

# The end of the security-development nexus? Reflections from counterinsurgency in north-eastern Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the light of an increasing shift from international interventionism based on liberal peacebuilding to shorter-term stabilization efforts, this article questions the persistence of the security-development nexus as a theoretical framework backing military and non-military action in conflict affected areas. It argues that the nexus has been weakened by the prominence gained by regional and national actors in the African continent trying to enforce “African solutions to African problems”. Drawing on interviews with key informants and mobilizing relevant primary and secondary literature, the paper explores how ad hoc military coalitions created by African states to respond to crises in the continent are sanctioning the transition from long-term peace-building to short-term stabilization objectives. Analysing the Nigerian government’s counterinsurgency strategy against Boko Haram, we argue that the country has completely dropped the ambition to tackle the root causes of the insurgency, and has instead turned to short-term (and short-sighted) security stabilization operations in line with the global trend of disengagement from active peacebuilding and development promotion. Thereby, we contend that the adoption of this kind of “African solutions to African problems” equals militarized crisis-management in the continent’s peripheries without advancing sustainable solutions to conflicts.

**Keywords:** security; development; stabilization; Nigeria; Boko Haram

## Introduction

The last fifteen years have seen an increasing disengagement among major international powers from the international peacekeeping and peacebuilding scene. Burned by spectacular failures and busy with more pressing internal security threats and budget constraints, they have progressively abandoned grandiose peace- and state-building objectives in conflict-ridden developing countries and turned to shorter-term stabilization and counterterrorism. This has put the premises of the security-development nexus under strain: if the basic idea backing peacebuilding was that development strengthened security while underdevelopment caused conflict, stabilization focused on short-term political settlements and on enforcing security through military means with little space for longer term development.

In parallel with this shift in paradigm, African security activism increased not only to fill the vacuum left by major powers, but also as a consequence of the ideological stance of finding “African solutions to African problems” expressed in the creation of the African Union (AU). These African solutions took the form of a number of regional security responses to crisis and the creation of

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several ad hoc coalition to address specific problems around the continent, often based on the principle of non-indifference promoted by the AU.

Several analyses exist on these regional security actors and on ad hoc military coalitions, but limited attention has been paid to their effectiveness and sustainability compared to more structured and longer-term – although imperfect – international interventions. While undoubtedly being an expression of local agency and self-determination of African countries, to what extent can “African solutions” deliver sustainable and effective answers to African crises?

This paper addresses this question through the analysis of the Nigerian response to the Boko Haram insurgency. Nigeria is a peculiar case: as a regional power, it has promoted several initiatives and military interventions in the numerous wars in West Africa since the 1990s. However, the emergence of various threats to its internal security since the early 2000s – the most notable being the Boko Haram insurgency – forced the country to withdraw from its external engagements. Consistently with its history of tense relations with international aid, it never requested external interventions even when the Boko Haram crisis worsened around the mid-2010s, and rather relied on a regional ad hoc coalition to conquer back part of the national territory that was occupied by the insurgents. Even then, however, the Nigerian response to Boko Haram was predominantly managed by its own national army, and politically driven by its alliance with the US in the framework of the Global War on Terror.<sup>2</sup>

Through the analysis of the Super Camps Strategy and of Operation Safe Corridor, the paper sheds light on the exclusively military nature of the Nigerian response to Boko Haram and to the consequences that this has on the areas hit by the insurgency. It argues that the Nigerian solution to the Boko Haram problem not only contributed to shrinking the humanitarian space (a phenomenon also observed by Iocchi (2018), Njoku (2020) and Haavik and Iocchi (2021)), but also on the space to carry out medium-long term reforms and development activities. The development side of the security development nexus is therefore completely dropped, to the detriment of the living conditions of the local population and of the chances of addressing the root causes of the insurgency.

The paper draws on field research conducted in Northern Nigeria since 2014 on the various ramifications of the Boko Haram conflict. The article mobilizes a wide array of textual sources—from institutional documents to journalistic reports, secondary academic literature and practitioners’ papers—combined with 13 interviews with relevant actors operating in the security and development sectors in Nigeria. Interviewees have been identified through “snowball sampling”, with one contact redirecting the researcher to others. Six focus groups have also been conducted with internally-displaced persons (IDPs) from Borno and Adamawa states as well as with humanitarian personnel.

