

# THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA'S INTERVENTIONS IN MITIGATING THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF A DEVELOPMENT UNIVERSITY

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## Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has precipitated a complex humanitarian crisis characterized by mass displacement, loss of lives, and socioeconomic disruption. Different development assistance organizations, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), have intervened to mitigate the adverse effects of Boko Haram terrorism in the northeast and Nigeria generally. These organizations' activities have received scholars' attention; however, the American University of Nigeria (AUN), a development university in the heart of the conflict zone, has received limited critical attention on its roles in combating the Boko Haram menace. This paper holistically examines AUN's strategic interventions in education, community engagement, and peacebuilding, underscoring the pivotal role of development universities in crisis mitigation and community resilience, especially in the developing world. Such initiatives include the Chibok Girls Education Initiative, the Feed and Read program, the Waste to Wealth project, and the AUN Adamawa Peace Initiative (API). Through these humanitarian-centered programs, AUN demonstrates its dedication to fostering human capital, empowering vulnerable populations, and promoting a culture of peace to alleviate Boko Haram terrorism. This research highlights the potential of development universities as agents of positive change in conflict-ridden societies, providing a model for community-engaged higher education institutions seeking to contribute to sustainable development and post-conflict recovery. By uniting research efforts and translating findings into action, AUN exemplifies the transformative power of knowledge and humanitarianism in combating security challenges and building a more resilient future for Northeast Nigeria.

**Keywords:** American University of Nigeria, Development University, Boko Haram Terrorism, Humanitarianism

## 1 Introduction

The emergence of Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad, also known as Boko Haram, terrorism in 2009 after the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, has undermined various forms of development in Northeast Nigeria and caused unimaginable humanitarian crises. Boko Haram terrorism remains one of the most prominent and devastating conflicts in Nigeria since independence (Adeleke & Omobowale, 2023). Some of the harmful effects of the Boko Haram

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conflicts include limited economic activities in the Northeast, such as restricted access to farmlands (Ikpe, 2017), food shortages in the region and northern Cameroon (Kah, 2017), kidnappings, “furthered displacement of people, and...hampered human developments” (Moshood and Thovoethin, 109). Development organizations, such as United Nations agencies and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have mitigated these negative socio-economic effects; however, studies have focalized international organizations’ humanitarian interventions more than their local partners. Equally, there are limited studies on the American University of Nigeria’s humanitarian efforts to mitigate the Boko Haram terror in the Northeast, especially in Adamawa State. The American University of Nigeria (AUN) is significant and strategic because it is the only development university in the region and connects humanitarian services with education.

AUN, formerly ABTI University, was founded in Yola, Adamawa State, in 2004 and started full-fledged in 2005 (AUN website). Yola is located in Northeast Nigeria, which has been the hotbed of Boko Haram terrorism since 2009. The emergence of Boko Haram poses a tremendous challenge to development in the region. Incidentally, AUN’s mission as a development university is to foster holistic development in Nigeria, Africa, and globally. Hence, the Boko Haram conflicts undermine AUN's mission.

Conversely, since Boko Haram’s emergence, AUN has intensified its efforts at fostering numerous developments in the Northeast and globally. These developments are premised on different interventions that have served as shock absorbers for the region and align with AUN’s goal to serve as a university “which would focus on development issues” (AUN website). Our objective in this paper is to examine these interventions through an exploratory approach, which we believe can unfurl more conversations on AUN’s contributions to mitigating Boko Haram terrorism in Northeast Nigeria and illuminate development universities as model universities in the developing world for engendering peace and human capital development.

Mazi Ojiaku and Gene Ulasky (1972) trace the history of Nigerians’ preference for American education since the 1930s to its practicality, work-study system, and “far greater range of opportunities and superior graduate studies” (383). AUN offers parallel opportunities and, most importantly, prioritizes humanitarianism in the form of community service and other specific interventions. Community service is one of the pillars of AUN as a development university and is positioned as purveying interventions to mitigate Boko Haram's violent extremism. Compulsory community service, voluntary community service, and service-learning are the tripartite community service at AUN. The three forms engender humanitarianism and development of AUN’s host communities and region, the Northeast. According to Bronwen Everill and Josiah Kaplan, humanitarianism originated from eighteenth-century enlightenment ideas and entails sympathy for the suffering of the *Other*. They aver that humanitarian actions entail “economic, trade, and social interventions by a variety of actors focused on ‘development’” (3). Although they raise other pertinent issues on the controversies surrounding humanitarianism, this study focalizes their argument about humanitarian intervention as a source of development.

