

A Vicious Cycle: How Poverty Fuels Crime, Conflict, and Insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the complex connections between poverty, crime, conflict, and insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria, a region grappling with a multifaceted crisis characterised by mass displacement, youth radicalisation, and diminishing state authority. By employing a mixed-methods approach that includes surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions throughout Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Katsina States, the study indicates that poverty acts as both a driver and a result of the insecurity crisis. Quantitative analysis establishes that unemployment, low income, and inadequate education are significant predictors of susceptibility to criminal activities or victimisation. Qualitative findings emphasise that economic hardship, climate-related stress, and institutional neglect contribute to cycles of violence. Based on Human Security and Structural Violence frameworks, the results highlight the necessity for integrated, pro-poor development initiatives aimed at breaking this cycle. The study concludes with policy recommendations that focus on revitalising rural areas, creating jobs, improving educational access, adapting to climate change challenges, and fostering inclusive governance. To attain lasting peace in Northwestern Nigeria, addressing the fundamental causes of poverty and rebuilding citizens' trust in their government will be essential.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Northwestern Nigeria has transformed into a landscape of complex insecurity, marked by rising violence, rampant banditry, mass kidnappings, intercommunal strife, and a general collapse of law and order. Previously recognised for its abundant agricultural legacy and peaceful coexistence, the region—comprising states such as Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Katsina—now ranks among the most perilous in Nigeria, with thousands of lives lost and communities uprooted (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2023). While many studies have concentrated on the security aspects of this crisis, there has been a lack of focus on the underlying structural factors, especially poverty, and their intricate relationship with crime and conflict.

Poverty remains a significant developmental challenge in Nigeria (Magaji et al., 2022). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) reports that over 133 million Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, with the North-Western states contributing disproportionately to these statistics. Issues such as high illiteracy rates, limited access to healthcare and education, youth unemployment, and infrastructural neglect have collectively entrenched economic deprivation in the area (Magaji, 2002). These socio-economic deficits are not simply markers of underdevelopment; they are fundamental causes of insecurity. When essential needs are unmet and legitimate pathways to economic betterment are obstructed, individuals—especially marginalised youth—may resort to crime or armed violence (Jafaru, Magaji, & Abdullahi, 2024) or may become susceptible to manipulation by extremist or criminal entities (Akinola, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

Additionally, the impacts of climate change—particularly desertification and unpredictable rainfall—have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of farming communities (Yakubu, Magaji, & Magaji, 2025). Farmers and herders are increasingly clashing over access to shrinking natural resources, heightening local grievances and igniting cycles of retaliatory attacks (Salihu, 2022). In many regions, state institutions are either weak, absent, or lacking public trust, creating a void that bandits and armed groups exploit

(United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). This not only hastens the disintegration of social order but also perpetuates a vicious cycle in which poverty incites insecurity, and insecurity, in turn, exacerbates poverty through displacement, market disruptions, and school closures (Magaji, 2008).

The primary assertion of this research is that poverty is not merely a backdrop to insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria; rather, it is a key, causal factor. By examining the relationship between economic deprivation and crime and conflict, the study offers crucial insights into the dynamics that perpetuate the crisis and proposes solutions focused on sustainable development. Rooted in Human Security Theory and Structural Violence Theory, this paper examines how structural disparities, marginalisation, and institutional neglect serve as catalysts for violence and criminal activity in the area. Consequently, the study examines the socio-economic origins of insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria to address the following questions: In what ways does poverty facilitate the rise and continuation of criminal behaviour and conflicts? What are the interconnections between insecurity and underdevelopment? Furthermore, what policy measures are necessary to disrupt this cycle?

This investigation transcends academic interest. It is directly relevant to Nigeria's efforts toward fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 1 (No Poverty), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Ignoring the relationship between poverty and insecurity may not only extend instability in Northwestern Nigeria but also contribute to wider national and regional insecurity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Definitions

Gaining a clear understanding of the interrelated issues of poverty, crime, conflict, and insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria necessitates precise and contextually relevant definitions. These issues do not exist independently; instead, they are interconnected factors that reinforce each other, creating a destructive cycle that perpetuates underdevelopment, instability, and humanitarian crises in the region.

