

## Informal institutions and peace in Northern Nigeria

### Enhancing interfaith relations without damaging informal mechanisms of responsiveness

As the Nigerian state has failed to manage the recurrent waves of interethnic and interreligious violence, a wide range of local informal institutions have developed capacities to step into this vacuum. This brief presents research findings on three important examples of such institutions in Kano and Kaduna: business associations, religious leaders, and ethnic associations. On this basis, it makes a two-sided argument. On the one hand, domestic and international policy makers clearly should strive to sustain and enhance the contributions of these informal institutions to intercommunal conflict management. On the other hand, however, they should be careful to protect the downward connections and mechanisms of accountability of these institutions with their local communities.

Even among the African states challenged by internal strife, Nigeria stands out as a troubled giant. This is particularly true in northern Nigeria, where, despite a long history of coexistence, recurrent episodes of collective violence and the more recent attacks attributed to the jihadist '*Boko Haram*' movement have destabilised a fragile peace. Over the years, international policy makers have formulated a range of strategies to address this region's insecurity. One such strategy has been to strengthen the contributions of Nigerian civil society to peace and stability.

Northern Nigerian society now has a thriving and diverse body of formal and popular organisations operating at the fringes of the state. Many of these organisations have important societal functions – including in the domain of conflict management – and can boast more legitimacy than actors operating within the state system. Informal institutions have shown a remarkable potential for constructive change. However, the diversity, local character, and legal marginality of many of them has made it difficult to partner with these organisations.

This brief provides an analysis of three types of civil and informal institutions in northern Nigeria that contribute to conflict management and intercommunal peace in the cities of Kano and Kaduna. Based on field research conducted by members of the Nigeria Research Network, the brief presents background information and the main findings on three types of popular institution. It concludes with recommendations for domestic and international actors in Nigeria, that will

help them to engage with northern Nigerian local institutions to enhance their efficacy in improving the region's fraught intercommunal relations.

#### Background

Though it is often associated with Hausa-Fulani Islam, northern Nigeria is religiously and ethnically diverse. Its links to Islam and the Hausa-Fulani ethnicity predate the 1804 jihad that established the pre-colonial Sokoto Caliphate. Today, the populations of many of the 'core' northern states have remained Muslim. However, this Muslim population is divided by status and class, ethnic affiliation, and religious doctrine. Moreover, throughout the 20th century, Christian minorities in the north have grown due to patterns of migration and conversion. In many northern cities, such as Kano and Kaduna, the majority Hausa-Fulani live alongside minority groups from the north, such as the Kanuri and the rural Fulani, as well as southern ethnic minorities of Igbo, Yoruba, and others.

Religion is one of the most salient aspects of people's social lives in the area, both as a source of identification and of social organisation (Ehrhardt 2012). Given the religious diversity and the salience of religious belief, many analysts have suggested religious motivations for the region's recurrent violence. However, the IRP-Abuja studies all emphasise the critical importance of material and structural factors underlying this violence, such as intergroup inequalities, competition over land, political discrimi-

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Based at the University of Oxford and the development Research and Project Centre in Kano, the **Nigeria Research Network (NRN)** connects European, American, and Nigerian academics and practitioners who have extensive experience with empirical and development-oriented research in northern Nigeria.

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### Box 1: Goat's Head Pepper Soup (*isi-ewu*) Sellers in Kano

The goat's head pepper soup (*isi-ewu*) business is an overwhelmingly female activity, and exclusively Christian owing to its link with the selling of beer. Despite this, the goat's head pepper soup business depends on close interaction with butchers – a predominantly Muslim male activity in the area. Rather than constituting a source of conflict between Christians and Muslims involved in the activity, the goat's head business has tended to harmonise the interests of Christians and Muslims involved. Both constitute lowly or despised groups in Hausa Islamic society: *isi-ewu* producers because they are involved in the selling of beer, and butchers because they are traditionally a semi-servile caste within Hausa social structure. *Isi-ewu* producers are also collectively organized in the Food Sellers and Beverage Association, which negotiates taxes with the Local Government, and collects them in bulk. The Association has reduced tax levels by more than half, according to the experience of a number of proprietors and also engages in basic social welfare activities; but there are a number of other problems faced by *isi-ewu* producers that are more difficult for the Association to address, such as the lack of electricity, religiously-biased policing and terrorist attacks.

nation and exclusion, and the lingering impact of unresolved violence and injustice.

