UNREST AND UNFILLED STOMACHS: UNRAVELLING THE LINKAGE BETWEEN ARMED CONFLICT AND FOOD INSECURITY IN NORTH CENTRAL REGION OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the link connecting armed conflict and food insecurity in Nigeria's North Central region. Due to resource competition, political and ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and religious extremism, the region has seen protracted armed conflicts. Food security has declined as an outcome of disruptions in agriculture, infrastructure, and market systems. Considering this, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the many linkages between food insecurity and armed conflicts in Nigeria's North Central region and also to suggest measures to address the challenges to enhancing food security conditions in the troubled region's armed conflict-affected settings. Therefore, unpacking the link between armed conflict-affected settings and various aspects of food insecurity is required. Data were gathered and examined in order to ascertain the current state of knowledge, study, and focus on various aspects of armed conflict and their disastrous effects on food insecurity in the region while using a scoping review technique to investigate the link between armed conflict and food insecurity concerns in Nigeria's north central region. The findings will help policymakers, practitioners, and researchers involved in conflict resolution and food security initiatives better understand the complex dynamics of armed conflict and food insecurity in the region. This research is critical for developing context-specific policies and interventions to tackle the challenges faced by conflict-affected communities while also promoting long-term peace and food security in Nigeria's North Central region.

Introduction

Persistent armed conflicts in Nigeria's north-central area have far-reaching social, economic, and political effects. This region, located between the country's predominantly Muslim north and predominantly Christian south, is distinguished by its diverse array of religious, ethnic, and cultural identities (Adogame, 2013). However, the region has a long history of armed conflicts, which are mainly caused by a number of interconnected factors. Religious extremism and radicalization pose an obstacle to North Central peace and stability. While differences in religion are not the only source of conflict in the region, extremist groups have used existing divides to advance their ideological aims (Chakraborti & Garland, 2012). These groups' activities, often characterized by attacks on communities and property destruction, have intensified tension and violence in the region.

Ojo (2023) argues that the impact of armed conflicts in the North Central region have been catastrophic. A lot of people have died, and large populations have been displaced, resulting in major humanitarian crises. Infrastructure destruction, including healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and markets, interfered with essential services and hampered economic development. Furthermore, armed conflicts have harmed food security, worsening an already perilous situation in the region (Abubakar & Amurtiya, 2023). Researchers are interested in conducting empirical studies on the socioeconomic consequences of armed conflicts at the micro as well as the macro levels. In keeping with macroeconomic studies, countries adapt successfully to the adverse economic jolts caused by conflict and ultimately revert to their pre-conflict growth direction (Korn & Stemmler, 2022). Armed conflicts have been found to have short-term adverse effects on food security and economic growth in general (Martin-Shields & Stojetz, 2019).

The comprehension of the causes and dynamics of armed conflict in the North Central region is crucial for creating productive interventions and policies to deal with the underlying issues and foster peace-building efforts for long-term food security. It is possible to mitigate conflicts and create sustainable pathways to peace and stability in the North Central by addressing underlying grievances, improving governance and security, and encouraging dialogue and reconciliation among different groups.

Methodology

Using a scoping analysis method, the study investigates the relationship between armed conflict and food insecurity realities in the North Central region of Nigeria. Articles were gathered and analysed primarily to determine the current level of knowledge, research, and interest on the various formations of armed conflict and their devastating impacts on food insecurity in the region. A scoping review is viewed in this context as a method for connecting and summarising evidence-based research with the objective of deciding the most significant aspects of a phenomenon of research that can be employed to guide policy evaluation (Munn, McArthur, Mander, Steffensen, & Jordan, 2020).

The approach resulted in the collection and thorough review of research studies, as well as online material. Therefore, relevant reports, policy documents, and academic literature were reviewed and analysed to understand the historical context, policy responses, and existing interventions related to armed conflict and food insecurity in the North Central region. Google Scholar, Web of Science, ProQuest, ISI, and Scopus were employed for these studies by utilising terms such as 'armed conflict,' 'food insecurity,' and 'linkage' in general. These expressions were then mixed to contain the terms 'Nigeria' and 'North Central region,' in specific.

