

Policyweekly

| The Urgency of Peacebuilding in the South East of Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1** Development agencies and partners, especially the United Nations, should consider peacebuilding programmes in the South East for special attention, as in the North West and North East.
- 2** There is a compelling need for dialogue in the tension between secessionist agitators and the government.
- 3** Different levels of psychosocial support and guarantees of protection reassurances must be extended to communities affected by farmer-herder conflict.
- 4** There is a need to support women who have suffered rape on their farms or any other form of gender-based violence connected with the farmer-herder conflict.
- 5** Interventions are essential around the relationship between the security sector and citizens in the South East to curtail the coercive policing mode in the region.
- 6** A special security sector reform to combat kidnapping more effectively across the country and in the South East is a necessary policy direction.
- 7** Regarding communities occupied by gangs claiming to be agitators, the dialogue approach will support the government to distinguish between genuine agitators and criminals and take measures to rid the communities of criminals.
- 8** The government needs to focus on supporting employment creation, especially in supporting small businesses' growth and redirecting the energy of some young people who lack jobs and regard the government as the reason for their condition.

Introduction

A comprehensive but simplified idea of peacebuilding by the [Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies](#) is given as the development of constructive personal, group and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national and racial boundaries to resolve issues of injustice or structurally embedded non-physical but harmful violence, in non-violent ways. Broader thinking about peace and violence would typically lead us to Galtung's (1969) idea that apart from physical violence, deliberate political, economic, religious, cultural and legal obstacles that society places on groups of people constrain them from attaining the quality of life that would otherwise have been possible, is called structural violence. This violence relates to the hindrances subtly tied to institutions like policy processes and laws to constrain some groups. When, for instance, the government allocates values unfairly,

whether in the distribution of visible values like infrastructure, employment, particular interventions to the imperfect, or spaces for equitable participation in government, it is structural violence, and we commonly reference it as marginalisation.

The government's usual response to security issues in the South East is to send more security men to suppress agitations. It also rejects options of dialogue and is believed by South-easterners that the government treats security challenges from violent herdsmen with less regard. Essentially, the state still fails to see the need for a peacebuilding approach that addresses physical and structural violence issues in the region. Besides, donor or development NGOs leave the region unattended while concentrating their energy in other parts of the country. By 2020, Borno State had [172 NGOs](#) active in different areas. The development partners followed the political directive of former President Buhari to donor agencies to face the [North](#). They, therefore, shifted focus to the North East and have lately extended to the North West. It is correct to see that the conflicts and challenges of the South East are best-given attention rather than allowed to escalate to the level of the North East when it would cost more in resources. The government approach to conflicts in the South East, which is currently unproductive, could become counter-productive if the strategy is not reviewed in favour of a peacebuilding approach. Thus, this edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly considers the urgency of peacebuilding in the South East.

Dynamics of Conflicts and Tensions in the South East

Marginalisation, which the people of South East Nigeria lay claim to, whether it is accurate or mere perception, frames their approach to Nigerian politics. At the core, the feeling that the political state is not looking after the people drives agitation among some groups for

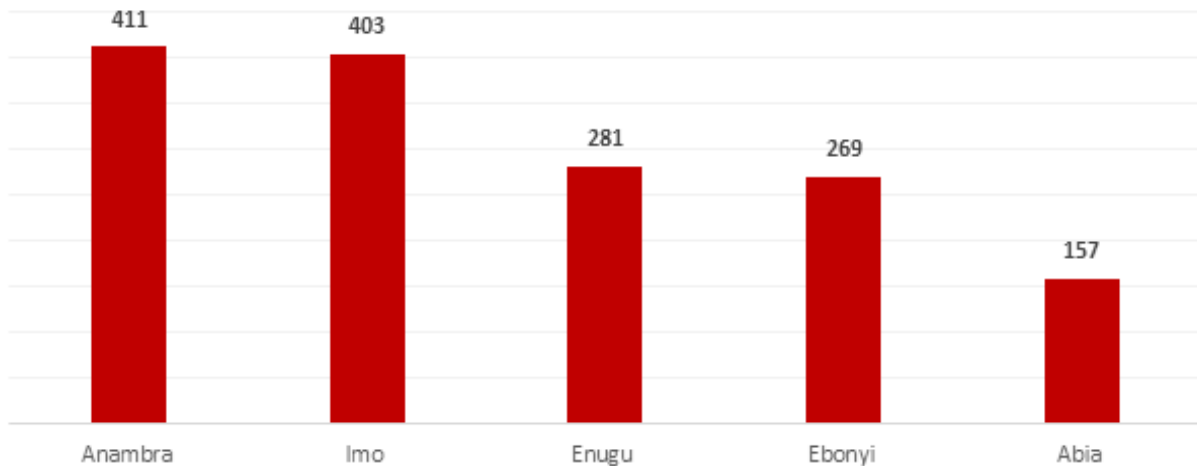
secession. In contrast, others recoil into silent rejection of the state, apathy and grief. In capturing the situation of injustice and the systematic growth of violence in the South East, a Nigerian lawmaker, [Hon. Abdulrazak Namdas](#), held three years ago that:

