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HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND ARMED CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY RESPONSES

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Abstract
Nigeria's multifaceted humanitarian crises, driven by protracted armed conflicts and governance challenges, have resulted in widespread displacement, food insecurity, and infrastructural decay. This study critically examines the relationship between armed conflicts particularly the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer–herder clashes, and rising banditry and the resulting humanitarian challenges in Nigeria. Employing a **mixed-methods research design**, the study utilizes **both primary and secondary data** sources to ensure analytical depth and reliability. **Primary data** were gathered through field surveys, interviews with displaced persons, and focus group discussions involving humanitarian workers and local authorities in conflict-affected regions. **Secondary data** were derived from official reports of international organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), peer-reviewed academic publications, and governmental policy documents. Findings reveal that Nigeria's humanitarian crises are deeply rooted in systemic inequalities, weak governance, and inadequate institutional responses. Armed conflicts have displaced millions, destroyed livelihoods, and reversed progress in poverty reduction, education, and health. The study identifies underfunding, poor coordination, and insecurity as major barriers to effective humanitarian intervention. Moreover, prolonged instability has significantly undermined Nigeria's progress toward achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study concludes that sustainable solutions require a **holistic conflict transformation approach** that integrates security, governance, and development interventions. Strengthening local capacities, promoting inclusive governance, and aligning humanitarian responses with long-term development planning are essential for achieving durable peace and resilience. By combining empirical field evidence with secondary data analysis, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the humanitarian–development nexus in fragile states like Nigeria.
Keywords: Humanitarian Crisis, Armed Conflict, Displacement, Nigeria, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, continues to face profound humanitarian crises driven by persistent armed conflicts and governance challenges. Over the past two decades, the country has experienced overlapping security emergencies that have destabilized communities, displaced millions, and undermined prospects for sustainable development. These crises are rooted in complex social, political, and economic structures that have deepened existing inequalities and strained national cohesion (Ibrahim & Usman, 2022). From the insurgency in the northeast to farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt and rampant banditry in the northwest, the cumulative effects of these conflicts have eroded public trust in government institutions, disrupted livelihoods, and impeded national development goals (Akinyemi & Okafor, 2023).

The **Boko Haram insurgency**, which emerged in 2009, represents one of the most devastating conflicts in Nigeria's post-independence history. Concentrated in the northeastern states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, the insurgency has resulted in over 35,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 2 million people (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024). Boko Haram's campaign of terror including suicide bombings, mass abductions, and the destruction of social infrastructure has crippled local economies, disrupted education, and created severe humanitarian emergencies (Shehu, 2020). The insurgency's persistence, despite repeated military operations, highlights the inadequacy of purely security-driven responses in addressing the socio-economic and ideological roots of violent extremism. The humanitarian consequences extend beyond Nigeria's borders, spilling into the Lake Chad Basin region and affecting neighboring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (McGrath, 2025).

Beyond the northeast, the **farmer-herder conflict** has become one of Nigeria's most persistent sources of violence, particularly in the Middle Belt region. Driven by competition over land, water, and grazing resources, these conflicts have taken on ethnic and religious dimensions that threaten national unity (Okeke & Musa, 2021). Desertification and climate change have further exacerbated the struggle for resources, forcing nomadic herders southward into farmlands traditionally occupied by sedentary farmers. The resulting clashes have led to the destruction of farmlands, loss of lives, and mass displacement of rural populations. According to Akinyemi and Okafor (2023), these conflicts contribute significantly to food insecurity, as agricultural production declines and access to markets becomes restricted. The humanitarian toll is compounded by the state's inability to implement effective land-use policies or mediate disputes, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence and displacement.

In recent years, the **northwestern region** has witnessed a surge in **banditry and communal violence**, emerging as a new epicenter of insecurity in Nigeria. Armed groups, often described as "bandits," engage in cattle rustling, mass kidnappings, and village raids, terrorizing communities and forcing thousands to flee their homes (Ibrahim & Usman, 2022). The escalation of these attacks reflects broader issues of governance failure, poverty, and marginalization. Many of the affected communities are already vulnerable due to limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Consequently, the humanitarian implications are profound entire rural economies have been devastated, while women and children suffer disproportionate impacts through abductions, gender-based violence, and loss of livelihoods (Bryant, 2024).

