

Local action to protect communities in Nigeria

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Collaborative, creative initiatives in Nigeria helped protect local communities from much of the impact of Boko Haram violence. When international agencies arrived, however, they ignored these efforts.

Our city, Yola, sits on the edge of the Sahara desert, where green turns to brown on maps of the continent. Located in Adamawa state in north-east Nigeria, Yola is both Christian and Muslim and has a long history of tolerance. The American University of Nigeria (AUN) was established about a decade ago by Atiku Abubakar, a former Vice-President of Nigeria, who grew up in this area; his vision was to build a university that would help to improve the lives of people in this region which has some of the highest illiteracy, unemployment and child and maternal mortality rates in the world.

The AUN-Adamawa Peace Initiative (AUN-API) arose during nationwide strikes in 2012 over the removal of fuel subsidies. The usually tolerant city of Yola became tense and unstable, like much of the country. At talks between the AUN and local leaders it was decided that one of the best ways to protect our community was to focus on youth and women – those who had no education, no income, often few or no family members, and little connection to society. And a critical decision was made early on that local leaders, who knew the community best, would identify these individuals, not the University. Then we at the University would design programmes to meet their needs. We never could have foreseen that programmes designed to improve literacy and incomes would eventually help to protect a city.

As the threat of the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram¹ increased, the ability to identify and support vulnerable people, especially young males, became the basis for a successful intervention and community protection effort. Initially we did not think of these programmes specifically as protection against violence but as strategies to give people education, income and hope. Over time, however, as we met with thousands

of disaffected youth, it became clear that their option had become binary: join an AUN-API programme or join Boko Haram.

“It was either Boko Haram or you: there is nothing else for us.” (18-year-old boy, Yola, Nigeria)

The first AUN-API programmes were ‘Peace Through Sports’ projects, large-scale information and communications technology (ICT) training, and women’s income-producing projects. It was in March 2014, however, that we realised that we would have to rapidly expand our efforts and play a significant role in protecting our community. That month the Emir of Mubi, a town to our north, sent an urgent request that we visit Mubi and bring food and clothes. A dozen API members drove north and met with the Emir. “Go into the room next door,” he said, “but be prepared as you will be shocked.” The large room contained about 500 women and girls. There were no men or boys. When the women were asked where their husbands and boys were, their response shocked us all: “Our boys were taken by Boko Haram and our husbands were burned in front of us.” Peace, protection and the expansion of our programmes to reach vulnerable youth became our obsession. But what did protection mean in our environment?

The University had already established its own security force. Hiring initially close to 300 local people, our head of security – a former US Marine as well as professor – worked with API members to identify ‘vulnerable’ older youth and then train them as guards. This had the dual effect of both reducing the vulnerability of and increasing incomes for a large group of people. Furthermore, these security officers became visible symbols of protection in the community, and could be our eyes and ears in the community. As importantly,

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members of AUN-API were also trained in self-protection and, because Muslim and Christians were learning together, these activities promoted understanding and connection between religious groups that often had little understanding of each other. This training has continued for three years, with additional training provided during periods of increased violence and near holidays, when trained citizens protect each other's churches and mosques.

Support for IDPs

Soon after we returned from Mubi, the internally displaced people (IDPs) began arriving. First a few hundred, then 5,000, and ultimately 300,000, mostly women and children. They had no food, no clothing and no place to live. Chief Abdulmumini, one of our AUN-API members, said that if the University would provide seeds and school fees, he would settle them on his land. We raised funds for seeds, food and clothing, and foolishly thought the problem of displaced people had been solved. But over the next 12 months thousands more poured into Yola. The vast majority – according to our data, 95% – ended up living in the community where they had family or other connections; the remaining 5%, the most desperate, who had no such family connections, moved to the government-run IDP camps.

By April 2015, we were feeding 276,293 people every week. Peace Through Sports now had close to 12,000 participants, the women's income projects had approximately 2,000, and ICT training was ongoing during this whole period, reaching about 1,200 people. Two peace conferences were held with peace activists from states badly affected by Boko Haram violence.

