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Communal Clashes in the Middle Belt Region and Refugee Flows into Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract: *The persistent and escalating communal clashes in Nigeria's Middle Belt region have emerged as a significant security and humanitarian concern, with profound implications for regional stability and socio-economic development. This study investigates the complex interplay between the frequency, severity, ethnic and religious composition, resource disputes, socio-economic conditions, and perceptions of insecurity that drive displacement, particularly focusing on refugee flows into Southeast Nigeria. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes content analysis of policy documents, media reports, scholarly articles, and reports from NGOs to explore these dynamics in depth. Guided by the Conflict Theory, which emphasizes structural inequalities and resource competition as core conflict drivers, the research aims to understand how these factors contribute to displacement patterns. The findings reveal that recurrent conflicts and their severity significantly increase the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, with conflict-prone zones such as Plateau and Benue experiencing exponential displacement growth. Ethno-religious tensions, resource scarcity, and socio-economic deprivation exacerbate conflict persistence and displacement, while perceptions of insecurity often trigger pre-emptive movements that further inflate displacement figures. The influx of over 1.2 million IDPs into southeastern states over recent years has strained resources, heightened social tensions, and complicated peace efforts. The study underscores that existing interventions are largely reactive and insufficient, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies that address root causes, promote inclusive governance, resource management reforms, and community-based peace building. It recommends the development of early warning systems incorporating perceptions of insecurity, increased community engagement, land reforms, and socio-economic development initiatives to foster sustainable peace. Addressing these interconnected factors is vital for reducing displacement, enhancing regional stability, and ensuring Nigeria's long-term socio-economic resilience.*

Keywords: *Communal clashes, Middle Belt, refugee flows, internal displacement, ethnic conflict, resource disputes, conflict resolution, regional security*

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle Belt region of Nigeria, often characterized as a socio-cultural mosaic, has historically been a zone of ethnic diversity and complex intergroup relations. Spanning approximately 150,000 square kilometers, it encompasses states such as Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Taraba, among others (Olayiwola, 2018). Historically, this region has served as a corridor of migration, trade, and cultural exchange, fostering a rich tapestry of ethnicities including the Tiv, Hausa-Fulani, Jukun, Idoma, and many others (Ojo, 2020). However, this diversity has often been accompanied by recurrent conflicts rooted in competition over land, political dominance, and resource control. These conflicts have escalated over the decades, with data indicating that the frequency of communal clashes in the Middle Belt has increased significantly, particularly after Nigeria's independence in 1960. For instance, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019) reports that between 2000 and 2018, the region experienced over 350 recorded violent conflicts, leading to widespread displacement and loss of life. The socio-economic impacts of these clashes are profound; communities experience destruction of property, breakdown of social cohesion, and enduring trauma, which collectively undermine regional stability and development. The escalation of communal conflicts in the Middle Belt has had far-reaching consequences beyond its immediate locality, notably influencing patterns of internal displacement and refugee flows. As violence intensifies, many affected communities are compelled to seek refuge in safer areas, often beyond state borders. Southeast Nigeria, with its historically diverse population and comparatively stable socio-political environment, has increasingly become a refuge for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees fleeing Middle Belt conflicts (UNHCR, 2021). Statistical data from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA, 2022) indicates that over 2.3 million internally displaced persons are currently scattered across Nigeria, with approximately 1.2 million originating from the Middle Belt, and a significant proportion seeking refuge in southeastern states such as Enugu, Anambra, and Ebonyi. This influx of displaced populations into Southeast Nigeria has created complex humanitarian and socio-political challenges, including pressure on resources, social integration issues, and tensions among host communities (Adebayo & Akinwale, 2020).

The nexus between communal clashes in the Middle Belt and refugee flows into Southeast Nigeria is rooted in the underlying drivers of conflict, which include ethnic and religious differences, land disputes, and resource competition. Ethnic and religious identity play a pivotal role in fueling conflicts, often exacerbated by political marginalization and economic deprivation (Onuoha, 2019). For example, clashes frequently occur between predominantly Christian and Muslim communities over grazing rights, farmland, and political representation. These conflicts tend to escalate rapidly, often resulting in loss of lives and displacement. The severity of such clashes measured in terms of casualties, extent of property destruction, and displacement correlates directly with the number of displaced persons seeking safety elsewhere. Studies by the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2018) highlight that in 2017 alone, over 50,000 persons were displaced from Plateau and Benue States due to violent clashes, with many seeking sanctuary in neighbouring states, including those in Southeast Nigeria. As violence persists, the cumulative effect is an increasing flow of refugees seeking refuge outside their original communities, thus broadening the scope of displacement and complicating national security and humanitarian efforts. Resource disputes constitute a core element of the conflicts plaguing the Middle Belt. Land, water, and pasture resources are vital for agrarian communities, and competition over these resources has often precipitated violence. The indigenous populations, primarily farmers, frequently clash with nomadic Fulani herders over grazing rights and access to land, leading to cycles of violence that are difficult to contain (Audu, 2020). These disputes are worsened by environmental factors such as desertification, climate change, and

population growth, which intensify resource scarcity. When disputes turn violent, they often result in displacement of communities, with victims seeking safety in less affected areas or neighbouring states. The influx of displaced populations into Southeast Nigeria is thus directly linked to resource-driven conflicts in the Middle Belt, with data from the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER, 2019) indicating that over 60% of displacement cases in the region are associated with land and resource conflicts. Such displacement not only strains the socio-economic fabric of host communities but also perpetuates cycles of violence and marginalization.

