The IDP situation in Borno State, Nigeria – returning to uncertainty?

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Contributors

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Abbrevations

BAY	Borno, Adamawa, Yobe
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
FGD	focus group discussion
IDP	internally displaced person
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram)
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
KII	key informant interviews
LGA	Local Government Area
MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
NGO	non-governmental organization
SEMA	State Emergency Management Agency
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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Introduction

Nigeria is faced with a protracted displacement crisis caused by jihadist insurgencies, banditry and natural disasters. This crisis is particularly manifest in the north-east, where for more than 12 years over 2 million people have been forced to move in to, out of and between internally displaced person (IDP) camps and informal settlements. Some have tried to return home or resettle to another community, only to have to move again. All suffer from limited access to essential services such as healthcare and education, and deficiencies in food security and adequate shelter (INGOFORUM 2023/2024; Mercy Corps 2023b). Moreover, the young age of the IDP population (UNHCR 2021) means many camp residents have few, if any, memories of their lives prior to leaving their homes of origin.

The state of Borno is one of the most affected in Nigeria. Here, about 900,000 people continue to live in about 65 formal and 158 informal camps (Baba-Ibrahim 2024). In 2021, Borno State Governor Prof Babagana Umara Zulum began the process of closing the camps and returning IDPs to their homes of origin (Human Rights Watch 2022**)**. While more than 100,000 people have already moved out of the camps (Human Rights Watch 2022), uncertain remains as to what the majority of IDPs will do once the camps are closed. This report aims to fill this knowledge gap by presenting a foresight study that, coupled with analysis of previous studies, draws on ethnographic data and field observations collected among IDP populations around Maiduguri in October 2024.

The foresight analysis framework (Wiebe et al. 2018) used relies on three inter-related factors: 1) the weight of history; 2) the contradictions of the present; and 3) the pull of the future. While this method cannot offer statistical representativity, it does allow for indicative scenarios encompassing known (albeit uncertain) risks and probable futures. These scenarios are not only valuable for policy planning, but constitute important pilot data for larger, more systematic studies going forward.

The choices facing IDPs in Borno State

The IDPs in Borno State have been driven by the effects of conflict into formal and informal settlements. There, they have sought the safety in numbers, as well as the services provided by humanitarian actors and the Nigerian government. The knowledge base concerning IDPs in Borno State is currently limited, although some studies do exist and are duly discussed below (Ekezie 2022 ;INGOFORUM 2023/2024; Iorbo et al. 2024; Mercy Corps 2023a, 2023b; Modu et al. 2024; Mohammed 2022; Ododo et al. 2020; Sadat et al. 2021; Shallangwa 2021; Shallangwa & Tijani 2020; Sutton 2021; Yusuf et al. 2023). While the circumstances of Borno State are unique in some respects, it is not the first place in Africa to experience a situation whereby massive numbers of people are displaced, but across a limited geographical range. In particular, the situation in Borno State bears significant similarities to that of Northern Uganda between 2002 and 2005 (see Bjørkhaug & Bøås

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2014; Bjørkhaug et al. 2007; Bøås & Hatløy 2005).[1] As such, analysis of the latter case offers the prospect of useful conceptual knowledge regarding the situation faced by the Borno State IDPs and the choices they can realistically make.

Choice is often seen as binary between 'voluntary' and 'forced'. Translated to a situation where IDP camps are about to be closed, this means either IDPs move voluntarily or are forced to move somewhere else – be it back to their home of origin or somewhere else. This is not, however, how things tend to play out in real life, as the choices open to most people – IDPs or otherwise – are much more constrained. We all live our lives constrained by certain perimeters, some of which we can influence, others we simply take for granted. Thus, somewhere between 'voluntary' and 'forced' exists a third category we can term 'voluntary forced'. Here, people can exercise some autonomy when making choices, but it is always limited. In the case of the IDPs in Borno State, their autonomy is curbed by their lack of resources, the conflict that has destroyed their local communities, and the extended period they have remained in the camps.

For many of the younger IDPs – who constitute a large proportion of camp residents – the camp has become home. Thus, asking them to return to their place of origin, regardless of the non-life of massive want they are subject to in the camps, represents a leap into the unknown. The camp at least represents safety in numbers, in contrast to uncertainty and insecurity provoked by the idea of home as a faraway village. These are important issues to be taken into consideration when identifying durable solutions to the IDP situation in Borno State (Bradley 2018).

While there have been some improvements in the security situation, humanitarian organizations operating in Borno remain worried about the camp closure process. Continued violent activity by jihadi insurgency groups such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, or Boko Haram), combined with a lack of health and educational facilities in rural Borno, mean IDPs may be forced to return to areas affected by immense insecurity. On the other hand, the camps were only ever meant to be a temporary response to an immediate crisis, offering people on the run refuge, shelter and basic necessities. The longer the camps exist, the more difficult the return process will be. Added to this, life in camps comes with its own challenges, including overcrowding; inadequate shelters; lack of food security; insufficient water and sanitation; and high levels of reported sexual violence (Mercy Corps 2023b).

Outstanding questions and potential IDP responses to camp closures

Closing the camps as early as possible is, therefore, the preferred option, but doing so without the consent of those living in them presents its own set of challenges (Global Protection Cluster 2023; Human Rights Watch 2022; HumAngle 2024). People need to know what they will return to. Do their original settlements still exist? Do people remember the boundaries that separate their land from others in the settlement, as well as the land claimed by neighbouring settlements (Kiggundu 2008)?

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1   There are several other current cases of large-scale displacement in the Sahel region, but none are directly comparable to the massive, compressed displacement seen in Borno State and Northern Nigeria more widely. Moreover, none have yet reached the stage where a return scenario can be played out.

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Are their dwellings vacant, or has someone else occupied them in the meantime? Is the security situation acceptable? Will they be provided with seeds and agricultural equipment? Given how long they have been displaced, do they still have the knowledge and skills to cultivate the land (Ishaku et al. 2020)? And will the return process be accompanied by such basic services such as health and primary education (see also Ewang 2022; Global Protection Cluster 2024; International Crisis Group 2023b)?

These are just some of the questions the IDPs must ponder in light of the existing and prospective camp closures. Ultimately, it boils down to a vulnerable group of people having to choose between four alternatives:

1. Return to their home of origin;

2. Return to another village or settlement where they may or may not have relatives or friends who can help them settle, but which is seen as safer and/or has access to better services;

3. Refuse to return and attempt to settle in Maiduguri or a similar urban centre (the safety of the garrison town); or

4. Return to Maiduguri (or a similar urban centre) as the only viable option after having attempted to go back to their home of origin or elsewhere.

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What previous studies tell us

The concept of durable solutions first emerged in the wake of the Second World War (Long 2014), and is anchored in the 1998 United Nations (UN) Guiding Principles, the 2009 Kampala Convention, the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. According to the Global Compact, durable solutions involve voluntary repatriation, local solutions, and resettlement and complementary pathways for admission (UN & UNHCR 2018). Meanwhile, the IASC (2010: 4) asserts that: "A durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance, and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement". This is to be achieved through either sustainable reintegration to the place of origin; sustainable local integration in areas where IDPs are taking refuge; or sustainable integration in another part of the country (IASC 2010). Against the above backdrop, the Borno State government, led by Governor Zulum, launched the Borno State Strategy for Durable Solutions to Internal Displacement in 2024.

The three-year (2025–2027) plan is part of the state government's drive to ensure resettlement efforts in Borno adhere to international commitments and the expectations of the current international regime on refugees. The Borno State Strategy therefore emphasizes that return should be voluntarily. However, although the strategy is ambitious and comes with a relatively detailed budget, it is short on concrete milestones.

