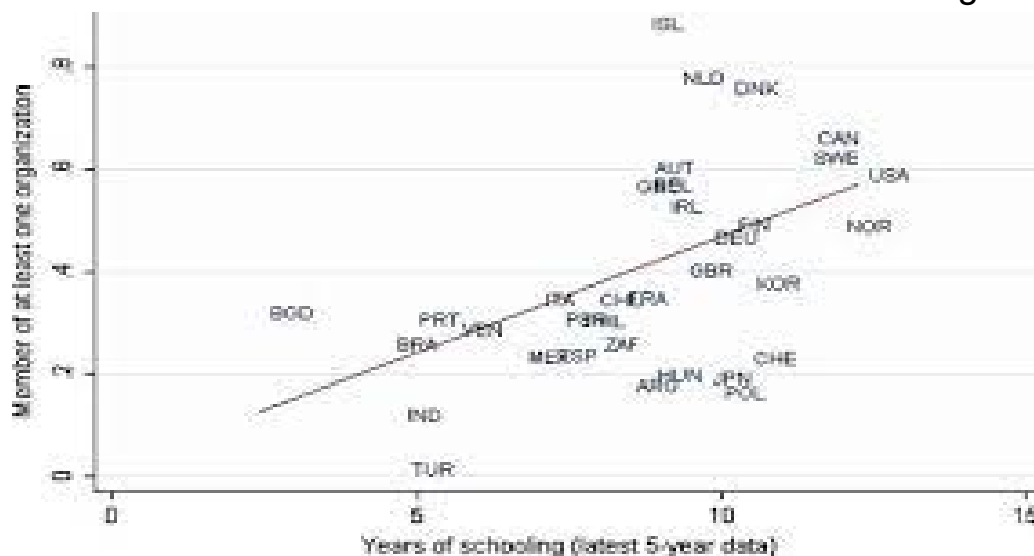


Children in Northern Nigeria have been denied the chance to seek education by the terrorist group Boko Haram. Why is education key to democracy/development and what does it mean to you?

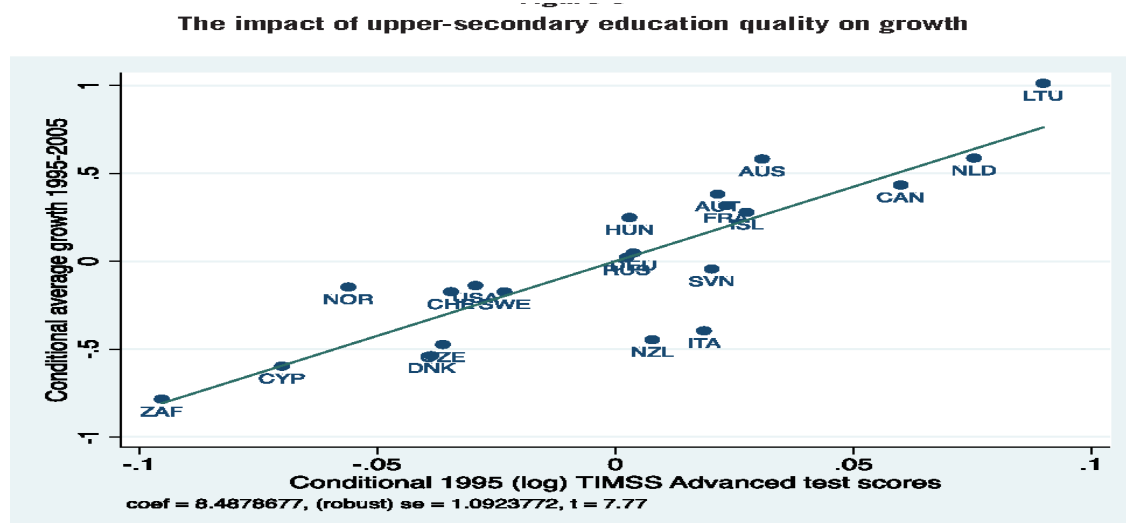
Boko Haram, which translates as ‘Western education is forbidden’ is a terrorist group based in North Eastern Nigeria who believe in the purification of Islam and ultimately aim to overthrow the Nigerian government. The group has become associated with brutality and violence since their insurgency in 2009 and has killed tens of thousands of people, including 300,000 thousand children. They have become associated with school violence and the kidnapping of school girls (who they don't believe should be educated). As a result of their actions 2.3 million people have been displaced from their homes and multiple food crises and famines have wreaked havoc on civilians in the region.



(fig. 1)

Given the large recorded number of students abducted by Boko Haram a particularly pressing question is how important is education to development and democracy going forward? The question of democracy is particularly key, studies have shown that education and democracy directly correlate (fig.1) partly because school teaches people to interact with others and promotes the benefits of civic participation. This helps broad based regimes like democracy as opposed to narrow based regimes such as dictatorship. In addition, education plays an important

role in encouraging free thought, critical thinking and widening opportunity which is necessary to challenge oppressive governments and poverty and to support democracy. Education can further fuel development by increasing the value and potential contribution of each individual worker, which helps economies move up the value chain - in this sense Education is absolutely essential to reducing poverty. All of this research on the benefits of education prove only one thing, the urgency of addressing the situation in Northern Nigeria particularly when the literacy rates in women are below half of the rest of the population.



(fig.2)

It is clear to see how this impacts the lives of thousands of school children living in fear but you might also be asking, how does this impact me many hundreds of miles away? This touches me intimately because women's education and women's rights are two things hugely close to my heart. These two things are put massively in jeopardy by the Boko Haram - nearly one thousand students have been kidnapped (the majority of them are girls) - they should be pursuing an education and living a happy fulfilling life; but instead are being sold into sex slavery, being physically and mentally tortured or even killed. The actions of Boko Haram have prevented around ten thousand students from going to school and a spokesperson from the Group said that such actions will continue until the Nigerian Government stands down. Education has often served to liberate and empower, and it is a fundamental principle that it should not be denied to anyone especially on the basis of religion

or gender. The abuse of women became a new tactic of the organisation in 2013 - there is no evidence that any of the female victims had anything to do with the conflict but were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Atrocities which act as obstacles to girls' education are the ones that touch me most deeply as a woman. But if I had to define what education represents for me (in a context like this) I would say it can be a path to the closure of gaps of inequality; wealth and gender and an opportunity to have a role and a voice in the future.

To conclude, it is really important that the oppressive actions of Boko Haram are highlighted - they hinder education on such a large scale which allows tyranny and poverty to spread. Democracy relies on education to teach skills key to building and creating a more democratic society and economic development relies on schools and universities to produce more educated and skilled workers to create a more efficient and profitable, higher value economy. These things are key to fighting regimes such as Boko Haram. The terrors of the Boko Haram become more personal to me because of the plight of women in the conflict and the rise of gender based violence and sexual assault as a result of the the terrorist acts of the Boko Haram. I feel that knowledge and understanding about this issue is not widespread - but should be important to all who fight for human rights.