COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future of Peacebuilding in Nigeria

JUNE 2020
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REPORT PRODUCED BY

Building Blocks for Peace Foundation, West African Network for Peacebuilding-Nigeria, Peace Initiative Network and CORAFID Centre for Innovation and Research.
1. **Introduction**

Globally, COVID-19 has upended lives, livelihood, economies and civilizations ushering us into uncharted territory and uncertain times in just over five months. The pandemic has widened inequalities, brought up new conflicts and shaken the trust of global economy and governance. In Africa, the situation is even direr. Fragile healthcare systems, dependent economies and weak government institutions have led to worsening consequences for the continent.

Although Africa has recorded comparatively fewer official casualties than other regions, the impact could be deadlier with on-going political crises and the likelihood of further deprivation of the vulnerable population.

Therefore, this report could not have come at a better time than now that peacebuilders are faced with resolving pre-COVID-19 conflict and also the new ones certain to arise from human rights abuses, shrinking civic space, corruption and economic hardship.

As part of efforts by civil society organizations (CSO) to explore the nature of peacebuilding in a socially distant era that is heavily dependent on virtual interactions, the Building Blocks for Peace Foundation, West African Network for Peacebuilding-Nigeria, Peace Initiative Network and the CORAFID Centre for Innovation and Research, organized a virtual dialogue among CSOs working on peace and security and other relevant stakeholders including INGOs, academics, religious leaders and representatives of government ministries to interrogate and explore the new look of peacebuilding in the context of responding and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.
Number of Participants: 50

Gender representation of participants

Age range of participants
We have produced this report to provide policymakers, peace activists and practitioners with recommendations on how to adjust to the new reality and help shape the peacebuilding landscape in Nigeria.

2. Global Situation

At the dawn of the new decade in 2020, a public health emergency on such a scale was unthinkable. COVID-19 has become an important threat to human relationships and national security since it was first recorded in Wuhan city, China in December 2019.

Since COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a global pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020, we have recorded more than 4.9 million infections confirmed in at least 188 countries and territories, including at least 326,000 deaths as 28th May 2020 (Aljazeera News 2020).

For peacebuilders, the COVID-19 pandemic is similar to a war situation with dire effects across all sectors from healthcare to education, politics, economy, peace and security.

With developed countries being caught off guard by the scale of the crises, nations are only just beginning to ease lockdown measures in May 2020 slowly but cautiously. However, we recognize the sad reality that the pandemic could linger for a while with the effects of the post COVID-19 era deepening from September 2020 till far into 2021 depending on how soon a vaccine emerges.

However, as peacebuilders, we must learn to live and carry out our life-transforming work during and after the lifespan of the virus.

3. Nigeria’s Local Context

Nigeria was presumably spared the scourge of the virus until her first case was recorded on February 28 2020. Since then, her confirmed cases have grown to clock over 6,667 as of May 21, 2020, with over 202 deaths (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control 2020).
As part of the effort to curb the spread of the virus, the Nigerian government imposed total lockdowns and social distancing policy in Abuja, Lagos and Ogun states on the 30th March of 2020 (USIP 2020). As peacebuilders, we continue to ponder over why the Nigerian authorities did not make adequate preparations to contain the virus and its socioeconomic effects long before it reached her shores.

The dramatic lockdowns did not adequately consider the ‘Do No Harm Principle’ as means of livelihoods have been lost with little or no palliative measures from the authorities. The country has endured gruelling hardship with more people slipping below the poverty line. Majority of Nigerians still live on less than $1 daily and rely on everyday transactions to survive. Restricting movements and closing all businesses without providing complementary socio-economic support and palliatives to all those affected shows government level of insensitivity and this act largely reduced the full compliance of the government ‘stay at home orders’ (Lawal, 2020).

There is a likelihood of rising crime due to frustration and aggression especially among youth in the country over the seeming injustice. Nigeria has a population of over 180 million people and about 65% are youth. For young people aged 15 to 35, 55.4% of them are without work and have no meaningful source of livelihood (Lawal, 2020).