Poverty: Poverty encompasses more than just a lack of financial resources; it is a complex phenomenon that includes deprivation of access to education, healthcare, clean drinking water, adequate housing, and social involvement (Shaba et al., 2018). As noted by Magaji (2007), poverty signifies not only financial hardship but also a violation of human dignity and self-determination. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) shares this perspective by defining poverty as a “denial of choices and opportunities,” which significantly hinders the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), more than 63% of Nigerians experience multidimensional poverty. The Northwestern states, including Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina, and certain parts of Kaduna, consistently report the highest poverty rates. These regions endure significant shortcomings in access to quality education, primary healthcare, sanitation, employment, and infrastructure (Musa, Ismail, & Magaji, 2024). The implications of poverty extend beyond low income to include social exclusion, food insecurity, and diminished human capital, rendering the population especially susceptible to exploitation by criminal and insurgent groups (Aluko & Magaji, 2020).

Crime: Crime refers to deliberate actions that breach established laws and jeopardise the rights and welfare of individuals or communities. In Northwestern Nigeria, criminal activities have surged to alarming levels, ranging from minor theft to sophisticated transnational crimes. Akinola (2021) characterises crime in this area as being motivated by both desperation and organised opportunism. High youth unemployment, poverty, and inadequate state presence in rural areas create an environment conducive to the proliferation of banditry, cattle rustling, armed robbery, arms trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom.

Additionally, certain criminal factions now function as proto-militias, displaying established leadership, revenue-sharing frameworks, and regional dominance, which complicate the ability of security forces to counteract them effectively. The ineffectiveness of law enforcement institutions, coupled with extensive poverty, enables criminal activities to thrive without oversight, especially in unregulated territories and forested landscapes.

Conflict: Conceptually, conflict arises from the pursuit of irreconcilable interests or objectives by various groups or individuals, often manifesting in violence or protracted tensions (Zailani, Magaji, & Jafaru, 2025). Within the Northwestern region, conflict manifests in several forms: intercommunal violence, clashes between farmers and herders, ethnic disputes, and violent struggles among armed bandit factions. Salihu (2022) notes that conflicts in this area are intensified by environmental challenges, such as desertification and resource scarcity, which escalate tensions between settled agricultural communities and nomadic herders.

Additionally, the commercialisation of violence has emerged as a key characteristic of unrest in the Northwest. Discontented factions frequently engage in conflict not solely to voice their grievances but also as a means of generating income through extortion, livestock theft, and abduction. This creates a scenario in which conflict becomes entrenched and cycles of revenge are accepted as normal behaviour.

Insecurity is characterised by a pervasive feeling of vulnerability and dread, accompanied by a lack of frameworks to ensure safety and stability (Magaji, Musa, & Salisu, 2022). It includes both tangible threats (actual acts of violence) and intangible experiences (feelings of fear and powerlessness). In the Northwestern area, insecurity is deeply ingrained in weak governance structures, open borders, failing security systems, and the breakdown of social contracts (Abiola, Magaji, & Musa, 2025). According to the United

Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), the region has turned into a hotspot for human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms distribution, further aggravating insecurity.

Insecurity influences every facet of life in the Northwest: farmers find it difficult to farm, children are pulled out of school for safety reasons, and entire communities face displacement. This phenomenon creates a self-perpetuating cycle; as insecurity escalates, development initiatives decline, leading to worsening conditions for poverty and crime (Adekoya, Magaji, & Ismail, 2025).

Interconnections: A Destructive Cycle - The intersection of these four factors—poverty, crime, conflict, and insecurity—creates a multifaceted feedback loop:

- i. Poverty contributes to crime: Those without livelihood options often turn to criminal activities for survival.
- ii. Crime provokes conflict: As organised crime groups battle over territory and resources, violent confrontations intensify.
- iii. Conflict heightens insecurity: Violent actions displace populations, damage infrastructure, and weaken governance.
- iv. Insecurity perpetuates poverty: Fear and violence deter agricultural productivity, disrupt education, restrict market access, and exacerbate humanitarian crises.

This cycle, if left unaddressed through comprehensive and sustainable measures, continues to hinder development in Northwestern Nigeria. It also compromises Nigeria's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in two interrelated theories: Human Security Theory and the Theory of Structural Violence.

