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## FROM RESTIVENESS TO ORGANISED CRIMES: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR PEACE BUILDING IN THE NORTHEAST, NIGERIA

By

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigated the relationship between youth vulnerability and participation in organized criminal activities while exploring communication-driven empowerment strategies capable of promoting youth participation in peace building in Northeast Nigeria. The research was anchored on the complementary insights of the Frustration–Aggression Theory and the Relative Deprivation Theory. The study utilized secondary data from Nigeria Watch Programmed, a systematically curated database of violent incidents across Nigeria from 1998 to 2025. Verified incident records relating to insurgency attacks, banditry, armed robbery, communal violence, and kidnappings were extracted for Borno State, Adamawa State, and Yobe State covering the period 2015–2024. Data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and trend analysis, while supplementary indicators from the National Bureau of Statistics were used for triangulation. The findings reveal that youths constitute a significant demographic within organized criminal and violent networks in the region, largely driven by unemployment, poverty, peer influence, ethnic tensions, environmental pressures, and manipulative political communication. The study further establishes that strategic communication interventions can significantly redirect youthful energy toward constructive civic participation and sustainable peace building. The study concludes that if the structural conditions that fuel youth frustration and perceived deprivation are not deliberately addressed, organized criminality may become progressively normalized among younger generations, thereby deepening the cycle of insecurity in the region. The study therefore recommends coordinated youth empowerment programmes, improved socio-economic opportunities, and deliberate peace-oriented communication strategies as critical measures for transforming youth restiveness into productive social participation in Northeast Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication Strategies, Organized Crime, Peace Building, Relative Deprivation, Youth Empowerment, Youth Restiveness

### INTRODUCTION

Across the world, the relationship between youth population dynamics, unemployment, and social stability has attracted significant scholarly attention. In many developing societies, the youth population constitutes a large demographic bloc whose productive engagement is crucial for economic development and social order. When this demographic advantage is not effectively harnessed

through education, employment, and social inclusion, it may transform into a destabilizing force capable of fueling social unrest, crime, and violent extremism (World Bank, 2020). Scholars have therefore consistently argued that youth empowerment—through employment opportunities, skill acquisition, and civic engagement—remains one of the most effective

instruments for preventing violence and promoting sustainable peace in fragile societies (Urdal, 2012; UNDP, 2017).

Nigeria exemplifies this demographic paradox. With one of the largest youth populations in Africa, young people constitute a substantial proportion of the country's labour force and social structure. According to national demographic estimates, individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 account for a significant share of Nigeria's population, making youth development a critical policy concern (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). Despite this demographic advantage, youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistent challenges in the country. Structural economic inequalities, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and inadequate policy implementation have limited the ability of the Nigerian economy to absorb its rapidly expanding youth population into productive sectors (Okafor, 2011; World Bank, 2020). As a result, many young people remain economically marginalized and socially excluded.

Several theoretical perspectives link youth marginalization with social instability. The frustration–aggression hypothesis suggests that prolonged deprivation and blocked opportunities may generate frustration which can manifest in aggression or deviant behavior (Dollard et al., 1939). Similarly, relative deprivation theory explains that when individuals perceive a wide gap between their expectations and actual socio-economic realities, the likelihood of social unrest and violent mobilization increases (Gurr, 1970). Within such contexts, unemployed and marginalized youths may become susceptible to recruitment by criminal networks, insurgent movements, or extremist groups that promise economic incentives, identity, or purpose.

These dynamics are particularly visible in fragile and conflict-affected regions where state presence and economic opportunities are limited. In several parts of the world, youth unemployment has been empirically associated with increased participation in organized crime, militancy, and insurgency (Urdal, 2012). In conflict-affected societies, unemployed youths may also become instruments of violence for political actors or criminal organizations that exploit their vulnerabilities. Consequently, contemporary peace-building strategies increasingly emphasize youth

empowerment as a central component of conflict prevention and stabilization (UNDP, 2017).

