



Foreign &  
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Office



Wilton Park



Report

## **Fostering social cohesion in Nigeria**

Wednesday 26 – Friday 28 February 2020 | WP1752

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**In partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

In Nigeria, social cohesion has been under threat in the past decades, moving across ethnic, religious and social divides. Tension between Christians and Muslims, farmers and herders<sup>1</sup>, North and South, across different ethnic groups, against a background of Boko Haram violence and the injustice felt by all groups involved, outline the Nigerian situation as incredibly complex. Building and fostering social cohesion and awareness in Nigeria through recognising the complexity of the challenges communities face and adopting a solutions-based approach is therefore vital to overcome the systemic inter- and intracommunal challenges communities face. Bringing people together to engage in open dialogue at the Wilton Park conference in the UK last February was an important and necessary first step towards creating critical spaces for change, working across the boundaries of ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic divides.

Nigeria is facing multiple and complex security challenges including religious violence in the North East, worsening violent criminality and insecurity in the North West and ethno-religious violence and farmer-herder conflict across large parts of central Nigeria. In a country in which approximately 80% of the population is highly religiously observant, roughly divided between the two main religions of Islam and Christianity, the role of religion and its primacy over ethno-political and other factors in these violent conflicts is hotly debated and contested. It is a debate in which opposing views are strongly and sincerely held, which in itself can complicate inter-faith relations. It is important to recognise the role religion plays including in fostering and maintaining social cohesion and consider moving away from the faith-blind approach some development actors and aid organisations employ in contexts where religion does play a key role in people's realities. In an era where trust is an issue, religious leaders tend to be more trusted than any other category of leaders, although there is yet insufficient data on the practical implications thereof. Religious leaders are however in the unique position to serve a key role as mediators and educators in times of conflict and insecurity. Although religion should not be regarded as a primary driver of conflict, it is important to first recognise the way in which religion shapes the conflict narrative.

<sup>1</sup> This phrase is used to cover a range of settled farming communities and a range of pastoralist and herding communities, including semi-nomadic and nomadic groups.

"I'm sure of one thing all of us have in common: to use whatever influence we have to foster social cohesion."

The Wilton Park conference aimed to provide a space for dialogue between diverse stakeholders from Nigeria and the UK, to discuss the challenges of inter-communal violence in Nigeria and examine how collectively government, civil society, faith-based and community organisations can work together to build solutions. The specific aims of the conference were to explore the dynamics of the conflict in Nigeria including the role religion plays as a driver of violence, while at the same time identifying and assessing other underlying drivers for insecurity such as resource competition, farmer-herder conflicts, poverty and inequality, access to education and structures of governance. The conference explored opportunities to strengthen inter-faith initiatives to tackle tensions and polarisation and promote respect and reconciliation between groups. Specifically, the role of faith leaders could play as a convenors and mediators in these reconciliation efforts was central to the dialogue. The conference set out to consider alternative dispute settlement mechanisms to address impunity for those responsible and ensure justice is applied to all. Finally, it sought to recommend how the British government and international partners can best support the Nigerian Government, faith and community leaders in building these solutions. The conference formed part of the UK Government's response to the [Bishop of Truro's 2019 Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians](#).

## Executive summary

These key themes emerged from discussion during the conference:

- **Shaping the narrative** – Reframing existing narratives and encouraging more inclusive narratives are key to understanding and tackling the complex challenges along ethnic and religious divides. Dominant narratives between North-South, Christian-Muslim, farmer-herder and ethnic divides have shaped the conflict, often informed by prejudice, stereotyping and misinformation. A key priority for peace should be a commitment to challenging one sided media narratives that fuel conflict.
- **Information and data** – Lack of data and insufficient access to information results in misinformation on sensitive issues such as Boko Haram violence and farmer-herder conflicts, furthering polarisation between groups.
- **Education as a focal point for change and peacebuilding** – Education should be at the forefront of change in the Nigerian context, as illiteracy and the absence of contextually sensitive education potentially strengthens divides between groups. Millions of children being out of school further raises the risk of turning towards violent extremism. Transforming education to include historical understanding, peace and justice can be a key mechanism to foster social cohesion.
- **Political will as an important driver for change** – The will to listen, to conduct dialogue with one another and for governance to show political will, are key in the Nigerian context. Unless there is political willingness and deliberateness of all parties involved, social cohesion efforts will be less effective. There is distrust towards the Nigerian government's response to inequality and impunity. There exists a widespread sense that unless systemic changes take place in governance, violence and security issues will not be adequately addressed.

