

Conflict and development in the North-East, Nigeria: the case of Boko Haram insurgency

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Introduction

The North-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, which comprises six States-Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe- is among the least developed in the country. Data from National Bureau of Statistics (2020) show that about 87.72% of the population of Taraba State live in poverty, 75.41% in Adamawa, 72.34% in Yobe, 62.31% in Gombe and 61.53% in Bauchi. The Gini Coefficient in these states shows existence of wide inequalities while literacy rate has been very low. In spite of these, the zone is faced with other challenges, among which is conflict, occasioned by the activities of the dreaded Boko Haram sect and recently, its splinter group known as the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Activities of the groups have worsened insecurity situation and further threaten development of the zone, and it appears there is no end in sight.

Background Specifics

The term Boko Haram is a combination of Hausa word, boko (book or Western education) and Arabic word, haram (forbidden or sin); meaning that Western education is forbidden or Western education is sin or abomination. This was the belief of the sect (Jamā‘at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da‘awah wa al-Jihād, which in Arabic means “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad”) that started the movement in year 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, North-East, Nigeria. The sect, which is commonly referred to as Boko Haram aimed at establishing an Islamic State that will operate differently from what obtains in Nigeria. This was due to its disenchantment with the Western form of government, which in their opinion has offered them nothing good but bad governance, corruption, poverty, injustice, and so on.

Although activity of the group was peaceful between 2002 and 2009, it changed its strategy and began to pursue violent means of achieving its aims when the leader, Mohammed Yusuf killed in 2009 was replaced by Abubakar Shekau. Since then, the sect’s operation has continued to be deadly with the use of dangerous weapons including explosives, “rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), anti-tank missiles, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), surface-to-air missiles, armoured tanks, A-K 47 assault rifles, as well as machetes and daggers” (Awortu , 2015, p.214) to attack all targets including individuals, government and religious establishments, the police, army, schools, etc. not only in the North-East of Nigeria but also in the neighbouring countries like Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

The sect has also resulted into burning of houses and markets, suicide bombings, kidnapping and killing of aid workers, preachers, travelers, school children, and women, as well as rapes. In April 2014, the group kidnapped about 276 female students from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State, which led to international outcries and attempt by many Western countries showing willingness to render some technical and intelligence-sharing assistance. In February, 2018

around 110 schoolgirls were also abducted by the group from the Government Girls' Science and Technical College, Dapchi in Yobe State. Late December, 2020 more than 300 school children were also snatched from a government boys' school, Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, Kastina State, North-West zone of the country of which the sect claimed responsibility. The claim however was refuted by the government, which noted that bandits were the ones behind the kidnap.

Apart from kidnaps of school children, Boko Haram has abducted several other individuals including expatriates and aid workers. According to UNICEF, between 2013 and 2018 more than 1,000 children were kidnapped by the sect in North-East alone. Moreover, many people have been killed by the group since the start of its insurgency. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator, Mr Antonio Jose Canhandula said in 2019 that since the Boko Haram conflict began, more than 36,000 people have been killed with about 50% of them being civilians.

Furthermore, in 2015, the sect pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and changed its name to the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) or the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, in the same year the group became fractionized with a faction reverting to Boko Haram while the other retained the name ISWA or ISWAP.

Causes of Conflicts and Insurgencies in North-East, Nigeria

The major causes of incessant conflicts and insurgencies in the North-East Nigeria are economic, political, and religious. Economic factors are in the area of poverty, inequality, unemployment, low level and lack of education among others. The reason is not far to seek. Poverty reduces resilience to conflict by weakening government institutions, and compounds “vulnerability to insurgency at the individual and community level by lowering the opportunity cost of mobilising for violence” while “high rates of unemployment and inequality, combined with low levels of education and development, are thought to soften the ground for recruitment and provide motives to fight” (Marks, 2016).

On the other hand, political causes of conflict cover poor governance; high level of corruption; the arming, use and abandonment of unemployed youths as thugs during political campaigns; etc. Poor governance and corruption drive violence and conflict and operate to undermine development, which is one of the cases in North-East of Nigeria. They also provide avenue to fund armed groups and criminal networks, prevent development of and weaken effective institutions of governance, depress social and economic development and further fuel conflicts (United States Institute of Peace, 2010). In addition, most of the unemployed youths, who are armed and used as political thugs often find themselves abandoned after politicians have won elections. As a result, majority them use the weapons to perpetrate crime while others are recruited into armed groups like the Boko Haram sect, which further reinforces conflicts.

