

Policyweekly

Strengthening Civilian Autonomy for Conflict De-escalation:

Reflections on Anambra State, Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1 Communities in Anambra State should leverage existing town union organisations to establish investigatory institutions to investigate and clarify accusations by state security agencies.
- 2 Communities should leverage access to local information to develop early warning systems to identify and raise alarms on the activities of suspicious groups.
- 3 Communities should collaborate with CSOs, particularly faith-based organisations, including leaders of traditional religious worshippers, to dissuade residents from participating or aiding the violence.
- 4 The community-choose-your-project initiative in Anambra State should be deepened as part of nonviolent community safety interventions.
- 5 Town unions and market associations should urgently be used as conduits for building peace, security and local intelligence in the state.

South-East Nigeria is experiencing unprecedented and alarming violence occasioned by the activities of Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) and clashes between them and state security agencies. Data from Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database reveal that at least 83 civilians and 36 security personnel were killed by NSAGs labelled as “unknown gunmen (UGM)” in the first half of 2022. Another 73 people were kidnapped in 28 kidnap incidents in the South East within the same period. This means that at least three civilians and one security personnel die weekly due to the activities of the UGM in the South East. The situation is worse in Anambra State, where the total number of UGM-related deaths exceeds the South East regional average (see figure 1). The state accounted for 31.5 per cent or 23 of the total number of kidnap victims and 40.9 per cent or 34 of the total number of civilians killed by the UGM in the first half of 2022.

The violent activities of the NSAGs and consequent deployment of state security personnel across Anambra State have seen civilian communities caught between the crossfires of NSAGs and state security forces, both willing to punish the civilians with violence if they suspect civilian collaboration with the opposing side. Discourses on violent conflict tend to focus on the role of armed actors in conflict de-escalation while ignoring

the capacity of civilian communities to influence armed groups' choices and de-escalate violence through nonviolent means. However, Kaplan (2017) shows that civilian communities can protect themselves from armed groups' violence, influence armed groups' preferences and contribute to de-escalating violence by exercising nonviolent civilian autonomy strategies without participating in the conflict. This edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly reflects on why civilian communities in Anambra State have failed to effectively exercise autonomy in the ongoing violent conflict and provides actionable strategies for strengthening civilian autonomy for conflict de-escalation in the state.

