

**RELIGION AND SECURITY ISSUES IN NIGERIA:
EFFECTS ON RURAL AND NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between religion and security challenges in Nigeria, with particular focus on how the practice and politicization of Christianity and Islam have contributed to rising insecurity and its implications for rural and national development. Adopting an expository and analytical method, the study interrogates how religious identities, extremist interpretations, and elite manipulation of faith-based sentiments have been instrumentalized to fuel conflicts such as banditry, insurgency, and communal violence. These dynamics have significantly undermined social cohesion and national stability. The study further explores the developmental consequences of such insecurity, especially in rural areas where livelihoods are predominantly agrarian. It reveals that persistent violence has led to mass displacement, loss of farmlands, disruption of food production systems, and increased dependence on humanitarian aid. These conditions not only undermine economic productivity but also erode human capital development, as displaced populations, especially children, face limited access to quality education and opportunities for self-actualization. The study concludes that religion itself is not the cause of insecurity; rather, its distortion and politicization have contributed significantly to the nation's security challenges. It recommends strengthening

interfaith dialogue, promoting responsible religious leadership, enhancing community-based security initiatives, rebuilding conflict-affected communities, and implementing policies that address the socio-economic conditions that fuel violence and extremism.

Keywords: religion, security, insecurity, Nigeria, rural development, national development, displacement, food security, human capital

Introduction

Religion occupies a central place in the social, cultural, and political life of Nigeria. As one of the most religious countries in the world, Nigeria presents a dynamic environment in which faith influences individual behavior, public morality, social organization, and political discourse. Religion serves not only as a spiritual guide but also as a social institution that shapes identity, values, and communal relations. Christianity and Islam constitute the two dominant religions in Nigeria, while African Traditional Religion (ATR) continues to influence indigenous beliefs and practices across various ethnic communities. Historically, religion has contributed significantly to social development through educational institutions, healthcare services, humanitarian interventions, and moral formation.¹ However, despite these positive contributions, religion has also become entangled with political competition, ethnic identities, and ideological extremism, producing significant security challenges.

Security remains one of the most pressing issues confronting contemporary Nigeria. The country has experienced various forms of insecurity, including religious insurgencies, banditry, ethnic militancy, communal conflicts, kidnapping, and

¹ Toyin Falola, "Religion and Nationalism in Nigeria," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2026): 252–65.

terrorism.² Several of these security crises have either directly emerged from religious tensions or have employed religious narratives for mobilization and justification. Groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have employed extremist interpretations of religion to legitimize violence and destabilize communities.³ The interaction between religion and insecurity in Nigeria is not merely theological but also socio-political. Political elites often manipulate religious identities to gain support, mobilize followers, and sustain power structures. Such instrumentalization transforms religious differences into fault lines for violent conflicts⁴. Consequently, religious divisions increasingly overlap with ethnic and regional identities, deepening social fragmentation.

The consequences of insecurity extend beyond immediate violence and loss of life. Rural communities, particularly in Northern Nigeria and parts of the Middle Belt, have become epicenters of insecurity. These regions, traditionally dependent on agriculture, have witnessed repeated attacks that force populations to abandon farms and livelihoods. The resulting displacement contributes significantly to food insecurity, poverty, and developmental stagnation. National development depends largely on social stability, human capital formation, and productive economic activities. Persistent insecurity undermines these foundations by disrupting education, reducing agricultural productivity, weakening institutions, and discouraging

² Orhero, A Ejogba “Human Security: The Key to Enduring National Security in Nigeria,” *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, no. 17 (2020): 470–84.

³ Onuoha, Freedom C. “The Terrorism–Organized Crime Nexus in the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria,” in *The Nexus Between Organized Crime and Terrorism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022): 366–90.

⁴ Hassan Matthew Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993).

investment. Thus, examining religion and security challenges in Nigeria requires understanding their broader implications for sustainable rural and national development.

This study, therefore, investigates the relationship between religion and insecurity in Nigeria and examines its implications for rural communities and national development. The study employs an expository and analytical method, drawing on secondary sources and relevant scholarship to interrogate how religious extremism and elite manipulation of faith have generated insecurity and undermined rural and national development.