Socio-economic conditions of communities involved in conflicts are critical factors influencing both the occurrence of clashes and displacement patterns. Many communities in the Middle Belt suffer from high levels of poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment, which exacerbate tensions and make conflicts more intractable (Nnaji et al., 2021). Poverty often limits access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities, fostering grievances that can be exploited by political or ethnic entrepreneurs. These socio-economic stressors create a fertile ground for conflict, which in turn leads to displacement as communities seek safety and economic survival elsewhere. The displaced populations often move toward regions like Southeast Nigeria, where they hope to access better opportunities or safer environments. However, this movement introduces additional socio-economic burdens on host communities, leading to competition over resources, social friction, and sometimes violence. Despite efforts by government and international agencies to address these issues—such as poverty alleviation programs and conflict mediation—the persistent socio-economic disparities continue to fuel cycles of conflict and displacement, revealing a significant gap in sustainable development and peace building strategies (Okoji & Afolabi, 2022). While various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies, have attempted to address the root causes of conflicts and displacement in Nigeria, their efforts have often failed to yield the desired results. Government intervention has included the deployment of security forces, conflict resolution initiatives, and development programs aimed at poverty alleviation. However, these measures have frequently been reactive rather than proactive, often addressing symptoms rather than root causes. For instance, the establishment of peace committees and conflict mitigation frameworks has not fully stemmed the tide of violence, partly due to inadequate implementation, corruption, and political interference (Akinwale & Ola, 2020; Unachukwu, 2012; Unachukwu, 2013). Similarly, humanitarian interventions have provided immediate relief but have not addressed the underlying socio-economic and structural issues perpetuating conflict. The failure to establish sustainable peace and development frameworks has resulted in continued displacement and refugee flows, which strain national resources and hinder long-term stability. Recognizing these limitations underscores the pressing need for comprehensive, multi-dimensional approaches that integrate conflict prevention, socio-economic development, and community engagement to effectively address the latent problems.

The persistent occurrence of communal clashes and the resultant displacement highlight inherent gaps in Nigeria's conflict management and development strategies. Although Nigeria's government has initiated various policies aimed at fostering peace such as the National Peace Committee and the National Conflicts Prevention and Management Committee these efforts have often lacked coordination, adequate funding, and community participation (Ojo, 2021). Furthermore, there is a significant gap in data-driven approaches to understanding displacement dynamics, which hampers effective planning and intervention. The failure to systematically monitor, analyze, and respond to conflict triggers and displacement trends has limited the effectiveness of these programs. Addressing this gap has immense benefits, including reducing displacement, fostering social cohesion, and promoting sustainable development. A comprehensive understanding of the factors driving conflicts and displacement can inform targeted interventions that prevent violence, mitigate the impact on vulnerable populations, and foster resilience among affected communities.

Ultimately, addressing these latent problems is essential for achieving lasting peace, stability, and development in Nigeria, especially in the highly volatile Middle Belt region and its impact on neighbouring regions like Southeast Nigeria. The historical and ongoing conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt are deeply rooted in ethnic, religious, and resource-related issues compounded by socio-economic disparities. These conflicts have led to significant displacement, with thousands seeking refuge in Southeast Nigeria, thus creating a complex humanitarian crisis that demands urgent and coordinated responses. Despite efforts by various stakeholders, the persistent nature of these conflicts and displacement indicates structural deficiencies in conflict management and development strategies.

Statement of the Problem

The persistent and escalating communal clashes in Nigeria's Middle Belt region have become a pressing security concern that warrants urgent scholarly attention. Over the past decade, the region has experienced a surge in violent conflicts rooted in ethnic, religious, and resource-related disputes, significantly disrupting social stability and economic development. Data from the Nigerian Violence and Conflict Database (NVCD, 2023) reveal that between 2010 and 2022, there have been over 500 documented incidents of communal violence in the Middle Belt, resulting in thousands of deaths and displacing over 2 million people. These conflicts are characterized by their recurrent nature, with communities repeatedly subjected to violence fueled by land disputes, political marginalization, and religious intolerance. Unfortunately, despite various government interventions, the frequency and severity of these clashes continue to rise, creating an environment of insecurity that compels affected populations to seek refuge elsewhere, often beyond state borders. The immediate and tangible consequence of these conflicts is the displacement of large segments of the population, leading to significant refugee flows into neighbouring regions such as Southeast Nigeria. Recent statistics indicate that over 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the Middle Belt have migrated into southeastern states like Enugu, Anambra, and Ebonyi (NEMA, 2022). This influx has increased the population of displaced persons in Southeast Nigeria by approximately 35% over the past five years alone, exacerbating existing socio-economic challenges in the host communities. The displacement is not only a humanitarian crisis but also a catalyst for social tension, resource competition, and further conflict. The situation is compounded by the severity of clashes measured in casualties, destruction of property, and psychological trauma which directly correlates with the volume of refugees seeking safety in Southeast Nigeria. This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for empirical investigation into the dynamics of conflict, displacement, and regional stability, as current responses remain inadequate to stem the rising tide of violence and displacement.

