

Addressing Symptoms, Ignoring the Roots: A Critical Analysis of Nigeria's Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Context of Northwest Banditry

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Abstract

This study addresses the enduring challenge of banditry in Nigeria's northwest region, where peace-building initiatives have largely targeted visible violence while overlooking structural roots such as poverty, youth unemployment and marginalization. It aims to assess the extent to which these initiatives engage underlying drivers of banditry and evaluate their effectiveness in promoting inclusive, community-driven, sustainable peace. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with 40 key stakeholders (government officials, security agents, civil society representatives and community members) and document analysis of relevant programme records. Findings show that although many initiatives include youth-engagement or livelihood components, the dominant response remains symptom-oriented; genuine community ownership and sustainable outcomes are limited. Sustainable peace in the region, therefore, requires a shift from reactive, top-down interventions to strategies that simultaneously transform structural inequities, reshape enabling environments and empower local communities. Accordingly, the study recommends redesigning peace-building programmes to prioritize structural reform, such as youth employment schemes and governance strengthening and embedding community governance

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structures, feedback mechanisms and local leadership to ensure long-term ownership and effectiveness.

Keywords: peacebuilding, banditry, northwest Nigeria, conflict resolution, root causes, sustainable peace

Introduction

Peace-building emerged as a critical global response to protracted conflicts in the 1940s following the end of the Second World War, aiming not only to halt violence but to create conditions for long-term peace. International frameworks such as the United Nations' "sustaining peace" approach indicate that peace is more than the absence of war (Galtung, 2011). In this case, it requires inclusive institutions, equitable development and accountable governance (UNDP, 2020). In many conflict-affected regions, actors emphasize short-term stabilization through security operations and humanitarian relief, yet the mounting evidence suggests that without addressing root causes such as poverty, exclusion and weak institutions. These interventions provide only temporary relief (De Coning, 2021). This global landscape indicates a growing recognition that peacebuilding must integrate structural change if violence is to be prevented rather than merely managed.

Within Africa, the challenges of peace-building are particularly acute. For instance, comparative evidence suggests that Africa faces unique and complex peace-building challenges. The continent has experienced numerous conflicts, including civil wars, ethnic violence, and terrorism, which have hindered development and stability. For instance, countries like South Sudan, Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo illustrate the precarious nature of peace processes, where weak democratic institutions and power struggles impede progress. Fundamentally, the continent's post-colonial legacies of weak state capacity, identity-based conflicts and socio-economic disparities complicate efforts to foster lasting stability. Adebajo (2020) and Gambari (2021) argue that Africa's peace regimes often lean heavily toward

immediate peacekeeping or militarized responses, while neglecting the underlying structural conditions that give rise to conflict. In the Sahel and West African region, overlapping phenomena such as resource scarcity, climate stress, illicit economy networks and weak governance have contributed to fragile environments where banditry proliferates (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020). These developments signal the need for peace-building practices that move beyond symptom-focused interventions to holistic strategies that engage governance, livelihoods and community resilience.

In Nigeria, the country offers a telling case of the limitations of prevailing peace-building approaches. Overemphasis on military strategies, weak institutions and governance, neglect of root causes and insufficient local engagement are factors inhibiting peace-building. Its size, diversity, and multiplicity of security crises from the insurgency in the northeast to herder–farmer clashes and banditry in the northwest illustrate the complexity of violent conflict and the state’s struggle to respond effectively. In the northwest region, states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto and Kaduna have experienced persistent armed bandit attacks, mass kidnappings and large-scale displacement of civilians (Oluwole, 2024). These patterns point to the fact that violence in this region is not simply criminal but is deeply entangled with structural issues, including youth unemployment, rural poverty, weak local governance and illicit economic networks. For example, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) found that nearly 30 per cent of arable land in one northern state was abandoned because of insecurity, and that youth unemployment in the region reached more than fifty per cent in recent years (UNIDIR, 2024). Thus, the interplay of socio-economic exclusion and fragile institutions illustrates the relationship between structural roots (independent variables) and the manifestation of banditry (dependent variable) in this context.

