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Effective and Sustainable Reintegration of the Children of Boko Haram Returnees from an Islamic Perspective; a Case Study of Maiduguri Town

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the effective and sustainable reintegration of children of Boko Haram returnees from an Islamic perspective in Northeast Nigeria. The research addresses the persistent social stigma, fear, discrimination, and mistrust faced by these children in post-conflict communities. It argues that reintegration should not only focus on security and humanitarian dimensions but also incorporate Islamic ethical values to foster reconciliation, peace-building, and long-term community healing. **Design/methods/approach** – The study employed a qualitative research design using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community members and Key Informant Interviews (KIs) involving Islamic scholars (Ulama), traditional rulers, camp managers, and humanitarian actors. In addition, document analysis was conducted on Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and Islamic literature concerning forgiveness, justice, rehabilitation, and child protection. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify major barriers to reintegration and the role of Islamic teachings in promoting social cohesion. **Findings** – The study found that children of Boko Haram returnees are largely perceived as victims of conflict rather than perpetrators of violence. However, stigma, social isolation, fear, and discrimination remain major obstacles to successful reintegration. Sustainable reintegration requires community sensitization, psychosocial support, access to education and vocational empowerment, and the active involvement of religious and traditional institutions. Islamic values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *tawbah* (repentance), *'adl* (justice), and collective responsibility significantly contribute to social healing and reconciliation. **Research implications/limitations** – The study is limited to selected communities in Northeast Nigeria and relies mainly on qualitative data, which may limit broader generalization. Nevertheless, the findings provide important insights for policymakers, humanitarian agencies, and religious leaders in designing culturally and religiously sensitive reintegration programs. **Originality/value** – This study offers a faith-based reintegration framework that integrates Islamic teachings with modern reintegration theories. It highlights the underutilized role of mosques, *Sangaya* and *Islamiya* schools, *zakat* institutions, and Ulama in supporting sustainable reintegration and preventing future radicalization.

Keywords: Reintegration; Boko Haram Returnees; Children; Conflict; Islamic Perspective; Psychosocial Support.

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Introduction

The reintegration of children affected by the Boko Haram insurgency remains a pressing humanitarian and security challenge in Northeast Nigeria. Despite government and international efforts, recent evidence indicates that many child survivors continue to be neglected by formal reintegration programmes. A 2025 inquiry by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) documented that girls and young women who escaped Boko Haram captivity received no tailored reintegration services, counselling, or vocational support, and were often not transferred to civilian authorities as required by the 2022 handover protocol between Nigeria and the United Nations [1]. The CEDAW experts described the experience of survivors as a "double prison," where even after escaping captivity, many were denied safe reintegration and faced devastating family rejection [2]. This failure persists despite Nigeria's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Children's Charter to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims of armed conflict [3].

Some researchers argue that within highly coercive environments, exploitation and agency are mutually constitutive; children may consciously embrace participation in the group as the only viable means to protect their families or seek self-significance, even as this reproduces a system aimed at their own exploitation [4]. Neglecting these complexities has profound implications for reintegration and community healing processes [5]. The scale of need is significant. A 2024 UNICEF study estimated that the insurgency has cost Nigeria approximately \$10 billion in lost economic opportunities over the past decade [6]. In response, UNICEF and the Borno State Government launched an economic reintegration programme targeting 1,033 children of Boko Haram survivors across six vocational training centres in Maiduguri, Bama, Biu, Damboa, and Konduga, combining technical education with psychosocial support [7]. Similarly, the NEEM Foundation has championed trauma-informed, value-based accelerated education models, demonstrating that integrated approaches combining education and psychology enable young survivors, including those with no prior education, to achieve academic excellence and earn university scholarships [8].