Nigeria's Northeast region represents one of the most prominent examples of these interrelated challenges. The region, comprising the states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, has experienced prolonged security challenges over the past two decades. These challenges include violent extremism, insurgency, communal conflicts, banditry, and other forms of organized crime. The emergence and expansion of extremist groups such as Boko Haram and its splinter factions significantly altered the security architecture of the region and attracted global attention (Agbiboa, 2013). The insurgency has led to massive displacement, destruction of infrastructure, disruption of livelihoods, and erosion of social institutions.

The security crisis reached a critical stage in 2013 when the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency in the three Northeast states following the expansion of insurgent attacks and the collapse of civil authority in several local government areas. Although sustained military operations have reduced the territorial control previously exercised by insurgent groups, the region continues to experience sporadic attacks, criminal activities, and social instability (International Crisis Group, 2020). Beyond insurgency, other security concerns in the region include rural banditry, cattle rustling, farmer–herder conflicts, kidnapping, and illicit trafficking of arms and narcotics across poorly monitored borders.

Scholarly literature suggests that organized crime in the region is facilitated by a combination of structural and environmental factors. These include weak border governance, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, poverty, limited state presence, and the spillover effects of conflicts in neighboring countries such as Libya and Mali (Nextier, 2022). The availability of illicit weapons and the expansion of transnational criminal networks have created opportunities for criminal enterprises ranging from arms trafficking and drug smuggling to kidnapping and extortion.

Within this context, young people constitute a significant segment of those affected by and involved in the dynamics of insecurity. Many youths in the Northeast face limited access to quality education, employment opportunities, and economic resources due to the prolonged conflict

and destruction of local economies. The resulting socio-economic vulnerability increases the likelihood of youth participation in criminal activities or insurgent movements (Mercy Corps, 2016). Empirical studies on violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin have identified unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion as important factors influencing youth recruitment into extremist groups (UNDP, 2017; Barkindo, 2016).

The relationship between youth vulnerability and violent recruitment often operates through several pathways. First, economic deprivation may push unemployed youths to seek alternative means of livelihood, including participation in criminal networks. Second, social marginalization may generate feelings of alienation and resentment toward state institutions. Third, extremist groups frequently exploit grievances related to poverty, injustice, and lack of opportunity in order to mobilize support among young people. In many cases, recruitment strategies include financial incentives, ideological indoctrination, and promises of social recognition or belonging (UNDP, 2017).

Despite increasing recognition of the role of youth empowerment in addressing insecurity, policy responses have produced mixed outcomes. Various governmental and international initiatives have been introduced to promote youth employment, vocational training, and economic reintegration in conflict-affected communities. For example, national security and counter-extremism frameworks in Nigeria have acknowledged unemployment as a major push factor for radicalization and criminal participation (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2017). Similarly, development partners and non-governmental organizations have implemented programs aimed at livelihood support, skills acquisition, and community stabilization.

#### Statement of the Problem

Youth restiveness has increasingly assumed a complex and dangerous dimension in Northeast Nigeria, gradually evolving from expressions of social frustration into organized criminal activities and violent extremism. Despite sustained governmental policies and numerous interventions by international development agencies aimed at youth empowerment, unemployment reduction, and deradicalization, the region continues to experience persistent recruitment of young people into

insurgent movements, banditry networks, and other organized criminal formations. This trend is particularly evident in the states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, where prolonged insecurity, socio-economic deprivation, and weak institutional structures have created fertile conditions for youth mobilization into violent networks. Existing responses have largely emphasized military containment and economic interventions; however, they appear insufficient in addressing the deeper communicative, psychological, and social dynamics that shape youth behavior in fragile environments. Consequently, many youths remain vulnerable to radical narratives, criminal inducements, and violent mobilization. While previous studies have linked youth unemployment, marginalization, and social exclusion to insecurity in conflict-prone societies, there remains limited empirical investigation into how strategic communication and empowerment frameworks can effectively redirect youthful energy toward constructive civic participation and peace building. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for systematic research that examines the nexus between youth vulnerability, organized crime, and communication-based empowerment strategies within the context of Northeast Nigeria.

#### Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between youth vulnerability and participation in organized criminal activities while exploring communication-driven empowerment strategies capable of promoting youth participation in peace building in Northeast Nigeria. In order to achieve this aim, the study pursues the following specific objectives:

- i. To examine the extent of youth involvement in organized criminal activities and violent networks in Northeast Nigeria.
- ii. To identify the socio-economic and communication-related factors that predispose youths to recruitment by insurgent groups and organized criminal networks.
- iii. To evaluate communication strategies that can empower youths to actively participate in peace-building initiatives within the region.

#### Research Questions

In line with the objectives of the study, the following research questions guide the investigation:

1. To what extent are youths involved in organized crimes and violent networks in Northeast Nigeria?
2. What socio-economic and communication-related factors influence youth vulnerability to recruitment by criminal and extremist groups?
3. What communication strategies can effectively empower youths to contribute to sustainable peace building in the region?

#### Literature Review

##### Youth Restiveness and Organized Crimes

Scholars argue that youth restiveness often emerges from deep-seated socio-economic grievances such as unemployment, poverty, political exclusion, and weak institutional governance (Agbiboa, 2015). In many cases, prolonged frustration among young people gradually transforms spontaneous protest behavior into structured criminal networks and violent extremism. For instance, Adesoji (2011) and Onuoha (2014) observe that unresolved socio-economic inequalities in Northern Nigeria have historically created fertile ground for militant recruitment and insurgent mobilisation. Similarly, Mustapha (2014) notes that the Boko Haram insurgency exploited existing social discontent among unemployed youth, transforming restiveness into organized violent movements. Other scholars emphasise that environmental insecurity, displacement, and governance failures further intensify youth vulnerability to criminal recruitment (Campbell, 2018; Zenn, 2020). Empirical studies also reveal that poverty and marginalization continue to reinforce youth susceptibility to radicalisation and criminal engagement in conflict-affected areas of Borno and neighboring states (Probel, Wordu, & Onyige, 2024). Within this analytical frame, Musa, Boya, Jibrilla, Ibrahim, Isa, Abdulhamid, and David (2024) argue that broader structural factors such as globalisation, inequality, and weak security institutions have further entrenched cultures of violence across parts of Nigeria. Consequently, scholars increasingly interpret youth restiveness not merely as delinquency but as a structural outcome of socio-political exclusion that can easily evolve into organised crimes if not addressed through inclusive development policies (Akinyetun, Bakare, & Adedini, 2023).

##### Strategic Communication and Counter-Narratives for Peace

A second body of scholarship emphasises “strategic communication and counter-narratives for peace.” Researchers argue that extremist organizations often rely heavily on persuasive communication, propaganda, and digital messaging to mobilise and radicalise young people. Braddock and Horgan (2016) explain that extremist propaganda constructs emotionally compelling narratives that frame violence as heroic resistance, thereby attracting marginalised youth. Similarly, Mohammed, Aondoer, Akin-Odukoya, and Saint (2024) demonstrate that disinformation and digital propaganda have increasingly been used by terrorist organizations in Nigeria to manipulate public perceptions and recruit young followers. In response, communication scholars advocate for counter-narrative strategies that promote peace education, dialogue, and community storytelling as alternatives to extremist messaging (Pate & Dauda, 2013; Nwankwo, 2015). Development communication theorists further argue that participatory media platforms, such as community radio, youth forums, and digital engagement initiatives, can help reshape attitudes toward conflict by empowering young people to share their voices and experiences (Manyozo, 2012; Servaes, 2008). Emerging research also highlights the growing role of digital media and social networks in mobilising youth for peace advocacy, civic engagement, and community awareness campaigns (Obijiofor, 2016; Sokoga, 2024). Within this context, scholars increasingly view communication not only as a channel of information dissemination but also as a transformative tool capable of reshaping perceptions, challenging extremist narratives, and fostering constructive youth engagement in fragile societies (Tufté, 2017).

