagement does not leave the weaker party dependent on goodwill alone.

KEY INSIGHT

An agreement among representatives could then assist reintegration without quietly waiving another person's claim to justice.

[32] "We Are Ready to Forgive" Because As-Sulh Hayr: Mapping the Potentials of Transitional Justice in Katsina State (Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, November 29, 2023), 130, sec. 8.2, box 1.

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The Gummi Emirate dialogue platform in Zamfara connected commitments by people renouncing banditry to action by law enforcement, with breaches referred for investigation and arrested persons transferred to the appropriate authorities. In Kebbi, the Emir of Argungu established a standing committee bringing Hausa and Fulani farmers and herders into regular dialogue on disputes.[33]

These arrangements are relevant because negotiation was connected to institutions beyond the immediate parties, providing a basis on which OPSC could contribute rehabilitation while civilian authorities receive complaints, facilitate lawful settlements and refer allegations requiring further investigation. Return from the camp would then form part of a process that the receiving state and community could continue. Establishing such a connection would begin with identifying which institutions still command trust and who can use them, since government recognition cannot by itself establish legitimacy among displaced people, women, minority groups or residents who believe a leader failed to protect them. Attention to those differences would allow existing experience to inform adaptation without assuming that every familiar authority represents all members of a community.

Stakeholders in Jibia and other affected areas described what periods of relative calm under local peace arrangements had made possible, including renewed cultivation, trading and contact across divided communities.[34] OPSC would therefore be engaging people already familiar with negotiation and able to identify both its value and its failures. The opportunity lies in connecting that experience to institutions capable of sustaining obligations when an armed signatory no longer wishes to comply. Local mediators could explain commitments and resolve disputes, while government assumes responsibilities they cannot enforce against armed actors on their own. This connection would allow familiar practices to support a civilian transition while preserving investigation and prosecution where required. An agreement among representatives could then assist reintegration without quietly waiving another person's claim to justice.

State ownership and national DDR coordination

State DDR committees offer a way to connect local knowledge of the Northwest conflict with the federal institutions responsible for terrorism cases and rehabilitation. Kaduna inaugurated its DDR, Peace and Security Committee on 5 May 2026, Katsina announced its committee on 12 May, and reporting on Zamfara's committee in August linked its responsibilities to victim recovery and community rehabilitation.[35] Their significance extends beyond administrative coordination.

The federal government has proscribed Yan Bindiga, Yan Ta'adda and similar groups as terrorist organisations, while the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022 assigns prosecution and adjudication to the competent federal authorities.[36]

[33] Higazi and Hassan, Conflict Analysis and Assessment, 51–53.

[34] Authors' interviews and stakeholder discussions on local peace arrangements, Katsina and Zamfara, May 2026.

[35] Kaduna State Government, "Kaduna Inaugurates Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration Committee to Enhance Security," May 5, 2026, https://kdsg.gov.ng/kaduna-inaugurates-disarmament-demobilisation-reintegration-committee-to-enhance-security/. Katsina State Government, "Governor Radda Inaugurates State Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), Peace and Security Committee," May 12, 2026, https://katsinastate.gov.ng/2026/05/12/governor-radda-inaugurates-state-disarmament-demobilisation-and-reintegration-ddr-peace-and-security-committee/. Binta Aliyu, "Zamfara Seeks Victims' Support Fund for Peacebuilding," Voice of Nigeria, August 29, 2026, https://von.gov.ng/zamfara-seeks-victims-support-fund-for-peacebuilding/.

[36] Federal Ministry of Justice, "FG Releases Official Gazette Declaring Bandits as Terrorists," January 14, 2022 (press statement dated January 5, 2022), https://www.justice.gov.ng/fg-releases-official-gazette-declaring-bandits-as-terrorists/. Federal Republic of Nigeria, Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act 2022, Act no. 15, Official Gazette 109, no. 91 (May 16, 2022), secs. 74 and 76, https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Terrorism-Prevention-and-Prohibition-Act-2022.pdf.

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A state committee cannot, by its own decision, extinguish liability for federal terrorism offences or replace the legal process with a local assurance of forgiveness.

Cooperation with OPSC, the Federal Ministry of Justice, security agencies and NCTC would give these committees a practical role within those legal limits. State and community representatives can help establish a person's local history, identify victims and explain the circumstances in which association with an armed group occurred. This information could inform assessment without allowing a traditional leader's endorsement or a governor's political preference to determine legal eligibility. The same committees could arrange documentation, continuing treatment, livelihood assistance and help with property disputes before a participant leaves rehabilitation. Their local reach could also give farming and pastoral communities influence over reception arrangements, provided representation extends to people those communities trust. Such preparation is especially valuable where surrender and eventual return occur in different states. It would connect federal decisions about admission to identifiable institutions responsible for safety, assistance and complaints in the place of return.

A participant who surrenders in one state and returns to another needs continuity between the institutions responsible for reception, rehabilitation and reintegration. National coordination provides an opportunity to address that problem: in July 2026, officials presented DDR standard operating procedures for validation, while a UK–Nigeria communiqué referred to implementation support following formal sign-off of the framework. On 16 October, the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) inaugurated a National DDR Task Team whose announced responsibilities included clarifying roles and addressing overlapping mandates.[37]



Government and security officials meet in Kaduna State to strengthen institutional coordination.

Source: https://x.com/MOIKaduna/status/2051[illegible]5579860

Photo credit: Kaduna State Ministry of Information and Culture.

[37] Sumaila Ogbaje, "Nigeria Adopts Victim-centred DDR Roadmap to Strengthen Peace — Laka," News Agency of Nigeria, July 13, 2026, https://nannews.ng/nigeria-adopts-victim-centred-ddr-roadmap-to-strengthen-peace-laka/. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, "Fourth United Kingdom–Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership Dialogue 2026: Communiqué," July 17, 2026, section 4, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fourth-uk-nigeria-security-and-defence-partnership-dialogue-june-2026-communique/fourth-united-kingdom-nigeria-security-and-defence-partnership-dialogue-2026-communique. News Agency of Nigeria, "FG Inaugurates Task Team to Coordinate Disarmament, Reintegration Efforts," Peoples Gazette, October 16, 2026, https://gazettengr.com/fg-inaugurates-task-team-to-coordinate-disarmament-reintegration-efforts/.

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These initiatives could help OPSC, state committees, justice institutions and arms-control authorities agree on how responsibility passes between them, reducing dependence on personal contacts when a participant moves to the next stage. The same clarity would help receiving communities identify who should respond to an allegation, a threat or promised assistance that has not arrived. Common standards could also prevent separate initiatives from offering incompatible assurances about surrender and release, while leaving local institutions scope to address particular disputes. Such consistency matters because an agreement reached in one state can change security conditions in another, making coordination part of the substance of reintegration rather than a matter confined to meetings between officials.

Civilian partnerships for care and livelihoods

OPSC's existing partnerships and multi-agency structure give its Northwest extension an institutional base on which to build. CDD-West Africa already provides technical support on rehabilitation, reintegration and transitional justice, while IOM's documented work includes family and community engagement with OPSC participants. IOM's Nigeria response planning also provides for psychosocial care, livelihoods, social cohesion and community stabilisation.[38] These relationships bring professional experience, equipment support and routes into receiving communities that Camp Tsafe can draw upon. The practical task is to extend and coordinate that contribution around the Northwest's circumstances, with clear responsibilities for the public agencies and partners involved.

Deepening these relationships could strengthen staff capacity through specialist training and supervision, while pastoralist organisations, survivors' groups and displaced households help identify difficulties that might otherwise become visible only after return. Partners could also improve public confidence where they have sufficient access and independence to explain the programme and raise concerns about its delivery. Their contribution would need continuity: staff require supervision after training, and an equipped clinic needs personnel, supplies and referral arrangements to provide care. Established partnerships therefore offer a substantial opportunity, provided institutional participation is translated into services that remain available after a participant leaves the camp.

