

Safeguarding the Lives of Children Affected by Boko Haram: Application of the SAFE Model of Child Protection to a Rights-Based Situation Analysis

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria is responsible for the highest number of lives lost in Africa in the past decade. The country has witnessed significant violations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Nigeria has signed and ratified. For instance, Nigeria had the second-highest number of children recruited to armed groups and the third-highest number of abductions in 2018. Current humanitarian efforts primarily target camps for internally displaced persons, while state strategies focus mainly on addressing security through combatant-targeted interventions. However, there is a need for more rights-based, integrated, and multifaceted approaches to tackle the interrelated threats to the security of children and their families affected by the conflict. This paper uses the SAFE model of child protection—which examines the interrelatedness of safety, access, family, and education and economic security—to analyze the challenges of children and youth affected by the conflict. We highlight the need for a gendered approach; strategies that address poverty and cultural and governance barriers; and interdisciplinary, context-specific, and autonomous child protection systems. The paper calls for urgent and increased attention to the core rights and human security needs of these children to avoid a replay of negative outcomes of conflict, where the costs and consequences propagate a cycle of violence and disadvantage.

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Introduction

Compared with other nations, Nigeria has the world's fifth-highest death toll due to armed conflict, primarily from the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency, with casualties exceeding those of past major incidents in Africa (namely Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo).¹ Over 2.4 million people have been displaced in Nigeria's affected regions.² Externalities from the conflict include food insecurity, disease outbreaks, forced migration, loss of business, and loss of infrastructure. In particular, the ongoing situation with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, which inflicts harm on civilians and renders women and children especially vulnerable, calls for a human security strategy to ensure safety and promote well-being while the active conflict awaits resolution. Humanitarian efforts focus primarily on internally displaced persons, and state-led interventions address security concerns through combatant-targeted strategies, to the neglect of the human rights of the broader civilian population.³ There is a need for more rights-based, comprehensive strategies targeting interrelated threats to the security of affected children in particular.

Over the last decade, the number of children living in conflict zones worldwide has increased by 74%, to over one billion.⁴ In 2018, Nigeria had the second-highest number of children (1,947; 1,596 boys and 351 girls) recruited for roles in the conflict.⁵ Nigeria also recorded the third-highest number of abductions in 2018.⁶ By 2017, Boko Haram had recruited approximately 8,000 children.⁷ Multiple instances of grave violations against children have been reported, including death, maiming, rape, other sexual violence, detention, and attacks on schools and hospitals.⁸ Further, while many children are harmed by Boko Haram, others have been detained by the country's security forces due to their parents' association with Boko Haram.⁹

Not surprisingly, nonstate actors often do not comply with the minimum standards stipulated for the protection of children in humanitarian settings. Further, there is a low level of coordinated response in general to ensure the protection of these children.¹⁰ Nigeria, as with many conflict-affected

countries, suffers from a disjointed and weak child protection structure and a dearth of evidence-based interventions, begging for systems that are responsive to the human rights threats facing children in the country.

The SAFE model of child protection is a human rights- and human security-based framework that examines the interrelatedness of safety, access, family, and education and economic security to understand individuals through a holistic, resilience-focused, person-in-environment lens. This paper uses the SAFE framework to analyze the risk and resilience factors contributing to youth involvement in the Nigerian conflict, as well as the gendered dynamics of those factors. Our analysis highlights how young people are particularly vulnerable to rights violations by various actors within the conflict. As applied, the model also identifies areas for state and humanitarian actors to brainstorm harm reduction approaches or approaches that appeal to these youth and their needs while reducing subsequent vulnerability. The analysis that follows suggests an urgent call to attend to the core rights and human security needs of these children in order to avoid perpetuating disadvantage and propagating cycles of violence. We conclude the paper with some suggestions for gender-specific community-based interventions and more macro-level countrywide infrastructure implementation.

Human security and child protection

The past few decades have seen a shift in the conceptualization and implementation of security and child protection toward a more holistic, person-centered approach that recognizes the interrelated nature of child rights and the individual, relational, communal, and structural societal systems required to actualize them. With the evolution of international conflict, significant vulnerabilities have been identified in the traditional approach to ensuring the security and protection of children. The field requires adaptation to meet the emerging understanding of contributing factors to peace, security, and child well-being.

Historically, the traditional framework of security in the face of external threats relied on states for the protection of their population. However, given that over 90% of current conflicts worldwide are internal as opposed to between states, this framework has become less relevant.¹¹ In addition, the assumption that the state can bear the responsibility of protecting its population is flawed when states suffer instability, may be the perpetrators of violence themselves, or may be ignorant or contemptuous of international humanitarian law. Even in the most stable of states, attempts to address the needs and rights of vulnerable populations are often disjointed and isolated.¹²

To accommodate these gaps, in the 1990s the United Nations Development Programme developed a *human* security framework, which shifted to a more people-centered focus and defined two main aspects of security: “safety from chronic threats” and “protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life.”¹³ The human security perspective creates space for this evolving context of conflict, as well as for a more nuanced analysis of how the dynamics of conflict impact specific populations. In addition, the human security approach emphasizes proactive strategies, including conflict prevention and peace building, as opposed to relying mainly on humanitarian response.¹⁴