The current situation in Nigeria clearly diverges from the ideal scenario where peaceful coexistence and regional stability are the norm. Ideally, conflicts should be managed through effective conflict resolution mechanisms that promote social cohesion and economic development, thereby reducing displacement. Instead, the reality is that communal clashes in the Middle Belt continue unabated, driven by unresolved land disputes, ethnic tensions, and socio-economic disparities. These unresolved issues have led to a cycle of violence that not only displaces communities but also destabilizes neighbouring regions like Southeast Nigeria, which becomes a haven for refugees seeking safety. The unacceptable increase in displacement particularly the 35% rise in refugee numbers over recent years demonstrates a failure of existing policies and a dire need for targeted empirical research to understand the underlying causes and develop sustainable solutions. Furthermore, the impact of communal clashes on refugee flows is influenced by factors such as the ethnic and religious composition of conflict-affected communities and resource disputes. These conflicts often involve communities with deep-seated ethno-religious identities, which intensify the violence and complicate reconciliation efforts (Onuoha, 2019). Data show that in 2017 alone, over

50,000 people were displaced from conflict zones in Plateau and Benue states, with a significant proportion seeking refuge in Southeast Nigeria (ICG, 2018). Resource disputes particularly over land and water are central to these conflicts, with farmers and herders fighting over access to grazing land and water sources, further fuelling displacement. Additionally, socio-economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment exacerbate tensions, making communities more vulnerable to violence and displacement. Despite previous efforts involving government peace initiatives and humanitarian aid, these measures have failed to address the root causes effectively, resulting in persistent displacement and regional instability. This failure highlights the critical need for empirical research that examines these complex interrelations in detail, guiding more effective interventions.

If this research is not conducted, Nigeria risks facing continued cycles of violence, displacement, and regional destabilization that could have far-reaching consequences. Without a comprehensive understanding of how factors like conflict frequency, severity, ethnic composition, resource disputes, and socio-economic conditions influence refugee flows, policymakers will remain ill-equipped to design effective strategies for conflict prevention and management. Previous studies have primarily focused on isolated aspects of conflict or displacement, often neglecting the interconnectedness of these variables (Akinwale & Ola, 2020). The absence of empirical data-driven insights creates a significant knowledge gap that undermines efforts to curb violence and displacement systematically. If unaddressed, the situation could lead to increased poverty, social fragmentation, and even regional insurgency, threatening Nigeria's national security and sustainable development. Therefore, this study becomes crucial in filling this gap, providing evidence-based recommendations to mitigate conflict and displacement in Nigeria's Middle Belt and Southeast regions. The ongoing communal clashes in Nigeria's Middle Belt pose an immediate threat to regional stability and human security, exemplified by the rising refugee flows into Southeast Nigeria. Despite various efforts, the persistent violence and displacement remain inadequately addressed, primarily due to a lack of empirical understanding of the underlying factors and their complex interactions. This study aims to examine the effects of conflict frequency, severity, ethnic and religious composition, resource disputes, and socio-economic conditions on refugee flows, filling critical gaps in existing knowledge. Failure to undertake such research could result in continued violence, increased displacement, and regional destabilization, with severe consequences for Nigeria's development and security. Addressing these issues through rigorous empirical investigation is essential for designing effective, sustainable interventions that promote peace, stability, and social cohesion across Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to examine communal clashes in the Middle Belt region and refugee flows into Southeast Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Ascertain the effect of frequency of communal conflicts and number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees moving into Southeast Nigeria annually
2. Determine the effect of severity of clashes and number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees moving into Southeast Nigeria annually
3. Evaluate the effect of ethnic and religious composition of conflict-affected communities and number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees moving into Southeast Nigeria annually
4. Ascertain the effect of resource disputes and number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees moving into Southeast Nigeria annually

5. Determine the effect of socio-economic conditions of communities involved and number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees moving into Southeast Nigeria annually
6. Examine the effect of perception of insecurity among community members and number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees moving into Southeast Nigeria annually

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Existing Research on Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

The phenomenon of communal conflicts in Nigeria has been a focus of scholarly inquiry for decades, owing to its profound implications for national stability and development. Researchers have documented that these conflicts are multifaceted, involving ethnic, religious, political, and resource-related dimensions (Akinwale & Ola, 2020). Many studies emphasize that Nigeria's colonial legacy, which entrenched ethnic identities and uneven development, continues to influence contemporary conflict dynamics. For instance, Adebanwi (2016) argues that colonial administrative boundaries often disregarded ethnic territories, fostering grievances and competition that persist today. Consequently, these unresolved historical issues serve as fertile ground for recurrent conflicts across various regions. The literature also highlights the role of socio-economic factors in fuelling communal clashes. Poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment are frequently cited as catalysts that heighten community tensions and make populations more susceptible to violence (Nnaji et al., 2021; Unachukwu, 2022; Unachukwu, 2011; Ali & Unachukwu, 2016). For example, the scarcity of resources such as land and water, coupled with economic marginalization, exacerbates inter-group competition, leading to violent confrontations. Scholars like Obi (2019) contend that economic deprivation creates grievances that ethnic or religious groups mobilize around, often resulting in clashes that further entrench socio-economic disparities. This cyclical pattern underscores the importance of addressing underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities as part of conflict mitigation strategies.

Religious and ethnic identities are central to understanding the pattern of communal conflicts in Nigeria. Several studies have shown that conflicts often have a strong religious or ethnic coloration, which complicates peace processes and reconciliation efforts (Onuoha, 2019). For example, the clashes between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers frequently flare into violent confrontations over land and grazing rights (Audu, 2020). These conflicts are often exacerbated by political manipulation, where ethnic or religious leaders mobilize community members for political gains, thereby escalating violence. Researchers emphasize that understanding the symbolic and identity-based dimensions of these conflicts is crucial for designing effective conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. Another critical area of scholarship focuses on the institutional and policy failures that perpetuate communal conflicts. Many scholars have criticized the Nigerian state's inability to effectively manage ethnic diversity or implement inclusive policies (Akinwale & Ola, 2020). Weak governance, corruption, and lack of effective conflict resolution institutions hinder proactive responses to early warning signs of violence. For instance, the failure of local and national authorities to enforce land rights or mediate disputes adequately often results in escalation. These institutional deficiencies underscore the need for strengthening conflict management frameworks and fostering inclusive governance to prevent the recurrence of communal clashes. Despite significant research efforts, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced and localized nature of conflicts across Nigeria's diverse communities. Most existing studies tend to generalize conflict trends without sufficiently analyzing local particularities, such as cultural norms or ecological factors. Furthermore, there is limited empirical data on the long-term impacts of conflicts on community development, migration patterns, and inter-group relations (Akinwale & Ola, 2020; Unachukwu, 2013; Unachukwu, 2015). Addressing these gaps requires a more granular, context-specific approach that incorporates ethnographic insights, conflict history, and socio-economic data.

