



INTRACTABLE CONFLICT AND THE DYNAMICS OF INSECURITY IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

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Abstract

This study investigated intractable conflict and the nexus of insecurity in Nigeria, examining drivers, manifestations, the synergy among conflict systems, and implications for national development. The study utilised a mixed-methods approach, drawing on secondary data from relevant national and international sources such as the National Bureau of Statistics, the World Bank, and the International Crisis Group, supplemented by qualitative content analysis of policy documents and literature. The research identified the following insecurity drivers within Nigeria: weak institutional capacity; socio-economic inequality; youth unemployment; political manipulation (including ethnic and religious sentiments); excessive access to small arms; and ecological degradation. This study also found that government responses are indeed extensive but largely reactive and superficial in nature, tackling violence without addressing the structural roots of conflict. The findings recommended full security sector reforms, the creation of policies for a more inclusive economy, further border control mechanisms, reinforced continuity and governance initiatives, and community-oriented peace-building approaches. This study has both theoretical and practical contributions; it offers a comprehensive framework of insecurity in Nigeria, but also policy-informing frameworks for sustainable peace and national stability.

Keywords: Governance, insecurity, intractable conflict, insecurity dynamics, national security.

1. INTRODUCTION

Intractable conflict in Nigeria manifests as a deeply entrenched and chronic cycle of violence along the lines of structural inequalities, governance failures, and identity-based cleavages (Okoli & Lenshie, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021; World Bank, 2022). The latest reports underline the scale and ferocity of insecurity across the country. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reported an estimated 51.9 million crime incidents in Nigeria between 2023 and 2024, among which over 2.2 million were kidnappings, leading to payments amounting to an estimated ₦2 trillion in ransoms. Likewise, based on Afrobarometer data, 79% of Nigerians consider kidnapping a major national issue and 63% feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods, (Afrobarometer2023). Analysis 2: These trends are compounded by the pervasive poverty and socioeconomic exclusion of the Nigerian population with recent estimates placing over 40% of Nigerians below the poverty line, which drives vulnerability to conflict as well as criminality (World Bank, 2022). The continuation of insecurity is also associated with low institutional capacity, widespread corruption, and limited state reach in rural and conflict-affected areas, which undermine effective conflict management and security provision (OECD 2021).

The nature of insecurity in Nigeria is becoming more fluid and adaptable, with armed groups using a mixture of insurgency, banditry and organised crime. The scale of the crisis is magnified



by humanitarian data: as of 2024, Nigeria had more than 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly from conflict in the North-East and North-West (IOM, 2024). Over 2 million people are also still displaced across the North-East, and children make up a large percentage of the total displaced populations (UNICEF, 2025). In terms of economic and food security cost, up to an estimated 35 million Nigerians will confront acute food insecurity as a consequence of conflict—which disrupted agricultural production and farms, homes (construction) and incomes—by 2026 (World Bank, 2025). In addition, information available from the National Human Rights Commission reflects acute surges of violence, such as the unprecedented increases in killings and kidnappings in 2025 (NHRC, 2025). These patterns illustrate an integrating vicious cycle - where insecurity induces forced migration, socioeconomic breakdown, and social fragmentation, which in turn anchors protracted conflict and makes durable peacebuilding difficult in Nigeria.

Declaring Nigeria, the world capital of extreme poverty and the persistence of intractable conflict and insecurity among other nations generates far-reaching humanitarian, social, and developmental consequences. Mass displacement and death represent one of the most evident consequences. Nigeria also has more than 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) according to the International Organisation for Migration, largely concentrated in the North-East and North-West regions of the country as a result of insurgency, banditry and communal violence (IOM, 2024). The United Nations Children Fund, also known as UNICEF, states that more than 2 million children have experienced insecurity and broken connections with social networks, while many have no access to education, health care or services necessary for the protection of their rights (UNICEF, 2025). As the World Bank states: "Insecurity has compounded an already critical situation in terms of poverty, food insecurity and the impact on agricultural production and rural livelihoods across Nigeria affected by conflict-related disruptions." (World Bank, 2022; 2025). These factors have exacerbated humanitarian needs and diminished community resilience in impacted areas.