Livestock services could help OPSC support participants for whom cattle rearing offers the most viable basis for civilian work. The Federal Ministry of Livestock Development and state services could assess participants' experience, arrange veterinary referrals and connect training to producers, agricultural colleges and markets. Possible sources of instruction and employer engagement include Nestlé's June 2025 collaboration with the Ministry on dairy technical skills and the Ministry's October 2026 announcement of revised agricultural curricula.[39] For someone with years of experience managing cattle, improved husbandry, feed production or milk handling may offer a more useful opportunity than an entirely new occupation, whereas the loss of animals or an unsafe area of return may require different assistance. Livestock expertise could help OPSC distinguish these circumstances and plan how lawful animals will be cared for during an absence. Since victims and displaced producers may need similar services, the partnership could also support recovery across a locality, giving households outside the programme a stake in the opportunities it helps create. Decisions about rehabilitation would then be connected to the assets, obligations and markets through which participants and their neighbours sustain a living.

[38] Centre for Democracy and Development, "Transparency & Accountability," accessed November 8, 2026, https://www.cddwestafrica.org/activities/transparency-accountability/. International Organization for Migration, IOM Nigeria Annual Report 2023, section "Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR)," accessed November 8, 2026, https://nigeria.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1856/files/documents/2024-05/2023-iom-nigeria-annual-report.pdf. International Organization for Migration, "Nigeria Crisis Response Plan 2026–2028," 2026 plan, accessed November 8, 2026, https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/nigeria-crisis-response-plan-2026-2028/year/2026.

[39] Nestlé, "Nestlé and Ministry of Livestock Development Collaborate to Launch Dairy Technical Skills Development Program," June 5, 2025, https://www.nestle-cwa.com/en/media/pressreleases/allpressreleases/nestle-ministry-livestock-launch-dairy-technical-skills-program. Federal Ministry of Livestock Development, "FG Unveils Revised Agricultural Curriculum to Strengthen Livestock Skills," October 19, 2026, https://www.fmld.gov.ng/news-details/234.

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4. Challenges of adapting Operation Safe Corridor

Defining the mandate of Camp Tsafe

Camp Tsafe's first challenge is to identify which armed-group associates it is intended to serve. The Northwest contains bandit networks, jihadist organisations and community defence formations such as Yan Sakai and Yan Banga. These groups may fight one another, cooperate against a common opponent or exchange supplies and personnel, while members of the same group can have different motives and roles. Public announcements establishing a regional facility do not by themselves settle how these relationships will be treated at admission.

A programme concentrated on bandit associates would face different rehabilitation requirements from one also receiving people with sustained ideological commitments or members of community defence groups accused of abuse. Unless the target population is explicit, officials may rely on inconsistent labels and communities may believe that only one side of the conflict is being asked to change.

One option would be to serve all legally eligible, low-risk Northwest armed-group associates at Tsafe, with the staffing and accommodation required to address different affiliations, clinical needs and interpersonal risks. Another would concentrate non-jihadist rehabilitation there and refer eligible people with jihadist-linked rehabilitation needs to Malam Sidi in Gombe, drawing on its longer experience of the Northeast insurgency.[40] Either arrangement would require a stated approach to people leaving community defence formations, who should not have to adopt a false jihadist or bandit identity to obtain appropriate assistance. Referral between centres would require arrangements for transport, family contact and continuity of care. The choice concerns the camp's professional purpose; the legal basis for each admission must still be established through individual assessment.

Victim recovery is a legitimate part of a wider DDR response, particularly where return depends on communities that have suffered abduction, displacement or lost livelihoods. Zamfara has called for a victims' support fund, and OPSC's coordinator has described plans for victim rehabilitation facilities in the Northwest and Northcentral. State committees can help coordinate that assistance while supporting people leaving armed groups.

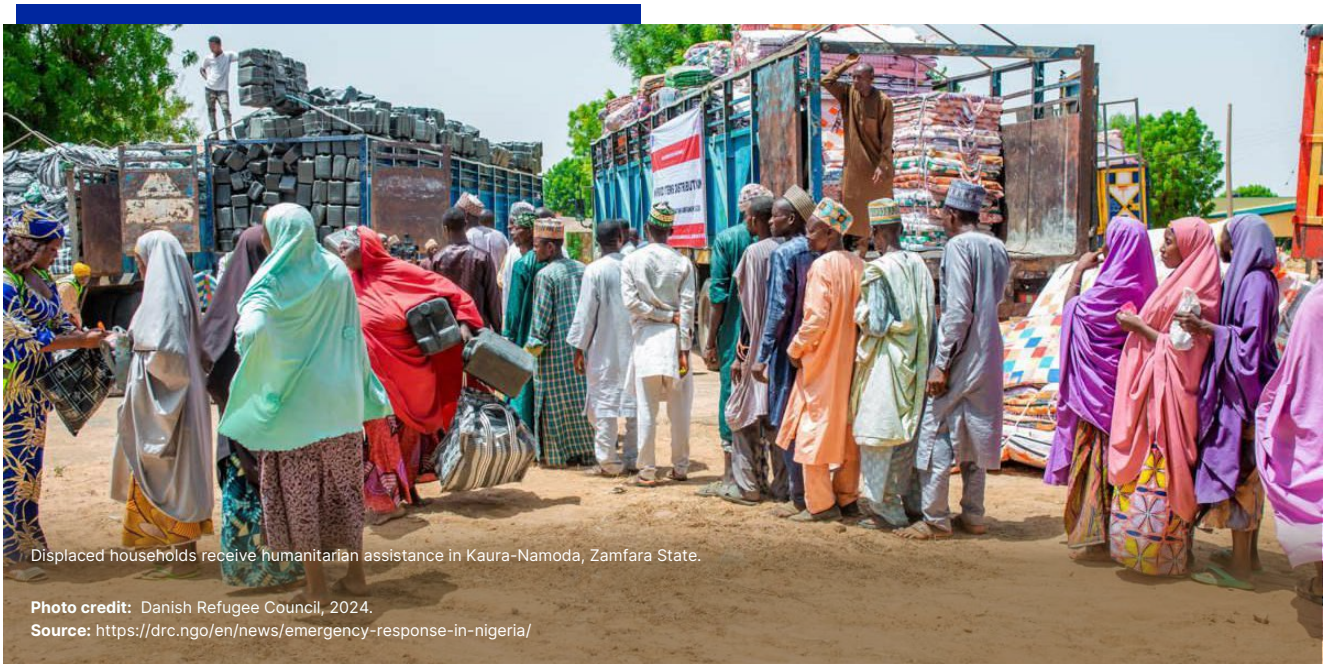
[40] International Crisis Group, An Exit from Boko Haram?, 3–6.

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Those responsibilities require different assessments: victims may need treatment, restitution and access to justice, while former associates require an examination of their relationship with an armed organisation and a lawful basis for rehabilitation. Some people occupy both positions. For former armed-group associates, assessment should also establish whether deradicalisation is needed, since coercion, criminal earnings and the search for protection may explain participation without a sustained ideological commitment.[41]

The difficulty arises when an emphasis on victims leaves the committees' responsibilities towards people renouncing violence unresolved. State DDR structures may centre their public explanations on victim support while Tsafe is also described as a victim-support camp.[42] In a setting where negotiation is politically contested, this language can allow support for a DDR institution without agreement on whom it will receive or what surrender entails. The uncertainty then affects referrals, staffing and funding: a clinician treating a survivor, an official assessing an armed-group associate and a community preparing for a returnee need to know which institution is responsible. Victim assistance cannot settle those questions, just as rehabilitation for former associates cannot discharge obligations to victims.

Tsafe therefore needs a public mandate that distinguishes its rehabilitation pathway from any voluntary residential services for victims. Victims should be able to obtain assistance without being classified as armed-group associates or placed alongside alleged perpetrators by default. If the facility provides both forms of care, each needs an appropriate admission basis, professional staff, safeguarding arrangements and a budget. Clear responsibilities would make victim recovery and lawful disengagement mutually supportive, while allowing survivors to seek justice or decline reconciliation.



Displaced households receive humanitarian assistance in Kaura-Namoda, Zamfara State.

Photo credit: Danish Refugee Council, 2024.
Source: https://drc.ngo/en/news/emergency-response-in-nigeria/

[41] Ali, "General Yusuf Ali." Aliyu, "Zamfara Seeks Victims' Support Fund." United Nations, "The UN Approach to DDR," IDDRS, module 2.10, November 19, 2019, sec. 7; "Reintegration," IDDRS, module 4.30, September 26, 2022, secs. 4.2 and 6.2.

[42] Authors' supplementary research notes on state DDR committees and descriptions of Camp Tsafe. Aliyu, "Zamfara Seeks Victims' Support Fund."