The third category of causes of conflict in the North-East zone of Nigeria is the religious dimension, which has to do with extremism, hard beliefs and ideologies held and taught by some religious leaders. Such ideologies and beliefs in the past have led to indulgency in the North. The case that rightly comes to mind is the violent Maitatsine movement in Kano (a North-West State in Nigeria) in the 1970s to the early 1980s. The group led by Mohammed Marwa attracted a large army of young and unemployed people referred to as the Yan Tatsine with hard and controversial Islamic teachings, which forbid people from using things such as radios, wrist

watches, cars and so on. Eventually, a large number of the members including the leader died in 1980 after several armed clashes with government security agencies.

Apart from this, there have been instances when innocent people of different religion were attacked by some religious fundamentalists who accused them of eating during the month of fasting. In late December 1994, a young Igbo trader named Gideon Akaluka was beheaded by Islamic fundamentalists, with his severed head paraded on a stick in jubilation around the city of Kano. His offence was that the wife desecrated the Quran by using some pages as tissue paper. He was then arrested and jailed by the Police. The killers broke into the jail, beheaded him and paraded the head in the streets of Kano.

The leader of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf began his religious ideology in the Izala Society movement and later founded the Ibn Taymiyyah Center in Maiduguri where he preached against Western education and taught his large followers messages filled with hatred with encouragement to take arms against the government, the security agents, and the infidels (non-Moslems and those who do not practise true Islam) (see Apard, 2015). These were some of the extreme teachings that fuelled conflicts in the North-East. And because most of the persons attracted by teachers of such teachings are youths, majority of which are poor and lack means of livelihood, they tend to put in their time and energy in pursuing and implementing the ideas sold to them by these teachers. In addition, some assistance in form of cash, food, shelter, and clothing always accrue to them from such movement. All these have operated to aggravate the conflict in the North-East of the country.

Effects of Boko Haram Activities and Development in the North-East, Nigeria

The deadly activities of the Boko Haram sect have led to several development challenges in the North-East States of Nigeria. Apart from escalating insecurity, the level of poverty in the zone has heightened while hunger has equally risen due to incessant attacks on farmers by the group. Besides, activities of the sect have created humanitarian crises leading to shortages of water, food and healthcare services as well as inadequate shelter with the emergence of a large number of internally displaced persons (IDP) across the Lake Chad region, which the United Nations has estimated at far above two million (2,000,000) with well above seven million (7,000,000) people depending solely on humanitarian assistance to survive.

In addition, the level of unemployment has surged in this part of the country due to the relocation of existing firms from the zone while new ones are afraid to establish there. Similarly, traders, small scale enterprise owners as well as farmers find it difficult to operate for fear of being killed by members of this dreaded sect.

Illiteracy rate has gone up in addition to high number of out of school children. The sect has also destroyed several physical infrastructures in the zone, particularly in Borno and Yobe States while public and private development projects as well as foreign direct investment have dwindled due to the operations of the sect.

In summary, the Boko Haram conflict has created more development challenges in the zone by aggravating the levels of unemployment, poverty, insecurity, hunger, humanitarian crisis, etc.

Efforts at Addressing the Problem

Since engagement of the Boko Haram sect in violent and destructive activities began in 2009, some policy initiatives have been put in place by the government, NGOs and private individuals to end their operations and address the problems it created. For instance, aside from employing military campaign strategy, which included multinational joint task force (this comprises troops from five countries, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria), the government at the centre made attempt to negotiate with the sect, which was not successful. Moreover, the North-East Development Commission was created in 2017 by Act No.7 of the National Assembly. The responsibility of the commission as contained in the Act is to among other things receive and manage any funds allocated by the federal governments and international donors to resettle, rehabilitate, reintegrate and reconstruct roads, houses, and business premises of the victims of terrorism and indulgency, and to tackle poverty, literacy, ecological problems and any other related environmental challenges in the North-East States and for related matters.

Furthermore, international donors set up prevention and stabilization strategies to address the problems, which according to Brechenmacher (2019) can be categorized into “programs aimed at strengthening local conflict prevention and mitigation systems, programs aimed at restoring local governance and basic services, and programs aimed at fostering social cohesion and ensuring there integration of former combatants.”

Results of the Initiatives

The initiatives and strategies adopted by the government and other agencies mentioned above initially yielded some results. This was at the beginning of the new administration, which took over the mantle of leadership from the previous government of President Goodluck Jonathan in May 2015. During political campaign early 2015, president Buhari promised to defeat the group within six months, and by August the same year he gave the service chiefs three months to defeat the sect. This challenge made them to put in more efforts and commitment to defeating the sect coupled with the efforts of the multinational joint task force. Moreover, more training was provided for the military (with security assistance from Western countries like the US and UK, which included deployment of military advisers and sales of light attack aircraft) in addition to coopting local vigilante groups and the civilian joint task force.