The strategy distinguishes between voluntary return to home of origin, integration into local host communities, and relocation to an area other than the place of origin. It also contains a lengthy list of minimum requirements that must be in place before return, local integration or relocation can be implemented, encompassing everything from security, housing and basic services to the provision of community centres, marketplaces and cash grants, as well as the guaranteed availability of food and non-food items for the first three months of a returnee's settlement (see Borno State Government 2024). While meeting these requirements is certainly important for achieving safe return, integration into host communities or relocation, the strategy provides no clear plan at to how this will be achieved. It also says little if anything on the need for urban planning.[2] As this report will show, one important consequence of the massive displacement in Borno State is increased urbanization: Maiduguri and similar towns have already experienced huge population growth, a trend that is only likely to continue.

Much has been written about the rights and experiences of IDPs. Here, it is important to acknowledge that IDPs are not a homogeneous group, with differences in identity, background, age, resources, education, networks and family structure significantly affecting an individual's experiences and needs, and therefore the choices open to them. Nevertheless, one particular dimension affects

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2   The strategy mentions that Maiduguri will expand and that new settlements in peri-urban communities must be established, but the consequences of this in terms of urban planning are not meaningfully specified.

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IDPs across the board: while residents rely on their camps, they were only intended as a temporary solution to an immediate crisis. Faced with this, the Nigerian state has made several attempts to return IDPs to their home of origin over the past 15 years. Unfortunately, ongoing conflict has led to many of these returnees becoming displaced once more.

In most cases, IDPs suffer a lack of basic necessities. Added to this, it is important take into account the immaterial needs, such as the social leadership, networks and practices some IDPs may be deprived of during their displacement (Iorbo et al 2024; Shallangwa 2021). On the other hand, a child born and brought up in a camp will have forged all their social networks within the context of camp life. As this implies, a camp is defined as much by its social relations as it is by its topographical features. Hence, those who have built their social relations entirely within an IDP camp may regard it as home, regardless of what the government or others may claim (Whyte et al. 2012). This raises the critical question of *when* displacement ends (Brookings Institution 2007).

Perceptions of what is safe and where one feels secure matter greatly to IDPs considering resettlement. This is particularly so when it comes to a conflict setting like the one in north-eastern Nigeria. Studies from Uganda show that the occurrence of attacks during or around times of resettlement correlates strongly with IDPs choosing to keep to the relative safety of their camp, as venturing out is deemed too risky (Bozzoli et al. 2012). In the case of Borno State, the Nigerian government sees itself as having won the battle against the jihadi insurgents. Evidence from other sources, however, suggests this is not the case (Ayandele & Aniekwe 2024; International Crisis Group 2024; UN 2024), with some even reporting that attacks increased during 2024, including those targeting IDP camps (Baba-Ibrahim 2024). Many IDPs may therefore wish to remain in their camp, which at least offers a degree of security and covers some basic needs, in contrast to a rural life that is fraught with danger and offers few prospects for a sustainable livelihood. Such considerations are particularly crucial to those who have spent a long time in camps and structured their lives accordingly, as evidenced by research elsewhere – for example, among IDPs in Burundi (see Kamungi et al. 2005).

Resettlement, return, livelihoods and property rights

Key to sustaining resettled communities are land rights or the opportunity to cultivate vacant land; knowledge of how to do so; and/or the possibility of employment (Kurshitashvili 2012). Many young people who have been IDPs migrate towards urban centres not only due to their relative security, but to sustain themselves economically. In the case of Borno, many young IDPs have flocked to the state's urban centres, in particular the state capital Maiduguri. The rapid increase in the number of people in these places has contributed to increased urbanization, which brings both challenges and opportunities: on the one hand, it often increases the number of poverty-stricken people living in destitute slum areas; on the other, it increases the workforce and level of economic activity in urban areas (Hammar 2014). For young IDPs, urban life may feel safer than returning to their family's rural village, while offering a more exciting alternative to the boredom of remaining in a camp.

Access to and ownership of land is a crucial consideration for camp residents thinking about

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returning to rural life. In practice, however, chaotic return processes have often led to the strongest engaging in land-grabbing, or land rights conflicts in cases where former IDPs have been resettled to new host communities. Such dynamics were clear during the return process in Northern Uganda (see Bøås & Hatløy 2005).

Rural return or resettlement not only relies on land rights and access, but knowledge – that is, the skills needed to cultivate and use the land. For youths who have not grown up in their rural homeplaces and so lack the necessary knowledge to work the land, the prospect of returning to a plot of land they cannot use holds little appeal. Moreover, lines of ownership may have been changed, or others – perhaps an earlier wave of resettled IDPs – may now be settled on the land in question. Gender is a critical factor, as land ownership is often inherited and negotiated by men through a patriarchal inheritance structure (Kamungi et al. 2005). Broadly speaking, the household best prepared for a return to rural life is one that consists of a husband and wife aged 30–40 years who have not been displaced for so long as to have forgotten the art of peasant agriculture or where the boundaries of their land lies, with children old enough to take on some of the farming workload. By contrast, much less prepared are younger households whose members possess few if any of the necessary skills for farming, having lived most their adult lives in an IDP camp. In addition, female-headed households are frequently disadvantaged by land ownership and management processes, which tend to be dominated by men of the leading lineages.

The issue of the relationship between IDPs and host communities is also highly relevant in the case of north-eastern Nigeria and Borno State. Relations between IDPs and host communities can function well, with the former relying on the latter for shelter, economic opportunities and new social networks (Fomekong 2021). At the same time, there is potential for social tension and even violent conflict, as has been seen in Nigeria. Both IDPs and host communities must cope in areas where various groups are driven to stake their claim to scarce resources. In the case of the Lake Chad basin, such conflicts were believed to have been the result of a perception among host communities that IDPs were being given privileged treatment by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and other humanitarian actors (Kamta & Scheffran 2021). Thus, competition over scarce resources in an increasingly urbanized Maiduguri and its environment has become a salient feature of IDP-host community social relations.

The Borno State IDP debate

Current discussions about how to manage the IDP crisis in Borno are characterized by two contrary positions. On the one side are those who claim the time is ripe for the IDPs to return, and that the response to the crisis should shift from primarily humanitarian measures to stabilization and development programming. The opposing perspective, mainly voiced by humanitarian actors, rests on the assumption that a safe return cannot yet be achieved and so the focus should be on the protection needs of the IDPs, including the fact that huge numbers of people remain dependent on support from (I)NGOs for their survival.

While both perspectives point to important truths, they tend to be presented as inherently

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incompatible with each other. In reality, a long-term approach that seeks to reconcile the necessity of moving beyond humanitarian assistance while recognizing acute current needs is required. The camps cannot exist forever, but return must be properly sequenced and planned, with IDPs confident their areas of return are at least relatively safe and that they will have access to protective forces if threatened with violence. Given these assurances, many will likely return, though they will need considerable assistance. At the same time, it is probable that others will choose not to return regardless, and as such their perspectives must also be incorporated into stabilization and development planning.

In 2021 the Borno State government shifted its policy from humanitarian response and camp management to the closure and relocation of IDPs under its Safe Return Strategy. Between 2021 and 2024, the Borno State government closed 17 IDP camps, directly impacting 166,775 people. Even so, there are still at least 215 camps – 62 formal and 153 informal – remaining in Borno State (CCCM et al. 2024). In 2024, a mere 8,000 people or so were relocated in Borno State, suggesting relocation is a tall order. With many relocations failing to meet minimum standards for voluntary, safe, and dignified returns. This approach has led to the emergence of spontaneous sites and increased pressures on existing camps, exacerbating humanitarian needs.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2024), 67 percent of IDP respondents in Borno State say they want to return or resettle within the next 12 months. Such an outlook is unsurprising given the absence of employment and livelihood opportunities, as well as the lack of basic services. For many, their existence is defined by a longing for something better. Yet, as camp residents are only too aware, a vast array of challenges stand in the way of achieving a better life, with security concerns foremost among them. JAS and ISWAP insurgents, as well as other armed non-state actors, continue to perpetrate violence in places of intended return. Added to this, many areas remain no-go zones for state forces and humanitarian actors.

