

Seeking a Different Path

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Abstract: *This article sets to explore a way forward away from confrontational means in the fight against violent extremism in the North East region of Northern Nigeria. It specifically focused on the plight of the girl-child and other most vulnerable groups. The fact is that within the global education community, the intersections between girl-child education and violent extremism are seldom discussed. There have been stories of the girl-child as victims of conflict, being threatened and abducted from their homes and schools, or forced to marry the extremist fighters. The paper diffuses the magnitude of violence and violent extremism as it undermines collective efforts towards maintaining peace and security, fostering sustainable development, protecting human rights, promoting the rule of law and undertaking humanitarian actions. It concluded that poor education may also function as a gateway to extremism. It is therefore, recommended that the government should provide quality education to victims while the society should support the government in receiving victims without harassment or molestation.*

Keywords: Girl-Child, Education, Violence, Extremism

1. Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that communal conflicts and individual differences are inevitable but violence is not. For violence and violent extremism in the North East has eaten deep into the fabrics of the society (de DIVITIIS, 2014). Looking at the socio-cultural dynamics of the North East and the cosmopolitan nature of the country, what is needed is a realistic approach through dialogue and reintegration, away from confrontational means. This means there is the dire need to modify the status-quo with a focus on the two variables. Besides, a recent findings UNICEF (2016) suggests the pressing need to reintegrate those victims who returned to their former base. But before dwelling further, it is imperative to undertake a conceptual review of the subject matter in order to have a glimpse of the situation around the globe. The essence is to provide us with some vital knowledge to compare and contrast with the situation in the North East.

2. Contextual Approaches

Although, there exist various approaches in counterterrorism policies across the globe, but existing literature Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, (2006); Paes, (2005); associated with dialogue and reintegration are still limited. But what exactly is the underlining message of dialogue and reintegration? How is it achieved, and controlled?

Recent studies Koehler, (2016); Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, (2016); are beginning to provide valuable insights. They maintained that it is concerned with developing an understanding of the belief systems or ideas and underlying causes for the adoption of violence from the extremist's perspective. The process involved turning away from a position of using and endorsing violence to abstinence from violent means. They emphasised that it is a means to an amicable way of moving parties in conflict towards a mutually acceptable or tolerable outcome. The approach was based on integrating violent extremist prisoners and the disarmament of extremist fighters in some countries of Europe and Asia, which according to them has proved to be the best (Stone, 2015).

However, a critical look at the literature shows their focus centred on reintegration of violent extremist prisoners in some parts of the world which does not represent the situation in the North East. In contrast, the main focus of this article is not specific about dialogue and reintegrating violent extremists and violent prisoners of war, but rather an all-encompassing process of incorporation of victims and their families into the mainstream civil society. In another development, Koehler (2016) in his monumental work established that reintegration or rehabilitation would specifically paved the way for a change in identity from a stigmatized victim(s) to an accepted individual(s), or from combatants to civilians. The process would alter their behaviour by ending the use of violent means, but to increasing actions that are certified by the mainstream civil society. Given its wide scope, Koehler's work is relevant to the theme of this article in the sense that it provided us with considerable information that proper deradicalisation through negotiations and reintegration would create an atmosphere of trust and security. As Bjorgo & Horgan (2009) puts it, the change in behaviour would always be visible in three ways i.e. the economic, social, and political realms.

In economic terms, dialogue and reintegration would necessitate the desire for economic reintegration in which an individual will be able to acquire gainful employment, skills, and be given start-up funds or equipment under a watchful eye. Such individuals might also start afresh and initiate other legitimate income generating activities to support themselves and their families. In social terms, they may find it easier to reduce their reliance and contact on the extremist networks and enhance their interaction with mainstream communities and families. The political dimension would make them well assimilated and would have to participate in the mainstream politics of their communities and even contest either at the local, regional, or national levels. This suggests to the fact that their active engagement within the community could lessen the risk of violent extremism.

Therefore, a flashback on the historical developments in Nigeria have shown that violence is neither new nor exclusive to the North East region. However, the region has been in the eye of the storm ever since the eruption *boko haram* insurgency in 2009. While most of the media

attention has been confined to the North East, it is important to note that the growths and the impacts of the extremism are not limited to that region and the “religion” which the extremists claimed to safeguard. What is more important is for every individual, community members, and the government, to strive and halt the increasing indoctrination of the teaming youths especially the girl-child.

