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Towards Reconciliation: Cross-Perspective Views on Positive Reconciliation in Northeast Nigeria

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Author | Meg-Ann Lenoble

CORDOBA PEACE INSTITUTE
GENEVA
معهد قرطبة للسلام

Towards Reconciliation: Cross-Perspective Views on Positive Reconciliation in Northeast Nigeria

Round Table Report

Friday 31 May 2024, Transcorp Hilton, Abuja, Nigeria

Meg-Ann Lenoble
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Contents

Introduction 3
Agenda 3
Participants 4
Presentation of the CAN project 4
Reconciliation process in Northeast Nigeria - “Sulhu” 5
Training sessions with communities 5
Dialogue with former members of armed groups 6
Key messages to support the sustainability of the reconciliation process 7
Main points of the Q&A session 8
Conclusion 9

Introduction

The roundtable titled "Towards Reconciliation: Cross-Perspective Views on Positive Reconciliation in Northeast Nigeria," was held on Friday 31st May 2024 at the Transcorp Hilton in Abuja and gathered 20 participants, including donors, UN agencies and INGOs with the support of the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). It was hosted by Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) and Dar al Andalus Centre – Kano (DAAC).

The main objectives of the roundtable were the following:

- **Sharing Knowledge and Experience**: Provide a platform to share lessons learned, challenges faced, and best practices identified in the implementation of the reconciliation project between communities and former members of armed groups.
- **Supporting Sustainable Reintegration:** Increase awareness of the issues and specific needs of communities affected by conflict in Northeast Nigeria as part of the reconciliation process. Discuss ways to support the sustainable reintegration of former armed group members, focusing on specialized training based on Islamic principles incorporated in the global best practices of peacebuilding.
- **Exchanging Innovative Strategies:** Explore and discuss innovative and effective approaches to reconciliation, reintegration of former members of armed groups, and promotion of social cohesion, drawing on concrete examples from the project.
- **Developing Operational Recommendations:** Formulate final recommendations based on the roundtable discussions and conclusions, intended to guide future reconciliation and social cohesion efforts in the region.

This roundtable was a strategic component of CPI and DAAC's ongoing efforts to foster peace and understanding through dialogue and cooperation in Northeast Nigeria. More specifically, it focused on the reconciliation process in Northeast Nigeria, a project component which has been implemented over the past two years. Relevant findings and approaches were shared relating to their activities, which have involved training sessions and dialogues between former members of armed groups and community members. These efforts aim to promote reconciliation based on conflict transformation, grounded in Islamic principles.

Agenda

10h00- 10h30: Welcome and Registration
- Welcome coffee
- Setting up of guests

10h30-10:45: Welcome Speech
- Introduction by Nuruddeen Lemu – Chairman of DAAC
- Opening remarks by a FDFA representative

10h45- 11h25: Project Presentation
- Presentation by DAAC and CPI

- Overview of the context, objectives, activities, and outcomes, next steps with key messages and recommendations
- Testimonies from community members, Videos live or via sharing of testimonies from DAAC.

11h25- 12h00: Opening exchanges – Q&A

- Discussions on reconciliation strategies between communities and ex-members of armed groups

12h00-12h15: Closing Remarks

Participants

Twenty participants attended the roundtable:

- Representatives from the FDFA in Abuja – Ojoma Ali, National Adviser on behalf of Florent Geel, Senior Political Advisor and First Secretary.
- Nigerian Implementation Partners: DAAC, CPI and DIWA
- International and National Organizations:
    - Representatives of United Nations agencies – IOM
    - Donors: EU, Germany, Norway, Netherlands, UK FCDO,
    - NGOs: MCE, PLAN, INGOs forum
- Government: Office of the National Security Affairs (ONSA), an established contact of DAAC, were invited but were unable to attend.

