

The Nigeria - Plateau State Peace Dialogue Project

A Project of the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) Rome, Italy

December 6-15, 2010

Held in Abuja, Nigeria

Introduction:

In December 2010, the first phase of the Nigeria-Plateau State Peace Dialogue Project developed and supported by the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) located in Rome, Italy was initiated. Three separate peace dialogues were facilitated by Dr. Eileen Borris between Moslem and Christian women, men and youth held at the Rockview Hotel in Abuja, Nigeria. Although there were anxieties in the beginning of each group coming together, a greater understanding developed between members of all three groups. Below is a description of the three phases of the project which also includes the development of forgiveness workshops and constitutional reform.

Background:

Nigeria is the largest country in the world with an evenly split population of Christians and Muslims.¹ Since colonial times, Nigeria has been divided between a Muslim north and a Christian south. This division became more important after the country's independence in 1960 and with the astronomical growth of both faiths.

In the last decade, there has been a catastrophic explosion of violent religious conflicts in Nigeria contrary to expectations that the inauguration of democratic governance will usher in stability, mutual co-existence and religious tolerance. Between 1990 and 2010 more than 50,000 lives have been lost and property worth millions of dollars destroyed in religious conflict in Nigeria. The most recent crises that erupted in Jos Plateau State Nigeria in January and March 2010 and sporadic incidents in April 2010 claimed over 1000 lives comprised predominantly of women and children. This latest and other incessant crisis with its human and material loss has placed on the agenda of international development practitioners the dangerous slippery slope of religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Program Objective: The goal of this project is to contribute to promoting forgiveness, reconciliation and harmonious co-existence amongst religious and tribal groups in Nigeria.

¹ Research by Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life

Program Activities:

Component 1: Facilitation of Peace Dialogues - Held December 2010

Three separate peace dialogues were conducted involving women, men and youth. It was explained that facilitating a peace dialogue was very different than holding a debate. The first session for each group engaged the participants to look jointly at the characteristics of moral imagination and included the concepts of organic interdependence, dynamic curiosity, artistic creativity and risk taking. People were urged to reflect on these qualities as well as what it meant to be a visionary peacemaker committed to resolving their own conflicts. Participants reflected on "conflicts"; engaged in active listening and clear speaking. Using the Native American concept of 'Talking Stick' participants were guided through a structured dialogue after allowing them to draft "ground rules" and appreciating the dangers of stereotyping. A documentary produced by the Interfaith Mediation Centre produced by two Nigerians, Pastor James and Imam Ashafa was shown as a stimulus for the dialogues to follow. In the course of all three dialogues participants opted for reconciliation and forgiveness as their way forward.

Component 2: Forgiveness/Reconciliation - To be held 2011

The Forgiveness/Reconciliation Component focuses on the healing of wounds of conflict, gaining a clearer understanding of forgiveness and understanding the ingredients in fostering reconciliation. The premise behind the program is that if we do not heal from our psychological wounds, victims have a higher likelihood of becoming perpetrators of crime down the road. Therefore the first part of the program supports people in their healing process by giving them the opportunity to tell their stories and begin a healing process. They will learn how to work with their difficult emotions and to see their situation in a different perspective which can give them more meaning as to what has happened and gain more peace of mind.

The forgiveness program has three components, (1) a healing component whereby people would have the opportunity to share their stories in a healing capacity and engage in a forgiveness process, (2) an educational component which will include explanations from a psychological, biological and spiritual perspective to help people gain a greater understanding of what is meant by forgiveness and would be designed according to the specific culture, and (3) a reconciliation component where reconciliation projects would be developed to help rebuild society including grass-roots initiatives to reduce the likelihood of community-based political violence. This will be done through the work of dialogue and scenario development.

The outcome of this component is to aid in the healing of emotional wounds due to conflict in Nigeria and in helping to rebuild society. Participants will understand the importance of the healing process especially in preventing further violence from taking place. They will learn that it is they who will benefit from learning how to forgive and that the power of forgiveness is what can change their lives, giving back to them what is important in life. Participants will be able to move through their personal process of forgiveness towards group processes of reconciliation

and learn how to develop reconciliation projects within their own society giving them peacebuilding skills within their communities and their nation.

Component 3: Legal Framework - To be held 2011

With early evidence that the root of much identified religious disputes in Nigeria is traceable to inter-related citizenship questions, this project will research and produce background documents on the citizenship question in Nigeria and generate answers to the question of who is a “settler”? Who is an “indigene”? Which Nigerian is a “settler” and which Nigerian is an “indigene”? When does a “settler” become an “indigene”? To what extent does the existing legal framework promote inter-religious co-existence amongst Nigerians? This component will also conduct advocacy sessions on federal and state legislators on the need for an adequate constitutional and legislative response to the religious crises in Nigeria.

Phase one of this project is now completed. Although peace was not achieved in the Plateau region, the participants of all three peace dialogues learned a lot. The stakeholders are committed to work together to move a peace process forward. They felt that it was their duty to ensure that what was accomplished during the time of the peace dialogues does not go to waste. Their hearts were touched and they vowed to continue to inspire one another. Each group declared the following:

1. Having suffered loss of lives, properties and displacement; and some of them having been made widows, the women resolved to love, help and support one another; continue to live in peace with one another and ensure that peace returns; continue the interfaith peace process amongst themselves.
2. Having extensively discussed the conflicts and crises in Jos and Plateau State, the men resolved to:
 - 1) Work in harmony, love, mutual trust and understanding;
 - 2) Promote peace and peaceful coexistence among themselves, their communities and among various faiths;
 - 3) Form a group where they shall be meeting regularly to develop policies, action plans and to network within themselves and all parties and groups;
 - 4) Promote mutual confidence, love and peace irrespective of their backgrounds, faith, and interests.
3. Having critically observed that in past crises, youths have been the most vulnerable, and the fact that their future, and indeed the future of the nation is at stake, resolved to:
 - 1) Forgive, love and support one another;
 - 2) Continue to live in peace with one another and ensure that sustainable peace;
 - 3) Continue promoting interfaith peace process in Plateau State and Nigeria;

- 4) Work in harmony, love, mutual trust and understanding as a team, networking with one another and relevant stakeholders, meeting periodically to deliberate and proffer solutions on the way forward;
- 5) Carry out series of activities that will uphold peace, mutual respect and understanding towards achieving significant development.

Each group called on IDLO, the Government and other stakeholders to support their course and agreed to meet in Jos within one week at different venues, dates, and times.