The continuing rise of intractable conflict and insecurity in Nigeria underscores the necessity for a more joined-up and holistic understanding of its underlying dynamics. Existing literature on violence in Nigeria has generated myriad studies and analyses of specific forms of violence such as insurgency (Adesoji, 2010; Agbibo, 2013), banditry (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014) and herder–farmer conflicts, yet no well-rounded account exists to explain how these conflict systems interrelate to sustain pervasive national insecurity. Reservation of violence-related datasets for conflict studies has become commonplace, though with ample evidence/indication of violent crime on the rise (National Bureau of Statistics 2024; International Organisation for Migration 2024)—including waves of kidnapping and mass displacement, no study yet aggressively synthesises these diverse patterns in a way that brings clarity through an analytical framework. It is critical for grasping the changing and interconnected character of insecurity in Nigeria, especially with violence increasingly moving away from at any point simply ideological



insurgency toward hybrid types of organised crime.

In addition, this study is necessary because of the inherent limitations of policy responses so far, focusing mainly on reactivity and security as opposed to prevention and structures. According to the World Bank (2022) and International Crisis Group (2021), economic scarcity, unemployment, governance deficits, and social exclusion have not received due prominence in both long-term stratagems and intervention modalities. Also, some major government initiatives, such as community policing and rehabilitation programmes, are under-evaluated, which could have supported an evidence-based development of policymaking. It is therefore essential for this study to act as a bridge between theory and policy, by: 1) presenting usable data-backed overarching analysis that integrates aspects of intractable conflict and insecurity in Nigeria, and 2) identifying ways in which improved policy options can be contextualised for improved effectiveness, sustainability, adaptability or fit-for-purpose intervention

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Intractable Conflict

According to Coleman (2020), intractable conflict is a system of overlapping social, political and economic processes whose composition helps generate violence afresh and sustain it by interdependent feedback loops among different actors. Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) stated that none of the intractable conflicts is poverty or violence on its own, but adaptive systems of insecurity maintained by an umbrella of weak governance, inequality and institutional fragility, rendering resolution hard to achieve with long-term stability ever so elusive. Likewise, the International Crisis Group (2021) argued that there were successive cycles of violence that repeated over time. And importantly, it becomes hybrid forms what includes a combination of insurgency, communal violence and organised crime elements as part of intractable conflict. According to Kriesberg (2021), intractable conflict is a type of persistent disagreement, including repeated escalation, deep suspicion, and the belief that what might be permanent hostility cannot be settled because at least one party defines it as connected to identity and existential questions. Bar-Tal and Hameiri (2022) further underscored its psychological and societal aspects by asserting that protracted conflicts are maintained in part through deeply held narratives, institutionalised hostility, and collective beliefs that portray zero-sum and qualitative unfounded situations about the nature of their group-enemy relationship.

2.1.2 Insecurity

According to The World Bank (2022), insecurity is a condition where individuals and communities are exposed to persistent threats of violence, displacement, and livelihood disruption largely fuelled by poverty, institutional fragility and limited state capacity. The United Nations Development Programme (2021) likewise defined insecurity as a more comprehensive human development issue that includes physical violence, economic uncertainty and deteriorating social integration, threatening overall quality of life. Insecurity is defined as a state



of increased insecurity caused by weak institutions, inequality and insufficient institutional capacity to prevent or control conflict and violence (OECD, 2021) from a governance perspective. As an example of the more applied conflict and security analysis, the definition from the International Crisis Group for insecurity (2021) referred to it as cycles of violence and instability that repeatedly return in socially significant ways despite multiple interventions and take on insurgent and communal armed conflict forms often supported by organised crime. In the Nigerian Context, the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) operationalised insecurity as incidents of violent and criminal activities, such as kidnapping, armed robbery and communal clashes, which destroy economic value and threaten human lives.

2.1.3 Conflict Dynamics

Conflict dynamics refers to the nature of relationships among actors, grievances and institutions that shape how both violent and non-violent forms of conflict manifest over time in terms of their scale, scope, and severity (UNDP 2021). In a similar way, at the World Bank (2022), conflict dynamics speaking to structural drivers like poverty or inequality and weak governance interacting with immediate triggers shaping how conflicts form, unfold and endure in societies were defined. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021), conflict dynamics are formed in constant interaction between structural fragility, pressing socio-economic factors, and adaptive behaviours of both state and non-state actors. The International Crisis Group (2021) has also underscored key lessons related to violence–trap dynamics being fluid and sometimes unpredictable, depending on the strategies that armed groups, state forces and communities adopt in their reactions to changing conditions. In addition to this view, the Small Arms Survey (2020) pointed out that the availability of weapons, processes of mobilisation, and socio-political grievances sustain and compound cycles of violence.