COVID-19 has brought to limelight, Nigeria’s long-term weak healthcare infrastructure and the underlying socioeconomic condition which has exacerbated the spread of the virus.
4. An Assessment of Existing Responses to COVID-19 in Nigeria

i. Government:
Through the Presidential Task Force (PTF), which was set up specifically to coordinate government response to the outbreak, the federal government has rolled out its national response plan to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also continued to issue directives on response framework, coordination, and collaboration with other relevant stakeholders to effectively respond and cushion the effects of the pandemic on Nigerians (USIP, 2020).

Similarly, through the federal government, we have seen intervention measures such as the disbursement of funds to hard-hit states such as Lagos, Abuja and Kano, distribution of palliatives, and the school feeding program which are lauded steps. However, Nigeria’s generational problem of corruption, lack of accountability and transparency is ensuring that the country’s extreme poor are denied access to available initiatives.

ii Private Sector:
The private sector is playing a critical role in supporting government’s efforts during this pandemic. The idea is to join hands together to flatten the curve. For instance, the Nigerian Private Sector Coalition against COVID-19, an umbrella body under which industrialists and corporate organizations operate have donated grossly N27.160 billion naira as of April 28 2020, to help fight the contagious virus (Premium Times 2020). This only shows the extent to which collaborations are yielding to contain the effects and scourge of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

iii Civil Society:
The Civil Society is a major stakeholder in holding the government accountable for policies and decisions that affect the citizenry. The civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to give a voice to communities most likely to be left behind the national response plan by the federal government. They continue to advocate for protective measures and prioritization of the needs and rights of the vulnerable. CSOs are at the forefront of combatting misinformation and ensuring that hard to reach communities get the appropriate information about the nature of the virus and existing preventive guidelines. They support the distribution of food and non-food items among vulnerable communities targeting the elderly, widows, youth daily earners, disabled etc. However, the majority of CSOs are faced with dwindling resources as the adverse effects of COVID-19 loom large on the economy. Civil Society Organisations continue to identify citizens'
The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the dilapidated nature and decay in the health sector of developing nations. Irrespective of the brain transfer, poor funding, poor infrastructure which characterized Nigeria's health system for ages, the nation's Federal Ministry of Health and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) are providing the needed coordination and leadership. We have noticed great attempts at increasing testing capacity, prevention strategies and documentation of cases.

Humanitarianism is shown especially during any crisis. The fight against COVID-19 needs multilateral and international cooperation and everyone must support it wholeheartedly. The UN system in Nigeria is living up to expectations and providing a coordinated effort in terms of awareness-raising, education, technical guidance, the supply of health equipment and materials and also financial assistance to support the fight against COVID-19. Similarly, the European Union supported the Nigerian government to scale up public health preparedness and response with EUR 1.2 million (UNICEF 2020). The coordination and technical guidance provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) is commended and has assisted greatly in reducing fatality rate in Nigeria.

The effects of COVID-19 are overwhelming especially on youths. It has increased youth restiveness, criminality, frustration and aggression even as the level of unemployment in Nigeria becomes staggering. However, the majority of youths have continued to be responsible and contributed their bit to reduce the spread of the virus. Young people are combatting hate speech and fake news online and offline, mobilizing resources among peers for the distribution of palliatives among vulnerable communities, raising awareness in rural communities.

Olasupo Abideen, 26 year old Nigerian started ‘Know COVID-19 Nigeria,’ an initiative combating rumour and misinformation online.
vii. Security Agencies:
These agencies notably the Police and Military are leading the enforcement of the lockdown directives across states. However, reported cases of extra-judicial killings of innocent Nigerians during the lockdown have become worrisome especially in states like Plateau, Rivers, Lagos, Akwa Ibom, Abuja amongst others. It is, therefore, expected that in carrying out their duties, security personnel should not violate and or abuse the rights of the citizens. Nigerians must be protected at all times.

viii. Religious Leaders:
Religious leaders have continued to adhere to the lockdown directive regarding the temporary closure of churches and mosques by the federal and state governments respectively. Although, some of these religious leaders bemoan the closure of religious institutions, others are supportive of the government's efforts in fighting against COVID-19. For instance, the Catholic Church donated all of her 425 medical centres in Nigeria to be used as isolation centres by the federal government. Several others are also supporting in terms of providing palliatives and other basic health supplies to the citizenry.

