



Creating Alternative to

# **Youth Restiveness and Violent Extremism**

This policy brief was published within ActionAid Nigeria System and Structure Strengthening Approach against Radicalisation to Violent Extremism in Kogi State (SARVE) Project.

SARVE is an innovation of ActionAid Nigeria (AAN) aimed at supporting communities to build resilience against violent extremism through enhanced capacity and structures to utilize available resources in preventing radicalization, respond to, withstand and overcome impact of adverse violence extremism should it occur. The two-year programme which targets youths and women in 2 LGAs (Adavi & Igalamela/Odolu) and 5 Communities (Ofuloko, Okpakpata, Osara, Aku/Osaragada & Fulani) is slated to close-out and pass the baton to the communities and state government by December 2018.



▶ A cross section of youths at the Kogi Youth Summit on Preventing Violent Extremism facilitated by ActionAid Nigeria, February 2018

## Introduction

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Youth restiveness in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. Nigerian youth have been at the centre of most of the public uprising most especially in the 1970s up till the 1990s when youth activism was at its peak in the country. Many of the public protests at the period were either triggered by the young people, especially students of tertiary institutions through their students' unions or had them as major collaborators with other interest groups. The incidence of youth uprising in Nigeria, in spite of its disruptive nature had no root in extremism. The February

1, 1972 commemorative peaceful demonstrations by students of tertiary institution of the 1971 incidence of the killing of Adekunle Adepaju, a student of the University of Ibadan on February 1, 1971 was one of the earlier recorded incidences of organised protest of young Nigerians in the country. Subsequent demonstrations by students were to be less peaceful, especially with the attendant handling of the response of students' protests by the police which often result in fatal casualties. The students' uprising in the country in the period mentioned, contrary to some attempt at dismissing it as undue radicalism, however took its root and legitimacy from the students' own democratic tradition and valid aspiration for a just society which finds some correlation in the popular aspirations in the larger civil society, which popular grievances it finds alliances with and also an important bridge. It is for this reason that strong alliances existed then between the students, the labour unions, the Nigeria Bar Association and the media.

Association of Nigerian youth with violent extremism however could be traced back to the early 1980s with the emergence in some part of the country then of fundamentalists religious groups that preached and mobilised for supremacy and the propagation of beliefs of their sects. The radicalisation of the youth movements of the South South of Nigeria, especially after the killing of the Ogoni environmental rights activists by the Sanni Abacha led military regime also introduced a new form of violent uprising by Nigerian youth especially in the 1990s. The 1990s also saw the emergence in the South West of Oodua Peoples' Congress, which first emerged as a socio-cultural and political identity group and later metamorphosed to a militant group during the period of the struggle for the actualisation of the 1993 presidential election. The South Eastern part of Nigeria during the 1990s also had experience of different form of extremist groups that emerged first as vigilante groups and also those that evolved as self-determination groups. Some of these were also driven to extreme and sometimes violent positions at different stages due to various factors.



Youth restiveness in Nigeria therefore needs to be analysed, reviewed and understood from the context of youth self-expression and burgeoning democratic space, political economy of oil and Petro-Capitalism, struggle for survival, identity politics and separatists insurgency/hegemony.

Irrespective of position that youth restiveness is examined, what researches have shown is that “the degree to which youth restiveness constitutes a threat to national security has become a worrisome phenomenon that constantly attracts the attention of Nigerians and international communities.”

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*J. D Ojo. 1992. "Students' Unrest in Nigerian Universities". Ibadan Spectrum Books*

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*Insa Nolte 2007) Ethnic Vigilantes and the State: The Oodua People's Congress in South-Western Nigeria, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, Vol 21(2): 217–235 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240697124\\_Ethnic\\_Vigilantes\\_and\\_the\\_State\\_The\\_Oodua\\_People%27s\\_Congress\\_in\\_South-Western\\_Nigeria](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240697124_Ethnic_Vigilantes_and_the_State_The_Oodua_People%27s_Congress_in_South-Western_Nigeria)*

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## Religion and Youth Militancy

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Violent extremism though not a new occurrence however had always been contained and had not had strong influence on the young people to the extent of being prolonged. The Maitatsine riots between 1980 to 1985, in spite of its involving young people, was not youth inspired nor youth-led. Such incidences where they occurred have always been contained by the Nigerian government. The response of the Nigerian state to such incidences had been mostly in deployment of troupes to put down uprisings linked to religious sects or contain them within a certain small space and subsequently end the challenge they posed. While this approach had worked previously, in recent years, it has failed in containing the insurgents. This failure is not unconnected with the treatment of the uprising strictly as a religious issue without due attention to other contributory factors that aid the radicalisation of young people and their recruitment into religious movements. As valid as the view that religious beliefs could be the root cause of violence in some societies, there are other causes of discontent that are unrelated to religious beliefs. What has also been established in many instances is that it “may not be the root cause of discontent; instead, it initially may be primarily a way through which grievances are expressed and individuals mobilized”