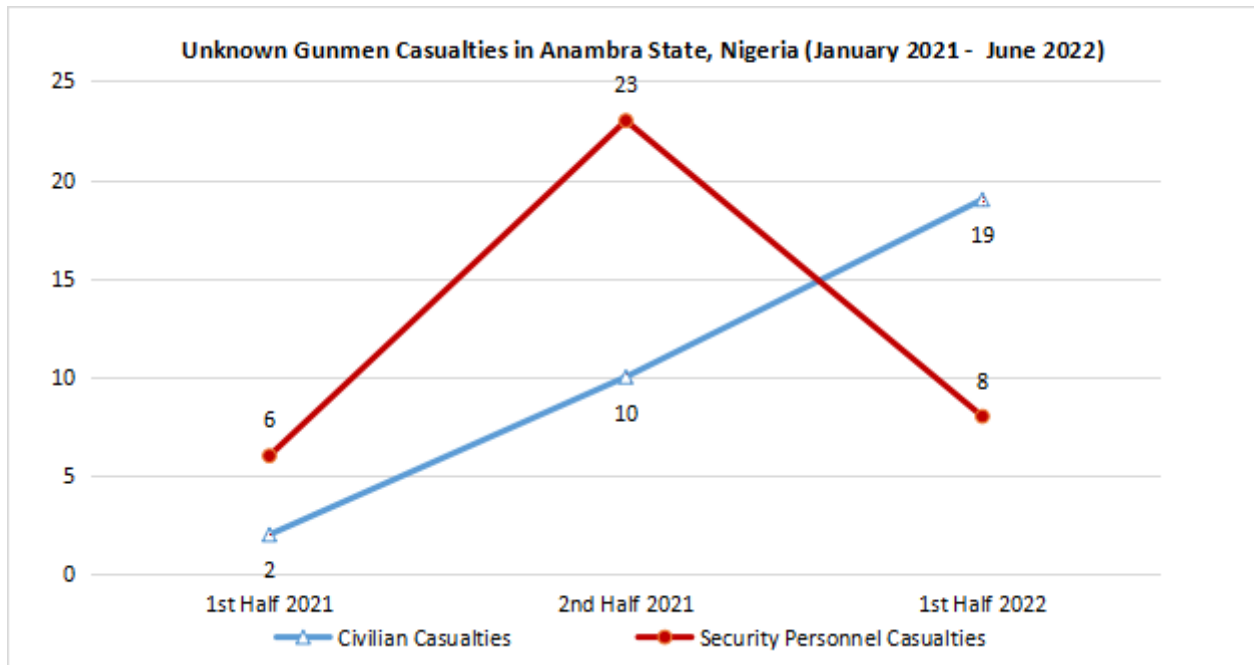


Fig. 1: Unknown Gunmen Related Deaths in Anambra State, Compared with South East Regional Average (January 2021 - June 2022) Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database

Unknown Gunmen: From targeting security agencies to targeting civilians

At first, some perceived the UGM as radical secessionist groups because they targeted and killed members of state security forces. Their activities were romanticised by some social media users who recorded and spread scenes of their attacks on state security forces on social media. Meanwhile, a trend analysis of killings by the UGM as documented by Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database shows that the targets of the UGM appear to have shifted to focus more on civilians. For instance, in 2021, security personnel accounted for 70.7 per cent of the total killings by the UGM, while civilians accounted for 29.3 per cent of total killings by UGM in Anambra State. However, by the first half of 2022, civilians accounted for 80.9 per cent, while security personnel accounted for 19.0 per cent of total killings by UGM in Anambra State (see figure 2). The same trend is observed in the larger data for the South East region. This suggests that more civilians are being targeted and killed by the UGM in the South East. The governor of Anambra State recently [alleged](#) that many of those parading as UGM are known persons indulging in self-serving criminal activities, including human organ harvesting.