AUN, as a development university, partners with other development partners to provide humanitarian interventions in northeast Nigeria since the Boko Haram onslaught. While many studies have been conducted on the impact of Boko Haram in the northeast and Nigeria, there is a need to explore the contributions of AUN in mitigating the effects of Boko Haram in the region. The case of AUN as a model development university that intervenes during a violent disaster should be a case study for the essence of development universities in the developing world. It is expedient to explore AUN’s humanitarian interventions holistically, such as the Chibok Girls Education Initiative, which empowers girls abducted by Boko Haram (Dauda, 2024), the Feed and Read program, which provides nutritional support and literacy education to displaced children (Global Partnership for Education, 2020), the Waste to Wealth project, which promotes economic empowerment for women (RESWAYE, 2021), and the AUN Adamawa Peace Initiative (API), which fosters interfaith dialogue and community-wide cooperation (Udo-Udo et al., 2020). Exploring these interventions holistically will illuminate AUN’s strategic position in lessening the vile effects of Boko Haram terrorism in Northeast Nigeria.

## **2 Development Universities, Conflict Societies, Humanitarianism**

A development university is a higher education institution actively engaged in research, outreach, and community development initiatives to address societal challenges. A development university such as AUN occupies a strategic position in a conflict environment to foster community development. Although the precise origin of universities has been controversial, the first formal incarnation of a university has been traced to Peter Abelard’s intellectual activities at the University of Paris (Scoyoc, 1962). However, the idea of a university has different meanings in different societies. According to James Coleman (1986), citing Clark Kerr, there are three ideas of a university. The first is Cardinal Newman’s idea of a university that stresses teaching and a liberal education but excludes research and service. The second is Abraham

Flexner's idea of the modern university, the German model that stimulates advanced research but opposes community service. The last is the American idea of multiversity that promotes service to society. However, Coleman identifies the fourth variant as the development(al) university, which is practically concerned with proffering concrete solutions to societal problems for development. AUN combines the community service feature of the third model and Coleman's fourth variant. AUN's goals of providing community service and finding concrete solutions to society's problems to engender development position it as a development university that alleviates the Boko Haram crises in Northeast Nigeria.

Coleman traces the origin of developmental universities to three traditions. The land-grant movement of the mid-1860s in the United States dictated that universities should find solutions to and develop societies, representing the first tradition. The second is in the foundation law of Japan's first university, prioritizing development as the focus, while the Soviet model is the third. The last tradition perceives a university as alleviating social inequalities and socializing students to serve the state. In the three traditions, development is a keyword geared toward developing societies. In developing countries like Nigeria, development universities are a model that can subvert conflicts and entrench developments. USAID and other development organizations have sponsored aid programs to promote these development aspects of universities. However, many universities in developing countries prioritize teaching and research but neglect service to society. Coleman's argument signifies the cardinality of development universities in developing countries, especially in conflict zones.

Tristan McCowan (2019) also contends that the development university is the best model for developing African societies, especially for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which terrorist groups like Boko Haram undermine. McCowan reveals that the terminology may differ in different contexts ranging from civic university to utilitarian university; the ultimate aim is to merge service and development in universities. The features of the development(al) model of universities encompass "commitment to public service, its focus on the most marginalized in society, and its emphasis on application of knowledge and impact on non-academic communities" (McCowan, 93).

There are limited scholarly studies on the roles of development universities in conflict zones in developing countries. AUN implements the development-university ideas but has received limited studies as a model in the developing world. For example, McCowan examines the University for Development Studies in Ghana and the federal universities in Brazil. Eric Fredua-Kwarteng also focuses on Ghanaian universities as models. AUN's positionality in Northeast Nigeria makes it an institution that should be studied in apprehending development universities' roles in conflict zones in developing countries. This research aims to illuminate the link between AUN as a development university model and its humanitarian interventions in lessening the harrowing effects of Boko Haram terrorism in Northeast Nigeria and promote more scholarly research on these interventions.

### **3 AUN's Comprehensive Response to the Boko Haram Insurgency in Northeast Nigeria**

The Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria presents a complex challenge, intertwining socio-economic disparities, religious extremism, and the critical role of education in conflict and peacebuilding. This essay examines the multifaceted interventions of the American University of Nigeria (AUN), as a development university in a conflict zone, in mitigating the insurgency's impact and fostering long-term stability in the region. AUN's comprehensive approach, encompassing innovative educational initiatives, community engagement, and targeted development programs, contributes to a holistic framework for community resilience and sustainable development. This approach equally valorizes the significance of development universities as a model for subverting conflicts and engendering SDGs in developing countries.

### **4 The Paradox of Western Education and Boko Haram**

Boko Haram's emergence in the early 2000s was fueled by a complex interplay of factors, including poverty, corruption, and a rejection of Western education perceived as a symbol of colonialism and inequality (Kyari, 2011). This rejection manifested in violent attacks on educational institutions, further destabilizing the region. The tragic abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 epitomizes this assault on education, highlighting the vulnerability of students, especially girls, in the face of extremism. However, the challenges to education in Northeast Nigeria extend beyond security concerns. A pre-existing lack of access to quality education, coupled with language barriers and inadequate resources, created an environment where extremist ideologies could take root (National Education Data Survey, 2010).

