

Preventing Violence and Facilitating Peace: A Case study of Youth Peace Ambassadors in Plateau State

Background

Plateau State has experienced recurrent violence since the mid-90s with significant human and material loss to residents. Between 2001 and 2012, 52 separate incidences of violence bordering on religious and ethnic conflict, left over 3,000 people dead and 5,300 persons displaced from their homes¹. Victims of these conflicts were mostly women and children. With a teeming youth population of 1,575,221² coupled with high levels of unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, the state remains one of the most volatile in North-Central Nigeria.



Peace Ambassadors in Training Camp

Over the years, youth in Plateau state have been drawn into violence, most notably by politicians who employ them for selfish political gains. It is common knowledge in Jos for instance, that flashpoints such as Angan Rogo, Angwan Rukuba, Rikkos and Nasarawa are brimming with youth capable of mobilising for violence at the shortest notice. Equipped with small arms and light weapons and largely unemployed, a good number of these youth have joined gangs to give them a sense of belonging.³ This trend portends danger for the future of the state and calls for decisive action aimed at re-directing youthful energies from fermenting violence to facilitating peace.

Building Ambassadors for Peace

In a bid to turn the tide of violent conflict in Plateau State, the Institute for Governance and Social Research (IGSR) with the support of the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme, (NSRP) embarked on an initiative to harness the potential of Plateau youth for peacebuilding. Beginning with extensive consultation and sensitization activities with traditional and religious leaders, law enforcement agencies, and women and youth groups, the initiative culminated with a seven day training camp for batches of 600 youth drawn from various ethnic and religious

¹ Institute for Governance and Social Research Survey Report 2014

² 2012 National Baseline Youth Survey Report (Published March 2014)

³ History: Conflict in the Plateau State Nigeria. <http://www.c-r.org/where-we-work/west-africa/history-conflict-plateau-state-nigeria> (accessed 23/09/ 2015)

backgrounds in the state. The youth were camped at the Citizenship and Leadership Training Centre in Shere hills where they received trainings on civic education and other topics such as Leadership, Security Awareness, Enterpreunship, Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation, Sports as an Instrument for Peace and Conflict Management. At the end of the camping period, participants were designated 'Peace Ambassadors' and given a mandate to serve as role models for other youths in their locality. The camp sessions were followed by 'Early Warning' Seminars alongside security operatives, after which the new peace agents were charged to return to their communities and work to foster unity and tolerance in their immediate environs.

Results

The immediate result of the camping activity was strengthened relationship between youths from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. This newly acquired sense of comradeship and unity of purpose is noteworthy in view of the conflict context of the state. A new culture of tolerance and acceptance was born from collective exercises designed to inculcate team spirit amongst participants at the camps. This was evident in the everyday demeanour of participants, particularly during daily physical training sessions anchored by Citizenship and Leadership Training Centre Instructors. It was difficult not to notice the stark contrast between the initial aloofness and hostility amongst some of the youth when the camp first began and the subsequent empathy and positive energy the group displayed at the end of the camping period.

The relationship-strengthening was not limited to the youth. The structure of camp activities provided the opportunity for participants to interact with security personnel who were invited to the camp. As camp participants graduated and were designated Peace Ambassadors, they maintained contact with their new-found friends from law enforcement agencies and began contacting them with security-relevant information in their day-to-day lives. Armed with peacebuilding skills and the new networks of peace-loving peers, the youth began taking proactive steps aimed at safeguarding lives and property beyond the camp borders. The most notable effort in this regard was the practice of sending early warning reports across the network of Peace Ambassadors and their security counterparts ahead of brewing conflict. Speaking on this new network for peacebuilding, one of the camp Commandants, Mr Sadeeq Musa Hong stated the following:

"... A comprehensive youth web of trust has been formed and it is so formidable that an early warning signal can emanate from one ward and you are certain that the information will get to other Ambassadors and security agencies."

A significant number of youth from flash points such as Angwan Rukuba, Angwan Rogo, Nasarawa, Yashanu, Zololo, Tundun wada and Rikkos trained as Peace Ambassadors have been instrumental in sharing intelligence with security agencies which has averted several planned violent group mobilizations in their communities. A case in point involved a recent bomb attack on July 5, 2015 in the city of Jos. Previously, attacks of this nature had led to accusations and counter-accusations that specific ethno-religious groups were being targeted with consequent reprisal attacks. In this instance however, Peace Ambassadors mobilised across

wards, quelling rising tempers and negotiating peace amongst the relevant groups. Early warning reports to security personnel also resulted in early response with significant security presence to discourage aggrieved parties from taking the law into their own hands. Improved synergy between the youth, local vigilante groups and security agencies led to significant security gains in the focal communities. Adamu Ahmed Baba, one of the Peace Ambassadors made the following comment:

“In the past, conflicts in Jos were very bloody because youths from different ethnic and religious background picked up arms against one another but what is found now is that whenever there are skirmishes, youths call to one another for help.....like the last bomb (July 5, 2015) in Jos, many youths were seen helping to evacuate victims, even when a group wanted to cause mayhem they were quickly handed to the security agents by fellow youths.”

The activities of Peace Ambassadors have also begun yielding increased levels of trust amongst communities previously divided along ethnic and religious lines. Peace Ambassadors have embarked on exchange visits across previously termed ‘no go areas’ particularly in the city of Jos. These surroundings have been opened up and the walls of hostility are gradually being removed.

Challenges

A major challenge to the Peace Ambassador initiative is the agitation for a complementary economic empowerment programme. In a state where significant numbers of youth are unemployed, the re-orientation occasioned by camp activities has kindled in Peace Ambassadors a desire to be gainfully employed so as to avoid being lured back into violence for financial rewards. The lack of resources to meet this demand has undermined the drive of the youths.

Another challenge the initiative faced was the intermittent nature of response from security agencies to early warning reports. On several occasions, security operatives failed to respond timely to security-relevant reports from Peace Ambassadors which has affected the morale of some of the youths. A case in point was the May 2014 bomb explosions where the attention of security operatives had been drawn to the suspiciously parked cars later found to have been loaded with explosives. There was no response to the early warning reports until the cars exploded with resultant loss in lives and property.

Lessons Learned

In undertaking this initiative, IGSR learnt how crucial it is to include both male and female youth in Peacebuilding efforts. Too often, initiatives of this nature lean towards a focus on male youth as they are perceived to be more susceptible to violence. Experience from the Peace Ambassadors initiative revealed that women were most adept at noticing suspicious movements and identifying subtle threats with resultant gains in averting violent conflict. Ensuring the involvement of both male and female youth served to maximise efforts to prevent violence and maintain peace.

Perhaps the most significant lesson learned from this initiative is the relatively cheap cost of early detection and prevention of violence against post-conflict remedial efforts. The early warning mechanism set up by the comprehensive youth web of Peace Ambassadors has significantly reduced the man hours spent by security and health operatives in times of violence. More importantly, it has reduced costs to human lives.