Local Actors, Conflict Management, and Peacebuilding in Central Nigeria

Insights and Policy Implications

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian Government should:
• Enact national, state, and local legal frameworks to regulate the conduct of traditional leaders.
• Institute oversight and monitoring mechanisms to engage with and regulate the activities of non-state security actors, to ensure that they contribute positively to the peace and security of their communities.
• Provide state and non-state security actors with high-quality, serviceable security equipment.

Civil Society and the Donor Community should contribute to the effectiveness and accountability of local actors through the provision of technical support.

The Economic Community of West African States should endeavor to develop a regional model for the regulation of local actors, including traditional or customary leaders, involved in conflict prevention, management, and peacebuilding. The sub-regional body should also serve as a platform for sharing best practices on improving the performance and accountability structures of local peacebuilding actors.

This policy briefing note focuses on the role of local actors in conflict management and peacebuilding in central Nigeria, and explores two issues: the problem of intractable conflicts and the potential for local actors to play a role in policy interventions aimed at conflict management. By focusing on local actors and their impact on prospects for peacebuilding in local conflicts, it reveals the need to draw lessons and best practices from local contexts to apply to regional and national conflict management policies and peacebuilding processes.

Intractable Theaters of Violence

Central Nigeria, or Nigeria’s “Middle Belt,” is a theater of complex inter-religious and inter-ethnic group relations. Although diverse groups co-exist peacefully across much of the region, there are areas that have experienced cycles of violent conflict. These conflicts converge around the interplay of religion, ethnicity, politics, and local resources, and are expressed in contestations over the ownership of land, resources, and political power and representation. Furthermore, processes of mobilization and collective action within central Nigeria’s conflict theaters have intensified with the emergence of the insurgent Boko Haram movement in the neighboring northeast. This has further accentuated the insecurity across the northern states of Nigeria.

The responses of these state governments can be categorized into immediate to short-term and medium to long-term. In the short-term, states...
deploy security agents—often the military—to enforce law and order, including the imposition of curfews to restrict citizens’ movement and restore a form of peace. In the long-term, states institute judicial and administrative commissions of inquiry to investigate the causes of violence and make recommendations to the government. Such state efforts have not only failed to gain traction, but also often largely exclude local communities in the decision-making processes surrounding conflict resolution and peacebuilding. As government policies have not engendered trust within affected communities, the achievement of true reconciliation, justice, and peace remains a major challenge. Additionally, without proper government programs for disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating (DDR) members of local militias into society, erstwhile “fighters” may turn to violent crime as a livelihood option following the cessation of conflict.

Local Actors and Prospects for Conflict Management and Resolution
Over the years, communities within regions of violent conflict have resorted to self-defense, in response to both the ongoing violence and failed top-down state conflict management processes. Such self-defense methods include the mobilization of resources and military materiel to protect their homes and land during periods of violence. However, within this landscape of violent communal, ethnic, and identity politics, “islands of peace” exist, where local actors serve as a force for non-violent conflict management. The first category of such local actors includes some traditional rulers. While some traditional rulers have emerged as rallying points for chauvinistic communal or ethnic mobilization in other instances, the focus of this document is on those that serve as agents of local peacebuilding. Other actors that positively impact peacebuilding are some local non-state security actors, such as hunter associations and neighborhood watch groups. The deployment of state security actors to theaters of violence is more likely to succeed when they collaborate with local non-state security actors. Given that non-state security actors are constitutive of the security landscape, it is imperative to reassess the focus and role of security sector strategies and local actors as they relate to conflict management and peacebuilding.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian Government should:
• Enact national, state, and local legal frameworks based on local engagement and participation, to regulate the conduct of traditional leaders in relation to conflict prevention, management, and resolution.
• Institute oversight and monitoring mechanisms to engage with and regulate the activities of non-state security actors, to ensure that they contribute positively to the peace and security of their communities. Such mechanisms should promote the effectiveness and accountability of local non-state security actors to their communities and the authorities.
• Provide state and non-state security actors with high-quality, serviceable security equipment. This includes battery-powered flashlights (torches), mobile phones and top-up credit, uniforms, proper identification, patrol vehicles, and adequate incentives to improve the effectiveness of such local actors.

Civil Society and the Donor Community should:
• Contribute to the effectiveness and accountability of local actors through the provision of technical support. They can do this through supporting additional research, knowledge production, and training; and providing expert advice to local and national peace and security actors and institutions.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should:
• Endeavor to develop a regional model for the regulation of local actors, including traditional or customary leaders, involved in conflict prevention, management, and peacebuilding. The sub-regional body should also serve as a platform for sharing best practices on improving the performance and accountability structures of local peacebuilding actors. Efforts towards instituting frameworks to guide the activities of traditional and customary leaders should prioritize accountability as well as deepen local participation by citizens, both of which are important steps towards building sustainable peace at the grassroots level across West Africa and beyond.

Two examples of this ongoing hybrid conflict management are the collaborative task force of state security agencies and non-state actors mobilised by the Plateau State government for peacekeeping purposes (Operation Rainbow) and the recent involvement of vigilante groups and hunter associations in the fight against Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria.