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### ABSTRACT

The American University of Nigeria’s Adamawa Peace Initiative (AUN-API) was established in 2012 at the height of countrywide strikes sparked by the removal of fuel subsidies in the country. Soon thereafter the Boko Haram uprising gained momentum in our region. AUN-API focuses on teaching and training vulnerable youth to give them employable skills, to build unity and tolerance, and to offer hope. In 2014 AUN-API began large-scale humanitarian work in response to Boko Haram terrorism, and at the height of the humanitarian crisis was feeding and caring for over 270,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had settled in Yola, Adamawa state. AUN-API has trained over 15,000 local youth in various development programs. AUN is also educating twenty-three of the Chibok students who escaped from their Boko Haram captors in 2014. This preventative model might be applicable in many areas of the world suffering from violence due to poverty, war, and extremist ideologies.

**KEYWORDS** Boko Haram; terrorism; Northeastern Nigeria; peace building; American University of Nigeria; Adamawa Peace Initiative (AUN-API); development

### The birth of a peace initiative

The town was very quiet and tense. People stayed at home. A curfew was put into effect. The date was January 2012 and the removal of fuel subsidies at the beginning of the year had led to nationwide protests and riots. Even before Boko Haram began its rampage in Northeastern Nigeria, the social fabric was already fraying.

On January 10<sup>th</sup>, Ahmed Joda, then Chairman of the Board of the American University of Nigeria (AUN), and I met, to discuss what we could do to try and keep the peace in Yola, the capital of Adamawa state in Northeastern Nigeria. We reached out to prominent Muslim and Christian leaders, traditional rulers and business and community leaders for a discussion. After three hours of deliberation the Adamawa Peace Council (later renamed the Adamawa Peace Initiative, or AUN-API) was formed. In the four years since that time, Adamawa has been one of the three states placed under a state of

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emergency by the Federal government, because of the uprising of Boko Haram. In spite of their success in recruiting young men from other towns in the area, AUN-API members can document that no youth from their organizations have joined Boko Haram. How did that happen? Did the peace efforts and development projects put into place prevent our youth from being radicalized? There is evidence to suggest that this is exactly what happened.

This article describes the birth of the AUN-API, explains our programs and projects, and details how the AUN-API took care of close to 300,000 IDPs who fled from the more extensive violence in Northern Nigeria. Mainly, this is a story of hope.

Early on, members of the AUN-API decided that our focus should be on the vulnerable youth in our community. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to define vulnerability in our environment. Over three-fourths of the citizens of our state are illiterate, unemployment is close to 80 percent, stunting (long term malnutrition) is estimated by UNICEF at 47 percent. Schools are in a shambles, there are no modern facilities, the use of technology is almost nonexistent.

Based on the indicators and local challenges, we developed the following assumptions that would guide our work and our projects:

- Youth must be positively engaged
- Religion is an instrument of Peace
- Women are the center of development, and
- Education is the foundation of society

Our model is a simple one. Community members know the problems and can identify vulnerable youth with more accuracy than can the university or any outside agency. We decided that the religious and community leaders and traditional rulers would identify youth and women who needed assistance, who



Figure 1.

had no income or education, or who might be susceptible to radicalization. The university would then develop programs to train and educate these most vulnerable citizens.

## Universities and social change

Why would a small university develop extensive projects in the community and end up feeding close to 300,000 hungry people? First AUN, which was founded in 2004 by former Nigerian Vice President, His Excellency Atiku Abubakar, is based on a different model. We aim not only to provide quality education to Nigerian and African youth but also to be a “development university”—to take the knowledge, skills, and solutions from the university to the larger community and country. Having benefited from American-style instruction as a young student himself, when he was taught by members of the U.S. Peace Corps, Atiku Abubakar sought to make this style of education available to all qualified young people of Nigeria and, increasingly, to the rest of Africa. It would emphasize critical thinking, small classes, student participation, and problem-solving. He saw his Peace Corps teachers not only as instructors but also as people solving some of society’s problems. That would be our model.