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The weight of history

The IDP crisis in Borno State is deeply intertwined with the deteriorating security situation in Northern Nigeria over the past 15 years. As such, it is necessary to provide a brief historical overview of this period, and in particular how the jihadi insurgency exacerbated the displacement crisis in Borno. The inception of the crisis came with the so-called Boko Haram insurgency, which had its epicentre in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. The uprising grew steadily into a massive cross-border insurgency, threatening not only Northern Nigeria, but several neighbouring states.

2009–2013

JAS, or Boko Haram, is an extremist Islamic group whose roots can be traced back to the early 2000s. Despite being an Islamic jihadist movement, Boko Haram's victims are mostly other practicing Muslims. As has been the case for Nigeria's other insurgencies, Boko Haram has thrived particularly in the country's poorest and most marginalized regions. Ample literature suggests the insurgency is tied to socio-political grievances stemming from poor governance, marginalization, corruption and opposition to Nigeria's southern centre (Adela 2021; Agbiboa 2015; Pérouse de Montclos 2014).

In 2009, Boko Haram clashed with Nigerian security forces in Maiduguri, culminating in the killing of its leader Mohammed Yusuf. This event is now viewed as the catalyst for the large-scale insurgency that has devastated north-eastern Nigeria over the past 15 years. In 2011, following a two-year crackdown by Nigerian security forces, Boko Haram resurged via a series of coordinated attacks on police, government and civilian targets, resulting in a significantly deteriorated security landscape across Northern Nigeria. This unrest coincided with the rise of criminal groups willing to collaborate or blend with jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, which has since splintered into multiple factions.

In 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Northern Nigeria, prompting a massive displacement crisis. Millions fled to neighbouring countries such as Chad, Cameroon and Niger, while others sought refuge in Maiduguri and other cities in the region. The situation escalated further in 2014 when Boko Haram militants abducted hundreds of schoolgirls, known globally as the 'Chibok girls' after the name of the town they were taken from. The Nigerian government responded buy increasing its military presence, supported by international partners (Adamo 2020).

2014–2024

By 2014–2015, it became clear that Boko Haram had expanded beyond Nigeria's borders, affecting neighbouring Chad, Cameroon and Niger. This in turn led to the 2015 formation of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a regional initiative aimed at combatting the extremist threat around Lake Chad. Despite dislodging Boko Haram from urban areas and splintering the group, the MNJTF has not been able to deal a final blow to the insurgency (International Crisis Group 2020, 2023a, 2024). Boko

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Haram has since fragmented into factions, with the most prominent being JAS and ISWAP, both of which employ hit-and-run tactics and make use of the challenging geography of Northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad islands to create hideouts (ACLED 2024).

Civilians continue to find themselves trapped between state security forces and JAS/ISWAP, responding to shifts in territorial control by cooperating with one or the other side out of necessity, which can lead to harsh reprisals. In this respect, the success of Nigerian security forces in dislodging Boko Haram from Maiduguri in 2013 had the consequence of transforming the conflict from an urban to a rural one, which now affects all of Borno and threatens other Lake Chad nations. This situation mirrors that of similar conflicts in the Sahel, where insurgents thrive in rural areas despite losing control of urban centres (Bøås 2025; International Crisis Group 2017).

Despite increased counterterrorism efforts under the MNJTF, 1.3 million people had already been displaced in Nigeria by 2015, with Borno State the hardest hit. At the time, the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights reported that IDPs are often housed in camps, informal settlements, host communities, rented houses, and even places of worship and public buildings. As a result, their access to basic rights such as education, food, healthcare, shelter and sanitation is severely restricted. Numerous displaced children have not been able to attend school, while those remaining in their communities experience poor educational standards due to insecurity, lack of teachers and the destruction of schools (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

In 2021, Borno State governor Zulum communicated the state's intention to return or resettle all IDPs and began the process within the city of Maiduguri. By August 2022, at least 140,000 had already been resettled. Many have voiced grave concerns in light of the fact that residents have been forced to leave the camps without consultation, adequate information, or sustainable alternatives to ensure safety or livelihoods. According to Human Rights Watch (2022), many have been resettled into much harsher conditions, as the humanitarian organizations that previously offered some assistances are barred from giving aid.

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Data and findings

In October 2024, we conducted field work in and around Maiduguri city in Borno State, consisting of face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) in five locations, as well as key informant interviews (KIIs) with a variety of stakeholders, encompassing both local politicians and international actors such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN-Habitat, the UN Representative Office in Abuja, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Danish Refugee Council and the IOM. The KII sessions also included representatives from the federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and several state government ministries, including the Ministry of Information and Internal Security; the Ministry of Justice; the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA); and the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

The IDP respondents and FGD participants were purposefully sampled in order to ensure as much diversity as possible in terms of age, gender, previous occupation, social status, place of origin and length of stay in the camps. This sampling was made possible by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) team, led by Professor Mala Mustapha in Maiduguri, which utilized its connections to social leaders and camp managers. A similar procedure was used for the KII participants, who were approached based on their knowledge of the local context and involvement with the IDP crisis. Below, we offer a synthesis of our findings and data from the KIIs and FGDs.

The camp sites as fieldwork locations

Our fieldwork was spread out over five different locations, two within the town of Maiduguri (Kawar Maila, a relocation site, and El-Miskin Madinatu camp) and three outside (Dalori I camp, Musari camp and Muna Elbadawi camp). Of the latter group, the furthest away from Maiduguri is Muna Elbadawi, located about 15 kilometres from town.

In terms of number of households, the largest site is Muna, which, according to the last verifiable data, hosted over 10,000 households in early 2024. The other camps are smaller, but accurate data indicating the number of households present is lacking.

Dalori I and Muna camps are soon to be closed. In fact, according to the original schedule, this should already have happened, but the devastating floods that hit Maiduguri in September 2024 have led to a postponement. At the time our team was working in these camps in October 2024, water still remained from the flood, having impacted the camps both materially and via outbreaks of water-borne diseases – most notably Cholera.

Most IDPs in the five sites reside in densely-packed shelters they have constructed using dried wood. A number of serious fires have already been reported, and future conflagrations could easily have devasting consequences due to the often rapid, uncontrolled spread from house to house. Water and sanitation are provided at certain points within the camps, but do not always work, and some

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inhabitants report that venturing the required distance after dark poses serious risks, complaining of criminality, drug abuse, prostitution and gender-based violence. Several respondents claim that women are too afraid to go out at night due to these and other issues. Meanwhile, the food and support provided by NGOs or the state is barely sufficient, prompting residents to cultivate tiny makeshift gardens to supplement their meagre rations. Many also work part-time inside or outside the camps, a practice more prevalent in the camp and relocation site within Maiduguri. Below, we present the views of individual camp inhabitants that represent majority concerns.

IDP voices

On the issue of return and life in the camp, a 75-year-old Kanuri household head who has resided in Dalori I since fleeing Boko Haram violence in 2014 said that, despite the lack of security structures and permanent housing, he now felt safer than he had in his village. He cannot return due to ongoing insecurity and feels stigmatized as an IDP. Previously a farmer, he is now unable to work due to insecurity, but harbours hopes for his children's education, which is currently limited due to the costs involved. Despite having land markers for reclaiming his property, he remains in the camp, valuing security over a return to his home of origin in Konduga. Nevertheless, he retains a strong desire to return home if safety can be guaranteed. At present, his children continue to cultivate parts of his land, but he worries relatives or community leaders (*Bulamas*) may try to lay claim to it due to his offspring's lack of local knowledge.[3] He emphasizes that security is essential for a 'happy home' – without it, his village no longer feels like home.

Several other household heads who have lived as IDPs since 2014 voice similar concerns. Some are engaged in basic farming – either directly or by sending their children – near the camp where they live. While most recognize the dangers of returning, few are content with life in the camp. Educational opportunities are scarce, with only limited temporary schooling for children. Some families manage to send their children to schools in the city, though this often requires a significant portion of their limited income. Several household heads express optimism about the feasibility of return if it is deemed safe. When asked about land rights, they remain confident that there are viable mechanisms for dealing with issues such as property demarcation. Many, however, sees the possible absence of *Bulamas* – due to the fact most are old and may have died in the interim, with the conflict preventing replacements assuming their position – as a complicating factor given their traditional role in land management and mediating land conflict.