Bringing resolution to the conflicts in northern Nigeria will require substantive interventions to tackle the structural causes of violence. There is no doubt that most of the responsibility to address these issues lies with the Nigerian state, and informal actors can only play a small part. The subsequent sections will illustrate their potential role, showing how three types of local institutions can affect intercommunal violence in their respective fields: 1) the informal economy, 2) ethnic and cultural associations, and 3) religious organisations.

#### Economic institutions in Kano & Kaduna

In her study of informal enterprise networks and intercommunal conflict in Kano and Kaduna, Meagher (2012) shows how Christians and Muslims cooperate in the informal economy of both northern cities. More importantly, most Christians and Muslims who work together show high levels of familiarity and trust across religious lines. As a result, they maintain good social relations, to the extent that they protect each other in situations of violence. The study highlights that, while collective violence between Christians and Muslims does occur, it rarely involves those who work closely together.

In several sectors of the informal economy, these constructive intercommunal relations can be reinforced by local enterprise organisations and unions. Motorcycles taxis in both Kano and Kaduna, for example, are organised into State chapters of the national Amalgamated Commercial Motorcycle Owners and Riders Association (ACOMORAN), which

unite Christian and Muslim riders around occupational goals. Box 1 presents a second example, of the Goat's Head Pepper Soup Sellers in Kano. In addition to these two sectors, Meagher (2012) also analyses tailors, butchers, and car tyre dealers. Through these case studies, Meagher clearly shows that familiarity, trust, and interest-based associations help to maintain constructive relations between Christians and Muslims who work together in the informal economy of northern Nigeria.

However, over the past years significant threats to this constructive dynamic have developed. In particular, Meagher notes that informal business associations are at risk from:

- Increasing residential segregation along religious lines, particularly in Kaduna;
- Withdrawal of (largely Christian) Igbo traders in Kano, and the consequent weakening of collaborative and job creating dynamics between Christian and Muslim businesses;
- The politicisation of religion by State governments, for example in the manner of implementation of *shari'a* law; and the preferential political relations with Muslim or Christian enterprise associations, for example in unequal processes of tax collection.

#### Muslim minority associations in Kano

Hashim and Walker's (2012) study of non-Hausa Muslim minorities in Kano State reveals the challenges of diversity within a faith community. There is a failure in the dominant Hausa-Fulani Muslim community to accept ethnic Muslim minorities as Muslims because they define them as an ethnic 'Other' with whom they are in conflict. Intolerance towards Muslim minorities becomes part of a wider cycle of ethno-religious crisis where the spiral of violence deepens as the definition of the 'Other' widens. As this situation worsens and conflicts become more frequent, Muslim minorities, sharing a religious identity with the Hausa on one hand and ethnic identities with the southern migrants on the other, are prevented from grasping opportunities for bridge building.

Associations of non-Hausa Muslim minorities in Kano are organised as formal religious groups with regular meetings and scheduled social and religious programs on Sundays, similar to the practice of the churches of Kano. Some of the associations, such as the Nuruddeen Society of Nigeria, were founded in the south of Nigeria, while others have their roots in Kano, such as the Igbo Muslim Association. All interviewees from these non-Hausa Muslim associations considered their communities as an important

part of the Kano population. Many are considered to be part of the Yoruba ethnic community, but the actual membership of these 'Yoruba' associations and mosques is ethnically highly diverse. As such, Hashim and Walker (2012) argue that these non-Hausa Muslim associations have great potential as mediators in situations of violent religious or ethnic conflicts.

