



Resolving Communal Clashes

- Revamp the Criminal justice system
- De-weaponise identity and disincentivise politics
- Reclaim ungoverned spaces
- Implement early warning mechanisms
- Commit to equity and fairness

Resolving Communal Clashes

Overview

Nigeria's communal and ethnoreligious struggles draw from its multicultural and multi-ethnic diversity. However, the various unresolved group wars have worsened from the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War to the various low intensive conflicts. As a result, diversity, which should be Nigeria's source of socio-economic strength, is a liability. Anugwom (2000) argues that the ethnic factor in Nigeria is the primary yardstick for allocating power and distributing national resources.³⁴ This point set the stage for the various forms of identity politics and economic struggle, leading to fierce competition between and among the different tribal groups that make up Nigeria.

Identity conflict in Nigeria is wide-reaching. Beyond the identity-informed struggles at the federal level, similar conflicts continue at the sub-national levels or within states. These conflicts could exist within the same ethnic groups but along sub-ethnic lines or within the same religion but along denominational lines. Such susceptibility to communal and ethnoreligious crises occurs across several states in Nigeria.

Data from Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database³⁵ shows that in the twelve months to September 2021, communal clashes accounted for 14 out of the 890 conflict incidents and 80 out of the 3,787 casualties. Although this conflict type accounts for only 1.6 percent of the incidents (and 2.1 percent of the casualties), it has a super-sized influence on the conflict situation in the country. These unresolved grievances fester over time and colour how social, cultural, and economic challenges are interpreted and resolved.

In the period under review, there were communal conflicts in eight states of the federation. Ebonyi and Osun states reported three incidents each, followed by Benue and Gombe states with two incidents each, while the other four states – Kwara, Niger, Bayelsa, and Edo – had one incident each. Ebonyi state, with 39 casualties, accounted for 49 percent of the reported deaths. Osun, Kwara, and Bayelsa states accounted for another 43 percent of the deaths.

³⁴ Anugwom, E.E., 2000. Ethnic conflict and democracy in Nigeria: The marginalisation question. *Journal of social development in Africa*, 15(1), pp.61-78.

³⁵ Fatality figures were culled from the Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database which sources its data from media reported violent conflicts. The database categorizes the conflicts into banditry, terrorism, farmers-herder crisis, extra-judicial killings, cultism, armed robbery, domestic violence, civil unrest, piracy, communal clashes.

All these deaths occurred in decades-old communal conflicts. For instance, the people of Ezza and Effium in Ado Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State have been sparring with their neighbours in Ohaukwu LGA of Ebonyi State. Three incidents in February, June and August 2021 claimed 39 lives. Similar circumstances exist in Osun state where conflicts over land between the people of Iwo and Ile-Oogbo. Many of these warring parties are largely from the same ethnic stock and share the same religious beliefs. The low-intensity conflict between the people of Ife and Modakeke continues to fester.

Communal Clashes	Number of Incidents	Civilian Deaths	Security Agents Deaths
Ohaukwu (Ebonyi)	3	39	-
Ayedire (Osun)	1	15	-
Oke Ero (Kwara)	1	10	-
Nembe (Bayelsa)	1	9	-
Shomgom (Gombe)	1	3	-
Ovia North-East (Edo)	1	1	-
Isokan (Osun)	1	1	-
Osogbo (Osun)	1	1	-
Balanga (Gombe)	1	-	1
Lavun (Niger)	1	-	-
Agatu (Benue)	1	-	-
Ado (Benue)	1	-	-
Total	14	79	1

Table 9: Communal clashes in Nigeria from September 2020 to October 2021 (Source: Nextier SPD Violent Conflicts Database)

Conflict drivers

In December 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, “There can be no justice without peace, and there can be no peace without justice,” he spoke not just for the Vietnam war protesters in the California prison. He spoke for all humans who exist in places where justice is not fairly dispensed. Nigeria’s ineffectual criminal justice system is at the heart of many of the conflicts in the country. Likewise, the failure to evolve [sustainable peacebuilding](#) measures is why communal conflicts have existed for decades. At the federal and state levels, the governments seem handicapped in proactively tracking the early warning signals, managing the violence triggers, or finding a pathway to peace.

Inter-group suspicions drive identity-related crises in Nigeria. Slight differences in language, cultural, or religious practices could trigger conflicts that result in mounting casualties. Interpersonal disputes that should not merit any serious considerations could cause a conflagration because of perceptions of [marginalisation](#) and threats of

group dominations. Politicians employ [identity politics](#) to achieve personal advantage even at the risk of triggering ethnoreligious sentiments that could lead to unrest and violence.

