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# Reinventing the Role of Children and Youth in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

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Reinventing the Role of Children and Youth in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding.

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PIM '73

YPLD CLC Capstone

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## **Abstract**

This paper underlines the roles of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding and the reinvention of their roles from participants of peacebuilding to active facilitators of post-conflict peacebuilding. The reinvention is based on the re-interpretation of the traditional roles of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding and the analysis of children and youth peacebuilding programs. The re-interpretation will suggest that children and youth take on a more active role, if not, a leadership role in peacebuilding programs conducted for children and youth. This paper will look at the historical and contextual information about Nigeria's inter-religious conflict and a youth peacebuilding program by the international non-profit, Search for Common Ground called Naija Girls Unite to answer the question of the re-interpretation of the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding.

*Keywords:* youth, peacebuilding, young people, post-conflict, Nigeria, roles, children, girls

# **Part I**

## **Introduction**

According to figures, in 2011 (Report, 2013), approximately 28.5 million primary school age children and 20 million out of the 69 million teenagers not in school are affected by conflict. In the same year, thirty-two countries have identified as affected by armed conflict. Because of the chaotic nature of children and youth post-conflict peacebuilding, monitoring and evaluation processes were not necessarily obliged, hence, leading to an incomplete final report of activities implemented. I looked closely into using Search for Common Ground's resources, the Naija Girls Unite program in Nigeria as a small case study to learn and assess the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding. Following this, because of the restriction of funds and time, the monitoring and evaluation processes in the Naija Girls Unite program fell short, therefore impacting the full assessment of the efficacy of the program. Learning from this and many other program experiencing similar shortcomings, Search for Common Ground in partnership with Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania (PATRIR), Save the Children Norway, Search for Common Ground, the United Network of Young Peacebuilders and World Vision launched the Multi-agency, multi-country, multi-donor evaluation on children, youth participation in peacebuilding (3M) in 2014 as an effort to streamline monitoring and evaluation activities of children and youth peacebuilding. While the magnitude of the effort is global, it is a start to which a new, more systematic statistical evaluation of a program adaptable to local factors.

In the reinvention of the roles of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding, the comprehensive assessment of past and current children and youth peacebuilding activities can

provide an insight to improve and create a wholesome and holistic approach to re-defining the role of young people in post-conflict peacebuilding. However, in certain programs, a ‘comprehensive’ assessment goes beyond the traditional quantitative and qualitative approach of academic assessment. The absence of a statistical data can be replaced with the methodology of story-telling as a means of monitoring and evaluating a program. Using this methodology, the re-invention of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding is allowed to be more organic and fluid as it adheres to the local context of a post-conflict community while still allowing practitioners and policy-makers to comprehend the changes before, during, and after the program has ended.

### *Summary*

1. The re-definition of children and youth is a process in which varying cultures carry varying definition to what a “child” and a “youth” is. While several countries around the globe are beginning to provide a certain definition to what a “child” and a “youth” is, it could also vary from the different communities living in that country. Because of this, the definition of “children” and “youth” should be allowed to be organic and fluid.
2. While a systematic, efficient, and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation methodology is preferred by practitioners and policy-makers in assessing a program, sometimes, the alternative method of story-telling can be compelling in providing a quantifiable result.
3. Naija Girls Unite is a small youth peacebuilding program in Nigeria. I looked into the program and assessed the possibilities of adapting the program in other countries.

## **Part II**

### **Methodology**

#### *Phase 1*

A qualitative desk research analyzing relevant research papers and theories concerning the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding was conducted. During this stage, a set of values was born to underline the roles of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding.

#### *Phase 2*

I conducted an interview with Ema Miroslava Bilings, Training Coordinator Plateau/ Niger Delta of Search for Common Ground. She assisted me in understanding what differentiated the Naija Girls Program as an example of transforming the roles of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding from other similar programs. Part IV of this research consists of stories shared by Ms. Bilings and the outcomes of the Naija Girls Unite Program as well as the monitoring and evaluation of the program. The interview was a two-fold process.

- a. The first interview with Ms. Bilings was conducted through a written reply on a list of questions supplied by me to Ms. Bilings via email.
- b. The second interview was a follow-up interview to the questions answered via a Skype video-conference.

The stories, facts, and findings on Naija Girls Unite Program was supplemented by Ms. Bilings. Due to constricted funding, I did not fly to Nigeria to personally interview the girls, staff, and the communities involved and impacted by the program. Names of the girls in Part IV of the

research have been altered to protect their identities. Quotes in the research are quotes of Ms. Bilings taken from the two interview sessions conducted.

### *Phase 3*

I analyzed the Naija Girls Unite as case study in confirming or dissenting the set of the set of values that underline the roles of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding. The girls in the Naija Girls Unite was not interviewed. What was taken from the program were the facts and results of the program, stated by reports produced by Search for Common Ground (SFCG). These facts and findings in the reports were analyzed and was determined as to whether they confirmed or dissented the set of values defined in Phase 1.