Other heads of household, however, no longer see returning to their home of origin as a viable option. Two 65-year-old male respondents with large families both express an unwillingness to return to their homes of origin, as they do not feel security can be guaranteed. Similarly, a woman who became the household head due to the passing of her husband believes integrating into a host community is a more realistic means of sustaining her family.

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3   *Bulamas* is a Kanuri term for village elders from leading lineages who act as custodians of land, land management and traditional land conflict resolution.

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Many IDPs have been affected by multiple displacement, some for a period of a decade, and may no longer know any relatives living in their place of origin. While several respondents believe the security situation is adequate at their home of origin, they are unwilling to return to an 'uninhabited place'. One, for example, claims all he requires is some support to kick-start his life back at home, but would ideally prefer to use this backing in Maiduguri. Some interviewees who hail from more rural places of origin, such as Yaleri in Konduga, complain they lack information about their land. Even so, they know the security situation remains extremely challenging, and that Boko Haram continues to operate in the area they used to live. Although some respondents are among family and have social networks and connections in their camp, others report that their families are widely dispersed.

Systematizing cross-cutting issues

Analysis of the material arising from our individual interviews and FGDs yields three cross-cutting issues: 1) *security and safe return*; 2) *livelihoods and property rights* (in the camp and beyond); and 3) *trauma of displacement* (connected to camp residents' experiences prior to and during displacement).

Security and safe return

While responses to the question 'Can you describe your thoughts and feelings about the possibility of returning to your place of origin?' vary among respondents, most (although to a lesser degree those belonging to the relocated community in Kawar Maila) centre on a single pressing issue: security, or lack thereof. Here, considerable emphasis is placed on the state ensuring safety and protection in areas currently deemed hazardous for return. While many respondents stress they wish to return to their land, almost all refer directly or indirectly to their belief that Boko Haram still operates – or at least recently did so – in areas around their homes of origin.[4]

One respondent from Musari camp states, 'I want to go back, but I don't want to go back just to be killed by Boko Haram', while another maintains that 'I will want to go back if things normalize – safety comes first'. Other respondents echo this view of Boko Haram as still active within their ancestral communities. Several know of people, including close relatives, who have narrowly escaped Boko Haram violence. In some places, the Bulamas have been able to strike a compromise regarding which lands people may settle on, although other parts remain out of bounds, with incomers risking violent reprisals. Meanwhile, Boko Haram has taken full control in certain areas and are now the ones residing on land belonging to IDPs. Many respondents also claim members of Boko Haram have integrated themselves into local communities and would recognize them if they returned due to their tax collection activities. In such circumstances, people not recognized as having paid their taxes or fully submitted to Boko Haram risk being killed.

Safety and security concerns are not confined to returning, but pervade daily life in the camps. In Muna camp, people tell stories of family members being kidnapped, with some respondents even

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4   Most respondents refer to splinter groups such as JAS or ISWAP as Boko Haram.

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reporting their families are still gathering funds to pay off ransoms. Others speak of killings that took place as recently as the week prior to our fieldwork. Although one respondent in Muna asserts that he will return as soon as the insecurity is solved, others regard it as unthinkable that they will be able to go back for the foreseeable future. One respondent goes as far as saying he would not return even if 'the governor comes' to his place of origin.

In Kawar Maila relocation site, people also complain about lack of security, with several inhabitants claiming not to have seen their lands for almost 15 years. Again, the reason given is persistent Boko Haram activity in the vicinity of their land. Some say that family members or relatives told to return by the government have since been killed or had to escape again, leading to multiple displacements. Several also anticipate conflict concerning their property as a result of their displacement and the Boko Haram insurgency – among other issues, much land is still in the ownership of Boko Haram-affiliated persons, who then lease it out. Moreover, much of the land has been razed to the ground, essentially forcing people to start again.

As previously touched upon, many of the Bulamas – traditional leaders who mediate conflict, uphold cultural customs and address local disputes – have been silenced, driven away or killed by Boko Haram. As one respondent observes, 'our Bulama has also run for his life, so the only people in charge are the Boko Haram members themselves'. The lands seized by Boko Haram have largely been given to members, loyalists or those who can afford to lease it and pay taxes – either monetarily or through giving up some of the harvest. According to another informant, 'This has changed the line of landownership from ancestral, to that of the gun'.

The issue of safety of return is ambiguous and complex. Despite the majority of respondents stating 'they will not return until it is safe', many also fear Boko Haram reprisals against those living in their areas of origin if the state attempts to impose a stronger security presence there. As such, it is not uncommon for people to confidently state they would return if true safety could be ensured, yet question the legitimacy of government claims that their areas are now – or soon will be – safe. One respondent went as far as saying 'if the military remove them [Boko Haram], I will go back. … They should be wiped out completely because if not they will always regroup'.

As mentioned, safety concerns aren't limited to the issue of return. In Musari camps, residents seem to perceive their environment as relatively secure, especially compared to their home of origin. Here, gender-based violence, rape or other forms of conflict do not seem as prevalent as in some of the other camps.

This viewpoint is in marked contrast to the opinions expressed by the residents of Muna camp. There, respondents report that Boko Haram has repeatedly attacked the camp, with fighters frequently kidnapping people during the night. Respondents also claim that many young men migrate to the city market in order to sleep outside during the night, rather than risk being kidnapped for ransom or forced to join the jihadists. On top of this, several respondents claim that 'bad boys' have been to the camps threatening to kill people. These may be criminal gangs or insurgents from groups such as ISWAP or JAS, with lines between these perceived as quite blurred. Another respondent points to drug abuse as a big issue, while a female respondent asserts she is currently unwilling to venture out

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at night for fear of being raped or suffering gender-based violence.

In Kawar Maila, although the issue of theft was brought up, insecurity is much less of an issue than in residents' homes of origin. The general sentiment is that despite the Kawar Maila community suffering from a lack of police and military presence, the CJTF does provide some security within the community. Established in 2008 during the rise of Boko Haram, the CJTF is a volunteer force, with many members absorbed into the regular armed forces. Yet, those who remain part of the CJTF provide both intelligence and community policing in Borno while supporting the armed forces. Several respondents claim that 'idle persons' fear the CJTF, which has supposedly led to a decrease in vices within the community – something that has generally been well received.

In El-Miskin Madinatu, respondents raise the issues of gender-based violence, rape and prostitution. The latter is a particular problem when it comes to young children, particularly girls, who often find themselves having to make a living through prostitution. One respondent claims that if it were not for her foster mother, she would have been exploited in the same way other girls and women in the camp have been.

Overall, while security in the camps tends to be much better than in residents' places of origin, insecurity remains an issue, especially for IDPs located in camps further outside of Maiduguri (Muna and Dalori I) or resettled within host communities.

Livelihoods and property rights

Most respondents in Musari camp complain about the lack of livelihood opportunities. Here, as in other camps, IDPs are reliant on 'good people' (mainly NGOs, family members/relatives and the state government), to use the term employed by one respondent. Farmers are cut off from their lands, with little space available to farm in the camp. One respondent says he wants to return home due to his lack of job or education, both of which he believes will be more easily obtainable in Marte, his place of origin. Given the lack of livelihoods and the fact the government has now stopped supplying any assistance to the camp, the only thing still keeping people in Musari is concerns about insecurity. Several respondents are open to relocating elsewhere provided both security and a real opportunity to get a menial job, learn a skill or start a business are provided. This requires both material and immaterial support from the government. For example, one farmer says he wants the government to 'provide me with farming tools and seedlings. In addition, the government must restore peace first'. Most people have relied on farming, hunting or fishing in the past, and while many say they still have the relevant skills, they admit the camp's children are not so adept, which may prove a challenge when it comes to returning to their homes of origin. Thus, as with other camps, many Musari residents are particularly interested in resettling near or within Maiduguri, or alternatively another urban centre.

