

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS): Challenges and Opportunities in Deradicalization and Reintegration

Badrudeen Adesina Balogun¹, Mufutau Olusola Bello²*

¹Muslim Chaplain, Ado-Ekiti Custodial Centre Nigerian Correctional Service, Ekiti State Command

²Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

*Correspondence: balogunade94@gmail.com

Abstract. This article examines the role of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) in deradicalization programs in Nigeria. Its objectives are to analyze the programs and services provided by NCoS, identify the challenges encountered, and evaluate NCoS's efforts in safeguarding the human rights of program participants. The study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through literature reviews, interviews with NCoS officers, program participants, and community leaders, as well as observations in several correctional facilities. The findings reveal that NCoS has developed comprehensive deradicalization programs but faces significant challenges, including overcrowding in correctional facilities, limited funding, and a shortage of professional staff. While NCoS has made efforts to protect the human rights of program participants, stigma and discrimination remain substantial hurdles. Community involvement in the reintegration of former extremists is also crucial, though it requires more effective strategies. This article provides recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of deradicalization programs in Nigeria. These include improving correctional facility capacity, developing programs and curricula, enhancing the competence of personnel, and strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems.

Keywords: deradicalization, Nigerian Correctional Service, violent extremism, reintegration, human rights

1. Introduction

Terrorism and violent extremism have emerged as significant global threats, presenting profound challenges to security, stability, and social cohesion across the world (Grossman, 2021). These phenomena are marked by the use or threat of violence, often driven by extremist ideologies aimed at achieving specific political, religious, or ideological goals. In Nigeria, the threat of terrorism and violent extremism has been a pressing concern for decades. The rise of extremist groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and various ethnic militant organizations has led to widespread violence, significant loss of life, mass displacement, and severe damage to infrastructure (Makai, 2024). Efforts to counter terrorism in Nigeria have employed diverse strategies, including military operations, law enforcement, and

deradicalization programs. These deradicalization initiatives are designed to rehabilitate individuals involved in violent extremism and reintegrate them into society, focusing on reshaping their mindsets and behaviors, detaching them from extremist ideologies, and transforming them into law-abiding and productive members of the community.

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) plays a pivotal role in the implementation of deradicalization programs in Nigeria (Clubb & Tapley, 2018). As an institution responsible for the detention, care, and rehabilitation of individuals associated with violent extremism, including those convicted of terrorism-related offenses, NCoS provides a range of comprehensive programs and services. These include counseling, education, vocational training, and spiritual guidance, all aimed at steering individuals away from extremist ideologies and preparing them for reintegration into society (Walanda, 2020).

Numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of deradicalization programs in various countries and contexts. Findings indicate that such programs can effectively reduce the risk of recidivism and facilitate the reintegration of former extremists into society. However, their success often depends on several factors, such as the program's design, the quality of its implementation, and the individual characteristics of its participants. Research specific to Nigeria has examined various aspects of deradicalization programs. For example, studies by Ogunnubi & Aja (2024), Owonikoko (2022), Ajiboye et al. (2021), Ike et al. (2024), Barkindo & Bryans (2016), Adebayo & Matsilele (2019), Ahmed (2015), Aly et al. (2015) and Abrifor et al. (2012) have analyzed the effectiveness of initiatives such as Operation Safe Corridor, the factors influencing program success—such as family support, education, employment opportunities, and community acceptance—and the role of correctional institutions in providing support services like counseling and vocational training.

Despite these valuable contributions, notable gaps remain in the literature. Most studies focus on deradicalization programs implemented outside correctional facilities, with limited exploration of the role and challenges faced by NCoS in implementing these programs within prison environments. Additionally, existing research has primarily centered on the security and effectiveness of programs in reducing recidivism, often neglecting critical aspects such as the protection of participants' human rights and the involvement of communities in reintegration processes. Moreover, few studies provide a comprehensive understanding by incorporating perspectives from various stakeholders, including correctional officers, program participants, and community members.

This article aims to address these gaps by examining the role of NCoS in deradicalization programs within correctional facilities, focusing on the programs and services provided and the challenges encountered during implementation. It also emphasizes the importance of human rights protection and community involvement, exploring how NCoS ensures the rights of program participants and engages communities in the reintegration process. Furthermore, the study integrates perspectives from multiple stakeholders to provide a more holistic understanding of

deradicalization efforts in Nigeria. By addressing these issues, the article seeks to contribute to the development of more effective and comprehensive deradicalization strategies in Nigeria while offering valuable insights for other countries confronting similar challenges.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). A case study was chosen as it aims to deeply explore and comprehensively understand the role of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) in deradicalization programs in Nigeria, along with the associated challenges and opportunities. The case study approach enables the researcher to delve into this phenomenon in-depth, taking into account the specific context and the diverse perspectives involved.