2.1.4 National Security

On its conception of national security, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (National Security Strategy, 2020), which conceptualised National Security as protection from threats to the nation, including terrorism, insurgency, banditry and other forms of internal aggression capable of undermining stability and governance. Likewise, Bassey (2020) defined national security as the ability of state to maintain internal order and protect lives and property via the management of security organs like military, police, intelligence bodies etc. Building on this perspective, Oluwaniyi (2021) identified the need to manage inter–state crisis and tenacious internal conflicts such as Boko Haram insurgency, herder-farmer clash, and communal violence shaping national cohesion. As further noted, Akinyemi (2022) advances the argument that national security is both multidimensional and multi-sectoral in nature, encompassing political stability, economic prosperity, food security and social harmony, all of which are preconditions for state legitimacy and development. National security is also defined as the combined ability of Nigerian educational, political, economic, religious and other institutions to avert or respond effectively to



multi-dimensional threats such as terrorism, organised crime, including human trafficking/organ harvesting and cyber insecurity-based crimes using resources generated from resource-based conflicts (National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies 2021).

2.1.5 Historical Factors Causing Intractable Conflict and Insecurity within Nigeria

Insecurity and intractable conflict in Nigeria has complex roots, deeply rooted in colonial arrangements that established the context for both patterns of division and inequality as well those binding events driving state fragility. While a political entity was constituted by merging the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, there was no concomitant social or institutional unity: different kinds of ethnic and religious groups were tarried into one under a centralised colonial administration (Ake, 1981; Falola & Heaton 2008). Indirect rule perpetuated regional segregation by establishing administration primarily through traditional authorities, using the indirect rule framework to solidify ethnic consciousness over national integration. Identity based tensions that emerged as a result of the divisions that were etched into these colonial governance structures, have continued to fester and adapt, now informing the conflict dynamics in Nigeria. Hence, colonial economic policies were not only extractive but also spatially asymmetric as well (Suberu 2001). In particular, infrastructure, education and administrative development was concentrated in certain regions and this has led to the perpetuation of systemic socio-economic menace.

2.1.6 Major Causes and Drivers of Intractable Conflict and Insecurity

In terms of security, Nigeria continues to grapple with entrenched structural vulnerabilities, socio-economic deprivations and governance deficits that bottom out into intractable conflict and insecurity, but the 2022 situation is markedly a quantitative escalation of these factors expressed through the quality sophistication and adaptability of violence. Governance and institutional collapse are still one of the main drivers as poor service delivery, corruption and weak state responses created governance gaps for armed groups (and criminal networks) to thrive in (World Bank 2022; OECD 2021). If anything, the overstretching of security actors in recent years, with reports claiming that insecurity continues to spiral all over the country even when military operations are underway is a symptom of state capacity failure to contain new menace (International Crisis Group, 2021). Recent data show the scale and persistence of insecurity as Nigeria alone suffered more than 5,300 deaths and over 3,100 kidnappings between Jan. 1, 2023 and July 31, 2024 (Nextier & National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Kidnapping increased over 30% between from the periods of 2023 to 2024 (EUAA, 2025) while deaths and attacks emanating from banditry within Zamfara, Katsina and Kaduna states has exponentially increased (WANEP, 2026). This follows the wider global trajectory of insecurity transforming from its ideologically driven insurgent origins into hybrid economies of criminality stimulated by poverty, an inability to respond effectively with enforcement, and profitability incentives.



2.1.7 Forms and Patterns of Insecurity across the Geopolitical Zones in Nigeria

Farmer–herder conflicts, communal violence, land-related grievances and ethno-religious tensions, mostly in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi and Niger States of North Central Zone, are the main drivers of insecurity. These conflicts are structurally driven by competition for land and grazing routes, and water sources that have recently become scarce resources due to climate change, desertification and population expansion. But in recent decades, the breakdown of traditional mediation mechanisms and weak land governance systems has coupled with a deteriorating relationship between farming and pastoral communities to exacerbate mistrust and engender an escalating cycle of reprisal attacks, giving rise to cycles of retaliatory violence. The easy access to small arms and light weapons has also heightened the intensity and human cost of such conflicts, drawing them out into long, drawn-out, violent struggles over local differences. As echoed in the phrasing of its continuously recurring humanitarian pressures, shocks and rural insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2021), empirical evidence has revealed that the most-afflicted zones for communal violence and displacement are found in Nigeria's North Central region (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The interplay of these dynamics demonstrates how environmental stressors and structural inequalities reinforce the structure of insecurity in the region.