Prior intervention efforts

Nigeria's efforts to stem the tide of communal conflicts are more [reactive](#) than proactive. The emphasis is usually on security deployment, which is usually ineffectual and unsustainable in managing or resolving decades-long identity conflicts. Furthermore, the government would usually constitute an inquiry panel to understand the causes of the conflict and recommend solutions. The results of such panels are seldom made public. The findings are not used in developing proactive measures to address the root causes of the conflict. The government, in some instances, seek to use messages (via traditional and social media) to build cohesion among the people. In other instances, the government may constitute committees to broker peace between warring communities and groups. Many of these approaches have failed to deliver lasting results because many people feel that they didn't receive justice on all sides of the conflict.

Recommendations

Revamp the Criminal Justice System

Nigeria needs to update its criminal justice system as it has the highest impact on social justice. The gap in the system includes security institutions' handling of civil and criminal cases. A 2014 [survey](#) by NOI-Polls shows that 51 percent of Nigerians attribute the high prevalence of jungle justice to a 'lack of trust in the law enforcement agencies. For instance, about [68 percent of the 74,000 inmates](#) in Nigerian jails in 2019 were still awaiting trial (Oduah, 2019)³⁶. The effectiveness of the criminal justice system in a country bolsters the stability of the State. It promotes public confidence in the State's ability to live up to the social contract of protecting people from harm. According to an Institute of Security Studies report, criminal justice responses based on the rule of law are essential for peace and security. Such structures strengthen the State's legitimacy and give a voice to victims. People are more likely to seek redress than resort to revenge if they feel confident about the criminal justice system in their country.

De-weaponize Identity and Disincentivise Politics

³⁶ Oduah, C. (2019). Nigeria's Prisons Set to Undergo Long-Awaited Reforms. Available on the VOA website <https://tinyurl.com/8ehwkpcs> (Uploaded August 24, 2019; accessed October 23, 2021).

The State should seek ways to [de-weaponise identity](#) as an instrument for contesting state allocations or public offices. All the structures the State has inadvertently used to polarise citizens along ethnic, indigene, settler, religious lines should be decommissioned. Many of these structures have institutionalised identity competitions and conflicts. Perceived economic gains fuel identity and political contests. There is a need to disincentivise political offices and political interests. The outsized and disproportionate reward for public offices triggers do-or-die politics and the violence it triggers.

Reclaim Ungoverned Spaces

Increasing security in crisis and violence-prone hotspots will reduce the need to resort to self or group defence and the propensity for reprisal attacks. Therefore, Nigeria's security agencies should maintain a robust situational analysis of frozen and potential conflict locations on all the crisis vistas. The agencies should rely on data and evidence to map the active and latent conflict spots to determine deployment strategies for the different locations proactively. Additionally, increasing governance structures in ungoverned spaces will improve the government's ability to protect and provide for the communities. It will encourage the communities to seek redress through appropriate channels and reverse the growing perception of the government's waning legitimacy and authority.

Implement Early Warning Mechanisms

[Early warning mechanisms](#) will help the government and communities prevent violence escalation. However, the government should adopt a bottom-up approach to include community members, local government actors, and security actors in the tactical monitoring of activities in communities prone to communal and ethnoreligious crises.

Achieve National Cohesion through Action and Messaging

Messaging and conversations to promote national cohesion should become more regular. Instead of the knee-jerk messaging following a conflict incident, the government needs to develop a messaging strategy driven by a well-considered theory of change. This idea allows the government to work with the private sector, civil society, and its development partners to drive a messaging campaign. It is important that the messaging is coordinated yet focused on achieving the social cohesion needed to address the root causes of the communal conflicts. This much-needed cohesion is not a citizen-focused action; rather, public officials must be seen to exemplify the values.

Commit to Equity and Fairness

As part of the effort to reduce perceptions of group marginalisation and dominance, the Nigerian State and its public officials must be seen as fair, just, and ensuring equity irrespective of ethnicity or religious affiliations. The Federal Character Principle should be placed above identity cleavages and commitments. Engendering true federalism is one way to ensure that more opportunities are enabled for people to advance their ambitions through state-enabled structures and environments. No Nigeria should ever feel excluded from rights or opportunities that are due to other citizens.