



AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF NON KINETIC PEACE MEASURES IN THE MIDDLE BELT REGION OF NIGERIA. THE FOURTH REPUBLIC.

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Abstract: *The issue of crisis and violence has time immemorial being a major issue in society. Its effects are widely seen at the micro and macro level. Therefore at the Macro level in the middle belt region of Nigeria, the state government being the chief security officer of the state has invented non kinetic peace measures in mitigating the rising crisis which has taken an ethno-religious posture. However, the measures seem to be ineffective as the power dynamics in the middle belt continues to fuel the crisis. The middle belt which is the food basket region of the state is now therefore reduced to a conflict zone where agricultural production output reduces day in day out and people flee for the fear of their lives. This paper applies the Power dynamic theory to explain the reason for the increasing crisis more so, the research applied the mixed research method. The research asserts that non kinetic peace measures are only effective when all stakeholders involved are well identified. The research found out that the underlying hatred between and amongst the various ethnic groups constitutes the major problem in the Middle belt region. The research recommends that for the middle belt to return back to its full potentials, the government must make a proactive decision in ensuring the application of the federal character policy to accommodate all the ethnic groups in the state polity.*

Keyword: Non kinetic, conflict resolution, crisis, middle belt.

1. Introduction

Conflicts have become a persistent challenge in human society, intertwining individual and collective fates (Njoku, 2022). Karl Marx framed this as historical materialism, highlighting the evolutionary crises that shape societies. Nigeria, shaped by British colonialism, is a nation of diverse ethnic groups that were never given the opportunity to determine the terms of their union. Even during the Willinks Commission of 1957/58, when ethnic groups sought socio-political and

economic autonomy, both foreign and local colonial powers denied them this right. As a result, Nigeria, forged through the forced amalgamation of various kingdoms, tribes, and ethnic groups, has been plagued by discontent stemming from a lack of a social contract (Siollun, 2021), leading to recurrent crises within its democratic framework.

The integration of diverse ethnic and religious groups under one national framework has exacerbated issues that continue to reverberate in Nigeria's political landscape (Turaki, 2015). The Middle Belt region, in particular, has been a focal point for land disputes, ethnic rivalries, religious tensions, and the impacts of climate change, all of which threaten the interests of various groups. These tensions have contributed to ethnic and religious conflicts that significantly affect the socio-political and economic fabric of the region. The reliance on military power and kinetic responses has proven ineffective, thus necessitating the adoption of non-kinetic, state-driven peace measures.

Non-kinetic conflict resolution refers to strategies that avoid physical violence, instead focusing on diplomacy, negotiation, mediation, and other peaceful approaches. These methods aim to foster understanding and compromise without resorting to violence, and are essential for promoting stability and cooperation in conflict situations. However, addressing the identity issues entwined with Nigeria's politics and socio-economic relations remains a challenge due to the complex power dynamics among ethnic groups, particularly in the Middle Belt (Adeseyinwa, 2019). Historical tensions among groups in Benue and Plateau states have made establishing trust and consensus difficult, further exacerbated by disputes over land use.

The Middle Belt is home to numerous ethnic groups, each with distinct customs and claims to land ownership. The merging of these groups into a single national framework has led to conflicts, particularly between indigenes and settlers. These disputes often reflect broader societal divides, such as foreign versus citizen, tenant versus landlord, and longstanding ethnic and religious animosities. Nigeria's unique land tenure system, rooted in traditional practices, often clashes with statutory land laws, leading to further tensions over land disputes in the region.

The ongoing crises in Benue and Plateau states have led to significant loss of life and destruction, evolving from disagreements into substantial security challenges. The escalating violence has deeply affected communal, ethnic, and religious groups. Since the Fourth Republic, issues like indigenous rights, political representation, resource allocation, ethnic supremacy, and religious mistrust have intensified conflicts, affecting both the states and the nation. Since the first major riot in Jos in 2001, over 31,000 lives have been lost (HRW, 2022), and despite over two decades of military and police presence, a fragile calm persists. Disputes over resource allocation, electoral competition, fears of religious dominance, and land rights have all contributed to the volatile situation (Krause, 2010).

