

Seven Steps to Saving Lives and Assisting People in Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin Statement by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

A violent eight-year conflict originating in Nigeria has intensified in the last four years and spread across borders into Niger, Chad and Cameroon, resulting in Africa's biggest humanitarian and protection crisis. Across the Lake Chad Basin, 17 million people¹ are affected by the conflict, and over 2.6 million – of which 1.5 million are children² – have fled their homes in search of safety and protection. Hunger and malnutrition remain at critical levels with 7.1 million people severely food insecure – 5.1 million of them in Nigeria alone.³ In Borno State in northeast Nigeria, at least 400,000 people could currently be experiencing famine-like conditions.⁴

Collectively governments, UN, NGOs and donors have been slow to acknowledge the scale of the crisis, shift gear from development to humanitarian mode to meet needs at scale, effectively mobilize resources, and gain access to those trapped by conflict. Military and political objectives in the fight against Boko Haram have trumped humanitarian concerns. However, a large humanitarian operation is now under way. The number of deaths and rates of acute malnutrition have been reduced in some areas where access has been possible in Nigeria, while in Niger the humanitarian response remains patchy, in Cameroon the food insecurity remains alarmingly high and Chad remains the forgotten crisis amidst a forgotten crisis.

On the 23rd and 24th of February 2017 the international community will convene in Oslo, Norway to discuss how to address the humanitarian crisis in North East Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. As concerned non-governmental organisations we highly welcome this initiative. The Oslo donor conference is a welcome chance to raise the profile of the crisis, address the urgent humanitarian needs, raise more money from a wider set of donors, and come up with a concrete set of recommendations and proposals to strengthen the collective response to the crisis and the long-term needs in the region. Below are seven steps needed to save more lives and assist people in Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin.

Step 1: Put Protection of Civilians at the Centre of Response

Prioritise the Protection of Civilians. Women, girls, men and boys have been subjected to horrific levels of human rights abuses and threats including sexual violence, abductions, killings, torture, forced recruitment, forced disappearance and arbitrary detention. Boko Haram continues to attack and abuse civilians, while soldiers, police, and government officials have allegedly used their positions of authority and gifts of desperately needed food or other items to sexually exploit and abuse vulnerable people, particularly women and girls. Separate incidents of rape have also been reported at the hands of security forces.⁵ Military interventions must uphold people's rights in accordance with international humanitarian law and should not exacerbate the humanitarian situation. Accountability measures must be put in place to prosecute those who harm civilians. A particular priority should be the development of specific livelihood and prevention strategies that protect women and girls from violence, rape and sexual exploitation. Attention must also be paid to the significant risks faced by boys and men who are frequently killed, detained, conscripted or disappeared. Aid has been militarized with military actors responsible for camp management and aid distribution, especially in newly accessible areas. We call on

¹ Lake Chad Basin Humanitarian Needs and Requirement Overview (2017), <http://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/2017-lake-chad-basin-humanitarian-needs-and-requirement-overview>

² IOM (2016), "Regional Displacement and Human Mobility Analysis", Dec. 2016, <http://www.globaldtm.info/regional-displacement-and-human-mobility-analysis/>

³ Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Overview (8 December 2016), <http://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-crisis-overview-8-december-2016>

⁴ FEWS NET, (13 December 2016), <http://www.fews.net/west-africa/nigeria/alert/december-13-2016>

⁵ Human Rights Watch (2016), "Nigeria: Officials Abusing Displaced Women, Girls Displaced by Boko Haram and Victims Twice Over", <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/31/nigeria-officials-abusing-displaced-women-girls>

governments to ensure that food reaches the affected population, including IDPs in camps in newly accessible areas without any restrictions. It is important that camp management is transferred over to civilian authorities as soon as possible, within a clear timeline. Emergency measures that have attempted to cut off Boko Haram from their food supplies and revenue sources have in the process cut people off from their livelihoods, markets and access to food. Governments have a duty to protect and facilitate people's freedom of movement and access to their livelihoods including fishing, farming and markets. Governments in the region must also uphold the right of people to flee conflict and violence, and respect international protection measures for refugees such as the principle of non-refoulement.