Causes of Armed Conflict in the North Central Region

The various causes of armed conflicts in the North Central region are analysed below;

a. Farmers/Herders conflict

In North Central Nigeria, a popular pseudo-empirical and anecdotal narrative contends that herdsmen militancy is part of the millennial jihadist's magnificent design to Islamize the region's people. This cynical viewpoint is strengthened by the region's herdsmen militancy, which is regularly directed at non-Muslim communities (Igbokwe & Iwuoha, 2019). Rapid population growth and the growing consequences of climate change have intensified resource use disputes between farmers and herders

in Nigeria (Day & Caus, 2020). As argued by Sheidu and Patrick (2023), climate and environmental conditions cause herders to transfer their cattle south, away from their primary grazing pastures in the Northern region. Flooding is a result of climate change and unpredictability in Nigeria. Flooding damaged over 676,000 hectares of farmland during the 2022 rainy season, reducing harvest and increasing the risk of food insecurity, according to the National Emergency Management Agency (Valavanidis, 2023). This increases struggle for limited land resources with farmers in the North Central region, leading to conflicts and confrontations between farmers and nomadic herders (Eke, 2020). Nomadic herders feed their animals (e.g., cattle) on farms, inflicting yield and economic losses to farmers. Farmers may respond by maiming cattle or evicting herders from their communities in retaliation. In retaliation, the herders fight back, and farmers/herders conflicts occur (Agyemang, 2017). Despite conflicts between herders and farmers have existed for a long time (Mbih, 2020), their occurrences and severity are increasing (George, Adelaja, Vaughan, & Awokuse, 2022). These conflicts have a direct effect on food insecurity because they have a direct effect on farmers' ability to cultivate farm land and/or access food through markets. Many farms in Nigeria's North Central region, primarily in Benue, Kogi, and Plateau states, have been abandoned due to fear of being killed or raped, as the majority of these farmers are women (Atim & Gbamwuan, 2022). During attacks, most women are allegedly abused, molested, and murdered by herdsmen.

Agrarian states in the Middle Belt valley have continually raised alarm. about the ongoing killings (Steve, 2018). The advanced weapons available to the Fulani herders revealed their boldness. They used to only carry and rely on machetes, long wooden staffs, and bows and arrows. They are, however, now displaying the Soviet assault rifle, AvtomatKalashnikova (AK47). They have used these weapons to terrorize farming communities across the country. Thus, from 2010 to 2013, Fulani herders were responsible for only 80 deaths, rising to 1,229 deaths in 2014. (Nwozor, OLANREWAJU, & Ake, 2019). More than 10,000 people are thought to have died as a result of Fulani herders' violence against farming communities over the last decade (Awotokun, Nwozor, & OLANREWAJU, 2020).

Armed conflicts that end in the injury or death of household members, crop yield losses, and farm property destruction can have an immediate and direct impact on household food insecurity by decreasing the immediate availability of food (Nnaji, 2022). George et al. (2022) argues that farmers who have been greatly affected by farmer-herder conflicts can also change their agricultural practises from lucrative commercial cultivation to subsistence agriculture to meet the food demands of their households. This restriction on herders' and farmers' activities endangers their livelihoods and food security (Dary, James, & Mohammed, 2017).

b. Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM)

It is worth mentioning that new groups are emerging and requesting the right to autonomy. Militia groups targeting various communities in the North Central states increased in the year 2020. Given the religious and ethnic ties, the current wave of violence against societies has been linked to Fulani ethnic militia and could be interpreted as an ethno-religious conflict (Nwankwo, 2015). Fulani ethnic militia (FEM) violence has risen substantially in the

past few years, rendering it one of the world's most deadly groups (Chinwokwu & Michael, 2019). In Nigeria, Fulani pastoralists own roughly 90% of the national herd, including the majority of cattle, camels, goats, and sheep (George, Adelaja, Awokuse, & Vaughan, 2021). While the Fulani's primary territory is in northern Nigeria, drought, climate change, and the Boko Haram insurgency have forced them to relocate to the country's North Central region.

The Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM) substantially decreases the total agricultural output for Nigerian homes. This is accomplished by reducing the total area of land utilised for agriculture (Fadare, Zanello, & Srinivasan, 2022). This is consistent with the findings made by Adeoye (2019), that several farmers in Nigeria's North Central region were compelled to leave their farms and relocate to more urban and suburban areas. In addition, FEM conflicts decrease crop production substantially because increased forced migration creates a land supply-demand inconsistency in many farming communities. This has worsened existing tensions in Nigeria's North Central region between Fulani and farming communities (Ojo, 2020).

