THE ROLE OF EXTENSION ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION (EALE) IN PEACEBUILDING AMIDST CONTEMPORARY INSECURITY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Northern Nigeria faces persistent and complex security issues that continue to severely affect communities, their livelihoods, and socio-economic development. Despite numerous military and political interventions, insecurity remains widespread across the region. This insecurity is rooted in a complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. Consequently, there is growing recognition that sustainable peace requires approaches that extend beyond military responses to address the underlying causes of conflict and promote long-term stability. This article explores the potential role of Extension Adult Learning and Education (EALE)[1] in peacebuilding efforts in Northern Nigeria. It argues that through EALE's community-based, participatory, and transformative nature, it can play a significant role in peacebuilding and in fostering peaceful, cohesive, and resilient communities across Northern Nigeria, and, by extension, in other African contexts facing similar issues.

The state of insecurity in Northern Nigeria

The following provides a snapshot of the region's security issues which, collectively, illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of insecurity in Northern Nigeria.

Ongoing reports document widespread attacks, killings, mass abductions, and raids on communities across Northern Nigeria. All 19 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, continue to experience persistent insecurity driven

by a combination of ethno-religious tensions, insurgency, banditry[2], kidnappings, and socio-economic marginalisation. Many analysts contend that this persistent insecurity reflects broader structural weaknesses within the Nigerian state, including corruption, the marginalisation of minority groups, weak governance, and the inadequacies of the country's security institutions.

The impact of insecurity in Northern Nigeria has been profound, affecting lives, livelihoods, education, healthcare, and broader social systems. Since 2009, conflict, insurgency, and banditry have claimed more than 300,000 lives and displaced approximately three million people, leaving many communities vulnerable to psychological trauma and prolonged humanitarian suffering. Persistent violence has disrupted local economic activities, limited access to essential services, and weakened social cohesion. In many rural areas, insecurity has forced farmers to abandon their fields, while livestock theft and the disruption of local markets have undermined agricultural production and economic activities. Numerous businesses have closed, employment opportunities have declined, and household incomes have been significantly reduced. Recent accounts indicate that many communities continue to experience killings, kidnappings, and the imposition of forced 'levies' of naira[3] despite reported peace agreements with armed groups. Women and girls remain especially vulnerable to gender-based violence, including abduction, rape, and sexual exploitation, with far-reaching consequences for their psychosocial well-being and economic security. Education has also been severely affected. Over half of schools in high-risk areas have been closed, destroyed, or left underattended due to attacks and community displacement.

Understanding the root causes

Some scholars trace the roots of these issues to colonial legacies of underdevelopment, which have contributed to persistent socio-economic and political inequalities in the region, while others emphasise more immediate causes, including the proliferation of small arms and the emergence of a 'war economy' in which banditry has become profitable through kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling[4].

Socio-economic factors: In Northern Nigeria, poverty levels remain severe, with many residents lacking access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and clean water. Ongoing insecurity, conflict, and economic hardship have contributed to the displacement of many people from their ancestral homes and traditional livelihoods. There is widespread poverty and unemployment, particularly among young people in rural areas where agriculture and livestock herding constitute the main sources of livelihood. Economic hardship has compelled some individuals to engage in criminal activities as a means of survival, despite the adverse consequences for their communities. According to journalistic accounts and security briefings, many apprehended 'bandits' have cited joblessness as a major factor influencing their involvement in banditry. This situation is further compounded by high levels of illiteracy, which limit access to opportunities and increase vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups operating covertly within local settings.

Political factors: Political actors have at times exploited ethnic, religious, and communal divisions for personal, political, or electoral advantage. During election periods, some politicians have been accused of sponsoring armed groups or mobilising youths to engage in violent activities. In response to persistent insecurity, governments have negotiated various peace agreements with armed groups, particularly in conflict-prone states. Although these accords are intended to reduce violence and promote stability, they have sometimes produced unintended consequences. In certain cases, peace agreements have been perceived as rewarding violent actors while overlooking law-abiding citizens. Such perceptions may encourage other groups to resort to violence as a strategy for attracting government attention and securing concessions. Furthermore, weak implementation and a lack of accountability mechanisms have limited the effectiveness and sustainability of many peace accords.

Environmental factors: Land remains a critical source of livelihood for farming and pastoral communities. However, population growth, agricultural expansion, and increasing urbanisation have intensified pressure for available land over the years. As grazing areas continue to diminish, disputes frequently emerge between farmers and herders over land use and resource access. These conflicts often escalate into violent confrontations that result in the loss of life and destruction of property. Similarly, access to water resources has become increasingly contentious in many parts of the region. Rivers, ponds, and other water bodies that sustain agricultural and pastoral activities are under growing strain from population growth, environmental degradation, and changing climatic conditions. Consequently, competition over scarce land and water resources has become a significant driver of inter-community conflicts and farmer-herder clashes in Northern Nigeria.