5. Effects and Implications of COVID-19 on Peacebuilding in Nigeria

Significant effects and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic since its outbreak in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in China continue to generate serious concern among state and non-state actors. The implications of the coronavirus pandemic have arguably been worsened by globalization in the 21st-century system. Partial or full national lockdowns have been adopted as one of the means to contain the virus with overwhelming effects. To this effect, peacebuilders across the globe have begun to contextually assess and evaluate the effects and implications of COVID-19 pandemic on peacebuilding. In Nigeria, the implications include; cases of extrajudicial killing, abuses of human rights, gender-based violence, corruption, poor governance, inflation, poverty and unemployment have significantly soared.

In the first month of the pandemic outbreak in Nigeria, death rates from extrajudicial killing by security operatives outnumbered mortality rates of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nigeria will see the rise of new forms of conflict including interpersonal ones within homes and communities amidst the rising loss of jobs and other means of livelihood among families. Family counsellors and mediators must be prepared to deal with these cases.
With deepening inequalities and likely economic recession in Nigeria, if a concrete attempt is not made at reducing existing deficit issues, violent extremists may cash in on the situation to radicalize more vulnerable youths and this may make the fight against proscribed groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP linger on and help sustain bandits' activities and birth other criminal groups in Nigeria.

COVID-19 pandemic has greatly undermined on-going peacebuilding efforts and humanitarian activities in several parts of Nigeria. With the restrictive orders and physical/social distancing policies, peacebuilders have limited access to conflict-affected communities with humanitarian needs, yet ‘conflictpreneurs’ continue to use unconventional routes into communities. With this, there is a strong tendency for Nigeria’s humanitarian crisis to get worsen.

The humanitarian emergency has brought with it anti-democratic norms. It has allocated new extreme power for elected officials and security agencies all in a bid to contain and enforce preventive guidelines. Officers of the Nigeria Police and Army have been found to inflict physical injury by weapons and other objects on Nigerians all in a bid to maintain peace and order. The killing of Rinji Bala, a 20-year-old man on the 12 May 2020 in Jos, Plateau State by an officer is a clear example. Another example is that of a Governor in a south-south state who ordered and supervised the demolition of a hotel in his state, which according to him was the punishment for disobeying his lockdown orders. These human rights violations are setbacks for Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

6. Opportunities and Challenges for Peacebuilding Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

In reality, COVID 19 has disrupted all facets of human lives and ensured that humans are faced with a 'new normal'. As peacebuilders we must adapt quickly to our new realities as the need for peace work upsurges across Nigerian communities. This 'new normal' requires peacebuilders to learn to collaborate through networking, consortia building and partnerships far more than they have done in the past years (Awuapila,2020).

Peacebuilders working on community-wide change are now required to opt for working with smaller cohorts of stakeholders that could drive change instead of the larger communities.
There is also an urgent need for a robust redesign of our early warning and response systems to better foresee and contain such major disruptions. Pre-COVID-19 peacebuilding models and approaches often adopted by local peacebuilding NGOs and their partnering agents included peace education outreaches, youth empowerment; mediation and advocacy need adjustment. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 holistic precautionary measures, there will be social and physical distancing for a longer time. Thus, peacebuilders must begin to exploit technological means of furthering their local peacebuilding activities to extenuate the escalation of violent conflict in various communities across the globe. However, rural communities who lack adequate internet access may be denied these opportunities.

Moving forward, peacebuilders will require stronger partnerships to sustain the peacebuilding work. COVID-19 has disrupted our work by throwing up new issues that make our pre-COVID-19 era knowledge and tactics almost obsolete. No one organization can make an impact alone in its focus themes nor can it lay claim to sole expertise in a particular geographical area. Therefore, all organizations, big and small, local and international would need to form partnerships to truly make an impact. Similarly, peacebuilders could no longer be generalists trying to cover all areas. We must be specialists in a specific area while forming strategic partnerships with other humanitarian actors.

Peacebuilders must learn to adapt and work with technological innovations where possible. Technology offers strong opportunities for peacebuilding. We must adopt online activism as a potent advocacy tool to drive policy changes. Funders and international partners should also support peacebuilders with appropriate technologies they need during the crisis, including increased access.
to power, phones, internet, radio, online platforms, and other communication tools. This should include supporting the development of innovative ways of reaching local communities during distancing and lockdown. The private sector could make significant new contributions to local peacebuilding with technology support at this time.