Nigeria's political structure complicates conflict resolution. As a federal republic, power is shared between the central government and the states, creating challenges in addressing conflicts due to differing priorities and perspectives. This was evident in the power politics surrounding the federal government's RUGA policy and state opposition to it. The centralized security architecture often limits the ability of sub-regional governments to enforce peace and resolve conflicts effectively.

Despite Nigeria's pluralism and efforts at promoting peace, long-standing conflicts persist due to exclusivity and poor intergroup relations.

The 1960 and 1999 constitutions legally granted settlers the right to maintain their residence during boundary demarcations and state creation, which has unintentionally led to violent land ownership clashes. In this complex security landscape, centralized security measures have struggled to address the nuances of these conflicts. Conflicts between customary and statutory land laws further complicate resolution efforts, with the federal structure influencing how these disputes are managed. While the central government creates policies to address conflicts, implementation often falls to the states, resulting in inconsistencies. The coexistence of multiple legal systems, such as customary and statutory laws, has complicated dispute resolution efforts, especially in Plateau and Benue states, where cooperation between the central and state governments has been unsuccessful.

This research aims to examine the challenges of implementing state-led non-kinetic peace measures within Nigeria's federal system and assess the impact of the Middle Belt crisis on the country's socio-political and economic structure.

1.2 Methodology

The research adopts a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative analysis which is gotten through primary and secondary sources. A structured interview was conducted on key informants and a survey was distributed to people in the study area. The key interview was used to analyze the effect of the the Middle Belt Crisis on Nigeria's Socio-Political and Economic Structure while the quantitative analysis was used to analyze the implementation of the non-kinetic peace measures

2. Literature Reviews

2.1 Conceptual clarifications

2.1.1 Concept of Non kinetic peace measures

Non-kinetic peace measures refer to strategies and actions that are aimed at resolving conflicts and maintaining peace without the use of physical force or violence. These measures focus on diplomatic, political, and socio-economic approaches to address the root causes of conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions. Examples of non-kinetic peace measures include negotiation, mediation, dialogue, diplomacy, economic sanctions, development aid, and reconciliation processes. These measures prioritize dialogue, cooperation, and understanding to foster peaceful relationships and prevent the escalation of violence.

The government typically handles conflicts between customary and statutory land laws by employing a multi-faceted approach. They recognize the importance of dialogue and mediation between representatives from both systems to find common ground and reach a mutually acceptable solution. Additionally, legal reforms and policy initiatives are often implemented to harmonize customary and statutory land laws. This includes creating frameworks that integrate customary practices within the broader legal system. By promoting inclusivity, transparency, and collaboration, the government aims to navigate these conflicts and find resolutions that respect the rights and interests of all parties involved.

Features of Non Kinetic Peace Measure

Non-kinetic peace measures have several key features. First, they prioritize diplomacy and dialogue as means of resolving conflicts and promoting peaceful resolutions. This involves engaging in negotiations, mediation, and dialogue to find common ground and reach mutually acceptable solutions. Second, non-kinetic peace measures focus on addressing the root causes of conflicts, such as socio-economic disparities, political grievances, or cultural tensions. By tackling these underlying issues, they aim to create sustainable peace.

Third, non-kinetic peace measures often involve the participation of multiple stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and local communities. This inclusive approach helps to build trust, foster cooperation, and ensure that diverse perspectives are taken into account. Finally, non-kinetic peace measures emphasize long-term strategies that promote reconciliation, justice, and the establishment of institutions and mechanisms that can prevent future conflicts. These features collectively contribute to the effectiveness of non-kinetic peace measures in achieving lasting peace.

2.1.2 Origin of the Middle belt crisis

The crisis in the Middle Belt of Nigeria is deeply rooted in a complex mix of history, ethnicity, and socio-economic challenges. The region is home to a variety of ethnic groups, and their long-standing tensions over land, resources, political representation, and religious differences have only grown over time (Njoku, 2022). Much of the conflict can be traced back to the colonial era, when the British drew artificial boundaries and introduced indirect rule. These decisions disrupted existing power structures, sowing seeds of resentment among ethnic groups who were now governed by foreign powers (Siollun, 2021). At the same time, the British promoted the cultivation of cash crops, which increased competition for land, especially between farmers and herders, further fueling tensions (Adeseyinwa, 2019).