Conflicts involving FEM, according to (ACLED, 2020), are complex and difficult to categorize. Some refer to FEM conflicts as religious conflicts because the vast majority of Fulani are Muslim and have regular disputes with predominantly Christian farmers (Ojo, 2020). The FEM also frequently clashes with other groups from the Eggon, Jakun, and Tiv communities, emphasizing the ethnic nature of FEM conflicts (Kallah, Ibrahim, & Jacob, 2022). Fulani militias, on the contrary, are not a centralised armed group with a clear mission. Their assaults are more opportunistic and less targeted and well-planned. However, because many of their attacks are against civilians, their use of terrorism as a tactic within ongoing farmer-herder tensions demonstrates terrorist characteristics (Nwozor et al., 2021).

c. Ethno-Religious conflicts

In the North Central region, ethno-religious conflicts are causing displacement within the region, food insecurity, and recurring outbreaks of violence between herders and farmers. It is clear that this is a conflict between indigenous farming communities or farmers and Hausa Fulani. In Plateau state, the clashes are more about ethnic and inter-ethnic relations, in addition to interactions between the Hausa-Fulani and other Jos Plateau communities (Anjide & Amaechi, 2022). Religion, on the other hand, is frequently used as rhetoric in clarifying conflicts. Despite their intermittent and sporadic nature, victims may perceive these conflicts as persistent and make modifications to cultivated areas to reduce their risks (Harari & Ferrara, 2018). The amount of land cultivated is more fixed in the short term than other agricultural inputs. Farmers will choose to reduce the amount of land dedicated to agriculture only if the likelihood of future attacks is extremely high (Mbah, Iwuamadi, Udeoji, Eze, & Ezeibe, 2021).

This means that, while ethno-religious conflicts are widely perceived as opportunities rather than pre-planned or targeted attacks, households in affected areas may not share those perceptions, resulting in food insecurity (Eke, 2020). Ethnic and religious tensions have been present in the North Central region for a number of years. This violence has resulted from the competition for power and access to land between nomadic and farming communities. Several individuals have

been murdered because of their ethnic or religious background. Fewer trucks are transporting food to the country's south, affecting food quantity and prices. Insurgency caused damage to farming activities and other related businesses, leading to a substantial decline in farm outputs.

d. **Organized criminal gangs**

A new group known as "bandits" has emerged in Nigeria's North Central region, further complicating the country's already complicated security situation. They mostly target villages in the region under the pretence of kidnapping and cattle rustling (Punch, 2018). According to Berdal and Serrano (2002), banditry is a form of organised criminal activity in Nigeria that involves kidnapping for ransom and looting villages for economic gain. In banditry operations, the existence of a clandestine organization with the ultimate goal of gaining illegal profits via the use of threats is common.

Rural bandits often operate during the night while villagers are sleeping, leading to the ransacking of some villages in Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa states. Such attacks tend to be erroneously linked to Fulani militancy during debates in society. So, the most recent spate of banditry is thought to have evolved from Fulani militancy to a new practise of criminal activities in the country, which involves robbery and kidnapping (Egwu, 2016). Bandits are organised criminal groups that are accountable for herd theft and herder murder. It has been linked with a primitive accumulation model that includes cattle rustling, looting, rape, and kidnapping. Despite the Nigerian government's assertion that bandits are entirely to blame for the large bulk of kidnappings and deadly attacks in the North Central region, there is evidence of Boko Haram's involvement, either directly or indirectly (Cooke, Sanderson, Johnson, & Hubner, 2016).

Fundamentally, the bandits' hostility toward the agrarian population in the North Central region, which has resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent Nigerian farmers, is having a negative impact on the region's food supply. The bandits' primitive activities have discouraged farmers from going to the farm, which has a knock-on effect on food production, leading to food insecurity.

Linkages between Armed Conflict and Food Insecurity in the North Central Region

The North Central region of Nigeria has been addressing a complex and linked set of issues, including armed conflicts and food insecurity. One of the primary ways armed conflicts contribute to food insecurity is through the disruption of agricultural activities (Dago, 2021). The North Central region is majorly agrarian, with agriculture serving as the people's major source of income (Odey, 2002). However, armed conflicts often result in the destruction of farmlands, looting of agricultural produce, and displacement of farmers from their land (Atim & Gbamwuan, 2022). Fear of violence and loss of personal safety prohibit farmers from using their fields, resulting in lower agricultural productivity and crop yields. As a result of the disruption in agricultural activities, food production decreases, making communities more reliant on external sources for food.