The question of community ownership of peacebuilding processes was central to the discourse by participants. We must prioritize the inclusion of community members in peacebuilding interventions. This will lead to greater ownership and increase the chances of success. More than ever, we must operationalize the principle of local ownership.

Furthermore, peacebuilders must seize and build upon the contemporary opportunity for synergy between states presented by COVID-19. The case of Madagascar sending her local herbal mixture to other African states is worth emulating. This position was also echoed by International Crisis Group Report (2020) where they observed that despite the negative impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding activities, there are also indicators for synergy, citing instances of humanitarian gestures from the USA to North Korea, from Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE to Iran to help mitigate the impact of COVID-19.
The impact of COVID-19 has been felt on the social contract between citizens and states. In Nigeria particularly, there is already an existing distrust where citizens do not believe the political leaders. COVID-19 has been seen as an avenue for corrupt practices especially in the area of palliatives and collection of unnecessary loans in the guise of fighting the pandemic. There have been calls already, particularly on social media for the Nigerian state to stop the COVID-19 scam. Videos on social media abound of COVID-19 patients dancing in isolation centres which symbolically means they are healthy and “not infected” by the virus according to critics.

Religious leaders are also not left out in this distrust game. High ranking Pastors and Imams have called out the federal and state governments to lift the lockdowns and allow religious activities to resume, accusing them of suppressing religious activities clandestinely. In this toxic environment, therefore, the work of local peacebuilders is cut out for them: build and rebuild trust between citizens and states starting from communities through sensitization, training and seminars while observing safety measures (International Alert, 2020).

8. Recommendations

i. Stakeholders in the peace and security sector not limited to CSOs and government should build strong partnerships amongst themselves for more impact in the post-COVID-19 era.

ii. Peace activists and peace practitioners must develop capacities for online advocacy, lobbying and other peacebuilding interventions at local, state and national levels.

iii. Peace and security stakeholders must begin to build the capacities of local communities to take ownership of peacebuilding interventions and the sustainability of government guidelines on COVID-19 safety measures.

iv. For communities with limited access to the internet, peacebuilders should maximize radio and TV opportunities to reach them with violence prevention modules.

v. The Nigerian government should include sociological, economic and psychological perspectives in their humanitarian responses in the post-COVID-19 era.
vi. The Nigerian government should strengthen humanitarian response framework and contingency planning to prevent a future outbreak.

vii. Protection of human rights of all Nigerians including young men and young women in the post-COVID-19 should be strengthened.

viii. We must ensure that the digital space is democratized and all that all Nigerians have access to the internet.

ix. The underlying socioeconomic and political conditions of Nigerians including poor health and social infrastructures, poverty, unemployment must be investigated and addressed.

x. Government, INGO, foundations and private corporations must increase funding for local peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria and as well strengthen the flexibility of funding mechanisms to effectively support field realities.

9. Conclusion

As peacebuilders in Nigeria, we must innovate new strategies of responding to emerging conflicts, especially in volatile settings while sustaining ongoing efforts. We must step up our preventive mechanisms and address the underlying causes of conflict in our communities. Resources must be pooled from unconventional sources as both international and local donors are getting overwhelmed.

Peacebuilding organizations across the world have suggested ways to support peace activities and interventions through redefinitions or funding cycles and modifications in funding mechanisms to enable organizations cope and create sustainable change in these trying times (Alliance for Peacebuilding 2020).

COVID-19 has presented an opportunity for local peacebuilders to be taken seriously as the nation’s resources and manpower is becoming overwhelmed. The distribution of palliatives to vulnerable communities and education of locals on health best practices in this COVID-19 era by various peacebuilding actors in the country has helped tremendously and must be sustained.
References


Building Blocks for Peace Foundation is a youth-led non-governmental organization working on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, accountability governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. www.bbforpeace.org

West African Network for Peacebuilding is a network of civil society organizations that seeks to build collaborative relationship among peacebuilding organizations towards conflict prevention and resolution in ECOWAS region, including Chad and Cameroon. www.wanepnigeria.org

Peace Initiative Network is a voluntary organization dedicated to the promotion of peace, unity and harmony in Nigeria, Africa and among the nations of the world. www.peaceinitiativenetwork.org

CORAFID Centre for Innovation and Research exists to foster and strengthen local partnerships and linkages to end violence in African societies including deepening conflict sensitivity of policies, practices, improving civic spaces and good citizenship.