3. How Girl-Child Education Intersects with Violent Extremism and Dialogue

There is no doubt that one cannot divorce development from education, as no society can rise beyond the level of its educational development. In particular, the girl-child education is the single most dominant tool with immense power to transform (Rufa'i, 2006). As observed glaringly in the last eight (8) years, the abduction, killings, and maiming of the child-child have increased among other vulnerable targets. Considering the scale of violent attacks in some parts of the North East, the girl-child is becoming precariously tied to violent extremism. Report Braga (2017) have shown that lack of access to education most often causes vulnerability which may lead them to join extremist group either as a promise unfulfilled or as a vehicle for indoctrination. The girl-child in some instances attempt to better their lives by joining the extremist groups when they lack the basic necessities of life. Specifically, the girl-child both as an individual and a member of the society should be given the opportunities she deserves especially education which proves to be key in fulfilling promises and nurturing potentials.

Whenever the issue of girl-child education is brought up for discussions it is usually because of the fact that it serves as the backdrop to violence against them. Previous researches Braddock, et al (2015) have shown that the girl-child, children and women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in most conflict-ridden settings in which many extremist groups operate. Extremist recruiters often target them because they tend to be unsuspected by community members and law enforcement agencies and are considered more supple than boys. The latest available record UNICEF (2017) on suicide bombings, and attempted bomb attacks in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad have shown that three (3) out of four (4) child suicide bombers are the girl-child while eighteen percent of all suicide bombers are women. These dangers are compounded in a situation where unaccompanied children, and orphans travel toward resources and safety. The heinous ordeal have again reminded us of the deepening link between violent extremism, and the girl-child. This has necessitated the desire for a way forward in tackling the menace of violent extremism in all forms and manifestations (Boothby et al., 2006).

4. Dialogue and Reintegration Crucial to Countering Violent Extremism

As far as dialogue and reintegration is concerned, a number of issues have come up for debate. The questions arise as to which category of people will be involved in dialogue? How can dialogue and reintegration prevent the spread of violent

extremism? How can the abducted be reintegrated devoid of rejection or isolation by the communities? These and more are what this article sets to discuss. Thus, in order to understand the circumstances crucial to the dialogue and reintegration, it is also imperative to note that not all extremists can be reintegrated. This drew my attention on the need to find out which categories of fighters and extremists to avoid.

Therefore, for the realistic approach to be effective and successful, the focus should be on defining the target groups in the early phase of every negotiation. In addition, the target groups to be reintegrated should be reflective members of the society. In this case, specific focus be placed on the girl-child and women who have been forcibly abducted and married to the extremist fighters, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), women widowed by the insurgency, refugees and their families, those men and child soldiers who were forcefully conscripted to serve as guerrilla fighters. Equally important target are those extremists (hence repentants) who have renounced violence out of their own volition.

One very important issue is for the government to have honest and open dialogue with them and the recipient communities. In addition, by engaging these particular groups of individuals what is more fundamental is bridging divides through negotiations and bringing communities together to heal wounds and divisions. The process of dialogue and reintegration would also form an integral part of youth deradicalization in the region, and the country at large. Similarly, their involvement will hopefully encourage better approaches in the future towards the promotion of sustainable peace and security in the post-conflict communities. As Stone (2015) puts it, failure to dialogue and reintegrate will represent a missed opportunity. So, the first point of call is designing an explicit dialogue and reintegration programme for victims and repentants.

5. Addressing the Plight of the Most Vulnerable

Due to the phenomenon of increased perpetration of violent attacks by the girl-child, and women, communities have become fearful and suspicious of themselves especially when the girls return home, particularly if they are extremists' wives. When abducted, or recruited, the victims spend considerable amount of time with extremists groups, and when they return home, reintegration is an enormous feat. For the girl-child and women, their abductors have impregnated many, and both of them and their children will have to face immense harassment and discrimination from their communities. Indeed, there are legitimate concerns, about how to approach the question of both victims and repentants.