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Criminal wealth and incentives for disengagement

The wealth generated through kidnapping, cattle rustling and the control of local economic activity raises an important question about the appeal of OPSC in the Northwest. A commander extracting payments from other people's activities faces a different set of incentives from a poorer subordinate seeking a dependable opportunity for civilian work. Bandit networks earn income from cattle theft, kidnapping, mining, transport-related activities and payments extracted for access to farmland. Reports from some sites in Bukuyum and Maru indicate that miners and buyers had to pay a tenth of their monthly earnings from November 2022.[43] Such recurring payments give the commander an interest in retaining authority beyond any particular raid or ransom. National kidnapping figures also show why this wealth cannot be treated as a simple contrast between Northwest and Northeast participants: SBM recorded about N22.9 billion in ransom demands and N7.78 billion in ransom payments nationwide between July 2025 and June 2026, with around 90 per cent of recorded payments attributed to the JAS faction of Boko Haram through eight incidents.[44] Neither demands nor group receipts establish an individual member's earnings, making the person's position within the network essential to understanding the attraction of assistance.

Those carrying out abductions may receive only a small share of the proceeds: "they are not even the ones collecting the ransom".[45] People directing attacks can control the larger payments while those executing them receive smaller shares. Vocational training and starter packs form part of the support offered to OPSC graduates,[46] but their usefulness depends on the resources a recipient already controls and the work they make possible. An offer that cannot match a commander's criminal earnings may still help a subordinate sustain a civilian livelihood.

The attraction of participation can also include authority that a vocational package cannot replace. A senior commander may live "like a king, giving orders".[47] Leaving banditry can mean losing followers, protection and the power to determine what others may do, as well as forgoing income. These losses help explain why assistance useful to a subordinate may have little appeal to a commander, without making a larger financial offer the appropriate response.

Payments designed to match criminal earnings would give actors with greater capacity for violence stronger bargaining power, while potentially deepening resentment among victims and allowing leaders to retain influence through associates. Nigeria's Presidential Amnesty Programme also illustrates the difficulty of connecting training to available work and sustaining an exit from dependence on programme benefits,[48] highlighting why assistance needs to lead towards viable civilian activity rather than become continuing reimbursement for abandoning crime.

The attraction of civilian assistance would also depend on conditions outside the package,

[43] Kingsley L. Madueke and Lawan Danjuma Adamu, "Keeping Up with North West Nigeria's Cash-shifting Bandits," ENACT Observer, August 29, 2024, https://issafrica.org/enactafrica/enact-observer/keeping-up-with-north-west-nigeria-s-cash-shifting-bandits.
[44] SBM Intelligence, "The Economics of Nigeria's Kidnap Industry, 2026."
[45] INT04, journalist based in Katsina, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[46] Ali, "Demand for Names of Reintegrated 744 'Repentant Terrorists'."
[47] INT06, journalist, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[48] Tarila Marclint Ebiede, Arnim Langer, and Jale Tosun, "Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration: Analysing the Outcomes of Nigeria's Post-Amnesty Programme," Stability: International Journal of Security and Development 9, no. 1 (2020): article 6, https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.752.

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including action against hostage taking, coercive levies and criminal finance, together with safer markets and access to redress. Improving those conditions may reduce the cost of leaving for a subordinate more effectively than a larger payment, provided enforcement does not destroy the lawful alternatives it is meant to protect.

Producers operating outside formal protection can become more dependent on armed intermediaries,[49] making it necessary to distinguish action against coercion and criminal facilitation from restrictions that prevent legitimate production. OPSC could contribute by helping willing, eligible people disengage, while other institutions address the commanders, assets and markets beyond its ordinary mandate. The more credible offer is support that makes lawful work and safe civilian life possible for people willing and eligible to leave, within a wider effort to weaken the relationships sustaining violence.

Justice for victims and community confidence

Victims' claims to protection and justice will shape how receiving communities judge OPSC. A family that sold cattle to pay a ransom may know someone it believes guarded the captive, while a displaced farmer may find that a person entering the programme still controls access to the family's land. Assistance directed towards former armed-group associates raises a direct objection: "the worst thing is for the government to take care of the bandits and abandon the victims".[50] The warning reflects a concern that rehabilitation could reward people believed responsible for abduction, killing and the destruction of livelihoods while leaving out those who suffered without help. Opposition to return is consequently a question of protection and accountability that communication alone cannot resolve.

Victims' claims to justice arise alongside wider recovery needs: IOM identified 1,311,026 internally displaced people across ten Northwest and Northcentral states as of February 2026, a combined regional figure covering several causes of displacement.[51] A community receiving graduates may therefore be rebuilding homes, livelihoods and services while seeing assistance directed towards former armed-group associates. Where victims still cannot report an abduction or recover property, that difference in public attention can reinforce the belief that violence offers a stronger claim on government than civilian suffering. Since failures of justice helped make armed self-help appear legitimate, a transition that leaves those failures unaddressed could reproduce one of the conditions sustaining the conflict. Protection and redress would need to respond to harm caused by bandits, community defence formations and state personnel alike, without making access depend on the identity of the alleged perpetrator.

OPSC needs to preserve victims' access to investigation and prosecution when a person accused of harming them enters rehabilitation. Each admission needs a recorded legal basis and status, because a Ministry of Justice eligibility recommendation, an acquittal and a completed sentence have different meanings that a programme certificate cannot resolve. The certificate should consequently describe the rehabilitation completed without implying clearance of every allegation, while credible information about an offence should lead to preservation of relevant records and referral to investigators and prosecutors. Making that referral effective would require an accessible means for victims to provide information, protection against intimidation and an explanation of which institution will act, with the participant retaining representation and an opportunity to respond.

[49] Madueke and Adamu, "Keeping Up with North West Nigeria's Cash-shifting Bandits."
[50] INT01, journalist, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[51] International Organization for Migration, "Nigeria — North-central and North-west Zones Site Assessment Round 19," Displacement Tracking Matrix, January–February 2026, https://dtm.iom.int/datasets/nigeria-north-central-and-north-west-zones-site-assessment-round-19.

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Communities also need to understand how the wider process leads to prosecution, release or rehabilitation, since announcements of sentences reveal little about the proceedings behind them. Independent access, interpretation and clear accounts of outcomes could make those proceedings more intelligible, provided cooperation between institutions preserves professional responsibilities in care. Health workers and counsellors should not become informal interrogators, nor should treatment depend on a confession or the provision of intelligence. The UN standard on DDR and transitional justice addresses information sharing and accountability together, providing a basis for coordinating these functions without collapsing the distinctions on which trust in each depends.[52]

Victims also need support when an offender remains at large, a loss is difficult to prove or the evidence is insufficient for conviction. The UN declaration on victims of crime recognises victimhood independently of whether an offender has been identified, prosecuted or convicted, and addresses assistance, restitution and compensation.[53] Medical care, psychological support, legal help and livelihood recovery should therefore follow the harm suffered and the needs arising from it. Reparations would add a public commitment to acknowledge and repair a violation that general development assistance may leave unrecognised: reopening a market, for example, does not necessarily address a household's stolen cattle or a missing relative. Part of this response already has a statutory basis under section 91 of the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022, which establishes a Victims Trust Fund in the Office of the Attorney-General for purposes including compensation, restitution and damages for victims of terrorism. Section 92 provides for its administration and the determination of beneficiaries,[54] leaving implementation dependent on funding and accessible claims procedures where the Act applies, alongside support for harms outside its coverage. Linking these arrangements to state recovery initiatives would give assistance an institutional basis that does not depend on an alleged perpetrator entering OPSC.

KEY INSIGHT

Victims' claims to protection and justice will shape how receiving communities judge OPSC.

Victims' participation in local reconciliation needs to remain voluntary, regardless of a leader's authority to convene dialogue. Traditional and religious figures may help clarify an account of harm or settle a property dispute while overlooking priorities held by women, displaced people, young people and survivors of sexual violence. Where those figures are implicated in contested land allocations or earlier failures of protection, a meeting may also reproduce the unequal relationships it seeks to repair. Religious appeals to forgiveness can support voluntary reconciliation, but they must leave a victim free to refuse, speak openly and approach legal institutions. What victims would regard as acceptable reintegration therefore needs to be established through protected consultation, rather than inferred from a representative's attendance at a peace meeting. The association between trauma and scepticism about the reform of former associates in Boko Haram-affected communities indicates why confidence in the Northwest would need to grow through continuing safety and a credible response to harm.[55] Public explanation can assist that process, but the judgement victims make will also follow what the transition changes in their own lives.

