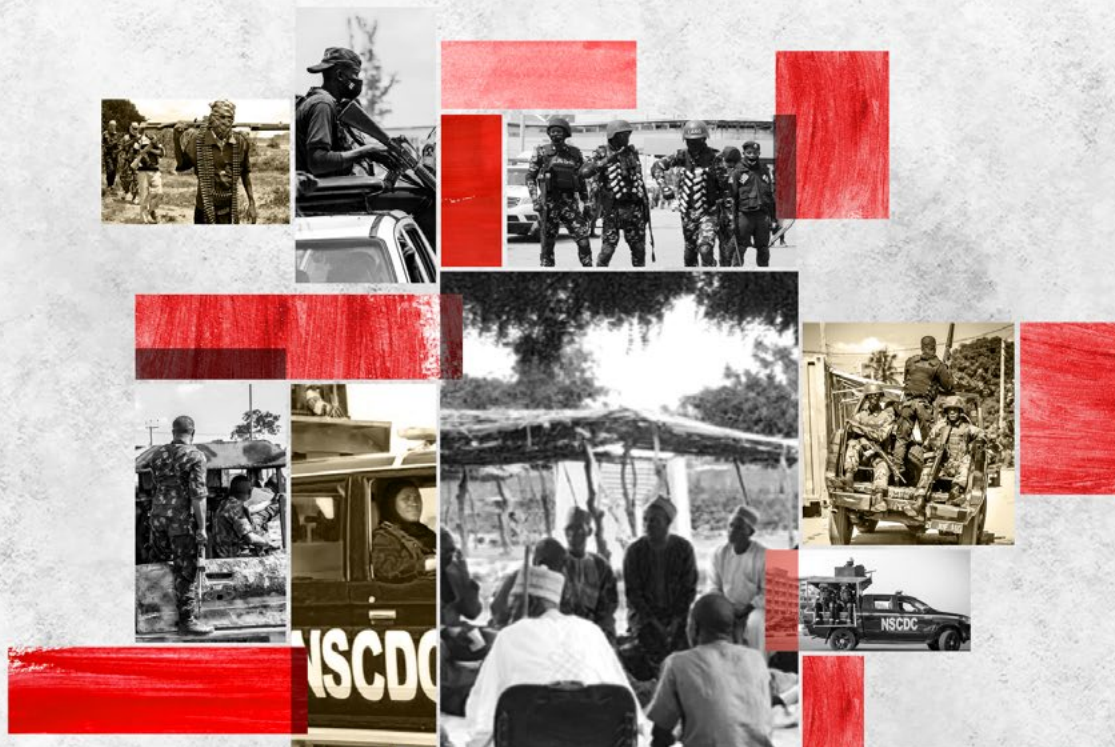


Policyweekly

Struggle for Stability

The Many Faces of Rural Resilience in Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1 Global practices for conflict prevention should be localised to fit the target communities' existing human development indices.
- 2 There is a need to conduct a robust needs assessment that identifies community needs and competency levels. One that widens the trainees' sample size and ensures adequate step-down sessions.
- 3 There is a need to adopt an out-scaling and strategic communications plan which will help disseminate best practices.
- 4 There is a need for rapid response to match the conflict signal reports from communities, mainly where such protocols exist.
- 5 Factoring in the political dynamics and actors in intervention sites will help to capture the relevant stakeholders' buy-in and ensure sustainability.
- 6 Successes against armed groups must be met with post-mission strategies that will sustain peace.
- 7 There is a need to solve issues such as livelihood gaps, climate change, governance gaps, grievances, criminality, social injustices and exclusionary politics, which often position communities on the path of vulnerability.

Introduction

Nigeria's conflict theatres are evolving with new actors and incentives. Old wars have lingered, and new ones are creeping up, undermining security frameworks and creating millions of distraught victims. Hundreds of fatalities, kidnap victims, and displaced populations characterise many scenes across the country's violent conflict hotspots. According to the Nextier Violent Conflict Database, 967 people have died from 261 violent incidents from January to March 2024. About 1,257 incidents were recorded in 2023. The figures for 2022 are not any different. However, the violence points to the scale and frequency of violent deaths in Nigeria.

The Nigerian state responds to a significant proportion of violent threats in the country with combative mechanisms. This has contributed to the unsteady yearly decline in violent incidents and fatalities in the country. In 2022, Nigeria's former Chief of Defence Staff, Lucky Irabor, [revealed](#) that 80 per cent of the country's armed forces personnel were currently deployed in all 36 states of the federation, performing police duties. In parts of the terrorism

and banditry-troubled northeast and northwest states, military bases inundate the communities and long stretches of roads. In southeast Nigeria, military checkpoints dot interstate highways. These military presences are often part of the tactical responses to distinct violent conflicts manifesting across regions in Nigeria. Despite military operations across the nation and in what some conflict experts argue to be 'police business', many Nigerian residents, especially those living in rural communities, still face risks of attacks by non-state armed groups (NSAGs).