The federal government has invested heavily in military campaigns across the region, and peace remains elusive. The

dominant reliance on military operations involving air strikes, ground offensives, and force projection has failed to yield durable peace. Despite short-term suppression of violence, these measures have neither dismantled the structural roots of insecurity nor fostered reconciliation. For instance, military operations against Boko Haram have yielded temporary successes, such as the recapture of territories, but have not dismantled the group's networks or addressed root causes like poverty and governance gaps. Between 2021 and 2024, the military onslaught has killed several notorious bandit leaders, including Buhari Alhaji Halidu, Boderi Isyaku, Dogo Rabe, Halilu Buzu Sububu, Kachalla Ruga, Gwaska Dankarami and a host of others, which is a significant milestone in the ongoing conflict. (Alao, 2024) Additionally, security forces have neutralized over 13,500 terrorists and armed criminals, rescued over 124,000 hostages, and dismantled nearly 3,843 illegal refineries since May 2023 (Nwachukwu, 2025). Despite all these, violence persists, highlighting the need for more comprehensive approaches that address issues like climate change and economic inequality. Recent policy analyses by Adesote & Akande (2023) and Mezie-Okoye (2024) posit that military operations, while necessary for immediate containment, cannot substitute for inclusive governance, socio-economic transformation, and community-led peace processes.

Despite the existence of about six (6) government-led and donor-supported peace-building initiatives, the persistence of banditry in the northwest raises serious questions about the adequacy of those responses. The federal and state governments have implemented a range of interventions from amnesty programmes, community-dialogue initiatives, rural development schemes, to security force deployment, but many analysts, such as Cristina Duarte, Gambari Ibrahim, Niagalé Bagayoko and Surulola Eke emphasise the need to address internal and external root causes of conflicts in Africa beyond traditional responses and inclusive peace processes (Gambari, 2021; Odumu 2022; UN, 2023).

In practical terms, this means heavy emphasis has been placed on immediate palliatives, ransom payments, temporary disarmament, increased patrols, rather than on creating stable livelihoods, strengthening inclusive governance or rebuilding trust in institutions. Such an emphasis risks perpetuating cycles of violence because the structural drivers remain unaddressed.

This disconnect defines the core problem of this study: peace-building in Nigeria's northwest region addresses the symptoms of banditry while largely ignoring its roots. Although substantial resources have been mobilized, the fact that hundreds of communities continue to suffer attacks, agricultural production has collapsed and displacement remains endemic suggests that the foundations of violence remain unattended by intervention (UNIDIR, 2024; Oluwole, 2024). Given this, Odumu (2022) noted that coordination among government, security agencies and civil society is often weak, and local voices are marginalized in the design and implementation of peace-building programmes. Therefore, the study asks: to what extent do Nigeria's peace-building initiatives engage with the structural drivers of banditry, and how effective are these initiatives in fostering inclusive peace with the stakeholders for sustainable peace?

The study makes significant contributions in both academic and practical domains. Academically, it extends the peace-building literature by applying the distinction between "negative peace" (cessation of violence) and "positive peace" (transformation of the underlying causes of conflict) to the context of northwest Nigeria (Galtung, 1969). By doing so, it deepens understanding of how structural variables such as youth unemployment, marginalization, weak governance and illicit economies interact with peace-building initiatives in a context of banditry rather than conventional insurgency. Practically, the research offers policymakers, practitioners and development partners empirical insights into why peace-building efforts in the region often fail to yield durable results, and how a paradigm shift towards

community-led, inclusive, development-oriented interventions can enhance sustainability. By identifying structural constraints and offering actionable recommendations, the study aims to support the redesign of peace-building strategies that move beyond short-term fixes.

The scope of the study covers peace-building initiatives implemented between 2015 and 2025 in the northwest geopolitical zone of Nigeria, encompassing government-led programmes and non-state efforts in states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi and Kaduna. The focus is on structural dimensions, governance, livelihoods, and community resilience rather than tactical counter-banditry operations. It is important to note limitations: access to high-conflict zones is constrained by security, respondent bias may affect qualitative data and documentary evidence is uneven across states. Nonetheless, the study triangulates interviews, focus groups and document analysis to produce a credible assessment of peace-building strategies and their alignment with root-cause transformation.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Johan Galtung, a pioneer in peace studies, introduced the concept of peacebuilding in the 1970s, distinguishing between “negative peace” (absence of violence) and “positive peace” (presence of justice, equality, and harmony). Building on this, other notable scholars include John Paul Lederach, who describes peacebuilding as “a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships (Lederach, 1997). The United Nations’ “Agenda for Peace” (1992) also provides a widely cited definition, emphasizing action to identify and support structures that strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict.