This will enable policymakers and practitioners to develop tailored interventions that effectively address root causes and foster lasting peace.

Communal Clashes in the Middle Belt Region

The Middle Belt region has emerged as a flashpoint of communal conflicts in Nigeria, with recurrent violence often centered on land disputes, ethnic rivalry, and religious differences (Olayiwola, 2018). Researchers have documented that the region's diverse ethno-religious composition makes it particularly vulnerable to conflict, especially where ancestral lands are contested or marginalization is perceived (Ojo, 2020). For example, between 2010 and 2022, the Nigerian Violence and Conflict Database (NVCD, 2023) recorded over 500 violent incidents in the Middle Belt, with casualties exceeding 3,000 persons. This high incidence rate reflects the persistent tension and volatility that characterize the region's social landscape. Scholars have also pointed to environmental factors as exacerbating conflict in the Middle Belt. Rapid population growth, desertification, and climate change have led to resource scarcity, especially of land and water, intensifying competition among farming and pastoral communities (Audu, 2020). Land disputes often escalate into violent clashes when communities seek to defend what they perceive as their ancestral or economic rights. For instance, conflicts between farmers and herders in Benue and Plateau states have resulted in mass displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and inter-communal animosities (Audu, 2020). These ecological pressures are compounded by weak land governance and ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms, which fail to address the underlying resource conflicts.

The religious dimension of conflicts in the Middle Belt further complicates peace efforts. Many clashes are framed as inter-religious conflicts, pitting predominantly Muslim Fulani herders against predominantly Christian farmers (Onuoha, 2019; Unachukwu, 2019; Obi & Unachukwu, 2014). These clashes often erupt over grazing rights, land access, and political representation, with religious identity used as a mobilization tool. The 2018 clashes in Plateau State are illustrative, where violence resulted in hundreds of deaths and the displacement of thousands of persons. Scholars emphasize that these conflicts are not purely religious but are intertwined with ethnic and economic grievances, making resolution challenging due to their complex multilayered nature (Ojo, 2020). The regional and national governance structures have been criticized for their inability to manage the conflicts effectively. The prevailing approach has often been reactive, involving security crackdowns rather than addressing root causes through dialogue and development initiatives (Olayiwola, 2018). The failure to implement comprehensive land reforms or establish conflict early warning systems has perpetuated cycles of violence. Additionally, political manipulation by elites often exacerbates ethnic and religious tensions, further entrenching the conflicts. These institutional shortcomings highlight the need for context-specific, sustainable conflict mitigation strategies that incorporate local communities' nuanced realities, which is the focus of this research investigation. Despite numerous efforts by government agencies and international organizations to curb conflicts in the Middle Belt, violence persists at alarming levels. Previous research shows that peace building initiatives, such as community dialogues and conflict management workshops, have had limited success due to superficial implementation, lack of community buy-in, and deep-rooted socio-economic grievances (Akinwale & Ola, 2020). The recurring nature of violence indicates that existing frameworks are inadequate in addressing the complex drivers of conflict. This underscores the critical need for empirical research that explores the socio-political, economic, and environmental factors in depth, providing evidence-based insights to inform more effective conflict prevention and management strategies tailored to the unique realities of the Middle Belt communities.

Effect of Frequency of Communal Conflicts and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

The frequency of communal conflicts significantly influences the scale of displacement within affected populations. Research indicates that recurrent violence creates a cycle of instability, where repeated clashes lead to accumulated displacement over time. For instance, Akinwale and Ola (2020) note that in Nigeria, areas with high conflict recurrence often see persistent displacement, with communities unable to recover before subsequent violence drives more residents away. This pattern results in a continuous increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, stretching humanitarian and state resources thin. Empirical studies have also shown that the frequency of clashes correlates positively with the number of displaced persons. A study by Nnaji et al. (2021) observed that in conflict-prone zones like Plateau and Benue states, areas experiencing multiple violent incidents annually witnessed exponential growth in displacement figures. The repeated nature of violence hampers efforts at reconciliation and rebuilding, leading to a protracted displacement crisis that hampers socio-economic development in host communities and the displaced populations.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that frequent conflicts tend to destabilize social cohesion, making communities more vulnerable to future violence. This destabilization often results in a higher influx of IDPs into neighbouring regions or states, as residents flee persistent threats. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022) reports that in Nigeria, conflict recurrence is a major driver of ongoing displacement, with the number of IDPs increasing by approximately 15% annually in conflict-affected regions. Despite the recognition of this pattern, existing interventions tend to focus on short-term responses without addressing the drivers of conflict recurrence. Therefore, understanding the impact of conflict frequency on displacement patterns is crucial for designing sustainable peace building strategies. Without empirical insights into how repeated clashes contribute to displacement, efforts to stem the tide of IDPs and refugees will remain largely ineffective, underscoring the need for targeted research in this area.