In Kawar Maila, there is a widespread desire to return to ancestral lands, as people feel unable to perform their traditional livelihoods and are forced to pay for their expenses (rent, food and water) without the opportunity to make a real living. Several say they have relied on cultivating crops and working the land, yet none of these skills have been transferred to their children. Many residents

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are unsure of the state of their lands and are concerned about property rights, both in their current location and in their places of origin. This is a common thread across respondents in all five sites.

Those relocated to El-Miskin Madinatu are also forced to rely on hand-outs from NGOs or so-called 'good people'. People complain of lack of education, health services and water, and remain unsure about their livelihood prospects should security return to their homes of origin. Many fear – or indeed know – their properties have been seized or destroyed, and raise the issue of land demarcation. Uncertainty abounds given that residents often lack relatives or other contacts they can rely on to obtain information about their places of origin. One respondent, a pastoralist, points out that their children would struggle to pursue this livelihood if they were to return, as they have not had the opportunity to acquire the required skills. Another respondent who used to farm has switched to selling second-hand furniture. His sons have now joined him in this endeavour, despite being old enough to know how to farm. Another respondent again has aspirations to start a charcoal business, but – like many others – is seeking capital and assistance to make this a reality.

Trauma of displacement

Many respondents are severely affected by the trauma of their experiences, both from when they were initially displaced and their subsequent period of displacement. Issues such as theft, gender-based violence, rape and malnutrition, as well as general psycho-social issues related to the non-life of being displaced, has led to the persistence of trauma even after people have reached the supposed safety of the IDP camp. Some IDPs suffer from having to remain idle, while others face difficulties dealing with the stigma attached to being an IDP. Related to the latter issue, many feel that IDP is a category they are forced into, not only by the government and (I)NGOs, but by the host communities they find themselves in or close to.

Some of the most lasting traumas are directly related to having witnessed brutal acts perpetrated by Boko Haram or other armed actors. Many IDPs barely escaped unscathed, with some having to leave behind family and friends whose fates they cannot be certain of even now. Such traumas are most acutely experienced by those living in camps still visited by Boko Haram and other armed men, as was evident in Muna and Dalori I, the two fieldwork sites furthest from Maiduguri.

KII findings

Below, we synthesize the views and discussion points that emerged during the KIIs, dividing up into three key groups: 1) local politicians and the government; 2) humanitarians; and 3) development actors.

Local politicians and the government

Much of the local and state government perspective centres on the assumption that IDPs have become overly reliant on camp amenities provided by the state and INGOs. On top of this, the government sees the camps as a breeding ground for myriad vices that negatively affect the IDPs, especially children. As such, the authorities regard it as their duty to break the cycle of dependence

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and push the IDPs to become self-sufficient. Towards this end, the Borno State government aims
to either voluntarily resettle the IDPs or offer starting capital that will allow them to become self-
reliant should they choose to remain. Many in authority believe the vast majority of IDPs will wish to
relocate having been granted starter packages, and moreover that the security situation is already
greatly improved, with only pockets of Boko Haram (JAS and ISWAP) resistance to be mopped up.
In this respect, the government is largely of the view that there are adequate community policing
networks and security agency intelligence-gathering capabilities in place. Much optimism is pinned
on development projects launched by state governor Zulum, especially when it comes to improving
social amenities in the urban centres of Borno State's various Local Government Areas (LGAs).

The state government, and specifically the Borno State Ministry of Justice, is tasked with handling
complaints concerning land disputes, gender-based violence, rape or insecurity related to either
relocation/return or camp life. While the ministry has handled issues of criminality, it has yet to
receive any complaints regarding insecurity and therefore contends that most IDPs are happy with
returning. The ministry acknowledges that many IDPs lack the knowledge and expertise to lodge a
complaint, but says this is an area it is actively working on.

SEMA claims the Borno State government and its partners initially worked harmoniously to manage
IDPs. The closure of IDP camps has, however, led to an accompanying withdrawal of support from
non-state actors. Even so, SEMA reports that the government called on INGOs to support relief
efforts following the recent floods.

SEMA highlights that many IDPs in Maiduguri have, when given the option, chosen to remain in
the city rather than return to their ancestral homes. The agency views the camp closures as an
opportunity for IDPs to become self-reliant, helped along by the government providing them with
capital, farming tools, land for agricultural activities, and three months of food aid to support
resettlement. Resettled IDPs have, according to SEMA, been relocated to zones with minimal
security threats, with the CJTF mobilized to enhance security. Overall, the agency expects significant
improvements in Borno within two years, and anticipates that the younger generation will adapt to
rural life, provided adequate social amenities are in place.

A local politician in Maiduguri presents a contrasting view, pointing to a range of challenges that
threaten to undermine resettlement efforts. While the politician acknowledges the significant support
provided by the government, he argues that insecurity remains the foremost obstacle to sustainable
resettlement. Boko Haram continues to hold sway in many rural areas, often using threats of violence
to coerce traditional leaders (*Bulamas*) into collecting taxes. Despite the government's insistence
that security has improved, the politician contends a shortfall in resources and personnel allocated
to security operations means resettlement zones remain susceptible to insurgent attacks. This leaves
returnees vulnerable to both physical harm and economic exploitation. The politician also points
to the financial struggles that resettled IDPs face, with the previously mentioned starter packages
deemed insufficient. Once the initial aid is exhausted, many IDPs lack the resources to rebuild
homes, invest in sustainable livelihoods or cover their basic needs. Here, women and children are
often disproportionately affected, as they face greater barriers to income generation.

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Given all this, the politician critiques the timing of the camp closures as 'premature', arguing the government has failed to ensure returnees to rural areas have access to essential infrastructure and services such as education, healthcare and functioning markets—all necessary for economic recovery and long-term stability. Without these foundations, the politician argues that many IDPs will see little incentive to leave the relative safety and access to services offered by urban centres such as Maiduguri. IDPs have also raised concerns about the fact that, given many young people have already established informal livelihoods in Maiduguri, any attempt to force them to relocate to rural areas lacking employment prospects or infrastructure will likely prove deeply unpopular. This, the politician warns, could contribute to cycles of poverty, criminality or even recruitment into extremist groups if their grievances are allowed to fester.

Tensions between the government and humanitarian actors have, according to the politician, further exacerbated the situation. Disputes over the distribution of aid, the management of camps, and whether to give assistance to those seen as connected to Boko Haram have strained relations between the government and humanitarians, undermining the coordinated efforts needed to address the crisis. As such, the politician calls for stronger partnerships between the government, NGOs, civil society and the private sector, all of which are needed to address both the immediate and structural challenges faced. In his view, the camp closures cannot provide a durable solution unless the government prioritizes securing areas of return, strengthening basic infrastructure and providing long-term support systems. Moreover, resettlement must be seen as a phased process rather than a quick solution if it is to avoid deepening the vulnerabilities of already marginalized populations and potentially reigniting the insurgency.

Humanitarians

Several international humanitarian actors handle the camps' social amenities, including the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), International Committee of the Red Cross/Crescent (ICRC), Medicins Sans Frontiers (MSF) and Save the Children. In addition, various Nigerian NGOs and religious organizations provide material and immaterial support to IDPs. The views expressed by the humanitarians differ drastically from those of the relevant government actors, particularly regarding the ongoing camp closures.

Their view is that IDPs have been involuntarily returned to their communities, often in the face of security risks, which prevents the NGOs access to provide support outside of camp settings such as hard-to-reach resettled communities. Despite improvements in security, humanitarian actors remain cautious about the sustainability of returns, as safety remains inadequate for many IDPs. As touched upon, the challenges of camp closures are substantial – many IDPs, especially those from conflict-affected areas, are hesitant to return home due to safety concerns and limited resources. While some essential services are available within camps, education is only provided up to primary level, which is seen as a massive barrier to young IDPs' development. Humanitarians are also concerned about the young population's adjustment to rural life; insecurity affecting agricultural livelihoods; and the need for continuous educational support.