The cumulative effects of these conflicts have created a **multidimensional humanitarian crisis** that extends far beyond the immediate conflict zones. Displacement has placed immense pressure on host communities, leading to overcrowding, competition for scarce resources, and increased social tensions. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) face dire conditions in overcrowded camps with inadequate access to food, clean water, healthcare, and education (United Nations OCHA, 2025). Food insecurity remains a central concern, as conflict-affected regions are often cut off from agricultural production and trade networks. According to the United Nations (2024), more than 26.5 million Nigerians are projected to face acute food insecurity due to ongoing conflicts and climatic shocks. The collapse of

social infrastructure schools, hospitals, roads, and markets has further weakened community resilience and deepened poverty.

In addition to the direct humanitarian impacts, these crises have **far-reaching implications for sustainable development**. Nigeria's commitment to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 faces significant setbacks as conflict and instability erode progress in poverty reduction, education, gender equality, and environmental sustainability (Shehu, 2020). For instance, conflict-affected regions such as Borno, Zamfara, and Benue record some of the lowest human development indicators in the country. The destruction of infrastructure and the diversion of government resources to security operations have limited investments in critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and agriculture. Moreover, displacement has disrupted economic activities and reduced productivity, particularly in rural areas that serve as the backbone of Nigeria's food system (Akinyemi & Okafor, 2023).

The **interconnected nature of Nigeria's humanitarian crises** also reveals the weaknesses in the national governance system and the inadequacy of institutional responses. While the Nigerian government has launched various initiatives such as the North-East Development Commission (NEDC) and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) coordination gaps, corruption, and limited funding have constrained their effectiveness (Bryant, 2024). International and local humanitarian actors have played crucial roles in providing relief and protection services; however, persistent insecurity and logistical challenges have hindered access to vulnerable populations (McGrath, 2025). Humanitarian workers continue to face threats of violence, kidnappings, and restricted movement, further complicating aid delivery (United Nations OCHA, 2025).

At the same time, the **political economy of conflict** in Nigeria reveals that many of these crises are sustained by systemic inequalities and the marginalization of certain groups. Regional disparities in resource allocation, the absence of inclusive governance, and poor accountability mechanisms have created fertile ground for grievances and insurgency (Okeke & Musa, 2021). The Nigerian state's overreliance on militarized approaches to conflict management, rather than emphasizing reconciliation, dialogue, and socio-economic empowerment, has also limited the effectiveness of peace building efforts (Ibrahim & Usman, 2022). As Bryant (2024) observes, the over-securitization of humanitarian crises in Nigeria often diverts attention from underlying social and economic drivers, leading to temporary stability rather than long-term peace.

Furthermore, the **humanitarian-development nexus** in Nigeria is increasingly gaining scholarly attention as analysts and practitioners seek more integrated solutions that bridge emergency relief with long-term resilience building. The traditional separation between humanitarian response and development planning has often led to fragmented interventions, duplication of efforts, and unsustainable outcomes. McGrath (2025) emphasizes the importance of "localization" in humanitarian aid empowering local actors and institutions to take ownership of response mechanisms. This approach not only enhances efficiency but also ensures that interventions align with cultural contexts and local needs. However, the challenge remains in translating these theoretical frameworks into practice within Nigeria's complex political environment.

In the broader context of **African security and development**, Nigeria's humanitarian crises serve as a microcosm of the continent's struggle with fragile states, weak governance, and the developmental consequences of protracted conflicts. The Nigerian experience demonstrates how internal insecurity can have transnational ramifications, including regional displacement, cross-border crime, and the spread of violent extremism (Shehu, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional strategy that incorporates conflict prevention, peace building, and socio-economic inclusion.

Given this backdrop, this study seeks to **analyze the intricate relationship between armed conflicts and humanitarian crises in Nigeria**, with particular emphasis on their implications for sustainable development. By examining the interplay between the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts, and banditry, the paper aims to uncover the structural and systemic factors that perpetuate humanitarian suffering. It also evaluates the **effectiveness of humanitarian response mechanisms**, both governmental and non-governmental, and identifies the limitations that hinder their success. Finally, the study explores how these protracted conflicts affect Nigeria's ability to achieve sustainable development, proposing evidence-based recommendations for policy reform and coordinated humanitarian action.