However, Hashim and Walker (2012) note that in periods of religious and ethnic violence, these Muslim minorities are increasingly attacked from both sides, each seeing them as representative of their 'enemies'. They also highlight the failure of state structures to invite the Muslim minorities to conflict resolution discussions because they do not fall within the state's operational stereotype of the Muslim northerner against the Christian southerner. Muslim minorities hardly get compensation for their losses, and their letters and petitions are hardly acknowledged. Because the state simultaneously distributes money and material goods to a few selected 'leaders' within the Muslim minorities, there is the widespread feeling that these 'leaders' are serving the interests of the state politicians at the expense of the Muslim minorities. As a result, rather than fulfilling their potential as peace builders in Christian-Muslim confrontations, non-Hausa Muslims have become de facto parties in a conflict where they are increasingly forced to take sides.

### Religious leaders in Kano

Though some Muslim and Christian leaders take part in the promotion of conflict, a good number of them use their positions to promote peaceful co-existence. Looking at the roles of these preachers in Kano, Ehrhardt (2012) shows that these institutions have several means at their disposal to address inter-communal strife.

First, religious leaders have easy access to their community members, are highly visible, and can count on high levels of legitimacy and authority, especially compared to politicians and state officials (see Box 2). On this basis, they can (de)mobilise their followers and have considerable influence over their perceptions of important societal events and their views of other religious groups.

Second, Christian and Muslim leaders are also one of the primary points of contact for community members in situations of crisis, such as marital conflicts, divorce, inheritance issues, health problems, interpersonal conflicts, or troubles of a spiritual nature. Christian and Muslim leaders thus have a great capacity to address intimate problems brought to them by their followers; however, their interventions

would benefit from more professional training, particularly in the areas of family counselling and maternal health. Moreover, many Christian and other minority religious leaders are also engaged in protecting their community during episodes of violence, for example by guarding the church compound or giving care to displaced persons. In all such cases, religious leaders have a significant opportunity to de-escalate crisis situations and contribute to peaceful conflict management.

Religious leaders in Kano have a potential to contribute to resolving the structural dimensions of intercommunal conflict in three ways:

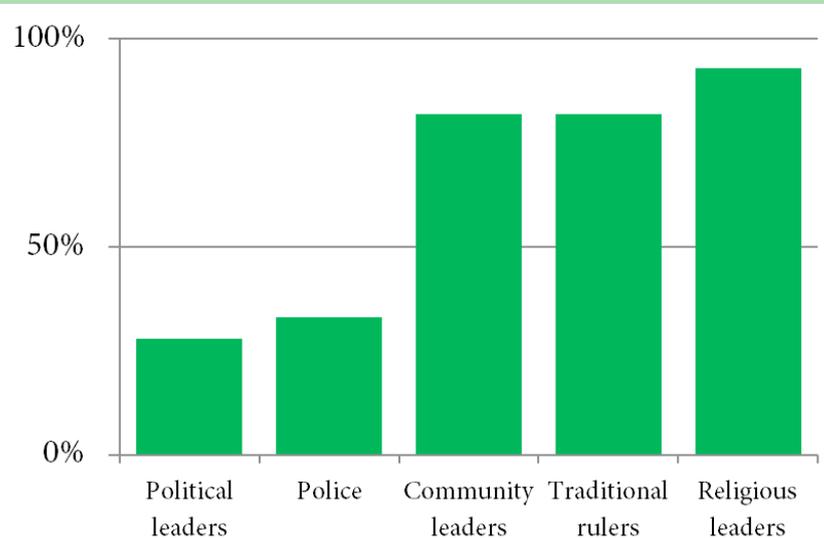
- Through the strengthening of religious and, to some extent, secular education;
- Through advocacy for the rights of minority religious groups, for example the right to build their own places of worship; and
- Through engagement in interfaith dialogues.

