



Wilton Park



Report

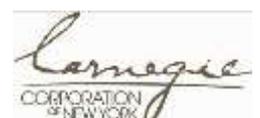
## **Conflict and Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria**

Wednesday 26 – Thursday 27 May 2021 | WP1761V1

In association with:



With support  
from:



## Report

# Conflict and Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria

Wednesday 26 – Thursday 27 May 2021 | WP1761V1

**In association with the African Peacebuilding Network of the Social Science Research Council, New York and the African Leadership Centre**

**With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York**

### Executive summary

The Wilton Park Africa Peacebuilding Series which is in its 5th year exists to bring to the table a range of voices including leading experts, policy practitioners, scholars, researchers, and civil society to discuss a wide range of issues around conflict and peacebuilding in Africa. This series is particularly key to building sustainable interaction between civil society and international actors in addition to providing a platform for intergenerational dialogue to interrogate and harvest ideas around a central theme of next generation peacebuilding.

Building on previous dialogues around the changing dynamics of conflict and the ways in which peacebuilding actors have been responding in the African context, the themes of future peace and next generation set the scene for this year's discussion around conflict and peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria represents a critical area as discussions around peace in that context are fundamental to the wider discussion on Nigeria's peace and stability and subsequently the West African region. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also central to the discussion considering the structural ramifications it has had and its exacerbation of an already precarious environment in Northern Nigeria, exposing the fragile economy, impacting livelihoods, and clouding an already uncertain future for the youth.

The need for visioning and mapping out what a peaceful Northern Nigeria will look like in the future was noted to be key to the conversation and was further framed by questions such as what will peace look like in the future? Who are the necessary actors (who needs to be included), what relationships are required, and what needs to be done to achieve this peace? Interlinked was the need to convene a range of voices usually not present at the discussion, including youth voices, local NGO's and women's organisations.

### Key takeaways

- Peacebuilding processes need to be democratised and representative of the different stakeholders.
- Peace needs to be integrated into the larger state framework and subsequent actions, including state building.
- Peace culture which is based on economic, political, and civil rights, which allows self-expression and participation at all levels of society needs to be built

and promoted by the state. Peacebuilding needs to transform mindsets, recognising a shared destiny and a common future. Inclusivity, gender equity and the importance of civic engagement are key to this acceptance of diversity.

- Addressing the issues of women's agency and representation and inclusion requires a concerted move away the simplistic perception of women as victims.
- There is need to address and reshape the social norms that determine women as unsuitable for and unbelonging in peacekeeping roles in both the formal and informal spaces.
- There needs to be greater appetite to create laws that protect women and girls from gender-based violence, resolve in enforcing existing policies, and intentionality in involving women in state led peace processes as women are equal stakeholders in said processes.
- As future leaders, youth must envision a peace that transforms the existing approach of state responses to critical crises from one that prioritizes the state's reputation, plays politics with human lives, and deflects, to one that invests in marginalised communities, human dignity, and bringing citizens closer to the centre.
- The future of peace actors and leaders hinges on early age nurturing to 'change the thinking' across the board, including in such key ways as supporting young women and feminist movements.
- Greater investment must be made into the management, understanding, perception of, and interaction with different religions, particularly Islam.

## Introduction

1. Moving away from conventional ways of addressing peacebuilding, which prioritises security, the dialogue framed 'peace' as the entry point. The importance of this shift is the opportunity it offers for a 'different and broader lens to view and understand the multidimensional issues, expand thinking and pathways, and the range of actors involved in achieving peace'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this shift in focus to future peace provides a critical departure by providing the platform for visioning, which has also been noted as essential to leadership.
2. What 'peace' is remains a complex yet critical question. Drawing on Galtung's notion of structural peace, it was noted that this is where Nigeria needs to be located. Conversations around peace in Nigeria located it at both the local and state levels. In the former an array of informal actors have been identified who are playing critical roles to promote peace. At the formal state level, evident gaps exist as peace is largely contingent on a leadership that is inclusive and forward thinking.
3. Through this dialogue, visioning proved critical to imagining and drawing up a road map to a peaceful future in Northern Nigeria and Nigeria. Moreover, in keeping with the approach of including a broader range of voices and actors this dialogue offered the opportunity for visioning beyond the traditional voices, drawing on an intergenerational and diverse participant group. In keeping with visioning, a collaborative effort was made to picture this peaceful future, drawing on a range of issues from the impact of COVID-19, the ungoverned Sahel region and the impacts for peace and transformation of peace for the future.