In the first part of the essay, we briefly discuss the theoretical framework of peacebuilding and international interventions with a focus on the evolution of practices at the global and African level. We then reflect on how “African solutions” have been crafted and interpreted by African actors,

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<sup>2</sup> The only ‘breach’ to the policy of not accepting external interveners has been the deployment of Chadian troops deep into Borno State in the frame of the Multi National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Chad’s troops withdrew in 2020. “Tchad : les soldats en intervention au Nigeria sont rentrés définitivement”, *Tchadinfos*, 3 January 2020. <https://tchadinfos.com/tchad/tchad-les-soldats-en-intervention-au-nigeria-sont-rentres-definitivement/> (accessed on 20/01/2022).

providing a provisional assessment of their evolution. In its third and fourth sections, the paper analyses Nigeria's counterinsurgency effort against Boko Haram, arguing that it can be considered as a glaring example of how the relationship between security and development is definitely leaning towards hard security, with no space for longer-term objectives.

## **Stability, not peace**

The emergence of peacebuilding, in the early 1990s, was greeted with enthusiasm by an international community dominated by liberal ideals and appalled by the outbreak of the so-called new wars (Kaldor 1999). The 1992 *An Agenda for Peace*, written by the then Secretary General of the UN Boutros Boutros-Ghali, introduced the term “peacebuilding” as something different from peacekeeping and other forms of peace interventionism, describing it as “an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict” (Boutros-Ghali 1992: 5). The consolidation of peace had to be achieved through development, to be sustained by strengthening state capacity and structures. Not only did states need support to create a conducive environment for private business and individuals’ initiatives by implementing good governance, anticorruption policies and better democratic performances (World Bank 1997); also, they needed to be able to counter violent threats within their national territories to prevent them from scaling up to the level of global threats. However, post-Cold War liberal euphoria did not last long: Al Qaeda’s bombing of US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam violently claimed international attention on what came to be identified as “fragile” states – states that were not capable of controlling their territory, protecting their population, providing basic services and countering violent threats and illegal activities (Morris 2013).

The conceptualization of security and development as deeply intertwined phenomena became entrenched in the international interventionism of the early 2000s (Duffield 2001), and their convergence on state-building programs was institutionalized by a UN report in 2004: “(T)oday we are in an era where dozens of states are under stress or recovering from conflict, there is a clear international obligation to assist states in developing their capacity to perform their sovereign functions effectively and responsibly” (United Nations 2004). Peacebuilding thus played a fundamental role in the strengthening of the security-development nexus: not only did peacebuilding operations focus on the military side of ending conflicts (often through mandates under Chapter VII of the UN Charter); also, they focused on what were considered universal good governance principles, including crucial civilian components concerned with strengthening the rule of law, providing capacity-building to state institutions, implementing development-like projects of various kinds to practically demonstrate the “dividends” that peace could bring to the local population. As most of the concepts born out of the early 1990s, peacebuilding had its roots in liberal thinking: it thus became known as liberal peacebuilding thanks to the work of a number of scholars that analysed its potentialities and its shortcomings (Paris 2010; Newman, Paris, Richmond 2009).

Liberal peacebuilding, though, has not had an easy life. Because of its universalistic stance and particularly in its version addressing state- and institution-building, it was criticized as imperialist (Chandler 2006), as a “*mission civilisatrice*” (Paris 2002), as a hegemonic project (Taylor 2007) and as incapable of delivering the promised improvements for local war-affected populations (Richmond 2013). Criticism has particularly focused on the liberal part of the binomial, arguing that a project premised on the liberalization of the economy and on the democratization of political systems had

no hopes of succeeding in contexts characterized by diverse experiences of statehood and political cultures (Paris 1997; Taylor 2007). And indeed, since their very early appearance, liberal peacebuilding operations have been marred by the challenges of dealing with local socio-political realities (Autesserre 2010; de Oliveira 2011; Taylor 2007), producing, at best, what has been defined as “hybrid peace governance” (Jarstad & Belloni 2012; Belloni 2012). Spectacular failures of peacebuilding/statebuilding missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and, lately, in South Sudan were matched with a perception of mounting security threats to countries in the Global North in the form of transnational terrorism and unregulated migration flows, encouraging a reformulation of discourses around security and security responses both in terms of doctrinal and operational paradigms (Karlsrud 2019).

The reformulation of international interventions as mere security responses is directly connected to the terrorist attacks to the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 and the launch of the Global War on Terror, which promoted a shift in focus from long to medium-term reforms and comprehensive development to short-term stabilization (Karlsrud 2019; Belloni & Moro 2019; Clausen & Albrecht 2021). Even though bilateral and multilateral massive military interventions started to increasingly blur the lines between development and military actors since the early 2000s, reducing both the humanitarian space and that for medium-long term reform, during the last decade efforts to establish liberal democracies were completely left aside.