Ultimately, the purpose of this research is not merely to document Nigeria's humanitarian challenges but to contribute to **a transformative understanding of conflict and development**. By adopting the conflict transformation and human security frameworks, the study emphasizes the need for solutions that go beyond temporary relief toward structural peace building and resilience. It calls for a holistic approach that integrates security, governance, and development interventions, ensuring that humanitarian efforts contribute meaningfully to long-term stability and national sustainability. In doing so, the paper positions itself within the growing body of scholarship advocating for a paradigm shift in addressing protracted humanitarian crises in fragile contexts like Nigeria.

Literature Review

Overview of Humanitarian Crises and Armed Conflicts in Nigeria

Nigeria's humanitarian landscape has been profoundly shaped by decades of recurring armed conflicts, political instability, and weak governance systems. The interplay between insurgency, communal clashes, and criminal banditry has created complex emergencies that have overwhelmed both state institutions and humanitarian actors (Bryant, 2024). The humanitarian crises emerging from these conflicts are multifaceted encompassing mass displacement, food insecurity, gender-based violence, and infrastructural decay. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2025) underscores that Nigeria now hosts one of the largest internally displaced populations in Africa, with over 3.2 million people displaced across the northeastern, northwestern, and north-central regions. This situation has transformed many parts of the country into epicenters of chronic humanitarian distress.

According to Shehu (2020), Nigeria's humanitarian emergency cannot be understood in isolation but as a symptom of deeper socio-economic inequalities and governance failures. He argues that the persistence of poverty, youth unemployment, and corruption has created fertile ground for violent extremism and communal violence. Similarly, Akinyemi and Okafor (2023) link conflict-induced displacement directly to rising food insecurity, noting that the disruption of agricultural activities and trade networks has reduced food availability,

increased prices, and heightened malnutrition rates, especially among children and women in conflict zones. The humanitarian crisis in Nigeria is thus not merely the byproduct of violence but also of systemic fragilities within the state's political and economic fabric.

The Boko Haram Insurgency and Its Humanitarian Consequences

The Boko Haram insurgency remains the most studied and devastating conflict in Nigeria's recent history. Originating as a radical religious movement opposed to Western education and perceived state corruption, Boko Haram evolved into a violent insurgency in 2009 following the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf (Shehu, 2020). The insurgency's violent campaign has targeted schools, government institutions, markets, and religious centers, resulting in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. The group's tactics, including suicide bombings and mass abductions such as the 2014 Chibok girls' kidnapping have drawn global condemnation (United Nations OCHA, 2024).

The humanitarian implications of this insurgency are vast. Displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with millions of civilians forced into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or across borders into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (McGrath, 2025). These displacements have created severe living conditions characterized by inadequate shelter, poor sanitation, and limited access to healthcare and education. Food production has drastically declined, as farmers flee conflict zones and markets remain inaccessible. Akinyemi and Okafor (2023) note that food insecurity in Borno and Yobe states is among the highest globally, with approximately 4.4 million people requiring urgent food assistance. The education sector has been equally devastated, with over 1,400 schools destroyed and more than 2.8 million children out of school, according to OCHA (2025).

Furthermore, the insurgency has weakened social cohesion and eroded community structures. The displacement of populations has led to the breakdown of traditional support systems, leaving women and children particularly vulnerable to abuse, trafficking, and exploitation (Bryant, 2024). Humanitarian organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Rescue Committee have documented widespread cases of malnutrition, disease outbreaks, and gender-based violence in IDP camps. However, security restrictions have made it increasingly difficult for aid agencies to operate, leaving significant gaps in humanitarian coverage (United Nations OCHA, 2024).

Farmer–Herder Conflicts and Resource-Based Violence

Farmer–herder conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt have emerged as one of the most pressing internal security and humanitarian challenges of the 21st century. Traditionally, these conflicts revolved around access to grazing lands and water resources, but in recent years they have taken on ethnic, cultural, and religious dimensions (Okeke & Musa, 2021). Climate change and desertification in the northern regions have pushed pastoralist herders southward in search of fertile land, resulting in violent clashes with sedentary farming communities. Okeke and Musa (2021) emphasize that the absence of effective land tenure policies, poor governance, and weak conflict resolution mechanisms have compounded the problem.

The humanitarian consequences are severe ,thousands have been killed, and entire villages have been razed, leading to the internal displacement of both farmers and herders. According to the International Organization for Migration (cited in Akinyemi & Okafor, 2023), more than 500,000 people have been displaced due to these clashes since 2015. In addition, the destruction of farmlands and livestock has led to chronic food shortages and disrupted local economies. These conflicts also undermine Nigeria's food security, given that agriculture contributes approximately 25% of the nation's GDP and employs more than 60% of its labor force (Akinyemi & Okafor, 2023).