##### Youth Empowerment and Participatory Peace Building

Peacebuilding scholars argue that young people should be seen not merely as victims or perpetrators of conflict but as critical stakeholders in rebuilding fractured societies (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997). Empirical studies in the region indicate that youth participation in dialogue platforms, civic education initiatives, and community mediation programmes significantly enhances social cohesion and conflict resolution (Ukanwa, 2026). Research conducted in

post-conflict communities in Adamawa State similarly demonstrates that youth-led peace initiatives, including community dialogue and reconciliation programmes, contribute to rebuilding trust and strengthening local resilience (Emmanuel, Dogoyaro, Kure, & Shafiu, 2024). Scholars such as Urdal (2012) and Omede (2015) further stress that youth empowerment initiatives must integrate economic inclusion, leadership development, and civic engagement in order to prevent relapse into violence. Other communication scholars emphasise participatory development communication approaches (Okhueigbe, 2022), where youth actively co-create peace messages and community interventions, thereby strengthening ownership of peace processes (Servaes & Malikhao, 2010; Asemah & Omoera, 2019). In this regard, Akinyetun et al. (2023) argue that meaningful youth engagement in governance, dialogue, and peace initiatives reduces the likelihood of violent mobilisation while strengthening democratic participation. Collectively, the literature suggests that communication-driven empowerment strategies are essential for transforming youth from agents of unrest into active partners in sustainable peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions.

#### Empirical Review

One of the most influential empirical investigations is the study conducted by researchers at Mercy Corps in 2016 titled *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth*. The study aimed to understand the motivations that drive young people to join violent extremist groups in Northeast Nigeria. Anchored on social network and economic opportunity perspectives, the researchers adopted a mixed-method field research design involving interviews and community-based assessments. The population consisted of youths and community members in Borno, Yobe, and Gombe States. A total sample of 145 participants was drawn through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides and focus discussions with former insurgents, community leaders, and youths who resisted recruitment. The findings revealed that youths constitute the dominant demographic group within Boko Haram and similar violent networks, with peer influence, economic expectations, and community grievances playing critical roles in

recruitment. The study specifically concluded that youth involvement in extremist violence is not driven solely by poverty but also by social influence and the promise of financial advancement. It recommended strengthening community-based counter-narratives, expanding youth access to livelihood opportunities, and improving community engagement mechanisms to reduce youth recruitment into violent groups.

Another empirical investigation addressing the extent of youth involvement in violent activities is the study conducted by Joseph Emmanuel, Nathan Dogoyaro, Enoch Kure, and Mahmud Shafiu in 2024 titled *Youth Involvement in Peacebuilding: A Study of Post-Conflict Communities in Adamawa State, Nigeria*. The study sought to examine the level and forms of youth engagement in conflict and post-conflict peace initiatives. The research was guided by conflict transformation theory and employed a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The population consisted of youths residing in post-conflict communities in Adamawa State. Using stratified and simple random sampling techniques, the researchers selected a sample of 300 youth respondents from three local government areas—Demsa, Michika, and Madagali. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and key informant interviews with youth leaders, community leaders, and civil society actors. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings showed that youths play a dual role in conflict environments, functioning both as actors in violent networks and as agents of peace initiatives. The study concluded that youth involvement in violent networks in the region is significant but can be transformed through structured peace engagement programmes. It recommended the institutionalization of youth-led peace platforms, expanded youth inclusion in local governance, and sustained support for community peace initiatives.

Ezemenake (2021) conducted a study titled *Youth Violence and Human Security in Nigeria* to further develop the relative deprivation model in the Nigerian context and to examine whether variables such as unemployment and underemployment are causally linked to violence and insecurity destabilizing the state. The study adopted an

explanatory research design and employed a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data with Ted Robert Gurr's theory of relative deprivation. Quantitative data were primarily drawn from the Nigeria Watch Program dataset (2015–2018), analyzing a total of 4,989 violent cases, while an online survey via Google Forms gathered responses from 191 out of a targeted 200 youth across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones (North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South, South West). Additionally, 17 interviews were conducted, including both uneducated youth and seven security professionals, to complement and validate the survey findings. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was employed to ensure respondents were selected based on convenience and accessibility. Findings identified cultism and ethnic factors as major contributors to youth violence, highlighting the importance of effective institutions, quality education, and targeted economic and security programs within regional and geopolitical zones as means to address the problem. The study found that unemployment, illiteracy, ethnic tensions, and institutional weaknesses significantly increase the likelihood of youth participation in violent crimes. The researchers concluded that economic exclusion and governance deficits create structural vulnerabilities that extremist groups exploit in recruiting youths. The study recommended strengthening employment opportunities, expanding youth education, and improving institutional governance to address the root causes of youth violence in Nigeria.