Within the child protection framework, there is lingering evidence of the more traditional approach to security and some progress toward integrating a more human-security lens. The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action enumerates the minimum standards for child protection in conflict, describing child protection as the “prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children.”¹⁵ Child protection efforts face challenges in the best of settings, and those challenges are further compounded in conflict.¹⁶ Too often, child protection program implementation is top-down in approach and overlooks community strengths and potential.¹⁷ Child protection responses can quickly assume colonial undertones and may propagate label-driven approaches targeted at vulnerable children such

as orphans, survivors of sex trafficking, or child soldiers.¹⁸ Such approaches miss opportunities to invest in long-term systems strengthening and solutions grounded in the autonomy and agency of those most impacted. Furthermore, they often develop siloed interventions that overlook the larger current and historical contributing factors. In humanitarian settings, limited resources and high levels of complex insecurity only compound these challenges.

To address gaps in the human security-based approach to child protection, the UNICEF Child Protection Strategic Plan initiated a shift from a prevention and response framework to a “survive and thrive” framework.¹⁹ Grounded in the right of self-determination and the right to participation codified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), respectively, this framework focuses on those who are most impacted and has the potential to tap into local problem solving.²⁰ The “survive and thrive” approach also more fully integrates an ecosystems model, where the individual is understood as being influenced and impacted by their ecological system on three primary levels: micro (for example, family and interpersonal relationships), mezzo (for example, group relationships such as school or religious communities), and macro (for example, attitudes and beliefs implicitly held in the wider culture and structural or governmental systems). This holistic view of the intersections between human security and child protection is required for sustainable structural change that can support conflict-affected young people.

While the integrated and ecologically informed approaches to human security and child protection have significant support at a theoretical level, it is still challenging to implement these practices in conflict settings. The SAFE model serves as a concrete tool to help integrate a holistic, strengths-focused, ecosystems lens of human security into a child protection analysis.

SAFE model

The SAFE model of child protection draws from

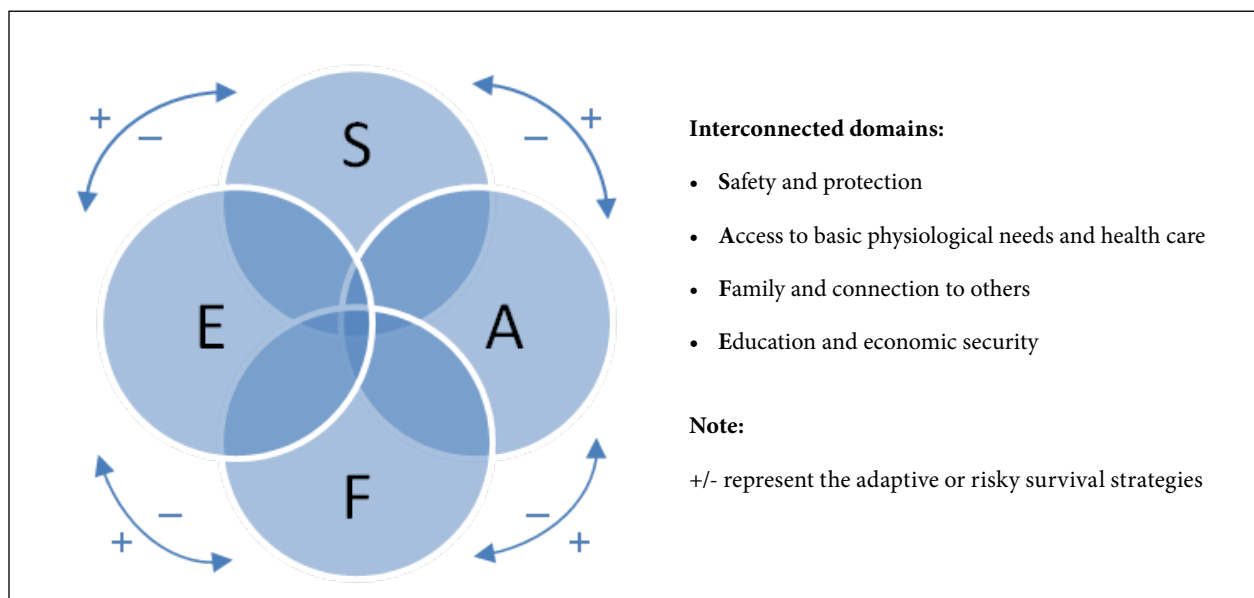
both human security and human rights frameworks to foster a more person- and rights-centered analysis for children affected by conflict.²¹ The CRC recognizes “the need to extend particular care to the child.”²² Guided by the principles of nondiscrimination, the best interests of the child, survival and development, and participation and inclusion, the CRC enumerates 52 articles protecting the social, political, cultural, and economic rights of children.²³ Signatories have a responsibility to protect children’s rights, including the right to life, survival, and development (art. 6), the right to an adequate standard of living (art. 27), the right to health care (art. 24), the protection of the family unit (art. 9), and the right to education (art. 28).²⁴ The person-centered and interdisciplinary SAFE model integrates these rights into its four core domains. The model recognizes the interdependency of human security, human rights, public health, and mental health in its focus on the individual and community experience within conflict situations.²⁵ The framework acknowledges survival strategies that youth and families employ in response to security threats and helps contextualize the way the ecosystem supports or detracts from stability in these domains. Such analysis can help advance a strengths-based approach, wherein risky survival

strategies are identified as opportunities for more adaptive and positive manifestations of agency to promote more resilient outcomes for individuals and families.²⁶