After the peaceful election of President Buhari in May 2015 and a new governor for our state, many displaced people said they wanted to go home and plant their crops before the rains began. In May 2015, the Governor asked AUN-API to travel north, with an army convoy, to see if it was safe for people to return home. It wasn't. The devastation was widespread. Almost all infrastructure had been destroyed, and there was no drinking water, no health clinics, no schools. Homes were destroyed, fields barren. As we drove through the region, people came out of the bush to thank our colleague, the head of security, who had not only led the establishment of our security force but had also held a weekly radio show on self-protection (which had included messages about the whereabouts of Boko Haram and suggestions for where to hide). Hundreds of people greeted him and told him that he had helped them stay safe and alive, a reminder of how essential it is to give people under threat information about basic safety and self-protection.

Arrival of international agencies

Then international agencies began arriving in Yola. Our AUN-API members briefed dozens of them on our peace perspective, the reach of our membership, our programmes and what we had learned. But we were largely ignored. Instead of drawing on this experience and our network, the agencies showed little desire to learn from us or involve us in their projects. Here are a few examples:

Throughout the crisis, AUN collected data on the IDPs – where they were from, age, gender, level of schooling and so forth. When we offered to turn this data over to a major international organisation, their



IDPs queuing for food, Yola, Nigeria.

representative said, “Why would we want your data?” He then went to the state governor, and negotiated to pay a large amount of money in order to conduct their own surveys.

Many victims were traumatised by what they had seen and experienced. Our AUN psychologist, a trained trauma counsellor, began to train other AUN employees so they could offer basic counselling to those who had experienced violence. When another international aid agency arrived, they did not offer to support these efforts to deal with post-traumatic stress. They simply tried to hire her away from AUN.

AUN expanded its efforts with our computer science students and staff to find ways of connecting people who had lost their families; we also used our TV show, *The Peacemakers*, and our website to show pictures of people looking for family members. When we asked for support from an international agency, we were told, “We only help people who are in camps.” This was despite the fact that the vast majority of the IDPs were not living in camps but on floors throughout our community.

AUN-API members met with the representatives of another agency to discuss food distribution. By then, our food supplies for the refugees were very meagre. We did not ask the agency to share their food supplies but asked only that they tell us who they were feeding in order that we did not duplicate their efforts. Their response stung: “We cannot share our lists of who we are feeding – you might have Al Qa’eda working with you!” One AUN-API committee member pointed out: “They don’t even know it’s Boko Haram not Al Qa’eda terrorising us!”

These attitudes led to misdirected efforts – and arguably resulted in more suffering. There is much work to be done to make the international system listen to those on the ground, who may know the most, and be more responsive.

Breaking the cycle

Despite our telling the displaced people that they should not return home yet, they still wanted to risk going home. They are farmers, and they wanted to plant their

crops, to try once again to be self-sufficient. The majority began returning north in mid-2015, and by September there were only 100,000 left in Yola, most still living in our community and being fed through our efforts.

New problems emerged, however. Tensions were high in many communities to which the displaced people were returning, because members of those communities had themselves done some of the killing. Communities were divided. AUN-API was asked to take on a new role – that of leading reconciliation efforts. With a small grant from the Canadian government, we began reconciliation efforts with women, children, religious leaders, vigilantes and elders. This work is on-going, and we hope to expand it.

Our self-protection efforts had worked. We had been able to feed close to 300,000 IDPs. Boko Haram violence came only to the edges of our city and Boko Haram was able to neither overrun nor recruit in Yola. Many community leaders attribute this to our peace, development and security programmes. The community knew the University was totally committed to peace and progress, as was the religious and political leadership of the community.

The Boko Haram violence recedes; the problems do not. Left in its wake in Yola, outside the University’s gates, are thousands of children left orphaned by the conflict. Local families have taken them in, and the University has started ‘Feed and Read’ programmes for these boys and girls, teaching basic literacy and numeracy while providing a free meal cooked by local vendors. The programme is growing but cannot keep up with the demand. It is essential that these small efforts be replicated and expanded, otherwise the cycle will begin again with youth who are uneducated, destitute, with no family, no support, and “nothing else” in their lives. We all know where that leads.

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1. Since the current insurgency started in 2009, Boko Haram has killed 20,000 people and displaced 2.3 million from their homes. It was ranked by the Global Terrorism Index as the world’s deadliest terror group in 2015.