Data collection was conducted through literature review, interviews, and observations. The literature review provided insights into deradicalization programs in Nigeria, relevant policies and regulations, and previous related studies. Sources included academic journals, research reports, government documents, and credible online platforms. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders involved in deradicalization programs. These stakeholders included NCoS officers at different levels—from central to field levels—to gather information about the programs and services provided, the challenges faced, and their perspectives on program effectiveness. Additionally, interviews with program participants were conducted to understand their experiences, changes in attitudes and behaviors, and the challenges they faced during reintegration. Community leaders and religious figures were also interviewed to gather their views on deradicalization programs, their roles in the reintegration process, and the challenges of welcoming former extremists back into society. Observations were carried out in several correctional facilities hosting deradicalization programs to directly observe program implementation, interactions between officers and participants, and the conditions and resources available.

Data analysis was conducted inductively and thematically. Data collected from literature reviews, interviews, and observations were systematically analyzed to identify key themes, patterns, and relationships relevant to the research questions. The data analysis process involved several stages: data reduction, where collected data were organized, summarized, and filtered to focus on the most relevant and significant information; data presentation, where the reduced data were displayed in narrative form, tables, diagrams, or other formats that facilitate understanding; and conclusion drawing and verification, where the presented data were analyzed to draw conclusions, address research questions, and validate findings.

Triangulation was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings by combining data from multiple sources, including literature, interviews, and observations. Additionally, member checking was conducted by asking interview participants to review and verify the interview transcripts and the researcher's

interpretations. These measures were taken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Role of the NCoS in Deradicalization Programs in Nigeria

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) plays a crucial role in Nigeria's deradicalization efforts by providing various programs and services aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating individuals exposed to extremist ideologies (Temitope Faluyi et al., 2019). This role is particularly significant given the rising threat of violent extremism in the country, notably from groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP.

The NCoS has developed comprehensive deradicalization programs within correctional facilities. These include counseling services, which offer individual and group sessions to help participants address the factors driving them toward extremism, alter their mindset, and rebuild self-confidence and self-esteem. Religious and civic education programs promote moderate religious understanding and instill national values, patriotism, and respect for human rights and laws. Vocational training equips participants with skills necessary for employment post-release, such as in agriculture, carpentry, tailoring, and information technology. Religious programs, including study sessions and sermons, foster a moderate understanding of faith and promote peace and tolerance. Recreational activities such as sports, arts, and music provide stress relief, encourage creativity, and nurture positive social interactions. Statistical data indicate that these initiatives have reached thousands of inmates across Nigeria, with over 5,000 participants recorded in 2022. Counseling and vocational training were among the most sought-after programs (Angalapu et al., 2024).

The implementation of these deradicalization programs involves multiple stakeholders, including NCoS staff, psychologists, counselors, religious leaders, and civil society organizations. Programs are executed in a phased and structured manner, tailored to the needs and characteristics of individual participants. Participants are selected through a comprehensive assessment process to determine their risk levels and specific needs. Programs incorporate both individual and group approaches, employing various learning methods such as lectures, discussions, case studies, and simulations. The curriculum, developed in line with human rights principles and international standards, covers extremist ideologies, moderate religious understanding, life skills, and preparation for social reintegration. Qualified personnel, including psychologists, counselors, religious figures, and specially trained NCoS officers, conduct the programs. Collaboration with government and non-governmental organizations supports the programs through expertise, training, funding, and additional resources, exemplified by partnerships with the National Counter Terrorism Agency for curriculum development and staff training (Clubb & Tapley, 2018).

Despite its successes, the NCoS deradicalization programs face several challenges. Overcrowded correctional facilities hinder the creation of an environment

conducive to rehabilitation and reintegration. Limited funding and resources, such as professional staff, training materials, and support facilities, further reduce program effectiveness. A shortage of skilled professionals, including psychologists and counselors with expertise in dealing with radicalized individuals, exacerbates these challenges. Additionally, societal stigma and discrimination against former terrorist inmates complicate their reintegration and heighten the risk of recidivism. Data from the Nigerian Ministry of Interior (2021) highlight a recidivism rate of 15% among former terrorist inmates, underscoring the need for more robust deradicalization and reintegration efforts.

The NCoS plays an essential role in deradicalization programs in Nigeria, contributing positively to the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals exposed to extremist ideologies. However, addressing existing challenges and enhancing program effectiveness require sustained efforts and collaboration among the government, civil society organizations, and the international community.