Armed conflict areas are home to an estimated 489 million of the 815 million hungry people (FAO, 2019), and one out of every four individuals lives in a post-conflict country (Rockmore, 2017). Armed conflicts aggravate food insecurity in numerous ways. Armed conflicts have an effect on supply-side production through decreasing input availability (such as labour), increasing uncertainty in price and profit, and rendering it more challenging for farmers to sell their produce. When goods and market mechanisms fail, food availability and accessibility suffer as a result. Understanding the impacts of armed conflict on food security is therefore critical in international and national efforts to combat food shortages to accomplish the SDGs, or Sustainable Development Goals 2.

Furthermore, armed conflicts in the North Central region have a direct effect on food availability and access. Conflict-related violence frequently destroys infrastructure, such as roads, markets, and storage facilities (Smith, 2018). This disruption of critical food supply chains limits access to food and increases its cost. In addition, conflicts can cause the displacement of populations, forcing people to abandon their homes and communities (Floranza & Asio, 2019). Due to the destruction of their livelihoods, limited resources, and reliance on external aid, displaced people frequently face barriers to food access.

The link between armed conflicts and food insecurity is not one-way. Food insecurity, in turn, can be a catalyst for armed conflicts. Inadequate food access and limited economic opportunities create fertile foundation for social upheaval and conflict (Mudasiru & Fatai, 2020). When communities fail to meet their fundamental food demands, tensions rise, and competition over scarce resources intensifies (Dominelli, 2012). This can lead to conflicts between different ethnic or religious groups, exacerbating existing divisions and grievances. Thus, addressing food insecurity is crucial for preventing and mitigating armed conflicts in the North Central region.

Effects of Armed Conflict on Food Security in the North Central Region

The rate of armed conflicts has risen exponentially, hindering the country's economic development, while the drive to plant new crops decreases with each attack. It is worth highlighting that grain production in Nigeria's North Central region has reduced by 40%. More than 35% of local farmers have been forced to leave their ancestral homes and farms. According to reports, the agricultural sector suffered greatly in the region that was affected, particularly the cultivation of common crops like corn, rice, millet, cowpeas, and sorghum (George et al., 2022). Conflict can influence the diversity of food by reducing agricultural output due to insecurity, an absence of inputs for farming and support services, destroying food-producing and distributing systems, destroying facilities such as markets and roads, and decreasing revenue combined with price hikes (Nwozor et al., 2019). Lower diversity of diets, for example, in the North Central region may be linked to a lack of options during conflict, as well as adjustment to eating habits when confronted with conflict.

As a result of direct conflict exposure, armed conflict affects the output from agriculture, land, labour, and physical structures. Farm production disruption is associated with the output effect. Livestock and crop products are not only frequently destroyed, but the types that are relatively transportable are taken off to serve members and sympathisers of terrorist organizations (George et al., 2021). As a result of cattle rustling and kidnapping, the majority of pastoralists have fled. Many pastoralist families have moved to avoid the ongoing upheaval. Some pastoralists sold their livestock in order to buy food or pay a ransom. Others lower stock levels to avoid bandit attacks. Low food production, market disruptions, and a growing number of IDPs reliant on the market for food have kept staple food prices in North Central above normal (Dago, 2021).

Farming activities and labour, in general, have declined dramatically, limiting alternative sources of income. Daily earnings dropped due to a labour shortage and a lack of demand. For income, some affected households have turned to labour migration, while others have turned to minor trading, crafts, and water hawking (Usman & Eyo, 2022). George, Adelaja, and Weatherspoon (2020) estimates the effects of attack on land possession, rented land, cultivated land, values of land, and patterns of farming. They presented findings indicating that the percentage of land left fallow rises as the intensity of armed conflict attacks increases, as does the average distance between cultivated plots and the residence. And that increasing the intensity of attacks discourages mono-cropping and encourages mixed cropping. They also discovered that as farmers' experience with violent conflict increased, so did their expectations about the value of their lands, leading to food insecurity. For example, the impact of armed conflicts on food security in Nigeria's Benue State cannot be overstated. Benue State, in the North Central region, has seen long-running armed conflicts between farming communities, primarily of the Tiv ethnic group, and pastoralist communities, primarily Fulani herders (Odey, 2002). Farming communities have been displaced and farmlands have been destroyed as a result of the conflicts, which are motivated by rivalry for land and resources (Okoli, 2016). These conflicts significantly impacted food production and disrupted local food systems, resulting in a rise in food insecurity among the affected communities (George et al., 2021).