Peacebuilding initiatives refer to deliberate strategies by governmental agencies, civil society organizations and affected communities aimed at restoring stability, strengthening institutions and improving socio-economic conditions in conflict-affected settings. This concept moves beyond immediate reactionary measures to envisage sustained efforts that rebuild trust, foster dialogue, support livelihoods and reinforce inclusive governance (Paffenholz, 2021).

In Nigeria's northwest region, initiatives typically include rural development programmes, community-dialogue platforms, youth engagement schemes, and local governance reforms. These efforts aim to create resilient communities capable of maintaining peace beyond external intervention, drawing on concepts like hybrid peacebuilding and local ownership. However, theory-practice gaps persist, highlighting the need for adaptive approaches that address local realities. For instance, the Community Dialogue Committees (CDCs) in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara states promote inclusive dialogue, while projects like the Conflict Mitigation and Community Reconciliation in North-West Nigeria Project support community responses to violence. Resilience, defined as the capacity to withstand and respond to crises, is key to these efforts, emphasizing the importance of context-specific and inclusive peacebuilding strategies.

Banditry in northwest Nigeria denotes organized violent activity by non-state armed groups, including kidnapping, cattle rustling, armed raids, killings, and illegal resource extraction in rural and semi-rural communities (Musa, 2025; Ojo, Oyewole & Aina, 2023). In contrast, terrorism involves violent acts intended to achieve political, ideological, or social goals, often targeting civilians or non-combatants, as seen in the actions of groups like Boko Haram. Another security threat is insurgency, a prolonged armed struggle aimed at overthrowing a government or occupying power, often with political or ideological goals, typically involving guerrilla warfare and seeking to control territory. Organized crime refers to structured groups

engaging in illicit activities like narcotics trafficking, extortion, and money laundering. While banditry is a form of organized crime, it often lacks the hierarchical structure of traditional organized crime groups. Communal violence, on the other hand, involves conflicts between different communities, often driven by ethnic, religious, or resource-based tensions. The key differences between these threats lie in their motivation, tactics, and structure.

These actions are not merely spontaneous or isolated crimes but reflect systemic patterns of exploitation and control over territory, often enabled by weak state presence, illicit economies, and social marginalization (Musa, 2025). Understanding banditry in this way highlights that it is both a visible threat to security and a manifestation of deeper vulnerabilities within the socio-economic and institutional environment. Structural drivers of conflict encompass socio-economic and governance-related conditions, such as pervasive poverty, chronic youth unemployment, marginalization of communities, weak institutional frameworks, and under-governed spaces, that generate and sustain environments in which violence is more likely to occur (Galtung, 1969). These drivers do not themselves constitute violence in the direct sense but create the circumstances that enable it. In northwest Nigeria, research shows that factors such as declining agricultural productivity, youth disenfranchisement, and inadequate infrastructure overlap to form a fertile ground for armed groups to recruit, mobilize, and operate (Ojewale, 2024). The implication is that unless peacebuilding initiatives engage these structural drivers, efforts risk addressing only the outward symptoms of violence while leaving the underlying conditions intact.

Negotiations and Amnesty Politics

Several state governments, particularly Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto, have experimented with negotiation and amnesty programmes as peace-building measures. These initiatives involved ceasefire agreements, dialogue forums, and reintegration promises to repentant bandits. Yet, interview data and secondary

reports reveal that these approaches have yielded inconsistent outcomes. Many participants viewed them as politically expedient but poorly enforced, leading to cycles of rearmament and renewed violence (Adibe, Uwaechia, & Akpan, 2022; Aina, 2023).

A controversial dimension of this dynamic emerged through the public advocacy of dialogue with bandits. This was led by Sheikh Ahmad Gumi, who has urged the federal government to grant amnesty and privileged treatment to bandits, framing them as misunderstood actors deserving rehabilitation rather than punishment. Sheikh Ahmad Gumi is a prominent Islamic cleric in Nigeria who's sparked intense debate with his stance on banditry. He's advocated for dialogue with bandits, arguing that negotiation is a more effective approach than military force alone. Gumi has met with bandit leaders, urging them to surrender and renounce violence, and has emphasized that most bandits are driven by grievances and a desire for survival rather than inherent brutality. However, his approach has drawn criticism from some Nigerians, who view it as lenient towards criminals. Defence Minister Christopher Musa has warned Gumi against backing terrorism, stating that sympathy for bandits' fuel insecurity and undermines national efforts to combat terrorism. While some community leaders have supported this conciliatory stance, the wider public has often perceived it as unjust and demoralizing to victims of banditry (Aina, 2023; Musa, 2025). These mixed reactions underscore the fragility of non-structured negotiation strategies when they are not anchored in justice, accountability and meaningful community participation (Adibe, Akpan, Nnamani, Ezeme & Nnaegbo, 2024).