The SAFE model argues that children’s security should be considered in the context of and in relation to other core dimensions of rights and well-being by examining the interplay between four core domains of children’s lives: safety and freedom from harm; access to basic physiological needs and health care (including mental health); family and connection to others; and education and economic security (Figure 1).²⁷ In line with the CRC, the SAFE model examines the evolving capacities of the child, underscoring the importance of the family when the child is young and transitioning toward an emphasis on the child’s capacities as they mature. The SAFE model highlights the interdependency of the system, as strength in any one domain can buffer insecurity in others. The model also posits that insecurity in any core dimension necessitates the adoption of survival strategies that may take adaptive and more dangerous forms and have cascading effects on other dimensions of children’s lives.

The holistic nature of the model helps contextualize the individual in their environment and validate the survival strategies that children and

FIGURE 1. SAFE model



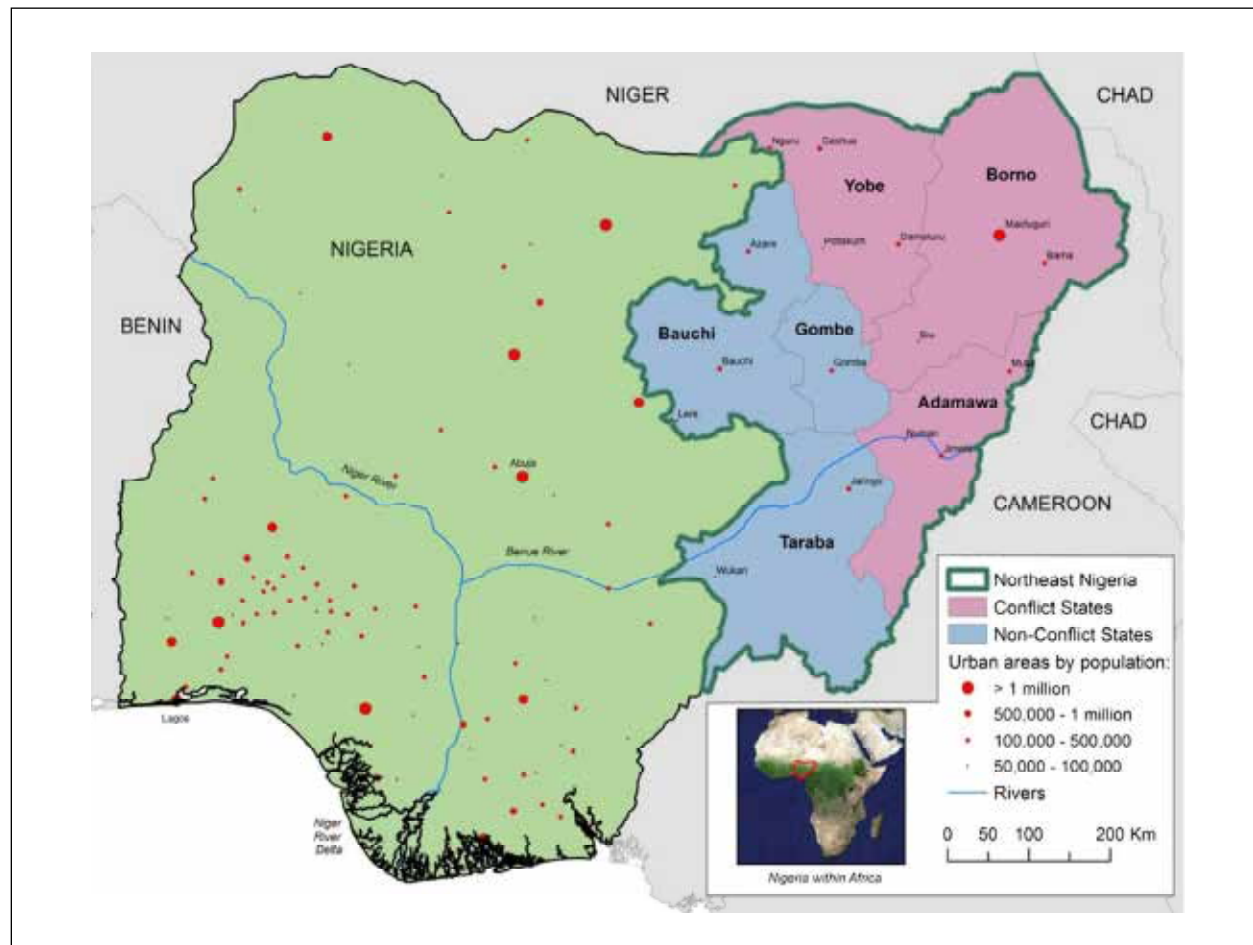
families adopt to meet their needs. Unlike a purely medical model of aid to families, the SAFE model appeals to psychosocial well-being by highlighting the importance of relationships, attachment, and connection to a larger community. The SAFE framework helps affected individuals and humanitarian workers conceptualize individuals facing adversity in the context of their dynamic, multifaceted environment. It focuses on the capacities and resources within the ecosystem to highlight solutions to challenges and to serve as a platform for more sustainable, community-centered responses. In recognizing agency within constrained choices, SAFE refocuses analysis away from “problem” individuals and instead looks at how systems can better protect rights and meet needs as afforded by international human rights law.