- **Trust and unity** – Fostering trust and unity between Nigerians from communities that are deeply divided is of high importance. There exists deep disunity and mistrust between groups as well as a lack of unifying Nigerian identity binding people together. Identity is more often attributed to ethnicity, region or religion. Promoting interaction and dialogue can provide space for constructive and sustainable change.
- **Complex drivers for conflict** – The need to recognise the various drivers for conflict. There is a need to understand the complexity of the issues Nigerians face and how they intersect. Poverty, socioeconomic challenges, inequality and (political) polarisation play a role in exacerbating conflict.
- **Actively involving the international community** – International organisations and institutions should play a more prominent role in supporting Nigeria, its communities, CSOs, religious and government institutions. This is where the British government, including DFID, can play a pivotal role, encouraging and providing support to different stakeholders. There could be greater support for Nigeria's National Livestock Transformation Programme given its potential to be a flagship solution to promote peace and reduce conflict.
- **Religious and community leaders as mediators** – Religious and community leaders need to be sensitive to their role in fostering social cohesion both within and outside their communities. However, religious and community leadership alone are not enough.
- **Intra - and interfaith dialogue foster cohesion** – There is great potential to foster change through the use of both intra- and interfaith dialogue, in learning about and interacting with people from other religious groups. Through learning about one another in interaction the perception of the other as 'different' can be transformed and stronger social cohesion fostered.
- **Peace and justice should go hand in hand**; it is important to both put an end to violence and foster justice and reconciliation. Building peace should not come at the expense of neglecting justice for impunity suffered by affected communities. It is helpful to look at examples of similar issues in other countries and how they approached peacebuilding.

A full list of recommendations and points for action can be found at the end of the report. Additionally, the participants made individual pledges to foster social cohesion in Nigeria. A summarised overview of these pledges is attached as an annex to this report.

## Introduction

1. The conference opened with an outline of the situation on the ground, discussing structural aspects of violence and insecurity in Nigeria. Instability in the region was discussed exploring the background of state and institutions, extremist ideology and violence, polarisation in parts of the country on the basis of ethnicity and/or religion, and typologies of different conflict in the country. During the conference the different drivers for conflict and insecurity were debated, moving from religious violence and the identification of more unknown drivers of conflict towards acknowledging the complexity of these drivers. Education, community engagement, justice and reconciliation and government response and leadership were mentioned.

2. Discussing the human consequences of conflict and the impact it has on people and their communities on a daily basis was part of the opening discussion. Moreover, the start of the conference highlighted the need to discuss how narratives are being shaped by, and influence, the current challenges. Identity and inclusion and representation of different groups across society and governance were mentioned and it was noted that the population is roughly proportionally divided in half between Christians and Muslims, but that governance and the media do not accurately reflect this. The conference provided a space for different parties to share their experience and expertise, highlighting that there are shared experiences of violence and injustice and that all are working towards achieving peace and justice. Through the collective sharing of similar experiences across different ethnic or religious contexts it became clear there is a need for shared understanding to move towards fostering social cohesion together.
3. This report reflects the main themes of discussions held over the duration of the conference. Where appropriate the themes are presented following the chronology of the conference, reflecting the plenary sessions as well as the break-out groups.

### Shaping the narrative

4. Throughout the conference introduction, the topic of broadening the narrative surfaced almost instantly. Starting by noting the difficulty of a single narrative, the conference sought to highlight the complexity of coexisting and contrasting narratives on several areas of insecurity. Firstly, it is important to note the sensitivity and diversity of conflict narratives. The Bishop of Truro's 2019 independent review on FCO support for persecuted Christians was a key background document to the conference. Although the review's purpose was to highlight the severity of violence and injustice against Christians, it is key to recognise the indiscriminate and widespread violence against communities of all religions in the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East. Every victim's voice should be heard and shifting the narrative of "Muslims against Christians" should be a priority to avoid fuelling tensions between groups. There is a tendency to extend the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram as Islamic violence rather than an ideological perversion and misinterpretation of Islam used by a group that targets members of any religious group. It remains important to approach the narratives, experiences and grievances of all groups with diligence and sensitivity.
5. This rhetoric extends to the narrative surrounding the stigmatisation of certain ethnic groups in the farmer-herder conflict, which was reframed during the conference as intercommunal violence to include the population that are excluded from this definition such as women and children. Attributing religion and ethnicity as main drivers for conflict blinds the narrative to other underlying drivers such as poverty, inequality, unemployment and access to resources. Through framing the conflict mainly along religious and ethnic divides, it has become easier to lose sight of the underlying drivers of marginalisation and the different reasons people turn to violence in the first place. Disillusionment with the government, lack of employment opportunities and lack of justice and impunity form a cocktail of factors pushing vulnerable groups into violence. There is a call for accurate analysis, acknowledging the role governance plays in this, and how through a shift of narrative, violence can be prevented and overcome. Further themes will elaborate on how to approach a narrative shift, starting with openness to dialogue and willingness to reach a shared understanding. Recommendations included engaging communities and organisations to counter inaccurate narratives, specifically focusing on countering inaccurate terminologies such as describing perpetrators of violence by ethnicity or religion and generalising Boko Haram<sup>2</sup> as the only group operating violently.