Non-combative measures still intervene in the hotspots and provide varied assistance to stabilise communities. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution has a department that sends teams to warring communities to broker peace. The Office for Strategic Preparedness and Resilience (OSPRES) plays a high-level coordinating role in mobilising early warning and early response protocols in Nigeria. At the state level, some sub-national governments have created peace commissions that deploy non-kinetic measures to address violent conflicts. The peace commissions in Kaduna and Plateau States are examples of such efforts. Non-governmental organisations and civil society groups are equally implementing EWER systems in troubled communities, helping to improve conflict reporting and rapid response.

Conflict-tracking mechanisms are mainly reactionary, like the efforts to stabilise hotspot communities. The reasons for these are not far-fetched. Some conflict-focused organisations are documenting violent incidents, helping to provide aggregated evidence of Nigeria's violent conflict profile. These efforts cannot undo the daily fatalities but potentially offer insights to aid the Nigerian state's security strategies. The documentation of incidents may also help to compare phases and see if intervention measures are leading to stability, correlated or not. Still, these efforts are reactionary, if not the mere documentation of Nigeria's daily and often preventable humanitarian tragedies, irrespective of the insights they provide.

Not enough is heard about incident prevention. While there is data to mark violent incidents in Nigeria, there is likely nothing to show for potential events thwarted by security efforts or other factors, including community-level peacebuilding. Indeed, in cases where such evidence exists, it is sprinkled across news reports, with no deliberate aggregation of events to generate lessons for future interventions. Therefore, documentation of violent incidents in Nigeria continues loudly, but the efforts in incident prevention take the back seat. This edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly looks at the challenges to community-level conflict prevention efforts and how they can be better coordinated and out-scaled.

Nigeria's Security Landscape

Violence in Nigeria varies significantly, reflecting diverse regional dynamics. In southeast Nigeria,

years of secessionist agitations and perceptions of marginalisation have snowballed into violent attacks, with secessionism-linked incidents shadowing other instances of sheer criminality. In the south-south, episodes of militancy by aggrieved community members where oil exploration has caused significant ecological degradation without corresponding development abound. There is also the unending feature of gangs, who engage in cultism, thuggery and electoral violence. In the southwest, there is the usual gang violence and fleeting events of fierce unrest among traders, tribal groups, road transport workers and protesters. There are also incidents of violent attacks by non-state armed groups across the region, save for Lagos state, Nigeria's commercial centre.

Northern Nigeria is not significantly different from the South in terms of variations of conflicts. In the northeast, over a decade of terrorism has resulted in thousands of deaths and millions of displaced populations requiring humanitarian assistance. The most significant threats to lives and stability in the northwest and northcentral zones are banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, and identity-related clashes, according to tracked data from the Nextier Violent Conflict. Beyond all these, some regions experience similar conflicts, such as a few cases of cultism, communal feuds, and farmer-herder clashes. Many of the armed groups also adopt kidnapping as part of their modus operandi. This explains why kidnapping trends across the country are widespread. However, large-scale kidnappings are prevalent in Northern Nigeria. Despite the numbers, these peculiar incidents happen unperturbed, and the movement of the dozens of kidnapped victims remains uncertain.

Rural Nigeria and the Struggle for Stability

Over 100 million people live in rural areas in Nigeria. These locations are home to most of the violence due to several factors. They are characterised by multiple multi-dimensional poverty indicators such as educational, financial, nutritional medical, housing, hygiene and energy deprivations. Ecological stressors are also worse in these locations, with many of its population unable to afford climate change resilience and adaptation mechanisms. Violence exacerbates the challenges in rural areas. Community resilience is low and often unsustainable due to the already undermined social fabric.

Several interventions in Nigeria aim to restore community-level peace and stability. These interventions adopt some strategies to curb violence and engender peace. Early warning and early response (EWER) systems are some of those efforts to mitigate the spread of violence and entrench proactive crime prevention and state-society partnership on security. Beyond these, other methods such as capacity building on conflict management, mediation and dialogue have also been adopted in different places.