## **Part III**

### **Literature Review**

#### *Lederach's Sociopolitical and Sociocultural Lenses of Peacebuilding Framework*

Lederach proposed two basic sets of lenses in terms of the peacebuilding framework (Lederach, 1997). The first set of framework proposes an overall vertical interpretation of the situation assessing the effect of peacebuilding at all levels of the community with the resources available at all levels. A second lens is a horizontal approach of looking directly at the immediate issues of the conflict as well as the broader relevant concerns to the conflict. In analyzing the Naija Girls Program and the lessons learned from that programs regarding the reinvention of the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding, this research will apply the two approaches suggested by Lederach to provide a more integrated approach to youth post-conflict peacebuilding. This study posits that post-conflict peacebuilding concerning children and youth goes beyond peace education and the reintegration efforts back into society. This study suggests that young people take on the leadership role of post-conflict peacebuilding within their local communities. This will be achieved through leadership training, trauma resilience training, conflict resolution training, and communications training. Through this integrative horizontal and vertical approach, young people will gain the necessary skills to be effective agents of change while providing an alternative narrative to the violent narrative that was apparent during the conflict.

One of the pressing issues concerning children and youth post-conflict peacebuilding is the lack of representation in peace agreements. Peace agreements usually set out parameters for disarmament, legal and political processes, parameters for the land division, and general security

issues for the general population. The peacebuilding rights for young people is usually not recognized in peace agreements (Jareg, 2005). In the Peace Agreement between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the relevant parties, children and expressively seen as victims of uncompromising recruitment by the LTTE into the civil war (Living in Fear. Child Soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, 2004). The role as agents of change of young people was entirely overlooked in the peace agreement.

At the same time, young people are often seen in a gender specific roles in which young men are seen as the aggressors and young women are seen as victims of aggression (Olenik, Taky-Laryea, Haugen, & Boyson, 2013). This is a fatal assumption as young men and women can be both perpetrators and victims during the conflict. It also suggests a myopic view of the role of young men and women in conflict. It reduces children and youth as both mere aggressors and victim while they could also have more complex roles than those two roles. This myopic categorization deludes young people into believing the stereotype that is brought upon them by society as well as practitioners and policy makers. It also denies young people from being seen as active participating agents of change and leaders of today rather than leaders of tomorrow.

Young people face a different daunting prospect in post-conflict from adults.

Young people will not inherit the conflict and the after effect of the conflict. They have already inherited it now, today. The psycho-social effect of witnessing and the exploitation of children and youth during the conflict can influence their long-term behavior of continuing the role of aggressors of violence and their willingness to reintegrate back into their communities post-conflict. During which time, children and youth are politically perceived by their vulnerability and helplessness as they, as children and youth usually do not have the similar access to decision-making consultations, direct representation in courts of law, nor to state policy forming

committee as their adult counterparts (Baines & Burciul, 2000). By not addressing this part of the political spectrum of the conflict, practitioners and policymakers are blinded from acknowledging the experience and knowledge possessed by young people whom have experienced the conflict in a different light from their adult counterparts.

Post-conflict peacebuilding is a continuous effort by members of society, institutions with the combination of various channels of communications including the collaboration of the international community within the framework of the culture of peace (Bar-Tal, 2013). As such, in order to make this framework of the culture of peace to work in the continuous efforts of peacebuilding, the voices of young people need to be given a fair chance of being heard and taken seriously into consideration. While young people may not yet be ready to take on the roles as policy makers of their country, their voices should be given a bigger venue as peace builders in a post-conflict community. While the definition of a "bigger venue" is quite vague, in the context of this paper, bigger venue does not necessarily mean active political roles in the central government, but more of an active role within their own communities and neighboring communities that are deeply affected by conflict.

To provide an opportunity for peace within the community, young people must be recognized as social and political beings (Kane, Feinstein, & Giertsen). In such, the real work is recognizing that young people are not leaders of tomorrow, but leaders of today. By understanding young people as leaders of today, political leaders, and community leaders will be more able to address the process of rebuilding a community post-conflict and its people in a more cohesive approach. Children and youth are more resilient, hopeful, forgiving, and more apt to listening differing opinions and suggestions than adults. If given the right tools and the right opportunities, young

people have the ability to grow into leaders that think with the heart at peace rather than perpetuating the cycle of violence with the heart at war.

However, it will take more than redefining the term "young people" to reinvent the role of young people in post-conflict peacebuilding. It is also vital to the direction of the decision making in the community that young people are seen as equal 'stakeholders' in the post-conflict peacebuilding efforts to rebuild the community. Conflict transformation is incremental, difficult and slow, and peace cannot be dictated or dispensed (McEvoy-Levy, Youth, Violence and Conflict Transformation , 2010). The worldview of conflict and its transformations depends on an individuals' geographical location before, during, and after the conflict as well as where one is positioned in the pyramid of society. A mother may not have the same worldview as a wealthy businessman. A high school student may not have the same worldview of the conflict as a village chief. As equal stakeholders, post-conflict peacebuilding will become a partnership, rather than a top-down approach to transformation a post-conflict affected community. Young people will be given a place in the decision making a table and a representation in the determination of the direction in a post-conflict setting within the community. The failure to incorporate young people into the decision-making process will ensure the cycle of violence is repeated as the restless young continue to be ignored.