Between 2015 and 2016, activities of Boko Haram were confined to remote areas and forests as the military intensified their campaigns against the sect. Many territories were recovered from them, which made the military to declare that the group had been decimated.

Furthermore, some of the kidnapped school children and other individuals were released by the sect, some escaped while others were rescued by the military. For example, in April 2015, approximately 450 women and girls were rescued by the Nigerian military in the Sambisa Forest, Borno State. By September the same year, 241 women and children were liberated with 43 members of the group arrested by the Nigerian military. The sect released 21 and 82 Chibok school girls to the Nigerian government as a result of several negotiations in October 2016 and May 2017 respectively.

In March 2018, the Federal government announced the return of 106 out of the 110 Dapchi school girls kidnapped by the group. Moreover, in May 2018 the military reported the rescue of more than 1,000 women, children and young men abducted by the Boko Haram group in the Bama Local Government Area of Borno State. Finally, some of the members of the group

surrendered to government while others were arrested by the military; out of which quite a number have been reintegrated into the society after undergoing some deradicalization programmes.

The above achievements notwithstanding, some of the abducted children and others still remain in the captivity of the sect, including Leah Sharibu, who was among the kidnapped Chibok girls in 2014, and was not released because she decided not to renounce her Christianity.

Furthermore, there is a resurgence of the activities of the sect in addition to banditry currently, which has escalated attacks not only in the North-East but also across some States in the North West. These can be attributed to the involvement of the international group, ISWAP. Furthermore, 2018 was the year preceding the general election in the country; so, the political dimension may not be explained away. Besides, there have been complaints from the military of insufficient and outdated weapons, which made some military personnel to run away from the insurgents as their Morales dampened. In addition, there were reports that the military was overstretched.

Between 2018 and 2020 several people were killed by the group including civilians and aid workers. This elicited more outcries from various quarters including the national assembly with the call for the president to sack all the service chiefs and appoint new ones. Although the president was reluctant to do this, however, as the activities of the militant group intensified, he finally succumbed to the call and on January 26, 2021 new service chiefs were appointed to replace the former ones.

Also, more voices from the president's region (North) including some of his supporters have been speaking against the administration's inability to contain the activities of the sect as well as that of the Bandits.

The sect has also been using different tactics including guerilla style of attacks, laying of landmines for the military, and the intelligence gathering that enable them to monitor the movement of the military. The military however, has also continued their onslaught on the group's hideouts with several of them killed.

The conclusion is that the conflict is far from over because it continues to intensify and creating more humanitarian needs. The sect is still very active and in control of some areas in the North-East, with upsurge in attacks and casualties. The COVID-19, which began in the late 2019 and spread to nations of the world including Nigeria, appears to have also worsened the crisis coupled with the economic consequences of fighting both the virus and insurgency.

Policy Suggestions

The efforts of the government and donor agencies at tackling the menace of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East zone of Nigeria are commendable. However, more needs to be done in addition to what is already on ground. For instance, there is the need for more political will to employ all available means within the armpit of the law to address the situation. The military should be well equipped and motivated. All security agents should synergize their operations for better results. The need for intelligence gathering and employment of modern technology to

defeat the group cannot be overemphasized. It is also important to block every avenue through which the sect accesses weapons, food supplies and all basic needs as well as communicate, recruit members, and travel.

Furthermore, it is apparent that the conflict may not be over without international support. Thus, it is imperative to seek assistance from the international community in the area of intelligence, provision of equipment and financial aid to tackle the problem. This is important because activities of the Boko Haram Islamic terrorist group have extended beyond the Nigerian border, thereby taking international dimension, particularly since the involvement of ISWAP. So, fighting terrorism requires international cooperation. Moreover, the government needs to tap from the experiences of nations, which have successfully fought terrorism within and outside their countries. Moreover, sources of funding by the sect should be tracked.

It is also important to address the problems of poverty, inequality, unemployment, illiteracy, out of school children, etc. that have been plaguing the zone for years. This is necessary because the poor and the unemployed are easy targets for recruitment into the sect. Addressing these issues will prevent young persons from joining the group. The issues of good governance and accountability are essential. Religious leaders should also focus on teachings that will foster peace, unity and love instead of teachings that encourage violence. There should also be aggressive campaign against radical ideologies and teachings by religious leaders.

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