Humanitarian actors see the closures as politically motivated. They claim most IDPs feel safer in

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the camps, with only around 20–30 percent ready to return home. Moreover, many of those willing to relocate may choose to settle in towns rather than returning to their ancestral lands, which they perceive to be unsafe. In light of these circumstances, it is argued that the camp closures should be gradual and phased, addressing root issues over the longer term rather than pushing the process through for political ends, which risks exacerbating the crisis. Without a comprehensive strategic plan encompassing infrastructure expansion and resource management, Borno's urban areas will struggle to accommodate the growing displaced population.

According to humanitarians, the government lacks commitment and donor support is waning, especially as neighbouring states in north-eastern Nigeria are more willing and able to apply a whole-of-government approach. Issues surrounding land allocation, resource distribution and conflicts with former fighters further complicate the integration of IDPs into host communities. Overall, they argue that a comprehensive approach involving all stakeholders – including the development sector IDPs, and government – is vital to addressing these challenges and achieving sustainable solutions for Borno's displaced population.

Development actors

A UNDP representative working in Borno State emphasizes the importance of infrastructure projects – such as water facilities, health centres and livelihood skills training programmes – when integrating displaced people into host communities. In doing so, UNDP point to the complex displacement patterns at play: initially, many IDPs settled in rural areas due to kinship ties, before persistent insecurity prompted them to move to safer urban centres. UNDP's approach contrasts with that of the humanitarian agencies as it prioritizes long-term reintegration and development over prolonged aid dependency in camps.

Some development actors find themselves taking a position on return and self-reliance that falls somewhere between the humanitarians and the government: while they agree that security issues persist and there are massive challenges, they also recognize the need to treat IDP camps as temporary solutions. One development actor points to the 'Borno Model', a screening approach that distinguishes between low-risk former insurgents and higher-level figures, as being particularly instrumental to reintegrating ex-combatants. The model both aids reconciliation and helps address land disputes. Development actors also express support for the IOM's durable solutions approach, which aims to shift the emphasis from temporary camp-based solutions towards sustainable community resettlement. This approach focuses especially on long-term infrastructure, including education facilities outside camps that can provide children with a more stable learning environment.

Since the IOM's arrival in north-eastern Nigeria, those working for the organization have observed a shift in the crisis: now, as highlighted by the IOM's intention studies, most IDPs favour local integration over relocation. The IOM believes the cultural and social elements of reintegration are key, and seeks to work with local traditions as a means of strengthening social bonds. Yet, the challenge remains: protracted displacement has deprived IDPs of skills, pushing youth towards negative coping mechanisms such as drug abuse and trafficking.

The BAY (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe) states face a unique dynamic in the form of large numbers of IDPs seeking to return amid living conditions that remain precarious. One development actor would like to see an approach based around 'green', 'yellow' and 'red' zones, corresponding to areas that are ready for return, require basic services, or are unsuitable due to security concerns. A schematic, phased approach along these lines does not, however, appear ready to be rolled out.

According to a development representative, the state's push for camp closures risks exacerbating vulnerabilities. Recent tensions between the government and humanitarian actors also complicate collaboration, with the state wary of the narratives shared by the humanitarians, instead painting IDP camps as centres of crime and social problems. The representative highlights substantial risks: unprepared or unsupported returns could lead to a new wave of displacement, potentially heightening exposure to insurgents or criminal networks. In Bama, for example, IDPs have returned to their former homes only to find them occupied, sparking further displacement. This points to a lack of strategic planning and investment, with critical shortfalls in housing, employment opportunities and overall support eroding the potential for self-reliance among IDPs.

Looking forward, partnerships are being put in place with the private sector to integrate IDPs into the job market. For instance, the partnership with tech firm CISCO aims to provide IDPs with data science and cybersecurity skills. However, this programme alone will only train up a few hundred people within a state grappling with millions of displaced people. Given that the Solution Action Plan for the three BAY states has set a combined goal of nearly $6 billion of funding over five years, a significant gap in financing remains. The BAY states have committed only a fraction of their annual budgets, necessitating robust external funding. Without adequate support, the ambitious durable solutions approach currently being pursued risks stalling, leaving IDPs and returnees with limited prospects.

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Analysis

The IDPs in Borno State are a multifaceted group, whose choices and possible futures are affected by a range of factors. Nevertheless, three probable scenarios can be identified. As has been shown, the line between 'voluntary' and 'forced' is often blurred. On the one hand, the IDPs are very constrained when it comes to choice of movement, both by the security situation and their limited socio-economic capital. On the other hand, they do have some degree of autonomy based on who they are, as well as where and why they have been – and continue to be – displaced. We therefore divide the IDPs into the following categories: 1) those faced with the possibility of returning within the near future; 2) those who think of return as a distant aspiration or unrealistic dream; and 3) those who find return unthinkable due to the trauma experienced or the fact they no longer regard their ancestral lands as home.

Past, present and future

The above three categories are anchored within an analysis that aims to uncover some indicative trends. In doing do, we must consider the inter-related factors of: 1) the weight of history; 2) the contradictions of the present; and 3) the pull of the future. For all the IDP participants, the history of the Boko Haram insurgency, together with their years of displacement and camp-based experiences, have played a pivotal role in shaping their present and possible futures – although in different ways and to different extents.

The weight of history

The impact of displacement on the IDPs resulting from the Boko Haram insurgency can be seen as the 'weight of history'. It is crucial to capture how this has influenced – and continues to influence – the IDPs and how they think about their possible futures. Most IDPs have been through intense, highly traumatizing experiences, with their lives often restricted to camp or camp-like settings for a protracted period. For many, this has negatively impacted their development, current livelihoods opportunities and how they think about the future.

Being an IDP is a formative experience, meaning the longer an individual remains in a camp, the greater the impact on their very persona. While this would seem to support arguments in favour of closing the camps as soon as possible, such a policy choice must also take account of what we call the 'contradictions of the present'.

The contradictions of the present

As our interviews demonstrate, the IDPs are currently grappling with an array of tensions and contradictions. Some want to return home as soon as possible; others would prefer relocation to

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safer areas or host communities; while others still do not envisage ever returning home, with most looking to settle in or around urban centres such as Maiduguri. Here, it should be reiterated that the IDPs are not a homogenous group. Rather, they are separated by age, gender, place of origin and, especially, how long they have been IDPs in a camp. The more formative the experience of being in a camp has been, the less likely it is they will return voluntarily.

Integral to the contradictions of the present is the gap IDPs see between the government's security promises and what they perceive as the reality of security in their home of origin. This is compounded by the accompanying gap between the government's stated ambitions of offering livelihoods and viable alternatives, and the perceived reality of protracted resource scarcity. Observations highlighting these contradictory gaps are especially evident among those who have personally experienced multiple displacements and/or attempted to return, only to barely escape with their lives from armed groups.

Trauma is another underlying factor influencing both livelihoods and security. Although for some the idea of returning home is accompanied by thoughts of a better, peaceful future, for others their home of origin is indelibly deeply associated with fear and violence, including seeing family members killed while having to flee to save their own lives. Thus, in mulling over their post-camp prospects, IDPs must attempt to unravel these contradictions of the present while weighed down by their history.

The pull of the future

Despite living a precarious life of massive want, IDPs – like everyone else – experience the pull of the future. In fact, a life of massive want provides ample time to think about possible futures. While some of these may be more realistic than others, all should be taken seriously, as they give an indication of what people will do if life in a camp no longer becomes possible. The IDPs aspire for stability and economic opportunities, some at their places of origin, some elsewhere, be it relocated to another community or as urbanites in Maiduguri. For those who still aspire to be farmers, their gateway to the future involves securing access to land and property. This gateway is, however, tempered by past trauma (the weight of history) and current security concerns (the contradictions of the present).