"There are very deeply held narratives when it comes to violence in Nigeria. Think about who is present in the room. Who you speak to, where and how, paints a completely different picture of the same violence and same issues."

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the report Boko Haram is used to refer to the various splinter terrorist and insurgent groups operating in the North East of Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin, including Islamic State West Africa.

6. In particular, conference participants recognised that describing the Fulani, or any other ethnic group, as a militia or as terrorists instigating violence was one of the most dangerous narratives used to misrepresent and even fuel violence. A Fulani representative spoke about how Fulani people (more accurately, the many different ethnicities which are collectively referred to as Fulani) saw the violence and their anger and sadness at how they were seen by many Nigerians. Participants concluded therefore that a key priority for peace should be challenging one sided media narratives which fuel conflict.
7. Developing mechanisms and action plans on how to equip leaders at all community levels to create and promote a common national identity can shift the focal point of action to becoming one where Nigerians work towards peace as opposed to polarised groups individually working towards peace. Shifting the narrative involve women, youth and young leaders to help inclusiveness, build capacity and foster empowerment.

### **Education for change and peacebuilding**

8. A recurring theme during the conference was the vital role education can play in fostering social cohesion and in building a sense of nationhood. Specifically, it was suggested that this could come through the teaching of history, which has not been in the school curriculum since the Civil War. This was seen to be important alongside the need for education to promote critical thinking.
9. The neglect of education across regions of the country was noted. This has left millions of Nigerian children out of school – the largest number of out-of-school children in the world. There was mention of an emergency of education, putting Nigerian children at a disadvantage. Education is a key linking factor between local mechanisms and addressing wider problems across society. Investment and improvement in education are vital in conflict resolution. Illiteracy and the lacking access to appropriate education in some regions further fosters radicalisation and extremism. Over the course of the conference, the curriculum of public education and its entry barriers for different groups was discussed with emphasis on the need for mass education and literacy that is informed by a sensitivity to religion. In some states the secularisation of education prevents communities sending their children to school. Moreover, the quality of education and its effect on recruitment into extremism was discussed. When the quality of education is low, disillusionment and resulting recruitment into violence may be more likely.
10. Additionally, inclusive, high-quality education as a tool for peacebuilding was high on the agenda. The importance of developing a comprehensive, inclusive national curriculum, while also increasing the number of schools in the more rural areas especially, can provide space for change. There was agreement that education was a key to addressing many drivers of different conflicts in Nigeria. Teaching valuable life skills as well as citizenship can foster a sense of unity and minimise youth being recruited into alternative ideological education such as that of Boko Haram. Providing education in the local language rather than in English was mentioned as a tool to make education more accessible although it was noted that English as a national language helps bind people together. Building capacity in education will broaden the opportunities of all Nigerians. Recommendations ranged from investing in the rural education sector, including building schools and training teachers to support to ensure heritage knowledge and history. To foster social cohesion, it is furthermore important that civic education and peace education are included in school and university curriculums. Investment and improvement in education are vital in conflict resolution, where knowledge exchange and regional placements could be an important tool to transform societal cleavages.

“We mentioned mass education, for the North this is extremely crucial, we are dealing with challenges even surrounding the definition of what literacy and education really is. Nigeria has the largest number out of school children in the world (12-14 million).”

## Information and data

11. Alongside improvements in education, another key element of shifting the narrative is information and data collection. The conference brought together experts from (local) government, nongovernmental organisations, religious communities, academia and other civil society organisations. While participants shared a wide range of experiences from research across Nigeria and the UK, access to empirical data and information was mentioned as an area in which improvements can be made. Misinformation (e.g. fake news) and a lack of data on issues of persecution, number of attacks, climate change, the nature of pastoralist-herder conflicts, the role of religious leaders and communities, the justice system and government policies and programmes leads to distrust and a dispersion of false narratives. On the one hand, this reflects the need to collect and promote accurate data on pressing issues. On the other hand, having faith in the produced and shared data is another challenge, as it becomes easy for data to feel misleading. Questions were asked how to facilitate data collection and how data can be used to proactively educate and shape the narrative. This theme ties into creating a shared understanding of the conflict narrative and the investment of different stakeholders, including government, religious organisations, civil society organisations and international non-governmental organisations as well as HMG in facilitating more research and evaluation capacity.
12. Participants concluded that there was a need for additional data alongside a need to honour the experiences of various different stakeholders. Accurate data will in turn shape narratives, policy and attitudes to policy and political will. It is also important to recognise the role of some mainstream media in creating and spreading fake news and contributing to destructive narratives and violence. Access to information and accurate data collection and distribution should in turn be positively reflected in the media, minimising the amount of falsely framed narratives that reach the ordinary Nigerian. Recommendations included the need to commission and fund independent, credible research on the number of violent attacks, crime victim statistics, cattle routes and changes to patterns and climate change. There is a need to develop a strategy on how to use data to proactively educate, myth-bust and shape the narrative. Accurate data should become available for both sides of the arguments to facilitate educated debate. This includes collaboration with international institutions and the Government of Nigeria to make information more accessible, including government reports to become available to foster and rebuild trust and transparency. There is an opportunity to explore ways of using radio, TV, film, media and celebrities to promote leadership, good practice, tolerance and peace. Information and data can operate as an accountability mechanism.

