

Guardians of Peace, Victims of Betrayal: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Military Personnel Navigating Scepticism, Trust, and Hope in Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor

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Abstract

While Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes are essential to post-conflict peacebuilding, their success depends on the perception and buy-in of key stakeholders, including security forces. This article examines the lived experiences of military personnel implementing Nigeria's flagship deradicalisation and reintegration initiative, Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). While OPSC involves multiple actors, including correctional officers, psychologists, and religious counsellors, the present study focuses specifically on frontline soldiers stationed at the Mallam Sidi deradicalisation camp in Gombe State. These military personnel, many of whom were previously engaged in direct combat with Boko Haram, are now tasked with facilitating the reintegration of those same adversaries. These personnel express deep uncertainty and a cautious optimism towards the programme. Drawing on qualitative interviews analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study introduces a betrayal-redemption framework to capture the psychosocial experiences of these frontline implementers. Narratives of betrayal, by government institutions, colleagues, and communities, reveal the depth of institutional neglect, mistrust, and scepticism about ex-combatants' repentance, all of which shape the operational identity of these actors. Yet a parallel, more hopeful view emerged, marked by cautious optimism, signs of post-traumatic growth, and acknowledgement of the programme's role in intelligence gathering and enhancing local security. This dual perspective provides both conceptual and practical insights. Conceptually, it enriches DDR scholarship by foregrounding implementers' emotional labour, a dimension often overlooked in existing research. Practically, it highlights the need for staff support systems, welfare reforms, and monitoring safeguards to ensure the sustainability of DDR efforts, describing it as a necessary, albeit imperfect, step toward peace. This article argues that reintegration risk facing challenges without putting into consideration the perceptions and experiences of those charged with delivering it.

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Introduction

Since its emergence in 2009, Boko Haram has remained one of the most destabilising insurgent groups in Sub-Saharan Africa. Concentrated in Northeast Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad Basin, the group has killed over 35,000 people and displaced at least 2.5 million

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(United Nations Development Programme, 2021; Sasu, 2022; Chétima et al., 2024). Its insurgency has undermined governance, destroyed vital infrastructure, and eroded community cohesion. By targeting schools, religious centres, markets, and civilians alongside military and political figures, Boko Haram has produced a protracted humanitarian crisis that intersects with economic precarity, weak state presence, and religious extremism (Zenn, 2020).

In response, the Nigerian government adopted a dual-track approach, combining kinetic counterinsurgency with non-kinetic strategies aimed at deradicalisation and reintegration. Among these efforts, Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) stands out as a flagship programme established in 2016 (Ogunnubi and Aja, 2024) that targets defectors from Boko Haram and seeks to deradicalise, rehabilitate and reintegrate them into society through a structured programme comprising religious reorientation, vocational training, psychosocial counselling, and supervised community reinsertion (Owonikoko, 2022). mj

Facilitated at the Mallam Sidi camp in Gombe State, OPSC symbolises a pivot toward soft-power counter-extremism. Public ceremonies like the March 2023 oath-taking by nearly 600 former Boko Haram members signal the scale and political weight of the programme (Sambo and Ahmed, 2024). In theory, OPSC aims to encourage defections, reduce insurgent ranks, and advance reconciliation, however, in practice, it has faced widespread controversy. Public critique focuses on its perceived leniency toward perpetrators, insufficient support for victims, and lack of transparency (Owonikoko, 2022; Ike et al., 2022). These criticisms reflect deeper frustrations with Nigeria's governance landscape, where citizens often view security and justice systems as opaque and unaccountable.

The programme's legitimacy has also been weakened by opposition from conflict-affected communities. Many residents in the Northeast perceive OPSC as a top-down initiative that benefits former combatants at the expense of victims (Ike et al., 2022; Owonikoko 2022). The reintegration process has sparked resentment among those who view the state as failing to provide restitution for losses suffered, while investing resources in rehabilitating former perpetrators. This public backlash illustrates the difficulties of pursuing peace in contexts where transitional justice mechanisms remain absent or weak.

Most research and policy analysis on DDR in Nigeria has focused on ex-combatants or host communities and victims (Ike et al., 2022; Uguweze et al., 2022). However, far less attention has been paid to a third category of actors: the security personnel responsible for

implementing key aspects of this initiative. In the case of OPSC, this includes military officers, correctional service workers, and counterterrorism officials who manage the programme's day-to-day operations. Many of these personnel, particularly the military, have been directly involved in the conflict, experiencing trauma, loss, and operational strain. They are now expected to act as wardens of individuals once considered enemies of the state. This expectation creates moral and psychological tensions that DDR frameworks rarely acknowledge or address. Their experiences reveal recurring feelings of betrayal at three levels: the state, institutional peers, and local communities.

At the state level, participants described systemic neglect and resource deprivation as evidence of abandonment. Despite increased military spending, rising from 1.44 billion US dollars in 2009 to 2.81 billion US dollars in 2018, officers reported poor working conditions, inadequate logistics, and long delays in salary payments (Ikem et al., 2022; Onuoha et al., 2023). At the institutional level, participants also voiced disappointment with their peers. Several recounted experiences of colleagues resigning from duty, leaking intelligence, or collaborating with insurgents. Such betrayals not only jeopardise mission effectiveness but also erode the camaraderie that is essential for morale. Allegations of corruption and disloyalty within the ranks reinforce the perception that the war effort is compromised from within (Ibekwe, 2015; Nigeria Defence HQ, 2022).

At the community level, some of the most emotionally charged feelings of betrayal were directed not at insurgents or the state, but at civilians. Participants expressed deep frustration at what they perceived as community complicity with Boko Haram. This support was not always ideological; in some cases, it was rooted in overlapping kinship ties, religious or cultural affiliations, or coercion under threat. Nonetheless, participants interpreted such actions as betrayals of both the nation and their personal sacrifices. The result is a morally ambiguous terrain in which the categories of victim, perpetrator, and bystander are blurred. This complexity adds emotional weight to DDR implementation and complicates trust-building between security actors and the communities they serve. Despite these frustrations, participants also described moments that restored their sense of purpose. Some recalled ex-combatants who showed genuine remorse or provided intelligence that disrupted insurgent networks. These experiences served as sources of personal validation and moments of redemptive meaning.

To conceptualise this duality, this article introduces a betrayal–redemption framework which draws on conceptual tools such as moral injury and institutional betrayal to explain why security personnel’s perspectives, particularly the military, are critical. Moral injury describes the ethical distress experienced when individuals are compelled to act in ways that violate their core values (Litz et al., 2009). The Nigerian military, in their fight against Boko Haram, report exposure to such morally injurious events, from civilian casualties to institutional neglect (Oriola, 2023; Ogundipe et al., 2020). Institutional betrayal, complementing this, captures the disillusionment that arises when organisations fail to support or protect their members (Smith and Freyd, 2014). Across militaries worldwide, such betrayal is strongly associated with depression, burnout, and suicidality (Williamson et al., 2020). Nigerian Military personnel describe similar experiences of poor welfare, inadequate resources, and lack of recognition, intensifying the psychological strain of implementing OPSC. However, post-traumatic growth theory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004) provides an avenue to interpret the emergence of resilience and optimism despite continued exposure to conflict and adversity.