Such “lowering of expectation” (Belloni & Moro 2019) was matched with the progressive disinvestment and disengagement from tackling the root causes of violence through the promotion of development. Instead, short-termed stabilization missions entail robust military interventions, a political settlement of any kind – not necessarily compliant with democratic principles – that allows the immediate end of violent conflict, and the prioritization of security over governance (Belloni & Costantini 2019). Social and economic development and the delivery of basic services appear to be stated as objectives of such missions, but they are rarely pursued, and short-term outcomes and context-specific approaches are preferred.

Stabilization missions are thus more likely to become more actively involved in conflict, either because they actually support the government’s efforts to stabilize certain areas – such as in the case of MONUSCO, which since 2013 was equipped with a Force Intervention Brigade to fight the rebel movement M23 in the eastern part of the country – or simply because they are just one of the military actors on the ground, making it difficult to distinguish between them and other forces more actively siding with the government also due to sharing of logistical facilities and equipment – as it happened in Mali, where the deployment of the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) with French support in 2014 was saluted by the UN Security Council as an opportunity to make MINUSMA’s presence more effective and offered logistical and medical support (Karlsrud 2019).

Overall, the turn towards stabilization in African peace operations has resulted in an increasing use of military interventions with no “development strings attached”, a tendency that has been strengthened by two converging dynamics: the will of the major international security providers, the US and the EU (particularly France) of becoming less directly entangled in protracted conflicts around the world, making their support more targeted and ad hoc; and a renewed activism of continental and regional organizations in the field of security under the claim of providing “African solutions to African problems” (Clausen & Albrecht 2021; Coleman & Job 2021).

## African solutions to African problems?

Starting from the second half of the 2000s, major international players such as the US, the UK, France and the EU have become increasingly reluctant to get involved with protracted interventions in conflict-affected situations. After the liberal euphoria of the 1990s and very early 2000s, much more direct security issues threatening Western countries in their own territories – transnational terrorism, illegal migrations – led governments under strain to shift the focus of their foreign policies towards increasing their own national security. Counterterrorism and stabilization thus became more appealing than longer-term interventions focusing on counterinsurgency and institution building with the aim of achieving a lasting peace (Karlsrud 2019). At the same time, Western countries became increasingly less keen on committing military personnel in peacekeeping/peacebuilding missions, both in their bilateral relations with “fragile states” and in multilateral interventions such as those under the UN aegis (Coleman & Job 2021).

Since 1991, Africa’s presence has become prominent in the top-ten ranking of contributing countries to UN Missions, and the number of contributing African countries has grown from 12 in 1991 to 37 in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Besides the benefits in terms of logistical, training and financial support deriving from participation to UN missions (Bove, Ruffa, Ruggeri 2020), the reasons of this growth have to do with the increasing activism of African actors in the field of security, and with the will to be more actively involved in the determination of national and regional security and foreign policy priorities.<sup>4</sup>

It is not by chance that most of African peacekeepers are deployed within their region of origin.<sup>5</sup> If in the past this was considered problematic, as it could potentially compromise the neutrality of the mission with the interests of countries often involved in regional crises, it has increasingly become the norm (Bove, Ruffa, Ruggeri 2020). It makes it easier to find contributors to missions, and it smoothens the process of mission approval often relying on regional forces already deployed in the troubled country. For example, this happened in Mali, where MINUSMA absorbed the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), a counterterrorism operation launched by the African Union in late 2012; or in Somalia, where a unilateral Kenyan intervention was re-hatted as part of AMISOM through an agreement between the UN and the AU.

Comfort Ero, Director of International Crisis Group, commenting on the relationship between the UN and the AU, has argued that there exist a “division of labour”<sup>6</sup> that delegates most of the fighting and peace enforcement work to African troops (Ero 2013). In other words, there would be an increasingly neat separation between the restoring of hard security, and whatever developmental work that is carried out afterwards. This division of labour has to do with the changing context in which the UN finds itself operating without major changes to its structure and its normative framework, as well as, with the already mentioned disengagement of major powers from grand peacebuilding interventions (Stewart & Andersen 2018; Coleman & Job 2021). With increasingly

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<sup>3</sup> See the United Nations Peacekeeping data on Troops and Police Contributors, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors> (accessed on 12/01/2022).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to mention that, in 2016, 83% of UN personnel was deployed in Africa’s ten missions, which alone account for 86% of the global peacekeeping budget (Stewart & Andersen 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See the United Nations Peacekeeping data on Troops and Police Contributors, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors> (accessed on 12/01/2022).

