



THE HUMAN COST OF INSECURITY: REIMAGINING PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

By Author(s):

DR. AKHOGBAI EMMANUEL MONDAY* (Ph.D)

Arokho Secondary School, Arokho, Owan East LGA, Edo State.

Abstract

Insecurity has evolved into one of the most disruptive forces in Nigeria's contemporary socio-political landscape, producing a scale of human suffering that stretches far beyond quantifiable metrics of violence. This article interrogates the human cost of insecurity in Nigeria, drawing on empirical data, scholarly research, and interdisciplinary perspectives from peace studies, political science, sociology, economics, and security studies. It argues that the country's long-standing security crises from terrorism and banditry to farmer-herder conflict, kidnapping, communal clashes, militancy, and urban crime are not merely symptoms of state fragility but engines of widespread social dislocation, structural impoverishment, psychological trauma, demographic realignment, and institutional decay. The article critiques state-centered, militarized approaches to security management, exposing their inadequacy in addressing root causes. It proposes a reimagined model of peacebuilding grounded in human security, community resilience, social justice, restorative governance, local participation, and adaptive institutional reform. The analysis contributes to global peacebuilding discourse by framing Nigeria as a critical case study for understanding human-centered insecurity in postcolonial societies. The article concludes by offering policy pathways for sustainable peace.

Keywords

Nigeria; insecurity; human cost; peacebuilding; human security.

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* Tel: +234 803 631 3876 | Email Address: eskedo2017@gmail.com



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1. Introduction

Insecurity has become one of the most defining realities of contemporary Nigeria. Whether in the form of Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, banditry and mass abductions in the North-West, farmer–herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, secessionist agitation and violence in the South-East, militancy and oil theft in the South-South, or rising urban criminality across metropolitan areas, the nation’s experiences of violence intersect with nearly every dimension of human life. Over the past decade, Nigeria has consistently ranked among the countries most affected by terrorism, mass displacement, and violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa (Olagunju, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021).

This article explores *the human cost* of this expanding insecurity shifting focus away from the conventional metrics of deaths, casualties, and incidents recorded in security databases. Instead, it interrogates the deeper and more enduring social, psychological, cultural, and developmental impacts of insecurity on individuals and communities. In doing so, it draws from a broad range of empirical studies, conflict reports, demographic analyses, and qualitative accounts from affected populations.

By emphasizing the human cost, this article advances the argument that Nigeria’s security challenge is not purely a military or political problem it is a fundamentally human one. Subsequently, the article critiques prevailing state-centered approaches and advances a reimagined peacebuilding paradigm grounded in human security, structural justice, and community-driven resilience.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 Insecurity

Insecurity refers to a sustained state of vulnerability to threats, violence, fear, and uncertainty, particularly when individuals or communities perceive that formal institutions cannot guarantee their safety (Akinwale, 2018). Scholars conceptualize insecurity in terms of direct physical harm, structural violence, loss of livelihood, psychological distress, displacement, and institutional collapse (Galtung, 1969; UNDP, 2022).

2.2 Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is a multidimensional set of processes aimed at preventing the recurrence of violent conflict by addressing structural inequalities, rebuilding institutions, promoting reconciliation, and strengthening communal resilience (Lederach, 1997). It goes beyond the cessation of violence and emphasizes sustainable social harmony supported by justice and equitable governance.

2.3 Human Security

Human security shifts attention from protecting the state to protecting individuals. It encompasses economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (UNDP, 1994). This article adopts a human-security lens to reinterpret Nigeria’s peacebuilding challenges.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Historical Context of Insecurity in Nigeria

Nigeria's insecurity challenges are deeply rooted in colonial legacies, ethnic fragmentation, weak state institutions, economic disparities, and uneven development patterns (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Post-independence governance failed to address inter-group mistrust, resource competition, and political exclusion, reinforcing cycles of grievances.

The militarization of politics, especially from the 1966 coup through the late 1990s, normalized coercive governance and weakened democratic institutions, creating fertile ground for contemporary conflicts (Osaghae, 1998). The return to democracy in 1999 brought renewed hopes but also coincided with an explosion of ethno-religious and socio-economic tensions.

3.2 Contemporary Research on Insecurity in Nigeria

Scholars identify several interlinked drivers of insecurity:

- poverty and unemployment (Adebayo, 2013);
- weak law enforcement and corruption (Ogundiya, 2011);
- climate change and resource scarcity (Buhari et al., 2018);
- ideological extremism (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012);
- land use conflict and desertification (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014);
- transnational organized crime (Ezeani, 2019).