USAID conducted 33 studies between 2001 and 2012 that divided post-conflict efforts into two parts; multiple intervention efforts, a pure focus on primary education, and a concentration on civic education and engagement (Olenik, Taky-Laryea, Haugen, & Boyson, 2013). The most widely used post-conflict activity is the access to basic education and life skills. The second most employed post-conflict activity is providing access to employment opportunities while the third most employed activity is peacebuilding and civic engagement. By treating young people as

mere participants as peacebuilding activities rather than post-conflict peacebuilding partners, practitioners and policy makers are effectively limiting the scope and possible alternative knowledge and possible solutions that could provide new insight into the conflict, as well as possible alternative to future post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. Reason being, this sees young people none other than aggressors or victims of conflict and mere participants of peacebuilding efforts. To expand the definition of children and youth and their role in post-conflict peacebuilding, the community and young people should actively communicate with each other in peacebuilding activities that repairs and improves the relationships between adult community members and young people. Though there are activities of civic education and engagement as well as peacebuilding, the question remains on the vertical integration of young people with the decision makers at the community and national level affected by these activities of civic education, engagement and peacebuilding activities (Maclay & Özerdem , 2010).

It is found that the biggest issue with identifying and evaluating the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding is the lack of monitoring of these efforts as well as the lack of understanding the local context of what it means to be a youth within that community that is deeply affected by the conflict. It was found through my research, the success of the Naija Girls Unite program laid on the foundation of trust between the local community and the organization exercising the program, Search for Common Ground. These communities have experienced violent conflict between the Christians and Muslims but because of the reputation of Search for Common Ground, the organization were able to go into these communities, obtain the support of the parents, teachers, and community members to allow the participation of the girls in the program.

### *Faucon's Youth Empowerment Model*

A meaningful participation of young people in post-conflict peacebuilding lies beyond conflict transformation and community engagement. Like any other types of relationships, there needs to be an element of trust between community elders and young people of that community. While young people may or may not have active role as aggressors during the conflict, forgiveness is an element that is not necessarily present post-conflict. There is a need for the realization that while young people may guilty of perpetrating violence during the conflict, they also represent the possibilities of the community. Power is a paradoxical, systemic phenomenon that permeates human functioning and interactions at all levels of the society (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). The society in which the adults hold legitimate power and ultimately responsible for decisions and actions, equitable power sharing is pertinent in engaging young people as agents of change. This research suggests that critical youth empowerment is a prominent ingredient in the exercise of reinventing the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding.

To enforce critical youth empowerment, the presence of collective empowerment must also occur within families, organizations, and the communities involved in the youth-led post-conflict peacebuilding processes. The cross-cutting process between individual guidance and structural change was looked at with the Naija Girls Unite program. It is a small program that managed to focus consequently on both individual guidance and structural change (Schell-Faucon, 2000). This led to the societal change in the communities involved in the program. While Schell Faucon notes that structural change to promote social 'peace-ability' can only be initiated by people who are not held back by their own inner conflicts, this research, perusing the Naija Girls Unite program as the case study contradicts this opinion. Naija Girls Unite proves to be anomaly as the

girls participating and the communities were considerably held back by their inner conflicts. They were given the necessary tools to overcome those internal psychological conflicts. The general expectations of young people, particularly the girls in these communities, were often very low nor were they allowed a voice in their communities. Through the Youth Development and Empowerment Program Model, young people are seen as assets and resources to be called upon to participate in community and social affairs (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). The low expectations of girls in the Naija Girls Unite communities were challenged, henceforth, providing an opportunity for a fresh envisioning of young people, in this case, often overlooked girls in communities torn apart by violence. This trust of the community towards Search for Common Ground laid the foundation groundwork for the older community members to re-imagine of the roles of their young people, leading to the success of a multi-dimensional youth-oriented, youth-led post-conflict peacebuilding.

Lederach points out that there are two frameworks for sustainable peacebuilding. Taking that into context, for a holistic and comprehensive sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding, both vertical and horizontal structures are needed to ensure young people can create an alternative narrative against the backdrop of a continuous cyclical violence within their community.

Grassroots approaches such as community peacebuilding activities perusing technology such as radio and television and middle range approaches such as problem solving workshops, conflict resolution workshops, and leadership trainings are pragmatic approaches to post-conflict peacebuilding involving young people. More importantly, active and current engagements between community members and young people are a key element in ending the cycle of violence within the community.

As the study by USAID showed, the lack of research pertaining the efficacy of civic education and engagement is one of the many socio-psychological barriers to an effective sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding on the community level. However, this research found that the monitoring and evaluation of children and youth post-conflict peacebuilding cannot always be conducted in a thorough quantitative or qualitative methodology. The question remains, how to do you quantify and qualify the change in psycho-social behavior and attitude of a conflict-ridden community within a limited timeframe (as most programs are). In the case study of the Naija Girls Unite program, the impact of the program goes beyond what can be proven by statistics and graphs and conclusions. The impact felt by the community is a process, slow but inevitable. It will take time (usually years before any real change can be quantifiable) and money that most programs lack for a comprehensive and long-term evaluation.