Human Security Theory, formulated in the post-Cold War context, broadens the concept of security beyond military threats to encompass risks to individuals' well-being, dignity, and livelihoods (UNDP, 1994). It includes economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (Enaberue, Musa, & Magaji, 2024). Within the framework of Northwestern Nigeria, this theory asserts that widespread poverty, lack of employment, and the failure of public services diminish human security, rendering individuals susceptible to violence, crime, and civil unrest.

Structural Violence Theory, introduced by Johan Galtung (1969), elucidates how social structures and institutions indirectly inflict harm by restricting access to fundamental needs and opportunities. Structural violence is evident in chronic poverty, educational exclusion, land dispossession, and political marginalisation—all conditions widespread in Northwestern Nigeria. This theory elucidates why insecurity persists even in the absence of overt conflict and why certain groups are more susceptible to violence.

Together, these theories form a comprehensive framework for comprehending how deeply entrenched structural inequities precipitate cycles of violence and instability in the region.

2.3 Empirical Review

Empirical investigations have increasingly shed light on the complex relationships between poverty and insecurity, particularly in Northwestern Nigeria. An expanding body of evidence suggests that poverty does not merely coexist with crime, conflict, and insecurity but actively drives and sustains these issues through structural deprivation, weakened institutions, and eroding social cohesion.

Okoli and Ugwu (2019) performed a comprehensive study in Zamfara State, revealing a significant link between elevated poverty levels and the rise of rural banditry. Their research indicated that economically disadvantaged youths—often lacking education and job opportunities—were particularly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups that offered financial incentives, security, and social recognition. The study highlighted that in such environments, engaging in criminal activities is often viewed as a pragmatic means of survival rather than a departure from societal expectations.

In a related study, Olanrewaju et al. (2021) investigated armed violence in Katsina and Sokoto states, pinpointing youth unemployment and inadequate service delivery as the primary catalysts. Their research indicated that ineffective governance and prolonged neglect by state authorities have fostered conditions conducive to the flourishing of armed groups and criminal networks. Young people, in particular, are left with few legitimate avenues for economic engagement, pushing them toward insurgent, bandit, or extremist factions.

A comprehensive study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) illustrated that households in the lowest income bracket were markedly more likely to suffer from violence, extortion, and displacement compared to those in higher income brackets. The report characterised this as indicative of systemic inequality and institutional breakdown, asserting that Nigeria's insecurity is closely linked to patterns of socio-economic exclusion.

Environmental challenges have also surfaced as significant factors contributing to conflict and insecurity. Salihu (2022) investigated the impacts of climate change in Sokoto and Kebbi, noting how desertification, unpredictable rainfall, and diminishing agricultural land heightened competition for resources between farmers and herders. These resource-related conflicts frequently spiral into prolonged communal violence, displacing countless individuals and exacerbating food insecurity.

The International Crisis Group (2023) highlighted how the escalation of poverty and social exclusion has created gaps in governance. Non-state entities such as bandit groups and local vigilantism have filled these voids, providing basic forms of protection, conflict

resolution, and even tax collection. While these groups often take advantage of low-income populations, they also gain their support by delivering fundamental state functions, thus undermining state authority and its exclusive use of force.

Mohammed and Lawal (2023) conducted surveys with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Zamfara and Kebbi States, finding that most displaced families had previously lacked access to formal education, financial resources, or steady income. Their precarious situation rendered them victims and, at times, participants in localised cycles of violence, particularly when young males joined armed groups as a means of survival.

In one of the rare studies addressing gender-specific issues, Aremu and Waziri (2022) investigated how poverty affects female-headed households in conflict-affected regions of Sokoto. Their findings indicated that women and girls are disproportionately affected by both poverty and insecurity, often becoming targets of sexual violence, abduction, and economic exploitation. The absence of income-generating opportunities for women was closely linked to an increased risk of gender-based violence and exploitation by insurgent and criminal groups.

Ibrahim and Danladi (2021) examined the impact of weak social institutions in conflict-prone rural territories of Katsina and Zamfara. Their research highlighted that poverty has eroded traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution and social regulation, rendering communities more susceptible to infiltration by armed groups. Where elders, religious leaders, and local officials once arbitrated disputes, there is now heightened distrust, often supplanted by militarised methods of justice and retaliation.

