

LAKE CHAD BASIN: CHILDREN AND YOUTHS IN CRISIS

Bolanle Kayode, Registered Social Worker with research involvement in the Lake Chad Basin.

Abstract

In the four countries constituting the Lake Chad Basin (Cameroon, Niger Republic, Chad and Nigeria) and currently affected by violent conflict and banditry, many people have been displaced and economic activities are disrupted. Over 4.5 million people in the Lake Chad Basin are dependent on humanitarian assistance for survival. Widespread trauma is not uncommon, as civilians are targeted for suicide bombings and kidnapping. Vital infrastructure is destroyed, preventing millions from accessing essential services. Caught up in the violent conflict are over 1.5 million children and youths, the majority of whom became (initially) internally displaced; many continue, crossing borders to seek asylum or refugee status in the neighbouring Lake Chad Region. Over 441,290 youths have been reportedly affected by school closure, while more than 428,000 children were assessed with severe acute malnutrition in the *UNICEF Lake Chad Basin - Child Rights and Humanitarian Dashboard*, (2022). Meanwhile, displaced children and youths are extremely vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, psychosocial distress and exploitation, as well as recruitment by non-state armed groups for banditry activities.

Methodologically, using witness accounts supported by secondary data such as public records, textbooks, journals and newspaper content, this article aims to be a straightforward account of the children and youths caught up in the conflict-affected Lake Chad Basin. It focuses on their plight, the adversities they go through, together with the consequences for their safety and well-being, including implications for both their communities and for global society.

Introduction and background

The Lake Chad Basin, which comprises the borders of Cameroon, Chad, Niger Republic and Nigeria, is one of the most deprived, poorest and most dangerous regions of the world. As climate change and environmental degradation continue to exacerbate the challenges faced in the region, Islamic group Boko Haram extremists are terrorising the people across the four countries, acting as a major driver, causing the displacement of people from their native lands. Having displaced millions of people, many of whom are children and youths, the violent conflict in Lake Chad Basin is being described as Africa's fastest-growing displacement and humanitarian crisis. Across the region, the number of people who have been forced from their homes is more than the Syrians in Turkey, which holds more refugees than any other country. Yet, the asylum seekers and refugees in the Lake Chad Basin, especially children and youths, appear left to their own meagre resources, as they remain largely invisible to the Western world.

The crisis in the Lake Chad region originated in Nigeria in 2009 as a result of violent acts by a group commonly known as Boko Haram, but it quickly intensified,

spreading across borders into Chad, Niger Republic and Cameroon. As a result of government military operations to curb the nefarious activities of the group, millions of people fled their homes for safety. In Nigeria alone, over 1.9 million have been displaced in the country's north-east, representing one of the world's largest internally displaced populations, while millions of people have also been reportedly internally displaced in the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger Republic. The Nigerian military, together with the Multinational Joint Task Force, boast of their gains in their efforts to drive the extremists from many of the areas they once controlled, but the gains are being overshadowed by the increase of Boko Haram attacks in the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger Republic.

Across these areas affected by violent conflict, people are constantly on the move in efforts to escape threats to their lives and liberty and in search of safety and protection. The United Nations leads a global movement to promote and safeguard the well-being of children and young people. Though its Convention on the Rights of the Child is stated not to be compatible with exposure of children and young people to trauma, many crisis-affected young people in the Lake Chad Basin are living with traumatic experiences that not only impact their mental health and psychological well-being, but also threaten their most basic rights as well as damaging the society they live in. Disruption to education and non-access to quality healthcare are no longer an uncommon experience for these youths. Many of the schools remain closed due to violent attacks across Lake Chad Basin, while the nutritional needs of children under the age of five continue to remain unmet, with many reportedly dying due to malnutrition (National Nutrition SMART survey, 2021).

Challenges experienced by children and youths in the Lake Chad Basin

1. **Experience of trauma:** Many of those most affected by the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin are women, children and youths, the majority of whom would have witnessed brutal killings of close relations, separation from family members, exposure to war/violence, been raped by bandits and, most times, have lost everything they had. They are often in need of shelter, food, water and non-food items, including access to healthcare facilities and education. Comments such as 'I am hungry', 'I cannot find my parent', 'They killed my sister and brother', 'I am tired' are no longer uncommon complaints from children as they arrive from conflict zones. Their access to these basic services and essential needs is often not met because humanitarian groups are unable to operate due to ongoing banditry activities. The culmination of these experiences is immensely traumatising for these children.
2. **Exposure to mental health conditions:** Many of the children and youths caught up in the crisis in the Lake Chad region do not understand why they