Aside from monitoring and evaluation issues to children and youth post-conflict peacebuilding, children and youth are also caught in the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, it is easy to overlook the complexities of the various ranges within the scope of who young people are. Children, in which during times of conflict are the most vulnerable of the group. They are the youngest and often seen as the weakest category within the transitioning group. Next, we have the adolescents. An adolescent reveals a distinction of which the image of a child is predominantly feminine, and the term 'adolescence' is mostly masculine. Children are often associated with victimization and innocence while youth are often associated with perpetration. Hence, a feminized child has the urgency to be saved but bad youth needs to be contained (McEvoy-Levy, *Troublemakers or Peacemakers? Youth and Post-Accord*, 2007). Because of this challenging phase and often confusing phase, they tend to go unacknowledged and under-served (Baines & Burciul, 2000). Adolescents are a high-stakes a group in which by understanding the



complexities of their roles during and after the conflict may carry weight in the sustainability of peace on both the community and national level. For an example, Generation X, a youth-led organization in Honduras developed peer support and provided ex-gang members access to education, vocational training, employment opportunities, and psychosocial support programs. Because of this, training has also been provided to the community police in the Honduran Police Department to help with the reintegration of ex-gang members back into the community (Kane, Feinstein, & Giertsen).

By acknowledging the presence of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding, they could play a larger role in averting further future conflicts before an another possible escalation to destructive levels – by assisting practitioners and policymakers to identify and eliminating systemic causes of the relevant conflict at hand (Rubenstein, 1993). Who better to identify and assist in eliminating systemic causes than young people whom are the most affected by the conflict and have played active roles, and preyed upon by violent groups during the conflict itself? It is also worth noting that because that because ‘*adolescing*’ is a process, the progress of self- identification during that period is an internalization of external and personal experiences that mold the behavior of young people.

One way to understand young people is that young people are in the transitional stage in life between childhoods to adulthood (Smith & Ellison , 2012). It is that stage where they at times are too old to be treated as children and at the same time, they are expected to have adult responsibilities (in some cultures, children reaching puberty is considered a marriageable age, and in some cultures, marriage is equated with being an adult) but without being treated equally in the economic and political pie in their community. At the same time, young people in conflict

zones are also faced with the complexity of the transition from conflict during childhood to peace times in adulthood.

Because young people are in a transitional stage, it is pertinent to not treat young people as a homogenous group but a distinctly complex heterogeneous group with multi-faceted basic human needs at every age group. At the same time, young people is also a heterogeneous group of different ages that can provide a unique perspective on post-conflict peacebuilding on the sole reason that they are a transitional stage that were children during the conflict and transitioned into adults post-conflict. They may also be children during and after the conflict but because of the experiences endured during the conflict, they may have a different set of skills and experiences that may be valuable to the post-conflict peacebuilding efforts in rebuilding their community.

However, because they are not considered as emotionally and mentally matured individuals by policymakers and practitioners, they are often marginalized in terms of political and economic opportunities in post-conflict peacebuilding settings. In doing such, young people have become disconnected, disenchanted, and cynical to any future peacebuilding efforts as well as any community building and economic recovery. An example of the adverse effects of marginalization of young people in post-conflict peacebuilding is exemplified in post-war Liberia in which many young people once aggressors during the Liberian civil war are forced back to their traditional pre-war roles. By not incorporating young people into active roles in post-conflict peacebuilding, young people in Liberia, once combatants have envisaged a reason to fight again (Maclay & Özerdem , 2010).

The roles of children and youth are complex. The political consciousness of children and youth are developed to an extent in which they have a high awareness of their role as children and

youth in influencing public opinion. This awareness can be seen in the participation of children and youth in the Palestinian Intifadas' as well as the involvement of children and youth in joining government forces (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam LTTE) and the (People's Liberation Organization for Tamil Elam PLOT) in Sri Lanka. These samples are just a few of the many examples where children and youth play more than the simplified roles of aggressors and victims of a conflict. While outsiders may see children and youth as aggressors, children and youth participating may see themselves as freedom fighters and heroes or they only see themselves making rational decisions about their survival (Drummond-Mundal & Cave, 2012). What adults see of young people and what young people see themselves is a contrast to one another.

There is a need to shift the theory that children and youth as future leaders to young people as leaders of today. The idea of youth children and youth as future leaders encourages complacency of adults to wait it out for the maturity of the emotional and mental capacity of young people in accordance with the social and cultural norms of their community rather than taking the proactive role of training young people to have a different mindset than adults that could lead to an alternative, if not, a peaceful future beneficial to the community in the long run.

If the physiological needs and the *consummatory* needs are not met, this will be a catalyst for an individual to go in search of meeting those needs. However, because young people for the sake of this research, are categorized as individuals in a transitioning period from childhood into adulthood, the basic human needs are multi-faceted and complex.