Northeast Nigeria and the Boko Haram conflict

The conflict in northeast Nigeria has resulted in ongoing violence, displacement, death, and hardship for over a decade.²⁸ While most of northern Nigeria has experienced bombing attacks, three states in the northeast border area—Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (collectively known as the BAY states)—have been the most impacted by the conflict (Figure 2).²⁹ Increased violent disruptions resulted in a declaration of a state of emergency in the BAY states in 2009.³⁰ While government forces work to contain the power and violence of Boko Haram, the group continues to regularly target civilians and humanitarian assets, including as recently as April 2021.³¹

Since the militarization of Boko Haram

FIGURE 2. Conflict-affected areas in Nigeria



Source: G. Dunn, “The impact of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria on childhood wasting: A double-difference study,” *Conflict and Health* 13 (2018)

around 2009, over 35,000 individuals have been killed, with civilians making up nearly half of the death toll.³² Between 2009 and 2014, Boko Haram was associated with 42% of deaths from the violence in Nigeria.³³ Violence ramped up in 2011 with the bombing of the United Nations compound in Abuja, and peaked in 2014–2015, with over 20,000 Boko Haram-related deaths.³⁴ In addition, over 2.4 million people in the region have been displaced.³⁵

Applying the SAFE model to the impact of the Boko Haram conflict on children

A SAFE model analysis helps identify risk and resilience factors within the ecosystem to reinforce organic community interventions that strengthen the well-being of children and highlight opportunities for external intervention. The SAFE model assists in unpacking the choices of youth who engage with Boko Haram and in exploring harm reduction interventions. While affiliation with Boko Haram present risks to the youth, the association may also be a survival strategy to meet basic needs, including stability and protection amid the conflict.³⁶

This analysis demonstrates how the four basic dimensions of the SAFE model are undermined by

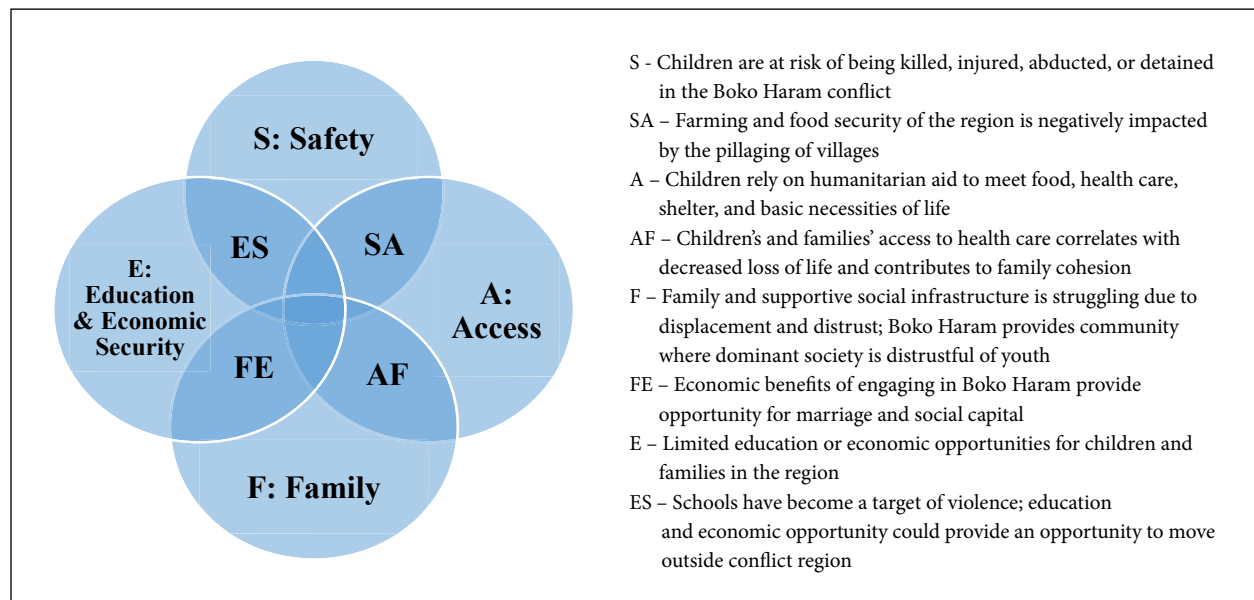
the conflict and may serve as push factors to joining Boko Haram. The examples and evidence that follow highlight the interdependence of the domains of the SAFE model, the cascading the interrelated sequelae of child outcomes in the face of conflict, and the gendered sources of risk and resilience (Figure 3). The analysis demonstrates a need for targeted systems-based approaches to strengthen prevention and protection initiatives.

Dimension 1: Safety, protection, and freedom from harm

Safety from violence-related injury and death.