<sup>6</sup> It could be argued, however, that such division of labour is more theoretical than practical: neither the AU nor regional organization can do without external support. Ad hoc coalitions are better funded and equipped because they serve more explicitly partisan interests.

complex operational contexts, often characterized by open conflict and, sometimes, insurgencies labelled as terrorist and therefore effectively cut off from any possible negotiation table (Duyvesteyn & Schuurman 2011), UN missions have been given more robust mandates (as in the case of the Force Intervention Brigade in the Democratic Republic of Congo) or have come to support the AU in more aggressive operations such as with the UN Support Mission in Somalia and the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin (Stewart & Andersen 2018).

While the UN remains the most powerful legitimizing framework for international interventions, this division of labour can also be found beyond UN missions, if we look at bilateral support to regional organizations or ad hoc coalitions pursuing shorter-term stabilization objectives. One such example is the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), a counterterrorism force initiated by Mali and the other members of the G5 Sahel after the UN Security Council rejected a request from the Malian government for a rapid intervention force with a more robust counterterrorism mandate than MINUSMA. Not only was the deployment of the FC-G5S saluted with favour by the UN, which committed itself to various kinds of support, but also by other international actors: during a donor conference in Paris in 2018, it received pledges for \$509 million.<sup>7</sup>

One of the reasons why regional security interventions are so appealing is that they can be deployed much more quickly than UN missions: they are subjected to much looser bureaucratic constraints and do not need complicated justifications for their robust mandate. Moreover, they do not need to conceal their predominantly military nature (Bara & Hultman 2020), as the defence of national governments and sovereignty in the case of more or less localized insurgencies can be somehow taken for granted and represents a precondition for any further engagement with the country. This is in line with the AU's approach to security and its introduction of the principle of "non-indifference" in place of that of "non-interference" that had dominated the Cold War years. At the same time, since the AU security architecture is still marred by inefficiencies and lack of funds, regional ad hoc coalitions enable regional actors to respond to security threats more quickly, also keeping a closer control on mandates and priorities of such missions (Karlsrud & Reykers 2020).

In the light of this increasing African security activism, it is legitimate, and indeed important, to ask whether these "African solutions", often bending towards short-term stabilization goals, are more likely to end violence and deliver sustainable solutions to African crises and conflicts. To answer this question, the remaining part of the paper will be dedicated to the analysis of the response to Nigeria's Boko Haram-related crisis, with a particular focus on the shrinking humanitarian and developmental space and its possible consequences on the prospects of ending the insurgency.

## **Boko Haram as an "African problem": Nigeria's response to the insurgency**

Nigeria, prosaically called "the African giant",<sup>8</sup> is the continent's most populous country, its first economy and one of its earliest oil exporters. Ever since its independence, successive governments have worked to make the country a regional and continental leading power, not only by virtue of its rapidly growing oil-fed economy but also establishing political and military hegemony. These efforts

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<sup>7</sup> Alissa de Carbonnel & Robin Emmott. 2018. «Donors pledge \$500 million for troops in West Africa's Sahel». Reuters, 22 February 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-security-sahel-eu-idUSKCN1G70J7> (accessed on 19/01/2022).

<sup>8</sup> "Nigeria: The African giant. A survey on the eve of independence". *The Round Table. The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 50 (197), 1959, pp. 55-63.

did bring some results; and despite Nigeria's negative records in terms of democratic transition and human rights protection until the very end of the 1990s, the country managed to lead the establishment and functioning of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), several regional military interventions, as well as several collective negotiations on behalf of the continent at international tables (Wright & Okolo 1999).

Troubled with security threats since independence, Nigeria has always been wary of international interventions, both for humanitarian and military purposes. This suspicious attitude developed for different reasons. Overall, since the Biafra War, Nigeria's political authorities nurtured a sceptical stance towards humanitarian interventions, bearing in mind the memories of how images of starving children were employed by Biafra separatists to mobilize support in the West (Desgrandchamps 2018). Perceived as the "left hand of the empire" (Agier 2008), Western aid actors were resisted by Nigeria's authorities also because of the country's ambition to position itself not only as a West African 'powerhouse' thanks to its oil reserves, but also as one of Africa's leading powers.

Mistrust towards foreign aid actors was strengthened by various incidents occurred in the health sector during 1990s, when the country was already bearing the brunt of Structural Adjustment Programs.<sup>9</sup> As Kano was the epicentre of these incidents, mistrust and suspicion grew particularly strong in the Muslim northern regions of the country.<sup>10</sup>

The resistance against foreign development aid flows was not matched by internal investments in socio-economic development. Instead, since the 1990s, the emergence of non-state armed groups in the Niger Delta, community militias in the central Plateau and, eventually, the diffusion of jihadi groups, all pushed for a rise in military expenditure (Nwankpa 2017b; Suchi 2019). As the Nigerian military has been the most influential institution in the country's post-colonial history (Siollum 2018), a "military culture" still permeates post-1999 civilian governments, concentrating resources and power to the detriment of civilian crisis-management institutions or consistent investments in social security and development.