Similarly, the empirical analysis conducted by Omoju, Ikhide, Olanrele, Abeng, Petreski, Adebayo, Odigie, and Muhammed in 2023 titled *Empirical Review of Youth-Employment Policies in Nigeria* examined the effectiveness of youth employment programmes in addressing youth vulnerability. The study aimed to evaluate how existing employment policies influence youth engagement in productive activities and reduce susceptibility to crime. Anchored on human capital and development theory, the researchers adopted a mixed-method design combining survey techniques with focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The population consisted of youths participating in government employment programmes across Nigeria. Participants were

selected through purposive sampling of programme beneficiaries. Data were collected through interview schedules, focus group discussions, and policy document analysis. The study revealed that despite multiple employment initiatives, youth unemployment remains high due to inadequate programme coordination, poor implementation structures, and weak institutional oversight. The study concluded that ineffective youth employment policies contribute indirectly to youth vulnerability to crime and social unrest. It recommended integrated employment programmes, improved governance frameworks, and inclusive policy implementation mechanisms to address youth marginalization.

A recent study conducted by Ukanwa in 2025 titled *Youth Engagement and Peace-Building Dynamics in Nigeria's North-East Conflict Region* examined the role of youth participation in peace initiatives within the conflict-affected states of Northeast Nigeria. The study aimed to investigate the determinants of youth engagement in peace-building programmes. Guided by participatory communication theory, the researcher adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population consisted of youth leaders, community actors, and participants in peace programmes across the region. A sample size of 327 respondents was selected through purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Data were collected using a structured four-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analysed through descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The findings revealed that youths actively participate in peace campaigns, community dialogue initiatives, and mediation processes when provided with institutional support and livelihood opportunities. The study concluded that communication-based engagement platforms significantly increase youth participation in peace initiatives. It recommended strengthening community dialogue programmes, expanding youth capacity-building initiatives, and supporting youth-led peace communication campaigns in conflict-affected regions.

Another relevant empirical contribution is the study by Agasokoa Chiale Sokoga in 2024 titled *Youth and Social-Media: Leveraging the Internet for Peacebuilding in Nigeria*. The study aimed to examine how social media platforms can be utilized to mobilize young people for peace initiatives and

counter violent narratives. The research was grounded in Social Cognition Theory and adopted an integrative research design involving systematic literature review and analysis of youth communication behavior. The population consisted of Nigerian youths actively engaged in digital media environments, while data were derived from scholarly publications, digital communication records, and policy reports. Analytical techniques included thematic and comparative analysis of communication patterns. The findings revealed that social media platforms provide spaces for dialogue, mobilization, and the dissemination of peace narratives among young people. The study concluded that digital communication tools can transform youths from passive consumers of conflict narratives into active promoters of peace messages. It recommended that governments, civil society organizations, and communication professionals should strategically deploy digital media campaigns, youth digital literacy programmes, and online peace advocacy networks to strengthen youth participation in peace building across Nigeria.

#### Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the complementary insights of the Frustration–Aggression Theory and the Relative Deprivation Theory, both of which provide strong explanatory frameworks for understanding youth involvement in violence and organized crime. The Frustration–Aggression Theory was first systematically articulated by John Dollard and his colleagues in 1939 in their seminal work *Frustration and Aggression*, which posits that aggression is often the direct outcome of frustration arising from the obstruction of goal-directed behaviour. According to the theory, when individuals or groups are persistently denied legitimate opportunities for socio-economic advancement, the resulting frustration may generate aggressive tendencies that can manifest in deviant or violent actions. Complementing this perspective is the Relative Deprivation Theory advanced by Ted Robert Gurr in his influential 1970 work *Why Men Rebel*, which explains that violent behaviour often arises when individuals perceive a significant disparity between what they believe they are entitled to and what they actually obtain in society. When young people compare their expectations of social mobility, employment, dignity, and political

inclusion with the realities of poverty, exclusion, and limited life opportunities, feelings of injustice and resentment are likely to emerge. Such perceived deprivation may create fertile ground for radical narratives and criminal enterprises that promise material rewards, social identity, or a sense of belonging. By integrating these two theoretical perspectives, this study provides a conceptual framework for understanding how structural deprivation and blocked aspirations contribute to the transformation of youth restiveness into organized criminal behavior, while also highlighting the strategic role of communication-based empowerment initiatives in redirecting youthful energy toward peace building and constructive civic engagement.