Within northeast Nigeria, there have been widespread safety and protection concerns from the near-constant violence that affects the daily lives of individuals.³⁷ Resolution 1261 of the United Nations Security Council identifies six grave violations against children in conflict zones: killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction and forced displacement, recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, targeting of schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.³⁸ Recent reports verified 5,741 grave violations against children in northeast Nigeria between January 2017 and December 2019.³⁹ The majority of these violations (3,170) were perpetrated by Boko Haram, with the

FIGURE 3. The SAFE model of threats to child protection in the Boko Haram conflict.



remainder attributed to state or state-backed forces.⁴⁰ Boko Haram has deliberately engaged in these grave violations through the intentional targeting of youth and consistent attacks on schools.⁴¹ In 2017 alone, Boko Haram used 146 children, mainly girls, as human bombs.⁴² In a context of pervasive violence, youth may join Boko Haram for the protection the group may offer.

Safety from abduction and recruitment. Due to the prevalence of child recruitment by Boko Haram, youth in northeast Nigeria are particularly vulnerable to the dual challenges of being targets for recruitment and stigmatized by their community for suspected affiliation with the armed group.⁴³ The CRC identifies the importance of family to children's well-being and development and the need to protect children from separation from their parents except in cases of abuse or neglect.⁴⁴ Armed groups' use and recruitment of children act as a twofold weapons, exacting violence on the youth themselves and on the community ethos by threatening family and community stability. Subsequently, unknown youth are viewed as suspicious by the community and state forces, reinforcing their isolation and vulnerability for recruitment.⁴⁵ While some youth make the strategic choice to join Boko Haram, many are kidnapped and forcibly conscripted. A kidnapped young woman refused a marriage to a member of Boko Haram and was flogged 100 times as a punishment.⁴⁶ She acquiesced to a later proposal to become a suicide bomber and was subsequently rewarded with regular food and better living conditions.⁴⁷ While this example highlights the complexities of agency and choice when engaging with Boko Haram, it also illustrates how the realms of safety and access are inseparable in these conflict situations. While engaging with the group does increase the risk of exposure to violence, it also can decrease the risk of imminent death. When youth engage and identify with Boko Haram, the group offers temporary security that the government has failed to assure. In addition, while this choice may place them in the line of further peril, the temporary security becomes a basis for connection.

Safety from the mental health consequences of witnessing or perpetrating violence. In armed conflict settings, experiencing, witnessing, or being forced to commit acts of violence has long-term debilitating effects on the mental and overall well-being and development of children.⁴⁸ International human rights and humanitarian law codify the protection of children from witnessing, experiencing, and being used as actors in violent conflict through numerous provisions, including article 19 of the CRC, which protects children from "all forms of physical or mental violence."⁴⁹ Applying concepts from social disorganization theory helps contextualize joining Boko Haram as a natural response to unmet social needs.⁵⁰ Often applied to gang involvement in the United States, the theory posits that where youth are excluded from conventional socialization opportunities, their natural response is to form peer groups with "antisocial" (not in alignment with the dominant social acceptance) tendencies.⁵¹ In this context, affected youth retain few conventional social opportunities due to disruptions to infrastructure and the latent suspicion of youth mentioned above. Furthermore, for adolescent youth, peers are the primary socialization force, so membership in Boko Haram proffers social opportunities, group identity, and belonging. Youth often report that gang membership fills some unmet needs, such as protection, money, and companionship.⁵² Membership in Boko Haram may also provide a buffer, albeit temporary, to the impact of violence through the socialization and normalization of its witness and perpetration. Furthermore, a common coping mechanism with severe childhood abuse and trauma is the perpetuation of violence and abuse onto others.⁵³ While membership may increase exposure to violence, the sense of belonging that membership affords may be incentive enough, particularly in a context of pervasive violence.

Dimension 2: Access to health care and basic physiological needs for youth in northeast Nigeria

Shelter and housing. Shelter is a basic right and need that is integral to children's feelings of safe-

ty and their capacity to thrive psychosocially.⁵⁴ In spite of over 10 years of humanitarian aid in northeast Nigeria, an estimated two million children still need shelter in the region.⁵⁵ The guerrilla tactics utilized in this conflict—which include the virtual destruction and occupation of captured villages—disproportionately impact civilians. In one three-day attack in 2015, satellite imagery showed that Boko Haram burned 57% of a village and its structures.⁵⁶ Using arson in this way, Boko Haram has destroyed shelters and cut off food, water, and power supplies, shifting the burden to humanitarian aid to fulfill these needs. In 2018, a weekly average of 4,500 individuals, primarily women and children, arrived at overcrowded and under-resourced camps.⁵⁷

For adolescent girls, the situation has gendered implications. While Boko Haram is sometimes dismissed as discriminatory against women, young women report various benefits to marriage within Boko Haram, including greater levels of safety, security, and independence than those found in normative culture.⁵⁸ For example, a young wife in Boko Haram relished “all the things he had gotten me for our house. A big family size bed, a chair, cupboard and utensils, clothes.”⁵⁹ Young and adolescent girls who have married combatants have also attested to enjoying increased financial stability and autonomy.⁶⁰ These extravagances may provide incentives to associate with the group, presenting a path for economic opportunity. In this way, Boko Haram capitalizes on the state’s failure to protect certain rights. Given that Boko Haram appears to offer some empowerment and agency to both sexes that is not as accessible in mainstream society, there is ripe opportunity for gendered harm reduction interventions.

