What's going on in Nigeria?

Toby Lanzer

Huge numbers of people in Nigeria's north-east have been affected by poverty, environmental degradation and, specifically, Boko Haram violence. The need to bring our collective understanding and resources to such a setting is obvious – so why does action to do so remain elusive and what can be done to set things on the right course?

When one thinks of Nigeria lots of things come to mind: energy, money and, increasingly, Boko Haram. The group has existed in the country's north-east for years but gained international prominence on the night of 14-15th April 2014 when over 200 girls were abducted in Chibok. This incident was a precursor of yet more outrages, and over the past eighteen months the number of people forced from their homes in Nigeria's northeast has risen to a staggering 2.2 million. Further, what was largely seen as a 'Nigerian problem' has taken on a regional dimension across the Lake Chad basin encompassing northern Cameroon, western Chad, south-eastern Niger and north-eastern Nigeria.

Why is there seemingly little reporting about what is happening and what is needed now in order to effectively provide protection and assistance?

There is a lack of news from the country's north-east – and indeed the entire Lake Chad basin – for all the wrong reasons. Perhaps we live in a world of too much news, and too many, too severe crises. Remember the Sahel in 2013? Or Gaza in 2014? Both were overshadowed by Syria. There are only so many crises that can make the headlines and which the world at large (including government officials and aid agency managers) can handle. The severity of each crisis also seems to have deepened. More people displaced; more towns destroyed; more villages torched; more lives lost,

women raped, and children out of school. And so one might argue that there is an inability to deal with 'yet another crisis'.

Just a few days after assuming my current role in July 2015, I visited Nigeria's north-east. The numbers of people in need and displaced, and the lack of action to address the situation, surprised me, and I asked my most trusted adviser, "How did I miss this?" "You were quite busy in South Sudan," she answered. This incisive comment led me to conclude that senior leaders and managers in capitals or indeed in my own institution were "quite busy" with Syria, Ukraine and the fast-evolving European migration crisis. And when I called on embassies in the Nigerian capital Abuja, on donor capitals and on my own institution for funding, a common comment was, "This is Nigeria, a rich country which can help its own people."

Addressing a crisis in a relatively rich country is problematic. Yes, Nigeria is wealthy and should have the resources to help its own people but issues of governance are often a factor as is the matter of the 'marginalised north-east'. Yes, aid agencies have been known to substitute for institutions of the state instead of supporting them, and we certainly would not want this to be the case in a setting such as Nigeria. And, yes, there is always the matter of national pride which nobody wants to dent and in that sense bringing attention to the situation in Nigeria's northeast is politically

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Nigeria: Total population 182,200,000

- Almost 2,152,000 internally displaced (as of end 2015, IDMC estimate)
- Plus almost 555,000 internally displaced or Nigerian refugees in Cameroon, Chad and Niger (as of April 2016, OCHA)

Of the total figure of IDPs, it is estimated that 12.6% were displaced due to communal clashes, 2.4% by natural disasters and 85% as a result of Boko Haram violence. See IDMC www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/figures-analysis

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Displaced villagers, now in Bama, Borno State, Nigeria, April 2016.

'tricky'. Given the number of people in need, however, much more had to be done, and with a greater sense of urgency.

Listening to what people want

In Nigeria's north-east, I asked people in the city of Maiduguri open-ended questions, starting with "How are things going?" What I heard was enlightening and reassuring. The main message from people was, "We can and want to take care of ourselves." The main help they needed was for the authorities to take back control of their towns and villages and to ensure security and safety for them, their children and their livestock. People also spoke of the need for roads to be safe and markets to be open and in so doing they underlined their wish to work and trade. Parents told me of their concern that children were missing the school year. One proud woman spoke to me of her nine children, whom she had raised almost single-handedly and who had become doctors and lawyers. "I don't need your blankets and buckets. I need to know that my town is safe once again, and then I'll walk home!"

Nobody uttered a word to me about 'humanitarian' this or 'development' that. For people struck by crisis, especially in already fragile settings, such constructs are only present in outsiders' minds, not in those of the people affected by violence and displacement or of the authorities charged with helping them.

The case of Maiduguri is instructive: a city whose population ballooned from 1 million to 2.6 million in a matter of months because of the atrocities committed by Boko Haram. Upon arrival the displaced people needed shelter, food and water. These basic needs persist and the temptation is to carry on with an emergency approach to providing shelter, food and water – that is, 'business as usual'. Upon reflection, however, we should recall what has happened in similar settings elsewhere when largely rural populations are forced from their homes or off their land and who seek refuge in cities. The desire to return home does eventually cool as time goes on. Accordingly, in the case of Maiduguri, creating a city that can cope in the long term with a population of 2.6 million is what is really needed. Aid agencies would do well to bring together their short- and medium-term work to help the authorities and local people create sustainable shelter in settings that have sufficient water and sanitation, clinics and schools.

Other organisations, such as the World Bank (not typically associated with response in crisis settings), now plan to accelerate their work in Nigeria's north-east and indeed the entire Lake Chad basin. Across the Lake Chad basin the roots of instability and misery lie in the abject poverty of the region and in the degradation of its environment. Since the 1950s Lake Chad has shrunk to 20% of its former size, making it harder for the population to access water for its needs, whether for people, farming or livestock. At the same time, the population has soared and is predicted to double in the next two decades.

If they are poor and lack water we can be sure that social tensions will mount, and could do so even more if violent extremists remain there to meddle in an already complex setting.

Stepping out from our 'silos'
Different parts of the international community need to collaborate with Nigeria's authorities to support their attempts to stabilise the situation and lay the grounds for peace and stability. First and foremost, countries of the region have come together to form a Multi-National Joint Task Force to address instability. Support has been forthcoming from different parts of the international community such as the African Union, France and the United Kingdom, which has itself established a team in Maiduguri providing advice to the Nigerian security forces on how to tackle Boko Haram (and to do so with due respect for human rights). While always heeding the principles of operational independence and impartiality, aid agencies need to collaborate more closely with other parts of the international

system – actors who are part of the setting even if they are not aid agencies. In the case of Nigeria's north-east, where various institutions work inside the development, environmental, humanitarian, human rights, political and security 'silos', the relevance of collaboration and the need for it should be self-evident. The alternative – remaining in our respective silos – is to lose an opportunity to build on the collective understanding and resources that we can bring to such a setting. This is so seemingly logical, yet illusive.

If we can learn to collaborate more effectively, in line with what the communities themselves are telling us about the situation and in support of the legitimate authorities on the ground, we can help people not only to survive but also to find their way out of the crisis and make their lives better sooner.

Toby Lanzer *twitter.com/tobylanzer*
UN Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel, and former Visiting Study Fellow with the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. He wrote this article in a personal capacity.