### *Maslow's Basic Human Need*

According to Maslow (Maslow, 1987), basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency. Generally, while food, safety, and shelter are the basic needs of any person,

however in a post-conflict setting, the need for a pragmatic yet holistic conflict transformation training, particularly a strong psychological support to train young people to have a stronger emotional state in order to overcome the violent cycle that has been cemented within them after a traumatic, violent event(s) and become agents of change. Those needs vary depending on each individual depending on their current circumstances and are complicated as young people in this research is defined in a broad spectrum of age. For the purpose of this paper, the basic human needs of young people will be argued in the general sense in the setting of a post-conflict situation in which in the pyramid of basic needs, a psychological support as well as a comprehensive conflict transformation training is considered a necessity, complementing the basic need of food, safety, and shelter.

Access to education, employment opportunities, ensure safety against violence, as well as equitable representation in terms of economy and politics are some of the primary needs of young people in a post-conflict setting. It could also be argued that the freedom against the prevalence of the pervasive nature of weapons proliferation can also be considered a need for young people. These requirements are not listed in any particular order. And as seen in the case study below, Naija Girls Unite, in order to fit the needs of the community, a wholesome and holistic approach to peace education, coupled with an all-inclusive training of communication, leadership, conflict resolution and trauma healing is needed to fulfil the needs of the young people within the communities of Jos.

Hence, in the post-conflict peacebuilding, in changing the narrative of young people, they cannot be leaders if they are not trained in conflict transformation as well as in leadership training and communication. But what are these human needs and why are they pertinent to the altering the narratives? It can be argued that ensuring the safety of young people participating in those

abovementioned training needs satisfiers and not need subjects. However, the determination of what are needs subjects and needs satisfiers are relative depending on the individual and the current physical and psychological situation of that person.

In a post-conflict setting, while hunger, shelter, and clothing are pre-requisites of what makes up as needs subjects; it can also be looked in another lens, until the cycle of violence is broken and peace is found and sustained, those needs are needs satisfiers and a broken cycle of violence is a needs subject. To meet the needs of breaking the cycle of violence, young people should be given the opportunity to seek safety and to find knowledge to alter their own narratives. In doing so, they should be allowed to be the captain of their own ship rather than being steered by biased adult policy-makers and practitioners. Food, shelter, and clothing will then become satisfiers to ensure that the sustainability of peace is guaranteed as it keeps the young people from being hungry and homeless in being agents of change within their community. It can also be argued that in a post conflict setting, a high social and ideological identity (Volkan, 2004) of a young person is vital breaking the cycle of violence and finding a sustainable peace in a violence-ridden community. Hence, the mind and spiritual need of a young person takes precedence over the need for food, shelter, and clothing. To clarify, if a young person decides that his/her social or ideological identity no longer aligns with the violent acts of experiences during the conflict and he/she wishes to break that cycle of violence, their need subject would be to exit that cycle for a peaceful life or a peaceful alternative to the conflict. In doing so, their main objective is to find that alternative narrative that aligns with their changed social and ideological identity. Food, shelter, and clothing become the fuel that sustains their fulfillment of objectives.

## *Summary*

1. The role of children and youth during the conflict is more complex than as an aggressor and/or victim. Because of the complexity of the role of young people in the conflict, organizations, practitioners, and policymakers should also take on a sophisticated view of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding. With alternative viewpoint, children and youth post-conflict peacebuilding can take on a more complex, holistic approach that is both horizontal and vertical in its approach.
2. Peacebuilding is like conflict. It is an incremental, difficult and slow process. It is a seed that needs to be nurtured and cared for. It is also as complex as the nature of power. Peace, power, and conflict are paradoxical and not mutually exclusive. Because it is a process, it also takes a comfortable amount of trust between the organizations implementing the program, members of the community, as well as the young people of the community. Peacebuilding is a process that cannot be forced into the community. It needs to be treated like a symbiotic relationship. While it cannot be forced upon the community, but the community has to realize that peace is a pertinent ingredient in its development into a peaceful future.
3. Because young people are in a transitioning period, the roles of children and youth during the conflict is often complex and fluid. They have experienced violence and conflict both as a child and a young adult, if not, at times, as a grown adult. The simplification of their roles during the conflict can be a negative influence on their potential roles during the post-conflict peacebuilding process.

## **Part IV**

### **Case Study: Naija Girls Unite Program**

In the case study that will be discussed further in this research, young people in Nigeria are often the easiest targets for violent groups such as Boko Haram because they are without the net of basic safety and security. Nigeria has been a host of violent inter-religious conflict of the past years with Boko Haram committing atrocities across the Northern states of Nigeria and the lack of political ability and will of the Nigerian government to effectively counter if not, minimize the violent influence of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Poverty has the tendency to persist in Nigeria because of the historical and continuing mismanagement of resources and corruption, in both the public and private sector (Ubhenin & Enabunene, 2011). This in turn causes an attraction of young people to align themselves with Boko Haram as they are with the economic injustice that perpetuates perpetual unemployment. Boko Haram exploited this sense of urgency in economic desperation by presenting itself as the messiah to save young people from the black hole of poverty and unemployment.

