Securing Schools:
Boko Haram and Education in Northern Nigeria

8/7/2021

100 Girls still Missing from Chibok School, last week one found. Photo Credit: Al Jazeera News

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It was a hashtag that took over the whole internet. Everyone spoke with one voice: "#bringbackourgirls." People as diverse as Michelle Obama, the Pope, Harrison Ford, and Malala Yousafzai contributed their voices to the movement that went truly global, with protests in New York, Paris, and Abuja, Nigeria–the epicenter of it all.[1] The girls in question were the Chibok girls, all 276 of whom were abducted from a school in the small village of Chibok in far northwestern Nigeria by Boko Haram, a terrorist group affiliated with the Islamic State. Today, nearly seven years later, despite the fiery, but short-lived, international outcry, over one hundred

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[1] Matfess, H. (2017, May 5). *Three Years Later, A Look at the #BringBackOurGirls Catch-22*. The Daily Beast. https://www.thedailybeast.com/three-years-later-a-look-at-the-bringbackourgirls-catch-22; Sherlow, M. (2015, April 14). Did the #bringbackourgirls campaign make a difference in Nigeria? *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/14/nigeria-bringbackourgirls-campaign-one-year-on

of them remain missing and thousands of others have been kidnapped, barely making international news.

The state of education in northern Nigeria remains in crisis, particularly in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states in the Northeast. Nigeria has 10 million children that are not in school and 69% of them are in the North.[2] Trust in the system is falling and consistent security, economic and cultural issues hinder any effort to rebuild this trust. These complicated issues have no immediate solutions, but the Nigerian government must start rebuilding trust and rebuilding infrastructure in northern Nigeria to prevent a total collapse of their educational infrastructure and to encourage a respectful and nuanced approach to development and modernization suited to the unique needs of the people of northern Nigeria. First, Nigeria's government should recognize its own role in creating this crisis. Inefficiency, teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms and political instability are the factors that hinder educational attainment in Nigeria, and the government's woeful bureaucracy and corrupt tendencies have a hand in creating every one of them. To ameliorate this crisis, the government must understand their agency in these issues and gain the political will to solve them, along with the deeper underlying factors that will continue to create issues for the education system.

The first step is what Phoebe Musdandu calls "winning the peace."[3] To Musandu, defeating Boko Haram is not enough as long as the dismal conditions in northeastern Nigeria that attracted people to Boko Haram in the first place remain. In the context of the Chibok mass kidnapping, she addresses the idea of #Bringbackourgirls and how bringing back our girls is only the first step. We must interrogate what they are returning to and recognize that even if they are with their families, the lack of opportunity that characterizes the lives of northern Nigerians does not disappear. In fact, region-wide security is the only feasible method to secure schools in the long term; any form of localized defense against Boko Haram is essentially a high stakes game of whack-a-mole. Boko Haram can target a different school, and schoolchildren will continue to be targeted and killed.[4] Thus, dealing with outstanding regional conflict–both related to Boko

[2] Adedeji, A., & Castradori, M. (2021). *Student kidnappings threaten collapse of Nigerian education system.* The Brookings Institution.

[3] Musandu, P. (2015). The Abduction of the Chibok Girls. *Hawwa*, *13*(2), 141–147

[4] Adeniran & Castradori, 2021

Haram and other ethnic and interreligious violence–is a key step to building the stability necessary for schools to be safe and useful.

The next step in recognizing the reality of education in northwestern Nigeria is acknowledging the trauma faced by many if not all students in the region. This requires proactive measures to ensure that not only are schools safe, but students feel safe. There are specific best practices for teaching those affected by conflict that focus on building positive relationships between teachers and students that recognize the students' strength and their incredible resilience in persevering through their trauma. Other key steps include counseling and individualized work to help students process their trauma.[5] This includes creating positive memories associated with school to prevent children from turning entirely away from education due to their very legitimate trauma.[6] One example of the region's trauma is the story of Amina Ali, a Chibok girl who was rescued after two years as a captive of Boko Haram. Now the mother of a terrorist's child, she no longer wants to pursue an education, choosing instead to start a sewing business. Nevertheless, Ali shows incredible resilience, bravely telling Reuters "I am not scared of Boko Haram - they are not my God."[7] Ali's story reveals the complex nature of trauma in the region, and how as outsiders, we should not interpret a choice to leave school as a sign of submission to Boko Haram or their ideology. Nevertheless, for those that do want to pursue an education, the trauma that exists is undeniable, and the Nigerian government should prioritize giving the region and its schools the resources necessary to heal.