## Political will for change

13. The commitment to fostering social cohesion in the Nigerian setting relies on the willingness of people, organisations, institutions and governments to drive change and tackle the complex drivers of conflict and insecurity. The wide range of stakeholders present at the conference had an open discussion sharing the deeply felt need for active political will to achieve change. Unless there is shared commitment, responsibility and accountability across institutions and people are open to collaborating despite their differences, it is hard to foster effective change. This means the federal government of Nigeria, local government, community leaders, should all work together and hold each other accountable. Through the duration of the conference it was evident that all stakeholders that were present had a strong drive and commitment to promote collaboration between their communities and institutions. This can provide a bottom-up grassroots approach to tackle the sensitive security issues Nigeria faces. This should, however, go hand in hand with state-driven policy reform and a more proactive role of both Nigerian and UK government institutions to work towards a shared vision for the future of the country.

“It is only when you listen that you will understand the magnitude of the problem. This is what dialogue is: sit and listen and understand. This is a big opening for us, a big opportunity.”

14. There is plenty of work ongoing in Nigeria, including numerous initiatives in place from international organisations, but a lack of national programming and local understanding makes it difficult for this to work. If different development and peacebuilding actors can be brought together around the table to have a common approach to the conflict, the political, ethnic and religious biases as dimensions implicating the conflict can be explored and addressed. Political will in this respect extends to taking religion seriously as being politicised, requiring a sensitive, religiously informed response from national government as well as international organisations.
15. Recommendations included government investment in community infrastructure, supporting the creation of state-level peacebuilding agencies, investment to build and protect markets, developing pilot farms to promote modernised farming methods and supporting the National Livestock Transformation Programme. Through collaboration of communities, government institutions and international organisations, critical mass can be created to actively respond to political bias and make progress on a national, state and local level.

### **Trust and unity**

16. Inextricably linked with the political will for change was the theme of trust and unity between different groups in society. Throughout the conference the theme of Nigerian identity was prevalent. Polarisation between religious and ethnic groups, between the North and the South and lack of trust in national and local governance hamper a move towards change. This is rooted in a lack of communication between communities, religious, ethnic as well as by profession (i.e. farmers and herders). Numerous examples emerged of where trust, or the lack thereof, between groups exacerbated tensions, where a climate of distrust and fear colour the commitment to pursue peace. These issues can be motivated by religious affinity, but often also relate to historical conflict and grievances, ethnic political and resource discrimination at a local level (although the experience of poverty and distrust in government is something that all Nigerians share). On the other hand, participants shared stories of trust-building and unity. Ultimately, everyone desires peace regardless of their religious orientation, ethnic or political affiliation. Where there are opportunities for people to come together and interact there exist strong initiatives to foster social cohesion.
17. Examples were given of initiatives in the Middle Belt where Christians and Muslims were trained as peace ambassadors together in order to address and minimise violence. In some areas where violence was present efforts to hold peace-making meetings over the past decade have resulted in members of different communities now working together. Examples of training community leaders in critical states to interact with each other about ideology and about theological points of convergence and divergence has aided building rapport and building trust. It enables members of different communities to see that in many ways they are dealing with similar issues on both sides. Peace-building initiatives by different states, civil society organisations and grassroots movements have shown that trust forms the foundation for dialogue, narrative change and social cohesion. Trust-building aids people to break the silence surrounding complex national, regional and local challenges and provides space for unity-building. Additionally, participants mentioned the pivotal the role of women in building trust and unity.

“Nigeria is in a difficult situation, and the situation is the lack of truth. The issues are complicated, some have practical solutions. But how do we deal with climate change issues, strategic and scientific discussions if we are not looking at them? It is easier to talk ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ than to address these issues.”

“This is supposedly the first opportunity to have said things I have never said in my life amongst [people from other religion]. [This is an] opportunity to open my mind. There is trust and I really appreciate this.”