The British also replaced traditional land systems with a new legal framework that often conflicted with local customs, creating disputes over land ownership that still persist today (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1978). On top of this, the introduction of Western education, Christianity, and a new legal system significantly changed the social and cultural fabric of the region, with both positive and negative effects (Turaki, 2015). These colonial policies shaped the ongoing issues in the Middle Belt, where ethnic groups like the Tiv, Idoma, Berom, and Fulani continue to clash over resources, power, and identity (Adeseyinwa, 2019).

The rise of cash crop cultivation brought economic opportunities but also significant challenges. While crops like cocoa, cotton, and groundnuts created a booming agricultural economy, they also shifted focus away from subsistence farming, which impacted local food security. Additionally, the control of cash crop trade by colonial powers and later multinational corporations limited the economic benefits for local farmers and made the region's economy vulnerable to market fluctuations (Siollun, 2021). This imbalance in economic power is one of the reasons tensions in the region have persisted.

Both the military and civilian governments have contributed to the ongoing struggles in the Middle Belt. Under military rule, power was highly centralized, and the region's grievances were largely ignored. The civilian government, while attempting to address some of the conflicts and land reform issues, has faced significant obstacles in resolving disputes and balancing the competing

interests of various groups (HRW, 2022). The legacy of these governance failures, combined with historical divisions, continues to fuel the unrest in the region.

One of the key land reform efforts, the Land Use Act of 1978, was intended to resolve issues of land ownership by giving control to state governors (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1978). However, its implementation was marred by corruption and disputes over compensation, leaving many of the land ownership conflicts unresolved. Furthermore, the creation of new local government areas during the Babangida regime was perceived by some as an effort to strengthen Hausa/Fulani influence in the region, adding another layer of tension (Siollun, 2021). The civilian government's attempts to address these long-standing issues have been met with mixed results. The deep-rooted ethnic tensions, complex land disputes, and shifting political interests have proven difficult to manage, and efforts to find lasting solutions have often fallen short (Adeseyinwa, 2019).

2.1.3 Various Non-Kinetic Peace Measures

Several strategies have been used in the Middle Belt to foster peace, focusing on dialogue, community involvement, and socio-economic development. These measures aim to address both immediate conflicts and the deeper, long-standing issues in the region.

1. Intercommunal Dialogue: Over the years, various peace initiatives have focused on opening lines of communication between different communities to promote understanding and peaceful coexistence. A prominent example is the Middle Belt Dialogue Forum (MBDF), which brings together leaders from various ethnic and religious groups to engage in open conversations. The forum serves as a platform for community leaders, traditional rulers, and religious figures to share their experiences and concerns in a constructive manner. The goal is to address the root causes of conflict, build trust, and create an environment where empathy and mutual respect are the foundations of dialogue. Through this process, the MBDF has worked towards finding common ground and building bridges between divided communities.

2. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms: Traditional methods of resolving disputes have played a crucial role in managing conflicts in the Middle Belt. These local mechanisms, rooted in the cultural practices of the region's ethnic groups, offer a more familiar and often more effective way of settling disputes. For example, community elders or traditional rulers frequently step in as mediators during conflicts. These respected figures, seen as neutral parties, facilitate discussions and work towards finding solutions that everyone can agree on. In addition, "palaver huts" or community meetings are common forums where disputes are discussed openly, allowing each party to share their side and work toward a collective resolution. This system places a strong emphasis on consensus-building and restoring harmony within the community, and it remains the primary method of conflict resolution in states like Benue and Plateau, where formal legal systems may be less accessible.

3. Economic Development Initiatives: Beyond dialogue and mediation, addressing the underlying economic causes of conflict is essential. Various development programs have been introduced to tackle the socio-economic issues that fuel unrest. These initiatives focus on improving livelihoods, creating jobs, and providing sustainable opportunities for local communities. Some of the key areas of focus include:

- **Agricultural Programs:** Efforts to improve farming techniques, provide resources to farmers, and develop crop value chains for key products like maize, rice, and cassava. These programs aim to make farming more profitable and sustainable, reducing competition over resources.

- **Microfinance and Entrepreneurship Support:** Programs that offer loans, business training, and mentorship to aspiring entrepreneurs. These initiatives empower individuals to start and grow their businesses, which in turn stimulates local economies.

- **Infrastructure Development:** Projects designed to improve infrastructure like roads, irrigation, and rural electrification, which are critical for enhancing transportation, productivity, and market access.