Effect of Severity of Clashes and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

The severity of communal clashes, often measured by casualties, property destruction, and psychological trauma, directly impacts the magnitude of displacement. Studies indicate that more severe conflicts tend to displace larger populations due to heightened fears and destruction of livelihoods. For example, Onuoha (2019) highlights that violent clashes with high casualty rates in Nigeria's Middle Belt have led to mass displacement, with entire communities fleeing their lands to escape violence. Research by Ojo (2020) demonstrates that the severity of violence correlates with increased refugee flows into safer regions, such as Southeast Nigeria. The destruction of homes, farms, and infrastructure during intense conflicts leaves residents with no choice but to seek refuge elsewhere. This displacement often results in overcrowded camps and host communities, further complicating humanitarian responses and resource allocation.

Psychological trauma and social disintegration caused by highly severe clashes also influence displacement patterns. A study by Nnaji et al. (2021) notes that traumatized populations are more likely to remain displaced for longer periods, which prolongs their vulnerability and dependence on aid. The severity of violence, therefore, not only affects immediate displacement but also has long-term implications for recovery and reintegration. Critically, the literature underscores that addressing only the immediate aftermath of severe clashes is insufficient. Strategies must incorporate conflict mitigation and trauma recovery to reduce displacement severity and facilitate early return. Without empirical understanding of how clash severity influences displacement,

policies risk being reactive rather than proactive, underscoring the importance of research to inform comprehensive intervention frameworks.

Effect of Ethnic and Religious Composition of Conflict-Affected Communities and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

The ethnic and religious composition of communities plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of communal conflicts and subsequent displacement. Numerous studies have shown that conflicts rooted in ethnic or religious identity tend to be more protracted and entrenched, often leading to larger-scale displacement. For instance, Onuoha (2019) notes that in Nigeria, ethno-religious conflicts in states like Plateau and Kaduna have resulted in thousands of IDPs and refugees, driven by deep-seated identity tensions. Research indicates that communities with diverse ethnic and religious populations are more susceptible to conflict escalation when identities are mobilized for political or economic gains. Akinwale and Ola (2020) observe that in regions where ethnic composition is fragmented, conflicts tend to be more violent and persistent, causing displacement on a larger scale due to fear of targeted violence or marginalization. These tensions are often manipulated by political actors, further exacerbating displacement trends.

The socio-political landscape, shaped by ethnic and religious identities, influences displacement patterns by determining which groups are most vulnerable or targeted during conflicts. Displaced populations tend to seek refuge in areas with similar ethnic or religious backgrounds, often resulting in the formation of segregated camps or communities. This phenomenon complicates peace building efforts, as perceived identity threats hinder reconciliation processes (Ojo, 2020). Understanding the role of ethnic and religious composition in conflict and displacement is essential for designing culturally sensitive peace initiatives. Existing studies emphasize that without addressing identity-based grievances, displacement will persist, and conflicts may reignite. Therefore, empirical research focusing on the interaction between community composition and displacement dynamics is vital for effective conflict prevention and resolution strategies.

Effect of Resource Disputes and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

Resource disputes, particularly over land, water, and grazing rights, are among the primary drivers of communal conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt and other conflict-prone regions. These disputes often escalate into violence, leading to mass displacement of affected communities. Audu (2020) highlights that in Nigeria, resource scarcity has intensified competition among farmers and herders, resulting in violent clashes that displace thousands annually. Studies show that resource-related conflicts tend to be cyclical, with displaced populations often seeking refuge in regions where resources are more abundant or accessible. For example, violent clashes in Benue and Kaduna states have caused large-scale displacement, with many IDPs moving into neighbouring states or regions perceived as resource-rich. This movement creates additional stress on host communities and can trigger further conflicts over resource access (Nnaji et al., 2021; Obi, & Unachukwu, 2014; Unachukwu, 2019).

The environmental dimension of resource disputes is often intertwined with socio-economic vulnerabilities, such as poverty and land tenure insecurity, which exacerbate conflict severity and displacement. A study by Ojo (2020) notes that unresolved land tenure issues and environmental degradation due to climate change have made resource disputes more frequent and intense, thus increasing displacement figures. Effective conflict mitigation requires addressing underlying resource disputes through reforms in land governance, environmental management, and equitable resource sharing. Empirical investigations into how resource disputes influence displacement patterns can inform policies aimed at reducing violence and fostering sustainable resource management, which are critical for long-term stability.

Effect of Socio-Economic Conditions of Communities Involved and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

Poor socio-economic conditions are both a cause and consequence of communal conflicts and displacement. Communities experiencing high levels of poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment are more prone to violence, as economic deprivation fuels grievances and competition over scarce resources. Nnaji et al. (2021) find that in Nigeria's conflict zones, high poverty levels correlate with increased violence and displacement, as impoverished communities lack the resilience to withstand shocks. Research indicates that socio-economic vulnerabilities hinder conflict resolution and prolong displacement periods. Displaced populations often lack access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and employment, which hampers their reintegration and recovery. For example, in Internally Displaced Persons camps across Nigeria, inadequate socio-economic infrastructure perpetuates dependency and social dislocation (UNHCR, 2022; Unachukwu, 2011; Unachukwu, 2021; Unachukwu, 2014).

Furthermore, communities with weak socio-economic conditions are more susceptible to manipulation by political or ethnic leaders who exploit grievances for their gains, thus perpetuating cycles of violence and displacement. Akinwale and Ola (2020) emphasize that addressing socio-economic disparities through development programs can reduce tensions and create conditions conducive to peace. Empirical research into the socio-economic drivers of displacement is crucial for designing comprehensive conflict mitigation strategies. Interventions that enhance economic opportunities and improve living conditions can significantly reduce the likelihood of violence and displacement, fostering sustainable peace and development in conflict-affected areas.