The Boko Haram insurgency exploded in 2010 in the Nigerian northern state of Borno, against a backdrop of suspicion and mistrust towards allegedly corrupt government institutions and development actors. The conflict developed from a small network of militant Islamists that clashed with security and defence forces in 2009 and was then violently repressed.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, between 2010 and 2013 the Nigerian army struggled to contain an urban guerrilla with Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno state, as its epicentre.

Faced with the impossibility of obtaining an ultimate military victory, in 2013 President Jonathan declared the state of emergency in the north-eastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa hit by the insurgency and deployed ground troops and the air force. Drawing on a culture of impunity and disproportionate use of force – which arguably contributed to the weaponization of the Boko Haram insurgency –, the army employed such a reckless level of violence in its repressive campaigns that

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<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth account of such incidents, see Yahya (2007); Renne (2010).

<sup>10</sup> It is not by chance that workers from NGOs or international health organizations were among the earliest targets of Boko Haram attacks. "Nigeria polio vaccinators shot dead in Kano", BBC, 8 February 2013, retrieved at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21381773> (accessed 17/01/2022).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the complex history of the Boko Haram insurgency see Thurston (2017); Zenn (2020).

the US decided to temporarily withdraw its military assistance.<sup>12</sup> The security forces targeted any actor that was potentially imbricated, or had contacts, with the Islamist insurgents, including NGO representatives who tried to negotiate safe access to conflict areas. Such occurrences have resulted in the criminalization of aid activities, to the point that development workers complained of being “virtually blocked: we move less, and in many cases do not move at all”.<sup>13</sup>

Between 2013 and 2014, the Nigerian army, with the support of the local militias known as Civilian Joint-Task Forces (CJTF) managed to drive the Boko Haram insurgents away from Maiduguri, thus reconquering the political and administrative centre of the north-east. This modified the insurgency: in 2014, Boko Haram fighters split into two factions, Jama’at Ahl al-Sunna li’l Da’wa wa’l Jihad, JAS-DJ, headed by the late Abubakar Shekau; and the Islamic State West Africa Province, ISWAP, headed by the late Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi. The two factions left the urban areas and moved to two different rural areas of Borno state. A flow of internally displaced persons (IDPs) started from the rural areas towards government garrison towns, turning the cities into hosting sites for hundreds of thousands of villagers escaping the conflict’s frontline.<sup>14</sup>

The IDP flow was sustained not only by Boko Haram attacks, but also by counterterrorist operations that were boosted in 2015 with the deployment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a regional ad hoc coalition formed with troops from Nigeria, Benin, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. With its counterterrorism mandate, the MNJTF gathered the support of several international donors – the US and the EU in the first place – who were willing to stabilize the area but would rather avoid both becoming themselves physically involved on the ground, and providing aid directly to the Nigerian government often in the spotlight for corruption and embezzlement episodes (Brechenmacher 2019).

While the MNJTF managed to conquer back much of the territory that had fallen in Boko Haram’s hands during the previous years, the election of General Muhammadu Buhari as president in 2015 improved Nigeria’s relations with Western donors. Even then, however, it took one full year before reports of starvation and devastating living conditions in Borno reached Western audiences, and thus it was only in 2016 that a large humanitarian operation was set in motion with the involvement of international humanitarian actors (Cole *et al.* 2017). Buhari had been elected upon the ambitious promise of ending the conflict during the first year of his presidency. Even though, not surprisingly, his promise was unfulfilled, he started speaking post-conflict in early 2017, when the so-called “Buhari plan” was released. The documents extensively used “stabilization” to refer to the shift from humanitarian to longer-term development activities (Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative 2016), in which the government has wider room for manoeuvre, contributing to the confusion around the actual meaning of the term. Trying to give it contextual specificity, a High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Basin held in Berlin in 2018 defined stabilization as something that “seeks to enable first steps towards reconciliation between parties to the conflict and to

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<sup>12</sup> “Human rights concerns limit U.S. intelligence, military aid to Nigeria”, Reuters, 13 March 2015: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nigeria-idUSKBNOM92L420150313> (accessed on 19/01/2022). The relations between the Nigerian government and the US were strained due to accusations of corruption and impunity of the Nigerian political and military leadership, but they improved after Buhari’s election as president (Brechenmacher 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a Nigerian NGO worker who asked to remain anonymous. Phone conversation, July 2020.