Innovative educational models are emerging. At Lafiya Sarari School in Borno State, approximately 80% of students are survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and the school employs trauma-responsive approaches, play-based therapy, and flexible six-year learning trajectories that allow students to progress at their own pace without the pressure of yearly academic benchmarks

[9]. The curriculum includes classes on peace, integrity, respect, honesty, and tolerance, which are values systematically targeted by Boko Haram [10]. Accelerated education programmes have demonstrated significant reach: from 2018 to 2021, the USAID-funded Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria (AENN) initiative helped over 200,000 children regain access to learning through Non-Formal Learning Centres, using condensed curricula in local languages and integrating trauma-informed teaching [11].

Community-led approaches have demonstrated remarkable success and attracted scholarly attention. The "Borno Model," where community panels vet ex-fighters and oversee reconciliation, achieves 85% sustained reintegration compared to 45% for national programmes like Operation Safe Corridor, with recidivism dropping from 29% to just 3% [12]. However, critical scholarship cautions against romanticizing such vernacular security measures. Akintayo argues that despite posturing as a vernacular security archetype aimed at rebuilding communal coexistence, the Borno Model can foster feelings of insecurity, suspicion, and anxiety amongst community members, revealing a disconnect between its theoretical promises and practical implementation [13]. In Gwoza, 97 ex-fighters rebuilt 120 homes alongside victims using community co-design models, with traditional reconciliation rituals (sulhu) enabling former combatants to rebuild relationships with those they harmed [14].

Islam emphasizes repentance and forgiveness: individuals who sincerely repent, seek forgiveness from Allah, and demonstrate commitment to change should be given opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration [15]. Islamic teachings on seeking knowledge and understanding support providing education and vocational training to enable returnees to lead productive lives [16]. The reintegration process requires community involvement, fostering understanding, reconciliation, and acceptance while ensuring safety and security [17],[18]. Many returnees have experienced trauma and indoctrination, making counselling and psychological support crucial for rehabilitation [19],[20]. Consultation with knowledgeable Islamic scholars, well-versed in Islamic teachings and understanding the specific context of Boko Haram returnees, can provide detailed guidance based on Islamic principles and the welfare of individuals involved [21]. It is against this background that this study aims to explore effective and sustained reintegration of the children of Boko Haram returnees into society based on an Islamic paradigm, drawing on recent evidence of what works and the persistent gaps that must be addressed.

The aims and objectives of this study are: to develop a holistic reintegration framework rooted in Islamic principles for the children of Boko Haram returnees; to identify the specific needs and challenges faced by these children and their families; To assess the existing support systems within Islamic

communities and institutions and their capacity to aid in the reintegration process.

Literature Review

Abdullahi and Onapajo investigated the role of community engagement and reintegration programmes in conflict zones, particularly within the conflict-affected communities in North-Eastern Nigeria. The study emphasized that the successful reintegration of ex-combatants depends largely on community acceptance, awareness, and participation in peace-building initiatives. Using a mixed-methods approach, the authors found that reintegration programmes become more effective when local stakeholders, traditional leaders, and affected communities are actively involved in programme design and implementation [22]. The study further revealed that psychosocial support, dialogue, economic empowerment, and social inclusion are essential for reducing stigma and preventing relapse into violence. However, challenges such as distrust, poor coordination among stakeholders, and inadequate support structures continue to hinder sustainable peace-building efforts in conflict zones.

However, significant challenges persist. Academic research examining reintegration programmes in Borno State found that while vocational training and psychosocial support led to positive changes for many returnees, stigma and discrimination from host communities, insufficient financial support, and lack of comprehensive after-care services remain major obstacles [23],[24]. A study of returnees in Adamawa State revealed that women and children face severe stigmatization and social exclusion, rejected, marginalized, and excluded socially, politically, and economically, leading researchers to warn that this exclusion risks “raising the new 'Shekaus” [25]. The CEDAW inquiry similarly found that psychosocial support, essentially provided by non-governmental organizations, was insufficient and unsustainable due to funding constraints [26].