“You can only dialogue when you trust the person so you open up [about] the real hidden issues so that we can cater for those issues.”

“Yes, Northern Nigeria might be the most lethal place to be a Christian, but also the most lethal place to be a Muslim.”

“Religion is more covering, like an image, a face: what we see. What drives this conflict is not religion... We need to be very careful in identifying key drivers of conflict. The binary of Muslim-Christian is not the issue.”

“The expectation from the HMG from ordinary Nigerians in [parts of] the country is immeasurable. There is deep trust for the British or anything associated with the UK; even before colonialism, and during colonialism governing us indirectly... With this expectation from HMG, the trust that is there, we expect HMG to do more with the situation today.”

## Complex drivers for conflict

18. The Wilton Park conference referenced the Bishop of Truro's 2019 Report on the Persecution of Christians in the dialogue about social cohesion in Nigeria. It soon became apparent that although the persecution of Christians through Boko Haram violence should be addressed, violence has affected most of the Nigerian population. Participants were therefore keen to address the complexity of conflict in Nigeria and sought to highlight the multiple drivers of violence and insecurity across the country. The conference addressed religious violence affecting both Christians and Muslims, including the Boko Haram insurgency and intercommunal violence between groups of Christians and Muslims, as well as different ethnic communities. These observations were linked to extensive fieldwork undertaken by civil society organisations and institutions, highlighting that as farmer - herder violence is not solely religiously motivated, so too the persecution of Christians is not the sole agenda of Boko Haram. Rather, Boko Haram's ideology rejects the legitimacy of the Nigerian state on a religious basis, resulting in violence that affects Christians, Muslims, government-affiliated workers and aid workers.
19. Participants examined the typology of the dynamics of rural insecurity in relation to the pastoralist-herder conflict, seeking to identify different types of conflict, including rural conflicts that originate in urban areas, conflicts centred around criminality, gang violence and abduction, conflicts related to social problems or substance abuse, and resource conflict centred on land-grabbing. There was an attempt to address the intertwining roots of conflict that often are inter-ethnic and ethnoreligious, affecting all involved groups in different ways, leading to often disproportionate violent retaliation. Drivers for conflict that were mentioned included lack of community engagement, lack of (access to) education, deepening poverty and marginalisation, socioeconomic inequalities, the absence of peace and reconciliation processes and the nature of government responses to violence. The human consequences of violence was also highlighted, touching on questions of justice and a culture of impunity. Acknowledging the complexity of the drivers of conflict and making their interconnectedness more visible can allow for more effective policymaking and capacity-building across all layers of Nigerian society, moving away from one community blaming the other.

## Active international community

20. One of the primary goals of the Wilton Park conference was to recommend how the British government can support the Nigerian Government, faith and community leaders in fostering social cohesion and building sustainable solutions that target all affected communities. Participants addressed the longstanding relationship between Nigeria and the UK, both as former colonial power and now as a provider of humanitarian aid and assistance through government institutions. The central question posed was how the UK government and the international community aid Nigeria, as many Nigerians hold the UK in high standing although some feel the UK government is not doing enough to hold the Nigerian government to account when it comes to security, accountability and transparency. The UK could have a strong influence on policymaking and accountability through putting greater pressure on the government to end the violence. HMG can give more voice to corruption in the military and government and in this manner hold Nigeria to account, being more vocal publicly as a 'critical friend' to the nation.

21. Although the UK supports Nigeria through giving aid, it is often not understood where the money is directed as aid is dispersed across different humanitarian organisations and not to the Nigerian Government. It was suggested that DFID, for example, might consider further communication efforts to spell out where the aid is directed and its impact. Internationally, the UK could help by raising the security issues in multilateral organisations more frequently and lobbying to raise awareness on pressing issues. On the other hand, the Nigerian state, institutions and organisations need to also look inward for solutions, where the role of HMG merely aids the processes of peacebuilding and fostering social cohesion. It was additionally noted that aid is often allocated towards initiatives that are aligned with Western ideas of peacebuilding and education, marginalising the part of the population that is not in Western education or not affiliated with these NGOs. Civil society organisations adopting a localised approach yet who are not affiliated with these aid organisations do not receive the support necessary to continue their work efficiently. HMG could therefore adopt a more culturally and contextually sensitive approach when it comes to assisting the Nigerian state, its institutions and grassroots organisations. However, international organisations and institutions should play a more prominent role in supporting Nigeria, its communities, CSOs, religious and government institutions. This is where HMG and institutions such as DFID can play a pivotal role, putting pressure on and providing support to different stakeholders. Suggestions included the continued support of the international community for the government's National Livestock Transformation programme, lobbying for government accountability, vocal and systematic peacebuilding promotion, and for the FCO to increase field visits to attack sites to show more support to communities after violence.