Overall, the interplay of militarized and negotiated efforts exposes a fundamental incoherence in Nigeria's peace-building architecture: it is fragmented, state-centric and often disconnected from local realities and the structural drivers of insecurity.

Theoretical Frameworks

Structural Violence Theory

The theory of structural violence was introduced by Johan Galtung in 1969, in his landmark work “Violence, Peace and Peace Research,” in which he argued that violence is not only expressed through direct physical acts but is also embedded within social structures and institutions that systematically deny individuals access to their basic needs (Galtung, 1969). The implication of this theory for the present study is that the persistent banditry in northwest Nigeria may reflect not only a failure of security operations but also deeper structural harm, such as long-term poverty, exclusion of youth, weak institutional frameworks, and social marginalization. Therefore, peace-building initiatives cannot be limited merely to tactical responses but must engage institutional reform, socio-economic inclusion and transforming the conditions that allow violence to emerge and persist.

Situational Action Theory

The second theoretical lens is Per-Olof H. Wikström’s Situational Action Theory (SAT), initially articulated in his 2004 work “Crime as Alternative: Towards a Cross-Level Situational Action Theory of Crime Causation” (Wikström, 2004). SAT posits that the decision to commit a rule-breaking act arises from the interaction between a person’s moral values and self-control (propensity) and their environmental settings or situational contexts (opportunity, exposure, criminogenic setting) (Wikström, 2004; Wikström & Treiber, 2019). Applied to banditry in northwest Nigeria, this suggests that individuals may engage in violent acts when they perceive crime as an action alternative, especially when their environment provides opportunities (arms flow, weak policing, economic exclusion) and their moral and self-control filters are weak. For peace-building initiatives, this theory implies that interventions must also work to reduce criminogenic opportunities,

strengthen local governance, enhance social norms and offer viable alternatives to youths vulnerable to recruitment.

Integrative Implication for the Study

When these two theories are combined, the framework offers a dual-level explanation for banditry and peacebuilding. Structural Violence Theory explains why certain societies become vulnerable to violence by exposing the embedded systemic injustices and institutional weaknesses. Situational Action Theory explains how individuals react to those vulnerabilities by engaging in violent acts when the situational conditions allow it. In the context of northwest Nigeria, this theoretical configuration underpins the study's central argument: that peace-building initiatives which address only the immediate symptoms of banditry (such as ransom payments, disarmament or security sweeps) risk failure because they do not transform the structural conditions, nor do they sufficiently alter the situational environments that enable violence.

Theoretical Synthesis and Contribution

By combining structural violence theory and situational action theory (SAT), this study offers a unique theoretical contribution to peacebuilding literature concerning non-ideological armed conflict. Existing studies frequently apply these theories separately. For instance, scholars use Structural Violence to explain broad grievances and SAT to explain individual criminal acts. However, this research demonstrates that these theories must be viewed as interdependent within the context of banditry in the northwest.

We argue that structural violence creates the necessary conditions, such as deprivation and marginalization, which fill the pool of potential recruits. Meanwhile, Situational Action provides the sufficient conditions, including environmental opportunities and weak moral filters, that trigger specific violent events. This Dual-Layer Conflict Mechanism explains why peacebuilding

efforts often fail when they address only one dimension. For example, amnesty programmes might address the situational aspect by removing immediate actors, yet they fail to alter the structural production of new actors. Conversely, long-term development plans may address structural issues but fail to secure the immediate environment against criminal opportunities. This integrative framework moves past the simple division between greed and grievance. It offers a more robust lens for analyzing why well-funded interventions in Nigeria frequently yield negligible results.

Empirical Review

The following studies were reviewed to provide an empirical framework for the study. Report by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) titled *Banditry Violence in Nigeria's North West: Insights from Affected Communities* (2024) presents survey data showing massive land abandonment, youth unemployment and illicit economic activity among communities in northwest Nigeria. The report highlights that many interventions focus on visible symptoms such as displacement, ransom payments and security sweeps rather than the deeper structural drivers of the crisis. This finding is relevant because it suggests that peace-building initiatives in the region may be misaligned with root causes.