The study is organized as follows. Section two clarifies the key concepts of religion, security, and rural and national development that underpin the analysis. Building on these conceptual foundations, section three examines the religious landscape of Nigeria, before section four turns to a broader discussion of the country's security situation. Section five then analyzes how religious practice and extremism, alongside elite manipulation of faith, generate insecurity, while section six explores one of the most far-reaching consequences of this insecurity: the displacement of rural communities. Section seven proceeds to assess the developmental fallout of this displacement, with particular attention to human capacity and food security, after which section eight considers religion's responsibility and potential for peaceful engagement in addressing the crisis. The study closes with section nine, which draws together the key findings and conclusions, and section ten, which sets out policy recommendations arising from the analysis.

Conceptual Definitions

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the key concepts organizing this study.

The Concept of Religion

Scholars have historically examined the concept of religion through two major approaches: substantive and functional definitions. Substantive definitions concentrate on the essential content of religion, emphasizing elements such as beliefs, rituals, and supernatural realities. A notable example is Edward B. Tylor's classical definition of religion as "the belief in spiritual beings".⁵ This perspective places particular emphasis on the existence of supernatural or divine entities as the defining feature of religion. Although Tylor's formulation played a significant role in the development of early anthropological studies of religion, it has been criticized for being too restrictive. Critics argue that it excludes non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism, which may not center on belief in spiritual beings, yet still possess characteristics commonly associated with religion. Consequently, Tylor's definition is often viewed as reflecting a Western and predominantly monotheistic perspective, thereby limiting its relevance in diverse cultural and religious settings.

In contrast, functional definitions focus less on what religion is and more on the roles it performs within individual lives and society. One of the most influential functionalist perspectives was advanced by Émile Durkheim, who defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them"⁶. Durkheim's definition emphasizes the capacity of religion to promote social solidarity, collective

⁵ Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Religion in Today's World: Global Issues, Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Melissa J. Wilcox (New York: Routledge, 2013): 27–54.

⁶ Robert Launay, "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 89.

consciousness, and communal identity without requiring belief in supernatural beings. Nevertheless, scholars have criticized this approach for being excessively broad.

Arinze presents both subjective and objective interpretations of religion. Subjectively, religion may be understood as the consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and the natural inclination to worship such a being. Objectively, religion consists of a body of truths, laws, and rituals through which human beings place themselves in subordination to the transcendent.⁷ These two dimensions illustrate that religion involves both an inner disposition of faith and an outward system of practices and norms governing the relationship between humanity and divinity.

The Concept of Security

Security does not have a universally accepted definition, as widely acknowledged in scholarly discourse. Scholars from different academic backgrounds conceptualize security based on their ideological orientations and intellectual perspectives. According to Orhero, security may be understood as freedom from threats to the physical existence of the state, as well as the capacity to promote self-preservation, development, and the overall well-being of the population.⁸ This broader understanding aligns with the concept of human security, which prioritizes protecting human needs across all spheres of life. According to Omede, security refers to the relative capacity of a state to

⁷ Francis A. Arinze, "The Church and Interreligious Dialogue," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2001): 156–77.

⁸ Orhero, A Ejogba "Human Security: The Key to Enduring National Security in Nigeria," *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, no. 17 (2020): 470–84.

effectively confront and manage threats that may endanger its fundamental values, national interests, and overall well-being.⁹

Insecurity, on the other hand, may be understood as the absence of confidence or assurance regarding one's safety, protection, and stability.¹⁰ A state characterized by insecurity is vulnerable to deterioration and eventual collapse in both human and material terms. Since human life is irreplaceable, its protection is essential for the continued existence and progress of society. Consequently, the absence of security affects every sector of a nation because human beings are the driving force behind all social, economic, political, and religious activities. In this regard, insecurity represents a threat to the social, religious, political, and economic fabric of a state. According to Obi, insecurity refers to "a chronic threat to human life, territories, states, religious beliefs, property, and institutions, among others."¹¹ This condition undermines the safety and stability necessary for the well-being and development of individuals and societies.

Rural and National Development

The term development is embedded with ideological, political, and historical implications that can significantly influence its interpretation depending on the viewpoint from which it is examined.¹² Nyerere viewed development as the ability of human

⁹ Omede, Adedoyin Jolaade. "Nigeria: Analysing the security challenges of the Goodluck Jonathan administration." *Canadian Social Science* 7, no. 5 (2011): 90-102.