The next step for the Nigerian state is to invest in diverse and sustainable economic development of the impoverished regions of the North. This includes investing in infrastructure and in education, especially for women. First, a combination of good roads and steady electricity would go a long way to create an enabling environment for economic growth. Additionally, another step the Nigerian government could and should take is investing in institutions of higher education in northern Nigeria as the southern regions continue to have almost twice as many

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[5] Waters, L., & Brunzell, T. (2018, August 13). Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma. *Greater Good Magazine*. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_ways_to_support_students_affected_by_trauma
[6] Adeniran & Castradori, 2021
[7] Nwaubani, A. T. (2016, August 16). Exclusive: "I just want to go home", says first Chibok schoolgirl rescued from Boko Haram. *Reuters*.

universities as the North.[8] Education also has an important role to play in reducing family size which is closely correlated with poverty. This is especially important in the North where there is strong opposition to any form of birth control.[9] This relationship between economic development and education could lead to a positive feedback loop in which investment in education encourages investment in the region which in turn furthers educational attainment. However, the first round of investment must be realized, and education must be funded and supported.

This first round of investment must involve rebuilding schools in the North. Boko Haram has destroyed 1,400 schools and has killed around 2,300 teachers. Beyond the completely destroyed schools, many are damaged or are in areas where it would be unsafe to resume learning.[10] These efforts were hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an extended pause in school, with very few options available to replace this lost time.[11] In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly every aspect of life in northern Nigeria has gotten more difficult as the refugee camps that hold many people who fled Boko Haram do not have adequate sanitation nor health services. Even outside of refugee camps, millions of other Nigerians have slid into poverty because of the pandemic.[12]

Additionally, across Africa, there is a lack of trust in their governments both for COVID vaccine safety and the rollout process for these vaccines, along with enduring issues relating to vaccine access and equity.[13] In northern Nigeria, specifically, there is much skepticism of pharmaceutical companies and the government that enables them. Some of this skepticism stems from a 1996 incident where Pfizer tested their anti-meningitis drug on children in Kano, Nigeria without receiving approval. Of the 200 children involved in the trial, eleven died. During the

[8] Dapel, Z. (2018, April 6). Poverty in Nigeria: Understanding and Bridging the Divide between North and South. *Center for Global Development*. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/poverty-nigeria-understanding-and-bridging-divide-between-north-and-south

[9] Dapel, 2018

[10] *Over half of schools remain closed in epicentre of Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria – UNICEF*. (2017, September 29). The United Nations. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/09/over-half-of-schools-remain-closed-in-epicentre-of-boko-haram-crisis-in-nigeria-unicef/

[11] Adeniran & Castradori, 2021

[12] *About OCHA Nigeria*. (2021). United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. https://www.unocha.org/nigeria/about-ocha-nigeria

[13] Seydou, A. (2021, March 12). Africa has started vaccinating against the coronavirus. But do citizens trust their governments on vaccine safety? *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/03/12/africa-has-started-vaccinating-against-covid-do-citizens-trust-their-governments-vaccine-safety/

trial, Pfizer withheld information about side effects and broke ethical guidelines relating to the use of a human control group.[14] Pfizer eventually settled the lawsuit that followed this trial, but the damage had been done. Additionally, Boko Haram is against vaccinations, seeing them as an example of anti-Islamic innovation, thus posing another barrier to exiting the pandemic–and thus getting back to school safely–in the region.[15]

Image Credit: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2021-03/05/c_139787852.htm

Another key step in supporting Nigerian Muslims is validating their religious identity and affirming their proud history, both in national life and in school curricula. We have already addressed the long scholarly tradition of northern Nigeria and how that includes education for women. Framing this scholarly tradition as something that can coexist with and support Western education is a key step to overcoming cultural hesitancy towards the Nigerian education system. While this does not solve the economic and security problems that hinder education in the region, overcoming cultural hesitancy to the imposition of Western-style education is key to creating a long-term solution to this crisis. The best practice for overcoming this cultural

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[14] Wise, J. (2001). Pfizer accused of testing new drug without ethical approval. *British Medical Journal*, *322*(7280), 141.
[15] Yusuf, M. (2008, October 15). *BBC Hausa Service Interview with Muhammed Yusuf* (A. Kassim, Trans.).

hesitancy is to lean into it and embrace the region's rich history and culture in the learning process.

Altogether, there is no easy solution to the educational crisis that is facing northern Nigeria. While long-term solutions can and must be implemented, the most important step for the Nigerian government is to prevent a total collapse. Students are going missing, students are dropping out, and those who stay in school are barely learning from underqualified teachers. The government must act now to help this region defend its scholarly tradition and defend its schools. This must be done by centering the populations affected and empowering them. Today, the world is no longer indignant about the state of education in northern Nigeria–perhaps because "pursue sustainable solutions to complex problems" is a less snappy hashtag than "bring back our girls." However, as a global community, we must encourage the Nigerian government to act and support an education system on the brink of collapse.

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