[52] United Nations, "DDR and Transitional Justice," Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, module 6.20, August 25, 2023, 16–28, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IDDRS-6.20-DDR-and-Transitional-Justice_August-25-2023.pdf.
[53] United Nations General Assembly, Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, resolution 40/34, November 29, 1985, paras. 1–6, 8–17, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/victims.pdf.
[54] Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act 2022, secs. 91–92.
[55] Tarela Juliet Ike, Dung Ezekiel Jidong, Mieyebi Lawrence Ike, Christopher Francis, and Evangelyn Ebi Ayobi, "Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Members and Combatants in Nigeria: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Community Members' Experiences of Trauma," Third World Quarterly 43, no. 12 (2022): 2811–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2109459.

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Eligibility and the legal consequences of surrender

Eligibility in the Northwest needs to be determined through individual conduct, present risk and legal status. A herder who paid a levy to prevent the seizure of cattle, a supplier who worked under threat and a person who voluntarily guarded abducted children cannot be assessed through poverty, pastoral background or an economic motive alone. The publicly stated OPSC rule requires security and Ministry of Justice assessment of suitability for rehabilitation, with ordinary admission restricted to low-risk individuals.[56] Within that rule, assessment should examine a person's role, the degree of coercion, continuing command relationships, access to weapons and illicit funds, and ability to threaten victims. A limited support role under coercion may be relevant to a low-risk referral; serious allegations still require their own legal examination.

Residence in an area controlled by an armed group, or kinship with a member, cannot establish criminal responsibility. Collective suspicion can extend to appearance itself: "Even to look like a Fulani is almost becoming crime here."[57] Where suspicion extends to people on that basis, treating a civilian as a rehabilitated fighter can entrench the very identity the assessment should correct. Such a person may instead need protection or ordinary civilian services. Defining low risk through conduct, present danger and legal status would prevent an assessment of suitability for rehabilitation from substituting for a decision about criminal responsibility.

A prospective participant also needs to know how surrender leads to a lawful decision. Our May 2026 fieldwork revealed uncertainty about Camp Tsafe: some stakeholders knew it mainly as a structure along the road, while others understood it as an amnesty initiative.[58] Such uncertainty affects whom someone should approach and whether an assurance of reception will be recognised by the next agency involved. A Northwest framework should identify authorised points of contact and connect reception to security investigation, Ministry of Justice assessment and any required judicial decision before rehabilitation. It should state what happens when a person does not qualify, explain the legal basis and conditions of any residence in a facility, and provide a means of review. Traditional and religious intermediaries can facilitate contact, but the authorities responsible for custody, records, weapons and referral must be identified. Clear procedures would make the low-risk rule usable without allowing surrender to carry an implied promise of immunity.

> **Even to look like a Fulani is almost becoming crime here.**
>
> Research respondent, Zamfara State, May 2026

A commander's surrender may bring security benefits while leaving serious allegations of criminal conduct unresolved. An influential kingpin may be able to release hostages, relinquish weapons, disclose information about a network's structure and operations and persuade followers to leave, giving government reasons to consider accepting

[56] Ali, "General Yusuf Ali."
[57] INT05, respondent working in Zamfara, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[58] Authors' stakeholder interviews in Katsina and Zamfara and stakeholder meeting in Zamfara, May 2026.

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the surrender through a credible process. Accepting the surrender would not, however, resolve allegations of organising attacks, profiting from kidnapping or financing further violence, which would require lawful investigation and prosecution where the evidence supports charges. Under sections 74 and 76 of the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022, the Attorney-General has a prosecutorial role and the Federal High Court has jurisdiction over offences under the Act, with the applicable law and forum following the conduct alleged.[59] These responsibilities limit the assurances that programme coordinators, state committees and intermediaries can lawfully give. The difficulty becomes acute where a commander makes immunity a condition of cooperation while government sees an urgent opportunity to recover captives, and victims see a concession as a reward for their suffering. Any prosecutorial arrangement would need an explicit legal basis and the involvement of the competent authorities, rather than an altered risk classification that conceals the bargain within routine OPSC admission.

The security value of accepting the surrender of a commander also depends on what happens to the organisation and resources he left behind. A leader's decision may not bind semi-autonomous commanders, and a successor may retain followers and income even while some subordinates seek rehabilitation. Individual assessment would therefore need to accompany scrutiny of the commitments made by the leadership, including whether surrendered weapons represent a loss of capacity or leave the resources to purchase replacements untouched. A commander who retains money to buy arms, pay recruits or enforce levies may preserve much of the authority that surrender is expected to reduce. Addressing that authority brings investigators and justice institutions into the management of suspected criminal wealth and competing property claims, for which the Proceeds of Crime (Recovery and Management) Act, 2022 provides court-supervised preservation and recovery mechanisms.[60] Possession could not simply become an entitlement recognised through negotiation with OPSC, just as participation in rehabilitation could not settle criminal liability. Where prosecution is necessary, rehabilitation may remain relevant within a lawful correctional setting and in preparation for eventual release, with any later OPSC referral requiring its own legal basis. The government consequently needs a response able to accept surrender and support eventual civilian life without making Camp Tsafe responsible for obligations it has no authority to discharge.

The legacy of peace agreements and disarmament

Earlier peace agreements have left a legacy of both temporary relief and distrust that OPSC will inherit. Negotiations under Bello Matawalle's administration brought periods of calm but failed to secure lasting protection.[61] That temporary reduction in violence gave way to breakdown and renewed attacks by 2021.[62] The central problem was the failure to translate dialogue into enforceable commitments. Many arrangements left armed actors with the means to resume coercion, while commitments made in one locality did not bind every commander or guarantee consistent action by security agencies. Restrictions on carrying weapons were also different from

[59] Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act 2022, secs. 74 and 76.

[60] Federal Republic of Nigeria, Proceeds of Crime (Recovery and Management) Act 2022, Act no. 16, secs. 9–14, Official Gazette 109, no. 92 (May 17, 2022), https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Proceeds-of-Crime-Recovery-and-Management-Act-2022.pdf.

[61] Authors' fieldwork, Katsina and Zamfara, May 2026, Zamfara interviews.

[62] Higazi and Hassan, Conflict Analysis and Assessment, 25.

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verified disarmament. Doma in Katsina illustrates the vulnerability: an agreement involving grazing access, limits on weapons and promises to release captives broke down before an attack in February 2026 killed at least 21 people.[63] Consequently, receiving communities have reasons to ask what would make another government-supported initiative enforceable when earlier promises were not.

Jibia complicates any simple judgement that local negotiation has produced no benefit. Mutual deterrence offers one explanation for its comparatively long period of relative calm, with armed groups expecting that communities could retaliate. A balance sustained through that expectation differs from confidence that a public institution will enforce the agreement. It also cannot be taken as evidence of uninterrupted peace: reporting in March 2026 recorded a serious breach in Falale and Kadobe, where a confrontation between vigilantes and suspected bandits was followed by a reprisal attack in which authorities said 15 people died.[64] The episode shows how a bargain sustained partly through the prospect of retaliation can be destabilised by another armed encounter. For OPSC, the lesson is to preserve the civilian gains made possible by local agreements while helping move protection away from dependence on an armed signatory or the threatened punishment of another community.

Even an agreement that continues to reduce attacks may leave residents exposed if the terms themselves preserve an armed actor's authority. Paying for access to fields or accepting restrictions imposed by a commander can be a rational choice for a village without protection, but recognising the arrangement as a basis for rehabilitation without examining those terms could turn coercion into an officially endorsed settlement. Similar questions arise where victims are expected to seek forgiveness from an armed group simply to recover the ability to farm or travel. What appears to be consent may then reflect the lack of any safe possibility of refusal, making it necessary to ask who accepted the agreement and under what pressures. OPSC and its civilian partners would need to distinguish these accommodations from the local knowledge of mediation and reciprocal obligations that can support a transition. Public support could help communities exercise those capacities with less fear by giving them an institution to approach when an armed party breaches its commitments. A temporary accommodation would then provide an opening to reduce coercion, provided government acts on the conditions residents could not change through negotiation alone. Leaving those conditions in place would instead make the appearance of peace a reason to tolerate continuing control.

