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Armed group opportunism in the face of recent crises: COVID-19 and climate change

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Armed group opportunism in the face of recent crises

COVID-19 and climate change

Siobhan O’Neil*

April 2023

Abstract: Terrorist and other types of armed groups often exploit natural and human-made disasters and emergencies to advance their causes. This paper studies how some armed groups have responded to two recent global emergencies—climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the messaging and actions of the Boko Haram in Nigeria and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) dissident groups in Colombia in response to COVID and climatic shifts. The paper uses assessment methodology to look into unique survey evidence from each country in order to determine the public impact of armed group decision-making and responses to these emergencies. It also considers the potential policy implications of the findings presented herein.

Key words: armed group decision-making, assessment methodology, COVID-19, climate change

JEL classification: D74, Q54, I18

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Note: references in numbered notes, exceptionally

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1 Introduction

Terrorist and other types of armed groups often exploit natural and human-made disasters and emergencies to advance their causes.¹ In some cases, armed groups respond to crises in a way that highlights their legitimacy and capacity or disparages that of the government. In other cases, armed groups seek to take advantage of a state weakened or distracted by a disaster or another emergency to advance their military attacks. Others take advantage of the hardship and chaos that follows disasters and emergencies to recruit and establish a presence. For example, there is evidence that al-Shabaab targets communities devastated by drought for recruitment.² Following the 2004 tsunami that hit Sri Lanka and impacted much of South-East Asia, the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) increased attacks, whipped up anti-government sentiment, seized aid and smuggled weapons into the country disguised as emergency supplies, and recruited orphaned children into the group's ranks.³ In response to the same event, Lashkhar-e Tayyiba (LeT) sent its charitable front to the Maldives under the guise of providing aid to tsunami victims, using the opportunity to establish a presence, recruit, and prepare for what would be the 'first recorded transnational terrorist attack', a bombing that killed 12 people.⁴

Today, humanity faces two major emergencies—climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. In many places, climate change effects are subtle; in others, the shifting climate is heralded by natural disasters and extreme weather events. Hurricanes, floods, mudslides, and heatwaves have left people dead, homeless, without income, and food insecure. The global COVID-19 pandemic has killed millions of people around the world, infected many more, and impacted global trade and human mobility. Around the world, criminal and armed groups—including listed terrorist groups—have responded to both climate change and COVID-19 by trying to instrumentalize the discord, death, and destruction they engender. These in turn can increase violence and conflict, and, in some cases, further degrade the environment and exacerbate climate change.

2 Methodology

This paper examines how several armed and terrorist groups in Nigeria and Colombia are responding to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ Using original data collected as part of the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research's (UNU-CPR) 'Managing Exits from Armed Conflict' (MEAC) project, the paper uses ground-level observations of how armed groups

¹ C. Berrebi and J. Ostwald, 'Exploiting the Chaos: Terrorist Target Choice Following Natural Disasters', *Southern Economic Journal*, 79/4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.4284/0038-4038-2012.268>.

² S. O'Neil, 'Trajectories of Children into and out of Non-State Armed Groups', in S. O'Neil and K. Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: UNU, 2018): 47.

³ D. Brancati, 'Political Aftershocks: The Impact of Earthquakes on Intrastate Conflict', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51/5 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707305234>.

⁴ Berrebi and Ostwald, 'Exploiting the Chaos': 793.

⁵ This paper draws from two other studies produced as part of UNIDIR's 'Managing Exits from Armed Conflict' project. Some of the data and analysis included in the study were previously published by the UN University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), when the project was administered there, in J. Cárdenas, C. Downing, and J. Vélez, 'Climate-Driven Recruitment and Other Conflict Dynamics in Colombia', MEAC Findings Report 8 (New York: United Nations University, 2021) or J. Caus, 'Climate-Driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria', MEAC Findings Report 1 (New York: UNU-CPR, 2021).

are responding—in their communications and their actions—to these dual crises in the two countries. These data were collected as part of a larger effort to understand exits out of armed groups—including Boko Haram and the FARC-EP⁶—and assess interventions to support full and sustainable transitions to civilian life. To this end, the MEAC project surveys and runs focus groups with ex-combatants and individuals formerly associated with armed groups, as well as the communities they return to.

The two sections of this paper that draw on MEAC’s work in Nigeria are based on three surveys and follow-up interviews with several respondents: the first survey was with 2,963 people from the Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga areas of Borno State, in the North East of Nigeria conducted between December 2020 and March 2021 by UNU-CPR and one of its implementing partners in Nigeria—Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA).⁷ In addition, the section on the effects of climate change in Nigeria benefits from a survey of 275 community leaders (e.g., Bulamas, Lawans, camp leaders/chairmen, district/ward heads, and women’s leaders) predominately in the MMC and Konduga areas that took place between September 2020 and June 2021. Data are also drawn from an additional ongoing survey in Nigeria, which to date includes 1,270 respondents from the North East of Nigeria, including hundreds of ex-combatants and former armed group associates. The two sections of the paper that examine armed groups’ responses to climate change and COVID-19 in Colombia are based on a phone survey with 2,460 people from 11 municipalities across the country,⁸ conducted from April to May 2021.⁹

2.1 Organization

The paper begins with an overview of how armed groups are responding to climate change followed by a section that examines the particular reactions to the pandemic of armed groups in Nigeria and Colombia. A section that compares armed groups’ responses to crises in Nigeria and Colombia follows. The paper ends with a consideration of the policy implications of the findings presented herein and looks at how viewing climate, pandemic, and security challenges through a more expansive lens—recognizing the interplay between them—may allow governments to craft more-effective policy responses.

3 Climate change

Over the last decade, there has been increasing attention on the nexus between climate change, insecurity, and conflict. This realization was on display at COP26, when NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg made clear that climate change must be at the heart of NATO’s agenda because ‘climate change is a crisis multiplier, climate change is making our world more dangerous’.¹⁰ According to adelphi—a Berlin-based think tank—climate change is a threat multiplier not because

⁶ The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army: in Spanish, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo.

⁷ UNU-CPR’s local partner on the Nigeria study is Mobukar Consultancy.

⁸ The municipalities surveyed were Mutatá, Antioquia; Caldono, Cauca; San José del Guaviare, Guaviare; Guapi, Cauca; La Uribe, Meta; Puerto Asís, Putumayo; Villavicencio, Meta; Bogotá, Cundinamarca; Cali, Valle del Cauca; San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá; and Apartadó, Antioquia.

⁹ UNU-CPR’s local partner on the Colombia study is Fundación Conflict Responses.

¹⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), ‘[NATO Secretary General Attends United Nations “COP26” Climate Change Conference](#)’, 2 November 2021.

it ‘automatically lead[s] to more fragility and conflict. Rather, climate change acts as a threat multiplier [because it] interacts and converges with other existing risks and pressures in a given context and can increase the likelihood of fragility or violent conflict. States experiencing fragility or conflict are particularly affected.’¹¹

One of the reasons climate change serves as a threat multiplier is because it offers armed groups an opportunity to recruit, elevate their status, and generate discord. In Nigeria and Colombia—two states deeply impacted by climate change—armed groups exacerbate environmental degradation, which contributes to climate change, and take advantage of its impacts (e.g., livelihood struggles for those who live off the land).

There has been significant support for the threat multiplier framing, given the complex interaction with other risk factors (e.g., socioeconomic dynamics) and the lack of direct evidential links between climate change and conflict. With new data in Nigeria and Colombia, however, we can now go a step further to examine the causal relationship between the two and begin to address the question—does climate change drive violent conflict?

For the first time, original evidence from both Nigeria and Colombia demonstrates that indeed it does. In Nigeria, there are direct observations of people entering armed groups—both Boko Haram and volunteer security outfits like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which has been battling Boko Haram—because of climate-change-related livelihood struggles. In Colombia, a similar pattern arises. There, armed group activities that degrade the environment serve as an additional push or pull into dissident groups and exacerbate climate change effects that are already influencing armed group recruitment there.

3.1 Nigeria

Currently, Nigeria is a climate change ‘hot spot’—experiencing the full range of climate change impacts across the country, including extreme heat, erratic rainfall, and more droughts, floods, and storms. In Nigeria, 41 million people—a fifth of the population—have high exposure to climate risks.¹² In the North East—the heart of the Boko Haram insurgency—the population faces the double burden of climate risks and extremely high levels of conflict violence.

In and around Maiduguri, climatic shifts are experienced by much of the population. In a survey of 275 community leaders (e.g., Bulamas, camp leaders) in the MMC and Konduga areas of Borno State conducted in November and December 2020, the majority of respondents (79 per cent) said they had experienced climatic shifts in their lifetime, such as changes in the rainy season, dry season, or Harmattan season compared with when they were younger. Two impacts of climate change in the North East have been seized upon by armed groups in the region to advance their cause: livelihood difficulties for those who make their living off the land and, relatedly, the shift in pastoralist migratory patterns.

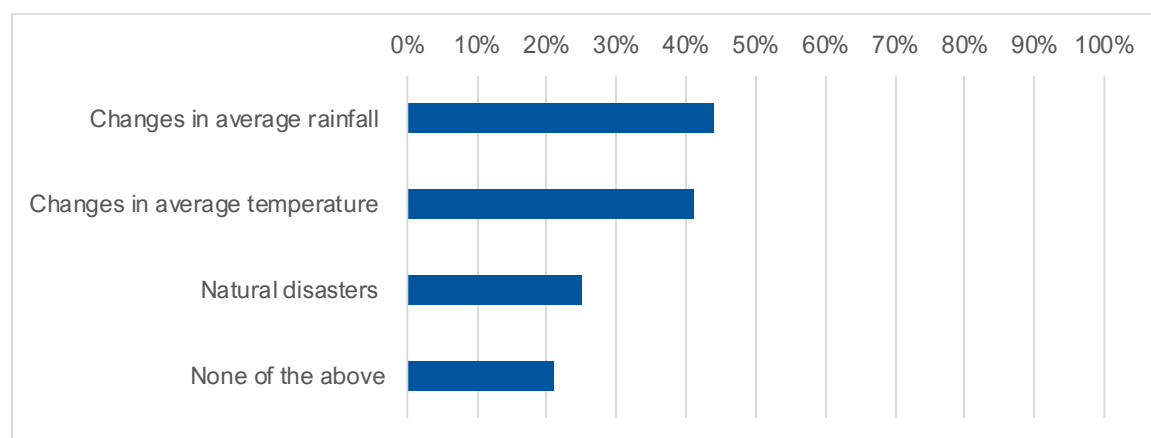
In the Sahel—and in Nigeria specifically—the focus on how climatic shifts lead to heightened conflict risk has largely revolved around the impact a changing climate has on agricultural

¹¹ K. Nett and L. Rüttinger, *Insurgency, Terrorism and Organised Crime in a Warming Climate: Analysing the Links between Climate Change and Non-State Armed Groups* (Berlin: adelphi, 2016).

¹² A. Moran, C. Raleigh, J.W. Busby, C. Wight, and Management Systems International, *Fragility and Climate Risks in Nigeria* (Washington DC: US Agency for International Development/USAID, 2019).

livelihoods.¹³ Rising temperatures and more-variable rainfall patterns increase both the risk of extreme weather events and floods *and* the risk of more-frequent and prolonged droughts. These factors (among others) aggravate the dynamics of desertification and water availability,¹⁴ posing increasing challenges for agricultural livelihoods. Indeed, 87 per cent¹⁵ of community leaders said they knew of people who had experienced difficulties making a living from farming, herding, or fishing because of changes in average temperatures and rainfall or natural disasters (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: ‘Before the conflict came to your community, from what you have heard, did people experience difficulties making a living from farming, herding, or fishing because of any of the following? Please select all that apply.’



