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Beyond Displacement: Integrated Remedial Strategies for Forced Migration in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Forced migration is one of the most urgent humanitarian and development challenges in Northern Nigeria, where a convergence of armed conflict, rural banditry, herder-farmer clashes, and climate change has displaced over 3.6 million people. This study investigates the root causes, socio-economic impacts, institutional response gaps, and local coping strategies associated with displacement in the region. Using a mixed-methods approach including field surveys, focus group discussions, and stakeholder interviews across Benue, Borno, Zamfara, and Kaduna States, the research reveals the multidimensional drivers of displacement, notably Boko Haram insurgency, criminal banditry, land pressure, and environmental degradation.

The study exposes critical institutional shortcomings such as fragmented humanitarian coordination, inadequate funding, weak policy enforcement, and limited stakeholder inclusion. Despite these challenges, it highlights community resilience through self-help groups, women-led cooperatives, and faith-based trauma support. The paper advocates for a shift from emergency-focused interventions to integrated, rights-based strategies that emphasize peacebuilding, livelihood restoration, climate adaptation, and inclusive governance. By aligning with global frameworks such as the Kampala Convention and the UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees, the study calls for durable, development-oriented solutions to address both immediate needs and the structural roots of forced migration in Nigeria.

Keywords: Forced Migration, Displacement, Northern Nigeria, Boko Haram, Rural Banditry, Climate Change, IDPs, Policy Gaps, Human Security, Integrated Solutions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Forced migration is an escalating global crisis that significantly impacts vulnerable populations, undermines national development, and strains institutional resilience. Unlike voluntary migration which is often driven by economic opportunity or personal choice, forced migration is characterized by coercion, where individuals or groups are compelled to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, natural disasters, or other existential threats (UNHCR, 2022). The phenomenon is both a symptom and driver of instability, contributing to cycles of poverty, insecurity, and marginalization across fragile regions (IOM, 2023; Ferris & Donato, 2022).

Globally, the scale of displacement is unprecedented. As of 2024, over 117 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, comprising internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless individuals (UNHCR, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa is disproportionately affected, accounting for nearly 30% of the world's forcibly displaced population, with internal conflicts and environmental stressors being the principal drivers (IDMC, 2023; IOM, 2022).

Northern Nigeria has emerged as one of the epicenters of forced migration in West Africa. The region faces a confluence of destabilizing factors, including protracted insurgency by Boko Haram and ISWAP, escalating banditry in Zamfara,

Katsina, and Kaduna States, recurrent herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt, and climate-induced displacement resulting from desertification and Lake Chad shrinkage (IOM Nigeria, 2023; Obi & Ebiede, 2021; Okoli & Ugwu, 2022). As of late 2023, Nigeria recorded over 3.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), with over 80% located in the North-East and North-West geopolitical zones (IDMC, 2023; NEMA, 2023).

The root causes are multifaceted. Conflict-induced displacement in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States continues to be driven by terrorism, military counter-insurgency operations, and the destruction of rural livelihoods (UNDP Nigeria, 2022). In the North-West, criminal bandit groups and local militias have created a parallel crisis of insecurity, with thousands of rural communities abandoned due to mass abductions, killings, and extortion (Zenn, 2021; ACAPS, 2022). Additionally, environmental degradation exacerbated by climate change has diminished arable land and water sources, forcing pastoralist communities to migrate southward in search of resources, often clashing with settled farmers (Okoli & Atelhe, 2022; IPCC, 2022; UNCCD, 2023).

The impacts of this forced migration are extensive and multidimensional. Economically, displaced households suffer the loss of land, assets, and livelihoods, leading to long-term poverty traps (World Bank, 2022). Socially, displacement severs community networks, increases inter-group tensions, and weakens traditional governance structures (Adewuyi et al., 2023). Health-wise, IDPs face heightened exposure to epidemics, malnutrition, and mental health disorders, particularly in overcrowded and under-resourced displacement camps (MSF, 2023; WHO Nigeria, 2022). Moreover, women and girls are disproportionately affected, experiencing heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child marriage, and trafficking in displacement contexts (UNFPA, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023). Children are also at risk of educational discontinuity, with thousands unable to access safe learning spaces due to insecurity or lack of infrastructure (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023).

Previous government interventions, such as the Presidential Committee on the North-East Initiative (PCNI) and the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), have attempted to address the humanitarian crisis through infrastructure rehabilitation and livelihood restoration. However, challenges persist due to fragmented coordination, insufficient funding, poor community engagement, and security setbacks (NEDC Report, 2022; Okoli & Orinya, 2023).

This paper therefore seeks to go beyond displacement by proposing integrated remedial strategies that address both the immediate humanitarian needs and the structural drivers of forced migration in Northern Nigeria. These strategies include strengthening peacebuilding mechanisms, climate adaptation programs, gender-responsive protection systems, livelihood empowerment, and inclusive governance frameworks. Grounded in empirical evidence and local realities, this paper advocates for a holistic and context-sensitive approach to ending the cycle of displacement and fostering resilience among affected communities.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Forced migration is widely recognized as the coerced and involuntary movement of people from their habitual residences due to threats such as armed conflict, environmental disasters, persecution, or large-scale development projects (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014). Unlike voluntary migration, which is largely influenced by economic opportunity or personal aspiration, forced migration arises from the breakdown of safety, rights, and livelihoods. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) expands this concept to encompass internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless populations. In the Nigerian context, forced migration is overwhelmingly internal, and most displaced persons remain within the country's borders. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM Nigeria, 2023), the majority of displacements in Nigeria are sudden, cyclical, and prolonged, typically exacerbated by insecurity, poor institutional coordination, and a weak social safety net.