The non-implementation of the agreed three Rs (Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation) after the civil war worsened the plight of citizens in the South East. It retarded the economic growth of the region, exacerbated their poverty situation, created unemployment, zero windows of opportunity and a completely dislocated social and political consciousness of the people. The aftermath was the emergence of non-state actors like MASSOB, IPOB, Bakassi and a constant cry of marginalisation.

In addition to secessionist agitation and its accompanying violence, the other genres of violence in the South East are farmer-herder violence, kidnapping, assassination by unknown gunmen, occupation of some communities by persons who purport to be secessionist agitators, attack on state institutions such as electoral institutions, security institutions and other structures or properties that express the presence of the state like government buildings and vehicles. At the peak of the crises in 2021, 254 people were killed in 63 incidents of attacks in the first five months of 2021, with Ebonyi State recording 101 fatalities, Imo State, 60, Anambra, 37 and Abia 33 and Enugu 22 deaths. Over the same period, 16 police stations were burnt down, and a good number of the murdered persons were members of the Police force and soldiers. Within the past four years (June 2020 – October 2024), the South East states recorded a total of 1521 fatalities from violent conflicts. Anambra state was the most affected, with 411 fatalities, and Abia state was the least affected, with 157 fatalities. (See graph below)

South East: Fatality Trend Across States

Period: June 2020 - October 2024

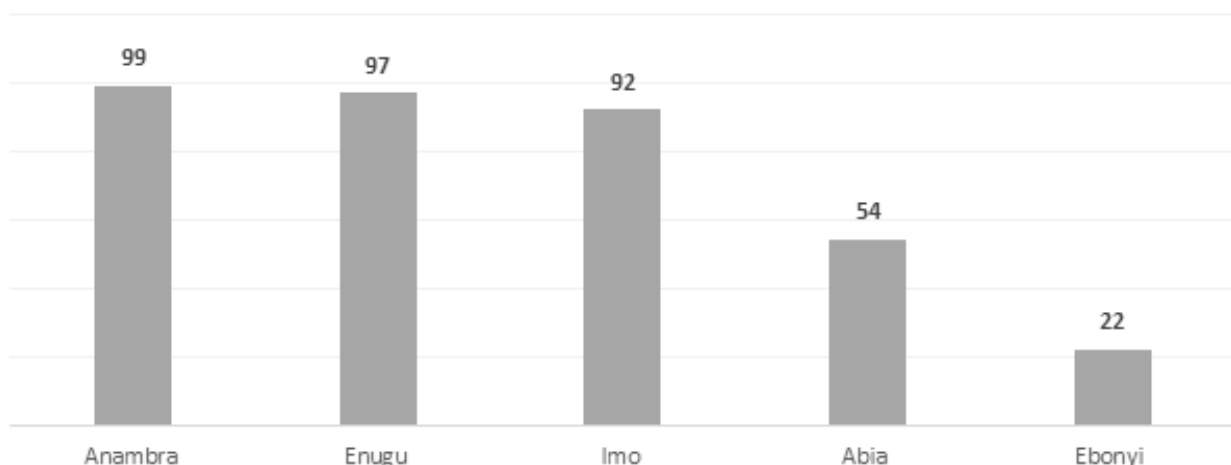


Source: Nextier Violent Conflicts Database

It was from July 30, 2021, that every Monday was set out compulsorily for everyone in the South East by Biafran agitators as a day for ghost town protest against the continued detention of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Also, [kidnappings](#), assassinations and murderous [cult gangs](#) remain active in the South East. In areas like [Orsu](#) and Amuro in Imo State, [Lilu in Ihiala Local Government](#), and Anambra State, there are pockets of camps whose members purport to be of the IPOB, even as IPOB denies these groups. Kidnapping still holds sway across the region. [In October 2022](#), University of Nigeria students and a politician were kidnapped along the Ugwogo – Opi Nsukka road. In [September 2023](#), 14 passengers travelling on the same route by bus were abducted. In late [October 2024](#), pockets of kidnapping where an unknown number of persons, including a lecturer, were kidnapped on that road, whose stretch is about 40 kilometres with not less than ten police checkpoints. According to the Nextier Violent Conflicts Database, there have been 364 kidnap victims in the South East over the last four years. Anambra State peaked with 99 kidnaps, closely followed by Enugu and Imo state with 97 and 92 kidnaps, respectively. (See graph below)