¹⁰ Odalonu, Boris Happy. "Worsening insecurity in Nigeria and its implications on governance and national development." *African Journal of Humanities and Contemporary Education Research* 5, no. 1 (2022): 31-49.

¹¹ Obi, Hilda Eno. "Library network security measures as determinants of archives preservation in public libraries in Rivers State, Nigeria." *Asian Journal of Information Science and Technology* 13, no. 1 (2023): 41-48.

¹² Mela, Keneth, and Matthew Funsho Bello. "Community participatory development in Nigeria: Benefits and challenges." *Journal of Good governance and sustainable development in Africa* 7, no. 3 (2023): 48-67.

beings to broaden their consciousness and, consequently, increase their control over themselves, their environment, and the society in which they live.¹³ From his perspective, human beings occupy the central position in the development process, serving as both its driving force and ultimate purpose. Consequently, he asserted that development is for man, by man, and of man. This implies that individuals are not merely passive beneficiaries of development initiatives; rather, they are active participants who must initiate and contribute to their own development. In other words, the opportunities associated with development are created and sustained through human effort and initiative.

National development is the overall progress and advancement of a nation across multiple sectors, including political, economic, social, cultural, scientific, and material domains. It encompasses the processes through which a country improves the general conditions of life for its citizens.¹⁴ Odum and Achinike conceptualize rural development as a strategy focused on improving the economic and social conditions of impoverished rural populations, ensuring that the most vulnerable groups benefit from development initiatives¹⁵

The Religious Landscape of Nigeria

Having clarified these foundational concepts, the discussion now turns to the religious landscape within which religion and security dynamics in Nigeria unfold. Nigeria possesses one of the most diverse religious environments in Africa. Islam predominates in the northern regions, Christianity is dominant in the south, while traditional religious systems continue to influence indigenous

¹³ Mela and Bello, "Community Participatory Development," 48–67.

¹⁴ Lant Pritchett, "National Development Delivers: And How! And How?" *Economic Modelling* 107 (2022): 105717.

¹⁵ Odum, Mbanefo H., and Daniel Chimaobim Achinike. "Rural insecurity and the food security question in Nigeria: a critical analysis." *South East Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2025).

communities throughout the country. Islam entered Nigeria through trans-Saharan trade routes between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Its spread accelerated through the Sokoto Jihad led by Usman dan Fodio in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Christianity arrived through European missionary activities during the nineteenth century and expanded significantly through educational and missionary efforts.

Religious distribution in Nigeria roughly follows regional divisions. Northern Nigeria consists predominantly of Muslims, while southern Nigeria contains a larger Christian population. The Middle Belt represents a religiously mixed region characterized by recurring tensions and contestations over identity and land. Nigeria's religious plurality should ordinarily serve as a source of cultural richness and social cohesion. However, issues between religious communities have generated recurring tensions. Colonial policies contributed to this polarization by reinforcing regional divisions and unequal educational development.¹⁷ Political developments further intensified religious competition. Since independence, issues such as Sharia implementation, constitutional debates, and political appointments have frequently assumed religious dimensions. Religious affiliation increasingly functions as a determinant of political loyalty and social belonging. Consequently, religion in Nigeria operates not merely as a spiritual identity but as a powerful social and political force capable of mobilizing communities and shaping national discourse.

¹⁶ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Hassan Matthew Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993).

Security Situation in Nigeria

Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, the country's security landscape has remained a major source of concern. Although conventional criminal activities have long been part of Nigeria's social experience, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war, the emergence of violent extremism, insurgency, and various forms of militancy has significantly complicated the security environment. These developments have introduced new dimensions to the nation's security challenges, making them more difficult to manage and contain.