- **Skill Development and Vocational Training:** Initiatives aimed at equipping young people with the skills needed for employment in sectors like construction, manufacturing, and hospitality, helping to reduce unemployment and improve economic stability.

4. **Social Reconciliation Efforts:** Efforts to heal social divides and promote unity in the region have included cultural exchanges, festivals, and awareness campaigns. These events aim to bring people together, allowing them to appreciate and celebrate each other's differences. Some examples include:

- **Festivals and Celebrations:** Cultural events where various ethnic groups come together to showcase their traditional music, dance, food, and crafts. These celebrations serve as a powerful reminder of the region's diversity and create opportunities for cross-cultural understanding.

- **Traditional Games and Sports:** Sporting events that bring together people from different communities to participate in friendly competition. These games not only promote physical activity but also build relationships and trust among participants.

- **Cultural Exhibitions and Workshops:** Events where local artisans and craftsmen display their work, helping to preserve traditional crafts while promoting mutual respect and cultural appreciation.

5. **Modern Military Conflict Resolution:** Even in more volatile situations, non-kinetic peace measures have become an important tool for the military. Inspired by peacekeeping strategies used by Western democracies and advanced by scholars like Galtung and Lederach, the Nigerian military has adopted approaches that focus on dialogue and amnesty, rather than purely military intervention. For example, initiatives like Operation Safe Corridor, which reintegrates former Boko Haram fighters into society, and Operation Restore Hope, aimed at pacifying Niger Delta militants, show that the military can take on a more collaborative, peacebuilding role. These strategies help to de-escalate violent conflicts and offer a path to reconciliation and recovery for communities caught in the crossfire.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 Power Dynamics Theory

The theory that best explains the problems of conflict resolution is the power dynamics theory. Power dynamics theory focuses on how power imbalances and disparities can hinder the resolution of conflicts. It recognizes that conflicts often arise due to differences in power, whether it's economic, political, or social power. These power imbalances can create challenges in finding

mutually agreeable solutions, as the party with more power may be less willing to compromise or may impose their preferences on the other party. Understanding and addressing power dynamics is crucial in conflict resolution to ensure fairness, equality, and a balanced negotiation process.

Power dynamics theory is applied in conflict resolution by acknowledging and addressing the imbalances of power that exist between parties involved in a conflict. It recognizes that power disparities can hinder the resolution process and create challenges in reaching a fair and equitable outcome. To apply power dynamics theory, conflict resolution practitioners strive to create an environment that promotes equal participation, open dialogue, and transparency. They aim to empower marginalized or less powerful parties by providing them with a platform to voice their concerns and interests. By understanding and addressing power dynamics, conflict resolution processes can work towards more inclusive and sustainable solutions that consider the needs and perspectives of all parties involved. Power dynamics looks at interest and key stakeholder's values to resolve conflicts. The theory assumes every stakeholder has varying interest and too resolve the issues the interest must be addressed.

Limitations of the theory

The power dynamics theory provides valuable insights into conflicts and their resolution, it does have some limitations. One limitation is that power dynamics can be complex and multifaceted, making it challenging to accurately assess and address power imbalances. Additionally, power dynamics can change over time, which means that a resolution that addresses power imbalances at one point may become inadequate in the future. Another limitation is that power dynamics theory may not fully capture the nuances of cultural, social, and historical factors that influence conflicts and their resolution. Despite these limitations, power dynamics theory remains a valuable framework for understanding and navigating conflicts, and it can be complemented by other theories and approaches to achieve more comprehensive conflict resolution.

2.3 Empirical Review

Insecurity and violent conflicts in Nigeria have created huge development gaps, impeded foreign investment inflows, and perpetuated socio-political instability. Oke, (2014), carried out a qualitative study on Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria, exploring the effects of insecurity on economic development. Using a thematic analysis of secondary data, this present study has found that insecurity disrupts economic activities, discourages investment, and deepens socio-political instability. The study highlighted that the struggle for resource distribution and political patronage has engendered a culture of fear detrimental to national development. However, the study was not on non-kinetic measures of containing the crisis but rather community dialogue and peacebuilding strategies.