Fueled by the message served of Boko Haram and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, Nigeria is enmeshed in an arms glut as guns are cheaper than bread on the streets (Ubhenin & Enabunene, 2011). The pervasive poverty and the presence of an outside violent group of Boko Haram has created an endless cycle of violence and further poverty that jeopardizes any possible opportunities to rise beyond unemployment and systematic structural and cultural violence that dooms the basic safety and security of young people.

Nigeria's Plateau State has seen faith-based violence since 1998 between Christians and Muslims. This violent conflict emerged between the predominantly Christian "indigenes" and the

predominantly Muslim "settlers", setting the tone for a faith-based conflict. While Christians and Muslims have lived side-by-side peacefully for years, Muslims are often viewed as settlers rather than "indigenes". While this discrimination have been ignored to be replaced by tolerance and peace, outsiders such as Boko Haram have taken this discrimination to instigate hate and prejudice from Muslims against their Christian neighbors. This retaliation has often resulted in fatal attacks.

The existing conflict is the product of the competition between Christians and Muslims in accessing land, economic, social, and political resources from the favorite playing State and Local Government Administrations (LGAs.) The conflict is acerbated with the emergence of Boko Haram taking advantage of the already tensions within the local community. The group uses this opportunity to carry out attacks on Christian establishments across the Middle Belt, including in Jos (in which Naija Girls Unite is) seeking to trigger local violence. These attacks were carried out by non-local Muslims, resulting in violent reprisals by local Christians against the local Muslim community in Jos. This further enhances the already intensified segregation of in Jos. Churches in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods lay empty while they are over-crowded in predominantly Christian communities and vice versa with mosques. Christians have been known to avoid intentionally walking through Muslims areas because they fear for their lives, and the same occurs with Muslims. This resulted in the creation of no-go zones for Christians in Muslim communities and vice versa.

In the case of young people and conflict transformation, women and youth are often the most ignored where post-conflict peacebuilding is concerned. The objective of Naija Girls Unite was to bring together the most neglected group of people, young women, to educate them in peace education and train them on trauma resilience and theories of conflict transformation and turn all



that into leaders of change in the communities. While concrete quantitative and qualitative results is often a requirement to be met from peacebuilding programs, but in all honesty, change is not always expressive and not always concrete. To rebuild a broken community, it takes time and money, in which both are not limitless for non-profit organizations carrying out efforts of post-conflict peacebuilding.

In order to achieve a holistic post-conflict peacebuilding, 22 young Christian and Muslims girls were engaged in the following efforts; three separate training camp for girls to be in conflict transformation, leadership trainings as well as communication training, social media interaction in which a Facebook page is created to provide a space for the girls to communicate and develop ideas for peace projects, community peace projects in which a Christian girl will be paired with a Muslim girl to create and implement a peace project in their community, and a TV Magazine to host, produce and disseminate the voices of the girls in advocating for peace and reconciliation, as well as community engagement activities led by these young girls to create a two-way communication between the girls as agents of change and the members of the community.

Search for Common Ground launched Naija Girls in 2012 with the hopes of bringing peace into embattled, broken communities in Jos. The girls were given several workshops in which they were trained in trauma resilience, communication, leadership skills and conflict transformation (particularly in the Theory of Change). The 22 young women were taught to recognize trauma and conflict as well as means to act upon trauma and conflict with the heart of peace.

#### *Structure of Naija Girls Unite Program*

The first camp that lasted three days is the introduction of the parents to the program as well as an introduction of the girls to one another and understanding what the program is. The

participation of the parents were not active in the first camp but it was vital for the parents to understand the nature the program and be given the assurance of the safety and well-being the girls.

The second camp consisted of the communication, trauma resilience and conflict transformation training. The girls were taught using the "Theory of Change" of which the girls learned to understand the flow community engagement programs and the impact of those community engagement programs. As for their communication training, the girls were taught the how-to of public speaking and speaking to other people confidently and in a non-aggressive manner. Using the Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), these 22 young women were taught to recognize that trauma is more than a psychological effect. Instead they were trained to treat the trauma they have experienced with certain exercises such as exercises realizing that crying releases trauma away from their bodies as well the simple act holding another person while they cried.

The second half of the program is the planning and the implementation of the community engagement programs by led by the girl and supported by the staff members of Search for Common Ground. The girls were paired into two per group, resulting in 11 activities ranging from a day of community engagement to several weeks of the girls teaching the community members conflict transformation and trauma resilience. What should be noted, as I learned from my interview with one of the facilitators of the Naija Girls program, these programs were fully planned and implemented by the girls. The only support given by the adult facilitators are

logistics and security. Below are several stories<sup>1</sup> from the impact of the Naija Girls program after the program ended as well as the projects implemented by the girls?