Step 2: Scale-up the Food and Nutrition Response in Nigeria and the Region

An urgent scale up of the food and nutrition response is needed. The bulk of funding required for 2017 is for nutrition and food security. Sufficient timely and flexible funding is needed to ensure the scale-up of in-kind food where necessary, and cash so that people can buy food. Improved coordination and leadership is essential to reach more people with food assistance in the coming months to stave off hunger in regional countries, and famine in Nigeria – the latter requires a full food pipeline without further delay. The UN and humanitarian community need to develop clear contingency plans and pre-position food and other relief items to ensure lifesaving aid can be rapidly deployed as new areas become accessible and where hunger and malnutrition is likely to be most dire. Funding also needs to be increased for emergency nutrition to combat severe levels of malnutrition and prevent children dying. The long-term health impacts of malnutrition are extreme and a scale-up of malnutrition screening and treatment services is required. Children who are malnourished at the start of life are also severely disadvantaged in their ability to learn. Funding for livelihoods and food security also needs to be increased. Without agriculture and livestock support, many farmers and herders will not be able to produce their own food or earn an income. 78% of IDPs in Nigeria are living in host communities⁶, placing considerable strain on the latter's limited resources we therefore need a coordinated coherent out of camp humanitarian strategy and funding for host community response.

Step 3: Increase Access to More, Better and Safe Quality Education

Give children and youth a passport to their future. 3 245 000 children are in need of emergency education in the region.⁷ Although schools, teachers and students have been deliberately targeted in this conflict, the education sector is heavily underfunded. This has to change. Every day a child is out of school is a day too many. Education not only has an instrumental role to play in helping the affected children heal the wounds from a terrible conflict, feel protected and acquire the necessary skills to progress, but education is also the foundation needed for the region to develop and prosper. This is why we urgently call on all humanitarian actors, including governments, to recognize education as key to the response. The funding gap for education needs to be closed. Funding should include a focus on systems strengthening, reconstruction of school buildings and payment and training of teachers; as well as strengthening of community participation, particularly through School Based Management Committees. The humanitarian response must also support quality non-formal education programs targeting IDP children in both camps and host communities. Furthermore, we call for the immediate cessation of attacks against educational facilities, personnel, and students as well as a stop to the military use of such infrastructures in line with the Safe School Declaration.⁸ We encourage all parties to the conflict to vacate

⁶ IOM (2016), "Regional Displacement and Human Mobility Analysis", Dec. 2016, <http://www.globaldtm.info/regional-displacement-and-human-mobility-analysis/>

⁷ Lake Chad Basin Humanitarian Needs and Requirement Overview (2017), <http://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/2017-lake-chad-basin-humanitarian-needs-and-requirement-overview>

⁸ The Safe Schools Declaration is an inter-governmental political commitment that express political support for the protection of students, teachers, and schools during times of armed conflict. As of January 2017, 57 countries have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, including Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

immediately any schools they are occupying and ensure that schools are safe for students to return. Teachers must be given the necessary training in conflict-sensitive approaches to education, including how to keep children safe at school. Particular attention should be given to the teachers and children who have been targeted, abducted and physically and/or psychologically mistreated due to the conflict.

Step 4: Safeguard Humanitarian Space: Safe Movement to Reach more People in Need

Safe access to people must be guaranteed. Ensuring that people in need can reach humanitarian assistance is the biggest challenge for humanitarian operations due to insecurity and restrictions on freedom of movement. People must be able to flee areas of conflict and reach lifesaving assistance. There is also an urgent need to increase agencies' ability to access hard to reach areas to meet humanitarian need. It is therefore essential that governments provide unhindered humanitarian access to communities, particularly in insecure and inaccessible areas. Bureaucratic obstacles must be removed, such as difficulties with registration and unclear processes for visas and customs clearance, including pharmaceuticals, as these delay and hinder humanitarian operations. In northeast Nigeria, Niger and Chad armed escorts are required or are being used by some agencies to access populations in insecure zones. The use of armed escorts in aid provision can limit NGO activities, as being associated with the military may put staff and beneficiaries at risk. Alternatives for allowing movement within insecure areas are needed, and this requires greater investment and resources to facilitate access negotiations and improve civil-military coordination, including increasing the number of civil-military and access staff in all four countries. A priority should be establishing clear, written civil-military coordination guidelines in accordance with the international UN Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support UN Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies.⁹ Such coordination is also imperative for facilitating rapid response mechanisms (RRM), and ensuring that such mechanisms can operate in line with humanitarian principles – maintaining neutrality, impartiality and independence. All RRM should be designed with the ability to operate independently from the military and with strong coordination across all sectors to ensure the strongest response with the widest reach possible.