In *Banditry and Modern Slavery: (In)security Dynamics in Nigeria* (Musa, 2025), certain bandit groups in northwest and north-central Nigeria are shown to be linked to modern slavery, forced labour and illicit economic networks rather than only opportunistic crime. This study broadens the understanding of banditry's structural drivers, emphasizing economic exploitation and criminal economies. Its relevance to your study lies in showing that peace-building responses must consider these embedded criminal dynamics if they are to be effective.

In *Conflict Entrepreneurship and Rural Banditry in Nigeria*

(Aderayo, 2025), bandit groups are examined as conflict entrepreneurs who exploit remote rural environments, weak oversight and resource-rich terrain. This research introduces nuance by suggesting that situational opportunity such as hideouts, weak law enforcement and resource extraction matters, alongside structural deprivation. The relevance here is that peace-building initiatives must address not only structural causes but also situational settings where violence thrives.

In *Cross-border Migration, Banditry and the Challenges of Small Arms Proliferation in Northwest Nigeria* (Onota, 2024), banditry is linked to porous borders, arms flow and transnational criminal networks in the northwest region. The study suggests that governance gaps and uncontrolled movements across borders contribute significantly to violence. Its relevance to your study is that peace-building initiatives must incorporate border security, arms control and regional coordination if they are to address root causes effectively.

The study, *The Rise of Banditry in Northwest Nigeria* (Rufus, 2025), uses mixed methods to document displacement, livelihood collapse, schooling disruption and persistent violence in communities affected by banditry. The author emphasizes that local populations view interventions as superficial and oriented toward symptom management rather than structural change. This is relevant because it supports your argument that peace-building must be inclusive and community-driven if it is to be sustainable.

In *Conflict and Peace-building in Northwest Nigeria: A Perspective on “The Bandit Warlords of Zamfara”* (Onapajo, 2023), a narrative and analytic reflection shows that the government’s framing of banditry as strictly criminal is overly simplistic. The study highlights the misdiagnosis of the crisis and the need for an intervention design that incorporates structural causes and local community perspectives. This is relevant as it underscores your focus on root-cause orientation in peace-building initiatives.

The paper *Porous Borders and Banditry in the North-West*

Zone of Nigeria (2024) examines how cross-border criminal networks and arms flows support bandit groups in northwest Nigeria. Although the author details and publishing outlet may require further verification, the study emphasizes the situational dimension of banditry. Its relevance is that peace-building initiatives must engage not only internal structural factors but also external regional dynamics.

The article *Armed Bandits in Nigeria: Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa* (2024) outlines how bandit networks are embedded in illicit economies, resource extraction and criminal markets in northwest Nigeria. The study stresses that these networks sustain violence and complicate standard security responses. This is relevant to your research because it highlights the need for peace-building strategies that consider economic drivers and criminal market linkages.

In *Armed Banditry and Food Security in Northwest Nigeria* (Oyewole & Aina, 2025) the authors link banditry with food insecurity, showing how farmland abandonment and attacks disrupt agricultural production and livelihoods. The relevance for your study is that structural drivers of violence include economic disruption and livelihood loss, which many peace-building initiatives do not fully address.

Lastly, the article *The Impact of Banditry on Nigeria's National Security* (2024) examines how banditry has expanded into state institutions, infrastructure and national policy, thereby deepening structural instability. The study demonstrates that peace-building must engage governance, institutional reform and national frameworks, not just community-level measures.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on banditry in north-west Nigeria and a parallel interest in peace-building responses, key gaps remain in the current scholarly discourse. Most existing studies concentrate either on the structural and situational drivers of

banditry such as youth unemployment, arms proliferation, porous borders, illicit economies or on the security-oriented responses of government and state actors (e.g., Odumu, 2022; Musa, 2025; UNIDIR, 2024). These works contribute valuable understanding of why banditry thrives and where it manifests, yet they seldom interrogate how peace-building initiatives themselves align with or address those underlying determinants. In other words, there is limited research on how interventions link programme design to root causes of violence, rather than treating manifestations of banditry as isolated phenomena.

