MOBILE EDUCATION UNITS IN EMERGENCY CONTEXTS
In the northeast of Nigeria, education is heavily affected by the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency. The group has been targeting the education system since their genesis in 2009 (Human Rights Watch, 2016). As a result, schools have been shut down and over 1.5 million children have been displaced, severely jeopardising their access to education.

This research examines the mobile education approach as a way for international actors to respond to the educational needs that have emerged as a result of the crisis.

Mobile Education Units (MEUs) are an emergency response using non-fixed spaces to provide education to children who would otherwise not have access. The approach is mainly used in hard-to-reach areas or areas where there are no formal schools and it is based on the support to the movement of external teachers to such areas.

Children enrolled in the MEUs as well as their parents participated in focus group discussions based on a structured guide. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers of the mobile units, community leaders involved in the project, desk officers from government agencies (SUBEB and SAME) and a number of staff from Plan Nigeria. A total of 74 participants participated in the research.

The main limitation of the research is related to site-selection. The research took place in three out of ten communities in which the MEUs are piloted. The sites were selected based on their accessibility, which includes considerations of safety. This led to the research mainly being focused in urban areas that host IDPs rather than more rural communities further away from MMC that mainly deal with recent returnees. This allowed for a focus on host-communities, but also resulted in large limitations with regard to the understanding of the general MEU approach.

**Methodology:**

This research is based on two research questions that are directly derived from the two specific objectives of the mobile education unit:

i. To what extent and in which way can the mobile education project provide access to safe and protective learning environment for children in communities affected by conflict?

ii. To what extent and in which way can mobile education provide a quality learning environment that facilitates reintegration into the formal education system?

The research is exploratory and was conducted within the first three months of project implementation in three communities in three different LGAs where the MEU pilots operate: Kofa in Konduga, Zajeri Texaco in MMC and Maimusari in Jere, in Borno State, Nigeria. The methods of data collection included focus group discussions, key informant interviews and observation.
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Background of the participants:

The vast majority of the children participating in the research had never attended school before enrolling in the MEU as their families did not have the resources to send them. Poverty was considered the most important reason for the lack of enrolment across all focus groups and interviews.

Other reasons for the lack of enrolment amongst the participants were engagement in income-generating activities, the absence of a school in the area they originated from or a lack of awareness among parents concerning the value of education and a resulting unwillingness to send children to school.
Impact of the crisis on education:

The crisis has had a big impact on the economic wellbeing of the area and the self-sufficiency of the people. A lot of people saw their livelihoods being destroyed as a result of the insurgency. Given that many of the farms in rural areas are inaccessible, the displaced populations in the towns in Borno State are struggling to generate an income and sustain their families. Because of the massive displacement, host communities, access to resources and jobs and become difficult. For many IDPs, it is difficult to find employment and the disruption of the market has led to a lack of food in the area. Poverty was shown to have a large impact on parents’ willingness to send their children to school.

Despite the negative impact and the setback the conflict has caused to the education sector, there is a general consensus that the conflict has had one positive outcome. As a result of the crisis, an increasing number of people have become interested in education and are willing to send their children to school. The main reason reported for the increased interest is directly related to the insurgents. Parents and teachers see the lack of education as one of the causes for the crisis, making the youth susceptible to the insurgents. Nevertheless, it is very important to note that when it comes to educational opportunities, many people reported the importance of free education. The data suggests that interest in education has spiked, but also that this is related to NGOs and international organisations offering free education. This is particularly the case for girls, because parents are less likely to invest in their daughters given that they might drop out at an early age if they get married.

Impact of the crisis on protection:

Overall, the participants considered their communities to be safe. They noted several security measures that had been taken as a result of the conflict. First of all, the Nigerian military has been deployed for provision of security in the communities. The communities are generally happy with the presence of the military, and no violent incidents were reported in relation to their presence. Secondly, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) is present in the region. The CJTF is a group of volunteers who took up arms alongside the government in order to defeat Boko Haram. They are held in high regard in the communities and continue to provide security to them.

They reported incidents of Boko Haram intrusion and seemed unaware of the security measures that have been taken within their communities. The teachers reported that some of the children are very quiet and isolated in the classroom environment.

