

### *Boko Haram: A Just Peace Analysis and Paths Forward*

by participants in the Nonviolence and Just Peace Table of the Catholic Theological Ethics in World Church, 2021

#### *Social Context and Root Causes:*

Boko Haram as an organization began in 2002. They were founded as a response to corruption and injustice in Nigeria, such as the large gap between the small group of rich people and the majority who lived in poverty; as well as the pattern of horrific human rights abuses by the Nigerian military. Samuel Dali, former President of the Church of the Brethren, confirmed the failure of the government as “lacking care for the local people, which frustrated many.” According to him, Boko Haram was one group that “took an extreme approach to try and destroy the government.” Boko Haram blamed Western influences and education for much of the injustice in Nigeria, and thus, proposed a turn to Islamic law. In 2009, a group within Boko Haram, frustrated by a lack of investigation into police violence decided to attack police posts and killed a number of officers. Soon their leader and others were arrested, but then killed in custody and displayed in public. These extrajudicial killings enraged many in the group and ignited an ongoing cycle of violence in Nigeria, as well as in some surrounding countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.

Currently about 2 million people are displaced in Nigeria’s northeast and about 8 million are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance. Significant impoverishment, lack of education and employment lends some groups to get destructive education by certain leaders, such as Boko Haram. Mr. Dali also identified unemployment as a significant root cause of this conflict. He describes how many spend a lot of money to get educated and then have nowhere to find an adequate job, so they are stuck with their family and this creates conditions for Boko Haram to step in. Mr. Dali described how Boko Haram would give out loans to people and simply instruct the recipients to pay them back by supporting Boko Haram’s agenda when they come back later. Boko Haram would soon after require the recipients to accept guns or else be harmed, and this eventually led them to better entice young people to join.

Another key root cause is how politicians are taking advantage of ethnic and religious differences. The Nigerian government, which is 85% from one tribe, is using tribes to fight with violence against Boko Haram. Mr Dali described how inter-religious dialogue attempts have too often been mostly elites and left out some key Islamic groups. He also referenced how the Christian Council of Nigeria has become too hijacked by the government and political pressure. More broadly, he thinks Christians tend to have an inadequate understanding of Islam and vice versa.

#### *Existing Just Peace Activity:*

A [Just Peace ethic](#) offers norms for three categories: to engage conflict constructively, break cycles of violence, and build a sustainable peace.<sup>1</sup>

Search for Common Ground has been contributing to investment in education and employment to diminish the material and human support system of Boko Haram. These practices actualize the just peace norm of economic justice to build a more sustainable peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> *A Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence*, ed. Eli McCarthy, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

They also work with village leaders, such as elders, teachers, and preachers to develop an early warning system. This practice actualizes the just peace norm of nonviolent direct action, particularly unarmed civilian protection to break cycles of violence.

Peace Direct offers vocational training with conflict and leadership skills to young people, which actualizes the just peace norm of training in nonviolent skills to engage conflict constructively. They also work to address the divides between ethnic and religious groups through sports and shared peacemaking projects. These practices actualize the just peace norm of conflict transformation to break cycles of violence.

Some communities have a rich mix of different religions, which has built resilience and prevented significant violence. This actualized the just peace norm of relationality. However, some segregation has crept in at times, such as economic structures manifested with “Christian markets.” Mr. Dali also described how a Catholic Archbishop launched inter-religious dialogue initiatives to help build credible relationality. The Women’s Initiative for Sustainable Community Development has also contributed in this area by bringing together local activists of different religious traditions, creating an early warning, early response mechanism, and deployment “peace teams” of local youth to monitor conflict. They have worked closely with Catholic and Mennonite communities on the latter.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the Peace Initiative has worked with Muslim youth by offering vocational training and nonviolent responses to conflict.

The Church of the Brethren supports the Women, Youth for Economic Advancement and Health Initiative, which focuses on meeting the needs of displaced women and girls through livelihood projects and trauma healing. This practice actualizes the just peace norms of gender justice and conflict transformation. Mr. Dali also mentioned how religious groups too often focus on aid after the violence rather than preventing violence.