The goal of AUN is to train the future leaders of Africa and to serve as both a stimulus and an agent of economic development and peace building throughout the region. To that end, all students, regardless of academic specialization, receive high-level training in information technology, entrepreneurship, and in arts and sciences, and all must work in one of AUN’s community development projects.

Like the American land-grant universities where the research results in agriculture were taken to farmers by extension agents, AUN students and faculty take our knowledge, solutions, and access to information technology to our community. We are the knowledge extension agents.

Before Boko Haram’s reign of terror began in 2009, AUN students and staff were already involved in community service, fixing schools and working in a community library. In 2011, the AUN faculty senate approved a required course for all AUN students that would train them to work in one of AUN’s community development projects (called a CDV course). At first there was great resistance to these community development courses—both from students and some of the faculty. Yola is hot, dirty, and poor. Some of the students, many from wealthy families, simply did not want to venture out into this poor community. By 2013, however, the student demand for community work and CDV courses was so great that we did not have enough buses to carry them all into the community. They had found the passion and fulfillment that can come from helping others.

Thus we came to our AUN-API peace, development, and humanitarian work with some prior experience in community outreach. Our first major

AUN-API development program was “Peace through Sports.” Using sports to build social cohesion has a long history in places of conflict. An associate dean of students at the university, Abdullahi Bello, who himself had been an athlete, started to build the program with a few football teams. They were all “unity teams,” i.e. made up of children from both Muslim and Christian religious communities. They were playing with, not against, each other. We soon developed female volleyball, with the same unity approach.

Because Rwanda had been so effective in using the peace through sports concept to build trust and tolerance after the genocide of 1994, we brought a Rwandan woman who had established the peace through sports program there to help us design the peace curriculum that would accompany the sports activities.

Before long we had over 5,000 vulnerable youth playing on campus and using a peace curriculum. Since many could not read, and AUN had already established literacy programs through our community development courses, their next step in the learning program was to participate in our Students Empowered through Language and Arithmetic (STELLAR) initiative. We had found this program to be quite successful in the past and had faith that it could work as well in this new context.

Then women in the community began to ask for help. They wanted both to learn to read and to earn an income. Most had no source of income at all and many were widows. “Waste to Wealth” and “Creating With Threads” were born from this need. Waste to Wealth trains hundreds of women in the community to turn plastic bags (trash which abounds in Yola) into beautiful products, and Creating With Threads involves the use of the scraps of material remaining from tailoring, turning them into place mats, rugs, briefcases, etc. Over 180 women now have a sustainable income because of these projects and Yola has found a way to help clean up its environment.

In our AUN-API meetings, community members themselves started asking for training to learn how to use computers and to access digital resources. AUN is one of the most technologically advanced universities on the continent. Our award-winning e-library has extensive digital holdings. After training the AUN-API members themselves, we opened up this training to the broader community. “ICT Training,” as it is called, has been one of the most successful programs in our community. The free eight-week course in information and communications technology (ICT) is open not only to vulnerable youth but also to the adults in the area. At one of the first graduations, as I was shaking hands with an older man, I asked him what he would do with his new education. “I never was able to go to university,” he said. “Now I will go to MIT’s website so I can get a free education.”

This program exploded in numbers and reach as many in the community began asking for free ICT training. We trained teachers from the Federal College of Education and nurses from the Adamawa State College of Nursing

and Midwifery on e-learning resource evaluation, location, and retrieval. LOAF or “Library on a Flash,” has given away digital libraries to dozens of schools and universities in our region.

At the same time, local youth in and out of school wanted to learn more about science. A program called “WhizKids” was started to encourage and support them in learning more about science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Based on the STEM model from the U.S., our AUN students are teaching these twenty-first century skills in twenty-two local secondary schools.

So even before Boko Haram expanded its violence and destruction into northern Adamawa state, we had trained over 15,000 vulnerable youth. We had earned the trust and support of our community. We needed it for what was coming.