The Fulani herdsmen crisis represents one of the most persistent security challenges in Nigeria. Traditionally, Fulani herders settled in fertile areas suitable for cattle grazing. However, as migration patterns became increasingly influenced by economic and socio-political factors, conflicts between herders and host farming communities intensified. Many Nigerians lose their lives, farmlands, crops, and other properties annually due to clashes involving Fulani herders. According to Ajibefun, these conflicts largely stem from the encroachment of farmlands by grazing cattle. Furthermore, the violence associated with herdsmen-farmer clashes has displaced numerous communities, depriving them of their farmlands and primary means of livelihood. The situation has become increasingly intolerable for many farmers, who often find themselves vulnerable to repeated attacks.¹⁸

While herders frequently attribute the origins of the conflict to religious differences and the alleged killing of their cattle, farmers perceive herders as a direct threat to their agricultural production because grazing cattle often destroy cultivated crops. These opposing perspectives have further deepened the crisis.

¹⁸ Ajibefun, M. B. "Social and economic effects of the menace of Fulani herdsmen crises in Nigeria." *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 8, no. 2 (2018).

The cycle of attacks and reprisals has generated severe social, relational, and economic consequences. The increasing possession of sophisticated weapons by herders, which are reportedly used against perceived opponents, presents a grave threat to national security. This concern is heightened by the apparent inability of security agencies, including the police, to effectively counter the firepower and boldness of armed herders.

Another security challenge is the growing prevalence of kidnapping in rural communities, which has compelled many young people to relocate their parents from villages to urban areas in search of safety, although cities themselves are increasingly affected by insecurity. According to Ibukunolun, kidnapping for ransom has evolved into a lucrative criminal enterprise in Nigeria. He observed that an average of thirteen persons were abducted daily during the first half of 2021, resulting in a staggering total of 2,371 victims within six months. Furthermore, he noted that more than one hundred abduction cases had already been recorded by the police in 2024. The widespread nature of these crimes has severely weakened local economies, as small-scale entrepreneurs and business owners often become targets of criminal attacks. Fear of kidnapping and violence has also discouraged participation in democratic processes, particularly during elections, where political thuggery and insecurity pose significant threats to citizens.¹⁹

The deteriorating security situation has undermined investment in rural areas. Local investors are increasingly reluctant to commit resources to communities plagued by violence and instability. For example, Anikwudike and Agabi reported that no fewer than eighty communities were overrun and abandoned due to bandit attacks in Zurmi Local Government Area of Zamfara State. Consequently, the Federal Government suspended gold-mining activities in the affected areas due to security concerns.

¹⁹ Akinsowon, "Root Causes of Security Challenges in Nigeria," 174–180.

Similarly, *Daily Trust* reported that by March 1, 2022, approximately 145 villages had been displaced by bandit activities across six local government areas in Southern Kaduna (Daily Trust, March 12, 2022). He further revealed that over 205 communities in Birnin Gwari and six other local government areas in Southern Kaduna were deserted within a one-year period due to persistent attacks.²⁰

The persistent threat to lives and property has compelled several multinational companies and investors to either scale down operations or completely withdraw from the country. Companies such as Dunlop, Michelin, Evans Medicals, GlaxoSmithKline Nigeria, and Procter & Gamble (P&G) have exited the Nigerian market, while others, including Guinness Nigeria, Microsoft Nigeria, and Kimberly-Clark Corporation, have at various times announced plans to restructure or reduce their operations. Those that remain often operate under heightened security concerns and increased operational costs. Furthermore, the persistent wave of kidnappings and violent attacks has negatively affected foreign direct investment, interstate commerce, tourism, and the transportation of goods and services across the country. The disruption of economic activities has resulted in significant income losses and reduced economic opportunities for rural populations, thereby deepening poverty and underdevelopment. Beyond the economic and developmental implications, insecurity has also damaged Nigeria's international reputation. The prevalence of kidnapping, banditry, terrorism, and other forms of violent crime has projected a negative image of the country globally. This has contributed to increased suspicion and unfavorable treatment of Nigerians in some international settings,

²⁰ Anikwudike, Christopher Nnabuike, and Paul Tsunabavyon Agabi. "Effects of Insecurity on the Socio-Political and Economic Development of Nigeria's Rural Environment: An Appraisal." *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy* 14, no. 1 (2024).

thereby affecting the nation's image, diplomatic standing, and global competitiveness.²¹