## Context

4. Nigeria is a nation rife with and engulfed in a host of insecurity issues not only across the northern regions; North-West, North-East, and North-Central, but also across the

<sup>1</sup> Participant during the discussion.

southern regions including the Southeast, South-south and South-West. Northern Nigeria, in particular, has been a hot bed of conflict for over a decade and has been considered an environment that is developmentally poor, performing badly against key indices such as education rates, and health. Notwithstanding that COVID-19 has had widespread global implications; in Northern Nigeria it has only served to exacerbate existing conditions. The state's lack of interest in or inability to serve fundamental functions such as providing economic, health, and physical security has left it in dire conditions.

5. The absence of the state in these crucial spaces has therefore caused a further breakdown of trust between the state and citizen, with the latter feeling more isolated from the state. This has served to open the door for non-state actors such as Boko Haram to mobilise and provide a range of services expected of the government including medical care, socio-economic relief, and even comfort. The history, geopolitics, socioeconomic conditions amidst an ongoing insurgency, banditry, ransoming and a host of other issues, the range of emerging new actors (both in conflict and peacebuilding) and the regional implications for other countries such as Benin Republic, Cameroon, Niger Republic, and Chad make Northern Nigeria a significant area for peace and security. Northern Nigeria in essence is a microcosmic representation of current and future peacebuilding challenges or questions for the African continent.

### **Inclusive representation**

6. The issue of inclusivity was a central point throughout the discussion as it was clear that this is fundamental to the shift in how peace is perceived, approached, and achieved. The issue of inclusivity can be linked to the conversation around the state and the sort of state that works toward achieving peace. In this regard, the ideal state was characterised as one that is collectively owned by its (citizens) constituents, where everyone has a space and a say and where there is no exclusion, marginalisation, or alienation of people such that they are actively pushed people to the fringes.
7. In the Nigerian context, the need for continuous negotiations that allows different parties such as women, youth, farmers, herders, the disabled (amongst others), to be self-determining actors who are active contributors in shaping the narratives and character of peace is very evident. Moreover, this ideal state would be one that can be held accountable, is participatory, thrives on interest and wellbeing of citizens and can deliver security and is an open space for all, being able to create both an infrastructure for, and culture of, peace. In increasing societal participation and promoting greater self-determination and individual and communal autonomy, a common consensus can begin to take shape in such a way as to translate into prosperity not only for Nigeria, but West Africa and the wider continent.
7. One of the most evident voices absent from conversations and formal practices of leadership or peacebuilding is that of women. A stark picture of the extent of this exclusion is highlighted by the fact that Nigeria has only had one female governor lasting 3 months, and the current national Senate and Lower House of Assembly boast a meagre 6% and 5.5% of female representation, respectively. Yet it is widely acknowledged that their representation and inclusion is critical to sustainable peace.
8. Unfortunately, while they remain absent in these spaces, they often bear the brunt of the violence. While the targeted violence, sexual or otherwise, against them and their continued insecurity must not be overlooked, the need to move away from the narrative that shapes them solely as victims is vital. The predominant narrative that focuses solely on their victimisation obscures the multifaceted counter terrorism, counter insurgency, and conflict management strategy roles women play in these insecure spaces. The continued exclusion of women, negation of their agency and seeing them as afterthoughts will continue to result in large gaps in peacebuilding processes. The move to leverage their agency, voices and experiences could

fundamentally lead to the necessary transformational ideas and solutions.

9. Another set of voices evidently absent from the conversations is that of the youth. While Nigerians under 35 years old account for over 70% of its population, across the various regions they continue to be marginalised and excluded from all national conversations and processes, not least in peacebuilding. The EndSARS movement which took place in October 2020, however, was indicative of the ability of youth to come together in a united front to stand up against the human rights violations and insecurity that remains rife. The swift and organised mobilisation by individuals and groups alike, for instance FemCo, gave a glimpse into the potential for Nigeria's youth to have a seat, and drive conversations, at the proverbial table.
10. Moving forward and creating a real chance for progress requires the youth to shift away from the use of tribe and religion as dividing lines and wedge issues, as is currently done by state actors. The role of social media is also a key point around youth engagement. Despite concerns about its potential for division and the spread of mis and disinformation through social media, youth have been able to innovate their way out of problems, creating market squares that bring diverse groups together, and giving otherwise separated groups and individuals voice. In so doing, youth have used social media platforms to both understand and find solutions to shared and individual problems, particularly around governance.