In his contribution, Ladan (2013) analyzed the insecurity and IDPs nexus in Northern Nigeria using a fragility theory framework. This study adopted a qualitative approach to ascertain how the fragile nature of the state increases the chances of conflict and subsequently results in displacement and deterioration of development indices. It was indicated that farmer-herder conflict, due to land tenure problems and resource competition, is one of the key drivers for displacement. However, this study has not explained how the non-kinetic peace measures of the state-driven mediation or alternative dispute resolutions can ease the tension.

Chukwuma et al. (2020) discussed a discourse analysis of Constructing the Farmer-Herder Crisis in Nigeria, from the lens of political narratives shaping perceptions of the conflict. Their findings report how securitization narratives of "Fulanization" and "sedentarization" shape public and policy responses to the crisis. The study has given insight into the politicization of conflict, but it empirically did not test the efficiency of some of the non-kinetic approaches, such as reconciliation programs or government-led peace dialogues.

In his analysis of rural banditry and its implication for regional security in West Africa, Adegoke (2022) employed secondary data analysis. The findings showed that banditry in Nigeria is aided by resource competition, political corruption, and weak governance into a network of insurgencies and transnational criminal activities. This, in a way, suggested that regional security cooperation could be vital in addressing the menace. The study was, however, focused on military responses and did not review non-kinetic measures of the disarmament program or community-based policing that might have played a role in controlling rural banditry.

Traditional African approaches to conflict resolution-one grounded in truth and participation-can provide a durable solution to the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Abideen 2020 African Traditional Conflict Resolution as Alternative Strategy in the Resolution of North-East, Nigeria Boko- Haram Insurgence. The failure of the government of Nigeria to resolve its lingering, violent conflict, especially the insurgent and terrorist conflict of the Boko Haram in the North-Eastern part of the country, which in the course of the year has resulted in the killing of thousands of people, displacement of millions, and destruction of billions of naira worth of property, calls for more concerted effort. The Nigerian government has employed different strategies in an attempt at resolving the conflicts all to no avail. This paper reviews the different strategies in an attempt to identify the loopholes and seeks alternative African traditional conflict resolution strategies owing to its core tenets, which is "Truth and participatory." The method employed in the collection of data is content analysis. It is expected that a proper understanding of the loopholes, coupled with the articulation of alternative strategies, may lead to lasting solutions for the lingering problems threatening the corporate existence of the country.

Identified Gaps to the Study

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the causes and consequences of insecurity in Nigeria, they largely focus on the problem rather than solutions, particularly non-kinetic peace approaches. There are limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of dialogue, reconciliation, disarmament, and peace education initiatives in mitigating conflicts in the Middle Belt.

3.0 Results presentation and data analysis

3.1 Data Presentation

A 400 respondent survey was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. The survey was distributed amongst stakeholders involved in the armed crisis in the plateau and Benue state middle belt region. The stakeholders cut across security agencies, religious groups, ethnic associations, MDA's, Policy makers, Peace commissions and panel of enquiry. The data were presented using simple percentage and comparison between the responses between the Plateau state responses to the government efforts at sustainable peace and also the responses of the Benue respondents to the state government sustainable peace efforts.

Table 1: showing respondent responses on interfaith representation in government meetings are a key component of the Plateau and Benue States government's peace policies.

Items	P-Frequency	P-Percentage	B-Frequency	B-Percentage
SA	29	10.7	13	10.1
A	56	20.7	11	8.5
N	8	3.0	4	3.1
D	176	64.9	76	58.9
SD	2	0.7	25	19.4
Total	271	100	129	100.0

Source: Researchers Survey, September, 2024

The data indicates widespread dissatisfaction with interfaith representation in government peace policies across both states. In Plateau, 64.9% disagreed, and in Benue, 58.9% disagreed, reflecting skepticism about its effectiveness. Agreement levels remain low, with only 10.7% in Plateau and 10.1% in Benue strongly supporting the initiative.

Table 2: Equitable land distribution in plateau state has reduced conflicts.

Items	P-Frequency	P-Percentage	B-Frequency	B-Percentage
SA	35	12.915	5	3.876
A	8	2.952	6	4.651
N	18	6.642	0	0.000
D	169	62.362	84	65.116
SD	41	15.129	34	26.357
TOTAL	271	100	129	100.000

Source: Researchers Survey, September, 2024

The data reveals strong skepticism about the impact of equitable land distribution on conflict reduction, with 62.4% in Plateau and 65.1% in Benue disagreeing. Only a small fraction, 12.9% in Plateau and 3.9% in Benue, strongly believe it has reduced conflicts. This highlights ongoing disputes over land allocation in both states.