Presentation of the CAN project

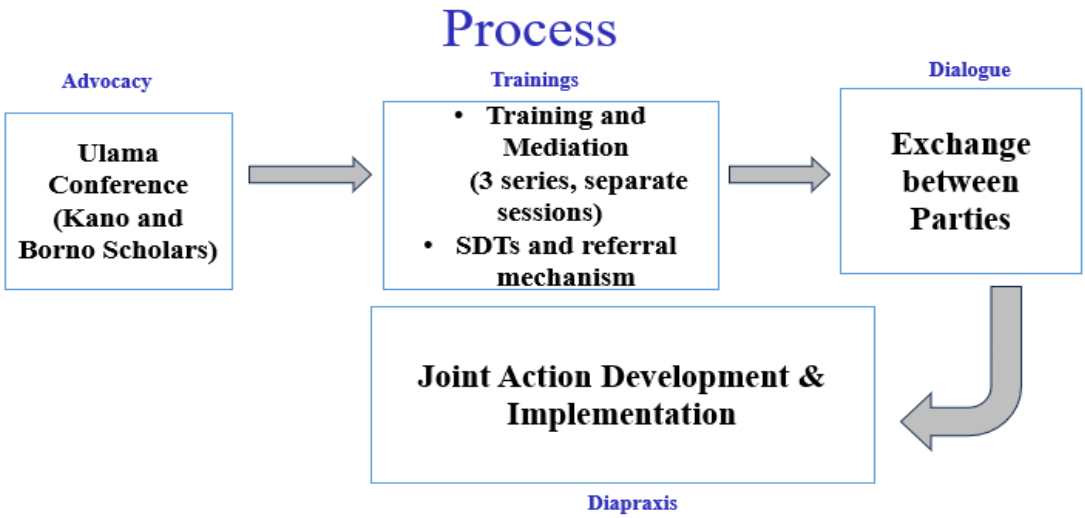
CPI has conducted the Constructive Alternative Narratives (CAN) project in Nigeria through 4 phases covering 2017-2024, funded by the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss FDFA and implemented in close collaboration with the local partner Dar al Andalus Centre (DAAC) in 9 states of Nigeria. The three components are as follows: 1) Constructive Alternative Narratives 2) Sulhu process (Reconciliation in Northeast Nigeria) and 3) Interfaith Dialogue with Students. It has the overall goal of supporting an inclusive, participative, and peaceful coexistence between communities with different cultural and religious backgrounds as well as providing constructive alternative narratives to extremist discourse through the empowerment of the youth and gatekeepers of the community based on a conflict transformation approach.

Following the death of Abubakar Shekau, the former leader of Boko Haram, on May 20, 2021, a "Post Shekau" period has emerged. This period has seen an increase in the number of Boko Haram followers surrendering in southern Borno state, with more than 1,000 combatants and their families surrendering in 2021. A significant challenge in this process is the negative and suspicious perception from the communities towards these “repentant” individuals, especially children. Perceptions, influenced by popular beliefs, ancestral animism, and witchcraft, are deeply rooted in Nigerian society, particularly in Northeast Nigeria.

To counter extremist discourse and alleviate tensions related to the reintegration process, it is essential to equip communities with a better understanding of the true precepts of Islam and foster deeper critical thinking about reconciliation based on religious tolerance.

Reconciliation process in Northeast Nigeria - "Sulhu"

In collaboration with DAAC, CPI has developed a specific methodology based on a conflict transformation approach and its extensive experience in providing constructive discourse in Arab and Muslim worlds. This project can demonstrate how the principles and practices for mediation in the Islamic Tradition can contribute to resolving contemporary conflicts.



The process started by organizing high-level meetings between the Ulema of Borno and the Ulema of Kano, who have a respected reputation based on Kano's history regarding the establishment of Islam in Nigeria. The idea was to create a safe space to encourage exchanges between religious leaders based on Islamic principles and to benefit from a high level of scholars with external extensive knowledge and interpretation of the situation in Northeast Nigeria on the need for reconciliation in Borno.

The "Ulema Conference", was held in Maiduguri in March 2022 where 5 Ulema from Kano and 25 from Maiduguri (18 male and 7 female) took part for 2 days of discussions.

This step emphasized the commitment of high-level religious figures to support the process launched by DAAC. It was fundamental to get the buy in and the commitment of these authoritative religious figures to launch the process and to ensure the commitment of the communities. The scholars resolved to form a group that united to follow up developments as they unfold with a view to contributing their share in ensuring lasting peace in their communities.

Training sessions with communities

For two years, 10 communities with 10 participants, comprising imams, scholars, community leaders, women leaders, and youths who are resident in the selected communities, have been included in the training focusing on promoting the ideology of forgiveness, reintegration, and rejection of vengeful attitudes in favor of "Sulhu" (reconciliation) and alternative dispute resolution based on Islamic teachings and a conflict transformation approach.

The implementation of teaching Islamic principles related to reconciliation has had a profound impact across different community groups. Women have embraced these teachings, fostering forgiveness within their communities and helping to accept and forgive family members. Youth have promoted harmonious coexistence by organizing events and engaging with various community groups, including farmers and classmates. Traditional rulers have seen significant success through personal interactions, helping individuals forgive and enabling returnees to contribute positively to the community. Imams and scholars have used sermons and religious teachings to promote peace and forgiveness, emphasizing the benefits of accepting former insurgents. They have established trusting relationships with returnees, aiding their repentance and reintegration. Overall, these activities have collectively strengthened community bonds and facilitated a more forgiving and cohesive society.

Dialogue with former members of armed groups

In parallel to these training sessions with communities, meetings with former members of armed groups have been conducted to explore their situations in terms of reconciliation, their challenges, and some of their successes. It has been reported that former members of armed groups face continuous stigmatization and suspicion from the communities and from their families especially for women who came back with children, in addition to the livelihood challenges. In some cases, collaboration has been organized with communities, for instance to provide security close to the fields for the farmers which is a positive outcome of the reintegration of the former insurgents.