<sup>14</sup> In 2017 the number of IDPs in Maiduguri was estimated at circa 275,000 by the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix Round XIX Report, October 2017, available at <https://www.iom.int/nigeria-displacement-tracking-matrix-round-xix-report-october-2017> (accessed 19/01/2022).



establish social and political consensus as a foundation for legitimate political structures and long-term development” (Brechenmacher 2019: 7).

While the definition adopted in this context also by some of the major donors like the US emphasizes the coexistence of civilian and military elements, Buhari’s policies in practice seemed largely leaning towards the military. Initiatives to improve regional coordination on the civilian side of the response, empowering the AU and the Lake Chad Basin Commission with the support of UNDP, fell short of expectations (Brechenmacher 2019). As the insurgency continued in the rural areas of north-east Nigeria, in July 2019 Buhari announced a new counterinsurgency strategy: the Super Camps Strategy (SCS). The SCS acknowledged the ongoing dynamics on the ground: it foresaw the establishment of a few military strongholds in well protected towns where military and civilians could reside. Movement outside these towns would be extremely constrained, and no protection would be delivered to those who lived or travelled outside, as small military outposts in the rural areas would be progressively dismantled. The declared objective of the SCS was to limit the losses caused by the ongoing insurgency through cutting off its supply lines for weapons and equipment. Not only would the concentration of high-value weaponry in well-guarded urban sites reduce Boko Haram’s capacity of raiding military outposts to acquire more arms; also, it would help reducing military casualties from these attacks.

The SCS has been accused of greatly and alarmingly reducing the humanitarian space in the country (Wolf 2020). Indeed, it confirmed the Nigerian government’s over-reliance on military force to deal with the insurgency and contributed to add further constraints not only to the movement of humanitarian actors, but also to that of agencies involved with longer term development interventions. While a number of programs typical of post-conflict contexts has been set up by international agencies – local institution-building programs, grassroots reconciliation initiatives, basic service delivery as a means of building trust in local institutions – these remain on a small scale and geographically limited to government garrison towns (Brechenmacher 2019): “NGOs perform limited activities, and are not able to have an impact [...] [delivering] only the bare minimum”.<sup>15</sup>

When the SCS was launched, approximately 80 local and international NGOs were operating in North-East Nigeria (Stoddard *et al.* 2020). While international agencies mostly operated in Maiduguri, tensions with the military increased as reports of embezzlement of aid funds by soldiers and vigilantes multiplied.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the military started imposing increasingly harsh administrative constraints on NGO operations. The campaign against international agencies reached its apex when in 2019 the NGOs *Action Contre la Faim* and Mercy Corps were banned from conducting activities and accused of channelling food and supplies to the insurgents.<sup>17</sup> Later, the same year, the so-called “Borno bill” was issued, centralizing the coordination of humanitarian response and development planning, which was seen of vital importance for the sustainability of the SCS by development actors.<sup>18</sup> The bill had a direct impact not only on the determination of

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Security Coordinator of international NGO based in Maiduguri. Skype conversation. May 2020.

<sup>16</sup> A. Haruna, “Boko Haram Victims Dying of Starvation as Borno Officials Steal Relief Materials,” Premium Times, 18 June 2016: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/205489-boko-haram-victims-dying-starvation-borno-officials-steal-relief-materials.html> (accessed on 19/01/2022).

<sup>17</sup> C. Boh, L. George, C. Nomiyama, “Nigerian Army says NGO aided terrorists, faces it to close office,” Reuters, September 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Mail exchange with humanitarian actors based in Maiduguri, October 2019. The bill established the Borno State Agency for the Coordination of Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Support (BSA) with the aim of supervising cooperation and humanitarian activities in the state.

development priorities, but also on the eligibility of development actors to work in the area and on their capacity to move around.

## **Militarizing development**

The new shrinking of the operational space for international aid actors was a more or less explicit invitation to the donors to support Nigerian-led post-conflict initiatives (Brechenmacher 2019). While, as we have seen, the Nigerian Government response had been primarily military in nature, the need to address pressing socio-economic problems underscoring the conflict was voiced within the army itself since 2014 and it was continuously and consistently reiterated.<sup>19</sup> Following this call, the Nigerian military undertook an internal reorganization, opening a new department to deal with human rights violations and putting some effort in improving its image among civilians. This entailed that the military would also take over non-military tasks such as the delivery of humanitarian aid and the implementation of longer-term development programs in the conflict areas. If this, on the one hand, was the result of the lack of functioning government structures in the areas taken back by the army in 2014-5, on the other hand it also had a legal backing thanks to the state of emergency in place between 2013 and 2015 that recognized the army as the legitimate bearer of administrative, development, security and humanitarian responsibilities.