Access to food and nourishment. Child protection is about ensuring the conditions necessary to promote healthy development, including access to food and water. Consistent access to such conditions enables the exploration of secondary psychosocial needs. In the conflict region, many youth struggle to meet their nutritional needs, and Boko Haram is capitalizing on this food insecurity to ingratiate

youth and build dependency. Although estimates of food insecurity have improved in the BAY states in recent years—from 3.7 million people in need in November 2017 to 2.7 million in August 2019—many are still dependent on humanitarian assistance for their food and cooking fuel needs.⁶¹ In October 2019, UNICEF treated over 10,000 severely malnourished children and over 35,000 moderately malnourished children in northeast Nigeria.⁶² The true extent of the problem is likely greater, as this count includes only those resilient enough to travel to outpatient programs. Due to security risks, health professionals face significant challenges accessing the fragile areas, where more than 823,000 individuals are estimated to experience extremely high levels of nutritional and health needs.⁶³ Boko Haram appeals to these survival needs to recruit children and youth. For example, while in initial recruitment, a child may have limited food; but once they adopt the group’s ideology, they begin receiving regular meals, as well as meat stew on Fridays.⁶⁴ Recognizing how Boko Haram exploits the nutritional needs of youth presents an opportunity for interventions focusing on safer ways to meet these needs.

Access to health care and vulnerability to disease. Densely populated areas such as camps for internally displaced persons are plagued by limited access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure. Overcrowding and other conditions lead to increased risk of waterborne diseases, as evidenced by the 2018 cholera outbreak in the BAY states.⁶⁵ A 2021 *Humanitarian Needs Overview* estimates that 5.8 million people need health care in the BAY states.⁶⁶ While the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the rights of all people to attain necessary medical services and attention when sick, access to health care in the BAY states has decreased significantly due to insecurity and violence.⁶⁷ Boko Haram and other nonstate armed groups explicitly target health care infrastructure.⁶⁸ In March 2021, 35.4% of the health facilities in the BAY states were damaged, nonfunctional, or only partially functional.⁶⁹ There were 10 verified attacks on hospitals in 2018.⁷⁰ Despite the

substantial efforts of the Nigerian government and humanitarian assistance organizations, health and safety concerns abound. In March 2021, a group of female victims of sexual violence with immediate health needs were denied access to shelter and medical treatment at a registered camp for internally displaced persons due to capacity issues.⁷¹ While there is no evidence to suggest that membership in Boko Haram buffers the insecurity of access to health care, there also is no evidence to suggest that membership diminishes access to care or presents an increased risk of vulnerability to disease.

Dimension 3: Family and connection to others

Loss of connection. A significant factor in the well-being of children is the support of the proximal family unit. The right to family is enumerated throughout human rights law, including in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which recognizes “family as the natural and fundamental group.”⁷² The CRC further stipulates that children should not be removed from their parents except in cases of abuse.⁷³ Of the over 6,000 children in the Child Protection in Emergencies program within the BAY states, 92% were separated from their families as a result of the conflict.⁷⁴ Overall, there are over 32,000 unaccompanied and at-risk youth in the BAY region.⁷⁵ These numbers underscore the ethos of impermanence challenging children’s ability to foster secure attachments and meaningful community relationships.⁷⁶

Damage to the buffering ecology of proximal care. In ongoing conflict, the existence of positive family and community supports is an integral part young people’s management of impending threats. While many families may foster resiliency in the face of a conflict, a multitude of factors may contribute to a breakdown in familial support. With ongoing insecurity in the SAFE domains, there is a high likelihood that caregivers are experiencing additional stress. Children living with their parents are likely to be impacted by an increase in their parents’ conflict-related stress.⁷⁷ Parental stress may serve as a protective or risk factor, depending on how children experience that stress. An overpro-

TECTIVE parent, for example, may provide a buffer and less opportunity to engage with Boko Haram. However, by the same logic, an overprotective parent may also limit other pro-social peer relationships that could serve as protective factors.

Breakdown of community trust, connection, and efficacy. Reports indicate that communities in northeast Nigeria have defaulted to a state of distrust and fear. One civilian speaking with the Center for Civilians in Conflict stated:

*No one knows for sure who the enemy is. Boko Haram will attack the people, and leave. Then the military will come, and also arrest people. When the people try to cooperate with the military, Boko Haram will attack them again. Now the military thinks [some] civilians are Boko Haram. Civilians think some military are Boko Haram ... We really don't know who the enemy is now.*⁷⁸

In this state of distrust, youth are perceived as particularly suspect since Boko Haram uses young people for peer recruitment and as human bombs.⁷⁹ In 2018, state forces detained 418 youth due to their parents’ alleged association with Boko Haram, and the majority of these youth were in detention for over two years.⁸⁰ While Boko Haram is violating the right to freedom from exploitation, recruitment, and conscription afforded in the CRC, the local government is also violating the rights of these youth through policing and unlawful detention.⁸¹ Detaining youth can cause further harm to their socialization, development, and growth in ways that impact their ability to thrive later in life. The limited social opportunities available to youth in the region may elevate the appeal of Boko Haram, as the youth may be resigned to not being socially accepted elsewhere.⁸² The context of distrust, fear, and impermanence present challenges to young people’s ability to foster strong pro-social peer connections that are integral to identity development.