Musa and Garba (2024) employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the relationship between poverty and radicalisation among youth in Northern Nigeria. Their study found that many young individuals involved in religious extremism or criminal militias were driven not primarily by ideological beliefs, but by promises of income, food, and a sense of community. This discovery challenges traditional security frameworks that overlook the material factors contributing to violence. A research project conducted by Bello and Sulaiman (2023) examined how rural inhabitants cope with conflict in Birnin Gwari (Kaduna State) and Shinkafi (Zamfara). They discovered that many rural inhabitants lacked institutional support and had to depend on informal networks or migration. However, these coping methods often did not tackle the underlying issues and sometimes exposed migrants to additional risks, such as human trafficking or forced labour in urban slums.

Moreover, Aliyu and Hassan (2023) reported that increasing food prices and decreasing agricultural productivity in Northwestern Nigeria, driven by insecurity, have led to a feedback loop: conflict disrupts agriculture, which worsens hunger and poverty, thereby provoking further conflict. Their quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant correlation between declining farm income and increasing local crime rates.

Lastly, Usman and Abdullahi (2024) examined how social capital can mitigate the impacts of poverty-induced insecurity. Their results indicated that communities with strong cooperative networks and trust in local institutions exhibited greater resilience to conflict escalation. In contrast, those with weakened social ties—often due to ethnic tensions or historical grievances—were more prone to descend into violence when faced with economic stress.

Together, these studies reinforce that the link between poverty and insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria is not merely coincidental but rather causal and multidirectional. Poverty generates vulnerability, undermines institutional credibility, and incites violence. Conversely, insecurity ravages local economies, disrupts the provision of services, and ensnares communities in cycles of deprivation. To break this destructive cycle, it will be necessary to implement comprehensive, multisectoral strategies that concurrently tackle economic marginalisation, fragile governance, environmental pressures, and social disintegration.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research utilised a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the complex interplay among poverty, crime, conflict, and insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria. This approach was chosen to enhance understanding of how structural poverty contributes to violence and instability, while also capturing the personal experiences of the affected communities.

3.2 Study Area

The study was carried out in four states of Northwestern Nigeria that are prone to conflict: Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Katsina. These states were chosen based on reported instances of violent crime, elevated poverty levels, and a high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), as documented by the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) and security monitoring agencies.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The target population encompassed:

- i. Community members (including victims of violence and displacement),
- ii. Youths (both employed and unemployed),
- iii. Local leaders and traditional authorities,
- iv. Representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs), and
- v. Government and security officials.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants for qualitative interviews, ensuring that individuals with pertinent experiences related to crime, poverty, or conflict were included. For the quantitative aspect, 400 respondents (100 from each state) were chosen using a multistage sampling technique, which included:

1. Identifying Local Government Areas (LGAs) with high levels of insecurity,
2. Randomly selecting wards within each LGA, and
3. Systematically choosing households and respondents within the wards.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

3.4.1 Quantitative Data

Structured questionnaires were distributed to gather information on socioeconomic characteristics, perceptions of insecurity, experiences with crime/conflict, and access to social services. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert scale questions and was pre-tested for clarity and reliability.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were gathered through:

- i. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with local chiefs, security personnel, and development workers,
- ii. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth organisations, women's groups, and IDPs,
- iii. Field observations of displacement camps, security checkpoints, and abandoned agricultural communities.

A total of 20 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, with two discussions held in each state. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and discussions were recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated into English as needed.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Questionnaire data were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and percentages, summarised the demographic information. To investigate the connection between poverty indicators (income, employment, education) and vulnerability to crime or insecurity, inferential analysis, particularly logistic regression, was employed.

3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interviews and discussion transcripts were analysed through thematic content analysis. Responses were coded manually and organised into themes that represented:

- i. The causes of poverty and insecurity,
- ii. Coping strategies,
- iii. Views on government responses,
- iv. Local initiatives for resilience.

The findings were compared with secondary sources, including reports from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), and various development organisations.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from a university-affiliated research ethics committee. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality, and either written or verbal informed consent was collected prior to conducting interviews. Efforts were made to prevent retraumatizing victims of violence, and interviews took place in secure, neutral settings.

3.7 Limitations of the Study

Despite its valuable contributions, the study is constrained by:

- i. Accessibility issues in high-conflict areas,
- ii. Potential response biases linked to fear or trauma,
- iii. Limited applicability beyond the chosen states.