#### Research Methodology

Instead of direct fieldwork, this study utilised secondary data from NigeriaWatch, (<https://nigeriawatch.org/>), an authoritative and systematically curated database of violent incidents and criminal occurrences across Nigeria from 1998 to 2025. The database allows extraction of verified incident reports by state, incident type, date, and actor classification, enabling robust quantitative analysis of organised crime and violent networks in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States within the period 2015–2024. Nigeria Watch was selected due to the inherent security challenges and ethical limitations associated with primary fieldwork in conflict environments, as well as its capacity to provide longitudinal and geographically detailed data suitable for statistical analysis. Data were extracted for relevant incident types, namely insurgency attacks, banditry, armed robbery, communal violence, and kidnappings, filtered by geographic location. Variables were coded for frequency, temporal trends, and where available, identification of perpetrators associated with youth cohorts. Analytical procedures included descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and trend analysis to address the research questions. To enhance validity, data from NigeriaWatch were triangulated with supplementary indicators from the National Bureau of Statistics and peer-reviewed studies on conflict patterns in the region. Limitations related to age disaggregation were mitigated through cross-referencing with secondary literature and media verification. This approach provided a

reliable, ethically responsible, and empirically grounded basis for analysing the extent of youth involvement in organised crime the socio economic and communication factors influencing vulnerability, and the impact of communication

strategies on peace building outcomes in Northeast Nigeria.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Lethal Violence and Protagonist Involvement (2014–2024)

Year	Total National Fatalities	Borno State Fatalities	Primary Protagonists in the Northeast	Primary Causes of Death	Northeast Fatality Density (per 100k)
2014	21,296	7,174	Boko Haram, Security Forces, CJTF	Insurgency, Terrorism	Extremely High (Peak)
2017	10,178	2,829	Boko Haram, Army, Cult Groups	Pol./Relig. Conflict, Crime	11.6% decrease from 2016
2020	12,318	3,069	BH/ISWAP, Bandits, Police	Insurgency, Crime, Covid-Extrajudicial	46.3 (Borno)
2022	15,245	2,921	Criminal Gangs, Security Forces	Banditry, Kidnapping, Pastoral	41.08 (Borno)
2023	11,794	2,123	Factional BH/ISWAP, MNJTF, CJTF	Insurgency, Banditry, Internal Fighting	29.03 (Borno)
2024	12,162	1,263	Insurgents, Bandits, Security Forces	Counter-ops, Insurgency	Borno remains #1

The longitudinal data presented in Table 1 illustrates that despite a nominal reduction in total fatalities from the 2014 peak, the concentration of violence in Borno State remains persistently high, signifying a normalization of lethal conflict in the Northeast. The analysis of these trends reveals a transition in the "protagonist landscape," where youth-led criminal gangs have become increasingly prominent alongside traditional insurgent groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP. The fact that Borno consistently records the highest fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, reaching 46.3 in 2020 and remaining at 29.03 in 2023—suggests that the state is caught in a "legacy of conflict" where violence has become a dominant social and economic

regulator for the youth population. Furthermore, the rise in internal fighting among insurgent factions, which accounted for a substantial portion of deaths in 2023, indicates a fragmentation of these networks, potentially making them more unpredictable and difficult to engage through traditional peacebuilding or military efforts. This data confirms that youth involvement in organized violence in the Northeast is not only extensive but is also structural, necessitating interventions that address the root causes of recruitment rather than just the symptoms of kinetic engagement.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Drivers and Conflict Dynamics in Northern Nigeria