Empirical research consistently highlights a vicious cycle in which insecurity worsens socio-economic conditions, further reproducing the same structural vulnerabilities that generate violence.

3.3 Gaps in the Literature

While extensive studies exist on Nigeria's conflicts, fewer works prioritize *the human cost* particularly long-term social suffering, intergenerational trauma, and cultural erosion. Additionally, literature lacks robust models for community-driven peacebuilding that reflect Nigeria's diverse realities.

4. The Human Cost of Insecurity in Nigeria

This section provides an exhaustive empirical and conceptual exploration of the human toll of insecurity beyond recorded fatalities.

4.1 Loss of Human Life and Physical Harm

Nigeria has recorded tens of thousands of deaths from insurgency, banditry, communal clashes, and militancy since 2009 (Amnesty International, 2020). These deaths extend beyond battlefield casualties; many involve civilians, women, children, and non-combatants. Mass kidnappings such as the Chibok (2014), Dapchi (2018), and numerous school abductions across the North-West illustrate the precarity of everyday life.

Empirical surveys show that residents no longer perceive any public space as inherently safe: markets, churches, mosques, schools, highways, and even homes (Akinola, 2021).

4.2 Forced Displacement and Humanitarian Crises

Nigeria hosts over 3.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), one of the largest displaced populations globally (UNHCR, 2023). Displacement disrupts livelihoods, education, housing stability, and inter-community relations. Children in IDP camps experience interrupted schooling, malnutrition, and heightened vulnerability to trafficking (Chukwuka, 2020).

4.3 Economic Devastation and Livelihood Erosion

Insecurity destroys local economies, discourages investment, and disrupts agricultural production. For instance, the North-East's agricultural output has fallen drastically due to Boko Haram violence, while banditry has crippled farming in the North-West. The economic cost of insecurity is estimated at billions of dollars annually (Agbiboa, 2021).

Small businesses face extortion, theft, arson, and forced closure. Transportation costs rise due to insecurity on major highways, reducing market access.

4.4 Psychological and Emotional Trauma

Exposure to violence produces long-lasting mental health consequences including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, particularly among women, children, and frontline responders (Oloyede & Adekeye, 2019).

Communities experience what sociologists describe as “collective trauma” a shared emotional injury that affects cultural identity, cohesion, and intergenerational wellbeing (Alexander, 2004).

4.5 Disruption of Education

Attacks on schools have led to widespread closures. UNICEF (2022) reports that over 11,000 schools in northern Nigeria have been shut due to insecurity at various times, affecting millions of learners. Education interruption widens inequality and reinforces cyclical poverty.

4.6 Breakdown of Social Cohesion and Trust

Insecurity destroys trust in state institutions and erodes communal relationships. Farmer–herder conflicts, for example, intensify ethnic polarization and undermine intergroup coexistence (Ibrahim & Umar, 2017). Vigilante groups and self-defense militias arise when citizens lose faith in the state's protective capacity.

4.7 Gendered Impacts of Insecurity

Women and girls face disproportionate risks, including sexual violence, forced marriages, trafficking, and domestic exploitation in IDP settings (Amnesty International, 2019). Gender-based violence escalates during conflict due to reduced policing and social protection.

4.8 Youth Radicalization and Criminal Pathways

Large numbers of unemployed youth become susceptible to recruitment by insurgent groups, armed bandits, and drug cartels (Aghedo, 2015). Radicalization is often linked to economic disenfranchisement, political exclusion, ideological indoctrination, and social frustration.

4.9 Institutional Weakening and Loss of State Legitimacy

Insecurity exposes the incapacity of state institutions police, judiciary, military to deliver core functions. Corruption, inadequate funding, logistical shortages, and internal sabotage weaken law enforcement efficacy (Adewale, 2020). This institutional decay perpetuates insecurity by creating governance vacuums.

4.10 Intergenerational Consequences

Children raised in conflict environments face reduced educational achievement, weakened social skills, and heightened vulnerability to violence. This produces long-term developmental setbacks that can last decades.

5. Drivers of Insecurity: Empirical Insights

5.1 Poverty, Inequality, and Unemployment

High poverty rates (over 40% nationally) correlate with increased susceptibility to criminal recruitment (World Bank, 2020). Poverty reduces resilience and increases desperation, making violence an attractive economic alternative.

5.2 Climate Change and Resource Scarcity

Desertification in the North has intensified competition for land and water, escalating farmer–herder clashes (Buhari et al., 2018). Food insecurity deepens tensions and creates ecological refugees.