Therefore, according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET, 2021), household members in the North Central region will remain displaced and will face difficulties in carrying out normal daily life. Furthermore, many households are unable to cultivate traditional crops due to displacement and must rely on inadequate community and market support. During the lean season, when staple costs are extremely high, they have few economic choices. As a result, food shortages will befall the households with the most vulnerability in the coming years.

Efforts in Addressing Armed Conflict and Food Insecurity in the North Central Region

A number of measures have been put in place to combat food insecurity in conflict-affected areas of Nigeria's North Central region. Between the years 2015 to 2018, the Nigerian government heightened its commitments to preserve land for Fulani herders by sending in a number of bills to the national assembly intended to be passed into legislation. These attempts were in line with the idea of resource appropriation, which refers to the unjust distribution and use of national resources via government instruments to favour a particular group at the expense of others (Olumba, 2022). Among the bills were the National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill, 2015 (HB 448), the National Grazing Route and Reserve Commission (Establishment) Bill, 2016 (HB 539), and the National Grazing Reserves Agency (Establishment) Bill, 2016 (Allison, 2019). Legislators from Nigeria's North Central region and Southern part of the country opposed the bills, and they were never passed.

In a similar vein, on July 1, 2019, President Muhammadu Buhari of the Federal Republic of Nigeria disclosed a new initiative to resolve the herders/farmers conflict in Nigeria, termed "RUGA Settlement." President Buhari argued that "RUGA" will end armed conflict in Nigeria and increase agricultural productivity (Olumba, 2022). According to Kabir (2021), the seventeen state governors of the North Central and Southern Nigeria jointly prohibited cattle grazing in the open in May 2021. However, President Buhari, on the other hand, reaffirmed his endorsement of open grazing and a revival of cattle grazing routes in Nigeria on June 10, 2021.

It is also paramount to state that the current administration of President Ahmed Bola Tinubu is not unmindful of the state of food insecurity in the country. He portrayed this by declaring a state of emergency on food insecurity on July 13, 2023, with some of the immediate intervention strategies to include engaging the country's security apparatus to safeguard farms and farmers, allowing farmers to go back to their farms without fear of being attacked, and to activate the already mapped out land banks of 500,000 hectares so as to increase the availability of arable land for farming which will immediately impact food output and drastically reduce the herders/farmers conflict (Punch, 2023).

Conclusion

Nigeria's North Central region is dealing with the twin challenges of armed conflict and food insecurity. Armed conflicts have a direct impact on food production, impede the agricultural system, worsen environmental challenges, and widen disparities in socioeconomic status. Food insecurity has far-reaching consequences in the region, affecting the productivity, health, and general welfare of its people. Given the study's findings about the long-term negative impact of conflict on agricultural labour supply, Nigeria's leaders need to do more to avert the spread of armed conflict in the country. It is crucial to address food insecurity and armed conflicts in the North Central region for reasons other than only human rights and social justice but also for Nigeria's general stability and development. It necessitates a comprehensive and integrated approach that recognises the interdependence of peace, agriculture, and food security.

Recommendations

These recommendations seek to address the interrelated concerns of armed violence and food insecurity in Nigeria's North Central area, with an emphasis on practical actions:

a. Strengthening agricultural systems and market infrastructure can protect the region from conflict shocks and promote long-term food security. Ethnic tensions often destroy agricultural assets and market systems, exacerbating food insecurity.

b. Improving long-term food security requires policymakers to address basic sources of conflict, such as resource rivalry and historical grievances. By promoting peace and

stability, people may re-establish their livelihoods and food production systems.

c. Collaboration among entities involved in conflict resolution, humanitarian relief, and food security programs is crucial to address the diverse character of these concerns, as interventions that leverage expertise and resources across sectors can be more comprehensive and effective in addressing the root causes of food insecurity in the North Central region.

d. Importantly, investing in early warning measures, such as data gathering and analysis tools, allows policymakers and humanitarians to address food security issues before they worsen.

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