The lack of a significant decline in rural violence

indicates that such interventions may be scratching the surface, preventing worse outcomes or challenging altogether. The following realities were extracted from interviews with community volunteers who collect early warning signals and report to appropriate authorities in northwest Nigeria. Their account of community-level conflict prevention mirrors the struggle for stability and communities' many challenges in maintaining peace. Based on their conflict reporting capabilities and responsibilities, the respondents stand between communities and law enforcement agencies, providing part of the much-needed bridge to state-society collaboration on security. Some of the identified challenges to conflict prevention in local communities include the following:

Ungoverned Spaces: whether ungoverned or under-governed, it is clear that such spaces record varied but low levels of governance. At best, governance is earmarked by traditional or customary practices and rules, especially regarding the local economy (market days), religion, mediation, security and justice dispensation. Places like this exist at the periphery, national and inter-state borders, far from formal authority or semblance of it. According to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), concerns over anarchic zones outside formal authority are understandable, citing cases of full-scale terrorism planned and carried out in weak and ungoverned states. This factor limits community resilience to violent conflicts and their place and entrenches a disconnect between the government, particularly law enforcement agencies and the people. For instance, a respondent indicates a lack of awareness of security agencies' willingness to work with the locals. In places where such relationships were cultivated, synergy and collaboration between law enforcement and community members improved significantly.

Lack of government presence in specific locations also comes with a lack of resources to engage the public. When non-state armed groups overrun violent hotspots, such locations often do not have adequate security workforce or facilities to engage until backup arrives. (Personal communication) In some instances, assailants operate unperturbed. When civilian authority is adequate to meet the needs of the public, mediate peace and administer justice, communities may thrive better. Recall that some of Nigeria's current violent conflicts arguably stem from age-long, unaddressed grievances and social injustice. The Niger Delta militancy, secessionism in the southeast, farmer-herder conflicts and communal clashes comes to mind. Therefore, interventions in such locations will struggle to build trust, synergy and collaboration between law enforcement agencies and communities. Launching conflict reporting strategies in such places will also be a struggle since community members are used to existing independently and often rely on traditional governance structures. (Personal communication)

Isolated Interventions: The location of some communities predisposes them to internal and external aggression. Due to budgetary constraints and other factors, peacebuilding and conflict prevention interventions may select deployment sites. However, intervening in a particular community, where its neighbours face conflict issues or if the local government area is rampaged by one form of violent conflict or the other. While such interventions may cater to internal conflict issues, they may not immunise the communities from external aggression or neighbourhood effects of violence in different locations.

Also, such interventions do not stop ecological stressors from posing harm and displacement risks for community members. In a typical climate-security nexus, climate change consequences can undermine peace and security frameworks, destroying community resilience and creating new needs. Displacements due to conflict or climate change may lead people to move to communities where interventions have been deployed and are not designed to cater for their needs. The increased struggle over access to natural resources and the interplay of new identities (internally displaced, returnee or refugee) will undermine local peacebuilding structures and thwart the success of the intervention.

Infrastructure and Knowledge Gaps: Anecdotal accounts of conflict reporters in some rural communities point to infrastructural gaps that limit sending early warning signals. This is the case with periphery locations with limited telecommunications infrastructure or poor internet penetration. This limits community members' ability to report threats and anticipate rapid response.

Robust community interventions often engage gatekeepers and volunteers and create change champions as part of their community buy-in and sustainability strategies. However, such interventions are sometimes constrained by knowledge dearth. When talented individuals are found, they are often relatively high fliers who may end up relocating from the communities to access better opportunities.

Political Economy of Interventions: The success levels of a particular intervention in banditry-ravaged northwest Nigeria recorded varied levels of community buy-in. In locations where a recognised traditional authority is carried along in the intervention, community members were more likely to engage and stay committed to the community conflict prevention mechanisms introduced to them than in areas where traditional authority are clustered, with no single and commanding representation. This is indicative that local political dynamics may inhibit how conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions are interpreted. It is worse, especially as conflict issues are often political, where resource sharing, local governance and authority are interconnected. Also, conflict is deeply rooted in historical grievances,

and identity divides and socio-economic disparities in some locations. Hence, community-level conflict prevention may not be successfully isolated from local politics. In this case, interventions struggle to accommodate broad group interests and achieve a consensus, especially if the intervention design did not adequately capture such factors.

Respondents also affirm that community members resist interventions because they may benefit from the status quo. Such people work towards undermining efforts toward implementing conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms at the community levels and may turn groups against one another.

Public Distrust: Law enforcement agencies in Nigeria struggle with public trust. This is worse where there is evidence of corruption, extra-judicial killings and ineffective security provisions. Conflict prevention interventions, especially early warning and early response (EWER) strategies, may be unsustainable if law enforcement agencies are not among the stakeholders involved. In (EWER), law enforcement agencies are essential to the mix. They often receive and act on the early warning signs. EWER is largely incomplete if law enforcement agencies are not looped in on the reporting system. Even in locations where informal security units such as vigilantes exist, collaboration between them and formal structures is often inevitable. Based on these, conflict prevention in communities is challenged by distrust people may have of security organisations. This limits collaboration on security while enabling the culture of self-preservation, which may undermine the nation's security architecture. The calls for gun ownership and the set up of ethnic militias such as the Eastern Security Network are clear examples.