The emergence of Boko Haram, real name Jama'atu Ahlissunah lidda'awati wal Jihad, which translates in English to, “people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad” though was borne out of religious belief, but is also closely linked to views on how society should be organised. Many researchers and religious scholars have established that the sect had structures and codes which are based on their own belief of how society should be organised. The reason for the wide membership of the group and its popularity amongst a layer of young people is easily grasped from a careful look at the social status of many of its converts who are mostly “unemployed youths, disaffected youths, and former Almajiris”. Interviews and debriefing of captured members of the group has shown that many of these apart from not having deep knowledge of the Islamic religion are mostly driven towards the sect through efforts at escaping poverty, desperation for survival. It is thus not surprising that most of the Boko Haram foot soldiers are impoverished and disenfranchised young people.

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## **Beyond Religion, Resource Control, Identity and Discontentment as Drivers of Violent Extremism: Seeking a better understanding of youth restiveness in Nigeria**

In recent time, more incidences of violent extremism in the country in which young people are active players have been recorded and have touched many parts of the country. Due to the massive impact of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East of Nigeria and

the attention it has drawn globally, sufficient attention has therefore not been paid to the sprouting of other incidences of violence arising from extreme views and involving young people in other places across the country.

The North Central part of Nigeria for a long time has had to cope with incidences of clashes between farmers and herdsmen. In recent years, the farmers-herders clashes have almost supplanted incidences of attacks by Boko Haram in the news. While it could be argued that farmers-herders clashes are as old as history of pastoralists' migrations in the country, the new dimension of the conflicts has taken a horrendous turn requiring urgent and



concerted intervention from state and non-state actors. Part of the reasons that have been adduced by close watchers of the situation is the generation change amongst feuding parties. It has been claimed that with the withdrawal of older pastoralists and farmers from active work, there has emerged a new generation on all sides who are unaccustomed to and not schooled in the traditional mode of conflict prevention and management applied by the older generation. Other explanations given is the changing communication terrain which has made communication and mobilisation easier for the younger generation who easily recruit support in the incidences of attacks or suspicion of attacks. Unfortunately, the state and the security agencies have shown little understanding of the impact of the new terrain enough to design appropriate responses.

Identity politics and self-determination have been major drivers of youth restiveness in the South West and South Eastern part of the country. The clamour for the actualisation of June 12, 1993 presidential elections though has been variously cited as the reason for the emergence of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), a better understanding of its emergence, its role and concerns it has generated could only be understood from the analysis of the group as a vigilante movement. Though its emergence coincided with the period of political impasse over the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, its origin and relevance at the time could also be understood better with the break down of law; the inability of security agencies to effectively combat crime; and the perception of state

institutions as implicated in the perpetration of crime in the country. The crisis within the group and emergence of factions along social status and age line in itself underscored the fact that in some instances, identity politics are triggered by other factors than ethnic and religious considerations. As recorded by many researchers, the source of confrontations between the OPC and other groups were more of response to what they perceived as other ethnic groups' taking advantage of the political situation to marginalise the Yoruba in the market places and other

economic locations in their own environ. Such feuds therefore were directed at wresting control of markets, lorry and bus terminus, fuel depots e.t.c.

The revival of the agitation for the separate state of Biafra by the youth of South East Nigeria, as explained by analysts could be linked to the perceived marginalisation of mostly young people of the region. While the leader of the South East have repeatedly distanced themselves from the agitation, the movements which are mostly populated by young people have centred arguments mainly around issues of economic marginalisation, resource allocations, creation of states and local governments and issues of unemployment.

The South South which for many symbolises resource curse has witnessed several incidences of youth restiveness and at different stages had been the signpost of recourse to violent extremism. The Niger Delta crisis as the insurgency in the Nigeria coastal region is known, according to some analysts and scholars, contrary to the impression the Nigerian state is wont to create is not strictly an attempt at hijack of the minerals of the area or economic sabotage by criminal element. Most commentaries on the repeated attack on the pipelines, attack on oil companies, abduction of oil workers for ransom and other forms of resistance in the region are products of mismanagement of the oil resources that has left the region poor and underdeveloped and subsequently produced an unintended consequence: created a large class of young men who have no hope of legitimate work that would fulfil their ambitions, and are easily recruited into violence.