*In one instance, one of the girls, Sarah O' Connor<sup>2</sup>, 13 years old had suffered a terrible loss, to which her sister was shot dead after the Naija Girls program had ended. As her father was crippled with the loss of his daughter, locked himself in his room, inconsolable. Sarah, in hearing this, knocked on her father's bedroom door, begging to be let in. After being reluctantly let in by her father, Sarah used the trauma resilience in telling her father to let go of the grief as she held onto him while he cried. She taught him that by locking the grief in his body, it will make him physically sick. Sarah also used this opportunity to spend a day in the orphanage she regularly volunteers at instead of mourning the loss of her sister. Indirectly, the children at the orphanage know her as the girl from the Naija Girl Unite program.*

*In another instance, Madeleine Albright<sup>3</sup>, a graduate of Naija Girls program is known on Facebook for spreading messages of peace on her Facebook wall. Her friends on Facebook has reached more than 2000 people all over Nigeria in spreading messages of peace.*

*In another instance, as one of the requirements of the Naija Girls program, the girls had to plan and implement a community project. There was a project by two girls that involved Muslim students to go into a no-go area for Muslims in a Christian community and Christian students going into a no-go area for*

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<sup>1</sup> Stories taken from interview notes with Ema Miroslava Bilings, one of the facilitators with the Naija Girls Unite program.

<sup>2</sup> Named change to protect identity.

<sup>3</sup> Named change to protect identity.

*Christians in a Muslim community. The purpose of these visits was to manage peace dialogs with the community members. Those visits were led by the two Naija Girls who planned it and supported by staff members of Search for Common Ground. Security was minimum as to not discourage attendance and participation of members of the communities. Both visits were equally successful as attendance and participation were lively and honest discussions on the violent conflict that affected those communities were held. The questions raised during the community dialog ranged from "Why did you kill my father?" to "Why do you hate us?" Most importantly, the girls were able to communicate to their participants on what it means to communicate effectively their wants, needs, and feelings without the need to put the blame onto others.*

*In another story, another Naija Girl program, and young Christian girl, Lindsey Green<sup>4</sup> went into a Muslim community with a fellow Naija Girl, a Muslim, Sanna Mohamed<sup>5</sup> wearing a hijab because she wanted to know what it felt like to walk down a street in a Christian neighborhood as a Muslim. To be clear, prior to being a Naija Girl, both girls have suffered tremendous loss and both lived in segregated communities and having negative, if not, violent opinions towards the other group.*

The approach taken by the Naija Girls program is both vertical and horizontal. The lessons learned from the Naija Girls program is that conflict often leads to both psychological and physiological trauma. To heal a community, the community first must feel the need to change the outcomes of their own situation. Horizontally speaking, a group of young women, 22 to be exact,

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<sup>4</sup> Name changed to protect the identity

<sup>5</sup> Name changed to protect the identity

was trained to heal themselves psychologically as well as learning to communicate themselves in a non-aggressive method, and indirectly, help heal their peers. Vertically speaking, as they felt they the change within themselves, change becomes contagious. Their families, their friends who did not participate in the Naija Girls program, their teachers, and community members, were infected with that flow of change. While change is hard and at times rejected, it becomes inevitable and is unquestionably accepted. As seen by the Naija Girls program, seeds of peace become a tree when it is allowed to grow by itself, in its own time, fed by the nutrients of "the want to change".

#### *Challenges faced by Naija Girls Unite Program*

However, the challenges faced by the program are omnipresent. Firstly, the lack of time and funds faced by Search for Common Ground impacted how the program was to be monitored and evaluated for its efficacy in children and youth peacebuilding. Naija Girls program is a program that can only be assessed effectively in years, and not months. Because of this, the full diagnostics of the program can never be fully measured or understood. The cultural, historical, political, social, and religious context plays a pivotal role understanding the subtle and present changes that are felt throughout the communities after the program ended. The model and design the program can be molded to fit other communities but because the shortcomings and the success program fall short other communities if transplanted.

The second shortcoming of the program is the incomplete report of the program. The first half of the program is into three camps. Search for Common Ground received the first two reports from the first two camps. A different facilitator was used in the third and final camp but because of the complications that arose from the third camp, the facilitator became absent and no report was

filed for the third camp. This in turn, affected the evaluation and assessment of the program as a whole.

### *Duplicating Naija Girls Unite Program*

The Naija Girls program has achieved what other children and youth post-conflict peacebuilding fell short of achieving for several reasons. Firstly, it took the route of understanding the cultural, social, as well as the religious role of children and youth within their communities. Search for Common Ground is a very well-known and well-respected organization in the Plateau State. Because of their reputation with the locals, projects like Naija Girls program had a smoother transition from planning to implementation by Search for Common Ground. There has to be a certain level of trust between the organization and the targeted communities. Search for Common Ground has been in Nigeria since 2004. Their local office is headed by a local individual with local knowledge and experience of local culture, politics, and language.

Secondly, rather than treating the girls as victims of violence, they were treated as potential leaders of their communities. They were trained, heard, and given the opportunity to create their own peacebuilding activities. The staff of Search for Common Ground provided guidance and technical support for the girls to achieve their goals and objectives. But the responsibility of planning and implementation laid solely on the girls using their training.