Note: when ‘yes’ responses are presented alone in data visualizations, the percentages are calculated after removing non-responses so as not to distort the size of the effects; non-response rates were low for all the questions featured herein.

Source: reproduced with permission from Caus, ‘Climate-Driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria’: 6.

There have long been concerns that climate-induced livelihood losses will make already vulnerable populations more susceptible to recruitment by Boko Haram and other groups that offer economic alternatives.¹⁶ Especially in areas that are highly dependent on subsistence farming, less arable land, less-predictable water availability, longer and more frequent droughts, and crop destruction from floods and storms have driven communities into precarious situations without many alternatives. The MEAC data suggest that climate-related livelihood challenges are having a direct impact on recruitment into the conflict in the North East. A striking 50 per cent of respondents reporting

¹³ O. Brown, *Climate-Fragility Risk Brief: North Africa and Sahel* (Berlin: Climate Security Expert Network, 2019); J. Caus, ‘Nigeria Case Study’, in A. Day and J. Caus, *Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change* (New York: United Nations University, 2020).

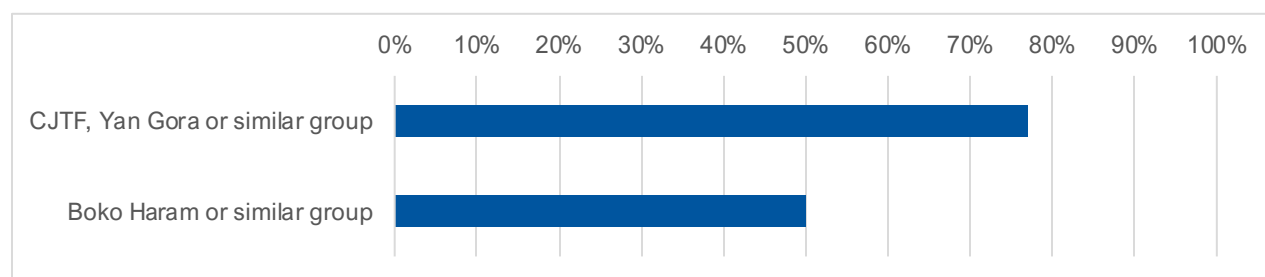
¹⁴ Climate change alone is not responsible for the loss of arable land and changes in hydrology in the region. Some studies have suggested that population growth, urbanization, and spreading agricultural production are additional stressors on the Nigerian ecosystem, while climate change serves as exacerbating factor. See Day and Caus, *Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change* (New York: United Nations University, 2020); USAID, ‘Climate Risk Profile: Nigeria’ (Washington DC: USAID, 2019).

¹⁵ The percentage of community leaders not replying ‘None of the above’.

¹⁶ There are legacies of marginalization and socioeconomic grievances in the region. The conflict has exacerbated them, along with high unemployment and poverty levels. There are indications that climate change is compounding these risks. See, for example, Brown, *Climate-Fragility Risk Brief: North Africa and Sahel*; J. McQuaid, D. Jackson, C. Thüringer, L. Hanson, and M. Dubois King, *The Role of Water Stress in Instability and Conflict* (Arlington: Centre for Naval Analyses/CNA, 2017); J. Scheffran, P.M. Link, and J. Schilling, ‘Climate and Conflict in Africa’, in H. von Storch (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.557>

climate-related agricultural difficulties knew of individuals who had joined Boko Haram or a similar group because of such difficulties; and even more (77 per cent) knew of climate-related recruitment into the CJTF, Yan Gora, or other self-defence forces (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: ‘Do you know of anyone who joined Boko Haram or another armed group like this because of these difficulties?’/‘Do you know of anyone who joined the CJTF, Yan Gora, or another group like this because of these difficulties?’



Source: reproduced with permission from Caus, ‘Climate-Driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria’: 6.

Subsequent surveys reinforce the connection between climate-related livelihood challenges and armed group recruitment in the region. A phone survey of 3,259 respondents across the Nigerian states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe conducted from September to December 2022 confirmed that climate change impacts are widely experienced. The survey found that of those respondents who knew people who had experienced livelihood challenges due to climate change, 15 per cent knew someone who had joined Boko Haram as a result. Another phone survey in the country’s North East (1,270 respondents to date, including a mix of ex-combatants and non-affiliated respondents), found that it is not just the public’s perception that people are joining Boko Haram due to livelihood challenges brought on by climate change: ex-combatants themselves often highlight these drivers of recruitment. Indeed, when former associates themselves are asked about the impact of climate change on their trajectory into the group, 11 per cent of the 341 Boko Haram, JAS (Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah), or ISWAP (Islamic State of West Africa) affiliates who acknowledged climate change livelihood challenges before they were recruited said these were among the reasons why they became involved with the group.¹⁷

Follow-up interviews conducted in November 2022, initiated to understand how ex-combatants’ climate-related livelihood challenges had led to their involvement with Boko Haram, uncovered several different pathways. One former Boko Haram associate described how his crops had spoiled due to lack of rainfall and he was going hungry. Another described how sandstorms had worsened in his region to the point where his house’s roof had been blown off and he was displaced. When Boko Haram came to their area, they joined the group because they felt they had no other options. Another respondent described another pathway:

My farm was affected by flooding. Before the insurgency, I was farming in the hilly region [along the Nigeria/Cameroon border]. When Boko Haram members occupied my community, they built their base on the mountain and that stopped me from having access to farmland in good locations. Heavy rainfall and flooding made it impossible to farm on the lands available to us. To be able to access the remaining good farmlands, one had to join Boko Haram.

These findings demonstrate a direct and specific link between climate change and the ability of Boko Haram and other groups to recruit and gain a foothold in hard-hit agricultural communities

¹⁷ The percentage may shift as more people are interviewed as part of this follow-up survey.

without many employment alternatives. Yet there is another related but less direct way in which Boko Haram and other armed groups have been able to exploit climate change risks in the region.

As a result of climate change effects—particularly desertification—pastoralists have altered their migratory patterns, moving into areas traditionally dominated by farming communities. This shift has fuelled resource competition between these two groups and led to dramatic levels of violence across Nigeria in recent years. The conflict has been further exacerbated by government response, or the lack thereof. The enactment of anti-grazing laws in several states and the 2019 National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) have led to the further altered herding patterns, driving herders into new areas, generated grievances among pastoralists, and, ultimately, inadvertently fuelled intercommunal violence.¹⁸ Governmental failures to respond to community warnings about the mounting risk of violence or bring to justice those responsible for attacks has created a sense of abandonment and impunity for those involved in violent raids.¹⁹

The mapping of ethnic identities on the farmer–herder fault-lines has furthered grievances and created opportunities for armed groups to exploit. Herders are predominantly Fulani—a Muslim ethnic group spread out across West Africa and the largest nomadic pastoral group in the world—whereas farmers tend to be Christian. Terrorist groups across the Sahel have tried to capitalize on the tensions between farmers and herders—and particularly with the Fulani. In Mali, for example, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have exploited tensions between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers²⁰ and Tuaregs along the Niger border, respectively, to swell their ranks. The Fulani have been accused by numerous governments of being ‘jihadist’, which is part of a larger ‘hostile political discourse about Fulani pastoralists that echoes across West and Central Africa’.²¹ In Mali, research by UNU has found cases where being part of an ethnic group labelled as jihadist actually led some young people to join self-avowed jihadist groups because the security forces would stigmatize them and respond as if they were indeed part of these groups even if they were not associated in any way.²² Moreover, as farmer and herder communities seek to protect themselves against each other, they often either raise their own militias or align with outside armed groups, including several known terrorist groups.²³ This is happening not only across the Sahel more broadly but also in Northern Nigeria.

It has been argued either that the rise of farmer–herder violence in Nigeria has coincided with a decline in traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, or that the number and extent of such conflicts—exacerbated by climate change and government policy—has overwhelmed existing dispute resolution capacity.²⁴ It is not clear if armed groups have stepped into a capacity void, offering alternative means for ‘justice’ in intercommunal disputes, or if the potential mediated solutions are less feasible given the dynamics or level of the conflict. It is quite possible both

¹⁸ ICG, ‘Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer–Herder Violence’, Crisis Group Africa Report 262 (Brussels: International Crisis Group/ICG: 26 July 2018).

¹⁹ ICG, ‘Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer–Herder Violence’.

²⁰ P. Le Roux, ‘Confronting Central Mali’s Extremist Threat’, 22 February 2019.

²¹ L. Brottem, ‘The Growing Complexity of Farmer–Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa’, Africa Security Brief 39 (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies: July 2021): 5.

²² O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*: 160.

²³ O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*: 160.

²⁴ See, for example, ICG, ‘Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer–Herder Violence’ or U.J. Ilo, I. Jonathan-Ichaver, and Y. Adamolekun, ‘The Deadliest Conflict You’ve Never Heard Of: Nigeria’s Cattle Herders and Farmers Wage a Resource War’, *Foreign Affairs*, 23 January 2019.

factors are at play. With regard to the former, it is important to highlight that armed groups across the Sahel have provided various types of services—from security to social services and dispute resolution—and in some cases have worked to ensure no formal governance structures are supported, in order to consolidate ties with and support from local communities.²⁵ To the second point, indeed, there are indications that the level of violence is overwhelming. In just the first six months of 2018, when farmer–herder conflict escalated, the resulting violence led to 1,300 deaths and the displacement of 300,000 people—a level of violence six times deadlier than the insurgency in the North East.²⁶

Boko Haram and other armed groups (including other listed terrorist groups) have taken advantage of farmer–herder tensions in the North West to build alliances with and mobilize new recruits.²⁷ With these efforts, there is growing concern that the whole region might become a ‘land bridge’, linking insurgents in the North East of Nigeria with armed groups in western Niger, a development that could further destabilize the whole Sahel region.²⁸

3.2 Colombia

Colombia, with its biodiversity and susceptibility to meteorologic events (e.g., the El Niño Southern Oscillation), is highly vulnerable to climatic shifts.²⁹ Already, rising temperatures and sea levels, along with flooding and other extreme weather events, are impacting the everyday lives of Colombians, and they will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future.³⁰ The effects of climate change in Colombia are deeply concerning in and of themselves, but they are also damaging because of the way they exacerbate dynamics that led to—or undermine the resolution of—armed conflict in the country.³¹ In addition, environmental degradation—including by armed groups operating in Colombia—exacerbates climate change effects in the country and undermines the full implementation of the peace agreement.³²

²⁵ After finding evidence of jihadist governance across the region, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) has launched a five-year research project to examine the nuances of rebel governance in the Sahel. See K.M. Osland, ‘Jihadist Governance in the Sahel (JIGOV-Sahel)’. In Mali, for example, armed groups provide dispute resolution, security, and resource management. In addition, some use informants outside around a formal tribunal in Mopti to intimidate people from utilizing it; see A.-E. Ursu, *Under the Gun: Resource Conflicts and Embattled Traditional Authorities in Central Mali* (The Hague: Conflict Research Unit (CRU), Clingendael Institute, April 2018): 34.