Religious Practice, Extremism, and the Generation of Insecurity

Against this backdrop of pervasive insecurity, it becomes necessary to examine more closely how religious practice itself, when distorted, contributes to generating such insecurity. Religious practice ordinarily promotes peace, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. Most religious traditions advocate compassion, justice, and peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, distorted interpretations and manipulations of religious doctrines can generate violent outcomes. Religious extremism refers to rigid ideological positions characterized by intolerance toward alternative beliefs and willingness to employ violence in defense of perceived religious truths.²² Extremists frequently present their actions as divinely sanctioned. The Boko Haram insurgency illustrates the intersection between religion and insecurity in Nigeria. Founded by Mohammed Yusuf in the early 2000s, Boko Haram rejected Western education and secular governance while advocating the implementation of strict Islamic principles. The movement transformed into a violent insurgency after Yusuf died in 2009.²³ Boko Haram's activities have included suicide bombings, attacks on churches and mosques, mass abductions, and destruction of communities. Their operations have caused

²¹ Anikwudike, Christopher Nnabuike, and Paul Tsunabavyon Agabi. "Effects of Insecurity on the Socio-Political and Economic Development of Nigeria's Rural Environment: An Appraisal." *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy* 14, no. 1 (2024).

²² Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religion, Nationalism, Violence, and Conflict," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2026), 110–21.

²³ Onuoha, Freedom C. "The Terrorism-Organized Crime Nexus in the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria," in *The Nexus Between Organized Crime and Terrorism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022): 366–90.

thousands of deaths and displaced millions of persons across Northern Nigeria. Although socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment contributed significantly to recruitment into extremist groups, religious narratives provided ideological legitimacy and mobilization mechanisms.

Political elites also exploit religious identities. Politicians frequently employ religious rhetoric during electoral campaigns to mobilize support and demonize opponents. Such practices deepen social divisions and create environments conducive to violence. The proliferation of hate speech by certain religious leaders further aggravates insecurity. Sermons that portray other faiths as enemies contribute to radicalization and inter-group hostility. Thus, while religion itself does not inherently produce violence, irresponsible religious practices and extremist interpretations significantly contribute to insecurity.²⁴

Insecurity and Displacement of Rural Communities

Among the most devastating consequences of religion-related insecurity is the mass displacement of rural communities. Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, with millions uprooted by conflict across the northeast, Middle Belt, and increasingly the northwest.²⁵ From rural communities such as Chibok in Borno State, Guma, Logo, Ukum, Agatu, and Apa in Benue State, Nimbo in Enugu State, to Kardoroko and Keana in Nasarawa State, and Bassa and Bokkos in Plateau State, the narrative remains consistently troubling. The escalation of insecurity is gradually becoming a defining feature of Nigeria, as incidents occur almost daily.²⁶ Charles documented

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 369.

²⁵ Osagioduwa Eweka and Toluwanimi Oluwakorede Olusegun, "Management of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa: Comparing Nigeria and Cameroon," *African Research Review* 10, no. 1 (2016): 193–210.

²⁶ A. Oni and F. Ibitoye, "Effects of Herders-Farmers Conflict on Agriculture in Benue State," *African Journal of Rural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2022): 58–74.

the worsening insecurity in Benue State, which left numerous homes destroyed and hopes shattered.²⁷ Similarly, Duru reported the brutal killing of at least 18 individuals by suspected armed bandits in the Mbache community of Katsina-Ala Local Government Area during the same period.²⁸ Hir highlighted repeated attacks by suspected herdsmen militias, kidnappers, and bandits across several Local Government Areas in Benue State, particularly within the Sankera axis, resulting in mass displacement and the abandonment of many villages.²⁹ Across various regions of the country, incidents of farmer–herder clashes, banditry, and violent insurgencies have become widespread. These crises have forced farmers and entire farming communities to flee from their fertile lands. Akinsowon contends that herders have attacked entire communities, abducted prominent individuals, destroyed churches, killed clergy and worshippers, murdered security personnel, committed acts of rape and looting, and perpetrated various other crimes. The displacement of farmers from affected communities has significantly reduced agricultural productivity, resulting in shortages of agricultural products in both rural and urban markets, particularly in central Nigeria.³⁰

Abdullahi maintains that the activities of Fulani herders have negatively affected Nigeria’s economy. Virtually every sector of the economy has experienced disruptions due to persistent

²⁷ J. Charles, “Shadow of Death: Benue’s Deepening Insecurity Leaves Trail of Shattered Hopes, Homes,” *Punch*, July 19, 2024, Punch article.