AUN responded to these challenges with innovative programs like the Students Empowered through Language, Literacy, and Arithmetic (STELLAR) and the USAID-funded Technology Enhanced Learning for All (TELA). STELLAR focused on improving early primary education through after-school tutoring, bilingual reading materials, and technology

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integration. TELA expanded this approach using radio broadcasts, mobile classrooms, and community facilitators to reach a wider audience, including displaced children. These initiatives highlight the power of community-based, contextually relevant education in conflict zones. By addressing the specific needs of affected communities, AUN demonstrated that education can be a powerful tool for resilience, peacebuilding, and development (AUN, 2012).

## **5 American University of Nigeria Atiku Institute for Development (AUNAID): A Catalyst for Peacebuilding and Development**

AUNAID, AUN's development arm, has been instrumental in addressing insurgency's long-term social and economic consequences. Recognizing the interconnectedness of education, health, and economic empowerment in peacebuilding, AUNAID has implemented various programs designed to rebuild communities and foster sustainable development. These programs are organized in partnership with different local and international development organizations. Collaborations with humanitarian organizations enhance community resilience and promote social cohesion.

AUNAID stimulates peacebuilding and reintegration programs. AUNAID's peacebuilding initiatives focus on restoring stability, reintegrating displaced persons (IDPs), and addressing the root causes of conflict (Usman et al., 2024). Vocational training programs provide IDPs and former insurgents with essential skills for economic reintegration, reducing the likelihood of a return to violence. A veritable example is AUNAID's Waste to Wealth. The Waste to Wealth program empowers women by providing recycling and waste management training. This initiative enables women to generate income while promoting environmental sustainability (RESWAYE, 2021). The program fosters social cohesion and contributes to community development by addressing economic and environmental challenges.

AUNAID also fosters health interventions. Recognizing the link between health and peacebuilding, AUNAID has implemented health interventions in IDP camps. The oral hygiene initiative at Malkohi IDP Camp, a collaboration with WHO and local healthcare providers, addressed immediate health needs and promoted long-term well-being through hygiene education (Tyndall & Inyang, 2019). By improving the health of IDPs, AUNAID contributes to their reintegration and the overall peacebuilding process.

Educational Initiatives is another AUNAID's humanitarian effort. AUNAID's educational programs have been remarkably successful in addressing the specific needs of children and youth affected by the insurgency. The Chibok Education Initiative, for instance, has empowered girls abducted by Boko Haram with psychosocial support, vocational training, and access to higher education (Dauda, 2024). The Feed and Read Program combines literacy education with nutritional support for displaced children. TELA, which leverages technology to educate out-of-school children and vulnerable populations, has also shown promising results. As Udo-Udo Jacob and Ensign (2020) argue, utilizing radio for instruction, especially in conflict zones, allows flexibility and adaptability, ensuring educational continuity despite disruptions. TELA exemplifies this approach, demonstrating the transformative power of education in fostering resilience, empowering individuals, and promoting long-term stability.

## **6 Community Engagement and the Adamawa Peace Initiative**

AUN's commitment to peacebuilding extends beyond its campus and into the heart of the community through the Adamawa Peace Initiative (API). Formed in 2012 in response to the growing threat of Boko Haram, the API brings together Muslim and Christian leaders, community members, and AUN representatives to address the root causes of conflict and promote peace through education and dialogue (Udo-Udo et al., 2020). The API's work is guided by several fundamental principles: youth engagement, education as a foundation for society, the centrality of women in development, and the potential for religion to be an instrument of peace.

Through initiatives like "The Peacemakers" television show, Peace through Sports, ICT training for vulnerable youth, and support for the Chibok girls, the API actively promotes peace and counters extremist narratives. By facilitating community-wide cooperation and providing platforms for dialogue, the API fosters resilience and demonstrates the power of collective action in building a more peaceful future (Udo-Udo et al., 2020).

## **7 AUN's Commitment to Research and Knowledge Exchange**

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AUN is committed to fostering interdisciplinary research and knowledge exchange to address the complex challenges of conflict and peacebuilding. The American University of Nigeria International Conference (AUNIC2024), themed "Uniting Research Efforts: Combating Security Issues in the North-East of Nigeria," brought together researchers from various fields to generate insights and identify practical interventions for promoting peace and stability (American University of Nigeria, 2024). This conference aims to produce scholarly insights that will further mitigate the effects of Boko Haram.

## **8 Conclusion**

AUN's comprehensive response to the Boko Haram insurgency is a testament to the transformative power of education, community engagement, and multifaceted interventions in fostering peace and sustainable development in conflict-affected regions. By addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable populations and contributing to long-term community resilience, AUN plays a vital role in rebuilding Northeast Nigeria and creating a more stable and prosperous future for the region. The plight of the Chibok girls serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of this work and the need to protect education from the forces of extremism. This inspiring work underscores the importance of continued investment in these initiatives and ongoing research and collaboration to ensure lasting peace.

This research also underscores the significance of development universities as a university model for ameliorating development issues in developing countries. By deploying AUN as a case study, this paper contends that universities in conflict zones must combine developmental policies and humanitarian practices to undermine conflict and its devastating effects. Significantly, universities' adoption of development and community service policies will foster achieving SDGs in developing countries.

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