²⁶ ICG, ‘Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer–Herder Violence’.

²⁷ ICG, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem’, Africa Report 288 (Brussels: ICG, 18 May 2020).

²⁸ ICG, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West’.

²⁹ See, for example, M. Cresso, N. Clerici, A. Sanchez, and F. Jaramillo, ‘Future Climate Change Renders Unsuitable Conditions for Paramo Ecosystems in Colombia’ *Sustainability*, 12/20 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208373>.

³⁰ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), ‘Regional Fact Sheet: Central and South America’, Sixth Assessment Report (Geneva: IPCC, 2021).

³¹ Studies have found that paramilitary violence in Colombia generated large outflows of people to secure areas for growing illegal crops, exploit mineral resources, and engage in extensive agriculture. See L. Fergusson, D. Romero, and J.F. Vargas, ‘The Environmental Impact of Civil Conflict: The Deforestation Effect of Paramilitary Expansion in Colombia’, CEDE document 36 (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios sobre Desarrollo Económico/CEDE, 2014).

³² See M. Prem, S. Saavedra, and J.F. Vargas, ‘End-of-Conflict Deforestation: Evidence from Colombia’s Peace Agreement’, *World Development*, 129 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.557>, and T. Krause, ‘Reducing Deforestation in Colombia while Building Peace and Pursuing Business as Usual Extractivism?’ *Journal of Political Ecology*, 27/1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23186>.

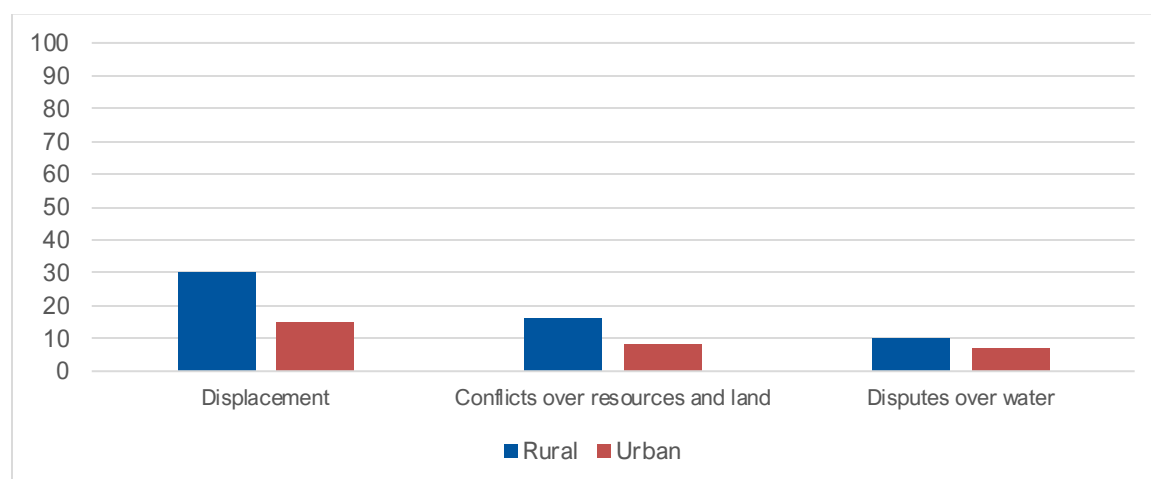
Climate change in Colombia

Climate change directly impacts—and threatens—the lives and livelihoods of Colombians across the country, but also does so indirectly, by undermining the implementation of the peace agreement and stability in the country. Moreover, the armed groups that have continued to operate since, or have emerged in the wake of, the peace agreement often engage in activities that degrade the environment. These activities can (1) contribute to climate change, (2) push new recruits into these organizations, as the land can no longer support their agricultural livelihoods, (3) pull in new recruits who are drawn to the money-making possibilities these groups offer through mining, land clearing, etc., and (4) facilitate narcotics cultivation and transport. In turn, the impacts of environmental degradation by these groups have serious implications for the implementation of the peace agreement in Colombia and the continued ability of armed groups—from the decades-old ELN (National Liberation Army; in Spanish, Ejército de Liberación Nacional) to the new and emerging FARC dissident groups—to operate.

Today, climate change is widely observed across Colombia. MEAC survey data from 11 different communities across the country show that the overwhelming majority of respondents (86 per cent) reported experiencing changes in rainfall, temperature, or extreme weather events (e.g., floods) during their lifetimes. This is true of both urbanites and those living in rural areas.

Climatic shifts have put Colombians in physical danger and—in many cases—have impacted their ability to remain on the land on which they reside, work, and access resources. Indeed, the data show that across all 11 municipalities, sizeable numbers of respondents have experienced displacement, conflicts over resources and land, and disputes over water—all as a result of climate change. As expected, rural communities—which are more reliant on land and other natural resources for their livelihoods and historically vulnerable to local conflicts and displacement—reported higher levels of impact than urban communities (see Figure 3).

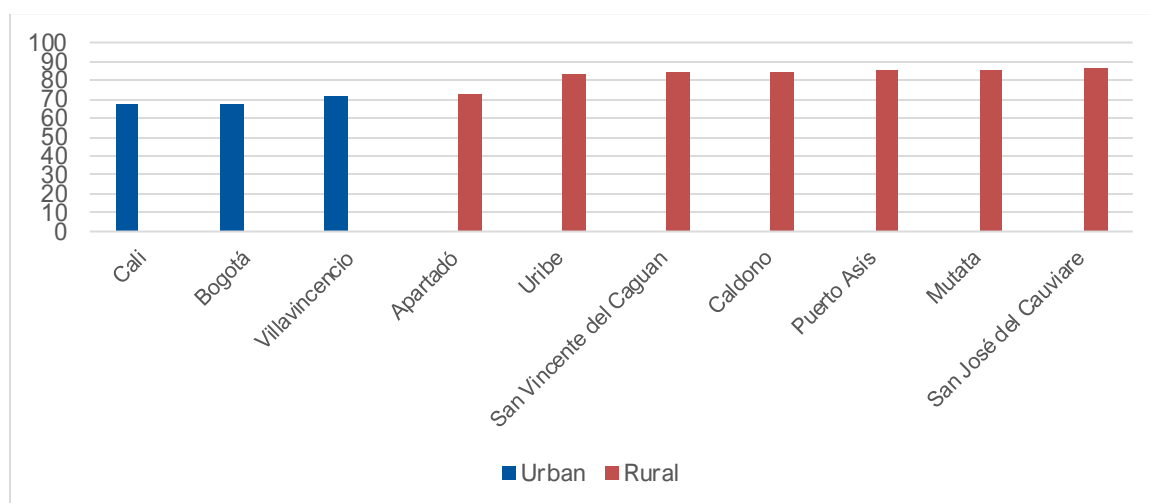
Figure 3: ‘Has your community experienced any of the following because of changes in rainfall and temperature?’



Source: reproduced with permission from Cárdenas et al., ‘Climate-Driven Recruitment and Other Conflict Dynamics in Colombia’: 7.

In Colombia, climate change appears to be significantly impacting livelihoods. The majority of survey respondents across the country knew of people who had experienced difficulties earning a livelihood as a result of climate change effects: 67–89 per cent depending on the municipality. Urban municipalities hovered in the high sixties or low seventies, whereas most rural municipalities were in the mid-eighties. The higher response rates in rural areas reflects the fact that far more people earn a living from agriculture, farming, or fishing there than in urban areas (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: 'In your lifetime, do you know anyone who experienced difficulties making a living from farming, herding, or fishing because of these [climate] changes?'



Source: reproduced with permission from Cárdenas et al., 'Climate-Driven Recruitment and Other Conflict Dynamics in Colombia': 6.

Environmental degradation in Colombia

Some of the same factors that make Colombia vulnerable to climate change (i.e., biodiversity), render the country attractive for economic activities that lead to degradation of the environment, especially deforestation, mining, and oil drilling. Among these human activities, deforestation is perhaps the longest-standing and the most damaging and is carried out by both legal and illegal actors. Moreover, many of these activities are intertwined with the last 50-plus years of conflict in the country.

Human-driven environmental degradation appears to be on the rise, and to be impacting the lives of many Colombians. A sizeable number of survey respondents reported that human-induced environmental degradation had changed in frequency or severity over their lifetime, confirming increases in deforestation (29 per cent), mining (15 per cent), and drilling or extraction (11 per cent). As expected, these activities were reported more frequently in rural contexts.³³

Environmental degradation is important not only because it spurs climate change and renders populations further vulnerable to its effects, but because it is directly intertwined with important conflict dynamics. Since the peace agreement, deforestation has increased in intensity due to several developments. First, when FARC-EP laid down its weapons and withdrew from the areas it had historically held, affordable land in densely wooded areas became accessible and available, which led to people purchasing the land for its logging. Second, several active armed groups engage in logging for profit or in land clearing to facilitate cattle farming or the cultivation of illegal crops.

³³ The effects of climate change and environmental degradation were not experienced equally across all populations even within a single geographic location. For example, there were differences in reported levels of these impacts among different ethnic groups. Indigenous people reported the highest levels of conflict over resources and disputes over water as a result of climate change. Afro-Colombians who answered the question reported the highest levels of displacement as a result of climate change (35 per cent). And within these groups, men and women reported significant differences in displacement as a result of climate change: 43 per cent of Afro-Colombian women who answered the question reported this impact, compared with 28 per cent of Afro-Colombian men. This gender differential may be due to women's more tenuous land-holding, which makes them more vulnerable to land-grabbing and forced displacement.

Third, some FARC dissident groups are incentivizing deforestation in certain rural areas in order to allow them to open new corridors for the transport of illegal goods.³⁴

Active armed groups in Colombia also operate in informal extractive economies such as illegal mining. These activities degrade the land, making it difficult for surrounding populations to generate their livelihoods from agriculture. In addition, such activities can damage shared resources—particularly water—sparking competition and conflict over them.³⁵ The MEAC survey data reinforce the connection: municipalities where armed groups are active were more likely to report higher levels of conflict over resources and land. In Caldon, San José del Guaviare, San Vicente del Caguán, and Mutatá, twice as many respondents reported such conflicts as in urban centres such as Bogotá, Cali, and Villavicencio (17–21 per cent vs 8–10 per cent of respondents respectively). As with climate change, the effects of human-induced environmental degradation are not evenly distributed across segments of the population, with evidence that Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are more impacted, and women are more likely to be impacted than men.

Armed groups themselves often seek to control natural resources as way to generate income and create leverage with surrounding communities. There are reports, for example, of armed groups trying to control the rivers in Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities that serve as strategic transport corridors towards the coasts, which impacts their livelihoods and access to food and water.³⁶ Maintaining control over resources could help elevate (and fund) the spoiler dissident groups that have continued to operate, or have emerged, since the peace agreement was signed in 2016—a problematic development for the latter’s implementation and security in the country.