An alternative community in Boko Haram?

Engaging in Boko Haram can provide youth with a comparatively stable sense of community, since membership in armed groups can be perceived as

a protective buffer against the threat of violence.⁸³ As mentioned in earlier, social disorganization theory helps contextualize adolescents' choice to engage in illicit group activity as a natural response to the combination of systematic exclusion from more traditional community systems and the developmentally appropriate shift to peers as the defining factor for one's self-concept.⁸⁴ For boys in particular, Boko Haram may provide opportunities for the social capital, power, family, and community needed to fulfill the patriarchal expectations that are difficult to attain in the current civilian infrastructure.⁸⁵ Boko Haram is a semistructured organization that offers identity as a "soldier," as well as structured upward mobility with opportunities to become a "commander." Often, children are targeted for recruitment precisely for their malleability and impressionability.⁸⁶ Boys are quick to adopt this new social identity and to self-categorize as "soldier" because of their re-socialization within the group.⁸⁷ With these identity development shifts, armed groups often manipulate the trauma of past and current violence to reinforce the in-group/out-group dynamic and solidify the sense of belonging and group identity.⁸⁸ While these factors likely contribute to the sense of community offered by Boko Haram, the group also addresses more tangible Nigerian cultural, financial, and social expectations to ingratiate the youth.⁸⁹

Dimension 4: Education and economic security for youth in northeast Nigeria

Education risks. There are several challenges facing youth in northeast Nigeria in the realm of education and economic security. An estimated 52% of school-aged youth in the region have never attended school.⁹⁰ As of 2021, the majority of schools in the BAY states have had some closure, with many still closed or reappropriated for other humanitarian needs.⁹¹ Without a school environment, youth do not have the same opportunities to develop peer socialization skills or the education skills that support future stability.

Schools have been targeted during this conflict, in violation of international humanitarian law. In 2018 alone, the United Nations documented

15 attacks on schools and hospitals, noting at least four schools that have been used for military purposes.⁹² Because of these attacks, kidnapping, and the general threat of violence, many schools in the region are closed.

As of March 2021, 60% of schools in Borno state remained closed, and an estimated 1.3 million individuals, 97% of whom are children, were in need of education-in-emergencies support.⁹³ The translation of the name Boko Haram, "Western education is a sin," is a guiding ethos of the group and challenges the overall concept of formalized education—and subsequently children's right to education in the region.

Family, economy, and education. The community faces ongoing challenges in evaluating the relative risk and protective factors that are associated with education in the region. Nigeria as a whole is challenged with low levels of primary education, with 36% of females and 27% of males in Nigeria having no education.⁹⁴ However, the urban-rural divide is significant, and northeast Nigeria has the country's lowest levels of education, with 57% of women and 47% of men reporting no primary education.⁹⁵ Further, according to a recent evaluation of education in the region, parents cite cost as the single most important barrier to enrolling or maintaining their children's education.⁹⁶ The connection between poverty and education highlights the utility of the ecosystem lens of SAFE. By understanding the familial and community experience, the SAFE model contextualizes decisions around children's education. While the child protection sector identifies education as a primary goal, the community may have historically prioritized more basic survival needs. The SAFE model analysis highlights this as an opportunity for interventions directed at the community to address the economic and educational perspective of caregivers.

With little infrastructure, near constant physical insecurity, and limited industry, there are few viable paths toward economic security for youth in northeast Nigeria. These economic challenges impact the other realms of SAFE—namely, access to security and family connection. Because of the

conflict, families have abandoned or lost access to their farms and livelihood and are dependent on humanitarian aid.⁹⁷ As noted by a young girl from Borno, "If the government gives food, then we get food."⁹⁸ Education, trade, agriculture, and fishing industries are all precarious due to the violence, leaving little opportunity within the regional infrastructure for skilled or nonskilled employment for youth or caregivers.⁹⁹

Boko Haram as provider. In the current economic drought, many young men struggle to obtain the dowry required for marriage. Boko Haram helps facilitate marriages for its members.¹⁰⁰ Young girls in Boko Haram also report that marriage affords them more favorable treatment and community status than dominant Nigerian society does, including having servants, receiving their dowry personally, and receiving care from their husbands.¹⁰¹ As wives in Boko Haram, some young women have power and authority unparalleled to life outside the group. One 14-year-old girl who was kidnapped and married off to a commander reflected, "After I became a commander's wife, I had freedom ... All the Boko Haram men used to respect me ... I felt like a queen in a palace."¹⁰² Living with Boko Haram seems to provide a kind of economic stability through attacking and pillaging from others. In late 2019, the group conducted repeated attacks on villages, looting livestock, money, and other valuables.¹⁰³ It would appear that Boko Haram's community has clear roles, expectations, and possibilities for the future that provide an appeal beyond existing culture.