### Additional Just Peace Recommendations

How might a just peace framework support existing local mechanisms and offer innovative approaches toward transforming this conflict?

Mr. Dali recommends a focus on Christians learning more about the history of Islam and vice versa. He also thinks having a common project to work on beyond simply dialogue and meetings is crucial. Mr. Dali believes this will create more space for moderate Muslims to cooperate and have more of an impact on Boko Haram as credible messengers. These recommendations are illuminated and supported by the just peace norm of relationality, which includes the practice of inter-religious relations, as well as the norm of nonviolent direct action, which includes unarmed civilian protection and within that the particular tactic of activating credible messengers.

Sr. Lilian Ehidihamhen, who is from Nigeria, also recommends going beyond better understanding of religious ideological systems to a deeper practice of becoming aware of feelings and [needs](#) in both parties. Such needs can include respect, support, participation, clarity, belonging, harmony, order, etc. This practice is the skill of nonviolent compassionate communication. As we become more aware of the needs we are trying to satisfy through our political positions, strategies, and behavior, then we can better align such activity to actually meeting these needs in all parties. This recommendation is illuminated and supported by the

---

<sup>2</sup> Bottom Up and Top Down approaches

just peace norm of education and training in key skills, which includes the skill of nonviolent communication and needs-based analysis; as well as the norm of human dignity.

The existing inter-religious communities, dialogue, and project efforts are crucial. However, Sr. Lilian's insights about needs-based analysis points to an additional insight from Mr. Dali, which is that Christians and Muslims still have significant growth in terms of desiring and becoming creative nonviolent peacemakers. An aspect of becoming such peacemakers is the willingness to acknowledge responsibility for harm. Mr. Dali could recall some former Boko Haram members offering this in Borno State, but overall this seems to be lacking from his perspective. Such willingness and practices of acknowledgement creates a cultural landscape that is more fertile for a shift from a retributive model of justice toward restorative justice. Closely related to restorative justice is the practice of trauma-healing and trauma-informed approaches. In a community immersed in long-standing violence, generational trauma often develops. Such trauma can often enable cycles of violence, and thus, the deeper transformation of the conflict entails robust trauma-informed approaches. The Church of the Brethren offers one example of existing trauma-healing programs, and such programs need to be scaled up. These recommendations are illuminated and supported by the just peace norm of forming nonviolent peacemaking communities, cultures, and institutions; as well as the norms of acknowledging responsibility for harm and conflict transformation, which are key to breaking cycles of violence.

Another significant aspect of becoming nonviolent peacemakers is developing the skills and organizational apparatus to activate effective, strategic nonviolent resistance campaigns and movements to address the legitimate grievances and needs of key stakeholders, including those in Boko Haram. Mr. Dali gave an example of how such training and programming was refused in a local Christian college. Yet, research has demonstrated that such campaigns are actually over 2x's more effective at obtaining short-term political objectives than violent campaigns. Nonviolent campaigns also have a significant participation advantage in terms of getting more people involved, and build the conflict skills that become pivotal for longer-term, sustainable peace. In contrast, violent campaigns even when they appear "successful" in the short-term, consistently struggle with cycles of destructive conflict and violence, such as generational trauma, corruption, military coups, and civil war. In fact, research has shown that successful nonviolent campaigns are over 10x's more likely to develop a durable democracy compared to such apparent "successful" violent campaigns.

Strategic nonviolent resistance is also complementary and often critical to peacebuilding programs. Mr. Dali noted how there appear to be many peacebuilding programs in Nigeria and yet their impact is too often spotty. Research has demonstrated that nonviolent resistance can help generate more fertile conditions for peacebuilding, particularly negotiations that better enable a sustainable just peace.<sup>3</sup> Such nonviolent resistance can also mitigate the activity and resources for violent resistance, which is critical to peacebuilding programs more generally. Developing nonviolent resistance campaigns is illuminated and supported by the just peace norm of nonviolent direct action.