A review of the drivers of forced migration in Northern Nigeria reveals a complex interplay of conflict, governance failure, economic disruption, and environmental deterioration. Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency has emerged as the most significant trigger of mass displacement in the North-East. The group's violent attacks on schools, markets, religious

institutions, and civilian communities have uprooted millions across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States (Zenn, 2021). Military counterinsurgency efforts, while aimed at restoring order, have sometimes led to collateral displacement, as civilians flee anticipated conflict zones or get caught in crossfire (UNDP, 2022). In the North-West, rural banditry—marked by armed raids, cattle rustling, abductions, and the imposition of levies on rural communities—has become a major cause of internal displacement. States like Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, and Kaduna have witnessed widespread displacement as a result of these criminal insurgencies, often fueled by the collapse of rural policing and the proliferation of illegal arms (Okoli & Atelhe, 2022).

In the North-Central region, particularly in Benue and Nasarawa, longstanding farmer-herder conflicts have intensified in both scale and lethality. These intercommunal clashes are often linked to competition over land, dwindling water sources, and shifting migratory routes caused by environmental degradation. Ethnic and religious undertones often exacerbate the violence, transforming localized disputes into protracted cycles of reprisal killings and mass dislocations (Obioha, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2022). The growing intensity of such clashes underscores the failure of land-use governance and conflict mediation mechanisms, and further exposes civilians to displacement. Equally significant is the role of environmental change as a structural driver of forced migration. The drying up of Lake Chad, recurrent droughts, and desertification have rendered large swathes of the northern region ecologically unviable for farming and pastoralism. As a result, affected communities are compelled to migrate southward in search of sustainable livelihoods, sometimes encroaching into contested territories and triggering additional conflicts (IPCC, 2022; UNCCD, 2023; Okpara et al., 2021).

The theoretical underpinnings of forced migration in this context can be best understood through three interrelated frameworks. First, Galtung's (1969) Structural Violence Theory provides a lens to examine how systemic inequality, deprivation, and institutional neglect predispose populations to forced migration. Under this framework, violence is not only physical but also structural—manifesting in poverty, marginalization, and denial of access to essential services. Second, Political Ecology offers a nuanced approach to understanding how ecological degradation intersects with power asymmetries, shaping patterns of resource scarcity, land grabs, and social exclusion that ultimately lead to displacement (Watts, 2015). Third, the Human Security framework, as developed by the UNDP (1994), is particularly useful in highlighting how forced migration arises from failures in securing economic, food, health, personal, environmental, and political wellbeing. In Northern Nigeria, displacement is often the outcome of a breakdown across multiple dimensions of human security.

While Nigeria has developed policy instruments such as the activation of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the establishment of the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), current responses remain largely reactive and relief-oriented. Most interventions focus on the distribution of emergency aid—food, shelter, and medical supplies—while neglecting long-term rehabilitation. Studies have highlighted significant gaps in institutional coordination among federal, state, and local authorities, leading to duplication of efforts and inefficient resource use (Adewuyi et al., 2023). Furthermore, durable housing, livelihood reintegration programs, and mental health services are severely underdeveloped. The humanitarian architecture is also criticized for being gender-insensitive, failing to adequately account for the vulnerabilities of women, girls, and persons with disabilities, who face heightened risks of exploitation, sexual violence, and neglect (UNFPA, 2023).

Learning from global best practices offers opportunities for improving Nigeria's approach to forced migration. In countries like Colombia, Sudan, and Iraq—each grappling with complex internal displacement crises—governments and humanitarian actors have adopted comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategies that combine peacebuilding, transitional justice, livelihood support, and housing reconstruction. These countries have demonstrated the value of decentralizing response mechanisms, empowering local governments, and actively involving displaced persons in the planning and implementation of recovery efforts (IDMC, 2023; IOM, 2022). The success of these integrated responses lies not only in addressing the immediate needs of displaced persons but also in tackling the root causes of displacement through policy reform, community reconciliation, and climate resilience planning.

3.0 STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in selected regions across Northern Nigeria, a broad geopolitical zone encompassing 19 of Nigeria's 36 states. This region is the most affected by forced migration in the country, accounting for over 80% of the country's total internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of 2023 (IDMC, 2023; IOM Nigeria, 2023). The study particularly focused on four states of Borno, Zamfara, Kaduna, and Benue representing the North-East, North-West, and North-Central sub-regions respectively.

3.1 Geographic Context

- **Borno State:** Located in the North-East, Borno shares international borders with Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. It has been the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency since 2009, with Maiduguri as its capital. The state is largely Sahelian with a semi-arid climate, marked by seasonal rainfall, prolonged dry spells, and sparse vegetation.
- **Zamfara State:** Located in the North-West, Zamfara is characterized by extensive rural landscapes, savannah vegetation, and gold-bearing geological formations. The state has seen a surge in rural banditry, kidnappings, and communal violence, leading to massive displacement in recent years.
- **Kaduna State:** Often considered a transition zone between the Muslim-majority north and the Christian-dominated south, Kaduna has been a hotspot for ethno-religious violence, herder-farmer clashes, and armed attacks on rural communities. The state also serves as a critical administrative and military hub in the region.
- **Benue State:** Situated in North-Central Nigeria and known as the "Food Basket of the Nation," Benue has experienced recurrent and deadly herder-farmer conflicts, resulting in massive displacement and the destruction of livelihoods. It is characterized by tropical wet-and-dry climate conditions and rich agricultural land.

3.2 Demographic Characteristics

Northern Nigeria is home to diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Tiv, and Idoma are among the dominant ethnicities. Islam is the predominant religion in the North-East and North-West, while Christianity and traditional beliefs are more prevalent in parts of the Middle Belt. High population densities in urban centers like Maiduguri, Kaduna, and Makurdi contrast with depopulated rural areas affected by displacement and insecurity.