Disarmament requires evidence that an armed group's capacity for coercion has weakened, beyond the number of weapons surrendered at a ceremony. Guns have also been rented in Zamfara, and ownership or control may lie with a commander or intermediary rather than the person carrying the weapon.[65] A handover would consequently need to be understood in relation to the organisation, the individual's role and continuing access to supply. The UN disarmament standard connects collection to secure handling, stockpile management and disposal,[66] requiring cooperation between OPSC, arms-control institutions, investigators and authorities responsible for local protection. That cooperation would need to accommodate people who never controlled a

[63] Ahmed Kingimi and Hamza Ibrahim, "In Nigeria, a Deadly Bandit Attack Exposes Fragile Local Peace Efforts," Reuters, February 10, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-deadly-bandit-attack-exposes-fragile-local-peace-efforts-2026-02-10/.

[64] Authors' stakeholder interviews, Katsina, May 2026. Ogalah Dunamis, "15 Killed in Katsina Community as Reprisal Attack Breaks Year-long Peace," Premium Times, March 17, 2026, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/864779-15-killed-in-katsina-community-as-reprisal-attack-breaks-year-long-peace.html.

[65] Rufa'i, I Am a Bandit, 35–36.

[66] United Nations, "Disarmament," Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, module 4.10, June 16, 2020, secs. 6–8, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IDDRS-4.10-Disarmament_16-Jun-2020-1.pdf.

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firearm, since an inflexible weapons requirement could exclude coerced associates or support personnel and create an incentive to obtain a gun simply to qualify. Obligations should follow the role and commitments involved, while group agreements also address captives, recruitment and coercive levies. The difficulty is political as well as practical, because a visible surrender may give government a symbol of progress and a commander new standing as an intermediary while the underlying criminal relationships survive. UN guidance on DDR and organised crime identifies the risk of preserving illicit power through a peace process,[67] reinforcing the need to examine whether a commander retains the means to recruit, collect payments and punish refusal after ceasing to carry a rifle in public.

Leaving a bandit group can expose a former member to rival commanders as well as community defence formations. A commander in Jibia reportedly refused to surrender a firearm because he feared a rival group and claimed he needed to protect the community.[68] The account shows why a promise to receive someone's surrender needs to include a credible arrangement for protection once the weapon is relinquished. A settlement requiring only bandits to surrender weapons may expose a returning herder to people from whom protection was originally sought, while farmers may resist disarming local guards as long as bandit groups remain able to attack their villages. These reciprocal fears require attention to the conduct and functions of each formation, because membership of a community defence group neither establishes lawful behaviour nor makes every armed actor equivalent.

The wider response would need to determine which activities should end, which legitimate functions require regulation and who will provide protection in their place. Where a lawful role remains appropriate, vetting, training and supervision would have to establish responsibility to public authorities, avoiding automatic absorption that preserves an abusive hierarchy under a new designation. Such decisions could themselves encounter resistance from people whose standing depends on providing armed protection or from political patrons who prefer a familiar intermediary. Government would have to address those interests without allowing them to determine which former associates can return or which victims may complain. Although restructuring every formation falls beyond OPSC's role, its rehabilitation work depends on these decisions, since programme completion cannot protect a participant from the same confrontation at a market or in a village of return. Durable disengagement therefore requires changes in the relationships through which former associates and their neighbours obtain protection.

Political ownership and representation

Public opposition to negotiating with bandits extends beyond Zamfara and forms an influential position among Northwest governments. The objection centres on agreements that reward violence, allow armed leaders to dictate terms or leave them able to resume attacks. Zamfara governor Dauda Lawal's stated conditions for any talks require prior strength on the government's side and unconditional surrender of weapons by the bandits; Sokoto's governor has likewise made acceptance conditional on unconditional surrender.[69] The legacy of failed agreements gives this position a basis that cannot be dismissed as resistance to every form of non-kinetic action.

[67] United Nations, "DDR and Organized Crime," Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, module 6.40, February 5, 2021, 4–8, 19–21, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-6.40-DDR-and-Organized-Crime.pdf.

[68] INT04, journalist based in Katsina, interview by the authors, May 2026.

[69] Zamfara State Government, "For the Record: Negotiating with Bandits Will Never Be Part of Our Strategy – Gov. Dauda Lawal," press statement, February 11, 2025, https://zamfara.gov.ng/2025/02/11/for-the-record-negotiating-with-bandits-will-never-be-part-of-our-strategy-gov-dauda-lawal/. Muhammad Abubakar, "Understanding Governor Aliyu's Katsina Declaration on Banditry," commentary, Sokoto State Government, May 7, 2026, https://sokotostate.gov.ng/understanding-governor-aliyus-katsina-declaration-on-banditry/.

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Officials who remember temporary concessions followed by renewed violence may regard another negotiation as a means of restoring a commander's freedom to operate. The practical question is consequently what kind of contact is proposed, under whose authority and with what consequences for the armed capacity left in place.

Government interlocutors also locate the persistence of banditry in what they regard as insufficient federal military action. Governors answer locally for attacks and finance security support, while the military operations on which they rely remain under federal command. Their frustration concerns both the protection residents receive and their own limited ability to direct the forces expected to provide it. Within this perspective, talks conducted before sustained pressure has weakened the groups would concede too much to actors who still believe they can impose terms. The expectation is that military action should first make continued violence untenable and bring the groups to seek surrender, after which government can consider the conditions for a civilian transition.[70] This is a political judgement about the use and sequencing of force. It does not, by itself, establish that earlier negotiations failed only because military effort was insufficient, or that every form of disengagement must wait for a comprehensive military victory.

Communities make decisions about peace agreements within a more immediate struggle to survive. Residents who cannot farm, reach a market or secure the release of relatives may accept contact with an armed commander even when state policy rejects negotiations. Accounts from the field describe local government chairmen and other officials attending some of these engagements, although official accounts may deny government involvement or describe the arrangements as community initiatives.[71] These accounts do not establish that every reported participant acted with state authorisation. They do reveal uncertainty about what a local official's presence signifies, which assurances other agencies will recognise and who will respond when an agreement fails. A community may reasonably interpret that presence as an indication of public backing, while the state later treats the same undertaking as a private accommodation. The resulting uncertainty can expose residents to retaliation and leave commitments on protection, weapons or captive release without an institution prepared to enforce them.

The public positions of states also differ in the space they allow for dialogue. In Katsina, Governor Dikko Umaru Radda has acknowledged permitting communities to pursue talks while declining to initiate negotiations himself and insisting that any engagement by him must proceed from strength. Kaduna has more openly combined military operations with dialogue through its peace model.[72] A common language of firmness therefore does not establish a uniform regional policy. Nor can opposition to concessions be taken to mean that no local contact occurs. For OPSC, these differences make a shared explanation of its mandate necessary: a rehabilitation referral, a village ceasefire, a commander's surrender and a bargain over immunity carry different legal and political obligations.

OPSC can fit within a policy of sustained military pressure because it offers a lawful route for eligible people to leave the networks that military operations seek to weaken. That route is distinct from purchasing an armed leader's cooperation or allowing a community agreement to dispose of

[70] Authors' stakeholder interviews and supplementary research notes on state-government perspectives.

[71] Authors' stakeholder interviews and supplementary research notes on community agreements and reported official participation. Esha Aliku, "Katsina Gov Denies Negotiating with Bandits," PUNCH, October 16, 2025, https://punchng.com/katsina-gov-denies-negotiating-with-bandits/.

[72] Donatus Anichukwueze, "There Are Moles in Govt, Security Agencies, Communities Aiding Bandits — Gov Radda," Channels Television, May 7, 2026, https://www.channelstv.com/2026/05/07/there-are-moles-in-govt-security-agencies-communities-aiding-bandits-gov-radda/. Kaduna State Government, "Kaduna Inaugurates Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration Committee to Enhance Security," May 5, 2026, https://kdsg.gov.ng/kaduna-inaugurates-disarmament-demobilisation-reintegration-committee-to-enhance-security/.

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criminal allegations. Zamfara's provision of the Tsafe facility alongside its rejection of ransom payments illustrates the possibility of making that distinction in practice.[73] Serious allegations still require investigation and prosecution where warranted, and a rehabilitation programme cannot determine immunity or replace the competent court. The programme's narrower contribution is to help low-risk, legally eligible individuals disengage safely, receive appropriate care and prepare for civilian life while enforcement continues against active groups. Clear public explanation would allow governments to support such departures without presenting rehabilitation as an admission that military action or judicial prosecution should cease.