Peacebuilding from an Extension Adult Learning and Education perspective

While military and political responses remain important in addressing insecurity, including the deployment of security forces, enforcement of curfews, and government-led dialogue with key stakeholders, there is growing recognition that sustainable peace requires community-based educational interventions. State-led security interventions have largely focused on military containment strategies, which have proven insufficient in addressing the underlying factors that cause and sustain conflict in the region. Effective peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria therefore requires a more holistic approach that extends beyond the existing security responses to address broader political and socio-economic issues, and the educational and community development needs of affected populations.

Although not widely recognised, Extension Adult Learning and Education (EALE) should form an integral part of such an approach.

Adults play a critical role in shaping local social relationships, community engagement, and decision-making processes. Through EALE, they can acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and capacities necessary to foster dialogue, strengthen social cohesion, and support sustainable peace within their communities.

While insecurity continues to disrupt formal education systems, EALE - and the non-formal learning opportunities it provides - extends beyond formal institutions and reaches people regardless of location. It is community-oriented, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the lived realities of affected populations, making it suitable for addressing complex social conditions.

Grounded in a participatory approach, EALE is able to support peacebuilding efforts in the following ways:

- Encouraging critical awareness: EALE can help to deepen critical awareness by enabling participants to better understand the structural causes of conflict, including poverty, inequality, unemployment, and social exclusion. It supports efforts of conflict transformation rather than merely conflict management.
- Equipping participants with conflict resolution, communication, and leadership skills: These can help participants to identify early warning signs of conflict and intervene appropriately before disputes escalate into violence.
- Creating inclusive platforms for dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, and trust-building: These can foster opportunities for peaceful and harmonious coexistence among divided groups, including those with histories of conflict, resentment, trauma, and mistrust. Through engagements such as roundtable discussions and community dialogues, conflicting parties are provided with safe spaces to express their concerns, identify underlying issues, develop mutual understanding, and work towards reconciliation. Such processes help rebuild relationships, restore trust, and promote sustainable peaceful coexistence within communities. One such example is interfaith education in the context of ethno-religious tensions in Northern Nigeria. Through interactive learning sessions, participants can challenge prejudices and stereotypes, develop a deeper understanding of different faiths and cultures, and cultivate mutual respect.
- Implementing adult learning programmes that integrate mental health education linked to peacebuilding is essential for providing emotional support and healing to participants affected by conflict and trauma. Such programmes can help individuals develop coping mechanisms, build resilience, and foster positive relationships, thereby contributing to social cohesion and sustainable peace within their communities.
- Providing vocational and livelihood-focused training that equips adults with practical skills for sustainable livelihoods and economic resilience: Examples include improved agricultural practices, modern retail knowledge and skills, and value-chain marketing techniques. Expanding income-generating opportunities and strengthening self-reliance can help reduce economic hardship, which is often linked to increased vulnerability to violence, criminal activities, and social instability.
- Strengthening civic participation: As stated earlier, EALE can contribute to peacebuilding as a complementary approach that goes beyond security interventions. Civic education can equip adults with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to engage in local governance processes and hold authorities accountable.

Conclusion

The persistence of insecurity in Northern Nigeria highlights the limitations of relying solely on military and political responses to achieve lasting peace. While security interventions remain necessary, addressing the root causes of conflict requires complementary approaches that empower communities and promote social transformation. EALE offers such an approach by equipping adults with critical awareness, conflict resolution skills, livelihood opportunities, civic competencies, and platforms for dialogue and reconciliation. Through its emphasis on participation, inclusion, and community engagement, EALE can contribute significantly to strengthening social cohesion, fostering resilience, and addressing the socio-economic conditions that often fuel conflict. Integrating EALE into broader peacebuilding initiatives can therefore enhance efforts to build more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable communities across Northern Nigeria, and, more broadly, across Africa.

References /Further reading

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Endnotes

1 EALE refers to community-oriented educational programmes, including literacy education, vocational training, civic education, and extension services, aimed at improving adults' knowledge, skills, and capacities outside the formal education system, in order to support personal development, community participation, and socio-economic development.

2 A term commonly used in Nigeria, it refers to a highly organised form of violent, large-scale criminal enterprise.

3 While individual poor farmers might be extorted for smaller amounts of money, entire rural communities, village clusters, market hubs, and affluent individuals are routinely forced to raise millions of naira (Nigerian currency) collectively to satisfy the financial demands of armed groups.

4 This refers to the illegal theft and movement of livestock, particularly cattle, often carried out by individuals or organised groups for economic gain.