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*Insa Nolte (2007) Ethnic Vigilantes and the State: The Oodua People's Congress in South-Western Nigeria, International Relations Copyright © 2007 SAGE Publications, Vol 21(2): pg 218*

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Insa\\_Nolte/publication/240697124\\_Ethnic\\_Vigilantes\\_and\\_the\\_State\\_The\\_Oodua\\_People%27s\\_Congress\\_in\\_South-Western\\_Nigeria/links/0c960538f7609cbbce000000/Ethnic-Vigilantes-and-the-State-The-Oodua-Peoples-Congress-in-South-Western-Nigeria.pdf?origin=publication\\_detail](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Insa_Nolte/publication/240697124_Ethnic_Vigilantes_and_the_State_The_Oodua_People%27s_Congress_in_South-Western_Nigeria/links/0c960538f7609cbbce000000/Ethnic-Vigilantes-and-the-State-The-Oodua-Peoples-Congress-in-South-Western-Nigeria.pdf?origin=publication_detail)



Osara Youths receive livelihood support factory from ActionAid



## Main Conclusions

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- From the foregoing, it is clear that youth restiveness in Nigeria is neither a product of tendency for anarchy by the youth populace but rather product of response to social stimuli that are imposed on them by the contradictions within the system and flaw lines that in most cases leave the young people little option than the taking of the streets.
- The rise in violent extremism, especially from the mid-1990s are easily traced to the frustration due to factors such as severe poverty, unemployment, and elite corruption which in turn causes aggression within the affected masses.
- The recruitment of citizens, especially young people, is made possible by the feeling of alienation, frustration, and abandonment. These invariably make them find refuge in recruiting religious groups or easily get manipulated to wage insurgency against the state.
- It is also clear that by their sheer numbers, their availability, and their eagerness to take up anything that may relieve them of conditions of poverty, idleness or weariness, youth are easily recruited by political parties, armed groups or criminal networks. In addition, youth, not shy of testing the world they are engaging, do not shun aggression against rivals, contending views or those above them. They therefore pose their own demands and form their own movements.
- The endemic psychology of humiliation and shame involved in the state and the country's ruling class classifying of the children of the poor as indolent has in turn given rise to the belief that adults, represented by the state, have given up on them or have reneged on their social and moral obligations towards them. This in



turn result in the tendency for the youth to become more aggressive and willing to confront the system where incentives are provided for such.

- The Nigeria state and the security system have shown little understanding of the new dynamics introduced to organising and mobilisation through technology, especially internet and the mobile phones.
- Recourse to religion has become for most youth not only an expression of belief or search for divine help but a frantic search for acceptance, communal feeling and acceptance. This invariably has made them vulnerable to manipulation by groups with extremists views.
- The economic capability of transnational religious movements and use of same for influencing is not to be underestimated. Religious movements now function as frameworks of vigorous, joint economic action, promoting a new work ethic and creating new networks of opportunity.
- Without an effective educational, employment and livelihood programmes designed to empower youth, especially the socially disadvantaged, young people will always be susceptible to socially subversive activities and manipulation by interest groups.
- Military actions in the face of youth restiveness and emergence of dissenting positions have not worked in all of the instances of uprising, especially since the mid-1990s as state violence often applied without measure and quite devastatingly, in most cases evoke similar practices in response from the nonconforming group(s).

## Recommendations

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While the current efforts of the Nigeria government at dealing with insurgency and radicalisation is acknowledged, it is critical that following options be considered:

Poor people care about surviving and putting food on the table, they prioritise material gains, not politics. Government therefore needs to undertake genuine reforms aimed at creating socio-economic and political institutions with which citizens can empower themselves so as to identify and reject endeavours towards radicalisations and the issues emanating from it.

In the face of enduring youth deprivation, remedial policies should be developed and implemented to take people out of poverty and reduce vulnerability to manipulation.

The federal government of Nigeria should review its current Social Investment Programme to make it more inclusive and more responsive to the yearnings and aspiration of the young populace.

That the federal government and the National Assembly enact relevant policies and pass laws that make it mandatory for the governments at all levels to prioritise education and employment programmes that assist youngsters, especially the socially disadvantaged.

National and international NGOs should be actively involved in creating programmes and policies designed to help youngsters attain independence, employment, civic representation and social standing.

The option of armed response to curbing youth restiveness and violent extremism as has been shown in the case

of Niger Delta youth, OPC and Boko Haram has never succeeded in taming the tendency of such groups to recruit and function. It is therefore recommended that a policy of early engagement and creation of platforms for constant dialogue be established in the face of youth restiveness and mushrooming of dissident groups in order prevent issues from degenerating to violent actions.

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*Abbink Op Cited*

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ActionAid Nigeria is a member of ActionAid global federation. Our strategic objectives include: enhancing people's power in democratic and inclusive governance, working to protect women and girls from violence by creating opportunities for economic independence and decision making, enhancing women's leadership in accountable humanitarian and resilience system, and strengthening systems and increasing resource diversification for quality programme delivery.

ActionAid Nigeria is powered by the belief that a Nigeria without poverty and injustice is possible.

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