Table 3: All ethnic groups have equal and fair access to land use

Items	P-Frequency	P-Percentage	B-Frequency	B-Percentage
SA	2	0.74	2	1.55
A	4	1.48	10	7.75
N	2	0.74	3	2.33
D	8	2.95	102	79.07
SD	255	94.10	12	9.30
TOTAL	271	100.00	129	100.00

Source: Researchers Survey, September, 2024

The data shows overwhelming disagreement on fair land access, with 94.1% in Plateau and 79.1% in Benue rejecting the notion of equal access. Only a minimal 0.74% in Plateau and

1.55% in Benue strongly agreed. This indicates widespread perceptions of inequality in land use across both states.

3.2 Data Analysis

The responses to the first research objective indicate a critical perception of the effectiveness of state-led non-kinetic peace measures in addressing the Middle Belt crisis. In Plateau State, there is a general dissatisfaction with the government's peacebuilding strategies, as the majority of the respondents believe such initiatives have been ineffective. The same sentiment is shared in Benue State, where the state's approach to non-kinetic interventions raises a number of concerns among respondents. These data highlight the feeling of non-inclusiveness and coordination within peace programs, thus weakening collaborative efforts for sustainable peace. Most respondents strongly feel that state-driven peace initiatives are bereft of commitment and inclusiveness, with shortcomings in both engagement and implementation. Precisely, 66.05% of the respondents in Plateau State and 87.60% in Benue State express dissatisfaction with the inclusiveness of peace efforts, thus reiterating previous studies, which had indicated minimal government interface with varied ethnic and religious groups (Okwuosa, 2021; Akinbode, 2018). The ideal non-kinetic peace measures are those that ensure broad-based participation and reinforce trust to resolve community grievances.

The results indicate that 62.4% in Plateau and 65.1% in Benue doubt whether the fair distribution of land has reduced conflicts, hence resource-based interventions are not a plausible strategy for conflict resolution. This hypothesis is supported by academic findings indicating that without transparent governance and deeper socio-political reforms, no land policy in itself can ease long-standing conflicts. Okeke (2018); Ogundele (2021); Eze (2019); Adamu (2021). A lack of transparency in land allocation processes and mechanisms for handling disputes remains a big concern, further highlighting the need for adjustments in policy. The survey also reveals mixed perceptions of human capital development policies as peace strategies. While increased access to education and health facilities has received fair support in Plateau State, there are significant concerns over fairness in the distribution of civil service employment and agricultural resources, which are important in ensuring economic stability. The criticism of these policies is even stronger in Benue State, reflecting the continuous debates over the effectiveness of such policies in maintaining peace, according to UNESCO 2020, UNICEF 2021, and Omotola 2017. Finally, there is general discontent over government response policies to these grievances, including compensation mechanisms for displaced persons and victims of land disputes. Many respondents believe the inadequate compensatory policies and weak enforcement of conflict resolution policies further inflame tensions rather than promote reconciliatory sentiments among the parties in conflict (Ojo & Adebayo, 2019; Adamu et al., 2021; Ibrahim & Mahmud, 2022; Eze & Afolabi, 2020; Nwaogbe, 2021).

3.3 Effects of the Middle Belt Crisis on the Socio-Political and Economic Structure of Nigeria

The crisis in the Middle Belt has redrawn the socio-political and economic topography of Nigeria with profound implications for national cohesion, good governance, and economic sustainability. Continuing violence, land conflict, and ethno-religious conflagration have aggravated old structural vulnerabilities and deepened distrust among the communities, pointing to inefficiencies in governance. This section examines the said effects using key themes drawn from KII interviews

with community leaders, security personnel, and policy thinkers, as well as a review of policy papers, government reports, and scholarly articles.

Socio-Political Fragmentation and Identity Conflicts

The Middle Belt has long been characterized by diverse ethnic and religious groups coexisting under historically fluid land tenure systems. However, land disputes and demographic shifts have heightened intergroup tensions, reinforcing narratives of indigene-settler antagonism. Key informants (KII-03, Community Leader, Plateau State; KII-07, Local Government Official, Benue State) highlighted that local policies governing land ownership and grazing rights often favor particular ethnic groups, fueling resentment and contestation.