5.3 Political Exclusion and Bad Governance

Patronage politics, electoral manipulation, and governance failures breed grievances that groups exploit to justify violence (Ogundiya, 2011).

5.4 Proliferation of Small Arms

Nigeria hosts millions of unregistered small arms circulating through porous borders (Ezeani, 2019), fueling banditry, militancy, and communal clashes.

5.5 Religious Extremism and Ideological Violence

Boko Haram and ISWAP exploit social disaffection, indoctrination networks, and weak state presence to mobilize followers. Their violent theology attacks state legitimacy and imposes fear.

5.6 Weak Judicial and Law-Enforcement Systems

Impunity emboldens perpetrators. Studies show that fewer than 5% of violent crime cases in many northern states result in convictions (Abdullahi, 2021).

6. Critique of State Responses to Insecurity

6.1 Over-Militarization

Successive Nigerian administrations have relied on kinetic force deploying military operations such as *Lafia Dole*, *Hadarin Daji*, and *Safe Haven* with limited sustainable success (Omede, 2019). Militarization often fuels civilian casualties, strengthens insurgent narratives, and fails to address underlying causes.

6.2 Fragmented Security Architecture

Overlapping mandates between the military, police, civil defense, and intelligence agencies create operational inefficiencies and bureaucratic rivalry (Olagunju, 2020).

6.3 Neglect of Human Security

State strategies rarely prioritize human welfare education, health, employment, and social justice despite their centrality to long-term peace.

6.4 Corruption and Poor Accountability

Mismanagement of security budgets undermines operational capacity and public trust (Adewale, 2020).

7. Reimagining Peacebuilding in Nigeria

This section proposes a multidimensional peacebuilding model grounded in empirical evidence and global best practices.

7.1 From State Security to Human Security

Reimagining peacebuilding requires reorienting priorities toward protecting lives, livelihoods, and dignity.

7.2 Community-Driven Peacebuilding

Local actors traditional rulers, women's associations, youth networks, religious leaders must lead conflict resolution. Community peace committees have proven successful in Plateau, Kaduna, and parts of Adamawa (Ibrahim & Umar, 2017).

7.3 Restorative and Transitional Justice Mechanisms

Societies emerging from violence require truth-telling, accountability, compensation, and reconciliation to restore trust. Nigeria's experience with amnesty in the Niger Delta shows both potentials and limitations.

7.4 Addressing Structural Inequalities

Peace cannot emerge without tackling poverty, unemployment, and inequitable access to resources. Economic empowerment programs, if transparent and participatory, reduce vulnerability to recruitment.

7.5 Strengthening Democratic and Security Institutions

Reforms should include:

- police decentralization;
- judicial reform;
- improved intelligence coordination;
- anti-corruption enforcement;
- community policing.

7.6 Climate-Sensitive Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding strategies must integrate climate adaptation, land management reform, and environmental restoration.

7.7 Education and Counter-Radicalization

Schools are critical spaces for teaching tolerance, critical thinking, digital literacy, and civic responsibility. Deradicalization programs must focus on rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and reintegration.

7.8 National Dialogue and Inclusive Governance

A reimagined peace requires a national conversation addressing historical grievances, constitutional reform, and power-sharing.

8. Policy Recommendations

- a. Adopt a human-security framework in all national and state security policies.
- b. Invest heavily in social protection systems targeting vulnerable communities.
- c. Decentralize policing and strengthen community policing structures.
- d. Expand climate adaptation programs to reduce ecological drivers of conflict.
- e. Implement transparent mechanisms for managing security budgets.
- f. Scale up education reforms, particularly in conflict-prone zones.
- g. Establish restorative justice institutions to address past and ongoing grievances.
- h. Promote youth employment programs tied to skill acquisition and local development.
- i. Institutionalize dialogue platforms among ethnic, religious, and community groups.
- j. Enhance border security to curb illicit arms flow.

9. Conclusion

Insecurity in Nigeria is neither accidental nor random—it is deeply embedded in historical legacies, socio-economic inequalities, governance failures, ideological extremism, and structural vulnerabilities. Beyond the statistics of violence, insecurity imposes profound human costs that reshape the nation's cultural, psychological, demographic, and developmental landscape.

Reimagining peacebuilding demands a decisive shift from militarized, state-centered frameworks to human-centered, community-driven, justice-oriented approaches. Sustainable peace is achievable only when Nigerians experience safety not merely as the absence of violence but as the presence of dignity, opportunity, and hope. The path forward requires bold policy choices, institutional reforms, inclusive governance, and unwavering commitment to human security.

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