### **Reshaping the narrative and relationships**

11. The stark reality is that peace has not, and cannot, fall out of the sky. Peace is contingent on the nature of the relationships that exist within the society amongst all the stakeholders. In Nigeria, the total breakdown of trust between society and the state and its agents - including the political class – is evident and requires immediate repair. One of the participants aptly noted that peace requires introspection at the individual, community, and state levels. Another point that was addressed is the need for the relationship between religious organisations and traditional rulers to be addressed and reconstituted. The use of ethno-religious differences to create cleavages has had widespread impact on the wider society who are left bearing the, often violent consequences.
12. Linked to the earlier point around inclusivity, the need to broaden the conversation to a wider subset of the population needs to be re-emphasised. Where existing peace conversations have historically been restricted to specific groups such as the urban middle classes, they need to be more democratised, bringing people from different walks of life into the fold, providing an opportunity for them to function as agents of peace. This democratisation of peace and rebuilding of trust, in no small part, rests on narrowing the gaps between different groups as well as between groups and the state itself.
13. Alongside the deliberate inclusion of the voices of women, young girls, and youth in general, justice - in its many forms - must be understood as a key part of the foundation on which peace is built. Through economic, social, and judicial justice, individuals and groups can be empowered to begin rebuilding their lives, livelihoods, and confidence in the state. This would subsequently have the result of improving the chances of peace creation and sustainability. Bridging these relationships also calls for complementarity between the efforts of state and non-state actors. Despite the resilient efforts of a wide array of non-state and informal actors in building peace, countering the ongoing spate of violence and insecurity, and providing succour to people, substantive success seems as yet an unattainable dream. This lack of widespread immediate success, however, needs to be located within the context of a considerable lack of complementary action by the state.

### **State absence**

14. The dearth of formal state peacebuilding structures and lack of support from those in

existence has led to a large tract of ungoverned spaces across the country. In these ungoverned spaces, there is a noticeably ever shrinking space for peacebuilding on the one hand, and an expanding conflict space due to an outsized focus and agitation, not for peace but for narrow political ends on the other. Lacking introspection, formal leadership has failed to recognise that a one size fits all approach as a panacea to the dynamically evolving nature of the issues is an untenable one and displays a trivialisation of the trauma faced by a generation of Northern Nigerians.

15. Whilst being distracted by a narrow view of leadership, COVID-19 has exacerbated endemic issues, further eroding trust, and leaving people feeling more isolated from the state due to the lockdown security measures and truncation of services. These ungoverned spaces allow the emergence and entrenchment of non-state armed actors who both wield violence and provide services to people as a means of control. These non-state actors have stepped into the breach, covering the ground given up by the state, mobilising to provide medical care, economic support, and other services which should otherwise be provided by the state. Further, we see conflict merchants display an understanding of the import of education in both the constant attacks on schools and school age children by violent groups and as a tool of indoctrination to foster tension and block peace by non-violent actors.
16. Lauded though they should be, the efforts of local organisations need the state and its ability to cater to the fundamental, basic needs of a wide swathe of people as these groups on their own cannot effectively push back against non-state armed actors. It is important that the state recaptures this lost ground in all its many forms.
17. From an educational and religious perspective, it must make concerted efforts to ensure a reimagining of the role of, and interaction with, religion, particularly Islam. There must be a reorientation on how religion is taught, engaged, and understood - not as an instrument of division, but as one of peace that can be used to alleviate conflict. In the provision of other services, state leadership must recognise that COVID-19 did not cause but exacerbated existing issues.
18. Addressing the issues faced by citizens requires acknowledging the widespread trauma suffered by a generation of women, girls, and youth at large. It requires understanding that new skills and solutions to endemic problems cannot be arrived without the inclusion of the voices traumatised by said problems. Character and values such as empathy as well as honest interrogations and corrections of the past must be promoted if there is to be true reconciliation, a better class of citizens, and a transition to an actual peaceful society.

### **Northern Nigeria's regions**

19. As northern Nigeria is made up of different regions with their own particularities, breakout groups were created to allow participants to think through the earlier discussions and come up with potential solutions to the ongoing situations in the North. A summary of this is below:
  - I. North-Eastern Nigeria is an evidently complex environment which makes the situations unfolding there constantly fluid. Four factors were identified as shaping the conflict in the region: religion; ethnicity; economic deprivation; and youth vulnerability and exclusion.