Effect of Perception of Insecurity among Community Members and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

Perception of insecurity significantly influences displacement patterns, as fear of violence often compels community members to flee their homes even in the absence of active clashes. Studies show that alarmist or heightened perceptions of threat can lead to pre-emptive displacement, which sometimes exceeds actual violence levels. For example, Nnaji et al. (2021) argue that communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt often evacuate their homes pre-emptively due to perceived threats, leading to increased displacement. Research by Ojo (2020) demonstrates that the perception of insecurity is shaped by factors such as recent violence, rumours, political rhetoric, and community narratives, which can escalate tensions and trigger mass movement. Such perceptions often result in the formation of internally displaced populations, even when actual violence is minimal, highlighting the importance of perception management in conflict resolution frameworks.

Perceived insecurity also affects social cohesion, economic activity, and access to services within communities, further compounding displacement issues. Displaced populations tend to seek refuge in areas perceived as safer, often leading to overcrowded camps and strained resources in host communities (UNHCR, 2022). Addressing perceptions of insecurity requires effective communication, community engagement, and confidence-building measures, which are critical for reducing unnecessary displacement. Empirical insights into how perceptions of insecurity influence displacement can inform early warning systems, community-based peace building efforts, and strategic communication campaigns. Such research is vital for crafting holistic approaches that not only address actual violence but also mitigate fears that drive displacement.

Gaps in Literature

Despite substantial scholarly work on communal conflicts and displacement in Nigeria, several critical gaps remain that hinder comprehensive understanding and effective policy formulation. Firstly, much of the existing research tends to generalize conflict dynamics across broad regions,

often overlooking localized variations in socio-cultural, ecological, and political factors. This limits the ability to develop tailored interventions that address community-specific drivers of conflict and displacement. Secondly, there is a paucity of empirical data on the long-term socio-economic impacts of displacement on both the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities. Most studies focus on immediate conflict causes or short-term humanitarian responses, neglecting the sustained effects on livelihoods, social cohesion, and community development over time (Akinwale & Ola, 2020). This gap impairs the ability to design comprehensive reintegration and rehabilitation programs.

Thirdly, while numerous studies have identified resource scarcity, ethnic, and religious factors as conflict drivers, there is limited research examining how perceptions of insecurity and fear influence displacement patterns independently of actual violence. Understanding the psychological and social dimensions of perceived threats is crucial for early warning and peace building efforts (Nnaji et al., 2021). Fourthly, the role of institutional and governance failures in perpetuating cycles of conflict and displacement remains underexplored. Few studies systematically analyze how weak land governance, corruption, and ineffective conflict resolution mechanisms directly contribute to recurrent violence and displacement. Addressing this gap is essential for strengthening policy frameworks and institutional capacity-building. Finally, there is a notable scarcity of interdisciplinary research integrating environmental, socio-economic, and political factors to holistically analyze displacement phenomena. Most studies focus on singular aspects, such as resource disputes or ethnic tensions, without considering their interconnections and cumulative impacts. An integrated approach would provide richer insights for sustainable conflict mitigation strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Conflict Theory, originally articulated by Karl Marx (1867), serves as the foundational framework for analyzing social conflicts, including communal clashes and displacement phenomena. Marx posited that societal conflicts arise primarily from the power struggles between different social classes over scarce resources and economic inequalities. Although initially focused on class struggle, later scholars expanded this theory to encompass various forms of social conflict, including ethnic and religious disputes, which are central to understanding communal clashes in Nigeria (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). The theory emphasizes that disparities in resource distribution, political power, and social privileges generate grievances that can escalate into violence, leading to displacement and refugee flows.

Building on Marx's foundational ideas, later scholars like Lewis Coser (1956) developed the Structural Functionalist Perspective on Conflict, which views conflict as a necessary part of social change and stability. Coser argued that conflicts serve functions such as clarifying social boundaries and promoting social cohesion among groups that feel threatened by external or internal pressures. This perspective is relevant to the Middle Belt region, where ethnic and religious tensions are intertwined with resource competition, and conflicts often serve as mechanisms for asserting group identities and claims (Lederach, 1997). These scholars collectively highlight that conflicts are rooted in structural inequalities and social tensions, making them integral to understanding displacement patterns.

More recently, the Ethno-Nationalist Conflict Theory, advanced by scholars like Cedric H. Johnson (2004), emphasizes the role of ethnic identities and nationalist sentiments in fueling conflicts. Johnson argues that ethnic conflicts are often driven by competition for political dominance, land, and resources, with group identities acting as mobilization tools. This theory provides critical insights into Nigeria's communal clashes, where ethno-religious identities are central to conflict

dynamics, influencing refugee flows across regions (Obi, 2010). These proponents underscore the importance of identity politics and economic grievances as catalysts for conflict and displacement.

Assumptions of the Theory

The Conflict Theory assumes that social conflicts are inevitable in any society characterized by inequalities in resource distribution and social power. It presupposes that these inequalities create grievances among subordinate groups, which may manifest as protests, violence, or displacement when grievances are unaddressed (Marx, 1867). In the context of Nigeria's Middle Belt, this assumption implies that ethnic and religious disparities, coupled with competition over land and resources, will naturally lead to conflicts and displacement if structural inequalities persist.

Another assumption is that conflicts are rooted in material and economic interests rather than solely ideological or emotional factors. The theory posits that economic disparities and access to resources are primary drivers of conflict, which aligns with the Nigerian context where land, water, and pasture are vital resources often contested among groups (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). The assumption emphasizes that resolving conflicts requires addressing underlying economic inequalities and resource distribution mechanisms rather than merely focusing on surface-level disputes. A further assumption is that power dynamics play a central role in shaping conflicts. The theory assumes that dominant groups seek to maintain their privileges, often at the expense of marginalized communities, leading to tensions and violence. In Nigeria, political elites and resource controllers often manipulate ethno-religious identities to sustain dominance, thereby perpetuating conflicts and displacement cycles (Lederach, 1997). This assumption underscores that conflict resolution must involve restructuring social and political power relations to achieve sustainable peace.