### **Responding to a humanitarian crisis**

At first a few thousand refugees, mostly women and children, came to live in our city. Many stayed with their friends and relatives. Since the university is one of the largest employers in the region, we heard their stories through our own staff. Early in 2014, AUN employees started coming to work with disturbing stories: people from the north were coming to Yola and had no food or places to live. In response, our staff were taking in relatives and sometimes families they did not know, giving them shelter and food. One driver was hosting 50 people in his house. As the numbers grew, the university responded. AUN employees contributed funds so that we could give food to our employees for the refugees. The Nigerian culture is generous and dedicated to family. Extended family relations are offered shelter regardless of the strain it will put on already stretched resources. It is a mark of shame to let even a distant family member go to a refugee camp.

Then, as the violence to our north increased, 5,000 more came. AUN-API community leaders rallied to help them. In May 2014 the village head of Bole, Alhaji Abdul Mumini Abubakar, a prominent AUN-API leader, raised the plight of the refugees at every AUN-API meeting. He said that if AUN-API would provide seeds and school fees he would settle the IDPs on his land. It was a novel solution to a pressing human problem. We concluded that as more IDPs fled the areas overrun by Boko Haram, the refugee crisis would only get worse unless a solution like this was implemented.

We brought supplies to the IDPs including grains, clothing, sanitary items, and petty cash. This continued for weeks and months. The AUN-API group repeatedly visited the village bearing more supplies. AUN faculty and staff members individually contributed sufficient funds to send the refugee children back to school. These 5,000 people are now fully integrated into the village of Bole, next door to the university.

With the success of this resettlement program we naively thought that we had solved the crisis of hungry people. We were wrong. Less than six months later, by the fall of 2014, we were feeding over 20,000 refugees from cities to the north. We were still under the illusion that our crisis was under control, that more IDPs would not come, or if they did come, the state government and international community would assist us.

But more kept coming: 20,000, then 100,000, then 250,000. Only a small percentage of these refugees, about 10,000, went to the government-run IDP camps. The rest stayed in private homes.

In early fall, 2014 we were asked by the Emir of Mubi—a traditional leader in a town to our north—to bring food and clothing to a group of displaced women and girls. He invited us to his palace then asked that we go to a room next door where we found about 500 woman and young children—all girls. When we asked, “Where are your boys and husbands?” the women cried and then turned quiet. Finally one said, “They were burned or forced to join Boko Haram.” The Boko Haram crisis had turned into a war. Few were watching; fewer were assisting.

In October 2014, Mubi fell to the insurgents. Many of the residents of Mubi, including students, faculty, and staff from Adamawa State University, fled. Now Yola was bursting with people. The vice-chancellor of Adamawa State University came to my office one morning. His students and staff, himself included, were living as displaced people in Yola. Could AUN take some of his students and allow them to finish their studies? We agreed that we could handle their seniors studying science. For close to a semester his students and staff took their classes on our campus.

But it was not as easy to feed and clothe the hundreds of thousands of hungry, displaced people. Only a small percentage went to government-run camps and it was easy to see why people did not want to go there. When the first major camp opened there were no latrines for women and children. It was a very unsanitary site when we visited. AUN-API decided to build biolatrines for those women and children. Then stories of rape and human trafficking began to emerge. These stories were validated. More refugees came to live with us in the community, avoiding the camps.

By the fall of 2014, the population of Yola, which is normally 400,000, had more than doubled. The vast majority of the displaced lived with relatives or even on church grounds. Close to 3,000 Christians and Muslim families lived on the grounds of St. Theresa’s Catholic Church. Bishop Mamza, a member of AUN-API took care of housing and distributing food to them, with assistance from our peace initiative.

All of our food distributions became an inter-faith exercise. Bishop Mamza would go to the Muslim Council where Imam Dauda Bello would lead the food distribution. He and other Muslim leaders attended the food distributions at St. Theresa’s. AUN-API members attended the distributions in great

numbers. These food distributions occurred several times a week. We raised money from the founder of the university, the former Vice-President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar, who said, “Don’t allow people to go hungry.” We also received funds from the U.S. government and a small amount from the United Nations. Other international organizations visited but their help was minimal. For over a year we fed 276,000 people, while we continued our literacy and other AUN-API development projects.

