

Scattered for Safety

Boko Haram, Girls, and the Promise of Distance Learning

PIPS White Paper 11.1: *Executive Summary*

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Boko Haram, the Islamic fundamentalist group intent on overthrowing the Nigerian government, continues to pose a threat to civilians in northeastern Nigeria. The insurgency's opposition to democracy and Western-style education has resulted in thousands of attacks on villages, schools, and military posts. Despite President Buhari's 2015 declaration of Boko Haram as "technically defeated," recent attacks demonstrate that the insurgency is still operationally effective. On February 19th, 2018, militants kidnapped 110 girls from their school in Dapchi, underscoring the weakness of strategies enacted to protect students. Large numbers of students congregated in a single location continually provides opportunities for militants to take significant numbers of women at once. The rise in attacks on female Nigerians, combined with Boko Haram's targeting of schools, poses a serious threat to girls' education in the Lake Chad Basin.

Developing an alternative schooling program using low-cost data cards will ensure that Nigerian girls can safely access an education. Rather than gathering in a specific location at a particular time, girls can study from their homes using cell phones or tablets. Technology-enabled education will not only protect girls from attack, but also increase educational resources to students living in rural areas.

Causes and Effects of Boko Haram's Attacks

Boko Haram's targeting of villages and schools stems from the politicization of religion in Nigeria, corruption in the security sector, social norms and inflationary bride prices, and the increased use of female suicide bombers.

With the emergence of democracy in 1999, civilians in the northeast started to advocate for a broadening of Sharia law. Politicians promised an increase in religious legislation in exchange for support at the ballot box, however, their failure to please multiple religious and ethnic factions created dissatisfaction that Boko Haram used to garner support. Pervasive corruption in Nigeria contributes to civilian distrust of the security sector and prevents the eradication of Boko Haram.

Women abducted by Boko Haram are used for both recruitment and terrorism purposes. Boko Haram continues to attract young, unmarried men by promising them brides in exchange for

enlistment. Additionally, the insurgency has increasingly relied on women and children to carry out acts of terrorism, as such individuals appear innocent and unsuspecting in village environments. Between 2014 and 2016, 75% of Boko Haram's suicide bombers were female.

Boko Haram's operations in the Lake Chad Basin pose two humanitarian problems for the region. Young women abducted by Boko Haram who escape or are rescued face intense discrimination upon their return to normal society. In multiple instances, women who are not properly reintegrated returned to the insurgency. Furthermore, the crisis has produced one of the worst humanitarian situations in the world. The United Nations (UN) estimates that "more than 2.8 million people have been displaced, and more than 4.4 million people face severe food insecurity."

Existing Approaches to Protect At-Risk Students

A number of UN offices, think tanks, and international NGOs have proposed various methods for combating Boko Haram and protecting students. To date, the implementation of these proposals has had limited success in preventing attacks on schools.

- *Current and Proposed Policies for the Nigerian Government.* The most common proposal to protect students from Boko Haram's raids is to increase the presence of security forces in northeastern schools. However, this policy has proven to be largely ineffective. Nigeria's military and police forces are simply not large enough to adequately protect schools in this region, and troops are widely mistrusted by civilians. Other recommendations include adjusting traditional approaches to education, improving communication with insurgents, and reinforcing the Safe Schools Initiative, a global partnership that outlines a variety of security related policies to protect students from attack.
- *Current and Proposed Policies That Involve International Organizations.* Efforts that could be undertaken by and within international bodies focus on increasing collaboration between interest groups and reinforcing international education guidelines. Thus far, the signing of international education policies appears to have been largely symbolic—recent attacks on schools illustrate that progress has been limited.

The above recommendations require significant policy changes, vast amounts of money, or the cooperation of the military. Such proposals are difficult to enact in a state struggling with government and military abuses.

Educating Nigerian Girls Through Distance Learning

Implementing a policy of dispersal in which girls are not gathering in a central location for school will diminish insurgents' incentive to attack and allow girls to seek an education without the persistent threat of abduction. Through a distance learning initiative students can access educational materials on SD cards inserted into basic phones or tablets.

- *Identifying Key Actors.* A steering committee comprised of teachers, donors, and individuals from NGOs is the best method of establishing distance learning in the northeast. A Nigerian NGO with an established base in the region should spearhead the program. The government stands to benefit from this type of technological solution as it is a cheaper alternative to providing military protection at schools. Funding from an external aid organization could help expand distance learning to a wide swath of girls in the northeast.
- *Implementing Distance Learning in the Northeast.* Although phone penetration across the country is high, young women may not have access to personal devices or may use a flip phone that lacks the appropriate screen size to clearly view educational materials or videos. In these cases, phones or tablets must be distributed. Involved actors must collaborate to convert the existing educational curriculum into a digital format to be placed onto SD cards. While a durable device that holds a charge is an important aspect of technology-based educational programs, the ability to charge said devices is equally crucial. An internationally-funded solar energy project that provides small home solar panels is the best option for allowing students to charge phones or tablets. Finally, some form of contact between students and educators is necessary. Teachers could visit individual students in their village weekly or speak with students over the phone. Through this type of network, current teachers would be able to remain in their positions assisting students.

Broader applications of distance learning programs exist within Nigeria. Such initiatives would provide access to education for displaced children living in IDP camps and host communities across the country. Additionally, such programs would allow children from impoverished households in Nigeria to continue working or completing necessary tasks at home while also pursuing an education.

As long as Boko Haram continues to disrupt northeastern Nigeria, girls in the region are at risk. The Nigerian government's widespread abuses and civilian distrust of the military makes it difficult to enact security-based responses. A technological approach allows Nigerian girls to access education through cell phones or tablets at any time and location. This initiative is a relatively inexpensive method of protecting students without the necessity of government funding. The targeting of girls gathering in school buildings is eliminated through distance learning. This policy will allow thousands of Nigerian school-aged girls to safely access an education.