This framework also reflects a broader shift in DDR thinking. Earlier DDR models emphasised metrics, logistics, and cost-effectiveness, often treating implementers as neutral functionaries. Third-generation DDR approaches now emphasise local ownership, social reintegration, and emotional dynamics (Rodríguez-Castellon, 2024). In this context, military personnel are not merely enforcers of policy but emotionally invested actors whose perceptions and well-being directly influence the programme’s effectiveness. As evidenced in Sierra Leone, Colombia, and Northern Uganda, the affective dimension of DDR implementation can shape outcomes just as much as policy design (Theidon, 2007; Bubbenzer and Tankink, 2015).

In Colombia, Theidon (2007: 72) conceptualises DDR practitioners as “*transitional subjects*” who carried the psychological burden of mediating between ex-combatants and local communities, while McMullin (2013: 118–121) shows how reintegration staff in Sierra Leone and Uganda had to navigate resource scarcity, local resistance, and their own emotional exhaustion. Beyond these specific cases, Muggah (2009: 15–18) situates implementers within the wider political economy of DDR, emphasising how unrealistic mandates and constrained funding compound practitioner strain, while Pham, Vinck and Stover (2009: 5) document the

difficulties faced by humanitarian staff working with traumatised populations in Northern Uganda. Importantly, Bubenzer and Tankink (2015: 23) stress that peacebuilding personnel themselves require psychosocial support to remain effective, a point echoed in UN Integrated DDR Standards (2006), which recognise the role of staff wellbeing in ensuring credible DDR outcomes.

Furthermore, the United Nations' Integrated DDR Standards (2006) and its subsequent guidance (The Future of DDR; United Nations Peacekeeping, 2021) explicitly acknowledge that psychosocial recovery, including trauma-healing, stigma reduction, and social cohesion, is integral to DDR and should inform reintegration strategies. In humanitarian settings such as South Sudan, high levels of psychosocial distress among conflict-affected populations are well documented. Studies report patterns of overthinking, emotional disorders, and limited access to services, while needs assessments among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda highlight significant strains on beneficiaries and staff delivering psychosocial support (Adaku et al., 2016). These findings suggest that practitioners working in DDR or similar contexts face heavy emotional burdens. Sharif (2018) further argues that neglecting the psychosocial and political needs of reintegration processes risks destabilising DDR and fuelling remobilisation. These insights resonate with the Nigerian context, where Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) personnel contend with institutional neglect, limited psychosocial support, and the moral ambiguity of rehabilitating former adversaries. Positioning the Nigerian case within this comparative literature demonstrates that experiences of strain, moral conflict, and even redemption among OPSC personnel are not anomalies but part of broader, underexamined dynamics of DDR implementation.

This study therefore seeks to address this identified gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of key actors in DDR programmes. To capture these dynamics, the present study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach suited to exploring how individuals interpret morally ambiguous and emotionally demanding experiences. The next section outlines the methodology, including research design, data collection, and analytical procedures.

Methods

This paper draws on qualitative research conducted as part of a broader inquiry into the psychosocial and ethical dimensions of deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes in Nigeria. The focus of this article is on the lived experiences of military personnel implementing the Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) initiative, with particular attention to how these actors navigate emotional tensions and moral dissonance in the process of rehabilitating former Boko Haram combatants. The study is grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a methodology well suited for exploring how individuals make sense of complex and often morally ambiguous life experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009).

Research Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Author's University Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. The study design prioritised participant wellbeing, confidentiality, and informed consent throughout the research process. Care was taken in recognising the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the potential for distress or discomfort among participants.

Research Setting and Participant Profile

Fieldwork was conducted at the Mallam Sidi deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) Camp in Gombe State, Northeast Nigeria. This location serves as one of the main sites of implementation for the OPSC programme and houses surrendered former insurgents undergoing rehabilitation. A total of eight participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. All participants were male, over the age of 18, and had served in the military in roles directly linked to the implementation of OPSC. Each participant had a minimum of one year of experience within the programme. Recruitment was initiated through prior consultation with programme leadership and was supplemented by internal referrals among military personnel.

Interview Approach and Trauma-Informed Practices

The study utilised semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private setting within the camp compound, ensuring confidentiality and psychological comfort. The interview guide was designed to allow flexibility, enabling participants to reflect on their personal experiences, professional challenges, and emotional responses to the programme. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in English.

Interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Where recording was not possible, detailed field notes were taken during the session and expanded immediately afterwards. A trauma-informed lens guided the entire interview process, including the use of language that avoided re-traumatisation, active listening strategies, and the provision of breaks when needed. Participants were regularly reminded that they could skip questions, take a pause, or withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence.

Data Handling and Anonymity

All transcripts were anonymised by removing any identifying information, such as rank, unit affiliation, or references to specific events or individuals. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for analysis purposes. Quotations presented in the findings have been left as they were said to retain the original meaning and intent of the participant.

Analytical Framework: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The analytic process followed the six-step structure of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and sought to maintain transparency throughout. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to achieve deep familiarity, while initial notes captured descriptive detail, linguistic nuance, and preliminary conceptual reflections. These notes informed the development of emergent themes, which were then grouped into superordinate categories to reflect broader experiential patterns across the dataset.

Second, open coding was used to label discrete experiences, such as “delayed salaries,” “community complicity,” or “moments of optimism.” Third, codes were clustered into emergent themes, for instance, “institutional neglect” and “scepticism about repentance.” Fourth, these emergent themes were refined into **superordinate**

categories—betrayal/scepticism and hope/redemption, that captured the broader experiential patterns across participants. Fifth, cross-case analysis compared individual accounts to identify convergence and divergence, ensuring idiographic commitment while developing shared themes. Finally, interpretative synthesis linked these patterns to relevant conceptual frameworks, such as moral injury, institutional betrayal, and post-traumatic growth.

As IPA is grounded in the idea of a double hermeneutic, the analysis involved both understanding the participants' own meaning-making and the researcher's interpretation of that meaning (Eatough and Smith, 2017). Reflexive journaling was integrated throughout the analytic process to document interpretative decisions, emotional responses, and ethical considerations. The reflexive log also served to mitigate bias and maintain analytical transparency, particularly given the author's sole responsibility for conducting, interpreting, and presenting the findings.

Reflexive journaling was embedded at all stages. For example, when "betrayal by colleagues" overlapped with "betrayal by community," reflexive notes documented why these were treated as analytically distinct: one rooted in professional solidarity and institutional loyalty, the other in civil-military trust relations. This reflexive log also recorded the researcher's emotional responses to narratives of violence, helping mitigate bias and avoid over-identification with participants. These steps collectively enhance transparency, allowing a pathway to trace how raw testimony was transformed into the betrayal–redemption framework.

Rigour and Reflexivity

To enhance the credibility of the research, multiple techniques were employed. First, each interview was analysed individually before identifying patterns across cases. This idiographic commitment ensured that the unique experiences of each participant were not diluted in pursuit of thematic convergence. Second, the analytic process involved iterative reading and theme revision to strengthen internal coherence and representativeness. Third, reflexivity was actively incorporated at all stages of the research. This included critical self-awareness of the author's positionality as an external academic observer in a militarised, emotionally charged context. The author remained conscious of the dynamics involved in

asking participants to revisit potentially painful memories, as well as the risk of misrepresenting the complexity of their experiences.