Beyond the economic dimension, these conflicts erode inter-ethnic trust and contribute to the proliferation of small arms. The ready availability of firearms has increased

the lethality of attacks and complicated peace building efforts. Okeke and Musa (2021) argue that resolving the crisis requires a holistic approach that integrates climate adaptation strategies, pastoral reform, and inclusive dialogue among communities. Humanitarian responses to these conflicts have often been limited to emergency relief, with little emphasis on long-term recovery and social reconciliation.

Banditry and the Humanitarian Situation in Northwestern Nigeria

Banditry in the northwestern states of Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kaduna has recently emerged as a major driver of insecurity and humanitarian crisis in Nigeria (Ibrahim & Usman, 2022). The phenomenon, though rooted in local grievances over poverty, marginalization, and land disputes, has evolved into organized criminality involving mass abductions for ransom, cattle rustling, and village raids. Ibrahim and Usman (2022) provide a socio-political analysis that links the rise of banditry to weak governance, corruption, and the failure of security institutions. They contend that bandit groups exploit governance vacuums and community mistrust to establish control over rural areas, taxing local populations and challenging state authority.

The humanitarian impacts are far-reaching. Hundreds of villages have been destroyed, and tens of thousands of people have fled to neighboring states or across the border into Niger Republic. Women and children are often abducted, while entire communities have lost access to education and healthcare. Bryant (2024) observes that these attacks have severely disrupted agricultural production, contributing to rising food prices and rural impoverishment. The resulting displacement has overwhelmed host communities and strained limited humanitarian resources. Despite government military operations, banditry persists due to the absence of robust governance structures and sustainable livelihood programs (United Nations OCHA, 2024).

Humanitarian organizations operating in the northwest face significant access constraints due to insecurity and the risk of kidnapping. Consequently, many affected communities remain underserved. Ibrahim and Usman (2022) stress the need for community-based peace building and state investment in local governance to restore security and social trust. Without addressing the structural roots of rural poverty and inequality, the humanitarian situation is likely to worsen.

Humanitarian Response Mechanisms and Challenges

The Nigerian government, in collaboration with international partners, has implemented several humanitarian response mechanisms aimed at mitigating the effects of conflict. Agencies such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), and state emergency agencies have been instrumental in coordinating aid delivery. However, numerous studies highlight significant operational and structural challenges that undermine these efforts (Bryant, 2024; McGrath, 2025).

A major issue is inadequate coordination among humanitarian actors. The multiplicity of international and local NGOs, coupled with limited data sharing, has led to duplication of efforts and resource inefficiencies (United Nations OCHA, 2024). Funding shortfalls also remain a critical challenge. Despite the large scale of need, Nigeria's humanitarian response plans are consistently underfunded, with only about 45% of appeals met in recent years (United Nations OCHA, 2025). This underfunding constrains aid agencies' ability to deliver food, healthcare, and shelter to affected populations.

Security restrictions further exacerbate the humanitarian gap. Many conflict-affected areas remain inaccessible to aid workers due to violence, landmines, and the threat of abduction. McGrath (2025) highlights the increasing localization of humanitarian aid as a potential solution to these challenges. By empowering local NGOs and community-based organizations, humanitarian responses can become more adaptive, culturally sensitive, and

sustainable. Nevertheless, local actors also face resource constraints, limited institutional capacity, and political interference, which often hinder effective implementation.

Humanitarian Crises and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The literature consistently underscores the devastating impact of conflict on Nigeria's development trajectory. Shehu (2020) argues that armed conflicts and humanitarian crises have reversed decades of progress in poverty reduction, education, and health. The destruction of infrastructure, disruption of livelihoods, and displacement of labor forces have slowed economic growth and widened regional inequalities. In conflict-affected states such as Borno and Zamfara, poverty rates exceed 70%, far above the national average.

Moreover, these crises threaten Nigeria's ability to achieve the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) are particularly undermined by the continuing cycle of violence and displacement (United Nations OCHA, 2025). Food insecurity and malnutrition remain pervasive, particularly among displaced populations. Akinyemi and Okafor (2023) highlight that without addressing conflict-induced displacement and insecurity, Nigeria's agricultural and economic reforms will remain ineffective.