Following bilateral consultation with communities and former members of armed groups based on a “do no harm” approach, two dialogue sessions between the two groups in different localities have been organized. Ten communities in Borno state benefited from productive dialogue sessions between community stakeholders and former members of armed groups, establishing a secure environment for meaningful interactions (Group I: MMC/Magumeri, Gwoza, Pulka, Bama and Konduga, Group II: Damboa, Kukawa, Mafa Mongunu and Kaga).

The dialogue sessions yielded several positive outcomes. It has fostered trust-building and effectively disproved and deconstructed extremist narratives. These sessions also facilitated community-led solutions for peaceful coexistence and broke down stereotypes, leading to conflict transformation. By sharing similar experiences, a collective network was built, fostering solidarity and providing powerful comfort among communities.

Subsequently, community stakeholders and former members of armed groups successfully collaborated on joint micro projects following dialogue sessions. These initiatives included, for instance, motorized borehole renovations in Mafa and Kaga, as well as classroom renovations in Kukawa and Damboa. The process involved creating safe mediation spaces with a joint action component, allowing the stakeholders to move beyond dialogue. By establishing a common workspace, the communities and former members of armed groups were able to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes, recognize each other's humanity, and interact on a personal level. This approach helped defuse tensions, anger and positively impacted their perceptions, fostering a sense of forgiveness and cooperation.

During the process of diapraxis including former members of armed groups and the community, several significant challenges emerged. Initially, there was resistance from the Ulema from Borno state to be involved in the process, necessitating a dedicated advocacy effort, including an Ulema conference with high scholars from Kano to address their concerns. The community at large was fully opposed to accepting the returning insurgents, presenting a major hurdle. Building trust towards the process, the DAAC and the project required persistent effort from both former members of armed groups and the communities involved.

Women's participation was another critical challenge, requiring additional encouragement and effort to ensure a meaningful and active participation from women involved in the process. Furthermore, community leaders faced accusations of collaborating with returnees simply by interacting with them, which complicated the trust-building process. Despite these obstacles, the facilitation of the dialogue process continued, aiming to foster understanding and cooperation between the former insurgents and the communities. The positive outcomes, feedback, and testimonies collected have effectively illustrated the benefits of the process. The members of the involved communities serve as the best ambassadors for this successful reconciliation effort.

Key messages to support the sustainability of the reconciliation process

Holistic Conflict Transformation: Advocate for a conflict transformation approach that emphasizes ongoing mediation and dialogue. This should involve dialogue sessions and diapraxis initiatives that are methodically tailored to meet the specific needs of communities and former members of armed groups, ensuring effective communication and resolution strategies.

Religious and Social Frameworks for Reintegration: Enhance reintegration processes by incorporating continuous, specialized training based on Islamic principles. This training underscores the importance of unity, forgiveness, refraining from negative judgments, managing anger, and encouraging lifelong learning. These initiatives are tailored to address the specific needs of the former members of armed groups, identified within this phase of the CAN project. Long-term support and follow-up are essential for former members of armed groups to ensure they are equipped to overcome challenges and prevent further radicalization or return to conflict areas. This comprehensive approach supports the social rehabilitation of former armed group members, facilitating their successful reintegration into society.

Community and Leadership Capacity Building: Enhance the capacities of local scholars, religious leaders, and community leaders through targeted educational programs on positive reconciliation. These programs should be extended to camp instructors to ensure a widespread understanding and implementation of reconciliation principles across different community figures.

Comprehensive Psychosocial Support: Implement robust psychosocial support mechanisms for both communities and former combatants. These mechanisms are essential to address the deep-seated emotional and psychological scars left by the conflict, aiding in the healing and rebuilding of community ties.

Economic Integration and Support: Develop an integrated economic component by fostering partnerships between DAAC and other INGOs to provide an integrated support to the beneficiaries of reconciliation programs. Such initiatives could include vocational training and microenterprise opportunities to ensure economic stability and reduce the risk of relapse into conflict dynamics.

Main points of the Q&A session

During the Q&A session that followed the roundtable, several pertinent questions were raised by the participants. The session provided clarity on various aspects of the project and highlighted areas needing further attention. Here are the key points discussed:

Engaging with Christian Communities

One participant questioned the project's focus on dialogue with Muslim communities using Islamic principles, inquiring how the reconciliation process would engage with Christian communities. It was emphasized that this phase of the project was a pilot, primarily based on the CAN (Constructive Alternative Narratives) method approach and Islamic principles. Ensuring that the methodology is accepted and relevant was crucial, and gaining the confidence of religious leaders was a priority. Moving forward, the project plans to extend its efforts to include Christian communities comprehensively.