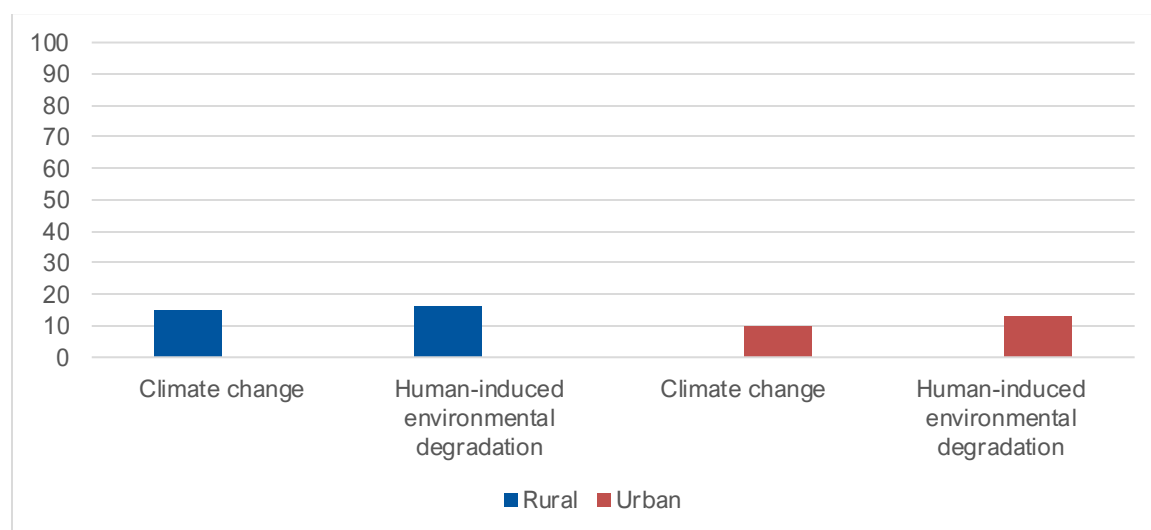
As in Nigeria, the data in Colombia suggest a link between climate change and human-induced environmental degradation and recruitment into armed groups. As indicated in Figure 5, of those who reported experiencing climate change across municipalities, 13 per cent said they knew of people who had joined armed groups because of difficulties earning a livelihood due to climate change. As expected, rates were higher in rural areas, and particularly in places where dissident armed groups are most prevalent (e.g., 19 per cent in Guapi). In addition, across municipalities, 15 per cent of respondents who reported changes in deforestation, mining, and oil drilling also reported knowing people who had joined armed groups due to difficulties associated with these activities. Again, rural areas reported higher levels of recruitment linked to this human-induced environmental degradation, with reported levels as high as 28 per cent in Apartadó. In Apartadó—as well as in San Vicente del Caguán—deforestation serves as one of the main sources of financing for dissident groups and allows them to offer higher salaries to draw in local recruits.

³⁴ J. Vélez, ‘La trocha que sirve de corredor para la disidencia de Gentil Duarte’, *La Silla Vacía*, 25 March 2019.

³⁵ Interestingly, disputes over water due to human-induced environmental degradation were reported at higher levels in urban contexts. In Colombia, there have been protests in cities over access to water after systems could not keep pace with population growth and related pressure on urban water systems as supplies dwindle.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘Colombia: Armed Groups Oppress Riverside Communities’, 7 June 2017.

Figure 5: ‘Do you know anyone who joined an armed group due to economic difficulties caused by these changes in rainfall or temperature/economic difficulties caused by these changes in deforestation, mining, and oil drilling?’



Source: reproduced with permission from Cárdenas et al., ‘Climate-Driven Recruitment and Other Conflict Dynamics in Colombia’: 9.

There were some small indications in the data that today’s FARC dissident groups manage natural resources differently than the former FARC-EP guerrilla group. When it was still active, the FARC-EP had strict environmental management guidance that prevented degradative activities in some parts of the country. The dissident groups active today, however, appear to have eschewed such restraints in an effort to maximize financing from activities like deforestation and mining. Such a shift could also be the result of the different goals and relationships with local populations that dissident groups have in comparison with the FARC-EP.

In Colombia, the push and pull of new recruits into armed groups due to human-induced environmental degradation is unlikely to cease until degradation activities are stopped. It is unlikely that a narrowly focused approach to these activities—one that ignores current armed group activity—will be successful in tackling the issue. Successfully addressing the effects of climate change and environmental degradation will be important for the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC-EP. As long as environmental exploitation continues to fund dissident groups and climate- and degradation-related recruitment fills their ranks, it will be hard to bring peace to all of Colombia.

4 The COVID-19 pandemic

Within three months of an outbreak of a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2 virus) in China in December 2019, the virus had spread around the world and was classified as a pandemic.³⁷ The highly contagious respiratory virus—known as COVID-19—is transmitted from person to person by breathing aerosolized droplets shared by an infected person. For most people the virus presents like other upper respiratory diseases, but for a small percentage, symptoms are so severe they require hospitalization and can cause death. These severe cases were so numerous that they overwhelmed medical infrastructure around the world, causing governments to impose restrictions, close schools, and institute lockdowns to try to curb the spread of the virus. As of

³⁷ WHO, ‘WHO Director-General’s Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19—11 March 2020’.

early April 2023, there had been more than 762 million cases and more than 6.89 million deaths as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸ COVID-19 restrictions—coupled with fear about the virus—have had a huge impact on human mobility, education, the economy, and wellbeing.

COVID-19, like climate change, represents a collective-action problem. In an interconnected world, no one country can defeat—or at least effectively control—the virus, without the collaboration of other states, the public, and key partners. In March 2020, the UN secretary-general called on all warring parties around the world to silence their guns and ‘focus on the true fight of our lives’—combatting the pandemic.³⁹ In some cases, the virus did mollify violence,⁴⁰ but in many others the chaos and competition it engendered only fuelled more conflict.

In many places, the outbreak of the pandemic provided armed groups and other non-state actors challenging the state (or the state system) with an opportunity. Armed and criminal groups around the world sought to take advantage of the pandemic to expand their critique of governments, demonstrate their leadership, grow support, and swell their ranks.⁴¹ For example, the Taliban moved to undermine the credibility of the Afghan government by promoting its own ability to lead the public health response and accepting the COVID-19 vaccine, showcasing its public information campaign and touting door-to-door sanitizer distribution and temperature checks.⁴² Los Viagras and other criminal groups in Mexico provided essential services during pandemic lockdowns ‘to build up political capital’ with local populations.⁴³ In the US, white supremacists urged their followers to weaponize the virus against their enemies and used the pandemic to promote antisemitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric.⁴⁴

The response of two armed groups to COVID-19—and the public’s reaction—were captured by MEAC surveys rolled out in Nigeria and Colombia during the pandemic.

The surveys in both countries asked questions about government and armed group messaging and actions in response to COVID-19, as well as respondent perceptions of them and public health preferences. What is interesting in comparing these two sets of data is the difference in how armed groups responded to the pandemic in each place. While different in their messaging and actions, the ultimate goal of the groups in question—Boko Haram in Nigeria and FARC dissidents and

³⁸ WHO, ‘Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard’, 24 November 2021.

³⁹ UN, ‘UN Secretary-General Calls for Global Ceasefire to Focus on Ending the COVID-19 Pandemic’, 23 March 2020.

⁴⁰ There is mixed evidence about the early impact of COVID-19 on armed conflict. For example, examining evidence from nine countries (Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Colombia, Thailand, India, and Yemen) from the first six months of 2020, Tobias Ide found that while four states had experienced temporary declines in armed conflict, five other states experienced increased levels. In both cases, the response of armed groups and government appears to have been strategic—either when refraining from violence to ‘account for impeded logistics and to increase their popular support’ or when accelerating military actions to ‘exploit either state weakness or a lack of (international) attention due to the COVID-19 pandemic’; T. Ide, ‘COVID-19 and Armed Conflict’, *World Development*, 140 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105355>.

⁴¹ S. O’Neil and K. Van Broeckhoven, ‘Opinion: With Armed Groups on the Rise, Youth Engagement Is More Important Than Ever’, Inter Press Service (IPS), 7 October 2020.

⁴² A. Jackson, ‘For the Taliban, the Pandemic Is a Ladder’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 May 2020.

⁴³ Quoting V. Felbab-Brown in F. Ernst, ‘Mexican Criminal Groups See Covid-19 Crisis as Opportunity to Gain More Power’, *Guardian*, 20 April 2020.

⁴⁴ A. Folley, ‘FBI Warns White Supremacists Encouraging Members to Spread Coronavirus to Law Enforcement, Jews: Report’, *The Hill*, 22 March 2022.

other armed groups in Colombia—was to take advantage of the pandemic to strengthen their organizations and their legitimacy, particularly vis-à-vis the government.

4.1 Nigeria

Early in the pandemic, Boko Haram factions conducted two of the two deadliest attacks against military forces in the group's history.⁴⁵ Soon after, Abubakar Shekau—the then leader of the JAS faction of Boko Haram⁴⁶—issued an audio recording that characterized the international pandemic response as a war on Islam, while suggesting that his followers were immune to the virus.⁴⁷ Shekau appears to have viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to critique the government and attract recruits. The audio tape—released in April 2020—goes on to declare that the COVID-19 pandemic is a form of punishment from God.⁴⁸ Shekau calls for a return to Allah and strict observance of congregational prayers in order to protect oneself from the virus. This call for communal prayer was in clear contradiction to the social distancing requirements then put in place by the government in its effort to curb the spread of COVID-19. While Shekau offered a critique of the government's public health restrictions, his views on the pandemic did not lend themselves to the group demonstrating its own public health capacity as other armed actors tried to do (e.g., the Taliban). JAS's rival faction, ISWAP, also known as the Al-Barnawi faction, was largely quiet on the pandemic, but its actions, and publications from its parent organization, ISIS,⁴⁹ suggest that it viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to launch more attacks and expand its activities as government resources were diverted to controlling COVID-19's spread. It did not, however, appear to take advantage of the crisis to demonstrate its capacity for governance.⁵⁰

Public health context

The JAS faction's messaging around the coronavirus reflects and plays into a pattern of conspiratorial thinking and widespread scepticism about the ostensibly sinister foreign origins of COVID-19 that are common in Nigeria and beyond.⁵¹ In Nigeria, despite long-running vaccination campaigns that have resulted in relatively high vaccine awareness and acceptance—even in remote areas—there has also been a history of unrelated medical controversies and misinformation campaigns around vaccines that have given opportunistic actors a foothold to undermine

⁴⁵ A.-B. Jalloh, 'Increased Terror Attacks in Africa Amid Coronavirus Pandemic', Deutsche Welle (DW), 9 April 2020.

⁴⁶ In this report series, the authors will refer to two factions that are both currently known as 'Boko Haram' in and around Maiduguri. When relevant, findings will distinguish between the faction led by Shekau (also known as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah or JAS), and the rival faction led by al-Barnawi (also known as the Islamic State of West Africa or ISWAP). Shekau's recently reported death—if confirmed—could impact the relationship between the two factions and how they are perceived and referred to locally. See Reuters, 'ISWAP Militant Group Says Nigeria's Boko Haram Leader Is Dead', 7 June 2021.

⁴⁷ J. Campbell, 'Boko Haram's Shekau Labels Anti-COVID-19 Measures an Attack on Islam in Nigeria', Council on Foreign Relations blog, 17 April 2020.

⁴⁸ Y. Anka, 'Abubakar Shekau Mocks World Leaders and Derides Social Distancing in New Audio Message', HumAngle, 15 April 2020.

⁴⁹ For example, a piece in ISIS's weekly newsletter *al-Naba*—released shortly after Shekau's audiotape—described the pandemic as 'an opportunity for the group ... the virus and subsequent economic downturn would divert government attention, weaken capacity and increase fragility. This, it said, is an opening to step up efforts and expand activities'. A. Bulama Bukarti, 'How Is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 20 May 2020.