Concerns about a predominance of Hausa members in some state DDR committees add an ethnic dimension to the uncertainty over their role.[74] In a conflict sharpened by reprisals and collective suspicion, the people assessing a case or promising protection may be judged through their perceived relationship to one side. A Fulani household may hesitate to provide information, help a relative surrender or approach a committee about stolen cattle if doing so appears to expose it to a hostile network. That hesitation can weaken the local information and cooperation on which rehabilitation depends. Confidence therefore concerns who participates in decisions as well as the government's declared purpose.

The history of vigilante mobilisation makes this concern concrete. Yan Sakai and other community defence formations gained support by promising protection where public security had failed, yet anti-Fulani profiling and abuses helped turn protection for some settlements into danger for others. Formal recognition or a new institutional title did not by itself remove those practices. Gummi's earlier support for a multi-ethnic community watch group, alongside action against vigilante excesses, offers a different precedent for organising protection.[75] A DDR committee that appears to reproduce an existing communal alignment risks carrying the same distrust into a process intended to make civilian return possible.

OPSC could use its federal convening role to help states build more credible participation across these divisions. Fulani and other pastoral representatives need meaningful influence alongside farming communities and other affected groups, with women, young people and displaced residents able to speak beyond established elites. Consultation should establish whom communities trust and how representatives report back, rather than relying on an ethnic label or a single appointed leader. That influence should shape reception plans, explanations of admission rules and priorities for recovery assistance, while legal decisions remain with the competent authorities. Confidential complaints and review outside local patronage networks would give people a way to challenge discrimination or threats. Representation would then be connected to the safety and fairness of the process, rather than ending with membership on a list.[76]

KEY INSIGHT

Confidence therefore concerns who participates in decisions as well as the government's declared purpose.

[73] Channels Television, "'I'll Never Pay a Dime to a Criminal,' Gov Lawal Rejects Ransom Payment to Kidnappers," October 5, 2026, https://www.channelstv.com/2026/10/05/ill-never-put-a-dime-to-a-criminal-gov-lawal-rejects-ransom-payment-to-kidnappers/. Zamfara State Government, "Operation Safe Corridor." Aliyu, "Zamfara Seeks Victims' Support Fund."
[74] Authors' supplementary research notes on concerns about committee composition and perceived ethnic balance.
[75] Hassan and Barnett, Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem, 25–27.
[76] United Nations, "Reintegration," IDDRS, module 4.30, September 26, 2022, secs. 4.3 and 6.2.

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Regional ownership of Tsafe cannot, however, be inferred from the host state's support. Some Katsina stakeholders understood the facility mainly as a structure along the road or as an amnesty initiative, rather than as part of a shared regional response.[77] The ambiguity surrounding local agreements can carry into reception and return if a promise made by one official is not recognised by the next institution involved. Participating governments therefore need an agreed account of authorised contact, lawful surrender and their responsibilities after rehabilitation. A facility provided by one state cannot settle what another receiving state will finance or who will protect and assist people after return.

Receiving states need arrangements for accommodation, continuing treatment, documentation, livelihood assistance and protection in place before participants graduate from OPSC. Public endorsement without these arrangements may leave someone in the facility after completing its activities or send them to a community that has received little information or support. In either case, families and local organisations may absorb costs that the programme has left unresolved, including organisations already assisting victims. State committees would need budgets and authority to secure action from the relevant ministries, while regional arrangements provide a way to resolve disagreements about transfer, cost sharing and the location of return. Responsibility should follow these agreed functions rather than automatically fall on the state of first surrender or depend on a governor's personal relationship with a programme coordinator. National DDR coordination could establish a common basis, with receiving states making their commitments effective through civilian services and continuing engagement with communities. This preparation is especially important where residents fear a returnee's continuing armed connections or where the proposed place of return remains unsafe. Without it, a rehabilitation decision in one state can transfer a protection problem to another government that has neither accepted nor prepared to manage it.

Residential rehabilitation and civilian livelihoods

Participants whose households depend on livestock need an arrangement for animal care during residential rehabilitation. Feeding, watering, protection and treatment continue throughout the absence, while milk must be used or sold, calves may be born and herds may need to move as pasture and security conditions change. Seasonal movement can involve relatives and other herders, including travel across the international border,[78] so a prolonged absence may disrupt the very livelihood expected to support reintegration. Planning would need to begin with the person's actual relationship to the animals, since an owner, a hired herder, a household that has lost its stock and a commander controlling rustled cattle face different situations. Pastoral background alone establishes neither ownership nor a wish to continue herding. Where animals are lawfully held, their care should be agreed with the owner and affected household before a prolonged residential phase, whether responsibility falls to an existing herder, a trusted relative or a supported producers' organisation. That agreement would need to cover

[77] Authors' fieldwork, Katsina and Zamfara, May 2026, Katsina interviews.
[78] International Organization for Migration, "Nigeria — Transhumance Tracking Tool — Flow Monitoring Dashboard 19 — Katsina and Zamfara States (April 2026)," Displacement Tracking Matrix, accessed November 8, 2026, https://dtm.iom.int/reports/nigeria-transhumance-tracking-tool-flow-monitoring-dashboard-19-katsina-and-zamfara-states.

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costs, veterinary access, grazing and water, information for the owner and responsibility for losses across the production cycle. It could not simply assign unpaid work to women or children because another household member has entered rehabilitation, since sustaining the livelihood requires an arrangement that those providing care can also sustain.

Stolen or disputed livestock create a further problem because animal welfare and competing ownership claims must be addressed together. Investigators would need to record the available evidence and use lawful procedures to preserve and manage the stock while ownership is determined, drawing where applicable on the court-supervised mechanisms provided by the Proceeds of Crime Act.[79] OPSC enrolment could not establish title, yet an investigation would not suspend the animals' need for food, water and treatment. Justice institutions would therefore need to work with livestock specialists without transferring decisions about ownership to those responsible for welfare. The Federal Ministry of Livestock Development and state services could advise on temporary care and veterinary referral, while the Ministry's June 2026 validation of a national livestock information system, including identification and traceability functions, offers a possible link to future tracing work.[80] Such information could assist an inquiry, but contested claims would still require testimony, transaction records and lawful adjudication. Relocating a herd would introduce further rights that also need protection, because receiving land may be cultivated, access to water contested and residents fearful of people accompanying the stock. An arrangement intended to protect assets could otherwise displace another producer or transfer conflict to a new locality, undermining the recovery it was meant to support.

KEY INSIGHT

Vocational training needs to prepare participants for work that is viable in the area where they will live after rehabilitation.

Prolonged camp residence may undermine the civilian livelihood that rehabilitation is intended to support when it interrupts lawful work or leaves household responsibilities unmet. Residence may be necessary for secure assessment, separation from a dangerous network or specialist care unavailable elsewhere, but a low-risk person with viable work and household responsibilities may not require every element of support to be delivered through prolonged camp residence. Where law and safety permit, a shorter residential phase could lead into supervised community support, scheduled counselling or practical learning through an agricultural institution. Mobile provision might also reduce disruption at important points in the production cycle, provided civilian partners can maintain care and respond when protection fails outside the facility. Where former associates can readily coerce a participant or staff cannot travel safely, these alternatives may be unsuitable, and lower costs cannot be assumed given the demands of coordinating services across locations. The choice would therefore follow assessed needs and local capacity, with Tsafe potentially coordinating rehabilitation while partners deliver appropriate parts nearer the place of return. Preserving livestock livelihoods

[79] Proceeds of Crime (Recovery and Management) Act 2022, secs. 9–14.
[80] Federal Ministry of Livestock Development, "FMLD Moves to Centralise Nigeria's Livestock Data," June 19, 2026, https://www.fmld.gov.ng/news-details/187.

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makes the importance of that choice visible, but similar questions arise for participants in other occupations, people with caring responsibilities and those with disabilities.

A camp also brings former associates into sustained contact, creating a question about which relationships rehabilitation helps them leave and which it may unintentionally preserve. Camp residence may also make it easier for participants to "sell ideas among themselves".[81] If influential residents retain authority over others, they could intimidate those seeking to disengage or encourage the sharing of criminal knowledge. Accommodation and supervision would therefore need to address relationships between residents alongside each person's individual needs.