Results and Discussion

By focusing primarily on one of the key actors engaged in the deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programme in Nigeria, this study was able to unearth key themes that have not been explored by previous studies in the Nigerian context. The study revealed three superordinate themes, which were further clustered into six subthemes as exemplified by the table below. However, it should be noted that the themes are interrelated and the occurrence of one of a theme in one subtheme, might influence or even strengthen the occurrence in others.

Table 1 showing superordinate themes and its subthemes

Superordinate Themes	Subthemes
Perceived Betrayal and Scepticism over repentance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Betrayal by the government - Betrayal by colleagues <u>and the erosion of trust in military cohesion</u> - Betrayal by the community - Doubt over genuine repentance and transformation of ex-combatants
Hope and Redemption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cautious optimism and second chances - Effectiveness of the deradicalisation programme and ex-combatants help towards CVE

Superordinate theme 1- Perceived betrayal and Scepticism over repentance

This theme highlighted a pervasive sense of betrayal, which has had a significant negative impact on the operational effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts based on participants experiences and perceptions. This sense of betrayal, whether from leadership,

colleagues, or the communities, fosters an environment of mistrust and disillusionment, which further erodes their ability to perform optimally. This betrayal not only hampers their motivation but also feeds into a broader scepticism toward the OPSC, which participants cited as a barrier to progress. They voiced concerns that the OPSC's decisions and actions were often disconnected from the realities of the field, further reinforcing feelings of frustration. The challenges faced by the participants are not limited to the logistical and operational difficulties of their work; they also reflect deeper emotional, mental, and financial struggles that significantly impact their performance, morale, and overall sense of duty. These factors, when combined, create an environment where motivation is at an all-time low, trust in leadership is diminished, and the ability to execute tasks with efficiency and commitment is severely compromised – as will be reflected in the analysis of the participants' accounts below.

Betrayal by the government

This highlights a recurrent theme in the literature on Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts: deep-seated institutional betrayal by the state. It reinforces existing critiques of the Nigerian government's approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants. Participants' accounts expose the fault lines between policy design and implementation, where ambitious reintegration programmes like Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) are launched without the necessary support structures for those tasked with implementing them. At the heart of this sense of betrayal lies the chronic under-resourcing of the military, a challenge exacerbated by the perceived misallocation of resources to deradicalisation initiatives. As participant 1 states: *“They are the reason why the government can't focus... the whole process, resources, they keep pushing it over there to say they are fighting insurgency or insecurity. So that's the reason why the government is giving excuses ...”*

His words reflect a broader perception that the state prioritises symbolic gestures, such as high-profile rehabilitation schemes, over substantive investments in the welfare and operational capability of soldiers. The underlying sentiment is one of disillusionment with a state that appears to have shifted its attention and compassion to perpetrators rather than protectors. This view aligns with existing literature that critiques the logic of DDR in Nigeria, particularly where such programmes are perceived as favouring insurgents over loyal state

actors (Ikem et al., 2022; Oriola, 2022). The situation is not merely logistical but deeply psychological and ethical. Soldiers like Participant 2 describe enduring physical and emotional strain under exhausting conditions: *“You will not sleep throughout the night; you will be on the watchtower... you will be the one to respond... That is why... I know those are the challenges military men face.”*

This constant state of alertness and overwork leads to burnout and decreased operational efficiency. These experiences echo studies by James (2024) and Ogundipe (2020), which identify low morale, lack of rest, and poor welfare provisions as key factors contributing to desertions, resignations, and operational fatigue. More significantly, the present study suggests that these are not just isolated incidents, but part of a broader systemic failure rooted in governmental neglect and worsened by corruption. Numerous studies such as Ikem et al., (2022); Onuoha et al., (2020); Gray and Adeakin (2015); Sawyerr (2014); Abiodun et al., (2020), reveal that despite the substantial increase of the security budget, a corresponding impact has not been achieved in the counterinsurgency efforts in Northeast Nigeria. Soldiers frequently complain about insufficient weapons and equipment, delayed salary and allowance payments, and many operational concerns. While the findings of this study corroborate these claims, the military authorities have denied or dismissed such findings, often resorting to half-truths or false reports to suppress this.

In this context, reintegration efforts like OPSC are not seen as part of a holistic peacebuilding strategy but rather as evidence of political theatre or elite-driven policy ventures. This perception undermines the legitimacy of such programmes and calls into question their sustainability. The frustration expressed by participants also points to a growing resentment towards the notion of "second chances" being extended to individuals who, in their view, have committed irredeemable acts. As one participant explained, *“if they catch any soldier or any uniform person, they do not give the person any second chance, they kill the person, so why giving them with a second chance”*. This reflects the difficulty in reconciling such policies with the harsh punitive realities faced by soldiers who are captured by insurgents and executed without mercy.

Additionally, these findings lend support to Oriola’s (2022) argument that the military hierarchy and civilian leadership continue to benefit from corruption and patronage networks that compromise troop welfare. The study substantiates this with first-hand narratives that

reflect the emotional toll of this neglect, particularly when juxtaposed against the resources channelled into rehabilitating insurgents. From the deprivation of adequate welfare services, medical care and other supplies, soldiers have been made to cater to their needs themselves, as the duty of care has been neglected by those who are responsible (James, 2024; Soriwei, 2016). The findings further illustrate how disappointment with the government's prioritisation of DDR initiatives over soldier welfare fosters scepticism, not just towards reintegration initiatives, but towards the sincerity of the state's broader counterinsurgency agenda. Participants questioned the long-term viability of reintegration, particularly when some ex-combatants reportedly returned to combat after completing the OPSC programme. As participant 1 noted, *"as many as are repenting, many are giving up, some are going back, they are still recruiting more people."* This observation is in line with Ike et al. (2023), who identified recidivism as a major flaw in Nigeria's reintegration strategy.

Betrayal by colleagues and the Erosion of Trust in Military Cohesion

The experiences shared by participants in this study shed light on a critical internal fracture within the Nigerian military as it implements the Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) programme. The accounts of betrayal by colleagues underscore the psychological toll and operational risk posed by divergent beliefs and actions among troops. This sense of betrayal extends beyond interpersonal disappointment; it is experienced as a violation of professional solidarity, national duty, and ethical commitment. Participants described a deep sense of disbelief and emotional injury upon discovering that some colleagues had actively undermined operational efforts or, more alarmingly, had provided sensitive intelligence to insurgents. One participant's strong testimony illustrates the extent of this disillusionment: *"Yeah, several force men, several armies have been caught leaking information to those same guys. Our own colleagues betraying us... they will pay you heavily."*

This confession highlights the dual burden faced by military personnel, external threats from violent extremists and internal threats from compromised colleagues. Such betrayals are not only strategic liabilities; they are moral injuries that leave soldiers questioning the unity, loyalty, and purpose of their work. Several participants attributed this internal division to underlying cultural and religious affiliations. As he noted: *"Some of us, like those from these northern parts... still see those guys as their own brother and as their*

own religion person but not knowing these guys are deadly. “This observation reveals how social identity can influence operational integrity. The sense of kinship some personnel feel towards ex-combatants introduces tensions between personal loyalty and institutional duty, complicating the already fragile trust required in counterinsurgency contexts. These tensions can manifest in passivity, reluctance to engage, or in some cases, direct sabotage.