⁵⁰ Bulama Bukarti, 'How Is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?'

⁵¹ H. Hoechner, 'In Northern Nigeria, Distrust Jeopardises the Response to Coronavirus', The Conversation, 15 April 2020.

international public health measures in the North East of Nigeria. In the 1990s, there were controversies around a clinical trial conducted in Nigeria by pharmaceutical company Pfizer that eventually ended in a suit and an out-of-court settlement. World Health Organization (WHO) and World Health Assembly campaigns to eradicate polio were marred in Northern Nigeria when some Islamic preachers and political leaders, spurred by anti-vaccine activists from Kano State, declared their opposition to the eradication campaign and boycotted the distribution of vaccines in five states of Northern Nigeria.⁵² The boycott was fuelled by rumours that the vaccine was an American conspiracy to spread HIV and cause infertility in Muslim girls. In addition, local politicians and leaders of the federal government fuelled rumours to further their socio-political and religious interests,⁵³ and state officials used polio vaccines as a bargaining chip to press for more federal resources.⁵⁴ All of this took place in the context of pervasive poverty that had impacted education levels and suppressed information access, which made it harder to combat rumours. These previous experiences shaped diverse stakeholders' responses to the COVID-19 virus and the vaccine roll-out.

Despite the investments made by the WHO and its partners to build a fair, equitable, and trusted vaccine distribution infrastructure in the country, the historical misinformation and exploitation of vaccine campaigns—coupled with the current humanitarian and security crisis—creates challenges for COVID-19-related public health efforts in Nigeria. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, misinformation,⁵⁵ discordant messaging about coronavirus from the central and state governments,⁵⁶ and uncertainty about testing and treatment capacity⁵⁷ have created discord and confusion. The situation has been compounded by legitimate concerns regarding the side effects and efficacy of certain vaccines and the discontinuation of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which has been seized upon by local anti-vaccine advocates. It is against this backdrop that Boko Haram and other armed groups in the region have sought to take advantage of the pandemic to advance their cause, conduct attacks, and grow their ranks.

COVID-19-related messaging

This section examines how Shekau's messaging around COVID-19 permeated the region and how it was perceived by the public, drawing upon original survey research in Borno State that was conducted as part of the MEAC project. The findings below are based on a phone survey with

⁵² For example, estimates suggest that outbreak control cost the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) over US\$500 million after polio incidence in Nigeria jumped from 202 cases in 2002 to 1,143 in 2006. See I. Ghinai, C. Willott, I. Dadari, and H.J. Larson, 'Listening to the Rumours: What the Northern Nigeria Polio Vaccine Boycott Can Tell Us Ten Years On', *Global Public Health*, 8/10 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2013.859720>.

⁵³ Ghinai et al., 'Listening to the Rumours'; A. Raufu, 'Polio Vaccine Plans May Run into Problems in Nigeria', *BMJ*, 327/7410 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.327.7410.380-c>.

⁵⁴ Ghinai et al., 'Listening to the Rumours'.

⁵⁵ E.R. Agusi, S.I. Ijoma, C.S. Nnochin, N.O. Njoku-Achu, C.I. Nwosuh, and C.A. Mesoko, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Distancing in Nigeria: Ignorance or Defiance', *The Pan African Medical Journal*, 35/52 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.11604/pamj.sup.2020.35.2.23649>.

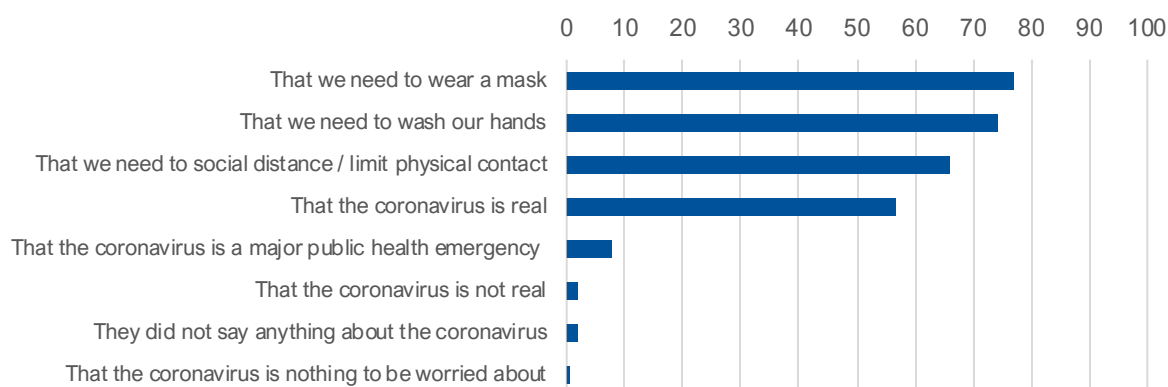
⁵⁶ In Kogi State the government has repeatedly rejected the reality of COVID-19. See Channels Television, 'Kogi State Governor Rejects Existence Of Virus', 6 July 2020.

⁵⁷ I. Chitungo, M. Dzobo, M. Hlongwa, and T. Dzinamarira, 'COVID-19: Unpacking the Low Number of Cases in Africa', *Public Health in Practice*, 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2020.100038>.

almost 3,000 people that ran in and around Maiduguri in Borno State, Nigeria, from December 2020 to March 2021.⁵⁸

Armed group messages are not likely to be consumed in a vacuum; rather, they compete for the public's attention alongside those of government and other actors. Thus, it is important to examine Shekau's messages alongside those of the government and other influential parties. The MEAC survey data suggest that government messaging about the pandemic was widely known to the public. Of those surveyed, 85 per cent of respondents said they had heard messaging about COVID-19 from the government or community leaders (see Figure 6).

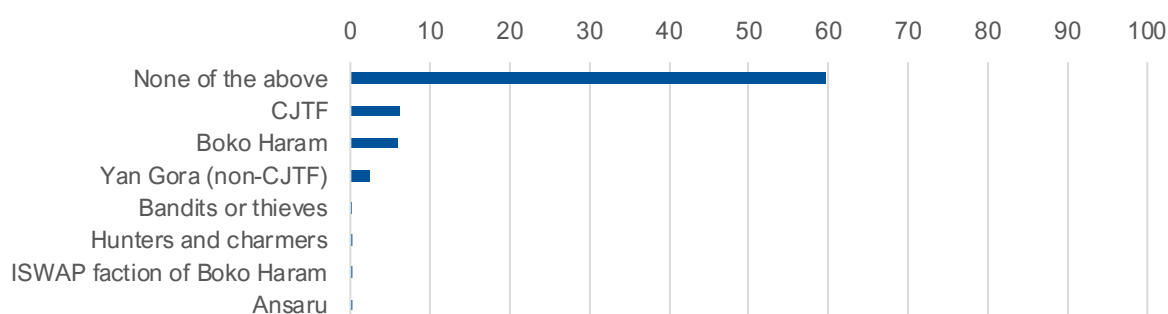
Figure 6: Government messages about COVID-19



Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

As highlighted in Figure 6, when asked what specific messages the government was sending about COVID-19, respondents were most likely to cite the need to wear a mask, wash hands, and social distance. More than half of respondents said that the government stressed that the coronavirus was real.

Figure 7: Penetration of COVID-19 messaging from armed actors

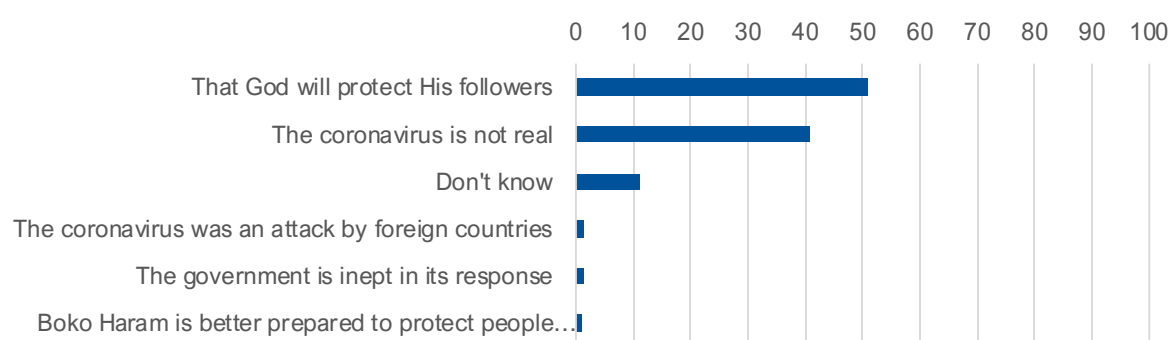


Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

⁵⁸ This research was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by IPA, with support from Mobukar Consultancy. More information on MEAC partners and donors is available at UNU-CPR, 'Managing Exits from Armed Conflict'.

Various armed actors have engaged in messaging about COVID-19 in Nigeria. As shown in Figure 7, when respondents were asked if they had heard messaging about COVID-19 from armed groups, criminal groups, and volunteer security outfits, most said they had not (60 per cent). Interestingly, a sizeable portion of respondents (30 per cent) refused to answer the question. The very high ‘refused to answer’ rate here raises the question of whether more respondents have heard these messages but did not want to admit as much to enumerators. However, 6 per cent—a few hundred people—admitted to having heard messaging from Boko Haram.⁵⁹

Figure 8: Boko Haram’s messages about the pandemic



Source: author’s illustration based on MEAC data.

Of those who admitted to having heard messaging from Boko Haram, the dominant messages they reported having heard about COVID-19 from the group—as outlined in Figure 8—were ‘That God will protect His followers’ (51 per cent) and the somewhat contradictory ‘The coronavirus is not real’ (41 per cent). Of those who admitted having heard messages from Boko Haram on the pandemic, 41 per cent trusted the group’s message, with male respondents more likely to trust them than female respondents (57 per cent to 29 per cent).⁶⁰

It is one thing for people to be exposed to an armed group’s misinformation about COVID-19, but does hearing these messages impact perceptions and behaviour? This is extremely important to know in order to understand public health efforts in conflict contexts. The survey also asked respondents about whether they thought the pandemic was an attack by foreign countries, whether they thought COVID was real, whether they thought they were immune, and if they would get a vaccine should one become available.