Vocational training needs to prepare participants for work that is viable in the area where they will live after rehabilitation. Years of experience managing cattle may provide a basis for improved husbandry, fodder production, calf management or milk handling, while the loss of a herd, disability or an unsafe place of return may require another occupation. Where livestock work remains appropriate, the practice known as cin kara, grazing cattle on crop residues after harvest, illustrates why training depends on agreements outside the camp. This practice has linked herders' feed needs to farmers' fields, sometimes through payments or exchanges involving manure.[82] A returning herder may need to renew those arrangements before improved husbandry can generate an income. Dairy work would likewise require water, hygiene and dependable collection or storage, while trading needs capital and safeguards against handling stolen stock.

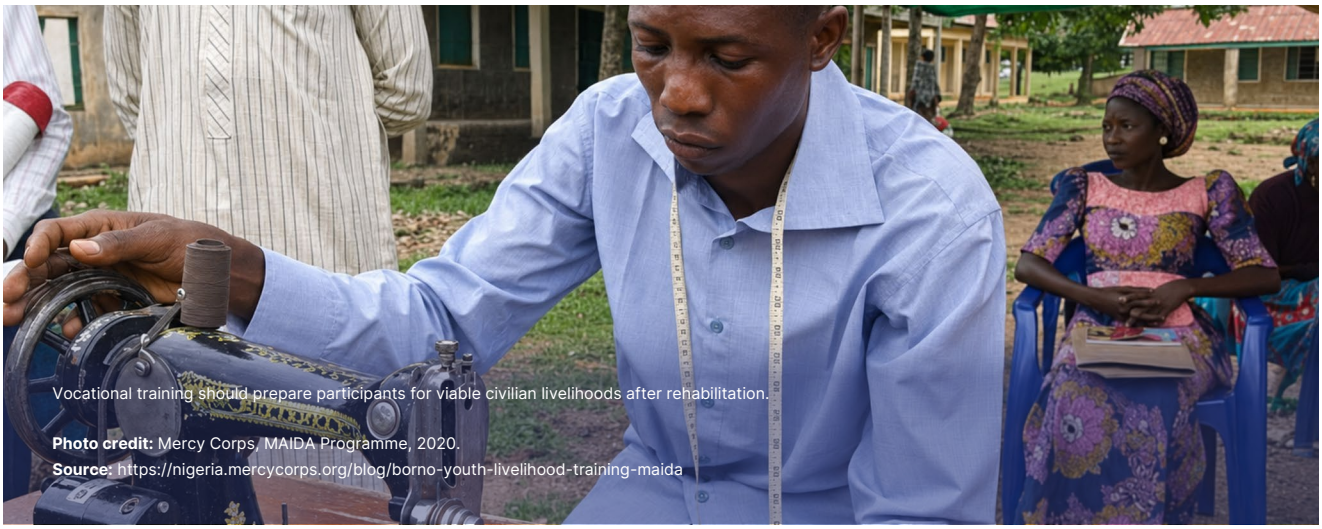
Participants choosing other occupations also need training connected to local demand. Pump and agricultural equipment maintenance, solar installations, processing, storage and repair trades would need assessment against available customers, materials and safe access to work, with apprenticeships connecting participants to established businesses. The UN reintegration standard emphasises that vocational training alone does not create employment and must be linked to economic opportunities and continuing support.[83] Agricultural colleges, livestock services, the National Directorate of Employment and employers could help establish those links by agreeing how learning, equipment, inputs and assistance continue after the course. Their involvement would make the choice of a trade depend on where it could be practised, who would buy the work and whether a graduate could reach that market safely, rather than on the availability of instruction alone.

The benefits of vocational training also depend on household relationships and control over land and income. Allocating grazing or irrigation resources over an unresolved claim could create another conflict, just as additional work in animal care or milk processing could benefit a household without giving women control over the resulting income. Displaced and victimised producers may have equal or greater needs for restocking and market access, making shared recovery more acceptable where people retain a meaningful say over assets and earnings. Within participating households, women associated with armed groups would also need assessment of their own experiences beyond their relationship to a male participant, while children require a distinct civilian protection response. Nigeria's September 2022 handover protocol provides for transfer of children allegedly associated with armed groups to civilian authorities within seven days in its armed-

[81] INT07, interview by the authors, May 2026.
[82] Higazi and Hassan, Conflict Analysis and Assessment, 11.
[83] United Nations, "Reintegration," Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, module 4.30, September 26, 2022, 2, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IDDRS-4.30-Reintegration_26-Sep-2022-1.pdf.

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conflict context,[84] placing their recovery within arrangements for education, family tracing and age-appropriate care. These needs cannot be met simply by extending an adult residential model or vocational package to the family, because the person admitted to OPSC may be only one of several people affected by the transition. Receiving institutions would consequently need to establish who requires assistance, what relatives can realistically provide and when another service must intervene, so that graduation does not leave those responsibilities assumed but unfulfilled.



Vocational training should prepare participants for viable civilian livelihoods after rehabilitation.

Photo credit: Mercy Corps, MAIDA Programme, 2020.
Source: https://nigeria.mercycorps.org/blog/borno-youth-livelihood-training-maida

Professional capacity and public scrutiny

OPSC's participating institutions need to sustain care and reintegration services as people move from the camp into civilian life. Shared responsibility can weaken delivery when one organisation assumes another is following up, especially in psychological care, substance-use treatment and disability support that require qualified professionals, supervision and referral options. Access to these services also depends on Hausa and Fulfulde language capacity and knowledge of local institutions, so that participants understand their status and can use the assistance offered. Sustaining that access would require public institutions to identify what they will finance after a partner has equipped a clinic or supported training, preventing families from inheriting unfunded obligations at graduation.

Continuing contact with participants, victims and receiving communities is also necessary to establish whether services and protection remain available after graduation. Completion figures alone cannot show whether a livelihood survives, return is safe or coercive levies persist. Allegations of reoffending require investigation, while changes in regional violence cannot all be attributed to OPSC. Independent scrutiny of the actual transition would help distinguish these developments and reveal failed referrals, unmet needs and unsafe returns, giving institutions a basis for adjusting support as local conditions change. Without that continuing capacity to respond, weaknesses outside the facility could undermine rehabilitation that appeared complete within it.

[84] UNICEF, "Government of Nigeria, UNICEF Sign Handover Protocol to Protect Children Encountered during Military Operations," September 30, 2022, https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/government-nigeria-unicef-sign-handover-protocol-protect-children-encountered-during.

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5. Conclusion and policy recommendations

OPSC offers the Northwest an established institutional route through which eligible people can leave armed networks and prepare for civilian life, complementing military action and judicial prosecution. Its prospects are strongest where rehabilitation is connected to the protection, fair treatment and livelihood opportunities that make departure sustainable. The same analysis shows why the Northeast model cannot simply be transferred to Tsafe. A more fragmented field of armed actors, substantial criminal income, unresolved allegations and the memory of broken agreements make the purpose and limits of admission particularly consequential. Victims' recovery must form part of the wider response, while the camp retains a clear professional and legal mandate. State institutions also need the confidence of communities divided by the conflict, making credible representation part of the conditions for implementation. The recommendations that follow therefore connect decisions within OPSC to the responsibilities of federal justice and security authorities, receiving states, civilian partners and local institutions. Their purpose is to make the route out of violence credible to prospective participants and acceptable to communities without allowing rehabilitation to displace accountability.

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Define the mandate and population of Camp Tsafe

OPSC and the competent national authorities should define Tsafe's admitted population before deciding whether it will serve all eligible Northwest armed-group associates or specialise in non-jihadist rehabilitation. The ordinary pathway should remain restricted to low-risk, legally eligible participants, with assessment of conduct, coercion and continuing capacity for violence kept distinct from the legal determination of prosecutable allegations. On that basis, a thematic arrangement could refer eligible people with jihadist-linked rehabilitation needs to Malam Sidi while Tsafe develops services suited to other associations; a broader mandate would instead require sufficient specialist capacity and accommodation to address differences within one facility. Either choice should be reflected in agreed referral criteria, transport, continuity of care and family contact, preventing transfer between centres from becoming a substitute for determining eligibility. The same framework should explain how to respond to people leaving community defence formations, civilians misclassified through proximity to armed groups and participants requiring other care. Women should be assessed in their own right, while children should enter appropriate civilian protection arrangements and age-sensitive procedures. Defining these responsibilities publicly would allow resources to follow the population served and prevent an important surrender or available accommodation from informally expanding the camp's mandate.