### **Role of religious leaders**

22. Religious and community leaders have an important role to play in fostering social cohesion both within and outside their communities. The dynamics between religion and politics were discussed widely. The potential for religious leaders to mobilise their followers towards collaboration and inclusion, working towards breaking down the divides between communities took central stage. On the other hand, acknowledgements were made that leaders have also contributed to keeping communities divided and that religion has sometimes been used as a tool for manipulation and stigmatisation. The conference called for acknowledging the misuse of religion by religious leaders from both sides which has furthered division and animosity. There were also observations about the importance of religious leaders and the respect they receive in Nigerian society. Religious leaders have the potential to play a significant practical role in every area of life in their communities. Participants noted that religious leaders coming together to open dialogue and foster peace would be a very powerful mechanism, as faith leaders are uniquely positioned to prevent violence and build bridges across divides. However, calls for peace from religious leadership is not enough. Religious leaders need to take a more active role as actors in the peace-building process. Additionally, the recognition of the different levels faith leaders operate on points to the diverse roles they can play to prevent violence. An important observation is that the role religious leaders play transcends religion, therefore there might be an educational need to support leaders in building more secular skills for engagement.
23. Religious leadership should be engaged not only in the short term but sustainably in the long run, enabling different voices to be heard in proactive, long term peacebuilding and accountability processes. Recommendations were made to develop a religious engagement strategy, exploring the role of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) in developing this, as well as begin dialogue to facilitate the creation of a 'code of conduct' for religious leaders in their practice and engagement with communities. Recommendations were made to initiate a

"Fostering social cohesion is something we must work furiously on, especially on the responsibility bias of those who have taken up grand political power. It is their primary duty to bring the country together under God. There is a need to bring people together, work with our hearts and minds."

"God is not a registered voter, God is not on the ballot, religious political parties do not exist. We are asking religious leaders to preach peace around elections, and finally we are here [at Wilton Park] talking about faith, Nigeria's problems are more than faith, [we should be careful to not contribute to] a manufactured narrative The way we are framing this we are

manufacturing religion and making it part of a central problem of abdication of religious and political responsibility.”

“There is an extraordinary range of interreligious initiatives in Nigeria, it may be a petri dish for the world. Every form and every Theory of Change is played out in Nigeria. To some extent, we hear that one of the problems is the lack of mapping and evaluation.”

“If we develop a religious approach. if leaders from both sides can open their mindsets and say “I am a Nigerian” and impart that knowledge. ‘Brothers and sisters’, not ‘Christians and Muslims’.”

capacity-building programme to empower traditional and religious leaders to hold the Government of Nigeria to account. Additionally, participants noted that although religion plays a key role in society and therefore religious leaders and networks have great potential to effect change, framing Nigeria’s challenges merely across religious lines is dangerous and does not do justice to the complexity of its challenges.

## **Intra- and interfaith dialogue**

24. There is clear potential to foster change through the use of both intra- and interfaith dialogue, in learning about and interacting with people from other religious groups. The conference aimed to explore what potential intra- and interfaith dialogue has in fostering social cohesion. It was noted that globally, the interfaith movement is at a crossroads with high competition through lack of funding for interfaith initiatives. In addition, such initiatives are often under-appreciated in times of peace and the impact of interreligious activity is difficult to evaluate. This poses challenges to interreligious work, especially in Nigeria where numerous interreligious organisations are active. There is recognition that interfaith dialogue could help resolve some challenges if there are collective efforts from both religions to jointly condemn violent injustice and shift focus to what is important for all Nigerians. Interfaith dialogue has the potential to shift the narrative from Christians or Muslims being persecuted to Nigerians being persecuted. An important observation was to address which interreligious tensions have to do with belief and interpretations and the need to move towards common efforts that include issues of poverty and socioeconomic inequality. There should be a focus both on interreligious and intrareligious levels of action, as tensions within religious communities need to be addressed to foster constructive interfaith dialogue. Examples of faith-based organisations helping to minimise fractures within religious communities highlights the role of creating unity on an intra-faith level to hamper extremist exploitation. Facilitating space for community members to identify the challenges in their communities and subsequently addressing these challenges through cyclical intra-faith and interfaith dialogue provides a contextual approach to community challenges.
25. Interfaith dialogue examples from across Nigeria highlighted the potential of fostering interaction. Examples from programmes with religious leaders in critical states included training in countering extremist ideologies and interpretation, on both an intra-faith and interfaith level. Pastors and imams coming together regularly to discuss ideology, theology and specific community challenges showed that different religious communities often faced the same challenges. The importance of religious dialogue in promoting mass education was mentioned: it was, for example, reported that there was a 40% increase in public school enrolment after religious stakeholders engaged with their communities to promote schooling beyond faith-based education. Interreligious education that is contextually tailored teaches the youth important messages on pressing issues like gender and living in an interreligious community. Increasing the exposure of communities to different religions could be addressed through initiatives of visiting each other’s religious sites, i.e. ‘visit my mosque’ or ‘visit my church’ initiatives, bringing people together. Recommendations were made to support interfaith dialogue on a variety of issues: to set up an ‘Interfaith Network Against Corruption’; to increase funding and support for faith-based organisations by the international community and the government; to establish a Joint Religious Coalition promoting government accountability for insecurity and politicisation of conflicts. An important note to make is that interfaith and intra-faith dialogue can succeed with the support of not only religious communities but that the government and the international community should play a key role too.