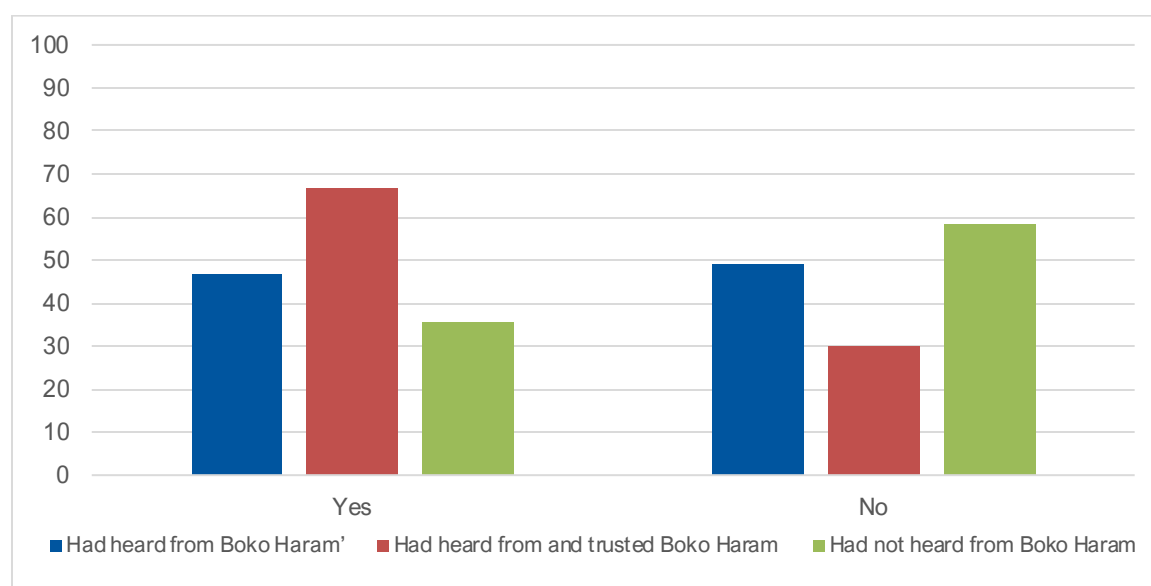
A significant portion of the community in and around Maiduguri believed that COVID-19 had nefarious origins. Overall, 36 per cent of respondents who had not heard from Boko Haram thought that coronavirus was an attack by foreign countries. Across the whole sample, female respondents were more likely to believe COVID-19 was an attack by foreign countries than male respondents (47 per cent compared with 30 per cent). Likewise, there was a differential across age

⁵⁹ About 4 per cent of respondents said they had heard messaging from the CJTF, making it the second most vocal non-state group in Maiduguri after Boko Haram. Overall, less than 4 per cent of respondents admitted having got messaging from the other groups they were specifically asked about, such as Yan Gora, bandits or thieves, hunters and charmers, Ansaru, and ISWAP.

⁶⁰ Disaggregating by age did not indicate significant differences across child and adult respondents (42 per cent of adults trusted the messages compared with 37 per cent of children, but the overall number of children who admitted to having heard from Boko Haram was small: 19 out of 399).

categories, albeit smaller, with children more likely to believe that COVID-19 was an attack (44 per cent) than adults (37 per cent) (See Figure 9).

Figure 9: ‘Do you think COVID-19 is an attack by foreign countries?’



Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

Admitting to having heard from Boko Haram caused a jump in seeing COVID-19 as an attack (47 per cent compared with 36 per cent of those who had not heard messages from the group). Trusting Boko Haram's message, however, had a much greater impact. Of those who admitted to having Boko Haram's COVID-19 messaging and trusting in that message, 67 per cent said they believed COVID-19 was a foreign attack. That COVID-19 was an attack—or the international response to it constituted an affront to Islam—appears to have been one of Boko Haram's dominant messages, so it is not surprising that it might influence those who were hearing them.

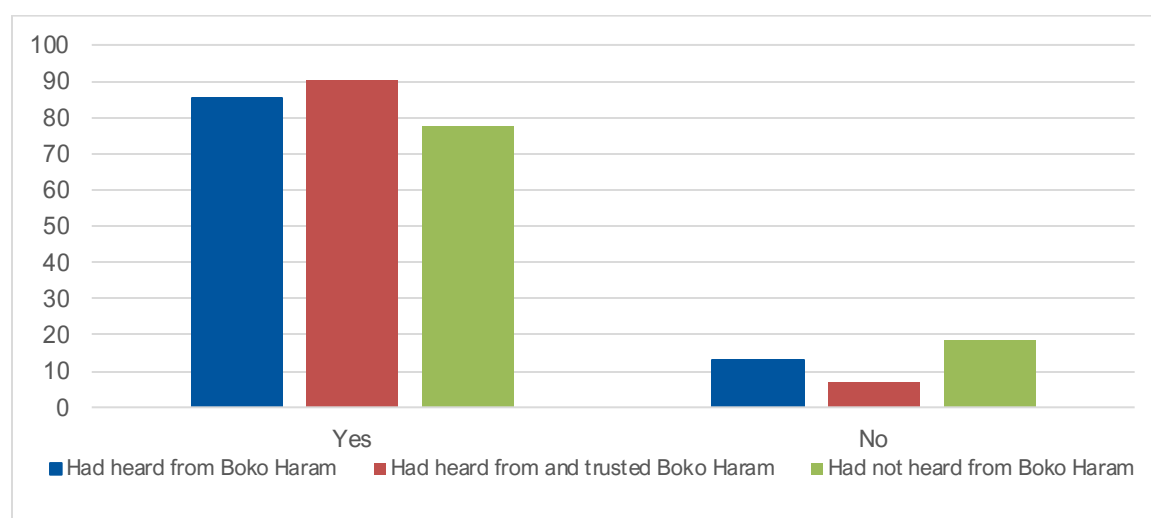
Interestingly, one of the other dominant messages from Shekau's audio tape was that the group's followers were immune to the virus. In light of his claim that 'we have anti-virus',⁶¹ it is important to examine the impact of Boko Haram's messaging on perceptions of immunity and whether those who had heard them were less likely to engage in preventative health measures (e.g., vaccines). Of the entire survey sample, a significant portion of people in and around Maiduguri believed they were immune to coronavirus. Hearing and trusting Boko Haram's message was associated with greater perceptions of immunity (49 per cent compared with 33 per cent who had only heard the group's messages and 39 per cent who had not heard them at all). Given that this was a specific claim of Shekau's, and how the group operated, it is not surprising that those who trusted him had greater feelings of invulnerability to the virus. The data show that when disaggregated by gender, women and girls who trusted the group's messages were more likely to feel immune (56 per cent) compared with men and boys who trusted the messaging (44 per cent).

Perceptions of immunity are important because they raise the likelihood that an individual would engage in risky behaviours, eschew public health protocols, and refuse vaccines when they become available, all of which could hamper efforts to get COVID-19 under control in Nigeria. Positively, however, the data from the survey suggest that most people in and around the Maiduguri area recognized the reality and risks associated with the pandemic. Of the entire sample, 77 per cent of

⁶¹ Anka, 'Abubakar Shekau Mocks World Leaders'.

respondents believed coronavirus was real. It should be noted that there is a nine-percentage-point difference between men/boys and women/girls, the latter of which were less likely to believe COVID was real.⁶²

Figure 10: 'Do you think COVID-19 is real?'



Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

The messaging of Boko Haram raises concerns about the impact it might have had on perceptions of the seriousness of the pandemic and some of the public health measures meant to contain it. Interestingly, the data suggest that hearing and trusting Boko Haram's messages about the COVID-19 decidedly increased perceptions that the virus was real: 85 per cent of those who had heard Boko Haram's messages and 90 per cent of respondents who trusted them believed the coronavirus was real, compared with 78 per cent of those who had not heard the messages. Indeed, as Figure 10 shows, those who had not heard Boko Haram's messages were more likely to deny the reality of the virus than those who heard or heard and believed the messages of the group.

At the time of the survey, life in and around Maiduguri had largely gone back to normal and the social distancing and stay-at-home orders of the early weeks of the pandemic were a distant memory. As such, the survey did not ask about social distancing or public health measures but focused on willingness to get the vaccine once it became available in Nigeria. Interestingly, willingness to take the vaccine did not seem to be impacted by hearing or trusting Boko Haram's messages on the coronavirus. Of all who had heard the messages, 81 per cent said they were willing to take the vaccine when it became available. Similarly, 82 per cent of those who trusted Boko Haram's messages planned to take the vaccine. The rate of willingness to take the vaccine was nearly identical among those who had not heard or heard and trusted Boko Haram's messages (81 per cent).

Notably, what appears to have a bigger impact on vaccine acceptance is age. Of the whole sample, compared with 77 per cent of adults, 71 per cent of child respondents expressed willingness to get the vaccine when it became available.⁶³ Since those under 18 are too young to remember the polio

⁶² There was no difference across age groups.

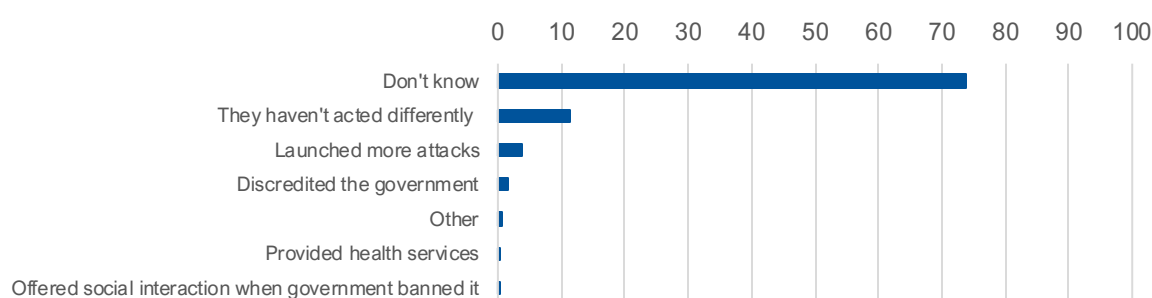
⁶³ Interestingly, vaccine acceptance for children who had heard from Boko Haram about Coronavirus (90 per cent) or had heard and trusted Boko Haram's message (100 per cent) was higher for those children who did not admit to having heard anything from Boko Haram about the pandemic (75 per cent). However, it is difficult to draw strong

campaign, there may be additional work that needs to be done to promote vaccine acceptance with younger cohorts.

The data suggest that seven months after the release of the initial audio tape, Boko Haram's messages had not yet eroded trust in vaccination, a key tool in combatting the spread of COVID-19. This finding is not entirely surprising. Despite the medical controversies and challenges to healthcare delivery in North-East Nigeria associated with earlier public health campaigns, ultimately they helped build strong public health awareness and vaccine acceptance in the area. That awareness seems to currently be strong among the subset of the population that listened to—and in some cases trusted—Boko Haram about COVID-19. It requires noting that the survey question used here is hypothetical and now that access to the vaccine has increased in North East Nigeria, it would be useful to follow up to monitor its actual use.

Beyond their own perceptions of the pandemic and public health preferences, the survey also asked respondents if they had perceived a change in Boko Haram's behaviour since the pandemic broke out. In policy circles, much was made of Boko Haram's intensification of military activity since the pandemic began.⁶⁴ Yet the public in and around Maiduguri was less sure if a such a shift had occurred. As seen in Figure 11, 11 per cent of respondents said Boko Haram had not changed its behaviour as a result of the coronavirus and 74 per cent said they did not know. The latter is very high. Given the willingness of respondents to answer other sensitive questions, it is unlikely that this high percentage of 'do not know' responses represent evasiveness by respondents, but perhaps it may indicate a lack of certainty in the population. Only 4 per cent said the group had launched more attacks and 2 per cent said the group worked to discredit the government as a result of the pandemic. Given the location of some of the large-scale attacks by Boko Haram since the outbreak of the pandemic, this is not altogether surprising. In the period leading up to the survey, many of the larger attacks conducted by Boko Haram's factions—particularly those that were covered in the international press—took place outside Maiduguri, possibly making any increase in activity less obvious to local residents.

Figure 11: Boko Haram's response to COVID-19



Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

Unlike other groups, Boko Haram—either Shekau's faction or ISWAP—did not try to use the pandemic to demonstrate the capacity to govern. Rather, there is some evidence that it tried to capitalize on the uncertainty and changes in military organization to conduct more and deadlier attacks. Likewise, Shekau seems to have viewed the pandemic as a means of undermining the

conclusions about the impact of the group's messaging on children as the subgroup of them that admitted to having heard messages is quite small.