In addition, although the consensus is that the communities provide a relatively safe and protective environment for children, when looking at underlying risks to child protection, there are several issues that were reported. In all three communities, parents and teachers reported on malnutrition, on lack of non-food items, meaning that some of the learners are coming to school hungry and with poor clothing or without shoes. A number of participants also feared an outbreak of disease and connected this to the lack of WASH facilities around the mobile units. A lack of education is also seen as a child protection risk by the community.

There is a clear difference in perceived threat between children and adults. Many of the adults mentioned the crisis in the community was now over and the fear had subsided, whereas the majority of the children still feel scared, especially at night.
Access:

With regards to the accessibility of mobile units, especially in comparison to formal education, one of the advantages noted by the participants is that it is free. This has helped spike interest in education, seeing that poverty is one of the main barriers to enrolment. However, even with free education, the effect of poverty on access and enrolment cannot be dismissed completely. In Kofa, it was reported by the teachers that there are still incidents of parents approaching them to see if their child can miss a day of classes so they can help on the farms or with other income-generating activities. Even when access to school is provided, poverty can be an impediment.

A widespread problem in Nigeria is the perceived unimportance given to or lack of understanding of education leading to low enrolment levels. This does not seem to be the case in the communities of the MEU. The teachers and government officials partially attribute this to the sensitisation campaign they conducted in the communities. People in the communities expressed high interest in education. Access is to a large extent based on their social capital, almost all participants enrolled in the mobile unit because their village elders or parents informed them of it. Social relations seem very important in order to be included in the target group of the MEU.

In Zajeri Texaco, the role that social capital plays in the awareness of and enrolment in the unit sometimes became a problem. One of the teachers reported favouritism from the community leaders regarding the children they choose to join the project. According to the teacher, “IDPs are supposed to enrol, because the unit is purposely designed for them. But what I am seeing is that the leader in the community, as they get familiar with the mobile education unit, they will enrol their children who have access to formal education. They do this because the mobile unit is free. They come and occupy the space.” This was the only reported incident of unequal access to the units. Overall, people are happy with the selection process. There seems to be no significant difference between the numbers of boys and girls in the unit, the communities accept and encourage that the mobile education unit is meant for all children.

With regards to access, the main problem that is mentioned is the lack of available spaces in the MEU. All the projects have a target, which is less than the number of children in the community. There are therefore still many children who do not have access to education. Some of the children who are not officially enrolled come to the classes anyway. The teachers report that it is very difficult to send them away, and that they therefore sometimes teach more children than they are supposed to according to the registry. In all three communities, the participants asked for an expansion of the units in terms of space, materials and enrolment figures.
Overall, the participants feel that the MEU is a safe space for children. In Zajeri Texaco and Maimusari the mobile units are fenced and the gate is closed during the teaching hours. In Kofa, they rely on the trenches outside the community, the military and the local community for physical safety from attack. In all communities, the members play a big role in the provision of safety to the students. The chair of the Community Education Committee in Maimusari describes it as follows: “The mobile unit is a safe space for the children. There are elders in the community, who come and check regularly if everything is going well. They also have local vigilantes, the CJTF. They are always around. The CEC has specifically asked for two of them. They are assigned to protect the safety of the students and the teachers. They do not have weapons, but they have sticks. They also have the contact number of the military and the police, in case anything happens.” The CJTF were made aware of the existence of the mobile unit and provide assistance. In Zajeri Texaco and Maimusari, they patrol the gates and make sure that nobody enters the vicinity during teaching hours. When children come to school late, the volunteers check the children before they enter. When unfamiliar people want to enter the area, the CJTF is in charge of interrogation and background checks. The community volunteers, or the CJTF, are most often named as the primary source of security for the pupils.

Teachers play a big role in creating a protective environment for the children. All teachers mention that they wanted to become part of the mobile unit because they care deeply about the vulnerable children and want to assist with providing a safe and quality learning environment for them. The teacher in Zajeri Texaco mentioned that she is ‘like a mother’ for a lot of these children and that she is happy about it. Teachers are trained in providing protective learning environments for the children in which they are not exposed to violence. The teachers in Kofa specifically commented on the “Do No Harm” approach of humanitarian action as a way to discipline the students.