Akintayo examines *sulhu* as a religious norm of mediation and reconciliation rooted in the socio-cultural precepts of Northern Nigeria, advancing that “the local” in local peacebuilding should be understood as contextual beliefs, norms, and practices that can aid communal rehabilitation [27]. Experts emphasize that reintegration, reconciliation, and healing are not one-off events but long-term processes requiring support for direct victims, indirect victims, and even perpetrators.

Islamic principles offer a robust framework for addressing these challenges. The concept of *Istijarah*, the ethical response of accommodating those in need, is embedded within Islamic civilisation and offers language and practice for cultivating virtues of humility, hospitality, kindness, and fraternity while

building community [28]. This indigenous framework, developed centuries before modern humanitarian instruments, provides culturally resonant approaches to integration that position returnees within society.

Agbiboa surveyed the challenges associated with the reintegration of former Boko Haram combatants and their associates in Nigeria, with particular attention to the social, political, and security implications of rehabilitation programmes. The study argued that reintegration efforts are often hindered by community distrust, fear of renewed violence, and the stigmatization of ex-combatants by victims and local populations [29]. Agbiboa noted that many communities affected by insurgency remain unwilling to accept former fighters due to the atrocities committed during the conflict. The study further emphasized that poverty, unemployment, ideological radicalization, and weak institutional support complicate the reintegration process. It also highlighted the limitations of government de-radicalization initiatives, stressing the need for community-based approaches, psychosocial support, vocational training, and inclusive peace-building strategies to ensure sustainable reintegration and prevent recidivism among ex-combatants.

Mohammadi, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Sadeghi, in their work, examine the issues surrounding the return of displaced persons and refugees to post-conflict societies. The authors emphasize that sustainable return depends on factors such as security, access to livelihoods, social acceptance, infrastructure, and institutional support within communities of origin. The study highlights that many returnees face difficulties, including unemployment, social exclusion, insecurity, and inadequate public services, which may lead to secondary migration or failed reintegration [30]. Furthermore, the authors stress the importance of long-term reintegration policies, community participation, and government and international support mechanisms in ensuring stability and sustainability of return processes in post-conflict settings.

Brownell & Basham examine the contributions of local and International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to the reintegration of former child soldiers and ex-combatants in post-war Liberia. The study highlights that reintegration is a long-term and multidimensional process requiring psychosocial counseling, educational support, vocational training, community development, and economic empowerment. The research also emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive interventions, community participation, and the use of communication technologies in service delivery. Brownell and Basham conclude that NGOs play a crucial role in sustaining peace and social rehabilitation, although the effectiveness of reintegration programs requires stronger evaluation mechanisms and continued governmental and international support [31].

Al-Qaradawi, in his work, stated that Islamic scholars have highlighted the importance of tawbah (repentance) and rahmah (mercy) as central to the process of forgiveness and reintegration. According to Al-Qaradawi, Islamic teachings advocate for the restoration of individuals who seek repentance, reinforcing the idea of rehabilitation rather than punishment. Similarly, Islamic social teachings emphasize the communal responsibility of the Ummah to support those in need [32].

Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the effective and sustainable reintegration of children of Boko Haram returnees from an Islamic perspective in Maiduguri, Borno State. The target population comprised Islamic scholars (Ulama), camp officials, and community and traditional leaders, who were accessed through snowball sampling due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Data were collected using three methods: Focus Group Discussions with community members to understand perceptions and attitudes toward reintegration; Key Informant Interviews with Islamic scholars, traditional rulers, and camp officials to explore Islamic principles, needs, challenges, and existing support systems; and document analysis of Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and Islamic scholarship on forgiveness, justice, and child welfare. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework approach of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation, with findings from Islamic texts integrated to ensure theological grounding. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and cultural sensitivity, were strictly observed, while trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description.