While these activities are promising, Ehrhardt also shows that, to-date, they have had little impact on shifting the deep structures giving rise to conflict. Moreover, while these activities can be applied to reduce conflict, they can also be used to intensify it. Finally, the influence of Christian and Muslim leaders in Kano is entirely based on the strong connection of the preachers with their community members. Severing this connection, for example through external conditional funding or 'tainting' the reputation of religious leaders with political connotations, can easily destroy their very basis of authority.

### Policy recommendations

These findings suggest several possible interventions by international actors, including the interna-

**Box 2: Percentages of Kano respondents with at least "some trust" in different authorities in Kano**





## References:

Ehrhardt, David (2012) Religious Leaders and Governance in Kano. Paper presented at a workshop on 'Interfaith relation in northern Nigeria: From research to policy and practice' in Abuja 1-2 August, 2012.

Hashim, Yahaya and Judith-Ann Walker (2012) Muslim Others: Criss-Crossing Ethno-religious Identities and Conflict in Kano. Paper presented at a workshop on 'Interfaith relation in northern Nigeria: From research to policy and practice' in Abuja 1-2 August, 2012.

Meagher, Kate (2012) Complementarity, Competition and Conflict: Informal Enterprise and Religious Conflict in Northern Nigeria. Paper presented at a workshop on 'Interfaith relation in northern Nigeria: From research to policy and practice' in Abuja 1-2 August, 2012.

For contact details and publications of researchers involved in the Nigeria Research Network (NRN), see: [www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/nrn/](http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/nrn/)

tional diplomatic community in Abuja. In general terms, the IRP-Abuja research suggests two points: that local **institutions could benefit from specific forms of institutional support to enhance their effectiveness, organisation, and respective contributions to the governance and job-creation**, including from international actors; but that extreme caution must be taken in doing so. **External interventions can weaken the positive contributions of informal institutions, particularly if they break downward accountability between institutions and their constituencies.** Focusing in on the specific institutions described above, the next paragraphs outline specific courses of action that could enhance their conflict resolution capacity.

### Economic institutions in Kano and Kaduna

- In Kano, the physical security of non-Muslims and non-Hausa Muslims should be improved to prevent further segregation or emigration. This is primarily the responsibility of the state authorities, but the international community could assist, for example, by facilitating the development of early warning systems and fora for intercommunal dialogue in response to collective violence.
- In Kaduna, the international community could urge the state authorities, both at the local and federal levels, to address the causes and consequences of ethnic and religious segregation of particular neighbourhoods like Gonin Gora and Tudun Wada.
- In both cities, the international community should guard against the risk that co-opting enterprise and other informal interest-based associations for state purposes may undermine their powers of collective mobilisation by weakening their popular legitimacy and accountability.

### Muslim minority associations in Kano

- There is an urgent need for the Hausa-Fulani Muslims and their leaders to acknowledge the Muslim minority groups and associations as part of Kano's Muslim community and full Nigerian citizens. The international community can advocate this to the Kano State government, as well as to their other partners in the Islamic

community.

- There is a need to acknowledge Muslim minorities as victims of collective violence and compensate them fairly. International actors can support this process either directly, by funding such compensation, or indirectly, by motivating Nigerian actors to do so.
- Minorities who are both Muslim and members of ethnic communities with dominant Christian populations should be included as stakeholders in attempts to deal with collective violence, for example in early warning committees, peace negotiations, and post-conflict peace building efforts.

### Religious leaders in Kano

- Christian and Muslim leaders should be supported in their capacity to provide religious and, particularly, secular education. This could include financial support for schools and professional support with the development of their curriculums, particularly in schools where secular and religious education is provided (e.g. *Islamiyya* schools).
- Christian and Muslim leaders should be supported with training in family and divorce counselling, as well as in reproductive health;
- Local efforts at Christian-Muslim cooperation and dialogue, such as the Kano Covenant, should be supported through facilitation or media exposure; but international actors should not view religious leaders as replacements for state authorities, or 'overload' them with complex and costly tasks like public service provision or democratisation processes.