

Helping to address religious conflict in northern Nigeria



Thousands Start Afresh in Niger after Fleeing Nigeria by Photo Unit, UNHCF, CC BY-NC 2.0 via Flickr

Imposing simple solutions on complicated problems is likely to end in failure. By looking in detail at the many complex aspects of northern Nigerian society, the Nigeria Research Network is deepening understanding and helping to shape policy responses to Boko Haram.

Nigeria is modern, democratic, and oil rich – but in the north, where Boko Haram has its stronghold, it is also a place of conflict. Outside Nigeria, it is the group's atrocities that have drawn attention and condemnation: for example, the 2011 attack on the UN embassy in Abuja, or the 2014 abduction of schoolgirls from the town of Chibok. For people living in northern Nigeria, however, the years since Boko Haram's uprising in 2009 have seen a relentless stream of violence that has so far displaced around 2.5 million people, and left thousands dead.

In their attempts to defeat Boko Haram the Nigerian Government initially focussed almost exclusively

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on military means, with limited success. Few resources went into supporting non-radical Muslims to publicly oppose Boko Haram, or into finding out how radicalisation occurred. But by 2014, the government recognised that more needed to be done to try to prevent radicalisation in the first place. At the specific request of the Nigerian Government, the Nigeria Research Network (NRN) in the Department of International Development began to carry out intensive research into exactly how and why Muslim youth became radicalised in Nigeria.

The NRN had already built a reputation for conducting careful, detailed analyses of the issues affecting Nigeria, particularly in the north. There is a temptation to see all the region's problems as arising out of a basic Christian-Muslim divide: Nigeria's relatively wealthier south is predominantly Christian, while the poorer north is mainly Muslim. But in fact, as the NRN has identified, it is not nearly as simple as that. Nigeria's Muslims are not a single, unified group; there have been centuries of conflict within Muslim communities in Nigeria, and this has had a profound impact not just on the rise of groups like Boko Haram but on how the whole of contemporary Nigerian society operates.

NRN researchers, led by Professor Abdul Raufu Mustapha, explored a very wide range of factors that potentially contributed to radicalisation. They looked at how children were brought up in different Muslim communities, and how rites of passage might affect their decisions. They examined the role of the almajiri system of Quranic education, in which poor parents give their children up to the care of Islamic teachers who require the children to beg in exchange for teaching. They explored the impact of youth unemployment, the role played by women in radicalisation, the way that different Islamic sects interacted with the informal economy, and the profiles of publicly known Boko Haram members. In addition, they drew parallels with similar conflicts in other countries such as Egypt in order to inform the Nigerian Government's response to Boko Haram.



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The research revealed a highly complex picture in which religion, education, economics, history and politics all played a part in driving the radicalisation of young people. The findings have been influential in designing the Nigerian Government's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programme, which now has a non-military 'society-focussed' approach that emphasises countering radicalisation and promoting development. A senior official in Nigeria's Office of the National Security Adviser described the NRN's input as 'seminal'. Building on a long tradition of high-quality African scholarship at Oxford, the NRN's careful and thorough research is having a direct impact on government policy and wider public understanding of the dilemmas facing a major corner of the African continent. With access to experts who have detailed knowledge of the local situation, they are able to make a significant contribution to policy solutions.

Professor Abdul Raufu Mustapha died on 8 August 2017.