Result and Discussion

Foundational Islamic Teachings for Reintegration

Informants consistently emphasized that Islamic teachings on repentance (tawbah) and forgiveness (maghfirah) provide the theological foundation for reintegrating children of returnees. As one Ulama stated: They should be taught the importance of repenting and forgiveness. They should also be taught that once you have repented, Allah will accept your repentance, no matter how great it is.

This theological assurance serves both the children and the community, creating space for acceptance based on divine precedent. Traditional leaders reinforced this perspective by invoking the Prophetic example: The Noble Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) himself signed treaties with former adversaries for the sake of peace, such as the Treaty

of Hudaibiyah, which ultimately restored stability and harmony. This historical example demonstrates that reconciliation is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings.

A critical Islamic legal principle emerged regarding the status of children: Since they are children who are not of legal age, there is no law binding upon them yet. Whatever the circumstances with them, they are not of legal age, even from an Islamic perspective. Hence, they should not be viewed with the crimes of their parents.

This principle (*raf' al-qalam* - lifting of the pen) provides clear Islamic justification for treating these children as innocent victims rather than offenders, regardless of their parents' actions. Informants articulated a restorative conception of justice: For the children, it could be that they were born in the midst of the turbulence, or even that some children were kidnapped and brought. They are also victims of circumstance.

A Structured Islamic Educational Framework

Informants proposed a comprehensive educational framework with sequential components: They should be taught good Islamic Morals. They should be taught literacy by teaching them the alphabet. They should be taught Fiqh, i.e., how to pray and fast. They should be taught Islamic history. They should be exposed to books of (*Akhlaq*) Islamic ethics.

This progression from basic literacy to advanced ethics reflects an understanding that reintegration requires both cognitive and spiritual reorientation. A significant finding was the emphasis on specific theological schools: They should be oriented with Theologies like Ash'ariya's books before they are integrated into society.

This reveals an awareness that theological content matters, with some approaches considered more conducive to peaceful coexistence than others. Informants also recommended narrative-based approaches to moral education: (*Akhlaq*) Islamic ethics lessons should be introduced to them through stories that show regret for bad actions and a need to change.

Strategic and Practical Considerations

A distinctive finding was the recommendation for geographical relocation: according to one of the key informants, it is not wise to integrate such children into the community in which they were known. It is advisable to empower them in business and reintegrated in communities where they were not known. So that their victims may not think of vengeance.

This pragmatic approach acknowledges the reality of community trauma and the potential for conflict, while still honoring the Islamic obligation to care

for the vulnerable. Regarding community engagement: Through the use of trusted professionals engaged by the government to hold persuasive talks with community leaders to convince them that the children are truly repentant. And to remind them (the leaders) that even Allah forgives whenever there is repentance.

Traditional leaders emphasized the bidirectional nature of reintegration: Community members must also be enlightened on how to receive them properly. They should not be victimized, stigmatized, or segregated. Instead, they should be supported in their efforts to rebuild their lives as responsible citizens.

Informants articulated a comprehensive vision of community responsibility: It is compulsory to make provision, such as clinics, to cater to the health needs of these children. Necessary arrangements should also be provided for their feedings three times a day. They should also be provided with adequate clothing (a minimum of three sets) since they are young and cannot fend for themselves.

Protection and Identity Needs

A dominant theme across both Ulama and traditional leader interviews was the need for identity protection: The best way to take the returnee children to Sangaya and Islamiya is to do so without exposing the identity of the children. Let them just be taken to the Sangaya and Islamiya like every other normal child. This will help in eradicating any stigma that may arise.

Traditional leaders echoed this concern: The way the community addresses repentant individuals matters greatly. Referring to them constantly as 'Boko Haram' or 'repentant' may not be pleasant and can hinder their reintegration process.

Regarding children born in captivity and girls who experienced sexual violence: They should be treated with dignity. They should not be violated and should not be forced into marriages. Islam frowns on forcing people to do things unwillingly.