The findings suggest that this betrayal is both ideological and material. Ideologically, some personnel reject the principles behind the DRR, viewing the reintegration of former combatants as a reward for violence. Materially, economic hardship and dissatisfaction with welfare provisions serve as powerful incentives for betrayal. Soldiers facing low wages and rising costs of living are vulnerable to financial inducements, especially when insurgent groups offer substantial sums in exchange for intelligence. As a participant explained, the moral boundaries can become blurred in the face of unmet economic needs. These dynamics are not new as reports by Ibekwe (2015) and Soriwei (2016) similarly documented cases of military personnel leaking information to Boko Haram, raising alarms about the internal security of Nigeria’s armed forces. However, the present findings deepen this concern by situating such betrayals within the lived experience of those still serving, highlighting not only the operational consequences but also the emotional damage inflicted on loyal personnel. The concept of cognitive dissonance is particularly useful in understanding this phenomenon. As described by Festinger (1957) and Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019), dissonance arises when individuals hold conflicting beliefs or engage in behaviours inconsistent with their values. For military personnel involved in OPSC, the act of implementing a reintegration policy they do not believe in, particularly one that appears to privilege former insurgents over loyal troops, creates intense psychological discomfort. Resignation, as observed by participants, may serve as a means of resolving this dissonance.

The betrayal by colleagues is also deeply entangled with a broader crisis of legitimacy and recognition within the armed forces. The perceived preferential treatment of ex-combatants’ fuels resentment among personnel who have risked their lives to maintain national security. As participant 3 recounted, some colleagues have left the force not merely out of ideological disagreement but due to the disappointment caused by watching former enemies receive financial and political support while they themselves remain neglected. This moral calculus, where loyalty is met with neglect and violence with reward, can erode

commitment and foster a permissive environment for defection or sabotage. This phenomenon complicates existing understandings of attrition and disengagement within Nigeria's Military. While previous studies have rightly pointed to corruption, poor infrastructure, and inadequate leadership as causes for desertion and demoralisation (Ikem et al., 2022; Ogundipe, 2020; Oriola, 2022), this study introduces betrayal by colleagues, fuelled by religious affinity, policy dissatisfaction, and financial strain, as an equally pressing concern.

Betrayal by the community

Another critical yet underexplored dimension of counterinsurgency operations in Northeast Nigeria is the perceived betrayal by local communities, which contributes significantly to the operational and emotional strain experienced by military personnel. While much of the academic discourse has focused on community resistance to reintegration of former combatants (Ike et al., 2022; Littman, 2021; Owonikoko, 2022), the current findings shift the analytical lens to a more immediate concern voiced by front-line military actors, specifically the entanglement of civilians in ways that actively obstruct military efforts, whether through deception, complicity, or passive inaction.

Seven participants described experiences where community members misled soldiers during operations or shielded Boko Haram combatants due to either familial ties or fear. This distrust, described vividly by participants, reflects a wider breakdown in civil-military relations. The testimony from participant 1 provides a stark depiction of this betrayal: *"...there was a time when I was in that Borno, their own family, their own community, when we go to their community, the people there would hide them [Boko Haram] inside their own house... it is just like a planned work between the villagers and the Boko Haram people to mislead the soldiers..."* This account captures the dual dilemma soldiers face. Not only must they battle armed insurgents, but they must also navigate a terrain where civilians, the supposed beneficiaries of their protection, may serve as covert threats.

Furthermore, as this participant notes, this not only increases the physical danger posed to soldiers through ambushes and planted explosives but also creates a pervasive sense of moral disorientation and isolation: *"...let me just say I will fight for myself."* The erosion of trust has practical and psychological consequences, leaving soldiers to question the very communities they are mandated to protect. Participant 3 similarly articulates the operational

toll of this betrayal: *“When we go into these villages to help, it’s really tough because sometimes the villagers themselves protect the Boko Haram guys... we end up walking into traps... It feels like those we’re trying to save are fighting against us.”*

This sense of frustration and betrayal recasts the civilian population from passive bystanders to active disruptors, albeit in ways that are often embedded in complex social, cultural, and survival-based motivations. It notes that some community members mislead the military not necessarily out of ideological alignment with insurgents, but out of fear or obligation to familial and communal loyalties. These findings complicate the dichotomy often drawn between insurgents and civilians in counterinsurgency literature. They challenge the assumption of clear lines between combatants and non-combatants and highlight how military efforts are deeply affected by local social dynamics. In doing so, the study underscores a key operational challenge: the military’s difficulty in discerning threats when allegiances within communities are ambiguous and culturally entrenched.

This dynamic is not unique to Nigeria. Literature on terrorism and civil conflict has long acknowledged the importance of kinship, tribal networks, and socio-economic dependencies in sustaining insurgent movements and protecting combatants from state forces. As Hafez (2016) explains, kinship plays a critical role in shielding individuals from legal consequences and fostering a collective silence. Sageman (2004) and Bloom (2011) have similarly documented how familial bonds, including those formed through marriage or blood, create protective networks around insurgents, particularly in close-knit rural or tribal societies.

Hoffman (2006) further adds that insurgent groups often cultivate community loyalty through economic incentives, providing material support to families in exchange for loyalty or silence. This may help explain why villagers may risk misleading state forces: to protect kin or to safeguard economic lifelines. Likewise, Crenshaw (2000) emphasizes the role of coercion, where threats of retaliation by armed groups dissuade community members from cooperating with the military. In this light, the actions described by participants may be less about ideological betrayal and more about complex survival strategies in conflict zones.

Notably, the finding raises a paradox in the reintegration discourse. If, as the participants suggest, communities were complicit in protecting insurgents during conflict, why then do these same communities often resist the reintegration of ex-combatants who have undergone deradicalisation? This contradiction challenges simplistic narratives of community

victimhood or innocence and points instead to a more nuanced reality where community allegiances fluctuate based on context, threat perception, and internal social dynamics.

Doubt over genuine repentance and transformation of ex-combatants

A salient theme that emerged from the interviews was the deep-seated *scepticism* regarding the sincerity of repentance among ex-combatants. This scepticism was not simply an abstract sentiment, but was rooted in lived experiences of betrayal, operational hardship, and the ongoing risks associated with the reintegration of individuals who were once engaged in extremist violence. Persistent scepticism regarding the sincerity of repentance among ex-combatants poses a critical challenge to P/CVE efforts. Several participants expressed concern that not all individuals who pass through the rehabilitation programme have genuinely abandoned their extremist beliefs. This raises the risk of recidivism or infiltration, where individuals act as sleeper agents within the camps or communities, potentially undoing the progress of deradicalisation efforts. Participants often responded to the question of genuine repentance from a place of uncertainty, acknowledging the difficulty in discerning a person's true intentions.