Step 5: Strengthen Leadership of the Response and Improve Humanitarian Coordination

Ensure greater investment in further strengthening UN, government and NGO leadership, decision making, coordination and the accountability of the humanitarian response. This can be achieved through additional resources for reliable data collection, increasing the number of information managers and better identifying needs and gaps. It also requires clarification roles and responsibilities in order to improve prioritisation, orient operational partners and adapt responses to ensure a needs-based response that is accountable to affected people. We welcome the shift of the centre of gravity of the response in Nigeria from Abuja to Maiduguri, and we need to ensure that information and communication sharing between field-level working groups and clusters and the capitals are strengthened in all four countries. We need stronger local, national and international NGO representation in government-led coordination platforms as the main implementers of assistance on the ground. In Nigeria, coordination of the Inter-Ministerial Task Force (IMTF) with other government-mandated agencies needs strengthening, and interlocutors with humanitarian community need to be clearly identified. We need donors to fund the humanitarian response plans in order to consolidate gains and to meet the needs of a greater number of people. We need a clear resource mobilization plan, and better coordination between humanitarian and development actors. The critically needed support to Nigeria must not compromise the support to regional countries. Governments of the region also need to allocate greater resources to the response and be clear and transparent about what they are doing.

⁹ <http://ochaonline.un.org/cmcs/guidelines>

Step 6: Ensure All Returns are Safe, Voluntary and Dignified

Minimum standards must be met before for genuine returns can take place. Surveys conducted with IDPs show that many people wish to return back to their homes. However, they are also explicit that they are only willing to return under certain conditions, such as guarantees of security and assurances that they will be safe, and access basic services and livelihoods. Accurate figures on the numbers who have so far returned are unavailable as there is no tracking in place to monitor the returns, including of refugees who are also moving across borders in the region. Moreover, many “returns” are actually secondary displacement, as people move to towns closer to home but aren’t able to return to their villages of origin. All actors must recognise that such movement does not in fact meet the definition of “return” as a recognised durable solution. The Governments of Nigeria, and regional governments and international community must ensure that all return of IDPs to their homes or areas of origin is voluntary and safe. While many IDPs are eager to return home, they must be given accurate information to make independent decisions about when to do so. Civilians cannot be part of strategies aimed at holding territory, and dispersal of IDPs to areas closer to home is not an appropriate solution for overcrowding. Channels for communicating and coordinating on the response to people’s movement should be established and systems for tracking and monitoring movement should be put in place to ensure timely identification of needs and protection issues, and to respond to these effectively. As both return and secondary movement continue, security of tenure, access to land and other issues related to housing, land and property must be addressed to support livelihoods, safety, and social cohesion. All returns must be accompanied by security guarantees, repair of damaged infrastructure and property and the provision of humanitarian assistance and basic services, including dispute resolution. Displaced people should not be encouraged to return where service providers and local authorities have not. Meanwhile, it remains imperative to improve conditions and scale up assistance to IDPs in camps and host communities. Returns should be a choice rather than as a last resort because of appalling living conditions in areas of displacement.

Step 7: Build Resilience and Increase Local Capacity

Importance of building resilience and addressing long term solutions. The crisis is taking place against a backdrop of long-term vulnerability to a range of shocks and hazards, including conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, deep-rooted poverty, joblessness and lack of good governance. For this reason, whilst maintaining an emphasis on life-saving humanitarian assistance and meeting urgent needs, it is also crucial to tackle the underlying causes of the conflict. We call on donors and governments to allocate longer term and predictable funding that allows for the response to incorporate a resilience-building, long-term and conflict-sensitive approach that creates links between humanitarian and development efforts. It is also important to targeting not only displaced people but also host communities and other affected groups, so as not to put at risk the social cohesion between them. The humanitarian community must support and work with local partners to ensure sustainability and local ownership. There is a need to support the livelihoods of affected people, including farmers who have been forced from their land, fishermen who are unable to access the lake due to insecurity, traders who are unable to access markets. The affected population must receive assistance that help to build their assets, so that they do not resort to risky or short term strategies, such as selling tools or livestock which are vital for their future prospects. Long term access to basic services such as water, health and education must be provided to all. The needs of particularly vulnerable groups, such as women and girls, must be identified and addressed. The affected people in the area are agents of their own change, and a resilience-building approach should involve them closely in planning and build on their existing methods for tackling the risks they face. It must therefore be a priority for all actors involved in the humanitarian response to build strategic relationships with local organisations, civil society and stakeholders. Above all a security approach alone will not provide a long-term solution to this crisis. It is only through investing in political solutions, protecting people, upholding their rights, and investing development and the regions’ people, particularly the children and youth, will we witness peace again in the region.

This statement is endorsed by the following NGOs:

Action Aid Nigeria
Action Against Hunger
Christian Aid
Coopi - Cooperazione Internazionale
eHealth Africa
GAIN
International Rescue Committee
Medecins Du Monde
Mercy Corps
Norwegian Refugee Council
OXFAM
Plan International
Save the Children
Search for Common Ground
SIF - Secours Islamique France
ZOA