South East: Kidnapping Trend Across States

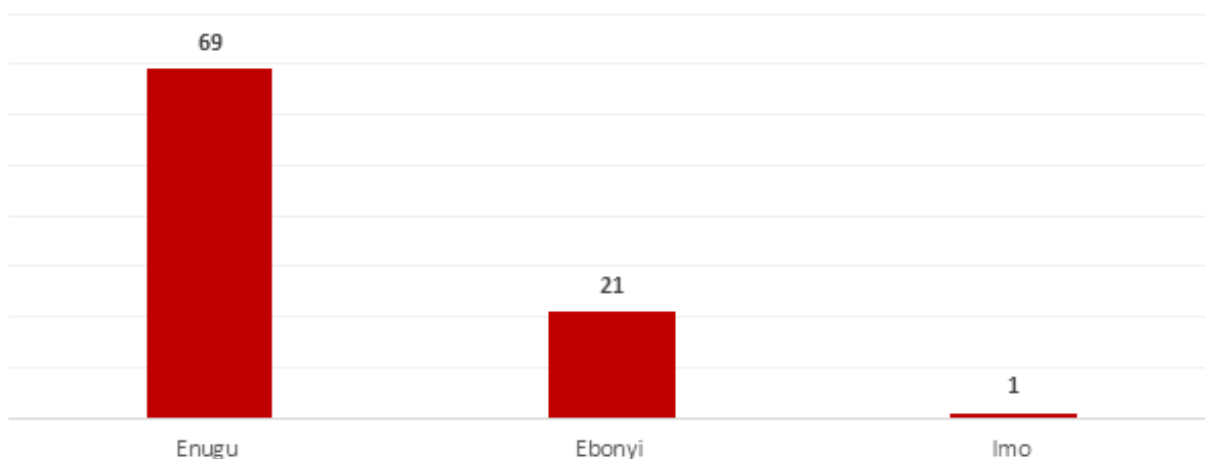
Period: June 2020 - October 2024



Source: Nextier Violent Conflicts Database

Regarding farmer-herder violence, a long chronicle of [violent activities of Fulani herdsmen](#) in the South East since 2016 ranges from mass murder in several communities across the region, invasion of farms and crop destruction, rape and kidnapping. In most of the incidences, including those in which the culprits were arrested, such as the ones that carried out the [Nimbo massacre in 2016](#), justice was never served as the perpetrators were set free. Also, the scale and statistics of fatalities from farmer-herder clashes across states in the South East to date sum up to 91 fatalities. (See graph below)

South East: Fatalites from Farmer-Herder Clashes Across States
 Period: June 2020- Octoer 2024



Source: Nextier Violent Conflicts Database

As conflicts and insecurity in the South East deepen, international development partners and the international community, including the United Nations and its agencies, seem unconcerned about South East Nigeria, especially by not funding or partnering with the Nigerian state for large and targeted peacebuilding programmes like in other parts of the country. One development partner interviewed during this report argued that “the International agencies and donor partners have joined in marginalising South East Nigeria, probably waiting for a full-blown crisis or war” (Personal Interview). Further examination shows that all major development partners, such as FCDO, USAID, The European Union, The UNDP, etc, have many ongoing peacebuilding, conflict and resilience programmes in other parts of the country but not in the

South East region. These include The North West Prevention Facility by UNDP, The SPRiNG (Strengthening Peace in Nigeria) targeting North West and North Central regions, Promoting Peace and Economic Development in North Central Nigeria by GIZ, Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Northeast Nigeria through Education, Economic Development and Social Change by UNESCO, etc.