The region also has one of the highest poverty and illiteracy rates in Nigeria, with limited access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, particularly for women and children (NBS, 2022). These socio-economic vulnerabilities compound the effects of forced migration and slow the pace of reintegration and recovery.

3.3 Socio-Environmental Challenges

- **Security Breakdown:** Armed insurgency, rural banditry, and criminal violence have led to the abandonment of thousands of villages and towns.
- **Environmental Degradation:** Desert encroachment, drought, and land degradation are pushing herders southward, intensifying intercommunal conflicts.
- **Collapse of Rural Livelihoods:** Agriculture and livestock rearing, the mainstays of rural economies, have been disrupted, causing food insecurity and economic displacement.
- **Infrastructure Deficit:** Many affected communities lack roads, health centers, and basic water and sanitation facilities, impeding post-displacement recovery.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology was designed to capture the complexity and context-specific nature of forced displacement across Borno, Zamfara, Kaduna, and Benue States.

The study adopted a qualitative case study design supported by descriptive statistics. This approach was chosen to allow an in-depth understanding of the structural and proximate drivers of forced migration, the lived experiences of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the effectiveness of existing interventions. The study also applied a comparative analytical lens, drawing parallels between local responses and international best practices.

4.1 Sampling Technique and Respondent Selection

A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was used to select the study locations and respondents:

- Stage 1 involved the purposive selection of the four most affected states—Borno, Zamfara, Kaduna, and Benue.
- Stage 2 identified local government areas (LGAs) and IDP camps with the highest concentration of displaced persons, such as Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Anka LGA (Zamfara), Kajuru LGA (Kaduna), and Guma LGA (Benue).
- Stage 3 employed snowball sampling to identify key informants and participants for interviews and focus group discussions based on their involvement in or experience with forced migration.

The final sample included:

- 8 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with officials from NEMA, SEMA, NEDC, NGOs, security personnel, and local leaders.
- 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with IDPs, host communities, women's groups, and youth leaders (with gender and age diversity considered).
- 10 structured interviews with camp residents to gather qualitative insights into daily realities, coping mechanisms, and access to services.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

The study employed four primary data collection methods:

a. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with government officials, humanitarian actors, camp managers, and community leaders to understand institutional responses, policy implementation gaps, and local security dynamics.

b. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were held separately with men, women, and youth groups in IDP camps and host communities. These discussions explored perceptions of displacement causes, needs, access to social services, and suggested solutions. Sessions were moderated using a flexible guide to encourage open expression.

c. Field Observations

The researcher conducted site visits to camps and resettlement areas to observe infrastructure conditions, crowding, sanitation, livelihood activities, and community interactions.

d. Document Review

Secondary data were collected through a review of reports from UN agencies, Nigerian government agencies (e.g., NEMA, NBS, NHRC), non-governmental organizations, academic journals, and international development institutions. Key datasets included displacement figures, conflict tracking records, humanitarian response plans, and policy documents.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed and thematically analyzed using NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. Key themes such as causes of displacement, humanitarian challenges, gendered impacts, and policy gaps were identified. Triangulation of data from various sources enhanced the validity of findings.

Descriptive statistics from structured interviews and document reviews were analyzed using Microsoft Excel to generate summary tables and simple visualizations (e.g., distribution of IDPs by state, access to services, reported incidents of violence).

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Drivers of Forced Migration in Northern Nigeria

5.1.1 Insurgency and Terrorism

The Boko Haram insurgency, which erupted in 2009 in northeastern Nigeria, has evolved into one of the most enduring and destabilizing security threats in the Lake Chad Basin. Its violent tactics including mass abductions, indiscriminate killings, suicide bombings, and the destruction of entire villages have made it the single most potent driver of large-scale displacement in the North-East geopolitical zone. Field findings from this study, particularly from Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in camps such as Bakassi and Dalori in Maiduguri, Borno State, reaffirm that the insurgency has upended every aspect of social and economic life in the affected communities. Survivors recounted episodes of night-time raids where armed militants stormed homes, set buildings ablaze, slaughtered family members, and kidnapped women and children.

“We left our village in 2014. We moved again from Monguno to Maiduguri after Boko Haram attacked the camp we were in. It’s the third time now,” said a female IDP in Bakassi camp, echoing a common pattern of recurring displacement.

Such testimonies illustrate not only the scale of the crisis but also its cyclical nature. Many displaced persons have been uprooted multiple times, moving from one camp or host community to another due to continued attacks or insecurity. These “secondary” and even “tertiary” displacements highlight the persistent volatility of so-called “safe zones” and the failure of state security mechanisms to guarantee sustained protection (UNDP, 2022; IOM Nigeria, 2023).

According to IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (Round 44), as of late 2023, the North-East alone accounted for over 2.2 million IDPs, the majority concentrated in Borno State, with others spread across Adamawa and Yobe. This figure, however, underrepresents the true magnitude of displacement, as thousands remain unregistered, living informally with host families or in peripheral settlements without humanitarian oversight (IOM Nigeria, 2023). The insurgency has also generated cross-border displacement, with refugees fleeing into neighboring countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, thereby transforming it into a regional humanitarian emergency.

The Nigerian military has launched several operations such as Operation Lafiya Dole and Operation Hadin Kai—aimed at reclaiming territories from Boko Haram and its splinter faction, ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province). While these efforts have yielded territorial gains and disrupted insurgent supply chains, they have also led to unintended consequences, including displacement due to collateral damage, perceived military excesses, or fear of retaliatory attacks. Entire communities, anticipating renewed clashes, have preemptively fled their homes, often abandoning farmlands and assets.