²⁸ P. Duru, “18 Killed, Others Injured by Armed Bandits in Benue Community,” *Vanguard*, July 20, 2024, Vanguard article.

²⁹ S. Hir, “Benue: Herdsmen, Bandits Unleash Endless Terror on Residents,” *The Sun*, April 6, 2024, The Sun article.

³⁰ Akinsowon, Francis Idowu. “Root causes of security challenges in Nigeria and solutions.” *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research* 9, no. 4 (2021): 174-180.

violence and insecurity.³¹ Dauda emphasizes that gains achieved in the agricultural sector, particularly in food production, risk being reversed because of the adverse impact of herdsmen-related conflicts on farming communities. In many affected states, socio-economic activities are severely disrupted, as residents live in constant fear of attacks and are often unable to engage freely in farming and other productive ventures³²

In many cases, the violence leads not only to the destruction of crops and agricultural produce but also to the loss of farmers' lives. Consequently, thousands of affected individuals are compelled to abandon their homes, relocating to safer areas or relying heavily on humanitarian support for survival. According to recent estimates, over 2.2 million Nigerians have been displaced as a direct consequence of insecurity in rural areas, thereby disrupting food production and weakening the agricultural sector.³³

The Developmental Consequences of Displacement: Human Capacity and Food Security

The displacement of rural communities produces cascading developmental consequences. Food insecurity is the most immediate. The displacement of farmers poses a serious risk of widespread food shortages. When extensive areas of arable land are left uncultivated, agricultural output inevitably declines, and supply chains become destabilized. It is widely acknowledged that a reduction in food supply leads to scarcity and drives inflationary pressures. Observably, food inflation in Nigeria has risen to unprecedented levels in recent times. This reality has

³¹ Abdullahi, R. F. "Causes and Effects of Fulani Herdsmen Clashes with Farmers in Northern Part of Nigeria." *Law Issues* 16, no. 2 (2019): 172–181.

³² Dauda, S. M. "Impact of Government Intervention on Various Crises in Nigeria." *Societal Issues* 8, no. 1 (2019): 102–109.

³³ T. Ayetoto-Oladehinde, "Numbers of Displaced Nigerians Alarming – UN," *BusinessDay*, February 11, 2022, *BusinessDay*.

forced many households to reduce both the quantity and quality of their food consumption, while others have become dependent on humanitarian organizations and the support of compassionate individuals within their communities.

The implications for food security are therefore severe and far-reaching. A compelling illustration can be found in the rural communities of Benue State. Ijirshar *et al.*, in their study of Guma, Agatu, and Gwer Local Government Areas, established a measurable relationship between insecurity and agricultural decline. Their findings indicate that a 1% increase in rural violence corresponds to a 0.211% reduction in crop production and a 0.311% decrease in livestock output. This trend is further corroborated by national data, which show that maize prices rose by over 60% between January 2023 and January 2024, a development closely associated with disruptions in farming activities and the breakdown of transportation systems.³⁴

Also, empirical evidence reinforces this pattern. Oriko *et al.*, in their study on yam production in Logo Local Government Area, reported that 67.3% of farmers experienced a decline in productivity following herdsmen attacks. In many cases, yams were left unharvested, farming inputs were destroyed, and entire farmlands were abandoned due to fear and insecurity.³⁵ In a similar vein, Kwaghtser documented a 56% reduction in food production after violent incursions, with 62% of farmers reporting decreased income. As a result, once-fertile agricultural lands are increasingly turning into overgrown and unused spaces, while rural households struggle to resume farming activities amid ongoing trauma and instability. Furthermore, incidents of

³⁴ V. U. Ijirshar, I. I. Udaah, B. N. Mile, J. S. Vershima, and A. Adau, "Effect of Insecurity on Agricultural Output in Benue State, Nigeria," *arXiv Preprint* (2025).