3.2. Protection of Human Rights in Deradicalization Programs

The deradicalization program in Nigeria, particularly those organized by the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), must be implemented with full respect for and adherence to human rights. This principle is essential as the primary aim of the deradicalization program is to rehabilitate and reintegrate individuals into society, rather than to punish or further discriminate against them. The program should adhere to internationally and nationally recognized human rights standards, such as the prohibition of torture as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Convention Against Torture (Mariño Menéndez, 2015). These standards explicitly prohibit any form of physical or mental violence against program participants. Furthermore, the program must respect the right to freedom of religion, avoiding coercion to abandon one's beliefs, while focusing on transforming religious understanding and practices that conflict with human rights principles and humanitarian values. It should also guarantee the right to education by providing access to quality education, including moderate religious education, civic education, and vocational training. Additionally, the program must ensure the right to physical and mental health by offering adequate healthcare services, while the right to freedom from discrimination requires that all participants be treated fairly, regardless of their background.

To ensure the protection of human rights, NCoS has undertaken various initiatives. These include providing access to healthcare services in collaboration with health agencies, encompassing routine health checks, medical treatment, and psychological counseling. In 2022, 90% of program participants reportedly had access to adequate healthcare services. NCoS also guarantees the security and safety of participants during their stay in correctional facilities by preventing inmate violence, maintaining strict supervision, and ensuring a safe and orderly environment. Adequate worship facilities are provided for participants of various religious backgrounds, including mosques, churches, and other places of worship, along with religious activities

such as study groups, sermons, and celebrations of religious holidays. Regular training sessions are also conducted for personnel to enhance their knowledge of human rights and humane deradicalization principles, ensuring they are equipped to handle participants with dignity and respect (Emelonye, 2021). Additionally, NCoS has established a monitoring and evaluation system to assess the program's effectiveness and ensure its alignment with human rights standards through regular data collection and analysis.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in ensuring the protection of human rights within the deradicalization program. Former extremists often face stigma and discrimination from society after completing the program, which can affect their psychological well-being and hinder social reintegration. Limited access to legal services for participants still undergoing legal processes also poses a challenge, potentially jeopardizing their rights to justice. Furthermore, overcrowding in correctional facilities hampers the fulfillment of basic rights, such as the right to health, privacy, and a safe living environment, while increasing the risk of violence. A lack of awareness among some NCoS personnel about human rights, despite training efforts, continues to be a concern, potentially leading to human rights violations during program implementation.

In conclusion, the protection of human rights is a fundamental element of the deradicalization program. While NCoS has made considerable efforts to uphold human rights within its programs, the challenges identified highlight the need for continuous improvement. It is crucial for NCoS to maintain its commitment to respecting and upholding human rights at every stage of the deradicalization program, from assessment and planning to implementation and evaluation. These efforts will contribute to the development of a more effective, humane, and sustainable deradicalization program.

3.3. Community Involvement in Reintegration

The reintegration of former extremists into society is a critical phase of deradicalization programs. Its success depends not only on the transformation of the individuals but also on the acceptance and support of the community. Community involvement is essential to create a conducive environment for former extremists to start a new life, avoid returning to extremism, and contribute positively to society.

Community involvement in the reintegration process offers several significant benefits. First, it plays a crucial role in welcoming former extremists back into the community and aiding their adaptation to life outside correctional facilities. Acceptance by the community helps former extremists feel valued, which facilitates their transition to a new chapter of life. Second, it prevents stigma and discrimination, which are common challenges faced by former extremists. Engaging the community can help reshape negative perceptions and foster an inclusive environment supportive of reintegration. Third, community involvement builds trust and enhances security by creating a foundation of mutual understanding between former extremists and the

community, reducing potential conflicts and violence. Fourth, it raises public awareness about the issues of extremism and terrorism, which supports broader efforts to combat the spread of extremist ideologies (Abiodun & Akinlade, 2021). Finally, successful reintegration strengthens social cohesion, fostering harmony and unity as former extremists rejoin society and contribute positively.

To enhance community involvement in reintegration, the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) has implemented several strategies. These include conducting community outreach programs to educate the public about deradicalization and reintegration efforts, transforming negative perceptions, and encouraging active participation in the reintegration process. Collaboration with community leaders and religious figures has also been established, leveraging their influence to bridge communication gaps and provide moral support to former extremists. Additionally, NCoS facilitates communication forums involving stakeholders such as former extremists, their families, community leaders, religious figures, and local governments. These forums serve as platforms to exchange information, address challenges, and find collaborative solutions. Economic empowerment programs are another key strategy, offering skills training and resources to help former extremists secure employment or start businesses, thereby improving their livelihoods and easing their integration into society (Adebayo & Matsilele, 2019). Lastly, NCoS utilizes media channels, including print, electronic, and social media, to disseminate information about the program and advocate for community involvement in the reintegration process.