---

<sup>3</sup> Veronique Dudouet, "Powering to Peace: Integrated Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding Strategies," in International Center on Nonviolent Conflict's Special Report Series, vol. 1, April 2017. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/powering-peace-integrated-civil-resistance-peacebuilding-strategies/>

This particular norm also includes unarmed civilian protection (UCP), which can be critical support not only for protecting individuals, such as women, children, civil society leaders, and human rights activists, but also for creating civic space for nonviolent resistance campaigns. In the Jos and Wase regions there is already experience with such UCP ‘peace teams’ which were composed of local youth that reported to the Women’s Initiative for Sustainable Community Development, along with support from the Catholic and Mennonite communities. One of the most important aspects determining the success of such UCP programs is their ability to harness credible messengers in these roles. Who might be the more credible messengers with Boko Haram actors, with the government, with particular tribes, with particular faiths, with youth, with women, etc.? The Nonviolent Peaceforce’s deployments in the midst of civil war in South Sudan is a proven example.<sup>4</sup> The Nonviolent Peaceforce has also mitigated violence in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Iraq, and Myanmar, including the rescue of children abducted by armed actors and “terrorist” groups. If local community leaders consider such experience and resources, these UCP units could be deployed broadly in Nigeria as a way to mitigate the violence and construct a new reality.

As these critical nonviolent practices and structures get scaled-up, there may still be very difficult moments of violent attack. In such moments there may be an extreme difficulty of imagining a nonviolent way out. In turn, it’s important to note that a just peace approach is not oriented to condemning or morally shaming those individuals, groups, or organizations who turn to violent protection (dehumanizing, destructive or lethal force) in such extremely difficult moments. Instead, the orientation is to urge others to accompany them, nonviolently take on some of the risk with them, and continue to urgently explore creative nonviolent strategies to break the cycles of violence and build a more sustainable peace. In turn, while not condemning or morally critiquing, this approach is also not about being a voice for justification, legitimation or endorsement of violence. Rather the moral positionality is that ‘we are with you, we understand the extreme difficulty, and we will find a way out together to break this cycle of violence.’ As Catholics, this is a call to focus our formation, discernment, resources, advocacy, intervention, and for some, our bodies with this orientation.

While these efforts above are vital contributions, Sr. Lilian reminds us that broad structural changes are critical to build a more sustainable just peace. These include the educational system, access to quality jobs, economic equity, a robust civil society, and just governance. These must be part of the vision and constitutive to the types of approaches described above. One key aspect is deepening not only the sense of human dignity but also accountability. Accountability is not about increasing harm, suffering, or death for others. That is retribution. Accountability is about enabling a process that makes it more likely the perpetrators increase understanding of the harm caused, grow in empathy for those harmed, acknowledge responsibility for the harm, and work with the stakeholders to repair the harm as much as possible. A restorative justice approach can construct this accountability, and thus, the potential for a more just governance. The structural changes identified above are illuminated and actualized by the just peace norms of economic justice, human rights, robust civil society and just governance.

---

<sup>4</sup> Nonviolent Peaceforce, South Sudan program.  
<https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/program-locations/south-sudan>

### *Conclusion*

In this brief case study, a Just Peace ethical framework offers attention to root causes of conflict as well as broad assessment of existing activity consistent with just peace norms. With this contextual analysis, we can identify paths forward to engage conflict constructively, break cycles of violence, and build a more sustainable just peace. Some of these paths included deeper inter-religious relations, needs-based analysis, strategic nonviolent resistance, unarmed civilian protection, restorative justice, robust civil society, and economic justice. There are certainly challenges ahead and positive outcomes are not guaranteed. Yet, a just peace ethic offers us more creative and proven paths forward compared to the status quo approaches of violence and retribution. Let us imagine, hope, and be persistent together.

### *Primary Contributors*

Sr. Mary Lilian Akhere Ehidihamhen, KU Leuven, Belgium and Nigeria  
Prof. Sami Basha, American University, Italy and Palestine  
Prof. Eli McCarthy, Georgetown University, United States  
Prof. Maureen O'Connell, La Salle University, United States