Driver Category	Specific Socio-Economic/Communication Factors	Impact on Youth Vulnerability	Key Regional Indicators
Economic	Unemployment, "Get rich quick" mentality, Poverty	Direct recruitment into banditry and robbery	Borno consistently highest risk
Environmental	Land/Grazing disputes, Climate change-induced conflict	Mobilization into ethnic/communal militias	860 deaths from pastoral violence (2023)
Information	New media reporting, Political manipulation of conflict	Radicalization and creation of "fear climate"	Lagos-based media as primary info source

Social	Drug use among students, Educational disruption	Lowered inhibitions to violence, School attacks	43 students killed in 2014
Political	Leaders fomenting conflict, Lack of land tenure policy	Strategic use of youth for political/territorial gain	"Legacy of conflict" making peace difficult

The socio-economic mapping provided in Table 2 suggests that youth vulnerability is not the result of a single failure but a convergence of "multi-dimensional" stressors that strip young people of both their livelihoods and their agency. The analysis of this data indicates that economic desperation acts as the primary driver for "ransom-driven kidnapping" and "rural banditry," which have ravaged communities in the North-West and North-East zones. However, it is the "communication vacuum"—the absence of policy support and the prevalence of political manipulation—that allows these economic grievances to be weaponized into organized violence. For instance, the transition from

being a student to a combatant or a drug user is facilitated by the "social consequence" of a state unable to provide a secure environment for economic activities, which then pushes youth toward the "Aiye and Eiye" confraternities in the South or "insurgent factions" in the North. The correlation between drug use and crime further suggests that the psychological resilience of the youth demographic has been eroded by the prolonged state of emergency in the Northeast, making them more pliable to the demands of "armed gangs" and "extremist sects".

Table 3: Strategic Communication and Peacebuilding Frameworks

Strategy Type	Core Communication Objective	Proposed Mechanism/Theory	Target Demographic
Behavioral	Transition society to nonkilling attitudes	Nonkilling Theory (Ukoji 2016)	Students, Unemployed Youth
Conflict Resol.	Settle territorial and land tenure disputes	Community Protagonism/Dialogue	Herders, Farmers, Local Leaders
Media-Based	Counteract crime propaganda/fear	Proactive "New Media" Reporting	Digital Natives, Urban Youth
Policy-Driven	Messaging on resource equity/governance	Stakeholder Multi-dimensional Approach	Policy Makers, Anti-Crime Crusaders
Identity-Based	Resolve intra-group/intra-faith friction	Intra-religious Dialogue Platforms	Religious Youth Organizations

The analysis of peacebuilding strategies in Table 3 stresses that communication is not a passive tool but an active intervention that must be integrated into the broader security and development agenda. The adoption of the "Nonkilling theory" as a framework for research and action is particularly vital, as it offers a scientific and ethical basis for redirecting youth energy away from the "convulsive upsurge" of violent crime. The effectiveness of these strategies hinges on their ability to replace the current "climate of fear" with a "climate of participation," where youth are given the intellectual and communication tools to challenge

the "legacy of conflict" inherited from previous generations. For instance, addressing the "territorial questions" early in a dispute, through transparent communication and inclusive land tenure policies, can prevent the multi-year cycles of violence that often result in high-fatality events like the herder-farmer clashes in Benue or Taraba. This strategic communication approach shifts the burden of peace from the military to the community, thereby empowering the youth to become the primary architects of a more stable and secure Northeast Nigeria.

**Discussion of findings**

The analysis of Tables 1 and 2, alongside the empirical literature, indicates that youth constitute a significant proportion of actors in violent networks across Northeast Nigeria. The Nigeria Watch data reveal sustained high fatalities in Borno State, with insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, as well as bandits and cult factions, being primary perpetrators of violence. Ezemenake (2021) corroborates this, showing that unemployment, illiteracy, and ethnic tensions increase youth susceptibility to violent crime, while Mercy Corps (2016) emphasizes the centrality of peer influence, social grievances, and perceived economic advancement in recruitment to extremist networks. Emmanuel et al. (2024) further illustrate the dual role of youths, who operate both as participants in violent networks and as agents of peace when properly engaged. The Frustration–Aggression Theory explains this duality: blocked aspirations and limited socio-economic mobility generate frustration, which may manifest as aggression, drawing youths into insurgent or criminal groups. Relative Deprivation Theory complements this by highlighting that youths’ perception of inequality—between expected opportunities and lived realities—fuels resentment, facilitating recruitment into organized violence. Collectively, these findings demonstrate a convergence of empirical evidence and theory, underscoring that youth involvement in violent networks is systemic, shaped by structural, social, and psychological dynamics rather than isolated incidents.