Thus, these pulls of the future are moulded not just by the IDPs' own intentions and aspirations, but by the impacts government policies and stakeholder programming has on camp residents' opportunities. Although everyone faces trade-offs between voluntary and involuntary action to some degree, the IDPs of Borno State inevitably experience this dilemma much more acutely than most. Nevertheless, the return situation cannot simply be controlled by the government, or other stakeholders for that matter. Rather, the most they can realistically do is plan for return using a participatory approach that highlights the likely paradoxes, tensions and conflicts to be faced (see Whyte et al. 2014). Some of pull of the future factors that arise from such analysis – such as the probable drive towards urbanization – will have huge implications for both development planning and future humanitarian interventions.

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The three IDP categories

Against the backdrop set out by the effects of the past, present and future, we below return to the three main groups that emerge when determining what the IDPs in Borno State intend doing in the event of camp closure.

Return if conditions are conducive

The IDPs in this group are cautiously optimistic about returning, contingent on improvements in the security situation and being given assurances they will be provided with the means to restart their rural livelihoods. Some who adopt this mindset are realistic about their prospects, while others may be overly optimistic about a return to rural life offering a path out of deprivation. As already discussed, the household best prepared for a return to rural life is a husband and wife aged 30–40 years who have not been displaced long enough to have forgotten the art of peasant agriculture and where the boundaries of their land lie, with children old enough to take on a farming workload. A key task for durable solutions is therefore to identify these potential first-movers and what it would take to make them move. We already know what they need: security, tools, equipment and the means to sustain themselves while reclaiming their farmland and waiting for the first harvest. What we don't know is how many IDPs fall into the first-return category, nor the best means of meeting their needs based on a transparent method of granting security clearance to the relevant areas. What is required, therefore, is a systematic IDP profiling for return.

Immaterial resources are also required for restarting rural life, both in terms of encouraging younger households to become early returnees and avoiding land-grabbing by the initial waves of returnees. These immaterial resources encompass a community's social infrastructure, including leadership figures such as the *Bulamas*, who have traditionally governed land demarcations. Thus, to ensure both hard and psycho-social security, as well as social cohesion, support is needed for conflict-resolution mechanisms and community policing and security measures. These kind of needs were mentioned across the board by IDP respondents – from those wishing to return to those who fear return is never going to be an option – and were also underscored by development and humanitarian actors in the KIIs.

Return as aspiration or dream

The IDPs in this group do not see return as imminent, but rather a somewhat distant, largely unattainable, aspiration. Often, prolonged displacement and deteriorating conditions in places of origin mean returning is viewed as little more than a far-fetched story told to comfort children. This scenario particularly applies to those who feel deeply disconnected from their former homes, such as those who have been displaced for a decade or more, often multiple times. Thus, IDPs in this group do not envisage returning to their places of origin for the foreseeable future.

Faced with these lowered expectations, IDPs attempt to build viable alternatives such as integrating into the local community or resettling. These alternatives are shaped not only by what they wish

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to do, but by what skills they possess; where and who their relatives are; and the perceived social, cultural and economic feasibility of being relocated or integrating into a host community. Many pursuing such options will end up as urbanites, again highlighting the urgent need to step up urban planning as part of building durable solutions for Borno State.

Return as non-option

The IDPs in this group regard return as unthinkable. Often this is because they have lost faith in the feasibility of a safe return, a view particularly prevalent among those affected by severe trauma and entrenched insecurity – which is true for many victims of Boko Haram's protracted campaign of violence. Here, several respondents view return as not merely risky but impossible, regardless of government assurances.

This third group also encompasses IDPs whose sense of belonging to the camp and the community it represents, or to nearby urban centres, is stronger than that towards their homes of origin – in most cases, young people who have lived the majority of their lives as IDPs. Even if these young people have not personally been traumatized by events in their ancestral lands, the desire for sustainable livelihoods in their place of origin is simply not there. They may not know if they have any property or land left, lack points of contact such as relatives, or simply not have the skills necessary to live a rural life. Many therefore prefer to remain in the urban centres they have ended up at and seek city-based livelihoods such as trading or craftmanship. In doing so, they are often interested in vocational training and/or the provision of financial support to kick-start their own – or their family's – business plan. Considering how youthful the IDP population is, it should be borne in mind that a sizeable proportion of IDPs in Borno State likely fall into this category.

Displacement as an urban push

Displacement facilitates urbanization all over Africa (Crawford 2021). In the case of Borno State, two factors are crucial to the urban push-and-pull effect that is already occurring and will likely intensify as the camp closure process unfolds. Most camps are within or close to an urban centre, such as the state capital Maiduguri or the respective LGAs' main town. Assuming the security situation remains precarious – which is to be expected to at least some degree over the short to medium term – it is likely that many IDPs will prefer to stay in these urban centres, which at least afford opportunities for creating livelihoods and safety in numbers.

As our data highlights, many IDPs have been displaced considerable lengths of time (e.g. 5–10 years or more), often multiple times, before ending up in or close to Maiduguri or other urban centres. Moreover, some IDPs may have made previous attempts to return to their rural places of origin but been driven back to urban centres where there is a relatively higher security presence. As such, their proximity to the city affords a semblance of stability, both in security and social terms, they may previously have lacked.

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These dynamics not only have implications for the socio-economic situation of IDPs, but for the development of local communities in and around these urban sites. Careful urban planning, encompassing areas beyond just the main towns, will be needed for multiple key sites in the affected LGAs.

Reintegration and durable solutions requires acknowledgement of the fact that time cannot be turned back. Even in the unlikely event the conflict was to end immediately, Borno State's social landscape would not return to how it was before. The population has changed, and any realistic plan for a durable solution must find the right balance between rural, peri-rural, peri-urban and urban strategies.

Lack of data

One of the most glaring issues impeding the planning and practical implementation of durable solution policies is the lack of robust, systematic data. While gathering such data represents a monumental challenge, in the absence of a robust knowledge base built on systematic profiling of the IDPs – their demographic characteristics, perception and intentions, length of stay in camps, material resources at possible points of return or relocation, etc. – it will be near impossible to carry out the authorities' purported ambition of achieving a comprehensive, sustainable process. This profiling exercise should be supplemented by an urban labour market analysis, as many IDPs will either remain in urban centres or drift back to one should their return to a rural place of origin fail due to security challenges or a lack of skills and resources (access to tools, seeds and land).

Key uncertainties

The security situation

The current and future security situation remains a significant, unresolved uncertainty in terms of its influence on the timing, scale and direction of IDP returns. Perspectives on the present situation are highly divided: while some stakeholders believe security to have vastly improved compared to previous years, with the government seemingly on the verge of defeating the insurgency, others – including a number of international observers and voices from the humanitarian and development sectors – paint a more cautious picture. In particular, the latter group warn that although insurgent groups are currently preoccupied with internal clashes, they could well undergo a resurgence once these disputes subside. This concern has been reinforced by the noticeable uptick in attacks throughout 2024.

Financing of the Borno State Strategy

The Borno State government has estimated $2.7 billion will be needed to fulfil the stated objectives of the Borno State Strategy. This ambitious target relies on substantial contributions from both the national and state governments, alongside international funding. As such, the strategy proposes allocating 15 percent of the state budget towards its activities. Such a commitment has yet to materialize, however, raising doubts over the feasibility of meeting the declared goals. Added to this, the

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prospects for securing international financing remain uncertain amid a context of competing global priorities and potential donor fatigue. This ongoing financial uncertainty is likely to have a significant impact on how the return scenarios play out during the implementation phase.

IDP wants and skills

Despite several intention studies having been conducted, the available data on the wants and skills of Borno State's IDPs remains incomplete. Both the aspirations of IDPs – such as their willingness to return or reintegrate locally – and their skillsets, which will determine their capacity to adapt to conditions at their destination, have yet to be not fully charted. This creates significant uncertainty regarding how individuals and families will respond when required to leave the camps, as well as how effectively their skills will align with the economic and social needs of the communities they return to or integrate into. Although our pilot study provides a clearer understanding of these dynamics, this uncertainty must be highlighted as a critical risk factor affecting durable solutions until such time as more comprehensive data is available.