Consistently with the doctrine of the War on Terror, the Nigerian government has resisted the idea of engaging in peace or ceasefire negotiations with militant Islamists (Nwankpa 2017a), and rather focused on amnesty or “de-radicalization” operations in the attempt of disarming the insurgents and enabling their social rehabilitation. One of the programs designed to pursue these objectives was Operation Safe Corridor.

Operation Safe Corridor was launched in 2016 to target voluntary defectors from Boko Haram militants. It consisted of a 52-week programme including basic education, vocational training and religious re-education with the aim of reintegrating into society (Onapajo & Ozden 2020). For its characteristics, Operation Safe Corridor can be considered as a Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme with a strong component of de-radicalization. In order to distinguish itself from an amnesty programme as the one implemented for the Niger Delta insurgents, it was envisaged to only target low-level recruits from Boko Haram, leaving higher ranking elements to military offensives (International Crisis Group 2021; Bamas 2020) or to more targeted de-radicalization programmes like the classified Sulhu programme (Anyadike 2021).<sup>20</sup>

DDR programmes are a typical feature of post-conflict and recovery scenarios and are usually carried out by government authorities under the auspices of – or with a great contribution from – UN or other international bodies conferring neutrality and civilian supervision to the whole process. Operation Safe Corridor, however, is a fully military-controlled programme. It was initiated as a completely independent Nigerian initiative with a few international donors (the EU, UK and US), who only started supporting it in 2019 through the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Even though it was designed to move away from an exclusively military approach to the insurgency,

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<sup>19</sup> “Nigerian military cannot solve insurgency alone – Buratai”, *Premium Times*, 19 February 2021: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/443854-nigerian-military-cannot-solve-insurgency-alone-buratai.html> (accessed on 19/01/2022)

<sup>20</sup> Obi Anyadike. “Nigeria’s secret programme to lure top Boko Haram defectors”, *The New Humanitarian*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/8/19/nigerias-secret-programme-to-lure-top-boko-haram-defectors> (accessed on 19/01/2022).

the Nigerian army takes care of what it calls its “clients” from the admission to the programme to their graduation. Aspirant clients are detained at Maiduguri Giwa Barraks, where they are screened by a military committee and transferred to Mallam Sidi, the programme main facility. In Mallam Sidi, they receive religious education, literacy class, vocational training and psychological support from military-selected civil actors and Nigerian NGOs. At the end of the programme, they are discharged with a 20.000 Naira (42 Euros) pocket-money with which they are supposed to start an income generating activity and fend for themselves reintegrating into society (International Crisis Group 2021).

While undoubtedly representing an alternative opportunity for civilians willing to leave the insurgent areas, the success rate of the programme seems to be rather low and there is little evidence that it has worked as a pull factor for defectors (International Crisis Group 2021).

Arguably, the limited success of Operation Safe Corridor can be attributed to its many shortcomings. The programme has been criticized for the quality of training and education offered as well as for the little amount of money that graduates receive to reintegrate themselves in a society still extremely under strain, characterized by a stagnating economy and widespread violence. The fact that the screening process of people who enrolled in the programme was conducted entirely by Nigerian military authorities resulted in a very low accountability and in the enrolment of many ordinary citizens living in Boko Haram targeted areas (Breckenmacher 2019; International Crisis Group 2021, 2021). This kind of concerns was prominent among the diplomats of donor countries, weary of seeing “ordinary peasants” or “just kids” included in lists of “Boko Haram Terrorists”.<sup>21</sup>

These critiques are not unique to Operation Safe Corridor: they have often been addressed also to other DDR processes, with particular regard to the transparency of admission procedures, the quality of training and the capacity of actually reintegrating into society using the skills and the pocket money acquired through the programme.<sup>22</sup> Other more context-specific critiques concern the de-radicalization component: it seems at times that the term “de-radicalization” is used more as a buzzword attuned to donors’ War on Terror vocabulary, with the expertise of the those in charge of religious classes often questioned by their pupils (International Crisis Group 2021) and doubts around the overall relevance of the component. In the words of the Safety Advisor of an international NGO: “what’s the point in deradicalizing someone who has just fled Boko Haram [a radical group]?”<sup>23</sup>

All these critiques speak of aspects that may of course influence the success of the programme and the quality of the “soft” part of the Nigerian response to the insurgency. It is not the purpose of this paper to add critiques to the implementation of Operation Safe Corridor: rather, we argue that the major problem with Operation Safe Corridor as a DDR and de-radicalization programme lays in its very military nature and in the complete exclusion of any civilian body that could take over the process after the disarmament phase. A report from International Crisis Group (2021) based on interviews to graduates from the Mallam Sidi camp describes it rather as a detention centre, where people are detained in extremely harsh conditions, which has caused the death of several internees. Movement in and out the camp is constrained, and the enrolment process lacks transparency and

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<sup>21</sup> Mail exchange with a Western diplomatic source. Abuja, January 2020.