Government Involvement

Another query addressed the government's involvement in the project. It was clarified that as a pilot phase, the project required time to establish and broadcast its methodology to the government. Although direct government involvement was limited, the project engaged with key gatekeepers in Maiduguri. Furthermore, a member of the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) is on DAAC's advisory board, indicating indirect government participation, despite their absence at the roundtable event.

Ensuring 'Do No Harm' and Trauma Impact Assessment

The importance of ensuring a "do no harm" approach within the process was a significant concern, especially considering the work with traumatized populations. It was acknowledged that a trauma impact assessment is vital. The "do no harm" principle is a mainstream approach in this initiative. While the workshops with communities and former members of armed groups touch upon trauma healing and provide key information, it is recognized that this falls short of the full psychosocial support needed by individuals who have endured extreme daily violence. A holistic approach, involving coordination with various experts, is essential to provide comprehensive support.

Engagement Before the Release of Former members of armed groups

A question was raised about the process of engaging with the community before the release of former members of armed groups since our findings indicate in some communities some reluctance towards reintegration of former members of armed groups. The International

Organization for Migration (IOM) confirmed that their program includes meetings between the families of former members of armed groups, the former members of armed groups themselves, and the communities before reintegration. This proactive engagement and the process to achieve it are crucial for a smoother transition and acceptance.

Restorative Justice Process

Participants inquired about the place of restorative justice within this context and its implementation. The discussion highlighted that this project was inspired from a "restorative justice" approach since the aim is not to "negotiate" but rather to create a structured dialogue between the offender, the victim and the community, where all parties are given the opportunity to discuss the incident, its impact, and how to repair the harm done by the violent behavior. This can involve restitution, community service, apologies, and other means to address the needs of the victims and restore balance. Working towards the reintegration of the offender into the community, with an emphasis on learning from mistakes and fostering positive behavior changes is also one of the key steps of the methodology.

The need for safe mediation spaces to facilitate dialogue between both parties is huge. Providing these spaces is fundamental for the success of the reintegration process and helps ensure that both communities and former members of armed groups can communicate openly and constructively.

Criteria for Selecting Communities

Finally, the criteria for selecting communities and whether the project operated at the local community level, or the Local Government Area (LGA) level were questioned. It was clarified that the pilot phase involved working closely with local communities across the LGAs to ensure the methodology's acceptance and relevance. This grassroots approach was deemed necessary to build a solid foundation for the project's expansion.

Conclusion

We extend our deepest gratitude to the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) for their unwavering support, which has been instrumental in making this reconciliation process in Northeast Nigeria possible. Their involvement has been crucial in fostering peace and understanding between communities and former members of armed groups.

We also wish to thank all the participants for their dedication and dynamic exchanges during this roundtable. Their mobilization and contributions have been invaluable in shaping the discussions and outcomes of this initiative.

As we stand at a crucial juncture, the reconciliation process is fundamental for the positive reintegration of former members of armed groups and for ensuring a peaceful society now and for future generations. Nigeria is currently facing significant challenges related to the reintegration of former insurgents, including deeply rooted mistrust and stigmatization within communities. The success of our joint micro projects, such as motorized borehole and

classroom renovations, highlights the importance of community-led solutions in overcoming these challenges. These initiatives have not only provided practical benefits but also created safe spaces for dialogue, allowing conflicting parties to deconstruct prejudices and build trust.
The training sessions conducted over the past two years have emphasized the ideology of forgiveness and reconciliation based on Islamic principles. Women, youth, and traditional rulers have played pivotal roles in promoting harmonious coexistence through personal interactions and community events. Imams and scholars have used sermons and religious teachings to advocate for peace and forgiveness, highlighting the benefits of accepting former insurgents and aiding their repentance and reintegration.

The dialogue sessions between communities and former members of armed groups have been instrumental in disproving extremist narratives and fostering community-led solutions for peaceful coexistence. By sharing experiences, these sessions have built a collective network that provides powerful comfort and solidarity among communities.

The current context in Nigeria underscores the necessity of these reconciliation efforts. The negative and suspicious perceptions toward returning insurgents pose significant hurdles to their reintegration. It is imperative to expand and develop these interventions in a holistic manner, directly supporting the reconciliation process by utilizing relevant religious teachings and a conflict transformation approach. Long-term support and continuous specialized training for former members of armed groups are essential to prevent further radicalization and ensure their successful reintegration into society. Moreover, enhancing the capacities of local scholars, religious leaders, and community figures through targeted educational programs on positive reconciliation will ensure widespread understanding and implementation of reconciliation principles.

Together, with continued collaboration and support, we can build a more cohesive and harmonious society in Northeast Nigeria, ensuring peace and prosperity for current and future generations.