While previous studies have documented community resistance to reintegration (Ike et al., 2022; Owonikoko, 2022; Uguweze et al., 2021), this study shifts the analytical lens to the front-line military personnel, revealing a similar if not more complex form of distrust. Unlike civilians, military actors interviewed in this study have not only witnessed the atrocities committed by insurgents but have also directly interacted with the individuals undergoing the rehabilitation process. This dual exposure amplifies the emotional conflict they experience, as they are expected to facilitate peacebuilding while grappling with personal trauma and operational insecurity.

One of the most striking aspects of this finding is the nuanced differentiation in perception among participants. One participant, for example, offers a cautiously optimistic perspective: "*yes, I believe they can change because some of them, that is the recent ones that just graduated, the last family visits, the former ones came for the visit too. I always merge it ... the Niger Delta militant after the presidential pardon, they did not go back, I know it will not be all but at least 90% would be law abiding... because I am not in someone's mind, but I think some are genuinely repented, but I don't know of some.*" His statement reflects the

ambiguity and emotional tension that characterise the outlook of many personnel. This participant's reference to the Niger Delta militants illustrates an attempt to draw on past national experiences of successful reintegration, though tempered by a recognition that certainty in human intentions is inherently limited.

In contrast, the perspective of participant 3 represents a more guarded position. He states, *"You can never trust a repentant terrorist 100%... sometimes, some of them will come, tell you that they have resigned... but at the end of the day... [they are] trying to gather information... and tell other members this is what is going on"*. This account draws attention to perceived tactical duplicity, with individuals pretending to be rehabilitated while functioning as informants for insurgent groups. His narrative suggests that successful reintegration is not only about changing behaviours but ensuring that such changes are both authentic and irreversible.

This widespread scepticism also appears to be influenced by the perceived motivations behind surrender. Participants highlighted that many combatants do not appear to be driven by ideological transformation or moral awakening, but rather by strategic necessity. Hunger, lack of weapons, internal factional conflict, and dwindling financial support from sponsors were frequently cited as reasons why many individuals surrender, rather than genuine remorse. As participant 3 observed, *"Most of them come out... when you ask them, they will tell you that they are out of weapons, out of food stuff, no money... and recently there's another group called ISWAP that is fighting the Boko Haram."* Such revelations complicate the assumptions that underpin rehabilitation programmes, suggesting that structural collapse of insurgent groups may be prompting tactical desertions rather than ideological disengagement.

This aligns with the findings of Felbab-Brown (2018); Institute for security studies report (2020); Hassan, (2022) who argued that some individuals engage with DDR initiatives not out of transformed convictions but as a strategic pause, an opportunity to regroup, feed, or escape deteriorating circumstances. The implication is that reintegration strategies must not only focus on psychological reconditioning but also include robust intelligence vetting and community-based monitoring mechanisms. Altier (2021) synthesises more than three decades of DDR practice to draw lessons for violent extremist disengagement. She emphasises that disengagement from violence does not always entail deradicalisation, as many fighters disengage for pragmatic reasons such as coercion, opportunism, or survival rather than

ideological change. This insight is highly relevant in the Nigerian context, where participants in this study often questioned the sincerity of ex-combatants' repentance.

Participant 5's comments provide a particularly stark contrast to Participant 4's guarded optimism. He questioned the very premise of repentance through short-term rehabilitation, asking rhetorically, *"How do you want to tell me that people who joined this Boko Haram people... after years will now come here for a couple of months and now suddenly have changed?"* This line of inquiry reflects a deep-seated disbelief in the efficacy of the DDR programme. For participant 5, years of witnessing cycles of violence have eroded faith in the potential for transformation. His statement encapsulates the frustration and burnout often felt by soldiers, particularly those who see the same individuals they once combated being reintegrated without significant proof of behavioural change.

Such sentiments are not merely emotional reactions; they signify a wider institutional crisis of confidence. These responses raise critical questions about the metrics used to assess success in DDR interventions. While some government accounts boast of zero recidivism among OPSC graduates (Routley and Hassan, 2022), participants in this study present alternative narratives suggesting that relapse may be underreported or disguised under intelligence-related operations, corroborating studies like that of Zena (2013).

This sense of disillusionment has been further validated by reports in 2024 of alleged attacks carried out by reintegrated ex-combatants in Borno State, raising alarms about the adequacy of post-reintegration monitoring and risk assessment protocols (George, 2024). These incidents not only jeopardise public safety but also undermine the credibility of the programme among military personnel. Indeed, Clubb and Tapley (2018) caution against using recidivism as the sole metric of reintegration success, advocating instead for broader and more qualitative measures of community acceptance, employment, and psychological stability.

Furthermore, the belief that the motivation behind surrender is tied to dwindling resources rather than genuine ideological change raises ethical and practical questions. Participants worry that once the needs of food, shelter, or security are met, former combatants might return to their groups if they perceive conditions in the bush to be more favourable. This is not merely theoretical. A recent interview with reintegrated individuals in Borno State revealed growing frustration about unmet government promises, with some reportedly

threatening to return to the insurgency (Al-amin, 2024). This not only mirrors findings in Nigeria but also echoes similar outcomes in Cameroon, where reintegration has stalled due to community scepticism and insufficient institutional follow-up (Issa and Machikou, 2019).

Superordinate theme 2 - Hope and redemption

While betrayal dominated many narratives, some participants expressed a strong sense of hope regarding the deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) programme, viewing it as a critical opportunity for redemption among ex-combatants. This optimism was often conditional but meaningful. This programme represents, to many, a meaningful step toward finally closing the chapter on a decade-long conflict with Boko Haram. While participants admitted some initial difficulty in accepting the programme, they also acknowledged the positive ripple effects it has generated in the fight against Boko Haram.

Cautious optimism and second chances

The theme of hope and redemption emerging from this study provides critical insights into how security actors interpret the reintegration of ex-Boko Haram combatants through the Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) programme. Rather than viewing reintegration solely as a counterinsurgency strategy, participants' narratives reveal it to be a deeply emotional and moral process. For some, the programme symbolises a second chance not only for ex-combatants but also for the possibility of peace in the region.

Several participants shared optimistic reflections based on direct engagement with rehabilitated individuals. Participant 5, despite reservations about the morality of the programme, stated, *“To me, it's fine. Everyone deserves a second chance. The programme is OK... I have seen these people, have spoken to some of them... some of them were under pressure, while some of them were forced. To me, I feel what the army is doing is good. To give them a second chance.”* His view reflects a shift from retributive to restorative thinking and signals a broader change in the way some security actors understand insurgency, less as an individual moral failing and more as a product of structural coercion and limited agency.

Similarly, Participant 4 drew parallels with the reintegration of Niger Delta militants, explaining, *“Just like them, I believe everyone deserves a chance to change and do better. Giving people a second chance helps them turn their lives around and brings peace for*

everyone.” His remarks reflect a belief in the transformative potential of reintegration and point to precedent in Nigeria’s history, where former militants were successfully absorbed back into civil society. These perspectives align with broader peacebuilding literature that recognises DDR processes as not merely security mechanisms but as vehicles for societal healing. In this sense, hope among security actors is not just an emotion but a strategic and psychological resource that sustains long-term engagement with fragile peace processes.