A striking finding was the identification of property rights as a need: The government should ensure that the belongings of such children are handed over to them, as it is their right. Properties like a house and other belongings should be rightfully returned to them.

Psychological and Trauma-Related Needs

Both informant groups acknowledged the depth of psychological wounds: Many of these young men suffer from psychological trauma and deep indoctrination. They require professional counseling from mental health experts as well as spiritual guidance from Islamic scholars.

Traditional leaders noted the dual trauma affecting both returnees and victims: Trauma and Psychological Issues: Both victims and ex-fighters suffer trauma." Ulama advised educators on the need for patience: "Definitely, the orientation of the returnee children differs from the host children, and this may pose a great challenge. To overcome this challenge, teachers need not get bothered by some attitudinal issues of the returnee children. They should rather focus on normalizing the attitude and watch how it automatically gets integrated with others.

Educational Needs and Barriers

Informants recognized that many children have never received formal education: They should be taught literacy by teaching them the alphabet.

This indicates that educational needs begin at the most basic level. There was also concern about educational exclusion: The society should desist from stigmatizing these children so that they will not be isolated, as this could lead to some negative thoughts.

This reflects concern that educational exclusion could lead to re-radicalization, a cycle where stigmatization begets resentment, which begets vulnerability to extremist narratives. Traditional leaders further emphasized: Inclusive education should be prioritized in order to properly address the schooling needs of the children of repentant individuals. Education plays a vital role in shaping their future and ensuring that they become productive members of society.

Economic and Livelihood Challenges

Traditional leaders elaborated: Repentant individuals and their families need to be supported financially so that they can stand on their own feet and become self-reliant. Freedom from economic hardship will reduce the likelihood of returning to their previous activities due to poverty or frustration.

A significant finding was concern about creating resentment through unequal assistance: To avoid further conflict and misunderstanding, the government needs to have a balance in this regard. They should not put all focus on the children of Boko Haram alone. There is a need to have equal training

programmes that will foster economic stability for both the returnees and the host children.

This perspective recognizes that reintegration programmes must consider the broader community context to avoid creating new grievances.

Family and Social Challenges

Traditional leaders identified the need for family tracing: An avenue should be created to reconnect families separated by the insurgency. A similar radio program previously helped individuals locate missing family members affected by Boko Haram activities.

Regarding how to address children's questions about their parents: In the process, it should not be shown to them that their parents were evil doers. Focus should be on teaching them what Allah and His Prophet taught mankind.

This reflects a careful approach to family narratives that avoids demonizing parents while still guiding children toward positive values. Traditional leaders also emphasized: The children of repentant individuals should be treated the same way as the children of victims in the community. They should have equal access to healthcare, education, and all their fundamental rights as children.

Current Support Structures and Limitations

Existing support relies heavily on individual initiative: The support systems that currently exist within Islamic communities for vulnerable or marginalized children and families are through individuals who (willingly or those who are advised and encouraged by Clerics) do that as an act of ibadah.

This informal system, while valuable, is inconsistent and insufficient for the scale of need. A candid assessment from Ulama revealed significant gaps: The Islamic institutions are not tailored towards this. They are not well-equipped to address the psychological, educational, and economic needs of these children. There are no specifically trained personnel to support reintegration within the communities. The returnee children are in dire need of support (particularly financial), but it is lacking. The major constraint is that of space where the returnee children will be kept in Sangaya and Islamiyya to have an effective and conducive learning.

The Role of Mosques and Religious Institutions

Some of the scholars reported that Mosques also play a major role in supporting returnee children and families in terms of spiritual counseling through sermons. Aside from spiritual counseling, the mosque can be central in terms of organizing human thoughts towards donating whatever they can (a pair of shoes, a set of clothes, and other basic needs) for the sake of Allah. However, informants noted untapped potential: Honestly, there are none; even though Minbar (through khutbahs) will be a good avenue for addressing issues of reintegration, reconciliation, and even child protection.