Peacebuilding: Its Pillars and Promises for the South East

[Peacebuilding](#), which is more commonly associated with post-conflict situations and which, in that regard, refers to initiatives designed to prevent the eruption or return of armed conflicts, is not limited to post-conflict situations. Peacebuilding

helps to prevent violent conflicts, and the task of prevention can be categorised into [operational and structural prevention](#). Operational prevention is crisis-oriented and refers to political-diplomatic, economic sanctions, military interventions, and other practical preventive measures. Structural prevention has to do with democratic institution-building, relationship-building, prejudice reduction, power-sharing arrangements, reduction of social and economic inequalities, promotion of the rule of law, security sector reform, education and attention to social security. The above categorisation helps us distinguish peacebuilding in a post-conflict environment and a fragile social context. Thus, while every peacebuilding effort has political, social, economic, security and legal dimensions, their prevention focus may differ in some ways despite their shared focus area. For instance, in all peacebuilding environments, justice, inclusion, democracy, and the rule of law are crucial; they belong more to structural prevention than operational prevention.

Since understanding the issues of tension in the South East requires a focus on both physical and structural violence, peacebuilding in the region would necessarily entail both dimensions, but more on the structural since there are identifiable groups who openly contest against the nature of the political practice of the state as well and groups that nurse silent grief. For the agitating groups, the most vocal, which is the [IPOB](#), has its leader incarcerated, while a faction led by one Mr Simon Ekpa, who lives in Finland, is still constantly issuing orders for people to observe a 'sit-at-home' demonstration. In some instances, however, IPOB dissociates itself from the sit-at-home order, like the recent one on October 21 and 22nd, 2024, when it was purported that the group would test its

weapons. While agitators and criminal gangs disrupt the peace and economies of the region, governments within the area prefer to threaten citizens who comply with agitators' demands for fear of their safety. Persons who have been carelessly killed or had their properties destroyed for disobeying such order are hardly compensated or assisted by the state to get justice. Besides, NGOs do not consider these challenges an area of engagement. Yet, they are the only entities that can mediate the tension between citizens and states under this circumstance. The state needs to refine its strategy towards the South East, while development partners interested in conflict-related issues should open spaces of intervention in the region. Thus, we explore pathways to peacebuilding in the South East based on its unique security challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the issues of both physical and structural violence identified in the South East and the unsustainable solutions of the kinetic approach, we propose the following broader approaches that also take peacebuilding into account:

1. The situation in the South East calls for a peacebuilding programme, as in other parts of the country. Development agencies and partners, especially the United Nations, should consider the South East for special attention, like the North West and North East. Programmes like peace dialogue, community resilience, social cohesion, healing, and forgiveness will help the region, considering the Nigerian state's failure to implement the 3 RRRs after the civil war.
2. The need for dialogue in the tension between secessionist agitators and

the government is compelling. While conflict and insurgency may be overcome by military actions, they cannot be defeated by such actions. Dialogues pave the way for extracting particular commitments to peace. The case of insurgency in the North East is instructive. Apart from interventions like Safe Corridor, the crisis military force alone cannot effectively degrade the insurgency.

3. All the cases of physical invasion and mass murder in South East communities by herders remain sour points on how the affected communities view the government. They see the government as being tacitly supportive of the culprits and unsympathetic to the plights of the victims. Thus, different levels of psychosocial support and guarantees of protection reassurances need to be extended to them.
4. Women who have suffered rape on their farms or any other form of gender-based violence connected with the conflict need support. Fulani herdsmen raped some of the women; others were conscripted as comfort women by armed gangs within the region.
5. The relationship between Nigerian citizens and security forces could be better. The people of the South East feel a suffocating presence of security forces in checkpoints, not because the checkpoints are bad, but because the extortion and rights abuses that happen in them are concerning. Therefore, interventions are essential around the relationship between the security sector and citizens in the South East to curtail the coercive policing mode in the region.
6. A special security sector reform to combat kidnapping more effectively across the country and in the South East is a necessary policy direction.
7. Regarding communities occupied by gangs claiming to be agitators, the dialogue approach will support the government to distinguish between genuine agitators and criminals and take measures to rid the communities of criminals.
8. The government needs to focus on supporting employment creation, especially in supporting small businesses' growth and redirecting the energy of some young people who lack jobs and regard the government as the reason for their condition.

Conclusion

South East may not be witnessing open violence on the scale of what happens in northeast and northwest Nigeria. However, there are empirical referents to its claims of structural violence through state policies of neglect. This violence stretches to the neglect of remedies for communities and persons who have been subjected to injuries on a large scale, either by state actors or non-state armed actors. This condition continues to grow worse because both the government and the third sector have yet to see the South East as an area to implement peacebuilding measures to circumvent possible implosion in the future.

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Despite efforts of the Nigerian security agencies to decimate the insurgents, there remain some locations in the BAY States which together form the Northeast Belt of Insurgency, where the



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