Nevertheless, the triangulation and strong methodological frameworks bolstered the credibility and validity of the findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 400 individuals took part in the quantitative survey across four Northwestern states: Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Katsina. The age distribution indicated that 72% of the participants were between 18 and 35 years old, indicating a youthful demographic. The gender breakdown showed 58% male and 42% female participants. When examining educational qualifications, 34% lacked formal education, 41% had only completed primary education, and 12% had attended post-secondary institutions. Remarkably, 65% of the respondents reported being unemployed or working in the informal sector, and 74% lived below the national poverty line.

These figures highlight widespread structural deprivation, particularly among younger populations, indicating a demographic highly susceptible to economic destitution, criminal recruitment, and social turmoil—a conclusion supported by Ibrahim and Abubakar (2023), who observed a strong link between youth poverty and increasing banditry in Sokoto.

4.2 Thematic Findings from Qualitative Data

The analysis of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) revealed the following main themes:

4.2.1 Poverty as a Catalyst for Crime and Recruitment into Armed Groups

Participants from all states recognised insufficient livelihood opportunities as the primary factor driving youth involvement in banditry, theft, and kidnapping. Respondents from Zamfara and Katsina specifically mentioned that many young men were lured by armed groups with promises of financial rewards and social advancement, often earning more than they could through agricultural or low-paying jobs.

“They approach the village and say, ‘Why endure hardship when you can make money quickly by joining us?’ Some young men enlist because they are fed up with begging or farming that yields no profit.” — FGD participant, Bungudu LGA, Zamfara State.

This finding aligns with previous research conducted by Okoli and Ugwu (2019) and Olanrewaju et al. (2021) on the economic foundations of rural banditry.

4.2.2 Education and Institutional Neglect

Participants in Kebbi and Sokoto expressed concerns about the decline of the education systems in rural areas. Numerous schools had shut down due to insecurity, shortages of teachers, and the fear of abduction. Consequently, many young individuals were deprived of educational opportunities, heightening their risk of criminal exploitation.

“Children are no longer attending school because the roads are unsafe, and teachers have fled. When you take away their education, you pave the way for future bandits.” — KII, Local Education Officer, Sokoto South LGA.

This observation is consistent with Bwala et al. (2023) and the UNODC (2023), which both highlight the relationship between insecurity and the deterioration of state infrastructure, especially in education.

4.2.3 Resource Conflict and Climate Pressures

Focus group discussions in Kebbi and Katsina revealed that climate-related scarcity is a major driver of conflict. Desertification and unpredictable rainfall have decreased arable land, leading to disputes between farmers and herders. In specific communities, these resource-related tensions were exploited by external forces to provoke larger-scale violence.

“The land is no longer sufficient for both our cattle and their farms. Sometimes they attack; sometimes we respond. It has turned into a cycle of bloodshed.” — FGD respondent, Argungu LGA, Kebbi State.

This theme corresponds with Salihu (2022) and Yahaya et al. (2022), who recognised environmental pressure as a subtle yet significant exacerbator of conflict.

4.2.4 Perception of State Failure and Local Alternatives

Numerous participants voiced a lack of faith in government actions. In several communities, non-state actors—including bandits, vigilante groups, and even religious organisations—were perceived as more attuned to the community's needs than official authorities.

“We only see the government during election time. However, the bandits? They are here every day. Some even help resolve our disputes now.” — KII, Community Leader, Batsari LGA, Katsina State.

This resonates with the findings of the International Crisis Group (2023), which noted that gaps in governance have led to the rise of informal systems of authority and protection, often rooted in violence.

4.3 Quantitative Analysis

A logistic regression analysis was performed to identify significant predictors of vulnerability to criminal activities or victimisation. The dependent variable was coded as 1 (experienced crime or enlisted in armed group) or 0 (no experience), while the independent variables encompassed income level, employment status, education, and history of displacement.

Table 1: Logistic Regression Results

Predictor Variable	B Coefficient	p-value	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))
Low income	0.921	0.001**	2.512
No formal education	0.740	0.004**	2.096
Unemployment	1.034	0.000**	2.812
Displacement (IDP)	0.688	0.012*	1.990

*Significant at $p < 0.05$; **Significant at $p < 0.01$

The model indicates that unemployment and low income serve as the most significant predictors of vulnerability to crime and violence. Individuals lacking formal education are more than twice as likely to become victims of or engage in insecurity-related

activities. Additionally, displacement resulting from conflict has a marked effect, highlighting how cycles of violence create further vulnerability.