This reveals a significant gap: a potentially powerful platform for shaping community attitudes remains largely unused for this purpose. Traditional leaders confirmed. There are ongoing educational and awareness campaigns encouraging forgiveness, mercy, and reintegration, even though it is not much, and the percentage of convinced people is lower.

Sangaya and Islamiya Schools

Informants recommended discreet integration into Islamic schools. According to some informants, the best way to take the returnee children to Sangaya and Islamiya is to do so without exposing the identity of the children. Some expressed confidence. The Imams in particular have the necessary skills to handle the complex trauma, psychological issues, and ideological rehabilitation that the returnee children may need. This is because of the Islamic knowledge that they have already acquired and possess. However, this confidence was tempered by recognition that specialized training is needed: The government selects teachers from all Sangaya and Islamiyas for this purpose. These trained personnel will be of immense help in reintegrating the returnee children.

Traditional Leadership Structures

Traditional leaders described their mediating role: As traditional leaders, we forward the concerns and complaints of the masses to the appropriate authorities. We serve as a bridge between the government and the people because we are closely connected to both parties.

They also emphasized their role in community dialogue: Community dialogues should be organized where repentant individuals sit with religious scholars and community members to receive proper orientation based on Islamic teachings of peace and brotherhood.

Regarding practical reintegration methods, some of the informants opined that integration methods may include: Community dialogue sessions, Joint

cultural events, Sports and recreational activities, public peace campaigns, and religious teachings emphasizing forgiveness.

Collaboration and Coordination Challenges

Another important issue raised by informants relates to collaboration among stakeholders involved in reintegration activities. A major concern highlighted by several informants is the difference in theological orientations (Akida) among Islamic groups. According to one Ulama: A major challenge encountered is that of differences in theologies (Akida). Akida, among even the Muslim Ummah, is a big challenge that, if not properly checked and managed, can hinder the smoothness of any partnerships.

This observation indicates that theological differences within the Muslim community may create difficulties when different actors attempt to work together on reintegration programmes. If not properly managed, such differences could affect cooperation among scholars, religious institutions, and community actors involved in supporting the children of returnees. However, informants also emphasized that these differences should not prevent collaboration. Instead, tolerance and mutual respect were suggested as practical solutions. One informant explained: Stakeholders should have tolerance for others' Akida. Every sect should bear its Akida in mind and focus on the task of reintegration regardless of whether we are of the same Akida or not.

This perspective suggests that the reintegration process should focus on the shared humanitarian responsibility of protecting children rather than theological differences. By prioritizing the welfare of the children, stakeholders from different Islamic backgrounds can work together more effectively.

Resource Mobilization and Sustainability

Another major challenge identified by informants is the lack of sufficient resources to support reintegration activities. Several participants noted that the needs of returnee children and their families are significant and cannot easily be addressed through existing community support systems. One informant stated: The needs of the returnee children and their families are greater, and there are no existing community resources to cater to these families.

This statement reflects the reality that although Islamic communities promote charitable giving through mechanisms such as Zakah and Sadaqah, these resources are not currently organized in a systematic way to address the reintegration needs of children affected by the insurgency. Despite these limitations, informants emphasized that Islamic scholars (Ulama) could play an important role in mobilizing resources. According to one Ulama: The Ulama can be of immense help in mobilizing resources for sustainable livelihoods through

campaigning and convincing the rich in the society to contribute towards this project. The ulama can convince the rich to see this as an act of worship.

This suggests that religious leaders have the moral authority to encourage wealthy members of the community to support reintegration efforts as part of their religious obligations.

Informants also emphasized that reintegration should not be viewed as a short-term intervention but rather as a long-term process. For sustainability, they recommended continuous public sensitization through religious and media platforms. One informant suggested: Being a long-term process, there is a need to ensure a continuous and periodic reminding structure through bi-weekly sermons (Khutbahs) in mosques.