According to Punch (2024) and Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM, 2023), over 2,000 people have been displaced due to escalating violence in Plateau and Benue States since 2022, with large-scale movements altering demographic compositions and exacerbating communal distrust. A document review of the National Security Strategy (NSS, 2019) reveals that the Nigerian government acknowledges the role of land-based conflicts in driving ethno-religious violence but has struggled to implement a coherent framework for land conflict resolution.

Furthermore, interviewees from the Middle Belt Peace Initiative (KII-10, Peacebuilding Expert) emphasized that the politicization of ethnicity has led to deepened socio-political fragmentation. In their words:

“Conflicts here are no longer just about land. They have become symbols of exclusion, marginalization, and power struggles. Community trust is eroded when government interventions favor one group over another.” (KII-10, Peacebuilding Expert, November 2024)

Scholars such as Suberu (2016) and Chukwuma et al. (2020) corroborate this perspective, arguing that the securitization of farmer-herder disputes—often framed through lenses of ethnic and religious bias—further entrenches divisions. The securitization discourse, which labels specific groups as “aggressors” or “victims,” not only shapes local narratives but also influences state responses, often resulting in biased security interventions.

Governance Deficits and Conflict Escalation

Politically, the crisis highlights the Nigerian state’s governance limitations, particularly in conflict resolution and security management. Key informants (KII-05, Security Officer; KII-12, State Official) acknowledged that weak institutional frameworks and fragmented responses have prolonged the crisis. The document review of Amnesty International (2022) and International Crisis Group (2021) reports indicates that military operations like Operation Safe Haven have faced credibility issues, with accusations of ethnic bias and extrajudicial killings.

One local security officer (KII-05, Plateau State, December 2024) noted:

“When military interventions favor one ethnic group over another, communities lose trust. Many feel they need to take up arms to protect themselves.” (KII-05, Security Officer, Plateau State, December 2024)

Additionally, land demarcation policies remain a contested issue. A review of Nigeria’s Land Use Act (1978) and state-level land policies reveals inconsistencies in implementation, particularly

regarding pastoralist access to grazing routes. KII-07, a Local Government Official in Benue State, noted:

“There is confusion between statutory and customary land laws. Our state law follows federal guidelines, but local leaders enforce their own traditions. This creates endless disputes.” (KII-07, Local Government Official, Benue State, December 2024). The document review of Nigeria’s National Conflict Resolution Framework (2020) suggests that while policies exist to mediate disputes, their enforcement remains weak due to elite political interference. Akinola (2021) further argues that political elites often exploit ethnic divisions for electoral gains, undermining sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Economic Disruptions and Agricultural Decline

The Middle Belt crisis has also significantly disrupted economic activities, particularly in agriculture, trade, and investment. The region, known as Nigeria’s food basket, faces declining agricultural output due to conflict-induced displacement. According to Business Day (2024), the Mangu crisis threatens the supply of 477,900 metric tonnes of maize, impacting food security and commodity prices.

A review of National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) agricultural reports (2023) shows a steady decline in maize, sorghum, and yam production due to the mass displacement of farmers and destruction of farmlands. KII-02, a displaced farmer from Mangu, Plateau State, lamented:

“My family has farmed here for generations, but now, our lands are unsafe. Many of us have lost everything. The government offers little help, and we are forced to seek livelihoods elsewhere.”
(KII-02, Displaced Farmer, Mangu, December 2024)

Beyond agriculture, the document review of the World Bank’s Nigeria Economic Update (2023) reveals that investment in conflict-prone areas has plummeted due to insecurity concerns. KII-08, a business consultant in Jos, Plateau State, observed:

“Businesses are fleeing. Investors see the instability and pull out. Without economic stability, poverty will keep rising, and more youth will turn to violence.” (KII-08, Business Consultant, Jos, December 2024)

The review of ECOWAS Regional Security Policy (2023) also shows that the economic effects extend beyond Nigeria, with disrupted agricultural supply chains affecting regional food security and trade flows.