## Peace and justice go hand in hand

“We can choose to continue and say ‘there cannot be peace without justice’ but I can also see ‘there cannot be justice without peace’. Where do you go and do peace while you’re looking for justice now? We are not asking for justice now, we are asking for peace. We want people to stop killing us. Let the killing stop, then we can move from there.”

“When people interact, they understand each other. This is important for peace.”

“It is important to look at who is holding the pen on this Action Plan for Peace.”

26. It was highlighted that there exists an inextricable link between peace and justice: can peace come without justice, and justice without peace? Critical discussions about the deeply felt consequences of violent conflict hinted that violence cannot end without justice while recognising that peace can be a precursor to justice which takes time and commitment from all parties. Building peace should however not come at the expense of neglecting justice for impunity suffered by affected communities. The conference brought together knowledge and expertise on peacebuilding examples from within Nigerian states and communities as well as examples from other countries in the region dealing with similar challenges. Exchanging best practices and looking towards examples of peace commissions, peacebuilding organisations and communities living harmoniously despite security challenges can serve as a blueprint for the wider Nigerian society. Examples included training religious leaders as peace ambassadors to promote consciousness-building among leadership; engagement with victims and stakeholders from both sides; the voice and contribution of women in peace and security; successful peace meetings in several states; international peacebuilding organisations working on reconciliation and strengthening democratic governance. An important note was to ensure that development organisations and peacebuilding institutions conduct continuous discourse and share expertise: without development there is no peace, and without peace there is no development. The conversation around peace in Nigeria has often stayed on a state level, where peace infrastructures are addressed when insecurity takes place. There seems to be an absence of national peace architecture in rising insecurity situations, where policy responses remain very reactive. The conference addressed the need to build a proactive system for conflict prevention and response. Existent challenges to peacebuilding that were highlighted were: the tension between politics and peace, the capacity of the state as a peacebuilding actor, peacebuilding and religious identities, peace in a context of impunity, accountability and restorative justice, peace and national identity.
27. Recommendations for peacebuilding and justice combined elements of government accountability, the support of religious leaders, a strong international community, learning from existing peace initiatives in- and outside Nigeria, and crafting a sustainable peace architecture. Moving forward, suggestions were made to create a National Action Plan for Peace as observed in other countries in the region, where all groups contribute to developing such a plan. One important observation was the need for both highlighting positive stories and narratives in the peacebuilding process, whereas on the other hand the need for people to truthfully tell their suffering is important for reconciliation. Suggestions moving forward were to create state-level peacebuilding agencies learning from existing peace commissions in some states, while exploring the possibility for a national level structure. Further recommendations included the suggestion that the federal government appoint ‘Family Liaison Officers’ to provide support and leadership to family members of victims of kidnapping and killings. Furthermore, peace education can play an important role, including increased training, knowledge and investigative skills of civilian security actors. The international community, including HMG, could be more vocal and systematic on how to promote peace and develop a communication and influencing strategy. HMG could make their field visits to communities affected by violence more frequent, in collaboration with community and religious leaders, to show support. Practical solutions to foster justice included the Government of Nigeria to appoint a National Reconciliation Adviser, Justice and Peace training to be included in schools and establishing a Joint Religious Coalition to hold the government accountable. Finally, in collaboration with multilateral organisations like the African Union and ECOWAS, Nigeria can become an influencing player in guiding policy and discussion for the peace agenda for Africa as a whole.

## Conclusion

The Wilton Park conference on Fostering Social Cohesion in Nigeria set out to explore the dynamics of the conflict in Nigeria, looking at the role of various actors in promoting peace. It identified opportunities to strengthen inter- and intra-faith initiatives to promote peace and reconciliation, exploring in particular the role of religious leadership. It explored alternative dispute settlement mechanisms to address impunity and demand justice and sought to address how HMG can best support this. The conference identified action points along the following key areas: transforming the narrative; strengthening education; providing access to information and data; building of trust and unity; promoting political willingness; an actively engaged international community; facilitation of inter-/intra-faith initiatives; supporting community and religious leadership; and constructing a sustainable architecture for peace and justice.