21.8. Analysis of How Various Conflict Systems Impact Insecurity on National Development in Nigeria

Insecurity in Nigeria has changed from isolated crises to what has become an adaptive and mutually reinforcing network of conflict systems, including insurgency, banditry, herder–farmer conflicts and militancy, which have increasingly converged. The mass displacement of people, the destruction or weakening of local governance structures and the overstretching of whatever state security capacity exists, particularly in Borno and Yobe states, have provided spaces for insurgency activity to spread south into North-Western Nigeria, where impoverished villagers are preyed on by bandits from neighbouring areas (International Crisis Group, 2023; USAID, 2020). In a similar vein, banditry has transformed from rural opportunistic violence into organised armed networks with insurgent-type tactics that include kidnapping-for-ransom, territorial control and assaults on state institutions (OECD, 2021). Across the North-Central region, herder–farmer conflicts are becoming highly militarised by access to illegal arms markets and engagement of criminal networks that can amplify violence and linkages with bandit groups (World Bank, 2022). These mutually constitutive interactions have led to a situation where the conflict systems in these disparate geographies are colliding and leading to reciprocal feeding of violence from one region to the other through arms circulation, displacement and criminal interconnectedness.

Militancy in the Niger Delta similarly fosters parts of this recursive matrix by maintaining shadow oil economies, facilitating arms proliferation and creating networks for transnational organised crime. While large-scale militancy has declined, there are other significant sources of



money for organised crime groups that extend beyond the region: oil theft, pipeline vandalism and illegal refining finance activities such as kidnapping and smuggling in other parts of the country (OECD, 2021). The existence of small arms and light weapons then augments the lethality and mobility of these conflict systems, allowing armed groups to operate transnationally with increased efficiency (Small Arms Survey 2020). According to the International Crisis Group (2023), this convergence of insurgency, banditry, communal violence and organised crime represents a more general process of insecurity becoming reconstituted as a decentralised, profit-driven and increasingly adaptive hybrid system. However, insecurity in Nigeria continues to thrive as structural factors such as corruption, weak institutions and socio-economic inequality continue to stunt the effectiveness of policies passed. As reported by the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), incidents of violence such as kidnapping and banditry would continue to flourish in some areas, while communal clashes had become a nationwide phenomenon, suggesting an insignificant national improvement in security outcomes. In addition, ineffective coordination amongst security agencies, intelligence failure and lack of early warning systems are undermining the efficacy of government responses. According to the OECD (2021), deep institutional reforms and inclusive development strategies, alongside military responses, are critical to sustainable peacebuilding in fragile contexts as remains insufficiently executed in Nigeria.

2.1.9 Factors Undermining the Government's Capacity to Alleviate Intractable Conflict in Nigeria

Weak institutional capacity, poor coordination and governance deficits at every level of the security architecture are one of the most abiding problems that undermine government efforts. Despite Nigeria's deployment of several security operations and national policy frameworks, the effectiveness is hindered by overlapping mandates from beneficiaries across agencies within governmental silos or bureaucracies governed by poor intelligence sharing among key stakeholders. It also states that fragile institutions combined with weak accountability systems severely limit the state's capacity to provide effective security outcomes (The World Bank, 2022). Additionally, corrupt practices in procurement processes and security logistics erode operational efficiency, resulting in under-equipped personnel with limited means of attaining better welfare, that takes too long to respond to emerging threats. Moreover, the police system in Kenya is centralised and cannot respond quickly to local issues, which affects most rural and hard-to-reach communities where insecurity is at its worst.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Structural Conflict Theory

Structural Conflict Theory is a struggle based on dominant beliefs in a structurally existing set of power inequalities culminating primarily from the works of Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars before modern conflict theory expanded the meaning. This suggests that persistent and often intractable conflicts are likely to occur in societies marked by unequal access to resources, power



and opportunities since dominant groups use the institutions of the state in a manner that preserves their position for as long as possible, while marginalised groups will resist exclusion through all available means, including collective action and violence (Galtung 1969; Collins 2020). When it comes to Nigeria, this theory is more relevant than ever in analysing the structural underpinnings of insecurity. It is characterised by wide regional development gaps, unequal distribution of national resources and insufficient institutional capacity across governance structures.