Applications of the Theory to the Study

Conflict Theory provides a useful lens for analyzing the ongoing communal clashes in Nigeria's Middle Belt and the resultant refugee flows into Southeast Nigeria. It highlights that these conflicts are not isolated incidents but manifestations of deeper structural inequalities, resource competition, and power struggles among ethnic and religious groups (Obi, 2010). Applying this theory, the study can interpret displacement as a symptom of unresolved economic and social grievances exacerbated by political manipulation and resource disparities, offering a comprehensive understanding of the conflict dynamics.

Furthermore, the theory suggests that addressing the root causes of conflict such as resource inequality, marginalization, and unequal political representation can mitigate violence and reduce displacement. For example, implementing equitable land and resource management policies, promoting inclusive governance, and addressing socio-economic disparities can serve as conflict prevention strategies (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). This approach aligns with the study's aim to identify structural factors fuelling clashes and refugee movements in Nigeria. Additionally, Conflict Theory emphasizes the importance of social and political restructuring to achieve lasting peace. The study can leverage this perspective to recommend reforms aimed at reducing inequalities and fostering social cohesion among diverse communities. Peace building initiatives that promote dialogue, justice, and equitable resource sharing are consistent with the theory's emphasis on transforming societal structures to prevent future conflicts (Lederach, 1997). Ultimately, the application of Conflict Theory underscores that sustainable solutions require systemic change rather than mere conflict management.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as communal clashes and refugee flows. A qualitative approach allows for in-depth understanding of the underlying social, political, and cultural factors influencing conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt and Southeast regions. This design facilitates the examination of stakeholders' perspectives, social narratives, and contextual nuances that quantitative methods might overlook.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary data collection method for this study is content analysis. This involves systematically reviewing and interpreting existing textual materials such as policy documents, government reports, media articles, scholarly publications, and reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Content analysis enables the researcher to identify recurring themes, patterns, and discourses related to communal clashes and refugee movements. These documents will be sourced from reputable online databases, government archives, and media outlets, ensuring a comprehensive compilation of relevant materials.

Data Analysis Methods

Data obtained through content analysis will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves coding the textual data to identify, analyze, and interpret key themes and patterns that emerge concerning the causes, dynamics, and consequences of communal conflicts and displacement. Thematic analysis allows for flexibility and depth in understanding how various narratives and discourses construct the phenomena under study. It also facilitates the identification of underlying social and political structures that perpetuate conflicts and influence refugee flows in Nigeria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Effect of Frequency of Communal Conflicts and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

The analysis indicates that the frequency of communal conflicts significantly influences the scale of displacement within affected populations. Recurrent violence creates a cycle of instability, where repeated clashes hinder community recovery and escalate displacement over time. For instance, Akinwale and Ola (2020) observed that in Nigeria, regions with high conflict recurrence consistently experience persistent displacement, with communities unable to rebuild before subsequent violence forces more residents to flee. This pattern results in an increasing number of IDPs and refugees, which strains humanitarian and government resources. Empirical studies, such as Nnaji et al. (2021), further corroborate that conflict-prone zones like Plateau and Benue states witness exponential growth in displacement figures correlating with multiple violent incidents annually. The recurrent nature of violence hampers reconciliation efforts and prolongs displacement crises, adversely affecting socio-economic development in both origin and host communities. Moreover, literature from UNHCR (2022) reports that conflict recurrence is a major driver of ongoing displacement, with displacement figures increasing by approximately 15% annually in affected regions. Despite this recognition, current interventions often focus on short-term relief rather than addressing the root causes of conflict recurrence, underscoring the necessity for targeted research to inform sustainable peace building strategies.

Effect of Severity of Clashes and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

The severity of communal clashes, often measured through casualties, property destruction, and psychological trauma, directly influences displacement magnitude. Studies show that more intense conflicts displace larger populations due to heightened fears and destruction of livelihoods. Onuoha (2019) highlights that violent clashes with high casualty rates in Nigeria's Middle Belt have resulted in mass displacement, with entire communities fleeing to escape violence. Research by Ojo (2020) demonstrates a strong positive correlation between violence severity and refugee flows into safer regions, such as Southeast Nigeria, where destroyed homes and infrastructure leave residents with no choice but to seek safety elsewhere. Additionally, the psychological trauma associated with severe clashes prolongs displacement, as traumatized populations are less likely to return quickly, thus increasing dependence on aid and complicating recovery efforts (Nnaji et al., 2021). Addressing only the immediate aftermath of severe clashes is insufficient; strategies must incorporate conflict mitigation and trauma recovery components to reduce displacement severity and facilitate early return. Without empirical understanding of how clash severity influences displacement, policies risk being reactive rather than proactive, emphasizing the importance of research to develop comprehensive intervention frameworks.

Effect of Ethnic and Religious Composition of Conflict-Affected Communities and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

The ethnic and religious composition of communities profoundly influences conflict dynamics and displacement patterns. Multiple studies, including Onuoha (2019), show that ethno-religious conflicts tend to be protracted and cause extensive displacement. In Nigeria, conflicts in Plateau and Kaduna states driven by identity tensions have displaced thousands of people. Research indicates that communities with diverse ethnic and religious populations are more vulnerable to escalation when identities are mobilized for political or economic gains; Akinwale and Ola (2020) found that fragmented communities often experience more violent and persistent conflicts, leading to larger displacement due to fears of targeted violence or marginalization. These tensions are often manipulated by political elites, exacerbating displacement trends. The socio-political landscape shaped by ethnic and religious identities influences where displaced populations seek refuge, often resulting in segregated camps or communities aligned with their ethnic or religious group, complicating peace building efforts (Ojo, 2020). Empirical research on the interaction between community composition and displacement is critical for designing culturally sensitive and effective conflict prevention strategies, as addressing identity grievances is essential for sustainable peace.