This paradox reflects the double-edged nature of militarized counterinsurgency in displacement dynamics (UNDP Nigeria, 2022; Zenn, 2021).

Moreover, the psychological toll of insurgency-induced displacement is profound. In interviews, IDPs described persistent fear, anxiety, and trauma—many having witnessed the execution of loved ones or endured long treks through forests and rivers to reach urban safe havens. Women and girls, in particular, face heightened vulnerabilities, including sexual violence, forced marriage, and stigmatization, especially in cases where they were held hostage by insurgents and later rescued or escaped.

The collapse of basic services in insurgency-affected areas has further compounded the crisis. Dozens of schools, clinics, markets, and farmlands have been destroyed or rendered inaccessible. This not only undermines immediate survival but also erodes long-term development prospects, turning displacement into a protracted condition rather than a temporary emergency. Children born into this crisis—many now teenagers have never experienced stable schooling or community life, deepening generational trauma and exclusion.

5.1.2 Rural Banditry and Criminal Gangs

Rural banditry and violent criminality have emerged as potent drivers of internal displacement across North-West Nigeria, with Zamfara and Kaduna States representing the epicenters of this spiraling crisis. Unlike ideologically motivated insurgencies such as Boko Haram, rural banditry is largely rooted in criminal opportunism, resource predation, and the collapse of local governance. It manifests in the form of cattle rustling, mass abductions, extortion, sexual violence, and coordinated village raids—activities that have not only shattered rural economies but also eroded trust in the state's capacity to protect its citizens.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in Anka (Zamfara) and Birnin Gwari (Kaduna) revealed deeply disturbing patterns of violence. Participants recounted stories of communities being held hostage by heavily armed gangs who imposed levies, confiscated food supplies, and set homes ablaze. In many instances, entire villages were emptied overnight following threats or targeted killings. Survivors spoke of routine gunfire, daytime kidnappings, and the forced displacement of women and children into forests, where they lived for weeks before making it to IDP camps or urban slums.

“They came with motorbikes, over 50 of them, shooting everywhere... They took our cows and burned the grain silos. We couldn't even bury our dead,” – *Male FGD participant, Anka, Zamfara.*

These testimonies support the framing of rural banditry as the “criminalization of everyday survival,” particularly in ungoverned or under-governed rural spaces (Okoli & Atelhe, 2022). In these contexts, the absence of effective policing, the proliferation of arms, and the weakening of traditional authority have created a vacuum exploited by organized criminal networks. These gangs often establish parallel systems of taxation and coercion, turning entire regions into enclaves of fear, lawlessness, and displacement.

Empirical data and media reports corroborate these findings. In March 2024, an attack on Maradun LGA in Zamfara State left over 60 villagers dead, with survivors recounting how bandits stormed the village at night, looted homes, and killed anyone who resisted or attempted to flee. Similarly, in April 2023, coordinated raids in Giwa and Kajuru LGAs of Kaduna State resulted in widespread killings, arson, and the displacement of over 5,000 residents. These attacks, often underreported or minimized due to security fatigue and political hesitancy, point to a deeply entrenched crisis that continues to spread unchecked (ACAPS, 2024; SB Morgen, 2023).

Banditry-induced displacement differs from insurgency-related displacement in terms of its unpredictability and opportunistic character. Whereas insurgent movements often operate based on ideological objectives or territory control, bandit groups are typically motivated by immediate economic gain. However, the consequences are no less devastating. Displaced families lose not only physical shelter but also access to their farmlands, livestock, markets, schools, and kinship

networks. In many cases, communities that once thrived on subsistence agriculture are left entirely barren, with their inhabitants now dependent on overcrowded camps or precarious urban settlements with little or no support infrastructure.

Moreover, women and girls bear a disproportionate burden in banditry-related displacement. Numerous cases of gender-based violence—including rape, forced marriage, and abduction have been reported. Some are taken as "wives" by the bandits, while others are exchanged for ransom or subjected to sexual exploitation during captivity. The humanitarian response remains largely inadequate, with limited psychosocial services available and survivors often facing stigma upon reintegration.

Compounding the crisis is the increasing militarization of response efforts. While the Nigerian government has launched security operations such as Operation Hadarin Daji and Operation Forest Sanity, these efforts have yielded limited success and, in some cases, have led to further civilian displacement due to indiscriminate raids or clashes between the military and armed groups. Communities often express skepticism toward security forces, citing delayed response times, selective protection, and even allegations of complicity or corruption.

The humanitarian consequences of rural banditry are far-reaching. As thousands flee their homes, the strain on IDP camps, host communities, and local infrastructure intensifies. In Zamfara alone, an estimated 500,000 people have been displaced by bandit-related violence as of early 2024 (IOM Nigeria, 2024). Many live without access to clean water, medical care, or education, while humanitarian actors face access restrictions due to insecurity or poor coordination.

5.1.3 Farmer-Herder Conflicts and Land Pressure

In the Middle Belt states of Nigeria most notably Benue, Nasarawa, and parts of Southern Kaduna recurrent conflicts between nomadic herders and sedentary farming communities have become one of the most persistent and deadly sources of forced migration. These clashes, often framed as disputes over grazing routes and farmland access, have evolved into ethno-religious and identity-based violence, resulting in mass killings, destruction of livelihoods, and protracted displacement. The tension is fueled by competing land use systems, population growth, environmental degradation, and governance failures, with neither side feeling adequately protected or represented by state institutions.