However, when visiting the community, the community leaders that were present chased the large number of children that came away with a stick, for which the children frightfully jumped out of the way. One of the students reported: “The teacher sometimes uses a cane to scare us from doing the wrong thing. The teacher also advises us.” The students in Zajeri Texaco also report corporal punishment in the classes, although it was not clear if they are talking about the teachers of the mobile unit.

Outside of the risks directly resulting from the crisis, there are some protection risks that directly affect the mobile unit, including shelter, nutrition, lack of water and WASH. At the time of the field research, the temporary learning spaces set out under the project were not yet constructed. Rather, children were attending classes under canopies or under trees. In Maimusari, no form of shelter had been provided, meaning that the children spend their time in the sun, with little access to water. Some of the, especially younger, children had to leave the lessons earlier because the heat was unbearable and dangerous.

In Kofa, the teachers and parents mention that there is a problem with nutrition and access to water. One of the teachers described it as follows: “Most parents are farmers. The programme starts at 14:00, and some of the children work in the farms in the morning. They come back late and are very hungry. In other programmes, they used to give the children biscuits or other snacks. Under the mobile education programme, we are not doing that anymore. The teachers would really like to have the means to feed the children before the class starts. Now, you can see that they are hungry and it affects their learning.” In addition, the MEU in Kofa is far removed from a water source, which means that children sometimes miss class because they have to fetch water.
The teachers are important in the creation of a quality learning environment for vulnerable children. A teacher in Maimusari describes her methods as follows: "These are traumatised children and some of them are absent-minded in class. They are thinking or they are feeling lonely. So the best thing we can do as teachers is to create a conducive environment for them by sometimes playing, telling jokes, or singing. When we notice they are a bit more stable, we can go back to teaching them English and maths." The parents are satisfied with the teachers. They give advice and have an open attitude to the parents, who can approach them after class if there are any problems. Nevertheless, a shortage of teachers is still reported and there is a need for more qualified educators, preferably female.

At the time of the research, when the MEU pilot project had just started, the children were mainly learning basic literacy and numeracy. The majority were beginners but none described a difficulty to progress according to the schedule. Weekly tests, mainly oral, take place in order to measure the progress. In answer to what they have learned, most of the children mention basic maths, as well as the ability to spell their names and greet in English. The parents are satisfied, because they see their children doing homework and use what they learn in class at home.

A substantial challenge to providing a quality learning environment that is mentioned is the availability of resources. The vast majority of participants express the need for more learning materials, such as writing materials, pens and textbooks. Seeing the vulnerability of the children, the teachers also express the need for some recreation, such as ball games, in order to cheer the children up when they are depressed.

The learning space in some of the units proved to be a problem at the time of the research, not only for the protection of the children. Sitting outside under a tree or in the sun is likely to have a negative impact on learning outcomes, because children find it harder to concentrate. In Maimusari this is a particular problem, because the space is very dusty and the sand on the ground is black. Children come home very dirty and because the children have no uniforms, parents are complaining about having to spend money on soap. Besides that, the dirt can have an effect on the health of the children, which will in turn affect their learning outcomes. The delay in the construction of the TLSs will have an effect on the overall assessment on the impact of the pilot, seeing the first assessment will take place only a month after the spaces have been constructed and the learning conditions were poor beforehand.
Pathway to integration with formal education:

All participants are very hopeful that at the end of the programme, the children will have the necessary skills to enrol in primary education. The majority of participants are confident that when the crisis is over, the children will be able to enrol in formal education without any problems. They do stress the need for more primary schools in the area. The shortage of schools leads to over-crowding in schools, which is a problem for the integration of the mobile students. Another problem that is mentioned is a lack of resources. Formal schools charge a fee and parents had reported poverty to be one of the main reasons for their children being out of school prior to the MEU. This problem is likely to persist. A teacher in Maimusari is confident that she has enough influence to convince the parents about the importance of continuing to send their children to school, but realises it will be difficult if they do not have the necessary resources to do so.