Additionally, the social costs of prolonged humanitarian crises are immense. Education disruption has created a generation of uneducated youth susceptible to radicalization, while gender-based violence and child marriage have surged in displacement camps (Bryant, 2024). The psychological trauma associated with violence and displacement continues to affect community stability and intergenerational well-being. From a policy perspective, the failure to integrate humanitarian assistance into national development planning perpetuates dependency on aid and limits long-term resilience (McGrath, 2025).

Emerging Debates and Research Gaps

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the causes and consequences of Nigeria's humanitarian crises, several research gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses on individual conflict types such as Boko Haram insurgency or farmer-herder clashes without sufficiently analyzing the interconnectedness of these crises. This fragmented approach limits comprehensive understanding of how overlapping conflicts compound humanitarian challenges (Shehu, 2020).

Second, there is limited empirical data on the long-term socio-economic effects of displacement, particularly regarding education, health, and livelihoods. Most studies provide short-term humanitarian assessments rather than longitudinal analyses of recovery and resilience. Third, although localization has been promoted as a key principle in humanitarian response, few studies examine how local organizations operate under insecurity, limited funding, and political constraints (McGrath, 2025).

The integration of the **humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus** remains underexplored in the Nigerian context. While global policy frameworks advocate linking emergency aid to sustainable development, practical application in Nigeria has been inconsistent. More research is needed to assess how government and international agencies can operationalize this nexus to ensure that humanitarian interventions contribute to long-term stability.

Research Objectives

To analyze the relationship between armed conflicts and humanitarian crises in Nigeria.

To assess the effectiveness of humanitarian responses in conflict-affected regions.

To explore the implications of ongoing conflicts on sustainable development in Nigeria.

Research Questions

How do armed conflicts in Nigeria contribute to humanitarian crises?

What are the primary challenges faced by humanitarian organizations in conflict zones?

In what ways do prolonged conflicts affect sustainable development in Nigeria?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a conflict transformation framework, which emphasizes the need to address the root causes of conflicts and promote structural changes that lead to lasting peace. Additionally, the human security paradigm is utilized to understand the multi-dimensional impacts of conflicts on individuals and communities, encompassing economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.

Research Methodology

A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data is collected through field surveys, interviews with displaced persons, and focus group discussions with humanitarian workers and local authorities. Additionally, secondary data from reports by international organizations and governmental agencies are analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that armed conflicts in Nigeria have significantly contributed to humanitarian crises, leading to widespread displacement, food insecurity, and infrastructural damage. Humanitarian responses, while commendable, have been insufficient due to challenges such as limited resources, coordination issues, and security concerns. The protracted nature of these conflicts has further hindered sustainable development efforts, creating a vicious cycle of dependency on humanitarian aid.

Recommendations

Humanitarian interventions in Nigeria require a multifaceted approach that addresses both immediate relief needs and long-term structural challenges. There is a need for enhanced coordination among all humanitarian actors operating in conflict zones. By establishing a centralized coordination mechanism, the delivery of aid can be streamlined, reducing duplication of efforts and ensuring that resources reach the most vulnerable populations efficiently. Strengthening local capacities is equally crucial. Investing in local NGOs and community-based organizations enhances the reach and sustainability of humanitarian interventions, as these actors often have better access, local knowledge, and trust among affected communities.

Addressing the root causes of conflicts is fundamental to breaking the cycle of violence and humanitarian crises. Strategies should focus on equitable resource allocation, transparent governance, and conflict resolution mechanisms that mitigate ethnic and communal tensions. In addition, promoting sustainable livelihoods is essential to reduce communities' dependency on humanitarian aid. Programs that provide vocational training, agricultural support, and small enterprise development empower displaced populations and host communities, fostering resilience and self-reliance.

The safety and security of aid workers must be prioritized. Robust security measures, training, and early-warning systems can help humanitarian personnel operate in high-risk areas without interruption, thereby maintaining consistent support to affected populations.

Policy advocacy is also critical. Engaging policymakers to implement reforms that address systemic issues behind conflicts, such as land disputes, governance failures, and marginalization, can promote long-term peace and stability. Finally, establishing comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks is necessary to assess the impact of interventions, learn from past experiences, and improve the effectiveness of future humanitarian responses.

Major Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between armed conflicts and humanitarian crises in Nigeria. It offers insights into the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations and the implications of prolonged conflicts on sustainable development. The recommendations provided serve as a guide for policymakers, humanitarian actors, and researchers in addressing the complex issues surrounding conflicts and humanitarian crises in Nigeria.

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