<sup>22</sup> To give just one example, the DDR in South Sudan suffered from similar shortcomings plus a clear lack of political will on the side of the government. See Munive (2013).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Safety Advisor of international NGO based in Maiduguri, Skype conversation. May 2020.

accountability: the committee in charge of vetting possible participants to the programme is often misled to admit ordinary civilians from the Boko Haram affected areas simply because the military considers whoever lives in those areas as a supporter of the insurgency (International Crisis Group 2021).

This is a direct consequence of the structural conditions in which the programme was designed and developed: little interest on the side of international donors of becoming more involved into the Nigerian crisis (especially at its very beginning, when even within the region Boko Haram was seen as a Nigerian problem only); the little leverage international actors had due to the strength of the Nigerian central state and its capacity of mobilizing defence funds; the poor access enjoyed by international aid actors due to their difficult relationship with the Nigerian government; the willingness of the Nigerian government to entirely lead the response to the insurgency within its national territory, showing strength and finding an African (Nigerian) solution to an African problem. While in different circumstances, African solutions pursued by the institutional avenues provided by the African Union were based on diplomacy and on the search for a negotiated solution (for example in the case of Libya, see Swart 2016), in the Nigerian case the reliance on the rhetoric of the War on Terror, aimed at attracting support for Nigerian military campaigns against Boko Haram, has made the military solution the only viable option. Such reliance on military solutions has also somehow been encouraged by Western military assistance in the last two years: while in the early days of the insurgency there had been some scrutiny over human rights abuses by the Nigerian army – with the US temporarily withdrawing their support –, the election of Muhammadu Buhari seems to have made Western donors less keen on following up on cases of corruption and abuse within the military (Brechenmacher 2019).

## Conclusions

Through the analysis of Nigeria's strategy to cope with the Boko Haram insurgency, this paper has reflected about the effectiveness of "African solutions" to the security problems affecting the continent. These solutions have progressively moved away from the ambition to tackle the root causes of conflict and insurgencies, turning to short-term stabilization objectives in line with a global trend of disengagement from active peacebuilding and development promotion.

The case of the military-humanitarian intervention in north-east Nigeria presents interesting elements in this regard. The case encapsulates a broader global tendency towards the reduction of the already constrained development space in favour of a blatantly-securitized military approach that, despite the emphasis on human security reiterated in the documents of the AU and other international organizations, considers hard security and the pacification of insurgencies as the absolute priority, with little attention to the root causes of instability. In this process, certain groups of African citizens – often the most marginalized as well as the most severely hit by the consequences of such instability – become disposable in the name of national security imperatives.

Even though, several calls have been made to move away from a hard security approach to fighting Boko Haram and focus instead on "soft" priorities concerning socio-economic development (Okoli & Lenshie 2021) based on the assumptions backing the security-development nexus, the development side of the nexus seems to have completely disappeared in the practice of countering the insurgency. The need to "stabilize" insurgent pockets completely prevails over more ambitious

human security priorities (respect of human rights; protection of vulnerable citizens), while the population in the areas affected by Boko Haram is left to a humanitarian emergency of growing proportions.<sup>24</sup>

If on the one hand the Super Camps Strategy and Operation Safe Corridor can be seen as a an extreme “successful” attempt by Nigerian authorities to avoid being turned into a new laboratory for internationally-devised interventions, we are left to wonder whether this kind of “African solution” to the continents’ various crisis can actually bring sustainable solutions to conflict rooted in complex systems of social norms. Instead, the Nigerian case seems to suggest that they may be reinforcing destabilizing patterns of rule that rather add fuel to the grassroots grievances of the Boko Haram crisis, ultimately increasing local instability with the complicity of Western security assistance.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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<sup>24</sup> The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) described the food security situation in the region as being on the brink of a catastrophe. Almost nine million people are estimated to be in need of assistance, of which more than 5 million need food relief. The estimated number of IDPs is of almost two million, with one million stuck in inaccessible areas. See the OCHA Nigeria Situation Report of 31 December 2021, retrieved at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Nigeria%20-%2031%20Dec%202021.pdf> (accessed on 19/01/2022).

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