Concrete action points that were identified moving forward from the conference are outlined on the next pages.

## Action points moving forward

Recommendations were made to address the themes discussed above. These included 'low-hanging fruit', i.e. concrete, achievable changes that can yield large results. Most actions points are referred to throughout report, in the following areas:

- **Education:** inclusion of civic education and peace education in school/university curriculum; investment in the rural education sector; support to restore/maintain/preserve heritage knowledge; citizenship classes to be introduced in primary and secondary education; higher education establishments to promote regional placements
- **Justice:** justice and peace training to be included in schools; Government of Nigeria to appoint a National Reconciliation Adviser; establish a Joint Religious Coalition to ensure accountability of government for insecurity and politicisation of conflict
- **Information and reporting:** commission and fund independent, credible research on climate change, number of attacks, crime victims, cattle routes and patterns; develop strategy on how to use data to proactively educate, myth-bust and shape narratives for both sides of the argument
- **Leadership & dialogue:** develop religious engagement strategy; commence dialogue to facilitate creating 'Code of Conduct' for religious leaders; FCO representatives to increase field visits to sites of attacks, maybe jointly with religious leaders from both major faiths; federal government to appoint 'Family Liaison Officers' to provide support and leadership to family members of victims; creation of an 'Interfaith Network Against Corruption'; FCO to provide international leadership by facilitating interaction at community level and promoting interfaith interaction
- **Livelihoods & agriculture:** international community to coordinate support for the National Livestock Transformation Programme as a potential key flagship solution to reduce conflict; development of a pilot farm to promote modernised farming methods and offer support to farmers; investment to build and protect markets
- **Governance & accountability:** lobby Government of Nigeria to promote transparency by releasing all unpublished government commissioned enquiries/reports; initiate capacity building programme to empower traditional and religious leaders to hold Government of Nigeria to account; support the development of legal intelligence gathering methods enabling better tracking of hate speech
- **Peace architecture:** promote/support creation of state level peace building agencies; promoting best practices by sharing knowledge and lessons learned from state level peace commissions; explore national level establishment of a national level peace commission; HMG to be more vocal and systematic on how it promotes peace, developing communication and influencing strategy; increase training, knowledge and investigative skills of civilian security actors; develop strategy on how to better promote positive local 'good news' stories, and how to embed learning from good practice
- **Other:** investment in community infrastructure, including roads, power, communication networks, police stations; NYSC to reintroduce regional domestic placements; develop reintegration and resettlement strategy for IDPs; explore ways of using media and celebrities to promote leadership, good practice and tolerance; develop mechanisms and action plan to equip leaders at all levels to create and promote common national identity; include youth and young leaders to help inclusiveness, capacity building and empowerment.

## **ANNEX: Fostering social cohesion in Nigeria: pledges Made**

Each participant made two pledges at the end of the Conference on how they would work to foster social cohesion in Nigeria. The pledges were personal to the individual, but taken together fell into the following categories:

- To disseminate what had been shared and learnt at the Conference more widely within Nigeria and internationally in order to encourage a shared understanding of the issues. This would include discussion and collaboration with NIREC and All Institute for Peace and Security and by ensuring meetings were representative of communities as well gender inclusive.
- Conduct further research and to write accurately on conflict. Support more robust data collection on conflict, share Tony Blair Institute for Global Change Global Extremism Monitor data collection approach with relevant parties.
- Review the role of education and the teaching of History in Nigeria, and the links with faith, with the aim of bringing about concrete proposals for reform.
- Help mainstream consideration of faith issues in humanitarian and governance initiatives, including at the International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC).
- To work for Nigeria's development more generally in order to address some of the longer-term drivers of conflict, including research and support for the implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP).
- To foster interfaith collaboration at the local level; specifically working with the Kukah Centres.
- Motivate religious leaders to intentionally listen to other faith voices with openness, to all work together in developing a positive narrative and a shared understanding, and act together to end the killings and challenge any government in Nigeria to govern for the good of the entire citizens.
- Peace education for middle level religious leaders, both pastors and imams, specifically support and partnership for DIWA Iman and Pastor training Initiative and learn from the Tony Blair Institute training programme for religious leaders with the attendees to inform the way ahead and best practice.
- Work to strengthen Nigerian's peace architecture and develop a National Peace Plan for Nigeria, help address impunity and work to ensure justice is delivered for victims including lobbying for a National Peace Justice Programme.
- Stay in touch with this valuable network and build expertise into other areas of work and research.
- For the UK, to brief the PMs Special Envoy for FoRB and Minister for Human Rights on the discussions as a basis for consideration of future UK support.

### **Emma Bouterse**

Wilton Park | June 2020

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