

Mama Boko Haram - A Lesson In Trust

Kluwer Mediation Blog

July 2, 2014

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Please refer to this post as: Bill Marsh (Editor), 'Mama Boko Haram - A Lesson In Trust', Kluwer Mediation Blog, July 2 2014, <http://mediationblog.kluwerarbitration.com/2014/07/02/4672/>



Last month, Al Jazeera carried a piece called "['Mama Boko Haram' grasps for peace in Nigeria](#)". It detailed the activities of Aisha Wakil (pictured above), a Nigerian lawyer who has become a de facto mediator between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government - often at considerable risk to herself.

"Mama Boko Haram", as she has been dubbed, is now on the government-initiated Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North. She represents a powerful model of mediators who emerge from the community in which the conflict is located, rather than "outsiders". For example, this is how she first developed her relationship with the then leader of Boko Haram Mohammed Yusuf - in her own words:

"I would visit his house regularly and always cooked food to bring to the almajaris [pupils] of the Quranic school. Yusuf would always be there preaching and he liked my cooking very much, especially my egusi soup. He prayed that Almighty Allah would reward me because so many were eating from my pot, and that was how we established a close relationship. The boys called me 'mum'. Many of them didn't have mothers."

This touching portrait reminds us of some key truths:

1. Her role began simply by seeking to serve - in this case, to cook meals for those who needed food. Service is the very heart of mediation. It is all too easy for us mediators to get carried away with a sense of our own importance, occupying the privileged position in the middle to whom (we are hoping) everyone looks, and to forget that in the end we are there to serve the parties. And however much we may wish to hide it, our core motivation (whether it is to serve others or our own ego) is usually readily apparent to those with whom we work.
2. Trust is everything. Trust is built, piece by piece. And in the context of serious conflict, it is built slowly. It is not, in the end, the product of good trust-building "skills or techniques". It is the product of transparency - which is why our *true* motivation is so key. If we are not transparent, we will not build trust. If we are transparent and people don't like what they see, we will not build trust. Our true motivation is key - and you can't fake it.
3. Food is so often central to building relationships. It was over food that Aisha built the level of trust required for her to play a central mediating role. Indeed, Boko Haram insisted on her presence on the Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North. She is one of only two women on the Committee.

Later on in the article, Aisha refers to the Boko Haram members whom she knows in these words:

"I don't agree with what they are doing, but I speak to them because I am their mother. Sometimes they call me Um el Salam [Arabic for mother of peace]. These are Nigeria's lost boys."

It is surprising, almost jarring, to hear them described not as militant terrorists but as lost boys. All people have needs, whether we see them or not. It is so easy to assume, when confronted with sophisticated, aggressive, articulate parties and lawyers, that that is all that they are. Those whom I meet in mediation are more usually brandishing the weapons of litigation, not of physical violence, but the principle is no different. The longer I have mediated, the more I have come to understand that what parties present to us in mediation is simply how they want us to see them. It contains very little of their true hopes and fears, motivations and aspirations - at least initially. It is the image that they think the situation demands, and that most protects them. Only trust will get you beyond that image.

I will give the last word on Aisha to Bulama Gubio from the Borno Elders Forum, and a member of the Presidential Advisory Committee on National Dialogue.

"Aisha instigated dialogue through her contacts and nearly died trying to facilitate talks between Boko Haram and the government. The process of dialogue can only be successful if those who are involved in the grass roots level are included. Boko Haram trust her and she is a vital key from their community."

Food for thought, I suggest.