⁶⁴ Jalloh, 'Increased Terror Attacks'.

Nigerian government and attracting new recruits. While it is unclear if his message was effective in drawing new blood into the group, the MEAC data suggest that his messaging on COVID-19 was met with mixed reactions.

In and around Maiduguri, Shekau's audio tape appears not to have widely penetrated. Hearing the tape did not appear to sway many minds about COVID or the government or individual's response to it. For the fraction of the population that had both heard and trusted the messages, however, Shekau's tape appears to have had an effect on respondent beliefs about the nefarious origins of the pandemic and perceptions of personal immunity to the virus. The enhanced perception of immunity, however, does not appear to have eroded vaccine acceptance, although it will be important to determine if this hypothetical acceptance has translated to action now that vaccines are more widely available in the North East of Nigeria. It is quite possible that Shekau's mixed messaging—which inherently recognized the virus as real—and the historical investment in and familiarity with vaccine campaigns in the region helped to blunt significant belief shifts (and possibly public-health-related decisions) for those who trusted the messages. The data highlight, however, that young people may be too young to have internalized vaccine acceptance from the polio and other historical public health campaigns in the region, and they could be more susceptible to influence by messages such as Shekau's and other misinformation about the pandemic that has been rampant across many parts of the globe.

4.2 Colombia

In Colombia, active armed groups appear to have reacted to the pandemic in ways that on the face of it seem quite contrary to the reaction of Shekau's faction of Boko Haram. As this section of the paper will detail, armed groups often parroted the same public health messages about COVID-19 as the government. Their reasons for doing so, and some of their actions, however, suggest that they—like Boko Haram and other armed groups around the world—sought to take advantage of the pandemic to advance their cause and enhance their support. They did so even if it meant they appeared to be in lockstep with Colombia public health officials.

As in Nigeria, the MEAC surveys in Colombia aimed to understand which coronavirus and related public health messages were reaching the Colombian public, by whom, and to what impact. As with the earlier data examined around armed group responses to climate change and involvement in environmental degradation in Colombia, this section draws from original survey research carried out across 11 municipalities in April–May 2021.

COVID-19 ravaged Colombia,⁶⁵ sparking a significant government response. Early in the pandemic, the government instituted a series of public health measures and lockdowns and a public messaging campaign. From March 2020 to May 2021, President Iván Duque was featured on a nightly TV programme that also featured other officials and experts and was intended to streamline the information citizens received about the government's actions on the pandemic.⁶⁶ In addition

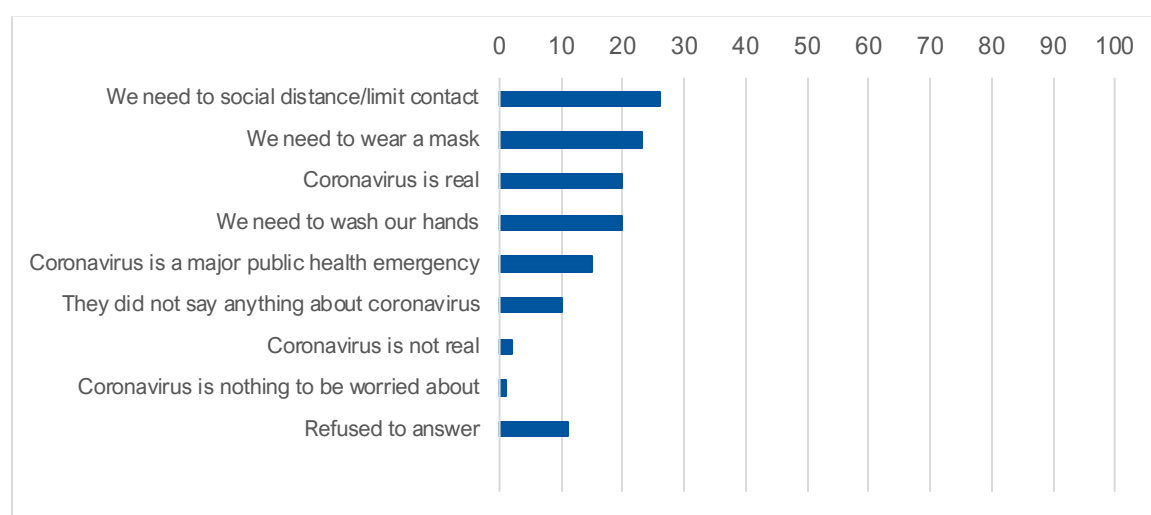
⁶⁵ Colombia has had a higher number of confirmed cases (5.05 million as of November 2021, for a country with a population of 50.34 million). To date, it has one of the highest death rates in the world from COVID-19 ranking it 14th out of 155 countries studied. See Statista 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths Worldwide per One Million Population as of November 24, 2021, by Country'.

⁶⁶ *El Tiempo*, 'Prevención y Acción ¿programa sobre el Covid o sobre el gobierno?', 29 October 2020; T. Duque, 'Mientras Duque se recarga en la T.V., acabó con las ruedas de prensa', *La Silla Vacía*, 11 December 2020.

to TV, the Colombian government used social media and, in more remote areas, community radio to spread information about COVID-19 and the governmental response.⁶⁷

The public is widely aware of the government's COVID-19 messaging campaign, but the evidence suggests that its particular messages did not leave a lasting impression on most Colombians. When asked about government/community leader messaging about COVID-19, only 10 per cent of respondents said that they had not heard any such messages. Most respondents, however, appeared not to have retained the main messages of the campaign. As seen in Figure 12, only 26 per cent said they had heard about social distancing, 23 per cent had heard about the need to wear a mask, and 20 per cent had heard about the need to wash hands.

Figure 12: 'What did the government or community leaders say about the coronavirus? Select all that apply.'



Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

Given the outsized role the Colombian military has played in the country over the last 50-plus years, it is important to understand how different state actors responded to the pandemic. When asked if they had heard messages on COVID-19 from the Colombian security forces (e.g., military, police), a sizeable minority of respondents (24 per cent) said yes. This is consistent with the historic use of the armed forces to carry out non-military activities, in this case public health functions, as a substitute for non-military state institutions in Colombia. This was particularly true in rural communities, which reported higher levels of awareness of military messages about COVID and where non-military state capacity has been historically low (67 per cent of rural residents compared with 33 per cent of urbanites).

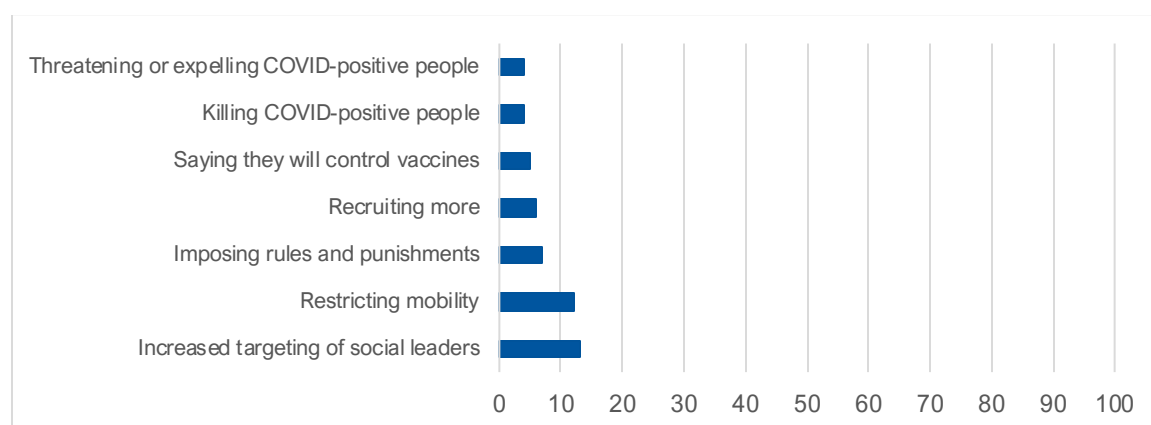
Against this backdrop, armed groups still active in Colombia were also responding—with messaging and action—to the pandemic. The main focus here is FARC dissident groups—an array of armed groups that either splintered from the FARC-EP when the latter signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016 and they refused to lay down their weapons, or were formed in the wake of the agreement. There are thought to currently be about 30 different dissident groups operating throughout the country, including notably the 1st Front led by Iván

⁶⁷ *El Tiempo*, 'Así defiende Hassan Nassar el programa diario de Duque', 31 December 2020.

Mordisco (nom de guerre) and the 7th Front led by Gentil Duarte (nom de guerre), and the Segunda Marquetalia, led by Iván Márquez (nom de guerre).⁶⁸

Most respondents across the 11 municipalities surveyed in Colombia had not heard armed actor messaging about COVID-19 (68 per cent). A small number of people, however, admitted to having heard messages from FARC dissident groups in rural municipalities, including San José del Guaviare, La Uribe, and San Vicente del Caguán. A much larger portion of respondents—particularly in rural areas—were aware of measures implemented by armed groups in response to COVID-19. Respondents in rural areas were more likely to acknowledge and to have experienced armed group restrictions on mobility than those in urban areas. For example, 23 per cent of respondents reported mobility restrictions by armed groups in San José del Guaviare, 18 per cent in San Vicente del Caguán, and 12 per cent in La Uribe. Across locations, 9 per cent of rural respondents reported that armed groups had increased the targeting of social leaders. Although much of this targeting occurred outside large urban centres, twice as many people in urban areas were aware of these attacks, likely due to access to media coverage of such incidents in urban centres and hesitation to report such incidents in rural areas where armed groups are active and respondents are concerned about being viewed as informants (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: ‘From what you have observed, have the armed groups responded to the coronavirus in any of the following ways? Please select all that apply.’



Source: author's illustration based on MEAC data.

Interestingly, the data suggest that armed groups were more focused on implementing restrictions than on messaging about the pandemic. This may reflect a divergence or a continuation of the dissident approach from FARC-EP predecessors. On the one hand, the focus on action over messaging may reflect the reduced communications capacity of the dissident groups compared with the larger, more sophisticated FARC-EP. On the other, it could reflect the historic focus leftist armed groups in Colombia have placed on demonstrating government inefficacy by stepping in to fulfil the unmet needs of the population.

In addition, there are signs that armed groups engaged in other activities in response to COVID-19, activities that undermine peacebuilding in Colombia. First, when tracking conflict incidents since the pandemic broke out, there appears to have been a short-lived decline in violence in the country around the time of the series of mobility restrictions and lockdowns that were instituted

⁶⁸ Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), *Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución* (Bogotá, CORE, 2020).

between March and July 2020.⁶⁹ Then violence began to increase steadily alongside cases until it surpassed levels during the immediate pre-pandemic period. Second, 6 per cent of respondents in the survey noted that armed groups had started recruiting more since the pandemic struck. Third, when asked if the pandemic had impacted the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement in other ways in their communities, rural respondents noted increases in illegal crop production and new obstacles put in place by armed groups. Variations in illegal crop cultivation reporting in the rural communities appear to fluctuate with armed group and trafficker presence. For example, 25 per cent of respondents who answered the question reported increases in cultivation of illegal crops in Caldon, a municipality where FARC dissident groups are present and there are stories of drug traffickers pressuring local farmers to grow coca.⁷⁰

In comparison with other places where armed groups have used messaging to critique or counter government public health messages about COVID-19, in Colombia, armed groups reinforced—albeit without much success—the same messages as the government. These groups—with a few notable exceptions, addressed below—appear to have largely reinforced government public health policies (e.g., imposing public health regulations and, specifically, restricting mobility). Sometimes, however, armed groups took advantage of the pandemic to grow their ranks by stepping up recruitment or going after social leaders—particularly peace and human rights activists—who work in the country. Across the sample, 13 per cent of respondents noted that armed groups had increased targeted killings of social leaders since COVID-19 was first confirmed in Colombia.