Public distrust also exists among community members, especially in heterogenous communities where social cohesion is broken. Identity conflicts and suspicions limit the window of collaboration and shared responsibilities. In its place, there is competition rather than cooperation. This prevents level peacebuilding efforts from mobilising communities and building resilience. Social cohesion is an essential ingredient for achieving community resilience and building peace. Some respondents confirm that past conflicts leave lingering psychological scars on individuals and communities, hindering their ability to trust and collaborate.

Forging a Robust Community Resilience in the Face of Violence

Nigeria's security landscape is complex and connected to its politics, economy, and culture. In the face of rural violence, deploying conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies is as complicated as ensuring sustainable results. From the lenses and experiences of conflict reporters in selected communities in Northwest Nigeria, some realistic measures are needed to sustainably engender

community-level peace and stability.

Conflict prevention strategies should be localised: The selection of change champions and volunteers may not be adequate to pass down the knowledge and the baton of implementation. Localising strategy is needed, especially with the rapid digitalisation of conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. EWER systems are becoming increasingly digital, but the skillset level of community members cannot match that pace, limiting the direct users of such systems. Therefore, global practices should be localised to fit the target communities' existing human development indices. Hence, conflict reporting apps may be limited to a few individuals.

Conducting Robust Need Assessment: Several project interventions do this, but they often emphasise what the community needs, not particularly what competencies are available. Project impact and sustainability will suffer if many community members cannot easily utilise the strategies without supervision. For instance, for budgetary reasons and for the mere fact it may be impossible to train everyone, some community members are often selected and trained in different capacities, with the expectation of them carrying on the project activities or conducting step-down training. There is a need to widen the trainees' sample size and ensure adequate step-down sessions are conducted. In some interventions, the knowledge is trapped in the hands of those identified as change champions without cascading to the ordinary community members. A robust needs assessment will help identify community needs and competency levels to address them based on the intended deployed strategies. It will also help to expand the target recipient of capacity-building activities.

Adopting an out-scaling and strategic communications plan: funding, accessibility, and other factors may limit the scope of community interventions, but an out-scaling plan and knowledge sharing will help disseminate best practices. Neighbouring communities in project sites may not directly benefit from the project intervention, but they can tap into the knowledge bank if it is strategically communicated.

Conflict reporting is a two-way street: There is a need for rapid response to match the conflict signal reports from communities, mainly where such protocols exist. Beyond community interventions, security agencies in Nigeria have a cluster of crime reporting channels. There is a need for such channels to be more responsive in meeting citizens' needs. Rebuilding public trust in security agencies requires the agencies' robust commitment to ensure public partnership and provide protection. Security agencies should not be found wanting at the time of distress, especially where such unfolding events have been communicated.

Political Economy Analysis is vital for conflict intervention: factoring in the political dynamics and actors in intervention sites will help to capture the relevant stakeholders' buy-in and ensure sustainability. It will also help mitigate low acceptance risks and complicate the issues it was geared to address.

After the storm: successes against armed groups must be met with post-mission strategies that will sustain peace. Over time, stabilised communities may become vulnerable to internal and external aggression if adequate post-conflict reconstruction measures are not in place.

Addressing multifaceted challenges: violent conflicts in Nigeria are triggered by a combination of factors that bear on livelihood gaps, climate change, governance gaps, grievances, criminality, social injustices and exclusionary politics. There is a need to solve these issues as they often position communities on the path of vulnerability.

Conclusion

Community members engaged in conflict interventions understand the objectives and are positioned to see it work for their benefit. However, in the course of their engagements, they see the challenges and understand them better since they act as the bridge between the communities on the one hand and the government or the project implementing team on the other hand. Therefore, ensuring robust and impactful peacebuilding and conflict prevention mechanisms requires detailing the experiences and perspectives of those engaged with the everyday tasks of collecting information and reporting conflict signals in Nigeria's avalanche of conflict hotspots.

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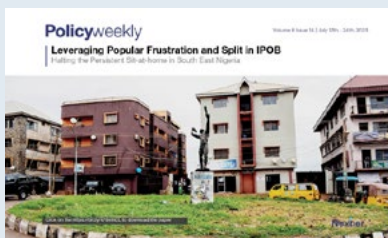
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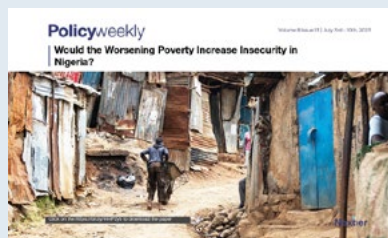
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