These factors must be understood as inextricably linked and addressed as such if there is to be any chance of finding lasting solutions to any or all of them. It is also important to look beyond the binary sectioning of religion between Christianity and Islam, recognising the role traditional religions play in society and bringing them in as peacebuilding actors. As culture plays a significant role in people's lives, it is vital to understand how it can play both a role in reducing the real sense of exclusion felt by youth as well as shape non-violent resolutions to conflictual

situations. The flow of corruption, especially in the elite class, needs to be stemmed as it has long been a problem that stymies the progress of peacebuilding efforts.

Whereas international actors have depended on business, military, and political elite at the national level to understand the 'lay of the land' and disburse donor funds, there must be a pivot to direct interactions with local level actors who better understand the intricacies and nuances in their communities. Doing so will bridge the existing knowledge gap, allowing local actors to provide solutions which cater to contextual idiosyncrasies. These local level actors include, but are not limited to activists, journalists, educators, and medical care providers. It is also crucial that the state and federal governments find mechanisms to keep peacebuilding processes continuous by having institutions that address problems at first encounter, as opposed to waiting for them to be a perceived threat to elite status and control.

- II. The key takeaway from the North central area of Nigeria is an evident presence of self-help where the state is absent. There is the need though to look at the role of the state in relation to how power and leadership are exercised and perceived. With regards to leadership, there is a need to look at legitimacy beyond electoral and corporate accountability and morality as well. However, it is also acknowledged that leadership is extremely complex in this region because there are so many different identities.

The issue of a trust deficit was addressed as being fundamental to repair relationships, especially between the elite and the wider population and the state and the citizens. Similar to earlier points on democratisation is the need for consensus building beyond the state, and all stakeholders needing to come together to arrive at various solutions. One of the solutions proposed is the need for an armistice which will serve to reframe the narrative around the different actors beyond their role as perpetrators and more as being part of the solution. The need to identify who can provide and lead this platform was a key question.

- III. Given the situation in the Northwest the need to adopt a human rights approach to peacebuilding has been proposed. Moreover the discussion moved to flipping the question to look instead at the role of local agency, namely thinking about stakeholders and how they can be involved in the processes. There is also the need to both create a consensus on the language of peace and what this means, as well as a national architecture on peace. One of the recommendations around education is how to infuse peace into the educational curricula that would bring women and marginalised groups in the conversations and processes. A final point around story-telling was proposed, looking into how historical narratives have influenced the ways in which peace has been perceived, drawing into the conversation those from the arts as mediums for helping to reshape the narratives.

- IV. The regional dynamics are heavily influenced by what goes on in northern Nigeria, given that it borders several countries who are affiliated in many ways and trade across what is considered artificial borders. Ungoverned spaces, as previously mentioned, also factor into the regional dynamics. Thus, it is important to pay attention to what is happening in Northern Nigeria. Two key points were made on this; one on the significance of trust building which includes the need to renegotiate the social contract, starting in the form of a national dialogue. However, the challenge remains locating mutuality and isolating the key issues that need to be agreed upon by all stakeholders. There is an urgency for this to happen as social capital is being lost.

The issue of resourcing and actors were also discussed in the context of the region and how there is a struggle to engage because of Nigeria's status as a hegemon. Moreover the need to pay attention to a new range of international

actors including Turkey, the Middle East, China, and India amongst others was cited as critical. A question around national actors, including national philanthropists, was also tabled considering the funding conversation. The second point was around needing a framework that would provide a platform for innovation, that can be located in national conversations not as a standalone but in finding synergies.

## **Concluding remarks**

20. After two days of a rich exchange of information, several key takeaways stood out including the importance of intergenerational, intersectoral, honest, creative, and continuous dialogue. Additionally, the importance of structural peace based on a renewed organic social contract was highlighted. The centrality of participation and the issue of ontology, language, and terminology such as what is future peace and the framing the discussion as peace versus security were critical areas of discussion.
21. Inclusive and forward-looking leadership, investing in marginalized communities in ways that promote dignity and justice and open space for locally-rooted solutions were seen as vital to build peace. Moreover, issues of education and ownership, who are the stakeholders and where does mutuality lay, and dreaming and imagination, the need to prioritise education and values and creating room to building on the positive were also flagged as key to improve the current situation.

### **Adeoti Dipeolu and Ademijulo Obafemi-Olopade**

Wilton Park | July 2021

Wilton Park reports are intended to be brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of an event. Reports reflect rapporteurs' accounts of the proceedings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) or Her Majesty's Government.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website [www.wiltonpark.org.uk](http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk). To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>