For some personnel, supporting reintegration provided a sense of moral repair, countering the disillusionment produced by state neglect and community hostility. A participant’s comparison with Niger Delta militants underscore this: he invoked a successful precedent to argue that reconciliation, while difficult, is not impossible. Such references suggest that soldiers sought moral and historical anchors to justify their fragile optimism. This redemptive outlook also finds parallels internationally. In Uganda, staff working with ex-LRA fighters described reconciliation as emotionally draining yet necessary for long-term peace (Allen et al., 2020). In Colombia, reintegration practitioners found meaning in the incremental progress of demobilised fighters, even when larger political processes faltered (Theidon, 2007). These cases reinforce that hope, though often overshadowed by scepticism, is a critical psychological resource for DDR implementers.

In the Nigerian case, redemption thus represents not merely a theme but an adaptive strategy through which soldiers sustain their engagement with peacebuilding. However, not all participants shared this optimism. Participant 1’s perspective introduces a compelling counterpoint rooted in battlefield realities. He asked, *“If they catch any soldier or any uniform person, they do not give the person any second chance, they kill the person, so why giving them with a second chance?”* His view reflects a deep moral and emotional conflict which is consistent with Oriola’s (2023) findings, where participants in Nigeria’s Northeast recounted insurgents’ brutality, including accounts of acid being poured on the corpses of fallen soldiers. For actors like participant 1, the violence they have witnessed and endured challenges the moral legitimacy of reconciliation, especially when the threat remains active.

His resistance is not isolated. Similar patterns have been observed across conflict-affected regions globally. In Northern Uganda, for example, the reintegration of former Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) combatants met significant resistance due to community trauma and mistrust (Allen et al., 2020). In Nigeria and Cameroon, studies by Ike et al.

(2022), Chetima et al. (2024), and Issa and Machiko (2019) have all shown that community acceptance of ex-combatants is shaped by perceptions of coercion, remorse, and active contributions to reconciliation. These conditions influence whether second chances are granted and impact the morale of military actors implementing such policies. What becomes evident in the findings is the complex emotional terrain that military personnel must navigate. The decision to extend compassion is not made in a vacuum but within the context of lived trauma, institutional demands, and personal loss. Despite these challenges, the fact that some participants expressed cautious optimism indicates an important psychological phenomenon: post-traumatic growth.

Post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004) refers to the positive psychological transformation that can occur as a result of struggling with highly stressful or traumatic events. It suggests that individuals exposed to trauma may also experience renewed moral purpose and enhanced empathy. In this context, some participants' support for reintegration, despite their exposure to violence, reflects growth in moral reasoning, empathy, and a redefinition of justice. Rather than becoming hardened by trauma, participants demonstrate an ability to reframe their experiences and envision a pathway to peace. Their willingness to emotionally invest in the reintegration process suggests that trauma, while deeply painful, can also catalyse new perspectives and a deeper commitment to change.

Furthermore, this post-traumatic growth is shaped by contextual variables. Godefroidt and Langer (2022) argue that community members are more inclined to accept former combatants who were coerced into joining, ended their involvement voluntarily, and contributed meaningfully to peacebuilding. This dynamic is also reflected in the military participants' responses. Their optimism was often conditional, anchored in their perception of the ex-combatants' sincerity, the observed outcomes of the programme, and the hope that this process signals the eventual end of the insurgency.

Additionally, despite the contrast in the views of participant 1, he expressed similar cautious optimism as expressed that he *“tries to stay hopeful but prepares for the worse.”* These participants' comments reflect a nuanced and diverse viewpoint about giving former combatants second chances, emphasising the difficulties and emotional aspects of these choices. Participants showed guarded optimism, recognising that many had been coerced into joining Boko Haram and suggesting that reintegration could aid long-term peace.

Furthermore, participant 4 drew parallels with the Niger Delta amnesty, highlighting the feasibility of successful reintegration. In contrast, Sodiq demanded retribution, questioning why leniency should be shown when insurgents rarely spared captured soldiers. Yet even he displayed cautious hope, acknowledging that strict punitive measures may not yield lasting solutions. This combination of hope and preparation for the worst indicates a pragmatic approach to the challenges of dealing with ex-combatants. Taken together, these perspectives underscore the moral and emotional complexity of DDR: while second chances can support peacebuilding, concerns about justice, trust, and security remain. Effective programmes must therefore strike a delicate balance between optimism and caution, rehabilitation and protection.

Importantly, these findings point to the necessity for a reintegration strategy that goes beyond the technical. Reintegration must be emotionally intelligent, morally responsive, and socially embedded. Programmes like OPSC must address not only the needs of ex-combatants but also the psychological wellbeing of those tasked with their rehabilitation. Without such holistic attention, the emotional burden placed on military personnel may become unsustainable, potentially undermining the very aims of DDR.

The hope expressed by some participants reflects more than blind optimism. It embodies a form of resilience, one that allows individuals to engage meaningfully with peacebuilding amid ambiguity and loss. Yet this hope exists alongside justified scepticism, moral discomfort, and institutional fatigue. For DDR initiatives to succeed, they must recognise and support both sides of this emotional equation. Doing so not only enhances programme effectiveness but also affirms the humanity of those who deliver it on the frontlines.

Effectiveness of the deradicalisation programme and ex-combatants help towards CVE

This study's findings contribute valuable insights into the effectiveness of Nigeria's Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) programme, particularly the role of ex-combatants in providing actionable intelligence that aids counterinsurgency efforts. As illustrated in participants' testimonies, the utilisation of insider knowledge from former Boko Haram members has significantly impacted operational strategies, led to measurable reductions in violence, and catalysed the reintegration of displaced communities. These

developments underscore the programme's strategic potential within the broader peacebuilding landscape. This finding resonates with previous accounts, as highlighted by a United Nations report (2021) that explores the usefulness of DDR programmes as paramount in contributing to the reduction of violence and the reintegration of ex-combatants into societies, especially in conflict affected zones, such as the Nigerian context.

The testimonies of participants 4 and 6 exemplify how intelligence from ex-combatants is operationalised to facilitate targeted and safer missions. Participant 4 stated, *"It helps reduce the violence of the Boko Haram to 90% and it has helped a lot... when some of them gave up and surrendered, the rest saw how it went, that they were not being killed or prosecuted, so that helped in reducing the war to let me say 90 to 95%."* This highlights both the tactical benefits of actionable intelligence and the psychological impact of visible government clemency, which fosters a domino effect among active insurgents. Participant 6 reinforced this point by explaining, *"During that profiling we assure them of their confidentiality. They then give us a few tips. It helps to bring out those in the bush."* These reflections point to a dual gain: operational security for military personnel and the gradual dismantling of insurgent resistance through exemplification and trust-building.

The narratives of Participant 4 and Participant 6 underscore the pivotal role of intelligence in counterinsurgency operations, particularly in persuading members of insurgent groups such as Boko Haram to surrender. By providing assurances of safety and anonymity, authorities are able to gather valuable intelligence that supports the effective targeting and reduction of insurgent activity. Participant 4's account highlights a tactical approach in which ex-combatants, after surrendering their weapons, are transported to camps in locations such as Maiduguri and Gombe. These camps act as safe havens, protecting former fighters from execution or prosecution, and this information is intentionally relayed to those still in the insurgency. Such strategies employ exemplification, demonstrating to active combatants that surrendering to the Nigerian government offers protection and care rather than punishment, making defection a more attractive option than remaining in the bush.