Furthermore, the literature is relatively silent on systematic evaluations of peace-building mechanisms in this region, particularly the extent to which such initiatives promote inclusive, community-driven and sustainable peace as opposed to predominantly top-down, symptom-oriented interventions. Studies that do examine responses often focus on security or palliative aspects of disarmament, patrols, ransom payments, or emergency relief without a critical assessment of their long-term alignment with structural transformation (Rufus, 2025; Aderayo, 2025). Thus, while research emphasizes the what of drivers and responses, far fewer works explore the how of intervention effectiveness and the why behind differential outcomes.

The perspectives, voices and lived experiences of affected communities remain under-represented in the literature. Many analyses rely on macro-level data, incident counts or institutional reports, but fewer incorporate qualitative insights from local stakeholders regarding how they perceive the adequacy, relevance and design of peace-building efforts. The absence of robust community-level feedback means that research often remains detached from the everyday realities of those most impacted by banditry and peace-building initiatives (Onapajo, 2023; UNIDIR, 2024). By exploring how programmes are experienced, aligned and evaluated from the grassroots, your study can fill a significant gap.

This research, therefore, seeks to address these deficiencies

by critically examining specific peace-building initiatives implemented in the north-west region of Nigeria between 2015 and 2025, analysing whether and how they engage structural drivers of banditry, and assessing their effectiveness in promoting inclusive, community-driven and sustainable peace. It further incorporates qualitative data from government officials, civil society actors and local community members to ensure that local perceptions and stakeholder experiences inform the analysis.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions to explore how peace-building initiatives in northwest Nigeria engage with the root causes of banditry. This choice stems from the need to analyze the complex human perceptions and institutional behaviours driving peacebuilding failures. The design is suitable because the aim is to understand complex human perceptions and experiences in context rather than to measure quantities, making it possible to capture rich, detailed insight into programs, stakeholder views and community responses. The population includes government officials, security agents, civil society actors and community members from the Northwest geopolitical zone, reflecting the full spectrum of those who design, implement and are affected by peace-building efforts. A purposive sampling method will select about 40 interviewees plus four focus-group sessions (each with 6-8 participants) to ensure depth of insight and data saturation.

Data will be collected via an interview guide and focus-group prompts that explore how initiatives define their objectives, address structural drivers (such as poverty, marginalization and governance deficits) and interact with local realities. These instruments were piloted to refine clarity and consistency. Validity is ensured through techniques such as member-checking, where participants review summaries of their responses, and methodological triangulation involving interviews, focus groups and document analysis.

Dependability is addressed through detailed documentation of all research steps. For analysis, a thematic approach will be used: transcripts will be coded, themes identified and patterns compared across groups to surface how interventions align with structural or symptom-oriented responses. This method is justified because it allows for systematic interpretation of qualitative data in a way that illuminates both context and meaning.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Presentation of Findings

The study involved 40 in-depth interviews with stakeholders (12 government officials, 8 security agents, 10 civil-society practitioners and 10 community members), alongside four focus-group discussions (each comprising 6–8 participants) across selected states in the region. Thematic analysis followed the six-step process of transcription, familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes and writing up. Three primary themes emerged: livelihood and structural marginalization, situational enablers of banditry, and design and delivery of peace-building initiatives.

Under livelihood and structural marginalization, participants frequently noted the abandonment of farms and widespread youth idleness. As one community member put it: “Our farms lie fallow because we fear the raids and no one gives us meaningful work afterwards.” These remarks illustrate the depth of economic deprivation and reinforce the structural-violence lens, showing how systemic exclusion facilitates conflict. In the theme Situational Enablers of Banditry, respondents referenced porous boundaries and weapons flow: “They crossed the border at night with guns and cattle under our eyes.” This highlights the criminogenic environment and aligns with the situational-action perspective on individual choice in a particular environment. The final theme, Design and Delivery of Peace-building Initiatives,

reflects perceptions of procedural weaknesses: a government official observed, “We were asked to attend the meeting, but the decisions were made in the state capital.” This quote emphasizes issues of token participation and continuity. Although numeric frequencies are not the focus of qualitative work, more than two-thirds of interviewees referenced livelihood deprivation, over half mentioned governance or institutional trust issues, and nearly half contested the degree of community empowerment in programme design.

Table 1: Nigeria’s budgetary allocation to defence and security (2018–2025):

Year	Total budget (₦ trillion)	Defence & security (₦ trillion)	Percentage
2025	49.7	4.91	9.88
2024	35.05	1.383	3.95
2023	21.8	1.248	5.73
2022	17.3	1.2	6.94
2021	13.6	0.966	7.11
2020	10.6	0.900	8.49
2019	8.8	0.590	6.70
2018	9.1	0.576	6.33

Sources: Federal Budget Office (2025); Tell Magazine (June 25, 2025); Adesote & Akande (2023).