22.2 Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory, which was articulated first by Ted Gurr (1970) and has been further refined in contemporary conflict literature, suggests that when individuals or groups feel they lack certain socio-economic or political conditions relative to what they expected, this creates a status gap that may lead to widespread unrest. Frustration stems from this feeling of inequity, which may lead to violence when aggression, rebellion or violent movement is provoked. Users also love the Gurr (1970) and Bar-Tal (2013). This theory emphasises that it is not absolute poverty per se, but perceived relative deprivation relative to others or to what people expect their standard of living should be. Relative Deprivation Theory can thus provide solid explanatory power of psychological and motivational drivers of insecurity, with emphasis on youths in the Nigerian context. High unemployment rates, escalating inflation, limited access to education and the marginalisation of specific areas give way to heightened experiences of exclusion.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research utilises a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a holistic composition of intractable conflict as well as insecurity dynamics within the Nigerian context. Quantitatively, it is based on secondary data from sources such as the National Bureau of Statistics, the World Bank and the International Organisation for Migration covering indicators between 2010 and 2025 (such as conflict incidents, displacement numbers, poverty rates and crime). Both descriptive statistics and trend analysis are used to explore the patterns of insecurity within Nigeria's geopolitical zones, and inferential methods, where appropriate, allow us to establish a relationship between socio-economic variables and the intensity of conflict. This is combined with a qualitative approach and work on content analysis of policy documents, security reports and academic works to better understand the root causes, interactions and trajectory of conflict systems. Based on a case study design of Nigeria, the research particularly focused on regional differences in the six geopolitical zones. Thematic analysis is used to codify the data and reveal themes about conflict drivers, government responses and security outcomes. The study also features a comparative angle, distilled from selected countries that have confronted similar insecurity challenges. This enables contextual interpretation and identification of relevant best practices for Nigeria. Given its methodological design, the approach allows for triangulated sources of data and strengthens both validity and



reliability of findings, which also provides an empirical basis for policy recommendations on how best to manage intractable conflict and insecurity in contemporary Nigeria.

4.COMPARATIVE EXPERIENCES IN MANAGING INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS: LESSONS FROM SELECTED COUNTRIES

4.1 Rwanda Experience

The experience of Rwanda in managing intractable conflict represents one of the most notable cases of post-conflict reconstruction and national recovery in contemporary Africa, particularly following the Rwandan Genocide. The genocide, which resulted in the deaths of over 800,000 people within approximately 100 days, devastated the country's social fabric, institutional structures, and economic systems. In response, the post-genocide government adopted a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach centred on justice, reconciliation, security consolidation, and long-term development (Clark, 2010; Waldorf, 2010). One of the most innovative interventions was the establishment of the *Gacaca* courts, a community-based justice system designed to process the large number of genocide-related cases, promote truth-telling, and facilitate reconciliation at the grassroots level. This mechanism complemented formal judicial processes, reduced prison congestion, and enabled communities to confront the realities of the genocide while fostering restorative justice and social healing (Clark, 2010).

4.2 Colombia Experience

The experience of Colombia in managing intractable conflict is rooted in its prolonged struggle with insurgency, narcotics-related violence, and organised criminal networks, particularly involving the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). For decades, weak state presence in rural areas, inequality in land distribution, and the lucrative drug trade sustained armed conflict and undermined governance. In response, the Colombian government adopted a dual strategy that combined sustained military pressure with political negotiation, culminating in the landmark 2016 peace agreement with FARC (Rettberg, 2020). The agreement focused on disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants, land reform, rural development, political participation, and transitional justice through institutions such as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. These measures significantly reduced large-scale violence and enabled the reintegration of thousands of former fighters into civilian life (OECD, 2021).

4.5 Afghanistan Experience

The experience of Afghanistan represents one of the most complex and enduring cases of intractable conflict, characterised by decades of insurgency, terrorism, foreign intervention, and fragile state institutions. Efforts to manage insecurity have included military counterinsurgency operations led by both domestic forces and international coalitions, alongside attempts at state-building and democratic governance. Significant investments were made in infrastructure, education, and institutional development following the 2001 intervention, aimed at stabilising the country and reducing the influence of insurgent groups such as the Taliban (Barfield, 2021).



5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that intractable conflict, its dynamics of insecurity and drivers (root causes) in Nigeria is influenced by the manifestation of security crisis across geopolitical zones; the interaction between conflict systems; and clearly defined implications for national development. This analysis establishes that insecurity in Nigeria is a multidimensional problem and a complex, evolving system of insurgency, banditry, herder–farmer conflict, militant (or communal) actions, urban criminality and so on, where these ideas are self-reinforcing. The endurance of these conflict systems is powered by structural underlying conditions that highlight a lack of governance, wealth disparity, unemployment, environmental degradation and declining political inclusion. Such conditions have led to increasing poverty, social displacement, low productivity and regional inequalities, which jeopardise continued development (World Bank 2022; NBS 2024).

Following the above conclusion, the study recommends as follows:

1. Government should strengthen Institutional & Reform via deep security agencies coordination & intelligence sharing
2. Government should prioritize violence prevention through socio-economic development and youth empowerment
3. Government should focus on border security enhancement to prevent small Arms proliferation and control
4. Government should take political governance reform and continuity of policies seriously to enhance National stability
5. Government should be engaging more with communities and their leaders to build enduring trust towards human security

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