In Benue State, particularly within the Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer-West LGAs, over 70% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been displaced due to farmer-herder violence, as confirmed by field reports and local government data. These conflicts typically begin with disputes over trespass or crop destruction but quickly escalate into coordinated reprisal attacks, often involving the use of automatic weapons, arson, and sexual violence. Affected communities report repeated patterns of displacement, returning after a period of calm only to be attacked again, often with greater ferocity.

The Yelewata massacre of June 13–14, 2025, offers a stark illustration of the brutality and displacement associated with this crisis. Armed herdsman launched a well-coordinated night attack on the Catholic mission and open-air market where displaced persons from earlier attacks were sheltering. According to Amnesty International (2025), over 150 civilians—including women, children, and the elderly—were killed in the attack, while Reuters (2025) reports that survivors were forced to flee through the forests, with some recounting how bodies were piled and burned in makeshift mass graves. Homes and food stores were razed, and the local church was desecrated, signifying not only territorial conquest but a symbolic dismantling of communal resilience.

"I am weak. I am broken. My wife and four children were killed while I was trying to save our goats," a grieving farmer told journalists shortly after the incident (Reuters, 2025).

Just weeks before, in May 2025, a coordinated series of attacks across Tyolaha, Tse-Ubiam, and Ahume communities led to the deaths of at least 42 people and displaced thousands. These attacks followed the same pattern—midnight raids, torching of houses, targeted executions, and the destruction of farmland during harvest season (The Guardian, 2025). These systematic patterns of violence have led many human rights observers and researchers to describe the situation as "ethnic

cleansing by attrition”—a slow, calculated strategy of depopulating valuable agricultural lands through fear, trauma, and repeated displacement (CSW, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Climate change is a critical exacerbating factor in this dynamic. The desertification of northern Nigeria and the shrinkage of Lake Chad have significantly altered the migratory patterns of nomadic herders, pushing them further south in search of water and pasture (Okpara et al., 2021). As these herders move into the agriculturally fertile Middle Belt, the absence of pre-established grazing routes and inadequate enforcement of land-use laws contribute to increasingly violent confrontations with host communities. The UNCCD (2023) warns that without major investments in climate adaptation and land restoration, environmental pressures will continue to push mobile pastoralists into contested spaces, inflaming intercommunal tensions.

Furthermore, these conflicts are often aggravated by the absence of effective dispute resolution mechanisms. State and federal institutions have repeatedly failed to provide timely or impartial intervention, while law enforcement agencies are under-resourced or reluctant to act especially when powerful interests are implicated. Traditional rulers and local peace committees, once effective in de-escalating communal disputes, have been weakened or sidelined by political manipulation and militarization.

The gendered dimension of this conflict is also profound. Women and girls in affected communities face gender-based violence, including rape, abduction, and domestic enslavement. Many are widowed or orphaned, forced into early marriage or prostitution for survival. Yet, their voices remain largely excluded from post-conflict dialogue or compensation processes. In the aftermath of the Yelewata and Ahume attacks, many female survivors were left without shelter, food, or psychosocial support, pointing to glaring gaps in humanitarian response mechanisms.

5.1.4 Environmental Degradation and Climate Displacement

While armed conflict remains the primary trigger of forced migration in Northern Nigeria, there is growing evidence that environmental degradation is increasingly becoming a structural and silent driver of displacement, particularly among pastoral and agrarian communities. Environmental changes—especially desertification, prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, soil erosion, and the progressive shrinking of Lake Chad—are rendering traditional livelihoods unsustainable and pushing populations to migrate, not out of fear of violence, but out of ecological necessity.

Field findings from Ngala, Kukawa, and Dikwa in Borno State reveal that many displaced pastoralists and farmers were not directly fleeing insurgent violence but were driven out by the collapse of water systems, pasturelands, and crop yields. In Kukawa, a young Fulani herder explained:

“We didn’t run from war. We ran from hunger and the death of our cattle.” – *Young herder, Kukawa IDP site*

This narrative illustrates the emerging phenomenon of eco-displacement a form of forced migration where environmental stress erodes the viability of livelihoods, disrupts food security, and compels movement in search of more habitable areas. For many northern communities, particularly nomadic herders, water scarcity and the decimation of grasslands have undermined the foundations of their cultural and economic existence.

The shrinking of Lake Chad, which has lost over 90% of its surface area since the 1960s, has had catastrophic effects on the surrounding populations. Once a major source of water and fish for over 30 million people across Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, the lake has steadily receded due to climate variability, dam construction, and unsustainable water use. Its decline has triggered the collapse of irrigation systems, fishery industries, and grazing reserves forcing communities to relocate or compete more aggressively for increasingly scarce resources (IPCC, 2022; UNCCD, 2023).

This environmentally driven migration often has cascading social and security implications. As pastoralists migrate southward in search of viable grazing land and water sources, they increasingly encroach upon settled farming communities in the Middle Belt and North-Central zones. This southward drift, driven by climate-induced ecological stress, contributes

to the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts, further complicating the dynamics of displacement in Nigeria. What begins as an environmental survival strategy becomes entangled in territorial contestation, ethnic tensions, and intergroup violence, reinforcing displacement in both directions (Okpara et al., 2021).

Moreover, climate-induced migration in Northern Nigeria is not evenly distributed. Vulnerable groups such as women, children, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected. Women, in particular, face increased burdens due to their role in water and firewood collection, which now requires longer treks due to resource depletion. Many girls are forced to drop out of school to support household survival, while families facing ecological collapse may resort to early child marriages as a coping mechanism.

Despite the magnitude of the crisis, environmental displacement remains under-recognized in policy circles. Nigeria's disaster risk reduction and displacement management frameworks are heavily focused on conflict and do not adequately incorporate climate change adaptation or resilience building. The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) and the Nigeria Erosion and Watershed Management Project (NEWMAP) have implemented localized interventions, but these efforts remain fragmented, underfunded, and detached from broader displacement response planning.

International frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the African Union's Kampala Convention, and the UNHCR Agenda for Climate Action all emphasize the need to recognize and address climate-induced migration as a distinct and growing challenge. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2022) warns that the Sahel region including Northern Nigeria is particularly vulnerable to compound risks arising from climate change, food insecurity, water stress, and weak governance, all of which heighten the likelihood of migration and displacement.

5.1.4 Environmental Degradation and Climate Displacement

While armed conflict remains the most visible and immediate driver of forced migration in Northern Nigeria, a quieter but equally devastating force is shaping displacement patterns across the region: environmental degradation. Increasingly, stressors such as persistent drought, desert encroachment, declining soil fertility, deforestation, erratic rainfall patterns, and the shrinking of Lake Chad are acting as long-term structural drivers of migration, especially among vulnerable pastoral and agrarian populations.

In informal settlements around Ngala, Kukawa, and Dikwa areas formerly known for their fertile grazing plains and water accessibility, field reports and focus group discussions revealed that many displaced persons had not fled direct violence, but rather the gradual collapse of their environmental support systems. These were families mostly herders who abandoned their ancestral routes not because of insurgent attacks, but because cattle were dying from thirst and starvation, and the once-reliable sources of water had disappeared.

"We didn't run from war. We ran from hunger and the death of our cattle," said a young Fulani herder at the Kukawa IDP site.

This account echoes a growing body of scientific evidence predicting a surge in climate-induced displacement across the Sahel region. According to the IPCC (2022), the Lake Chad Basin is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, facing severe ecological degradation and high levels of livelihood dependency on climate-sensitive sectors. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD, 2023) warns that without urgent investments in land restoration, water conservation, and adaptive infrastructure, migration will become a dominant coping strategy for millions across West and Central Africa.

In Nigeria, the progressive shrinkage of Lake Chad by over 90% since the 1960s has had profound consequences for water access, fishing, irrigation, and seasonal cattle migration. Pastoralist groups from Borno, Yobe, and northern Adamawa have been compelled to move further south in search of viable rangelands, often encroaching upon settled farmlands and triggering land-use conflicts, particularly in the Middle Belt and North-Central states. What begins as ecological stress

often transforms into social tension, eventually escalating into violent confrontation and retaliatory displacement. Thus, environmental displacement is not isolated—it is deeply intertwined with the broader dynamics of herder-farmer conflicts, communal clashes, and economic migration.

Moreover, the gendered implications of environmental displacement are particularly severe. As water points dry up and firewood becomes scarce, women and girls bear the increased burden of walking longer distances to secure basic household resources. This not only contributes to school dropouts and child marriage but also exposes women to higher risks of gender-based violence along remote collection routes. In many climate-affected communities, women have been forced into survival strategies such as transactional labor or migration into urban centers, often under exploitative conditions.

Despite the scale of the threat, policy and institutional responses to climate-induced displacement in Nigeria remain weak and fragmented. National frameworks for disaster risk reduction and environmental protection, such as the Climate Change Act (2021) and NESREA's sectoral guidelines, seldom integrate displacement risk mapping or mobility adaptation strategies. Humanitarian agencies tend to categorize IDPs primarily as "conflict-affected," overlooking those displaced by creeping environmental collapse, thereby excluding them from formal assistance programs.

Global frameworks offer models for more integrated responses. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), and the African Union's Kampala Convention all emphasize the importance of recognizing environmental and slow-onset disasters as legitimate drivers of displacement. Nigeria's adoption and domestication of these instruments must go beyond token ratification; it requires operationalizing climate-smart land governance, adaptive livestock management, dry-season irrigation systems, and early warning mechanisms for ecological collapse.

5.2 Socio-Economic Impacts of Forced Migration

5.2.1 Economic Disruption and Livelihood Collapse

One of the most immediate and enduring consequences of displacement is the collapse of livelihoods. Displaced persons often flee with minimal possessions, leaving behind farms, livestock, tools, and even access to cooperatives or market networks. Interviews conducted in Guma and Agatu LGAs of Benue revealed that more than 60% of respondents previously engaged in subsistence or commercial farming are now unemployed, underemployed, or fully dependent on food aid and irregular income-generating activities such as petty trading and firewood collection.

The destruction of food markets and stored produce in the Yelewata and Tyolaha attacks not only eliminated sources of income but also deepened food insecurity and broke the link between production and consumption chains in host communities. These findings corroborate Amnesty International (2025) and AP News (2025) accounts, which note that displaced farmers often watch helplessly as harvests rot in conflict zones they can no longer access.

This aligns with World Bank (2022) analysis, which estimates that displaced households in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria experience a 45–60% drop in income within the first three months of migration. Without sustainable economic recovery programs, many IDPs fall into chronic poverty traps from which recovery becomes increasingly unlikely.

5.2.2 Gender-Based Violence and Women's Vulnerabilities

Displacement disproportionately affects women and girls, exposing them to heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Across both formal and informal IDP settlements, female respondents narrated distressing episodes of rape, coercion, survival sex, and forced early marriage. The breakdown of traditional protective structures such as extended family networks, community elders, and religious institutions has left displaced women highly vulnerable to exploitation by security forces, fellow IDPs, and even humanitarian personnel.

In Guma LGA, survivors of the Yelewata massacre recounted abductions during the attack, followed by sexual assault while in flight or in makeshift shelters. Others reported that poverty and hunger compelled them or their families to exchange sex for food, shelter, or protection, particularly in camps with minimal oversight.