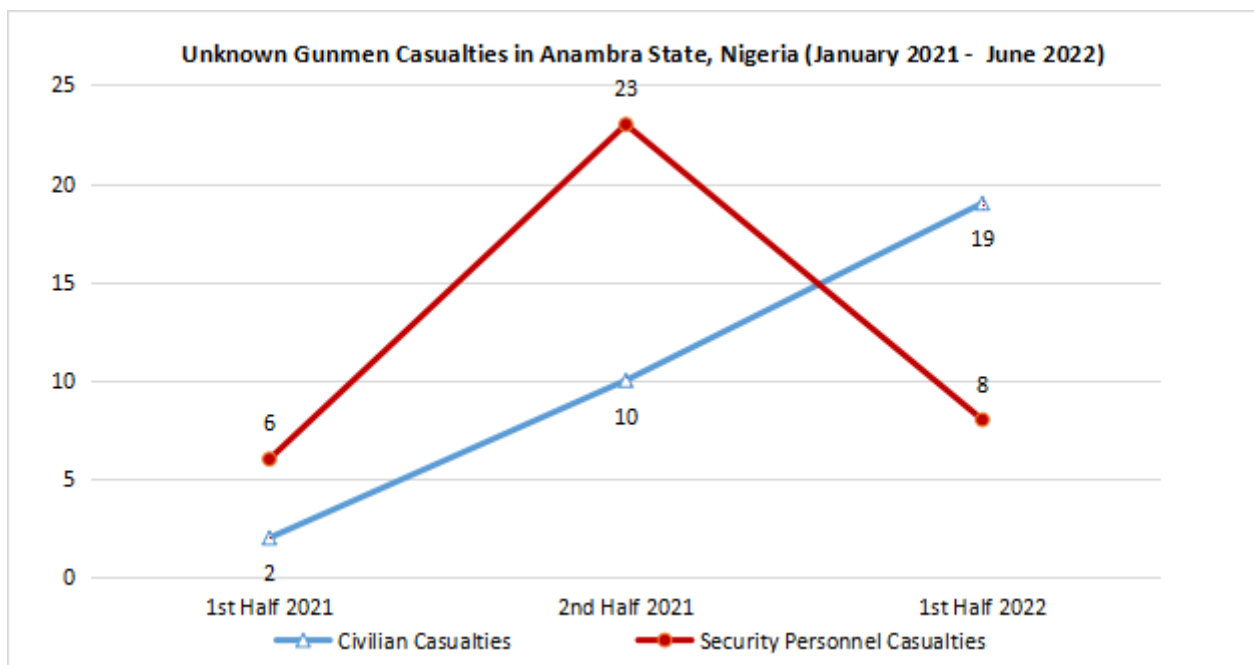


Fig 2: Unknown Gunmen Casualties in Anambra State, (January 2021 - June 2022) Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database

Explaining the limited autonomy of civilian communities in the ongoing violence in Anambra State

Civilian autonomy is the capacity of a civilian community to protect itself against armed groups' violence and maintain independent decision-making power over daily livelihood and outcomes for the community without participating in the

conflict (Kaplan 2017). Since 2015, civilian communities in Anambra State, like other South East states, have found themselves victims of both the NSAGs and state security agencies. While the NSAGs extort the communities through [the imposition of illicit taxation/levies on some communities](#), kidnapping for ransom and murder, some personnel of the state security agencies perpetrate various forms of rights abuses in an attempt to decimate the NSAGs. Evidently, many of these civilian communities have neither been able to protect themselves from the violence from both armed groups nor maintain independent decision-making over their daily livelihood and conflict outcomes. For instance, in addition to the kidnapping and killings by the NSAGs, the persistence of Monday sit-at-home in Anambra State even when the IPOB has announced its cancellation and despite an attempt by the state government to put an end to it attests to the limited autonomy of the civilian communities in the ongoing violent conflict.

More so, a recent [Nextier SPD Policy Brief](#) reveals that civilian communities experience human rights abuse by some security personnel deployed to engage the UGM and cannot hold the security agencies accountable for such abuses by the security personnel. The recent [discoveries](#) of hideouts of some NSAGs, particularly the kidnappers in some locations within Anambra State and the allegation that some community members, particularly native doctors, were [aiding](#) the NSAGs indicate that there are persons in the communities collaborating with the NSAGs who have hideouts in the communities from where they operate. The inability of the civilian communities to expose or even expel the NSAGs who use their communities as hideouts in the communities even though civilians are increasingly falling victims to the self-serving criminal interests pursued by the NSAGs is another evidence of the limited autonomy of the civilian communities in the ongoing violent conflict. This edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly identifies three factors which explain the limited autonomy of civilian communities in Anambra State in the ongoing violent conflict.

First is the disruption of social cohesion among the civilian communities since the resurgence of separatist agitation in 2015 due to disagreement over the best approach for addressing the perceived marginalisation of the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. Ibeanu, Orji & Iwuamadi (2016) identified two distinct groups with mutually exclusive views on addressing the Igbo question in Nigeria – the mainstream inclusivists and the radical separatists. The former pursues greater political, social and economic inclusion of the Igbos in the Nigerian state, while the latter pursues the actualisation of the sovereign state of Biafra as the only solution. The disagreement between the adherents of these two views evident in everyday discourses on the Igbo question among the South Easterners has created division among the people and undermined the social cohesion required for collective actions by the civilian communities to effectively employ autonomy strategies that can influence the armed actors towards de-escalation of violence.

Second and corollary to the first are the stigmatisation of community/traditional leaders and pan Igbo civilian organisations such as the Oha-na-Eze Ndi Igbo by the radical separatist group who perceive them as colluding with the Nigerian state to thwart the actualisation of the sovereign state of Biafra. The UGM has hidden under the guise of this stigmatisation to kidnap or assassinate targeted traditional or community leaders and local

politicians or destroy their properties, sometimes for political reasons. Some of the victims include [Igwe Alex Edozieuno](#), [Hon. Okechukwu Okoye](#) to mention a few. Consequently, many community leaders are now afraid for their lives and prefer not to openly talk about the violence by the UGM (Personal Communication). Thus, this stigmatisation has impacted negatively on the capacity of community leaders and the agency of Igbo civilian organisations to mobilise their communities for civilian autonomy.