4.4 Discussion: A Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Insecurity

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative data illustrate a self-perpetuating loop: poverty leads to disenfranchisement, which in turn fuels criminal behaviour and conflict, resulting in further poverty through displacement, infrastructure destruction, and market disruption.

- i. Poverty → Recruitment into crime
- ii. Crime → Conflict and displacement
- iii. Displacement → Loss of livelihood and education
- iv. Loss of education → Perpetuation of poverty

This detrimental cycle aligns with the Structural Violence Theory, illustrating how unequal access to resources and opportunities perpetuates indirect yet systemic harm. It also supports the Human Security Framework, which identifies threats to livelihoods, education, and dignity as essential to comprehending the security crisis.

Furthermore, the decline of state legitimacy—due to weak institutions, corruption, and neglect—has allowed non-state actors to assume governance roles, often resulting in violent outcomes. The influence of climate change further complicates the security context, intensifying disputes over land and water while overwhelming traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that addressing insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria requires more than militarised responses; it necessitates a comprehensive, development-focused strategy. The strong link between poverty indicators (unemployment, low education, income deprivation) and susceptibility to crime and conflict suggests that poverty alleviation should be a fundamental aspect of national security policy.

Initially, the findings underscore the need to integrate economic development and human security into counterinsurgency strategies. Initiatives for job creation, youth skills development, and community-driven enterprises should be viewed not solely as social measures but as strategic responses to insecurity.

Moreover, the state's inability to provide essential public services—such as education, healthcare, and protection—has widened the legitimacy gap, allowing criminal organisations and informal actors to assume quasi-governance roles. This emphasises the necessity of restoring state authority in rural regions, not just through police or military presence, but via sustainable governance, justice services, and fundamental infrastructure.

Furthermore, the connection between climate stress and conflict underscores the importance of policies that support climate-resilient agriculture and effective natural resource management. Strategies that regulate land access, encourage irrigation, and mitigate desertification will help alleviate tensions between farmers and herders while safeguarding their livelihoods.

Lastly, interventions should be gender-sensitive, acknowledging that women disproportionately endure the consequences of conflict and displacement. Empowering women economically and politically can bolster household resilience and enhance community stability.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that poverty is not simply a passive background to the insecurity affecting Northwestern Nigeria; it is a crucial and active factor. Through statistical analysis and accounts from interviews and focus groups, the study reveals that economic hardship, institutional neglect, and climate-related challenges are driving a destructive cycle of crime, conflict, and insecurity.

The primary indicators of engagement in or exposure to violence include unemployment, a lack of formal education, low income, and displacement—all reflections of multidimensional poverty. As insecurity increases, it dismantles educational systems, ruins livelihoods, and forces populations to relocate, perpetuating the very poverty that initiated the cycle.

For Nigeria to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—especially SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)—policymakers must break this cycle using integrated, inclusive, and locally informed strategies.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study's findings, the following significant recommendations are suggested:

1. Embrace a National Security Strategy Focused on Poverty Alleviation

Policymakers should incorporate anti-poverty initiatives into both national and local security frameworks, particularly in high-risk areas such as the Northwest.

2. Boost Investments in Rural Infrastructure and Educational Opportunities

Revitalise educational institutions in rural areas, enhance vocational training centres, and develop agricultural value chains to

empower the youth and diminish the economic allure of criminal activities.

3. Expand Employment and Livelihood Initiatives

Launch focused youth employment programs, support for microenterprises, and cooperative financing options to generate respectable and legal income opportunities.

4. Foster Inclusive Local Governance

Reinforce traditional and community leadership entities in sensitive conflict contexts to mediate disagreements and build confidence in official systems.

5. Integrate Climate-Resilient Development Strategies

Allocate resources towards sustainable agriculture, improved water access, and reforestation efforts to alleviate environmental conditions that can lead to conflict.

6. Strengthen Gender-Inclusive Recovery Efforts

Assist women-led enterprises, safeguard displaced women and children, and ensure women's participation in peacebuilding activities.

7. Encourage Community-Driven Peacebuilding Initiatives

Provide logistical and legal support to local peace committees, facilitate inter-communal discussions, and uphold traditional methods of conflict resolution.

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