The displacement of communities due to the conflicts also puts a strain on resources and services, such as healthcare and education. The government has to allocate resources to provide humanitarian aid and support to those affected, diverting funds from other development initiatives. Overall, the economic effects of the Middle Belt crisis are substantial and hinder the region’s potential for growth and prosperity. Resolving the conflicts and promoting stability is crucial to unlocking the economic potential of the Middle Belt and improving the livelihoods of its residents.

4.1. Summary

The issue of conflict in Nigeria has presently taken a new dimension as the security architecture cum porous borders allows for the free flow and outflow of weapons and humans without any hindrance. These have therefore led to an oligopoly of the means and instrument of violence whereby instruments of violence are owned and controlled by various groups. This therefore allows for an increased crime rate and easy escalation of conflict, as they have with them present instruments of violence. Present day Nigeria socio-economic problem of inflation and food insecurity has however exacerbated the issue, as resources have become more contentious and scarce. This therefore means that due to the state's inability to mitigate insecurity effectively, the adoption of the non-kinetic measure of peace, where grievances are solved through mediation and negotiation amongst the aggrieved parties, has been opted for. In their own forms, however, these non-kinetic measures are still limited due to the complex dynamic of power and interest.

4.2 Conclusion: Implications for National Stability

The crisis in the Middle Belt underlines the ineptitude of the government, where corruption, incompetence, and manipulation of ethnic and religious divides have been used as tools in political power struggles. This has stifled Nigeria's development, trapping the country in a cycle of political instability and economic stagnation, fueled by intolerance and systemic racism. The war indicates larger aspects of instability in the system of governance of the country and a failure to address the needs of its diverse population. The crisis also shows the interlink between social fragmentation, governance failures, and economic disruption. All these aspects feed into each other and create an environment where peace becomes increasingly unattainable. Insights from key informants and document reviews have illuminated the complex dynamics of the conflict, with a view toward comprehensive and inclusive peacebuilding strategies. In any attempt to find a solution to the Middle Belt crisis, Nigeria must address the challenges with focus on good governance, ethnic inclusiveness, and economic recovery among all its citizens. It is only then that the country can break itself loose from instability and foster lasting peace and national unity.

4.3 Recommendations

Given the intractable difficulties of the Middle Belt, any policy framework must be all-embracing, inclusive, and sensitive to conflict. First, land reforms have to be inclusive and participatory—that is, involving local communities, traditional leaders, and relevant government agencies in decision-making to make land policies representative and just. Strengthening land governance structures will also be important, ensuring that land transactions and dispute resolutions are undertaken in a transparent and accountable manner. Well-defined land tenure laws coupled with effective mechanisms of dispute resolution will go a long way in minimizing land-related conflicts. Investment in education and awareness programs can enhance understanding of land rights and help foster peaceful coexistence among the diverse ethnic groups in the region.

The diversity of the Middle Belt demands that the government of Nigeria strictly apply the principle of federal character. Resources and opportunities need to be fairly and evenly distributed to avoid marginalization of one group of people. This would help to bridge the gap between ethnic communities and make everyone feel involved in national development. Fair distribution of wealth and political opportunities should be treated as a pledge of justice and equality for all Nigerians.

The second major recommendation is that arms control and border security must be strengthened. A monopoly on violence is basically the sine qua non of state sovereignty, and without any regulation of weapons, the state can hardly assert its authority. Therefore, the government has the onus of responsibility to up its effort to improve border security to minimize the flow of small arms and light weapons, particularly from neighboring Niger and Chad. Robust intelligence sharing and regional cooperation will therefore be welcomed in reducing the proliferation of arms that breed violence across the region.

Governance-wise, the government of Nigeria should ensure that security interventions are neutral to ward off elite manipulation of ethnic divisions. Security sector reforms are thus needed in a way that such forces-the military and police-are equipped to handle conflict in a manner not to exacerbate but rather foster cohesion. Training in conflict de-escalation techniques will help security forces avoid heavy-handed responses that may escalate tensions.

The peace process should be founded on grassroots peacebuilding. Religious leaders, ethnic groups, and local communities coming together through grassroots, bottom-up initiatives will play an important role in facilitating intergroup dialogue and building trust. A combination of traditional conflict resolution practices with formal state-led initiatives helps to construct more effective peacebuilding processes that provide a sense of ownership and responsibility at the community level.

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