Third is the growing culture of fear among the residents, who prefer to remain silent for fear of incurring the wrath of armed groups or being stigmatised as a saboteur for condemning the situation. As noted by Kaplan (2017, p. 37), residents require assurance that they can count on their neighbours to pursue autonomy strategies. One Anambra State resident remarked that: “nobody is talking because you don’t know who is who. Even if you report to the security agencies, they (security agencies) may tell them (UGM) that you are the one that reported” (Personal Communication).

Strategies for strengthening civilian autonomy for conflict de-escalation in Anambra State

The following nonviolent strategies are suggested for strengthening civilian autonomy towards conflict de-escalation in Anambra State:

- i. **Establish community investigatory institutions:** communities in Anambra State should leverage existing town union organisations to establish investigatory institutions to investigate and clarify accusations by state security agencies on persons/groups suspected of collaborating with criminal groups. This institution will help separate peaceful agitators from criminal gangs. It will ensure that innocent civilians are not unduly punished while the NSAGs in the communities would be forced to leave, given the risk of being exposed. Such institutions will also hold state security agencies accountable for their acts in the communities. An intelligence fusion system should also be mainstreamed into the investigatory institutions to facilitate intelligence sharing with relevant authorities without compromising the anonymity of the informants.
- ii. **Establish community early warning systems through a partnership with think tanks:** with the aid of empirical data and analysis from think tanks, communities should leverage access to local information to develop early warning systems to identify and raise the alarm on the activities of suspicious groups emerging in the communities.
- iii. **Deepen culture of peace in collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs):** communities should collaborate with CSOs, particularly the faith-based organisations, including leaders of traditional religious worshippers, to dissuade residents from participating or aiding the violence. Such a culture of peace must involve pressures (e.g. naming and ostracising collaborators of NSAGs) and rewards (public commendation of nonviolent peacemakers).
- iv. **Deepen investment in nonviolent community safety interventions:** The community-choose-your-project initiative in Anambra State should be deepened as

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Nextier SPD (www.nextierspd.com) is an international development consulting firm that uses evidence-based research to develop and build knowledge and skills to enhance human security, peace, and sustainable development as means to achieving stability and prosperity in Nigeria, and in the African region.

part of nonviolent community safety interventions. To this end, the projects must be preceded by needs assessment and tailored towards impacting vulnerable persons in dis-invested locations who are most at-risk for participating in the violent conflict.

- v. **Strengthening the roles of town unions and Market Associations:** These two institutions should urgently be used as conduits for building peace, security and local intelligence in the state. They are well organised to assist the state and the security agencies in the fight against criminals in the state. To achieve this, the state should allow and encourage the unions and market associations to be more democratic in their processes, especially in electing their officials and other governance processes, in order to forge a united front and be able to assist the government in the fight against NSAGs in the state.

Conclusion

Anambra State is experiencing unprecedented violent conflict, and the civilian communities are caught between the crossfires of the NSAGs and state security agencies due to their limited autonomy in the conflict. Employing nonviolent strategies to strengthen civilian communities' autonomy will strengthen social cohesion and contribute

to de-escalating violent conflict in Anambra State.

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Ibeanu, O., N. Orji, and K. Iwuamadi. 2016. Biafra Separatism: Causes, Consequences and Remedies. Enugu, Nigeria: Institution for Innovations in Development.

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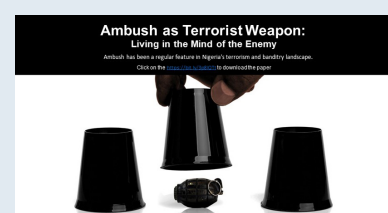
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