The response of dissident armed groups in Colombia to COVID-19 is thought to have been motivated by two things. First, armed groups appeared focused on trying to increase their legitimacy in the communities under their control by ‘protecting’ them from the virus. Second, there are indications armed groups were worried about the impact of COVID-19 infections within their ranks. By imposing limits on movement, prohibiting outsiders from accessing the communities they controlled, and enacting curfews, armed groups were both protecting themselves and usurping state functions to enhance their position with the population. Armed groups in Colombia punished violations of their COVID-19 controls. There are reports that armed groups fined people, burned motorcycles, displaced families, and occasionally even killed people for breaking their rules.⁷¹

Impact on public health choices

In light of the direction of the messaging by armed groups, and the low number of respondents admitting to hearing such messages, further statistical analyses about their impact on public health preferences and related beliefs are not helpful. Given the particular dynamics in Colombia, armed group messaging—which largely reinforced the Colombian government’s messaging—is unlikely to have undermined the public health response to COVID-19. The survey data suggest Colombians across the country recognized the reality of the pandemic. Of those who answered,

⁶⁹ The conflict incidents shown include battles and armed clashes between government forces and non-state actors, explosions, ‘remote violence’, and violence against civilians. “Remote violence” refers to events in which the tool for engaging in conflict did not require the physical presence of the perpetrator. These include bombings, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, mortar and missile attacks, etc. In events classified as “remote violence”, a spatially removed group determines the time, place, and victims of the attack. Remote violence can be waged on both armed agents (e.g., an active rebel group, a military garrison) or on civilians (e.g., a roadside bombing). ACLED, ‘Remote Violence’, 2017.

⁷⁰ Interviews with indigenous community leaders, CORE, Paéz, Cauca, August 2021, and *El Tiempo*, ‘Ejército denuncia que comunidad los expulsó con machetes en Caldon, Cauca’, 29 September 2021.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Colombia: Brutales medidas de grupos armados contra Covid-19’, 15 July 2020.

88 per cent considered COVID-19 to be real, with higher reported levels of belief in the virus in urban municipalities.

Indeed, the rural/urban divide is more likely than armed group messaging to inhibit an effective response to the pandemic in Colombia. This is largely due to continued urban/rural disparities in health infrastructure and the ‘militarization’ and non-gender-responsive approach to public health messaging, which, especially in poorer, more remote parts of the country, could undermine public health efforts. The data highlight some of the demographic differences in vaccine acceptance. Men were more likely to indicate willingness to take a COVID-19 vaccine than women (66 per cent compared with 58 per cent). Respondents in rural areas were less likely to express willingness to take the vaccine than those who live in urban areas. There was a 13–16 percentage point decrease in vaccine willingness for rural men and women, compared with urban men and women, respectively.

5 Comparing armed group responses to crises from Nigeria to Colombia

Contrasting the responses to the dual crises of the day—climate change and COVID-19—of armed groups in Nigeria and Colombia, it becomes apparent that while their actions are drastically different, their ultimate goal is the same—to take advantage of uncertainty, chaos, and conflict to advance their cause.

In the context of climate-change-related shifts, armed groups in Nigeria and Colombia appear to have responded in similar ways, taking advantage of climate-related livelihood struggles to lure new recruits into their ranks and establish relationships or leverage with local populations. In both countries, armed groups have directly and indirectly sought to capitalize on climate change. In Nigeria and Colombia, there are indications that armed groups either target or attract those who have struggled to make a living in agriculture due to climate change shifts. More indirectly, armed groups have stepped into resource disputes—created or exacerbated by climate change—to enhance their leverage with local populations or their legitimacy by demonstrating their capacity for governance—either in dispute resolution or in resource management. In Colombia, armed groups have gone further by actually contributing to climate change. By engaging directly in—or incentivizing—environmental degradation, armed groups are both hastening climate change and creating yet another pull into their ranks for people struggling to live off the land. This is seen most clearly in armed group involvement in deforestation or actions that encourage others to engage in forest clearing.

On the face of it, armed groups in Nigeria and Colombia appear to have responded to the pandemic in very different ways. In Nigeria, ISWAP took advantage of the pandemic to engage in military activities but does not appear to have tried to use the outbreak to demonstrate capacity for governance. The JAS faction of Boko Haram responded by criticizing the government, reinforcing its worldview, and trying to entice new recruits. In some ways, the message of JAS’s then leader Abubakar Shekau ran counter to that of the government, particularly with regard to promulgating conspiracy theories about COVID-19 being a foreign attack on Islam or suggesting that JAS followers were immune to the virus. In other ways, Shekau reinforced the reality of the virus, although his proscription for how to respond differed drastically from Nigeria public health messages. While the ISWAP and JAS factions appeared to respond to the pandemic differently, they appear similarly motivated to use the COVID-19 virus to bolster their ranks and legitimacy and undermine the Nigerian and other regional governments with verbal and military assaults.

In Colombia, armed groups, by contrast, seem to have engaged in actions that largely bolstered and enforced Colombian government public health policy. While these groups appear to have taken enforcement to a level far beyond what the government condoned, their actions were still oriented to stopping the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Armed group messaging on the pandemic appears either to have been less of a priority or to reflect their lack of interest in or capacity to carry out communications campaigns, but the messages sent largely reinforced the general thrust of Colombian government messaging. Most of these groups would certainly reject any insinuation that they were serving as arms of the Colombian state, but—with the exception of the violent punishments for violations some meted out—they were in many ways doing just that. Their actions were clearly not motivated by an effort to bolster the Colombian state but, rather, were based on an assessment of their own vulnerability and the opportunities to bolster their legitimacy with local populations afforded by the pandemic.

6 Policy implications and the way forward

The original survey data from the MEAC studies in Nigeria and Colombia presented herein reinforce the findings in the existing literature on armed group responses to various types of disasters. The contrast of Nigerian and Colombian armed group responses to COVID-19 highlights that while the actual messages and activities might vary, armed groups seem broadly interested in capitalizing on the uncertainty and conflict that arise from global challenges like pandemics. What—if anything—does this mean for public health responses or efforts to address climate change?

A commonality across countries and different groups is how crises and lack of governance combine to create particular opportunities for armed groups. It is not just climate change and its impact on livelihoods in the north of Nigeria, but the lack of formal—or the overrun of traditional—dispute resolution mechanisms to handle farmer–herder conflicts—or any intercommunal conflict—that combine to create a vacuum in which armed groups can flourish. In Colombia, the lack of progress towards institution building—and specifically the continued need for a shift away from militarized response to public needs—in rural areas has allowed dissident armed groups to step into the void both in response to the pandemic and resource management and exploitation. Enhancing governance—and not necessarily only at the state level—is key to effectively addressing climate change and public health emergencies, as well as all manner of challenges.

The response of various Nigerian and Colombian armed groups to the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change highlights there is a security angle to most global challenges. There is value in recognizing the security implications of climate change and pandemics. For largely invisible threats like COVID-19 or the incremental effects of climate change (in some places) it can be hard to create a sense of public urgency and galvanize the momentum needed to enact effective government—and certainly multi-lateral—responses. Applying a security lens to a crisis can inject a sense of urgency, bring in parts of government or other actors that are not narrowly focused on the challenge at hand, and open up other sources of funding to address the problem. It has been argued that by securitizing an issue, a challenge can be lifted ‘into an untouchable space of urgency,

over and above politics'.⁷² That said, adopting a security lens to global challenges like climate change and public health emergencies is not without risks.

While there is growing recognition of the nexus between climate change and security, and even the increased use of the term 'climate security' as a shorthand to denote it, the application of this lens—and even the term—are contested. For example, there are different ways of conceptualizing 'climate security' with different frames focusing on different 'referent object[s]' in need of securing—the international community, nations, humanity, or the ecosystem.⁷³ While there are indications that policy-makers seek to securitize climate change in order to create urgency around and public buy-in for their response, it doesn't always work and in some cases can contribute to distrust and backlash.⁷⁴ But an increased security focus risks turning the most climate-vulnerable entities into security threats, as stranded climate refugees become yet another vehicle for non-state actors to weaponize. Reframing regions vulnerable to climate change shifts as sources of security threats may lead not to more or more-effective assistance going to these populations, but rather to greater stigmatization, which can be weaponized by armed groups.⁷⁵ Other sectors are dealing with similar challenges and provide possible warnings for proceeding with caution. For example, as eligibility changes in recent years have allowed preventing violent extremism (PVE) programmes to draw on humanitarian funding, there has been a perceived 'potential distorting effect' on humanitarian action, undermining its principles and the impartiality of the response, diverting funds from populations with the greatest needs, and generating fears about threats posed by others.⁷⁶

This paper spotlights the reality that we are unlikely to be able to address complex, interconnected challenges with siloed responses. This is particularly true for global crises like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, climate change and public health policies need to be conflict-sensitive, and conflict prevention and conflict mitigation efforts need to consider climate and public health dimensions. Such a holistic approach to policy and programming can be difficult given the bureaucratic organization of state responses to challenges like climate change and COVID-19, especially since these two crises are global in nature. At the state level, however, there are some concrete ways to better integrate a climate-sensitive or public-health-sensitive approach into conflict prevention and mitigation efforts, and vice versa. For example, recruitment prevention and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)/reintegration programming after armed group involvement in Colombia, Nigeria, and, more broadly, throughout the Sahel region, needs to consider how climate change can pull or push people into—or back into—armed groups. Reintegration programming, which often contains a livelihoods component that seeks to break financial dependency on armed groups and promote civilian livelihoods, needs to focus on skills and livelihood alternatives that are less vulnerable to climatic shifts to ensure sustainable economic reintegration. This could practically include agricultural training that focuses on sustainable water management and the cultivation of climate-change-resistant crops or emphasize other climate-hearty (and market-absorbent) occupations.

⁷² J. Warner and I. Boas, 'Securitization of Climate Change: How Invoking Global Dangers for Instrumental Ends Can Backfire', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 37/8 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419834018>.

⁷³ M. McDonald, 'Discourses of Climate Security', *Political Geography*, 33/1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.01.002>.

⁷⁴ Warner and Boas, 'Securitization of Climate Change'.

⁷⁵ A.M. Hassan, 'Is Securitization of Climate Change a Boon or Bane?' *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2021.

⁷⁶ Norwegian Refugee Council, 'Countering Violent Extremism and Humanitarian Action', Position Paper (Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, June 2017).

Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic present big enough policy challenges without armed group instrumentalization. Unfortunately, armed groups seize on such crises and exploit the chaos, conflict, and confusion they engender. Anticipating such responses and crafting policies and practices that are responsive, address related governance gaps, and have strong, clear communications components can make it more difficult for armed groups to gain advantage in times of crisis.