This is consistent with findings from UNFPA (2023) and Amnesty International (2023), which document widespread SGBV across IDP camps in Borno, Benue, and Zamfara States. These reports stress that displacement in Northern Nigeria is undergoing a feminization, whereby women not only make up the majority of the displaced population but also bear the brunt of socio-economic and protection vulnerabilities. Yet, gender-sensitive frameworks remain grossly underdeveloped or underfunded within Nigeria's humanitarian coordination system.

5.2.3 Health and Mental Wellbeing

The public health implications of forced displacement are acute and multifaceted. Camps are often overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and lack basic health infrastructure. Field observations in camps near Makurdi (Benue) and Maiduguri (Borno) revealed that most IDP settlements lacked permanent health clinics, and where clinics existed, they were either poorly stocked or lacked trained personnel.

Malaria, typhoid fever, respiratory infections, and malnutrition were among the most common illnesses reported. Waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery were also prevalent, especially during the rainy season, due to poor sanitation and limited access to clean water. For many, treatment was either delayed or unavailable, increasing mortality rates especially among children under five.

Equally troubling is the mental health crisis affecting displaced populations. Many IDPs suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and grief, having witnessed or survived traumatic attacks, lost family members, or endured long journeys under harsh conditions. Unfortunately, psychosocial support services are rare, and mental health remains stigmatized in many host communities.

WHO Nigeria (2022) estimates that only 12% of IDP camps in the North-East have access to functional health clinics, while Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, 2023) emphasizes the urgent need for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive mental health services in displacement settings.

5.2.4 Educational Disruption

Perhaps one of the most tragic consequences of displacement is the widespread disruption of education, particularly for children and youth. Many displaced families lack the financial capacity, documentation, or physical access to re-enroll their children in school. In most IDP camps, makeshift learning centers are overcrowded, lack trained teachers, and operate without chairs, learning materials, or adequate shelter from the elements.

Some children have missed three to five consecutive academic years, with no clear path to re-entry. Others, especially boys, have turned to informal labor such as hawking, scavenging, or motorcycle transport (okada) to support their families, while many girls have dropped out permanently due to early marriage or domestic burdens.

"My son was in JSS 2 when we fled. Now he's 17 and he has not gone back to school," said a displaced mother in Makurdi.

The UNICEF Nigeria (2023) report estimates that over 60% of displaced children in Northern Nigeria are currently out of school, a statistic that not only threatens their individual futures but also compromises national development and stability. Prolonged educational disruption increases the risk of child recruitment into armed groups, engagement in criminal activity, and the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty.

5.3 Gaps in Institutional Response and Policy Implementation

5.3.1 Fragmented Humanitarian Coordination

One of the most frequently cited challenges by key informants across Borno, Benue, and Zamfara States is the lack of coherent coordination among humanitarian actors. The multiplicity of institutions ranging from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs), the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), to UN agencies, faith-based organizations, and international NGOs has led to duplication of roles, overlapping interventions, and, in many cases, resource misallocation.

Some internally displaced persons (IDPs) reported receiving redundant food aid packages from multiple organizations within the same week, while neighboring camps went without assistance for extended periods. This reflects the absence of a centralized beneficiary tracking and distribution system, which would allow real-time needs assessment, data sharing, and coordinated delivery (Adewuyi et al., 2023).

The Humanitarian Coordination Task Team (HCTT) established under the UN-OCHA framework has had limited success in harmonizing responses due to weak institutional buy-in and poor sub-national implementation. As such, efforts to mainstream a “cluster approach” often collapse at the point of state-level execution, leading to geographical inequality and service gaps.

5.3.2 Limited Funding and Bureaucratic Bottlenecks

Another critical institutional gap is inadequate and inconsistent funding, compounded by lengthy bureaucratic processes that delay the disbursement and utilization of available resources. Although Nigeria has established budgetary allocations for displacement and disaster response under the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and through the NEDC, field evidence suggests that much of this funding is either delayed or diverted.

A NEMA official interviewed in Abuja lamented that “funds meant for durable solutions are frequently tied up in administrative red tape or politicized through state-level rivalry.” This has resulted in short-term, stop-gap interventions rather than sustainable support systems. Shelter provision, for instance, often takes the form of temporary tents that degrade within months, with no follow-up on permanent resettlement or housing reconstruction.

This chronic underfunding is also linked to Nigeria’s low domestic revenue mobilization, compounded by oil revenue volatility, debt servicing obligations, and competing national priorities. As such, critical aspects such as psychosocial support, legal aid, post-conflict reconciliation, and livelihood restoration remain underfunded or altogether excluded from official programming.

5.3.3 Lack of Durable Solutions Framework

Despite the scale and protracted nature of displacement in Northern Nigeria, the country lacks a comprehensive Durable Solutions Framework aligned with international best practices. Most interventions are geared toward emergency response such as food distribution, health outreaches, and temporary shelters rather than long-term recovery, reintegration, or return.

Unlike countries such as Colombia or Iraq that have developed multi-sectoral roadmaps for displacement recovery, Nigeria has not fully domesticated key international frameworks such as the Kampala Convention on the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, which it ratified in 2012 but has struggled to implement meaningfully (IDMC, 2023).

There is also limited investment in transitional housing, land allocation, skills acquisition, or climate-adaptive livelihood opportunities. In many host communities, IDPs continue to live in camps for 5–8 years with no realistic path to return, relocation, or reintegration. The failure to move beyond emergency aid undermines self-reliance and entrenches a dependency syndrome, especially among youth.

5.3.4 Inadequate Stakeholder Inclusion and Local Participation

A recurring theme in focus group discussions with displaced populations is the lack of consultation and agency in decision-making processes. Policies around camp closure, relocation, and resettlement are often made without the participation of IDPs themselves, leading to resistance, resentment, and implementation failure.