Youth vulnerability in Northeast Nigeria is strongly mediated by socio-economic exclusion and information ecosystems, as reflected in Table 2. Economic deprivation—manifested through unemployment, poverty, and “get-rich-quick” mentalities—emerges as a key driver, aligning with the observations of Omoju et al. (2023) that ineffective youth employment programs exacerbate vulnerability to criminal exploitation. Environmental stressors, including land and grazing disputes and climate-induced conflict, also mobilize youths into ethnic militias, while political manipulation and weak governance provide structural openings for recruitment. Communication factors compound these vulnerabilities: social media, new media reporting, and politically motivated narratives amplify fear and radicalization, as noted by Ukanwa (2025) and

Sokoga (2024). The Frustration–Aggression framework elucidates how unmet socio-economic aspirations generate aggression, while the Relative Deprivation Theory explains how perceived inequalities—exacerbated by biased or manipulative communication—create fertile conditions for criminal and extremist recruitment. Divergences in the literature, such as the focus on peer influence versus structural poverty, converge in highlighting that vulnerability arises from a nexus of material deprivation, social networks, and information dynamics, emphasizing the necessity of multifaceted interventions addressing both economic inclusion and strategic communication.

The findings underscore that targeted communication interventions can transform youths from agents of violence into active participants in peacebuilding, as reflected in Table 3 and corroborated by recent empirical studies. Behavioral approaches, such as promoting nonkilling attitudes (Ukoji, 2016), and identity-based initiatives, including intra-religious dialogue platforms, align with Emmanuel et al. (2024) and Ukanwa (2025), who demonstrate that structured engagement enhances youth participation in conflict resolution. Media-based strategies, leveraging social media and new digital platforms, resonate with Sokoga (2024), showing that digital literacy and peace campaigns enable youths to counteract propaganda and violent narratives. Policy-driven communication on governance and resource equity complements this by providing institutional backing, creating enabling environments for sustained engagement. The theoretical lens explains the efficacy of these strategies: addressing the frustrations and perceived deprivations of youths mitigates aggressive tendencies while providing alternative pathways for social recognition, identity, and material security. Convergence across the studies suggests that integrated communication strategies—spanning behavioral, conflict-resolution, media-based, policy-driven, and identity-focused interventions—are most effective when contextualized within the socio-economic realities and perceptual frameworks of the youth, thereby operationalizing the complementary insights of the Frustration–Aggression and Relative Deprivation Theories in practical peacebuilding initiatives.

## Conclusion

As a great writer once observed, “the soul is dead in those who slumber; things are not what they seem.” The Nigerian system has tolerated violence and insecurity for so long that many who were born into it scarcely recognize what genuine peace looks like. A wounded social mentality is far more dangerous than an abused conscience. If the Nigerian state does not become deliberate and strategic in confronting insurgency and violent criminal networks, the consequences may be generational. The emerging Generation Alpha and Beta may not merely transition from youth restiveness to criminality; rather, they risk growing up socialized into a culture where crime becomes normalized, institutionalized, and tragically redefined as an ordinary condition of life.

### Recommendation's

RC.1 Federal and State Ministries of Youth, Local Governments, NGOs, and Community Leaders should create programmes that provide vocational training, mentorship, and community service opportunities to keep youths away from violent networks.

RC.2 Ministries of Labour and Education, State Governments, and Security Agencies should improve access to jobs, education, and conflict resolution mechanisms to reduce youth susceptibility to criminal and extremist recruitment.

RC.3 National Orientation Agency, NGOs, Media Houses, Religious and Youth Organizations should deploy media campaigns, community dialogues, and peace messages to promote nonviolence and empower youths as agents of peace

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