Despite a steady increase in defence and security spending, insecurity across the northwest persists. This disproportionate outcome highlights the limitations of kinetic approaches in asymmetric conflicts. As General Christopher Musa (former Chief of Defence Staff) noted, “non-kinetic measures now account for over 70% of the success required in modern counterinsurgency efforts” (Tell, 2025). Therefore, it becomes evident that sustainable peace demands a rebalancing toward non-kinetic strategies such as dialogue, livelihood empowerment, and institutional reforms that address the human and structural dimensions of insecurity.

Discussion of Findings

Objective 1 asked: To what extent do peace-building initiatives address the structural root causes of banditry? The analysis shows that while many programmes include youth-training or livelihood components, respondents perceive that these efforts are superficial and short-lived, with a dominant bias towards visible security responses. This finding reinforces the Structural Violence Theory (Galtung, 1969) proposition that embedded structural injustices perpetuate violence if not addressed. Empirical studies (e.g., UNIDIR, 2024; Musa, 2025) argued that both government-led intervention and NGO-led interventions tend to treat symptoms rather than systemic drivers, and our data support this conclusion while extending it by identifying specific community perceptions of tokenistic engagement.

Objective 2 assessed the effectiveness of peace-building mechanisms in promoting inclusive, community-driven, and sustainable peace in northwest Nigeria. The evidence is mixed: while some community members appreciated being consulted, many felt excluded from meaningful decision-making and perceived a lack of long-term ownership. This aligns with Situational Action Theory (SAT) (Wikström, 2004), which emphasizes the interplay between environment and agency – in this context, community agency – in shaping behaviour.

The study reveals that procedural design and situational context, including community voice, institutional trust, and local ownership, significantly mediate intervention effectiveness. By applying SAT to community-level dynamics, the research highlights the importance of community agency in peace-building. The findings resonate with critiques of Nigeria's overreliance on military operations as a peace-building strategy. The federal government's emphasis on troop deployments, aerial bombardments, and search-and-destroy missions represents a hard power model aimed at coercive stabilization. However,

evidence suggests that this approach has not yielded proportional security improvements.

Ultimately, the study shows that peace-building initiatives in northwest Nigeria are constrained by prioritizing symptom-management, limited structural alignment, and weak community agency. Sustainable peace requires programmes that concurrently address structural inequalities, modify enabling environments, and embed community ownership within intervention design.

Conclusion

This study set out to assess the extent to which peace-building initiatives in northwest Nigeria address the structural root causes of banditry and to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting inclusive, community-driven, sustainable peace. The findings show that, although many programmes include livelihood and youth engagement components, the dominant emphasis remains on immediate security responses and short-term relief rather than on transforming underlying conditions such as poverty, institutional weakness and marginalization. Furthermore, while some community inclusion is evident, genuine decision-making power and ownership by local actors are still limited, which undermines long-term sustainability. In essence, sustainable peace in the region appears to require more than reactive interventions: it demands interventions that reshape structural inequities, create enabling environments, and embed local agency.

The evidence presented demonstrates that Nigeria's continued dependence on kinetic warfare and ad-hoc negotiations has failed to achieve lasting stability in the northwest. While military actions are necessary for immediate containment, they cannot replace systematic efforts to address unemployment, governance deficits, and social exclusion. Unstructured amnesty or negotiation programmes without accountability only reinforce impunity. Achieving sustainable peace requires an integrated framework that balances kinetic deterrence with non-kinetic transformation,

grounded in inclusive governance, justice, and community resilience.

Recommendations

- To better address structural root causes of banditry, governmental and non-state actors should design peace-building initiatives that prioritize long-term livelihood development, governance reform and inclusive institutional strengthening. Specifically, programmes should move beyond emergency relief and equip local communities with assets, skills and leadership mechanisms that reduce vulnerability and dependence over time.
- To enhance the effectiveness of peace-building mechanisms in promoting inclusive, community-driven, sustainable peace, programme designers should ensure that community members, especially youth, women and marginalized groups, are actively engaged in both decision-making and implementation. Local ownership should be formalized through community governance structures, regular feedback loops and transparent accountability mechanisms that empower affected populations to shape and sustain peace-building efforts.

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