

Fatima Akilu Case B: Staying true to her values

In 2016, four years into her role as Director for Behavioural Analysis and Strategy at Nigeria's Office of the National Security Adviser (NSA), Fatima Akilu was summarily dismissed from her position, amid accusations of corruption at the organisation, and subsequently charged with fraud. Nigeria's fraud agency repeatedly investigated Fatima repeatedly at the insistence of the NSA, but could find nothing to substantiate the claims of malpractice, eventually concluding the allegations were tantamount to harassment on the part of the NSA.

In the middle of being investigated, Fatima sat at her kitchen table at home in Nigeria with her sister and considered her options. One particularly attractive option was a job offer at the United Nations – but that would have meant an end to the counter-radicalisation educational and counselling work she had poured herself into, and that was core to her personal values.

Reflecting on the initiatives her team had started at the NSA, she was aware of significant gaps in the provision of service; areas in which she had wanted to intervene but was prevented by a lack of time or funds. One such area was using trauma as a tool for peace-building.

She decided to be true to her values and continue her work in counter-radicalisation education in the only way now open to her: by doing it herself. She founded her own organisation, the Neem Foundation, and recruited her entire NSA team, now dismantled, to work for it.

At first it appeared the new organisation would attract the necessary support from the humanitarian agencies in the field: "When we left and started Neem, we had a lot of supporters who didn't believe the charges and backed us up," she recalls.

Unfortunately, and for reasons that remain a mystery to her to this day, a previous hire at the NSA briefed Neem's potential partners against her and all the offers of funding dried up. It was a very tough time: "We had no income [...] At one point, a big backer called and said, 'We can't work with you anymore because we've been told that you're politically compromised.' That was a big blow for me personally. But I kept my head down – I was determined that I was going to make Neem work, regardless of the obstacles that they put in my way. And whenever I went to the north-east, I saw people in need and I just focused on them and what we could achieve. But, on the whole, that first year was very, very stressful because my reputation was on the line."

It wasn't until a divisional head of UNICEF called Fatima personally to tell her that she didn't believe the accusations, and that she had faith in her fundamental honesty because she had worked with her for many years, and that she was going to fund Fatima anyway, that Neem truly got off the ground. "Because UNICEF was not afraid to fund us, other funders also came on board. That's how we started in the very early days. But it was very, very tough for me.