Several factors support or hinder community involvement in reintegration efforts. Supporting factors include public awareness, which facilitates acceptance and active participation; societal tolerance, which fosters empathy and second chances; and local government support through policies and resources. Community leaders and religious figures play pivotal roles in shaping perceptions, while balanced media coverage helps build positive public opinion. Conversely, challenges include stigma and discrimination against former extremists, which can lead to fear, distrust, and rejection; limited public understanding of extremism and deradicalization programs; and trauma among those affected by extremist violence, which complicates acceptance. Resource constraints and insufficient coordination among stakeholders further impede effective community engagement.

In conclusion, community involvement is a key determinant in the success of reintegration efforts for former extremists. Despite the strides made by NCoS in fostering public participation, challenges remain that require collective action. By addressing these obstacles and fostering a supportive environment, stakeholders can facilitate the reintegration of former extremists, enabling them to become productive, responsible members of society. These efforts will contribute to the creation of a safer, more peaceful, and harmonious community.

3.5. Discussion

This study has explored the critical role of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) in the deradicalization program in Nigeria. The findings indicate that NCoS has developed and implemented a comprehensive program encompassing counseling, education, vocational training, and religious activities to rehabilitate individuals exposed to extremist ideologies. These efforts align with social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of learning and behavioral change through social interaction and positive reinforcement. The NCoS deradicalization program provides an environment where individuals can acquire new values, social norms, and life skills that support their reintegration into society.

However, the implementation of NCoS's deradicalization program faces significant challenges, such as overcrowding in correctional facilities, limited funding and resources, and a shortage of trained professionals. These conditions hinder program effectiveness and reduce participants' access to adequate services and facilities. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which suggest that the success of deradicalization programs is heavily influenced by factors such as program quality, resource availability, and staff competence (Ja'afaru, 2018).

The study also highlights the importance of human rights protection in deradicalization programs. NCoS has undertaken various efforts to safeguard the rights of program participants, such as providing access to healthcare, ensuring security and safety, and offering worship facilities. Nevertheless, challenges such as stigma and discrimination, limited access to legal services, and overcrowding in prisons remain unresolved. This study underscores the need for a human rights-based approach in deradicalization programs, as advocated by various international and national human rights instruments.

Community involvement in the reintegration process of former extremists is another focus of this study. NCoS has developed strategies to engage the community, including outreach programs, collaboration with community leaders and religious figures, and economic empowerment initiatives. However, obstacles such as stigma, lack of understanding, and trauma continue to pose challenges. These findings support the argument that successful social reintegration requires active community participation (Gordon & Tapley, 2018). Communities must be involved in all stages of reintegration, from preparation and acceptance to the empowerment of former extremists.

This study has several limitations. First, it employs a case study design focusing on NCoS, making the findings less generalizable to other deradicalization programs in Nigeria. Second, the study relies on data collected from literature reviews, interviews, and observations at selected correctional facilities. Future research could adopt quantitative or mixed-method approaches to obtain more representative data that complement qualitative findings.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes significantly to the understanding of NCoS's role in deradicalization programs in Nigeria. It also provides

concrete recommendations that can be implemented by NCoS, the government, and other stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of deradicalization programs. This study is expected to serve as a reference for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in developing more comprehensive, humane, and sustainable deradicalization programs.

4. Conclusion

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) plays a crucial role in the efforts of deradicalization in Nigeria. NCoS is not only responsible for detaining individuals involved in violent extremism but also tasked with their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Through a comprehensive deradicalization program that includes counseling, education, vocational training, and religious programs, NCoS aims to change individuals' mindsets and behaviors, steer them away from extremist ideologies, and prepare them to become productive, law-abiding members of society. NCoS's efforts in implementing this deradicalization program align with its mandate to rehabilitate prisoners and prepare them for reintegration into society after their release.

Although some progress has been made, NCoS's deradicalization program still faces several challenges. Resource limitations, overcrowding in prisons, and a shortage of trained professionals are some of the obstacles that need to be addressed. Furthermore, the protection of human rights within the deradicalization program must continue to be improved. Stigma and discrimination against former extremists remain a significant challenge in the social reintegration process. Community involvement in accepting former extremists back into society also needs to be continually encouraged.

Deradicalization programs are long-term efforts that require commitment and cooperation from various parties. The government, NCoS, civil society organizations, and the public all play vital roles in creating effective and sustainable deradicalization programs. With joint efforts, it is hoped that deradicalization programs in Nigeria can be more successful in rehabilitating and reintegrating former extremists into society while preventing the spread of extremist ideologies in the future.

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