After the peaceful transfer of political power in Nigeria following the national election in spring 2015, many of the IDPs said they wanted to go home. To see if it was safe to do so, and to see what infrastructure was left in the areas that had been recaptured, a group of AUN-API members ventured north with an army escort in May of 2015.

The devastation was total. Churches, mosques, schools, public buildings, bridges, and homes were destroyed, and the land was burned. We returned and told the refugees what we had found. Nevertheless, many went home and are now trying to rebuild their lives amidst this devastation.

However, over 150,000 are still in Yola. We are still feeding them. Some are Nigerians who have recently been rescued from places like the Sambisa forest, others have returned from Cameroon and Central African Republic. Still others have come back to Yola, having found it is impossible to live in their former villages.

What have we learned from this experience? Is any of it generalizable to other communities—such as those in Europe—who are facing a tidal wave of desperate people? Did our model of partnership and cooperation between religious communities, and between the community and the university, work in sustaining the refugees? Did it help prevent violence in our area?

## Lessons learned

There are several lessons we can draw from the AUN-API partnership. First is the importance of local peace groups like our AUN-API. Made up of community leaders and others who have personal ties and deep knowledge of the local conditions, properly and amicably organized such groups bring huge resources to the situation. We know our community and we are in a unique position to bring diverse resources of talent, expertise, and authority together to find and implement solutions to crises, prevent our youth from succumbing to the temptation to join extremist organizations, and bring stability to the region. Our collaborative model works. We believe that governments, international NGOs, and other organizations working in regions of conflict should pre-identify local peace groups such as ours, and evaluate and use these embedded local networks to implement assistance wherever possible.

Second is the role a university can and should play in responding to the threat and reality of crisis. As a development university, the American



University of Nigeria is committed to community development programs that are enabling a local environment for peace, women's empowerment, and socioeconomic equality. Our students learn about the challenges facing their region and country, and contribute greatly to solving some of these problems. AUN students, faculty, and staff spent hundreds of hours—after school and on the weekends—feeding poor and hungry people.

Third is our experience with the so-called “international community.” The United Nations and affiliated international NGOs did finally arrive in Yola, but they arrived late, their assistance was insufficient when it was forthcoming at all, and that aid was not targeted well because they did not understand the community. While the overwhelming bulk of the refugee population avoided the refugee camps, with good reason, it was on such camps that the “international community” focused its attention.

We have two sets of data to support the notion that our type of community peace building and educational effort prevents radicalization. AUN-API members can document that none of the youth in their communities joined Boko Haram. While it is impossible to prove that this resulted only because of our educational interventions, the data is nonetheless encouraging.

At a recent launch of a Peace through Sports session in August 2015, I sat with a young man, a new member of the sports initiative. I thanked him for coming to the university and for participating in the Peace through Sports program. His response was telling: “It was either this program or Boko Haram. There is nothing else here.”

On our bus ride to Mubi, Imam Dauda Bello and I were chatting about our AUN-API mission. One of the Muslim stalwarts of our organization, he volunteered: “I am obsessed with peace.” We all are obsessed with peace in Yola. Perhaps that is why we managed to stay relatively safe in the midst of violence and anarchy.

### Notes on contributor

*Dr. Margee M. Ensign* earned her PhD in International Political Economy from the University of Maryland. Her research focuses on issues related to international and political development including peace building, genocide, reconciliation, and political development. Her latest publications include *Rwanda: History and Hope* (UP of America, 2011) and most recently she was a co-editor of *Confronting Genocide in Rwanda: Dehumanization, Denial, and Strategies for Prevention* (Apidama Ediciones Ltd., 2015). She is the President of the American University of Nigeria and Chairperson of the Adamawa Peace Initiative.