The benefits that Boko Haram provides are most saliently identified in testimony from deradicalization groups. A humanitarian worker speaking about the young women in deradicalization programs noted, "They felt that they were a chosen group. They had lived in relative luxury in the forest ... and really felt that there was nothing we could offer them."¹⁰⁴ Indeed, rehabilitation programs struggle with recidivism, as youth released back to their communities generally return to a space with little opportunity, no money, and no livelihoods. Reintegration is especially difficult after experienc-

ing the contrast of status and power within Boko Haram.¹⁰⁵ While rehabilitation programs attempt to include employment and training, insecurity in the region continues to seed the larger systemic challenges that require a more coordinated state effort, including a breakdown in infrastructure and industry.

Conclusion

While the rights enumerated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the CRC are aspirational, the SAFE model uses those rights to provide a framework to highlight where there are opportunities to affirm the well-being of and reduce the risk to children in complex conflict environments. While much of this analysis has focused on the individual and community level, the conclusions range from a targeted identification of specific areas for gendered interventions to broad recommendations for systemic change at the government level in Nigeria.

Gendered analysis

The gender-specific application of the SAFE model clarifies how Boko Haram targets and appeals to young women differently than young men. Counter to the narrative that Boko Haram brutally victimizes girls, some girls point to the fact that Boko Haram gives them more agency than dominant society, especially in realms of family, community, and economic independence. Identifying this benefit to women's and girls' membership in Boko Haram provides an opportunity for developing harm reduction approaches that address these specific factors. Next steps may include engaging and supporting communities to learn more about how Boko Haram meets the needs of young women and how these needs can be addressed within the community of origin. While this analysis highlights points in the system for reinforcement, the entire framework is based on interventions rooted in the community and individual needs. Thus, it would be important to allow discovery to unfold within the community around the needs and interventions.

Multiple community perspectives are necessary, particularly from young women formerly involved with Boko Haram, their family members, and community leaders. Some initial questions might include the following: What are community beliefs around the reason young women join Boko Haram? Are increased agency and economic independence in fact pull factors for women, or perhaps simply secondary benefits? Would more agency or economic independence in their home community have shifted the choices of women who joined? Where would the community be open to giving women more agency or economic opportunity? For women who do not join Boko Haram, what are their thoughts and rationales?

Similarly, the perception of community and family that Boko Haram offers young men—in contrast to the systematic exclusion and distrust that pervades in dominant culture—provides another gender-specific opportunity for intervention. Not only does Boko Haram appeal to the peer socialization of male adolescence, but the group has also instituted long-term, structured social capital and economic security in its familial framework, again highlighting the interdependency of these realms. Similar to above, the first step would require community conversations with different parties to understand the dynamic ecosystem and the beliefs, values, and interests of different parties. Possible questions to ask the impacted community in developing an intervention might include the following: What would need to happen to decrease the ethos of suspicion around young men in the region? Are there spaces for adolescent boys to engage in pro-social activities in the community without suspicion? How are more pro-socially oriented adolescent boys spending their time? How are individuals, families, and communities supporting one another and maintaining community in spite of displacement and disruption?

Using the SAFE model to apply a gender-specific analysis is likely to foster additional insights like the ones above onto the gendered child protection needs of youth in conflict regions.

Macro level

Poverty, culture, and governance. The SAFE analysis makes clear that Boko Haram capitalizes on poverty and instability and perpetuates an environment of insecurity to exploit, recruit, and retain members. There are some specific pieces of this analysis, such as ways that Boko Haram appeals to young women through empowerment, that represent shifts from dominant local cultural norms. However, many of the push factors that attract youth to Boko Haram are perpetuated by the group itself, including the constant threat of violence, housing and food insecurity, distrust of youth among the community, and lack of economic infrastructure. The Nigerian government must work to institute a more dynamic approach to address the micro, mezzo, and macro forces contributing to the exploitation and abuse of children.

Child protection systems. Similarly, there is a need for well-resourced child protection systems throughout Nigeria that encompass “formal and informal structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children.”¹⁰⁶ Throughout the decade-long conflict, the affected community has relied heavily on international humanitarian aid, which, while valuable, is not sustainable in the long term. As this analysis highlights, the vulnerabilities that Boko Haram exploits in the ecosystems of youth are interrelated, rooted in cultural and historic challenges, and in need of an organized systems-level intervention to address. The government needs to develop national and local child protection systems that include culturally relevant interworking structures to address the SAFE realms of security, access to health care and physiological needs, family and connection, and education and economic security for all children.

Autonomy for interdisciplinary and context-specific protection systems. There is an urgent need for an overarching and unifying national child protection system. Recognizing that the ecology

of risks and protective factors facing youth varies throughout the country, this child protection system also demands that local branches have the freedom to address the specific local needs of the complex ecosystem. The local system would benefit from an interdisciplinary team of specialists, including community and religious leaders, health and mental health workers, law enforcement, legal scholars, logistical coordinators, and financial specialists. With government support and use of the SAFE model analysis, a team such as this could strategize a framework to deliver more holistic strengths-focused social service programs driven by evidence-based interventions and grounded in the ecology of the region and community. The youth-centered, community-grounded component is particularly important in a conflict setting that continues to systematically violate young people's rights. Using the SAFE model will prove a practical tool to center human security and children's rights in the dynamic landscape of the Boko Haram insurgency.

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