³⁵ S. E. Oriko, M. D. Ismaila, and C. A. Ogbaini, "Navigating Challenges: Herdsmen-Crop Farmers Conflict and Its Effect on Yam Productivity in Benue State," *Neraca: Jurnal Pendidikan Ekonomi* 9, no. 2 (2024): 163–71.

violence often involve the destruction of villages and farmlands, making it extremely difficult for displaced rural populations to return and resume agricultural practices even after the immediate threats have subsided.³⁶

Religion, Responsibility, and the Imperative of Peaceful Engagement

Religion possesses enormous constructive potential. Both Islam and Christianity, in their classical formulations, contain robust teachings on justice, peace, and the sanctity of human life. The problem in Nigeria is not religion itself but the selective, distorted, and politically motivated readings of sacred texts that serve power rather than faith. Religious leaders who preach hatred or sanctify violence betray the core ethical imperatives of the traditions they claim to represent.

Given the depth of religious commitment across Nigerian society, clerics, imams, pastors, and traditional religious authorities possess unparalleled moral authority to influence attitudes and behavior. Research consistently shows that religious leaders are among the most trusted figures in Nigerian communities, particularly in rural areas where formal institutions are weak. This trust can be directed toward peacebuilding, reconciliation, and community solidarity. The Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, co-founded by a former Christian militia leader, Pastor James Wuye, and a former Muslim youth activist, Imam Muhammad Ashafa, who became partners in peace, demonstrates that even the deepest religious enmities can be transformed when leaders choose reconciliation over conflict.

³⁶ P. A. Kwaghtser, "Impact of the Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen on Food Production in the Agro-Ecological Zone-B of Benue State, Nigeria," *Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 56–64.

Interfaith dialogue, however, must be connected to concrete socioeconomic and governance interventions. Poverty, land scarcity, and political exclusion cannot be resolved by dialogue alone; they require policy responses and structural reforms. Religious communities can amplify developmental needs and hold governments accountable, but they cannot substitute for the state's primary responsibility to deliver security, justice, and development. Faith-based organizations, which already operate schools, hospitals, and community programs across Nigeria, often reaching where government services do not, should be mobilized more systematically as partners in post-conflict recovery and development.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between religion, security, and development in Nigeria. It has argued that while religion is not inherently conflictual, the distortion of religious teachings, the politicization of religious identities, and the manipulation of faith by political elites have contributed substantially to Nigeria's security crisis. The insurgency in the northeast, the Middle Belt violence, and periodic sectarian riots collectively represent a crisis that is partly religious in character, even when its deeper drivers are economic and political. The developmental consequences are severe and far-reaching: mass displacement has severed rural communities from their farmlands, triggering food insecurity; the destruction of schools and displacement of children has produced a human capital emergency with multigenerational implications. These are not abstract problems but the lived realities of millions of Nigerians whose capacity for self-actualization and national contribution has been devastated by violence they did not choose. Nigeria cannot achieve its development aspirations while millions remain displaced, malnourished, and excluded from education and economic participation. Religion, properly engaged, can be a

transformative force for peace and development. The task for Nigeria is to harness this potential while addressing the structural conditions that sustain conflict.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered to relevant stakeholders.

First, the federal and state governments should develop a comprehensive national framework for religious conflict prevention, strengthening existing institutions, including the National Peace Committee and state-level peace commissions, with adequate funding and clear accountability mechanisms for officials who incite religious violence.

Second, security sector actors should adopt community-sensitive approaches to counterinsurgency that minimize civilian casualties and strengthen civilian oversight. Military operations that generate new displacement or antagonize communities undermine the long-term goal of sustainable security.

Third, religious leaders at all levels should be engaged as formal partners in peacebuilding. Structured interfaith dialogue platforms should be established at the local government level, with dedicated support for women religious leaders whose voices are typically marginalized in formal peace processes.

Fourth, educational investment in conflict-affected areas must be scaled up, rebuilding schools, deploying teachers, providing psychosocial support, and ensuring gender parity. Accelerated learning programmes should be established for children who have missed years of schooling due to displacement.

Fifth, agricultural recovery programmes should prioritize conflict-affected rural communities with access to seeds, tools, extension services, and rural credit to rapidly restore food production. Land dispute resolution mechanisms should be

strengthened in farmer-herder conflict zones to address the resource competition underlying communal violence.

Sixth, political elites must be held accountable for instrumentalizing religion. Civil society, media, and religious institutions should collectively resist the manipulation of faith for partisan ends, and legislative frameworks against hate speech and religious incitement should be vigorously enforced.