For the displaced children, the solution mentioned is that when they go back to their home communities they can enrol in education. However, a number of participants mention the educational problems that exist in the villages. Many of the villages did not have a school before the crisis, meaning access to education for their children was already jeopardized. Some parents mention that there is a school in their village, but it is far away from their residence. They believe that as peace returns and safety measures are taken, their children will be able to bridge the distance when they go back to their communities. If the children end up staying in communities where the mobile units are offered, the teachers are convinced that they will find opportunities for their pupils.

A risk with trying to solve the educational problem that northern Nigeria is facing, and guaranteeing enrolment in primary schools for a high percentage of the population, is that the problem is very complex in nature. The community is highly reliant on the government to solve educational problems but complexity, lack of resources and lack of political will might become obstacles. There is a general concern that there is not enough political will to solve the problem in the long-term.

Plan Nigeria is working closely together with SUBEB on the implementation of the MEU. This creates opportunities: the teachers are already paid by the government, which will make it easier for the government or the community to take over management of the units, in cases where that is necessary. However, seeing the ongoing problems in the education system, it is not clear when the government will be able to provide access to government schools to the children currently enrolled.

Regardless of problems such as the lack of available schools and the possible lack of political will and capacity to make significant changes in the near future, not all the children will be able to enrol in primary school. Some of the adolescent students enrolled in the MEUs are partaking in primary school curricula, but are too old to enrol in a formal primary school. This creates a problem for which the community does not have a direct solution. Nevertheless, they remain confident that the mobile education unit has opened doors for the children, and that all of them will be able to obtain certification.
Based on the findings of the research, there are several conclusions that can be drawn with regard to the access, protection, quality and integration with formal schooling of the Mobile Education Units.

With regard to access, a main contributing factor to the impact is that the MEUs are freely accessible, giving parents the opportunity to send their children to school in spite of poverty. It is also very inclusive with regard to IDPs, given that most students are displaced and have never been to school. However, given the weak state of the Nigerian education system, the number of out-of-school children is so high that even within small communities, not all children can be accommodated by the MEUs. MEUs are an emergency response, but they are embedded in the barriers to education that stretch beyond the emergency. The problem is that the sector does not have the capacity to deal with these problems. MEUs face the risk that many of the EiE programmes face, which is that they have to respond to both the crisis and the general educational problems of a country, and they often don't have the funding or the capacity to do so. The teachers of the MEU subsequently had to make a difficult choice: teaching an overcrowded class or rejecting students that as a result will not have access to education whatsoever. Both scenarios were reported on, both are problematic.

Looking at the creation of a safe and protective learning environment, data shows that this is to a large extent related to the safety of the community as a whole. In the researched communities, the protective environment for children is perceived relatively high, especially when considering external threat. Local volunteers and the CJTF contribute to this. Another contributing factor is the fact that the MEU are fenced in two of the researched communities, seeing the teachers don't have to travel around but can rather gather in one space. Nevertheless, in many of the MEUs there are few procedures in place with regard to safety from external threat, and some protection risks persist, such as a lack of WASH facilities and malnutrition. In addition, the deep-rooted fear that persists in children asks for a more comprehensive response with regard to psychosocial support.

The quality of the units is to a large extent related to the level of teaching, which the parents and children reported to be satisfied with. The teachers have been selected by the state government and are familiar with teaching the federal curriculum. They are also already paid by the state, which adds to the sustainability of the project. A much reported problem is the lack of learning materials and the teaching environment (outside). The programmes are part of the emergency response and therefore some of the assets contributing to a quality learning environment are not in place.

Many participants express the confidence that towards the end of the project, they can enrol in formal education. The curriculum is designed in order to promote accelerated learning, and make sure that children who do not have previous experience with education are prepared to enrol in the formal system towards the end of the project. However, it is important to note that even when the project is successful in reaching the adequate level of basic education amongst its students, there is a massive shortage of schools in northeast Nigeria. The government is reporting investment in education and the construction of educational structures, but seeing that the enrolment rate before the crisis in Borno state was only 30 percent, this remains a big challenge. As a relief programme, it can be successful, but it is also operating in the field of development, where it is taking over the state’s responsibility to provide schooling for its children and it is not clear if the government will be able to provide all the students with basic schooling towards the end of the MEU programmes.
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