Indicative trends: Probable futures

Taking the three categories of IDPs presented above into consideration, together with the uncertain security situation, urbanization drive and lack of systematic profiling data, we present three indicative future trends. The first is the desired trend, the second is the most likely, while the third is possible but least desirable, meaning efforts should be made to prevent it from coming to pass.

Future trend 1: Desired, but unlikely

This scenario represents the best-case outcome, with key uncertainties aligning positively to create favourable conditions for return and reintegration. Here, the Borno State Plan is almost fully funded and systematic profiling of the IDPs has established a solid database of who they are, as well as their wants and needs. The conflict is not over, but its main effects are limited to peripheral areas of Borno State. As government forces gain ground, a robust methodology is established to certify areas as 'green', 'yellow' or 'red'. First-movers are escorted back to 'green' areas of origin by security forces, which remain on close standby in case violent groups re-emerge. First-movers are also provided with sufficient food and non-food items to start rebuilding their lives, while the careful phasing of the return process means cases of land-grabbing by are relatively infrequent.

The result is a relatively transparent return process, although it is also evident that less than half the IDP population will return to their homes of origin in the short to medium term. Some of this latter group are relocated to host communities, which are supported in their efforts to integrate IDPs, meaning the process advances without much controversy or violence. Despite urban planning aimed at catering to the IDPs choosing to remain in Maiduguri or key LGA sites, Borno State experiences some uncontrolled urbanization, which leads to a rise in slum dwellings and petty criminality. This is offset to some extent by increased economic activity in urban centres, which creates a number of jobs. Overall, while this scenario does not represent a perfect solution, it is a durable solution.

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Future trend 2: Most likely

Under this scenario, the key uncertainties produce both positive and negative outcomes for return and reintegration. The Borno State Plan is funded, but not to the extent needed. Some profiling studies have taken place, but the knowledge base for IDPs is not representative. There has been no real improvement in the security situation, with the majority of IDPs rejecting the official narrative that the war is over. Despite this, the camps are closed, with a traffic light system of 'go to' 'pending go to' and 'not go to' areas established. However, as intelligence is weak and not all first-movers are properly protected, some of these initial returnees become eyewitnesses to the dangers of returning to rural places of origin.

Some returns do take place, but mostly to areas the IDPs themselves have vetted as safe, with the strongest, most able households moving first. The relatively chaotic return process, which features little oversight or sequencing, means instances of land-grabbing are more common than in future trend 1. Overall, fewer IDPs move back to their places of origin. At the same time, a greater proportion of people unwilling to remain in urban centres attempt to relocate to host communities. As a consequence, the capacity for local integration is overstretched in some communities, resulting in occasional outbreaks of violence against newcomers. This in turn leads to new cases of displacement, with those affected migrating to urban centres and Maiduguri in particular. Although some urban planning has taken place, it remains insufficient, prompting growing slum areas and rising crime.

A durable solution has not been reached, but the process can nevertheless be managed. Provided sufficient impetus is given to rethinking the plan, and provided sufficient resources are allocated to bringing systematic data and analysis into the planning process, it may yet be possible to get back on track.

Future trend 3: Possible, but undesirable

In this worst-case scenario, key uncertainties predominantly result in negative consequences for return and reintegration. Funding for the Borno State Plan is wholly inadequate and there is no solid knowledge base regarding the IDPs and their wants and needs. Despite the conflict being far from over, no credible vetting system of 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas has been established.

Even so, the camps are closed, with people asked to return to their homes of origin, where – so it is claimed – they will be provided with security, as well as food and non-food items to restart their lives. Few of these promises materialize, however, and soon a new wave of violence by JAS and/or ISWAP is unleashed. The security forces become bogged down in asymmetrical warfare, meaning they are not always available to protect returning IDPs.

The result is a failed return process in which many IDPs return to camps that have officially been closed; seek relocation to often overwhelmed host communities, leading to violence and new displacements; or drift into Maiduguri. As a consequence, Maiduguri experiences an exponential rise in its population – something the city is ill-prepared for.

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This scenario has the potential to return Borno State and Maiduguri to the situation faced around 2013/2014. Should this happen, it would take years to put the state back on track to a durable solution.

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Conclusion: Returning to uncertainty?

Returning home after conflict has subsided – at least in some areas – is beset with uncertainty. While life in an IDP camp is one of massive wants, if a resident's memories of home are suffused by death and suffering, then even camp life may seem more desirable than returning to their place of origin. Moreover, the youthfulness of the IDP population in Borno State must be taken into consideration – for many, life in the camps is pretty much all they know. As all this suggests, return is rarely if ever easy.

Nevertheless, if Borno State government can secure a sufficient proportion of the funding necessary to assist those wishing to home to return or integrate into local communities, while improving the security situation by 'winning' the fight against insurgent groups, there is a fair chance that much of the Borno State Strategy can be achieved. Doing so, however, requires the government to come up with a transparent, credible means of describing how areas are judged to be no longer high-risk, but relatively stable. In addition, time and resources must be spent on determining how best to rebuild physical infrastructure and reinforce social structures such as the *Bulamas*.

Even if all the key uncertainties prove favourable, the Borno State government will have to focus much of its efforts on ensuring better livelihoods and opportunities in the state's towns and cities as, regardless of an improved security situation, many current IDPs will likely choose to remain in urban centres rather than return. This urban focus is constant across all three scenarios. More generally, a fully integrated approach would pave the way for a realistic path towards durable solutions, as it addresses both immediate needs and the long-term structural challenges facing returnees, host communities and urban citizens.

Taking all this into consideration, we make five key recommendations:

1. ***Bury the 'hatchet'.*** The polarized debate on how to proceed that has pitted the Borno State government against humanitarian actors, while provoking a 'war of words' between the development community and humanitarian organizations, is a waste of time and resources. All sides make valid points: the camps should be closed as early as possible, but the conditions must be conducive for doing so. Returning home represents a huge step into uncertainty, and people need to trust that making this move is actually feasible.

2. ***Establish a security clearance methodology and fund the systematic profiling of IDPs***. The security clearance methodology could be based on a traffic light system of 'green', 'yellow' and 'red' places, with the key challenge being how to implement it in a flexible, transparent manner. This has been pursued with some success in, for example, Northern Uganda and Eastern DR Congo. As such, interested stakeholders should revisit these experiences, using consultancies that possess the necessary competences if needed.

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Alongside this, a pool of resources should be allocated to fund the systematic profiling of IDPs, with the aim of gaining a thorough picture of their demographic backgrounds, skills and networks, and wants and needs. Without a solid knowledge base along these lines, it will be extremely difficult to work out how a durable solution can be achieved.

Should the above two objectives be achieved, the results will provide the Borno State government with the necessary milestones for monitoring the success of its durable solutions plan. Without this data, monitoring will be haphazard, thus negatively impacting planning and implementation.

3. ***Monitor and sequence the return process once it is rolled out in full.*** Careful oversight is needed to avoid large-scale land-grabbing, which could in turn lead to intra-communal violence, revenge killings, and a pool of discontented youth vulnerable to recruitment by JAS and ISWAP. While not inconsiderable resources will be required to achieve this, it is much better and cheaper to prevent conflict breaking out than trying to damp it down after the fact.

4. ***Support needs to be provided to host communities***. Even if they are given start-up packages, many IDPs will choose to relocate to host communities rather than return home. Thus, the relocation process also needs careful monitoring and sequencing if it is to avoid conflict in these communities, which may struggle to cope with an influx of newly arrived former IDPs.

5. ***Engage in proper urban planning, together with labour market studies.*** Displacement is a key driver of urbanization, as has already been seen in Maiduguri. A high number of IDPs will inevitably drift into the city and other urban centres, necessitating well thought-out urban and labour market planning if these places are to gain economically from the increased inflow of people. A failure to do so risks a rise in slum dwellings and criminality.

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