Women, children, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and ethnic minorities are particularly excluded from formal governance structures in displacement settings. Despite the fact that women constitute the majority of the displaced, they are rarely represented in camp leadership or planning processes. This undermines principles of inclusive governance and rights-based protection, further marginalizing vulnerable groups.

In Agatu and Guma LGAs, displaced persons lamented that they only heard about relocation plans “from the radio or politicians,” with no avenues for grievance redress, feedback, or participatory planning. This top-down approach contradicts the participatory ideals enshrined in global guidelines such as the Sphere Standards (2018) and the UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity Policy (2018).

5.3.5 Weak Legal and Institutional Frameworks

While Nigeria has various legal instruments such as the National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons (2012 draft) and provisions within the National Human Rights Commission Act the lack of enforcement mechanisms, limited awareness, and weak inter-agency coordination mean that these frameworks remain largely symbolic.

For example, the IDP Policy is yet to be passed into law by the National Assembly, making it a non-binding reference tool rather than an enforceable framework. This legislative inertia, coupled with poor data management, low technical capacity, and frequent turnover of government personnel, prevents institutional memory and continuity in displacement response.

Moreover, there is limited accountability for human rights violations within camps and host communities, including cases of exploitation, abuse by security agents, and arbitrary evictions. Mechanisms for reporting violations or accessing legal aid are virtually nonexistent, leaving many displaced persons without redress or protection.

6.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Strengthen Community-Based Security and Early Warning Systems

- Establish decentralized, multi-stakeholder early warning networks at the LGA and ward levels, incorporating local leaders, women, youth groups, and vigilante committees.
- Deploy rapid-response security units in high-risk areas such as Guma, Anka, and Birnin Gwari to deter attacks and protect IDP settlements.
- Enhance intelligence coordination between security agencies (military, police, NSCDC) and community-based informants to anticipate and prevent mass atrocities like the June 2025 Yelewata killings.

Rationale: Many attacks occur despite prior warnings. Community-led surveillance backed by state security can break the cycle of reactive response (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Amnesty International, 2023).

6.2 Promote Durable and Inclusive Livelihood Restoration

- Provide start-up capital and vocational training to displaced persons, especially women and youth, in agriculture, tailoring, ICT, and artisan trades.
- Establish cooperative financing schemes (e.g., IDP-led microcredit groups) to promote economic independence and reduce dependency on aid.

- Ensure access to arable land and tools for returning farmers under transparent and secure frameworks negotiated with host communities.

Rationale: Over 60% of displaced persons are economically inactive due to loss of livelihood. Economic reintegration is vital to post-displacement recovery (World Bank, 2022; NEDC, 2023).

6.3 Strengthen Psychosocial and Mental Health Support Services

- Scale up trauma-focused counseling programs through mobile mental health units and community health workers in camps and host areas.
- Train IDP leaders, teachers, and clergy in psychological first aid and gender-sensitive trauma management.
- Integrate mental health into primary healthcare services in IDP-hosting facilities with support from WHO and MSF.

Rationale: Widespread trauma from massacres (e.g., Yelewata 2025) affects community cohesion and mental stability. Healing is a prerequisite for reintegration and peacebuilding (WHO, 2022; MSF, 2023).

6.4 Expand Education and Child Protection Interventions

- Rehabilitate temporary learning spaces in IDP camps and provide teacher stipends, uniforms, and feeding programs.
- Develop catch-up learning initiatives for out-of-school IDP children and youth, using mobile classrooms and radio-based education.
- Enforce anti-child labour and child marriage laws, especially in camp environments, through regular monitoring by social welfare departments and NGOs.

Rationale: Over 60% of displaced children in Northern Nigeria are out of school, perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023).

6.5 Ensure Justice, Accountability, and Protection of Rights

- Establish mobile courts and special tribunals to investigate and prosecute mass killings, land grabbing, and sexual violence.
- Document IDP grievances and rights violations through legal aid desks in camps, run by civil society in partnership with NHRC and Ministry of Justice.
- Domesticated and enforce the Kampala Convention on IDP rights in all Northern Nigerian states.

Rationale: The continued impunity surrounding violent displacement (e.g., no arrests after the Yelewata massacre) undermines rule of law and fuels future violence (CSW, 2025; NHRC, 2022).

6.6 Foster Inclusive Governance and Participation

- Institutionalize IDP representation in camp committees, LGA peace councils, and state emergency planning boards.
- Mainstream women, youth, and PWDs in displacement-related planning, particularly in camp design, relocation, and livelihood programs.

- Improve donor coordination platforms (e.g., UN clusters, Nigeria Humanitarian Fund) to align state, federal, and non-state actors on shared goals.

Rationale: Participatory governance enhances accountability and local ownership, increasing the sustainability of solutions (Adewuyi et al., 2023; IOM Nigeria, 2023).

7.0 CONCLUSION

Forced migration in Northern Nigeria is driven by a convergence of insecurity, environmental stress, and weak governance. This study demonstrates that displacement is no longer a temporary humanitarian issue but a protracted crisis affecting livelihoods, education, mental health, and human dignity. The mass killings in Yelewata and other areas illustrate the failure of early warning systems and the urgent need for protection and accountability.

Addressing this crisis requires moving beyond emergency responses toward integrated, community-driven, and rights-based strategies. Livelihood restoration, peacebuilding, climate adaptation, gender protection, and inclusive governance must be central to any lasting solution. Nigeria must fulfill its obligations under the Kampala Convention and align responses with the SDGs and global best practices.

Ultimately, the future of displaced populations depends not just on aid, but on justice, empowerment, and systemic reform. Only then can Northern Nigeria shift from cycles of displacement to pathways of recovery and resilience.

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