Thirdly, the security and safety of the girls during the trainings were paramount. The teachers, the security personal, facilitators, and staff of the Search for Common Ground were trained to look out for any psychological or physiological distress from the girls. The opposite strategy was taken when the girls went into the no-go areas for their community engagement programs. The reasoning behind this was not to discourage attendance and participation from the local

community members. The result is two-fold. Firstly, the girls were supported to feel comfortable and safe being in their own space and in their own state of mind. As noted earlier in this paper, young people are more resilient than given credit for. Within the span of weeks, the girls, using the trauma resilience training became psychologically and physiologically aware of their own condition and the condition of those around them.

*"...some of those kids can do a workshop without me. They have learned so well. So those are also seeds that we may not see on a broad scale but that I know many of those girls are helping kids, whether in their own families or schools through traumatic experiences."*

- Ema Miroslava Billings<sup>6</sup>, facilitator for Naija Girls Unite

Because the care taken training and the trust these girls had for communities the girls became confident enough walk communities knowing Search for Common Ground will protect them and realizing of a possibility of retaliation by any member of the community harm it is a slippery slope that produced spectacular results.

*"There is no insurance. These are risks. This is what we call risk of peacebuilding. You know, often, people ask "where is the security?" security will frighten people away. So, there was no insurance. We had to have forms that the parents signed. We had to write letters letting them know the potential risk involved, and they had to agree whether or not they would permit their child to go. So, neither the Christian nor the Muslim kids and their parents had any assurance of what would happen."*

- Ema Miroslava Billings, facilitator for Naija Girls Unite

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<sup>6</sup> Quote taken from a Skype interview with Ms. Bilings dated June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015

The neighborhoods the girls went into are known for their violent past. The lesson learned here that while security vital ensure the safety the young participants but in the end, the advantage that Search for Common Ground had was the relationship built on trust with the local community.

### *Summary*

1. Young people are more resilient, forgiving, hopeful, and more apt to listening to differing ideas and suggestions than adults. Given the right training and opportunity, young people can be the agents of change needed by the community to provide an alternative direction of the community's future.
2. Absence of a systematic monitoring and evaluation methodology dampens the assessment in the efficacy of a program. However, the assessment of the Naija Girls Unite program proved to be compelling with the use of story-telling. Story-telling, if given the right venue, can provide a persuasive voice to a sustainable peaceful change in a community.
3. The element of trust is vital for the smooth transition from the planning, implementation, and post program between the members of the community and the organization responsible for the program. Because of the already present relationship between Search for Common Ground and the local communities in Jos, the local communities had an easier transition to accepting the idea of training their young women to be peacebuilders in which in a normal setting, would not occur.

## **Part V**



## **Conclusion**

Young people are NOT leaders of tomorrow. Rather, they are leaders of today. International non-profit organizations have much to learn from the small program of Naija Girls Unite in which the girls were given an opportunity to be the leaders they wished to be, today. By sowing seeds into these young women, by training them to view peace as a process, rather than a destination or objective, the chance of continuing peace efforts by the participants post program is higher than a linear peace effort that sees peacebuilding as a goal. Young people have an imperative role as active agents of change and not the mere participation in a singular linear peace process. There needs to be a redefinition of how the roles of children and youth play during the conflict.

Simplification as aggressors and victims influence is not conducive for a long-lasting peacebuilding efforts. The local cultural context of what constitutes to a "young person" should also be re-defined. As some cultures have a fluid definition of what constitutes to a "young person", international organizations interested in implementing programs should not just adhere to the local context of the definition of a "young person", but also be to reconcile with the objectives of the program. Naija Girls Unite targeted the most invisible group of young people in the Nigerian culture and put them in the forefront of peacebuilding efforts in their local communities. As I researched and understood the success of Naija Girls Unite, it was clear that the outcomes were more than what Search for Common Ground expected. The girls, through their training and community engagements, have transformed from being the most invisible group in their communities to the forefront as leaders of peacebuilding. They were trained using western models of peacebuilding but because of their understanding of their local culture, they were able to adopt and adapt those training to their communities without being offensive to their elders or the local culture.

The emergence of the need for monitoring and evaluation by the peacebuilding community is a significant step forward in the growth of the peacebuilding field. However, the rigid of the western form of monitoring and evaluation should not always be strictly adhered to. While the behavioral and attitudinal baseline at the beginning of the program is vital to keep track of the changes of the program, the progression of the program during and after should be allowed to be fluid and reflect the local context of which the program was exercised.

Feasibility of evaluation does not necessarily need to follow the traditional rules of monitoring and evaluation. As displayed with the Naija Girls Unite program, the evaluation is told in the form of stories shared by those participating or impacted by the program. These stories shared followed the vicissitudes experienced throughout the program as well as after the program ended. Storytelling can be a measurable form of evaluation as it allows the participants to express the changes they have felt in a way that is relatable to their local context of culture and language.

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