In addition, radio programmes and social media platforms were mentioned as useful tools for sustaining awareness and promoting community acceptance over time.

Government–Institution Partnerships

Informants consistently emphasized that effective reintegration cannot be achieved by religious institutions alone. Strong collaboration with government structures is necessary in order to provide the level of support required for these children. One informant clearly explained this limitation: Mosques, Islamic schools, and religious organizations cannot give maximum support to returnee children without the full support and backing of the government.

This highlights the need for government involvement in strengthening existing Islamic institutions so that they can effectively support reintegration programmes. Several participants recommended that government agencies should work closely with religious institutions through existing administrative structures. In particular, informants suggested that the Ministry of Religious Affairs could coordinate training programmes for Imams and teachers. As one participant stated: The Government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, should ensure the training and retraining of stakeholders (Imams and teachers) in the best ways to handle and support the reintegration of returnee children within the communities.

Traditional leaders also acknowledged that government programmes already exist to support repentant individuals and their families. These programmes aim to provide social and economic empowerment to help returnees rebuild their lives and reintegrate successfully into society. However, informants emphasized that stronger coordination between government institutions and community structures is still needed to make these initiatives more effective.

Conclusion

This study examined the effective and sustainable reintegration of the children of Boko Haram returnees from an Islamic perspective, drawing on the views of Ulama, traditional leaders, and community representatives in Maiduguri. The findings demonstrate a strong level of agreement among these stakeholders regarding the principles that should guide reintegration efforts. Informants consistently emphasized that children should not be held responsible for the actions of their parents. From both Islamic and moral perspectives, these children are considered innocent victims of circumstances and therefore deserve protection, care, and opportunities to rebuild their lives within society.

A major concern highlighted by participants is the harmful effect of stigmatization. Informants explained that discrimination, labeling, and social exclusion can prevent successful reintegration and may even increase the risk of future radicalization. As a result, community sensitization, identity protection, and respectful treatment of returnee children were identified as essential elements of any reintegration programme. The study also revealed that reintegration initiatives must consider the broader community context. Informants stressed that assisting exclusively the returnee children may create resentment among host communities and undermine social cohesion. Consequently, reintegration programmes should adopt inclusive approaches that benefit both returnees and other vulnerable community members.

Another important finding of the study is the untapped potential of existing Islamic and community structures. Although current support systems are limited, institutions such as mosques, Sangaya and Islamiya schools, traditional leadership structures, and Islamic charitable mechanisms possess significant capacity to contribute to reintegration processes. When properly coordinated and supported, these structures can play a crucial role in providing moral guidance, social acceptance, educational opportunities, and material support to affected children.

In conclusion, the study suggests that sustainable reintegration of the children of Boko Haram returnees requires a holistic framework rooted in Islamic principles and supported by strong collaboration between religious institutions, community leaders, and government agencies. Such an approach should integrate theological guidance, psychosocial support, education, economic empowerment, and continuous community sensitization. Through the combination of these elements, reintegration programmes can address both the immediate needs of affected children and the broader goal of promoting long-term peace, reconciliation, and social stability in conflict-affected communities such as Maiduguri.

Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest that an Islamic reintegration framework must be:

1. Theologically grounded in clear Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings on repentance, forgiveness, and child protection.
2. Practically nuanced to address the complex realities of stigma, community trauma, and security concerns through strategic relocation and identity protection.
3. Structurally supported through government partnership with existing Islamic institutions, including training for Imams and teachers.
4. Sustainably designed with long-term mechanisms including regular sermons, media engagement, and ongoing community sensitization.
5. Equitably implemented to avoid creating resentment through disproportionate focus on returnees, ensuring host communities also benefit from empowerment programmes.

Author Contributions

Ibrahim Abubakar Mustapha and **Muhammad A Ajiri**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Ibrahim Lawan Mustapha** and **Yagana Goma**: Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Investigation. **Abba Kale**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

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