The effectiveness of this technique is reflected in claims that it has reduced Boko Haram's violence by as much as "90 to 95%." This decline is attributed to clear evidence that surrendering fighters are exempted from retribution, thereby encouraging others to follow suit. The approach also highlights the transition from the "kinetic phase" of operations –

direct combat – towards more strategic, non-violent methods that undermine the insurgency from within by fostering defections. By addressing the fear and mistrust that keep fighters armed, this strategy offers a viable alternative to protracted conflict. Participant 6's reflections on profiling and the careful extraction of intelligence further illustrate a targeted and effective use of insider information. Such practices enhance operational efficiency by enabling the precise identification of active combatants' locations and by strengthening the military's ability to act on timely and reliable intelligence.

Such approaches resonate with broader Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) practices documented in international contexts. In Colombia, the demobilisation of FARC fighters under reintegration schemes led to considerable reductions in violence and improved public security (Valencia, 2012). Similarly, Berdal and Ucko (2013) discuss how post-conflict DDR initiatives in Africa, when effectively implemented, not only neutralised armed factions but also leveraged former fighters' knowledge to undermine insurgent infrastructures. These parallels lend credence to the strategy adopted in the Nigerian context and suggest its relevance beyond the sub-region.

The strategic use of defector intelligence aligns with findings from the *Sulhu* programme, a lesser-known initiative highlighted by Ayandike (2021), which focuses on negotiating surrender with senior jihadist commanders under guarantees of safety. These efforts have reportedly triggered a trickle-down effect within the ranks of insurgents. Though the current study did not directly assess *Sulhu*, the overlap in approach reinforces the credibility of the strategy described by participants in this research. The integration of high-value defectors with deep insider knowledge can reshape military planning and hasten the de-escalation of conflict, provided the trust framework remains intact. The success of such programmes shows they have the power to profoundly transform society to further peace. However, it is crucial that they are implemented correctly and receive adequate funding due to risks such as security breaches from the potential leak of sensitive information if ex-combatants are not fully committed to their roles in peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations. This comparison highlights the wide applicability of DDR programmes in advancing security and peace in conflict-affected communities.

Furthermore, the findings also signal a tension between operational success and psychological uncertainty. While participants acknowledged progress, their comments reflect

a persistent scepticism regarding the true intentions of some ex-combatants. Participant 3 noted, *“Yeah, it has been really effective, like 60%... most communities that were destroyed are beginning to go back to their homes. Peace has begun to restore... but...”* The trailing tone captures a sense of cautious optimism, an outlook that remains tethered to concerns of recidivism and the fragility of recent gains. This is not uncommon in DDR programmes globally. As Kilroy (2015) argues, transformation in public perception of ex-combatants is often conditional on sustained peace and visible reintegration outcomes, rather than symbolic acts of surrender alone.

Moreover, the success of intelligence-led DDR operations is contingent on broader structural and institutional support. Without adequate funding, consistent security assurances, and rigorous vetting mechanisms, the risk of intelligence leaks, false cooperation, or insurgent infiltration remains a real concern. This danger is compounded by the complex motivations behind individual defections, some of which may be more opportunistic than ideological. The ongoing nature of Boko Haram’s insurgency complicates this further, as complete disarmament remains an aspirational rather than actualised goal.

Despite these limitations, the programme has produced visible socio-economic benefits. As noted by participants, the return of displaced persons and the resumption of trade in livestock markets signify not just security gains but also psychological healing and social renewal. These are critical outcomes, particularly in a region long gripped by violence and fear. Research in Liberia supports this dynamic; Atta-Asamoah and Aning (2011) report that successful reintegration of ex-combatants correlates with improved local economies, social cohesion, and long-term peacebuilding outcomes.

This finding affirms the value of ex-combatant intelligence in advancing both military efficiency and peacebuilding outcomes within Nigeria’s DDR strategy. However, its long-term viability depends on overcoming persistent mistrust, ensuring consistent institutional support, and managing the political optics of reconciliation with former perpetrators. The Nigerian case reflects broader DDR lessons: that while tactical gains are essential, trust-building and community acceptance are what ultimately sustain peace. As such, DDR initiatives must be continuously adapted, well-resourced, and supported by inclusive policies that engage both victims and former fighters in the difficult work of post-conflict reconstruction.

Implication of Findings

The findings of this study offer critical implications for the theory and practice of deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes in fragile and protracted conflict settings. By centring the lived experiences of military personnel tasked with implementing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), the research highlights the emotional, moral, and institutional labour involved in peacebuilding. These areas are frequently neglected in policy and academic discourses.

A key insight from the study is that DDR programmes are not merely about the reintegration of former combatants but also about the restoration of trust within and across state institutions. Military personnel are not passive enforcers of policy. They are deeply affected stakeholders whose perceptions of fairness, justice, and legitimacy significantly shape programme outcomes. When these actors feel unsupported, morally conflicted, or emotionally disillusioned, the effectiveness of reintegration is compromised (James, 2024). As such, DDR must be approached not only as a tactical solution to violent extremism but also as a trust-building mechanism that includes those who deliver it.

The study draws attention to the pervasive sense of institutional betrayal. Participants repeatedly described feeling abandoned by the Nigerian state, citing poor welfare, inadequate resources, restricted leave, and lack of psychological support as evidence of systemic neglect rather than isolated lapses. One participant's comment, *"To give us pass and leave to go and see family is very difficult,"* reflects how even routine operational needs remain unmet, deepening frustration and emotional exhaustion. Despite increased military budgets (Ikem et al., 2022), field-level realities remain dismal. These conditions reinforce what Freyd (1996) terms institutional betrayal and contribute to moral dissonance among those expected to implement DDR under ethically ambiguous conditions.

The concerns of betrayal by colleagues, including defection, resignation, or collusion with insurgents, all of which erode unit cohesion and morale (Ibekwe, 2015; Participant 3, interview, 2023). This mirrors broader research on internal fractures within military institutions, where loss of trust among peers can be as destabilising as external threats (James, 2024). Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance helps explain this experience, where

soldiers struggle to reconcile loyalty to their mission with the institutional contradictions they face.

The implications for community relations are also significant. Participants reported that some civilians actively collaborated with Boko Haram, misleading troops or shielding combatants. Participants recalled villagers “*pointing the wrong directions*” and leading soldiers into traps. These betrayals not only increase operational risk but also strain the potential for civilian-security cooperation, a crucial pillar of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) efforts (Hafez, 2016; Crenshaw, 2000). However, participants also acknowledged that community acceptance of ex-combatants can enhance reintegration, echoing studies which show that social legitimacy is key to DDR success (Kilroy, 2015; Godefroidt and Langer, 2022).

Crucially, the study highlights how moments of hope and redemption, such as receiving actionable intelligence from ex-combatants or witnessing them reintegrate, carry disproportionate emotional weight for key actors, particularly members of the military. Participants comment that intelligence from former fighters has helped reduce the violence of the Boko Haram reflects the tangible operational gains possible through successful DDR. Similarly, the observation that “*everyone deserves a second chance*” signals a shift in moral perspective from punishment to restoration. These redemptive moments function as moral anchors amid an otherwise emotionally taxing environment (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004).