Indeed, a detailed reintegration process must be planned ahead of time for female victims and child soldiers since all of them have their individual needs. Therefore, greater attention and care should always be accorded to them when embarking on dialogue and reintegration. It is not unknown to me that the majority may wonder as to why I'm so specific. But the fact is not because these particular groups

are always reflexive victims, but because they are the ones who will most likely face alienation by their families and communities. This is especially true concerning reintegration in post-conflict communities even though it is often neglected. Even more disturbing is the irony where communities that once wished for their loved ones safe return while in captivity will later be unwilling to accept them back but instead labelled *annoba* (plague in Hausa parlance).

Also, there would be the likelihood of severe social stigma and humiliation against young girls who returned with “unwanted babies”. Should this be the case, the communities must take into account that such babies and their unprepared mothers are the ultimate reminders of the abuse they faced. Such hostile reception would only add to their horrifying ordeal. Even while in the IDP camps, education and other public goods become even less accessible to the girl-child, women and their children due to suspicions. Under such condition, families are instrumental in playing an important role in the success of reintegration by showing them love and a sense of belonging.

6. Challenges and Uncertainties

Dialogue and reintegration must also address the question of uncertainty as virtually all the victims, and repentants will face discrimination by community members. Likewise, there would be the likelihood of rising community tension and fear. This is because repentants will be perceived as former extremists who might pose a threat to post-conflict security. Another problem has to do with growing hatred among the civilian population who have suffered severely at the hands of the repentants. The mistrust, suspicion, and hatred within the community members, suggests neither the victims nor the repentants will be given adequate support nor treatment capable of helping them to deal with the untold hardship they have faced. In this case, the government must create an atmosphere of social cohesion and harmony through education, enlightenment and awareness campaigns. This opportunity will no doubt provide for successful reintegration and the potential for effective deradicalisation.

The dilemma of the girl-child and women is even a more daunting challenge, as they are now burdened by children born from their misfortune, with no skills and abandoned by their husbands. Hence, the government and development partners must take cognisance of these categories of marginalized individuals and the kind of assistance to be given. The target also requires, giving assistance to receiving communities in order to prevent societal tension and increase the capacity of local communities to reintegrate such people. However, such assistance must differ depending on their background and the environment in which dialogue and reintegration are done.

Based on the above, every aspect of dialogue and reintegration must be tackled with caution because repentants who cannot be accommodated by the society or participate and influence decisions that affect them may again be predisposed to take up arms as they seem to join in search of purpose, excitement or status.

7. Factors That Will Make Reintegration Difficult

Looking at the volatile nature of the North East, and the geographical location of the region, there are factors that will make the processes of dialogue and reintegration even more difficult. These factors can be itemised as follows:

- 1) Proliferation of dangerous weapons due to the region's exposure to porous international borders,
- 2) The presence of the remnants of die-hard extremist groups standing outside the negotiation,
- 3) The existence of other extremist fighters in the neighbouring countries, and
- 4) Security vacuums in the war-ravaged communities of the North East.

8. Conclusion

To sum it up, if the girl-child and women are vastly educated, the knowledge acquired can be a mitigating force to conflict prevention either through participation or otherwise (Braga, 2017). Government and community members must also think about the psychosocial aftermath of the violence as much as preventing extremism. The point here is that girl-child education is a critically important component of not only returning them to a sense of normalcy, but supporting them to be able to purge ahead, and regain their lives.

9. Recommendations

More practical recommendations are hereby made for how the work on dialogue and reintegrating victims of violent extremism, repentants and their families in post-conflict societies can be achieved:

- 1) The general public should support the government in receiving victims without harassment or molestation,
- 2) Also a quality education should be provided as one that incorporates relevant skills development and takes into account psychosocial support that may keep them away from resorting to violent groups who promise more immediate relief in terms of food, security, and opportunity,
- 3) Community leaders, have a role to play with some creative thinking in providing a safe space, and mentoring for moderate voices to be heard. The government must liaise with the leaders to intensify preventive efforts to counter the appeal of radical ideologies among youths.
- 4) Public Private Partnership be encouraged to facilitate the expansion of more transformative dialogue, mutual understanding, and more public discourse. Media outlets should be used across the whole region and beyond to stir up thoughts and discussions about dialogue and reintegration.

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