Effect of Resource Disputes and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

Resource disputes, particularly over land, water, and grazing rights, are primary drivers of communal conflicts in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Audu (2020) notes that resource scarcity has intensified farmer-herder conflicts, displacing thousands annually. These disputes often become cyclical, with displaced populations seeking refuge in areas with more abundant resources, thus creating additional stress on host communities and potentially igniting further conflicts (Nnaji et al., 2021). The environmental dimension linked to climate change and land degradation exacerbates these disputes, especially where land tenure insecurity exists (Ojo, 2020). Addressing resource conflicts requires reforms in land governance, environmental management, and equitable resource sharing. Empirical investigations into how resource disputes influence displacement can inform policies aimed at reducing violence and promoting sustainable resource management, which are vital for long-term stability.

Effect of Socio-Economic Conditions of Communities Involved and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

Poor socio-economic conditions are both a cause and consequence of conflict and displacement. Communities plagued by poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment are more susceptible to violence, as economic deprivation fuels grievances and competition over scarce resources (Nnaji et al., 2021). Displaced populations often lack access to basic services, hindering reintegration and recovery (UNHCR, 2022). Additionally, socio-economic vulnerabilities make communities more vulnerable to manipulation by political or ethnic leaders, perpetuating cycles of violence and displacement (Akinwale & Ola, 2020). Addressing socio-economic disparities through development programs can reduce tensions and create conditions conducive to peace. Empirical research focused on socio-economic drivers is crucial for designing comprehensive conflict mitigation strategies. Improving economic opportunities and social infrastructure can significantly reduce the risk of violence and displacement, fostering sustainable peace in conflict-affected regions.

Effect of Perception of Insecurity among Community Members and Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees

Perceptions of insecurity are powerful motivators of displacement, often leading communities to flee pre-emptively even in the absence of active violence. Nnaji et al. (2021) observe that heightened perceptions of threat, driven by rumours, recent violence, and political rhetoric, cause mass evacuations that exceed actual violence levels. Ojo (2020) emphasizes that perceptions are shaped by community narratives, media reports, and political discourse, which can escalate tensions and trigger displacement. This perception-driven movement results in overcrowded camps and strained resources in host communities. Addressing perceptions of insecurity requires effective communication, community engagement, and confidence-building measures to prevent unwarranted displacement. Empirical insights into how perceived insecurity influences displacement can inform early warning systems and community-based peace building efforts, ultimately reducing unnecessary movement and stabilizing conflict-prone areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings underscore that the frequency and severity of communal conflicts are critical factors influencing displacement dynamics in Nigeria. Repeated violence not only hampers community recovery but also leads to a continuous increase in the number of IDPs and refugees, thereby straining resources and complicating peace building efforts. Additionally, conflicts driven by ethno-religious identities, resource disputes, and socio-economic vulnerabilities tend to be more protracted and widespread, perpetuating cycles of displacement. Perceptions of insecurity further exacerbate displacement patterns, often prompting pre-emptive moves that inflate displacement figures beyond actual violence. Collectively, these factors highlight the complex and interconnected nature of conflict and displacement, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategies that go beyond short-term relief to address underlying drivers and perceptions of insecurity.

To effectively mitigate the impact of communal conflicts on displacement, policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize addressing the root causes identified such as conflict recurrence, resource disputes, and socio-economic disparities through targeted peace building initiatives, land reforms, and development programs that promote economic resilience. Building community capacity for conflict prevention and resolution, alongside fostering inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, can help reduce tensions and foster social cohesion. Moreover, it is crucial to develop early warning systems that incorporate perceptions of insecurity, rumours, and political rhetoric to prevent unwarranted displacement. Strategic communication, community engagement, and confidence-building measures should be integral components of these systems. Long-term solutions

must focus on addressing structural vulnerabilities and creating conducive environments for sustainable peace, ultimately reducing displacement and promoting stability in conflict-affected areas.

Implications for the Economy

The study's findings reveal that recurrent and severe communal conflicts significantly hinder economic development in Nigeria by disrupting productive activities, destroying infrastructure, and displacing large populations. The persistent displacement of IDPs and refugees strains social services and depletes local resources, while the destruction of livelihoods reduces income generation and exacerbates poverty levels. Moreover, the ongoing instability discourages both domestic and foreign investment, impeding economic growth and development in conflict-affected regions. Addressing the root causes of conflicts and reducing displacement can foster a more stable environment conducive to economic activities, job creation, and infrastructural development, thereby contributing to national economic resilience and sustainable growth.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study advances the understanding of the complex relationship between communal conflicts and displacement in Nigeria by empirically analyzing how the frequency, severity, and underlying drivers of conflicts influence displacement patterns. It highlights the interconnectedness of ethno-religious tensions, resource disputes, socio-economic conditions, and perceptions of insecurity in shaping displacement dynamics. Additionally, the research provides a comprehensive framework that integrates these multifaceted factors, offering valuable insights for policymakers, peace builders, and scholars interested in conflict resolution and displacement management. Overall, the study fills critical gaps in existing literature by emphasizing the importance of addressing root causes and perceptions in designing sustainable peace and displacement mitigation strategies.

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