In sum, sustainable peace requires a holistic reintegration strategy that supports both ex-combatants and those tasked with their rehabilitation. This study suggests that unless we address the psychosocial needs, institutional integrity, and ethical clarity of implementers, reintegration efforts will remain incomplete and vulnerable to backlash. The success of DDR depends not only on who is reintegrated but also on the legitimacy, wellbeing, and trustworthiness of those who do the reintegrating.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of security personnel implementing Nigeria’s Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) programme, with a particular focus on the moral, operational, and institutional tensions they navigate within the broader landscape of

deradicalisation and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse the narratives of eight frontline actors, the research revealed a complex emotional terrain shaped by institutional betrayal, peer disillusionment, community hostility, and persistent scepticism regarding the sincerity of ex-combatants' transformation. Yet, interwoven with this disillusionment were moments of guarded optimism and belief in the redemptive potential of rehabilitation. These findings offer rare insight into the psychosocial dimensions of CVE work from the perspective of those tasked with delivering security-led peacebuilding initiatives.

A key contribution of this study lies in its shift of analytical focus from ex-combatants and communities to the frontline actors responsible for facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration. It demonstrates that security personnel, many of whom have been direct victims of insurgent violence, are expected to undertake emotionally taxing tasks central to deradicalisation efforts, often without the institutional support necessary for ethical reflection or psychological resilience. Their narratives reveal layered perceptions of betrayal by the state, mistrust of colleagues, and disappointment in community responses. Each of these factors shapes their perceptions of programme legitimacy, CVE efficacy, and the moral coherence of deradicalisation policies. However, they also recount rare but significant moments of hope, grounded in religious beliefs, professional responsibility, and observed behavioural change among repentant fighters.

Despite its contributions, the study has its limitations. Firstly, the small sample size (n=8), however, while the sample size was relatively small, which could be considered a limitation, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is well-suited for smaller samples. The primary aim of IPA is to gain deep insights into individual experiences rather than broad generalizations. Secondly, there is the sole focus on the military personnel and the single site focus on the Mallam Sidi DDR camp which could constrain the diversity and generalisability of findings. However, the Mallam Sidi camp is the primary location for the OPSC initiative therefore it is key to the study's objectives, and by foregrounding this significant subset of actors, the study clarifies that its insights do not claim to capture the perspectives of all "security forces" but instead illuminate the psychosocial and moral challenges faced by soldiers navigating this dual role.

Thirdly, the absence of female perspectives, due in part to the gendered composition of Nigeria's security forces in the focused DRR camp, means that an important dimension of DRR implementation remains underexplored. Finally, the interpretative nature of IPA means that findings are necessarily filtered through the researcher's analytical lens, although reflexive journaling and trauma-informed practices were employed to minimise bias.

However, while grounded in the Mallam Sidi camp, the betrayal–redemption framework developed here has broader analytical relevance. Similar patterns of institutional neglect, peer disillusionment, and community mistrust are evident in DDR contexts from Cameroun to Liberia to Colombia, and other fragile conflict and post-conflict contexts. Although the small sample size and single-site focus may limit generalisability, the framework provides a conceptual lens for future studies to examine how implementers' perceptions shape DDR outcomes across contexts. Future research should extend this inquiry to include correctional officers, psychologists, religious counsellors, and community figures involved in OPSC and parallel initiatives such as Sulhu or the Borno model. Expanding this would capture the variation and gendered dynamics absent in this study. These steps would test the transferability of the betrayal–redemption framework and refine its applicability beyond the Nigerian case, ensuring a more holistic understanding of DDR implementation.

Nevertheless, the study offers rich, context-sensitive insight that complements and challenges prevailing DDR/DRR frameworks which often focus on metrics such as recidivism rates, number of disengaged fighters, or community reintegration outcomes. By foregrounding the affective and ethical labour of security personnel, the study challenges technocratic assumptions underpinning many deradicalisation policies and instead calls for a more human-centred, psychologically informed understanding of CVE implementation.

Conceptually, the research introduces a “betrayal to redemption” framework that captures the moral ambiguity and meaning-making processes experienced by security actors in their daily engagement with former combatants. This heuristic can be applied in other DDR contexts where military or law enforcement personnel are required to transition from combat roles to peacebuilding functions. Methodologically, the use of IPA opens space for scholars and practitioners to explore the sensitive dimensions of CVE and DDR policy delivery, especially in environments where trust, legitimacy, and identity are continually contested.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for deradicalisation strategies to include institutional mechanisms that support the psychological wellbeing, ethical clarity, and operational effectiveness of security personnel. These may include trauma counselling, moral reflection platforms, confidential debriefing structures, and participatory feedback systems. Without these provisions, deradicalisation efforts risk deepening cynicism, eroding operational morale, and undermining the very trust they seek to rebuild.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the argument that DDR programmes cannot be sustainable if they focus exclusively on transforming ex-combatants. They must also restore, equip, and affirm those responsible for facilitating that transformation. Sustainable peace is not achieved through reintegration alone, but through the ethical empowerment of all actors involved in the process. By placing security personnel at the centre of DDR implementation, this study opens new pathways for research and practice that are more inclusive, psychologically grounded, and attuned to the moral complexities of post-conflict recovery. As deradicalisation programmes continue to evolve, it is imperative to ask not only whether ex-combatants can change, but also how we support those who are tasked with helping them do so and at what cost.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Building on the implications of this study, several practical recommendations emerge that can strengthen the implementation of Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) in Nigeria, while also providing lessons for other conflict-affected contexts. First, there is a clear need to introduce structured psychosocial support for implementers. Security personnel working within DDR/DRR programmes frequently experience emotional fatigue, moral injury, and secondary trauma. Confidential counselling services, regular psychological debriefings, and trauma-informed supervision would help mitigate these challenges and promote the wellbeing of those on the frontlines. Second, reform of welfare and recognition systems is essential. Timely salary payments, consistent leave policies, and formal recognition of frontline contributions would go a long way toward addressing perceptions of institutional neglect and betrayal. By valuing the sacrifices of DDR/DRR implementers, institutions can improve morale and reduce the risk of disillusionment. Third, DDR/DRR personnel would benefit from training in resilience and ethical competence. Equipping military actors with

skills in resilience, cultural sensitivity, and ethical decision-making is critical in preparing them for the moral ambiguities and psychological pressures of reintegration work. Such training would not only strengthen individual coping capacities but also enhance the legitimacy of DDR programmes in the eyes of affected communities.

Fourth, the establishment of safeguards and post-reintegration monitoring systems would improve public confidence in DDR outcomes. This includes robust vetting procedures, community-based intelligence networks, and mechanisms for long-term monitoring of reintegrated ex-combatants. These measures would help counter scepticism about repentance and prevent recidivism, thereby contributing to sustainable peace. Finally, it is vital to foster participatory programme design by involving implementers more directly in shaping reintegration processes. Creating space for feedback, reflection, and shared ownership can build trust between frontline actors and the institution, while also making programmes more adaptive to local realities. Taken together, these recommendations emphasise the importance of supporting not only ex-combatants and communities, but also the often-overlooked implementers who play a decisive role in the success or failure of DDR initiatives.

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