

Combatting Terrorism: A Few Lessons from Nigeria and the 'Boko Haram' Experience

Written by By G. Odera Outa
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I was recently privileged to contribute in a study of the Boko Haram insurgency whose epicentre is Borno State, North East Nigeria.

Of course, there have been other attempts to understand Boko Haram and clearly, that 2018 Human Development Report for Nigeria is not the last word. Two lessons are however permanently edged in memory: Number one is that, insurgency, is fanned and fuelled by "internal enabling factors", as well as "the external enabling factors."

In the global pursuit to understand and resolve the dilemma of the "humanitarian-peace and development nexus," it is clear that an integrated, coordinated approach is an imperative. In the Nigeria's case, our team recognised that the humanitarian community must necessarily work alongside the developmental and peace communities as well as with citizens, government and other players for the better management and delivery of results.

If one were to declare the most important thing in the context of the face-off with Boko Haram, it would be that, terrorism cannot possibly be defeated if we continue to allow the flourishing of such extremely unequal societies on such a massive scale. For many outside the UN fraternity, the clarion call, "leaving no-one behind" may sound like an academic gimmick, or even political rhetoric. Yet, it is worth posing for a moment, just to think of its real implications and why it has a major bearing on all efforts to weed out the rise and rise of terror in our midst. The lesson is actually self-evident: Unlike conventional warfare, terrorism is certainly the most complex form of aggression, directed largely at scores of innocent victims. Moreover, terrorists are headstrong, ideologically nurtured and seemingly undeterred in their pursuits and convictions.

Now, if we are to be serious about it, the global humanity must work together, unlike ever before, to try and deal decisively with this enslavement called poverty and hopelessness. It is not for nothing that both the MDGs and the SDGs place the ending of poverty and hunger at the top of the list of global goals. The simple point is that, with such huge segments of society remaining poor and with virtually nothing to live and hope for, nothing will stop the susceptibility to the false allure of radicalisation and hence, terrorism.

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In Nigeria, our study confirmed that far too many people had deeply held grievances. They blamed all misfortunes on unending bad governance. In those circumstances, religious indoctrination takes centre stage, and believe it or not, Western Education is vilified and blamed for reconstructing and refiguring African societies that are bereft of morality and who do not seem to care about the plight of the poor majority.

The second most important factor revolves around corruption. Corruption in practically all instances is like an advanced stage of cancer; more so in Africa. Of course, it is also conceptually, part of the aforementioned 'internal enabling' factors. To put it into context, agents of terror may have infiltrated both the stable and unstable countries due to the ease with which corruption aids and abets criminality. You have probably heard it, time without number, that for only a few dollars, anything is possible; including, letting deadly terror groups cross many of Africa's porous borders. The access to deadly weaponry; their manufacture, sale and global distribution is a complex and sensitive area that the entire global community in their collective, will simply have to address.

My parting shot from that little foray into Nigeria's reality with Boko Haram, is that, insurgency and the rising incidents of terrorism leads to monumental disruptions and huge economic costs. They are also as complex and multifaceted. The global development community has increasingly conceptualised this dilemma in terms of a 'humanitarian-development-peace nexus', or in my view, a symbiotic rather than a linear relationship. In short, no one solution will be possible in our quest to put an end to terror. A window of opportunity is however beckoning: As the Nigerian study succinctly puts it, "prevention is the penultimate weapon and key." Whereas 'Prevention' is itself quite a huge topic, it suggests, as a minimum, that we must seriously re-think our entire socio-political and economic fabric. We must advance in the spirit of integrated, multi-sectoral approach to problem-solving, and in the case of Africa, I am beginning to think that, seriously, we must now spare time to re-think and re-engage Africa's lost values that made our societies' a little more wholesome and humane, just before the colonial debacle and its unending contestations.

ENDS

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