The mandate should distinguish rehabilitation for eligible armed-group associates from voluntary health, psychosocial and recovery services for victims. State DDR committees should explain how they will support each responsibility and connect them to the relevant civilian institutions. Public opposition to concessions must not leave the route for eligible departures undefined, while an emphasis on victim assistance must be matched by dedicated resources and access to justice. Any use of Tsafe for residential victim support should have its own admission basis, safeguards, staffing and budget, with assistance independent of participation in DDR. Rehabilitation plans should follow assessed needs, including whether ideological engagement is relevant, rather than treating every former associate as radicalised.

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Publish a Northwest surrender and referral framework

Defence Headquarters, NCTC, the Federal Ministry of Justice and participating states should agree and publish a route connecting an initial surrender approach to investigation, legal determination, rehabilitation or another appropriate response. The framework should identify authorised points of contact and distinguish the assistance traditional and religious intermediaries can provide from the authority required to receive people and take custody of weapons. Making those responsibilities known across the military, police, Department of State Services, camp personnel and relevant civilian institutions would reduce dependence on assurances that another agency may not recognise. People considering surrender should receive the same explanation in languages they understand, including possible prosecution and punishment, the conditions and likely duration of residence, access to representation and avenues for review. This explanation should make clear that surrender does not guarantee immunity while preserving humane treatment and due process. It should also establish who bears transport, care and household-support costs, so that access does not depend on payments to an intermediary or an indefinite absence sustained by relatives. Records should accompany each transfer and identify the legal basis of referral and continuing obligations, giving officials, prospective participants and affected communities a common understanding before a particular negotiation creates expectations the programme cannot fulfil.

Link local mediation to disarmament and justice

State DDR committees, justice institutions and OPSC should agree how trusted local mediation will connect to rehabilitation and return, drawing on experience in Gummi, Argungu and communities using pastoral and village leadership. Residents should help establish which practices retain legitimacy and who can access them, so recognition strengthens dependable remedies without validating payments or concessions extracted under threat. Public support should enable mediators to record agreed obligations and approach a responsible institution when commitments are breached, while agreements with armed actors provide for verifiable weapons obligations, release of captives, an end to coercive levies and protection against retaliation. Weapons requirements should follow the individual's role, including where a coerced associate never controlled a firearm, while a kingpin's surrender should proceed through a distinct lawful investigation of serious allegations and suspected criminal proceeds, with prosecution where warranted. Government should also address abuses and future security responsibilities within community defence formations, ensuring that an agreement does not leave returnees exposed to another armed actor. Religious and customary dialogue could then assist acknowledgement and settlement while

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victims retain access to courts and assistance independently of reconciliation. Keeping these protections in place, and avoiding additional fees or cumbersome procedures, would preserve local accessibility without authorising mediators or programme managers to promise immunity or recognise disputed assets.

Secure regional ownership and continuing support

Participating governments should agree Camp Tsafe's place within a regional response and connect it to their own DDR and civilian service arrangements. The uncertainty encountered in Katsina makes engagement outside Zamfara particularly important, since state committees can prepare for return only when governments understand and accept the responsibilities involved. Those responsibilities should be assigned to the relevant ministries and local authorities through funded reception, continuing care, livelihood assistance and protection arranged before graduation. Where surrender, residence and return occur in different states, a regional agreement should determine transfers, cost sharing and the resolution of disputes, complementing the host state's provision of facilities with commitments from receiving governments. The location of first surrender should not automatically determine every subsequent obligation, nor should support depend on personal relationships between officeholders. National coordination could provide common standards, with each state making them usable through civilian institutions and continuing contact with communities. If that engagement identifies an unsafe place of return, the responsible authorities should agree an alternative lawful arrangement and the assistance needed to sustain it. Establishing these commitments in advance would reduce the risk that completing rehabilitation merely transfers unresolved costs and protection needs to families or to a government unprepared to receive the participant.

Governors and state committees should publicly explain how lawful rehabilitation complements military operations and judicial prosecution, and distinguish that pathway from ransom payments, immunity or concessions that preserve armed authority. They should also clarify the authority of local government officials and intermediaries in community engagements, including which undertakings other agencies will recognise and who will act on a breach. Public accounts should accurately state whether government has authorised, supported or merely been informed of an arrangement, so communities are not left relying on assurances that officials later disclaim.

Receiving-state arrangements should include a review of committee membership and decision-making with affected communities. Governments should secure credible participation by Fulani and other

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pastoral communities alongside farming populations and other affected groups, including women, young people and displaced people. Representatives need influence over reception plans and recovery priorities, with safe ways for residents to question decisions or report threats. OPSC and civilian partners can support these consultations and an accessible complaints process, while independent scrutiny and referral of alleged abuses help prevent local rivalries from determining access to assistance. Eligibility and criminal responsibility must continue to turn on individual evidence.

Fund victim recovery and access to justice

Government should connect rehabilitation to identifiable resources for victims' protection, recovery and redress, with immediate health care, psychological support, livelihood assistance and legal help following harm and need independently of willingness to forgive or receive a graduate. To give that commitment an institutional basis, the Attorney-General should clarify funding and access to the Victims Trust Fund established under the Terrorism Act, linking it to state initiatives and assistance for harms outside its coverage. A reparations policy should specify recognised violations and available responses, including property restitution, compensation, continuing care and information about missing people where relevant. Access to these responses should be supported by confidential routes for allegations, explanations of institutional decisions and protection against intimidation. The Federal Ministry of Justice and relevant institutions should also make the route through investigation, trial, release and OPSC referral intelligible through appropriate independent access, interpretation and public accounts accompanying announcements of sentences. These explanations should leave room for victims to question an outcome or decline reconciliation, with women, young people and displaced survivors able to participate outside structures dominated by local elites. Allegations involving vigilantes and state personnel should receive attention alongside those involving bandits, so that claims to provide community protection do not exempt unlawful harm from examination.

Adapt residence and livelihoods to household circumstances

OPSC should determine the need for residential provision alongside its effects on lawful work and household responsibilities, retaining camp residence where secure assessment, protection or specialist care requires it. Where law and safety permit shorter residential phases followed by supervised support near the receiving area, civilian partners should accept clear responsibility for continuing care and action if protection becomes inadequate.

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For participants with lawful livestock, an arrangement should be agreed with the owner and affected household before a prolonged absence, specifying who will care for the animals, costs, veterinary access, grazing and water, information for the owner and responsibility for losses. Such planning must establish what relatives can realistically provide without presuming that women and children are available for unpaid work, while suspected criminal acquisition and competing claims remain with investigators and competent legal institutions. Livestock specialists could protect welfare during that process and, with the Ministry of Livestock Development, state services, agricultural colleges, producers' organisations and employers, connect training to viable work. The choice between husbandry, fodder, milk handling, trading or another occupation should follow the inputs, markets and safe access each requires, with assistance continuing beyond a course or tool delivery. Extending suitable opportunities to victims and displaced producers would support shared recovery, provided land and water arrangements do not create another contested claim. Assistance should be costed against assessed civilian needs and viable work, with transparent rules that avoid attempting to match criminal earnings or making violence a stronger claim on public support than victimhood.

Sustain professional capacity and independent scrutiny

OPSC's coordinating institutions and participating states should turn their shared responsibilities into continuing services with adequate staff, funding and referral arrangements. Civilian professionals need defined roles in psychological care, substance-use treatment, disability support and reintegration alongside the security functions of Defence Headquarters and other agencies, with supervision and practical follow-up extending the value of staff training. Equipment support should similarly include maintenance, supplies and competent use, while public institutions identify what they will sustain after individual grants end.

Independent legal practitioners, researchers and civil society representatives should have appropriate access to assess admission procedures, rehabilitation and return, with safeguards for personal information and confidential care. Continuing contact with participants, victims and receiving communities should identify unsafe returns, failed commitments and unmet needs. Reporting should distinguish allegations from established offences and programme completion from sustained reintegration, and examine whether armed authority and coercive payments persist. These findings would help OPSC and government adapt their response and allow affected communities to assess improvements in safety, livelihoods and access to justice.

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ISBN 978-978-67-4010-2

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