

Nigerian university tackles extremism and hunger

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REUTERS

A woman in Yola rescued from Boko Haram: The university is working to prevent radicalisation

As the world searches for methods to keep young people from joining radical groups, and new ways to prevent violence and foster development, this university may provide an example.

Perhaps our experience as a university in Yola, north-eastern Nigeria might add something to the global debate.

Yola, desperately poor, sits on the edge of the Sahara Desert, and for the past three years on the porous border between safety and security, at the edge of the territory seized by Boko Haram terrorists.

The American University of Nigeria (AUN) was established in this unlikely spot, founded by the former Nigerian Vice-President Atiku Abubakar, who was orphaned in this area as a young boy.

"Be a development university," he said when the university was established a little over a decade ago.



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The university has been helping with refugees arriving in Yola

Four years ago, with a growing number of unemployed youth just outside the gates of the university, and the hungry and hopeless in flight from Boko Haram flooding into our small city, the American University of Nigeria (AUN) began to implement our vision of a "development university."

We reached out to local religious and community leaders to see how we might partner with them in peace, food security, and education programmes.

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The AUN-Adamawa Peace Initiative (AUN-API) was born. All major local Muslim and Christian leaders, traditional rulers, and local community leaders actively participate.

Our goals are simple: educate and feed as many people as we can.



A video from Boko Haram this week showed school girls kidnapped from Chibok two years ago

In the process, we were guided by a number of principles - make sure women and girls are included in all projects; join with religious leaders in all efforts; involve AUN students, faculty and staff in all of these efforts; and make sure our local vulnerable youth know that they have a network of people who care about them.

The tsunami of hungry frightened people began arriving in Yola in 2014. The first 5,000 had few relatives in the area, no food and no access to school.



Margee Ensign (right) is a university leader at the centre of a humanitarian crisis

The next wave of 20,000 arrived by foot and by bus. Their hungry faces were seen everywhere in town. The Catholic cathedral and Muslim Centre became the major feeding areas.

Our peace initiative members developed comprehensive lists of where people came from, their names, ages, and gender so we could provide the most accurate food and supplies.

For example, women needed sanitary supplies; some young children needed life saving oral rehydration. At the university, we held classes all day and raised funds and fed hungry people the rest of the time.

By early 2016, the university's peace initiative had fed close to 300,000 people. One young woman and baby, who had been held in the Sambisa forest by Boko Haram and were severely malnourished, died in our local hospital. We all mourned.

What have we learned here that can be applied to other cities and countries?



A malnourished child in a refugee camp in Yola. Aid agencies have warned of starvation

First is the centrality of local leaders in any development effort. These conscientious and concerned religious and community leaders know which youth are particularly at risk to be radicalised.

Second, find out what these young people really want. Our peace network identifies the youth who need literacy education, tools to start a business, training to learn about information technology (which our youth want as much as any around the world). Then the university designs programmes and projects to meet these needs.

The young people told us they wanted to play sports. Thousands have joined our Peace Through Sports programme, which not only gives young people a chance to compete with each other in soccer, basketball and volleyball, and something to do during the day, but also teaches them to think about peace and cooperation.



The university has been working with local leaders to set up education projects

We begin each programme with a discussion of peace, led by members of the peace initiative. We listen to them talk about their challenges.

Most of the games occur on our campus, where students and staff welcome them and make them feel they are part of our community. Every team is made up of members of different religious and tribal communities. They forge teams with people they would otherwise never encounter, much less befriend.

While it's impossible to pinpoint which of our programmes have kept youth from joining the terrorist group in our back yard, more than one young man has said to me: "It is either you or Boko Haram - there is nothing else." Peace initiative leaders can document that none of the youth they identified and brought into our various programmes joined the terrorist group.

As the threat from Boko Haram fades, the problems local people face have not diminished.



The Nigerian army attacking a camp of insurgents

Thousands of very young children have been orphaned, left in our city to live with non-family members. Hunger has increased, as thousands of farmers were not able to plant their crops. The university is trying to deal with this next phase of the humanitarian crisis. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) and university founder Atiku Abubakar provided seed, which we distributed.

With assistance from USAID, we established Technology Enhanced Literacy for All, which employs tablet computers and radio broadcasts to extend learning to 22,000 out-of-school children.



The university has taken on the role of promoting a peace initiative

Many of the students walk up to three miles each way to participate. If for some reason a session is cancelled, children are visibly upset. When a radio failed to materialise recently, children went house-to-house in a village until they found someone willing to lend them one.

The university feeds and provides literacy and numeracy education to hundreds of children who are homeless, orphans, and Almajiri (Muslim religious school) boys.

The programme, Feed and Read, has just expanded to include Feed and Read for Girls. These children are out of school and are among the millions of Nigerian children who comprise the largest out-of-school population in the world.



Students graduating last summer at the American University of Nigeria

Currently, about 500 children receive instruction and a meal through these two programmes. The plan is to expand to help 2,000 children by 2017.

The demand for our projects far exceeds the number of places and available funding. At every session, hundreds of children crowd around the learning centres in hope of participating.

The children in the Feed and Read programmes share their meal with children who are not. It's heartbreaking to know that we can't help so many children who are hungry for learning, and just plain hungry.

It is essential that these modest efforts be replicated and expanded immediately. Otherwise, the most vicious cycle will begin again, devouring youth who are uneducated, destitute, with no family, no support, and nothing else in their lives. We all know where that leads.

The debate in the West about terrorism is usually presented in stark and defensive terms: increase security, curtail civil liberties and reduce the number of refugees allowed to emigrate. Is there another solution that would prevent angry and hopeless youth from joining terrorist groups?

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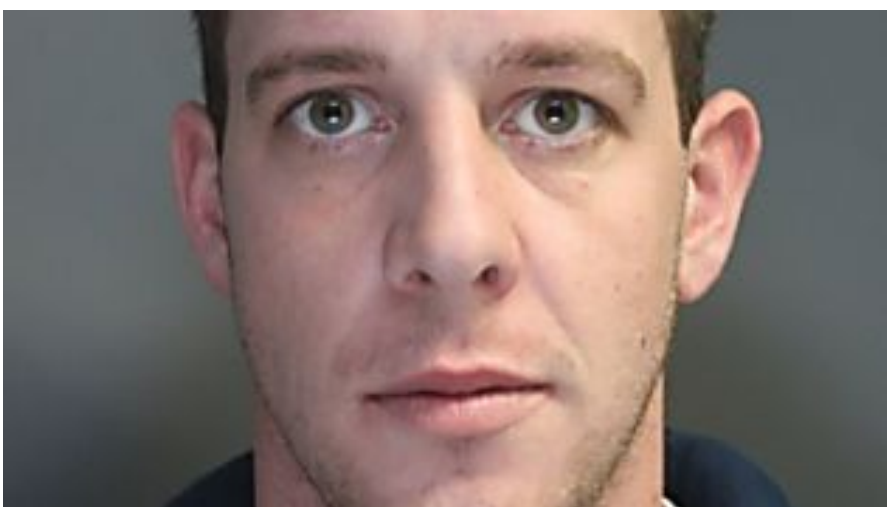


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