



International Journal of Peace, Governance and Social Change

**THE COMPOUNDING OF GRIEVANCE: A MULTI-CAUSAL ANALYSIS OF
ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS INTERACTION IN
THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY**

Kerry Muhati and Prof. Samuel Nyanchoga, Ph.D



The Compounding of Grievance: A Multi-Causal Analysis of Economic, Social, Political, And Religious Interaction in The Boko Haram Insurgency

Kerry Muhati

A PhD student, Tangaza University, Nairobi, Kenya

Prof. Samuel Alfayo Nyanchoga, PhD

Lecturer, Institute for Social Transformation, Tangaza University, Nairobi, Kenya

Article History:

Published on: 14/09/2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22751134>

How to cite: Muhati, K., & Nyanchoga, S. A. (2026). The Compounding of Grievance: A Multi-Causal Analysis of Economic, Social, Political, And Religious Interaction in The Boko Haram Insurgency. *International Journal of Peace, Governance and Social Change*, 3(2), 1–18.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22751134>

Abstract:

Purpose of study: This study examines how economic deprivation, social inequality, political exclusion, and religious ideology interact to compound grievances and sustain the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative, multi-causal analytical approach based on a critical review and synthesis of recent empirical and theoretical literature. Scholarly studies on poverty, horizontal inequality, governance, religious ideology, gendered violence, reintegration, and climate-conflict dynamics were examined and applied to the Boko Haram case to identify interacting causal mechanisms.

Findings: The analysis demonstrates that no single grievance adequately explains the persistence of Boko Haram. Multidimensional poverty and livelihood insecurity created conditions of vulnerability, while horizontal inequalities transformed socioeconomic disadvantage into collective grievance. Political exclusion, weak governance, and the repressive 2009 state response converted accumulated grievances into organised insurgency. Religious framing subsequently provided ideological justification, identity, mobilisation, and organisational resilience. Patriarchal structures enabled gendered violence, including abduction and forced marriage, while environmental degradation around Lake Chad continued to intensify livelihood insecurity. Reintegration efforts have also encountered community trauma, mistrust, and persistent structural grievances, demonstrating that individual deradicalisation alone cannot resolve the broader conflict system.

Conclusion: The study concludes that durable peace requires multidimensional interventions addressing the reinforcing relationships among economic deprivation, inequality, political exclusion, religious ideology, gender, and environmental vulnerability. Military operations and individual deradicalisation may suppress immediate threats but cannot independently dismantle the structural conditions sustaining insurgency. Integrated development, governance reform, ideological engagement, gender-sensitive reintegration, and environmental livelihood restoration are therefore essential.

Keywords: *multi-causal conflict; horizontal inequality; Boko Haram; religious ideology; gendered violence; conflict reintegration*

©2026 By The Authors. This Article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Insurgency rarely develops from a single grievance; rather, it tends to emerge where economic hardship, social exclusion, political marginalisation, weak governance and ideological mobilisation interact over time. The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria illustrates this complexity. Although Boko Haram uses religious ideology to justify its violence, evidence from affected communities indicates that the insurgency operates within wider conditions of poverty, livelihood insecurity, weak state presence, displacement and limited access to essential services. The UNDP identifies the Lake Chad Basin, comprising Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, as a prolonged environment of violent extremism, insecurity and human insecurity in which sustainable stabilisation requires responses extending beyond military operations (UNDP, 2021).

The economic dimension is particularly evident in northeastern Nigeria, where prolonged insurgency has weakened household resilience and disrupted productive activities. Tafida et al. (2023), examining eight insurgency-affected communities in Northern Adamawa State, found substantial vulnerability across food security, healthcare, water access, markets, conflict exposure and access to finance. The study further shows that pre-existing economic and governance constraints reduced households' capacity to absorb shocks, while insurgency simultaneously destroyed livelihoods and restricted access to productive resources.

Political and social grievances also contribute to the environment in which insurgency persists. Weak governance, perceived state neglect, exclusion and insecurity can undermine citizens' confidence in public institutions and create conditions in which extremist narratives gain greater resonance. International evidence reinforces this multi-causal interpretation. Rottweiler and Gill (2022), using a nationally representative United Kingdom sample of 1,500 respondents, found that perceived group deprivation was associated with extremist attitudes, although individual and protective factors influenced whether deprivation translated into extremism. Makki and Akash (2022) similarly identify poverty, regional inequality and governance as interconnected structural conditions associated with violent extremism in Pakistan, while Bilal et al. (2022) emphasise poverty, inequality, grievances, repression, weak governance and religious intolerance. These perspectives are relevant to Nigeria because they demonstrate that religious ideology may become more influential when combined with accumulated economic, political and social grievances. Thus, Boko Haram should be understood as a manifestation of compounded grievances in which economic deprivation, social vulnerability, political alienation and religious mobilisation reinforce one another.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Boko Haram insurgency remains a major security and development challenge in northeastern Nigeria despite sustained military operations, regional cooperation and counter-extremism interventions. Its persistence suggests that military pressure alone has not eliminated the underlying conditions that facilitate vulnerability, recruitment and mobilisation. The problem is particularly pronounced in communities affected by prolonged insecurity, where conflict has disrupted livelihoods, access to markets, healthcare, food security and household coping capacities. Tafida et al. (2023) found that Boko Haram had substantially increased livelihood vulnerability among rural households in Northern Adamawa State, demonstrating how economic hardship and insecurity reinforce one another.

At the same time, existing explanations of Boko Haram often emphasise individual dimensions of the insurgency. Economic accounts focus on poverty and livelihood deprivation; political perspectives emphasise weak governance, marginalisation and state neglect; social explanations examine displacement and community vulnerability; while religious interpretations emphasise extremist ideology and mobilisation. However, Rottweiler and Gill (2022) demonstrate that deprivation does not automatically produce violent extremism, indicating that grievances interact with other conditions before translating into extremist attitudes. Similarly, Makki and Akash (2022) and Bilal et al. (2022) demonstrate the convergence of economic inequality, governance failures, political grievances and religious intolerance in violent extremism.

The critical gap, therefore, concerns how economic, social, political and religious grievances interact and compound one another within the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Treating these factors independently may obscure the processes through which accumulated grievances create conditions conducive to radicalisation, recruitment, mobilisation and sustained violence. The study consequently seeks to provide a multi-causal analysis of how these interconnected grievances contribute to the persistence of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework for Multi-Causal Conflict

2.1 Economic Causation: Poverty as a Permissive Condition

Economic theories of conflict have traditionally proposed that material deprivation and the absence of viable livelihoods lower the opportunity cost of joining an armed movement. Where legitimate economic alternatives are scarce, the relative attractiveness of armed mobilisation, whether through material incentive, protection, or belonging, rises correspondingly. Recent empirical work has refined this proposition considerably. Rather than relying on income measures alone, Akar et al. (2024) tested the relationship between conflict onset and multidimensional poverty, meaning poverty measured across overlapping deprivations in health, education, and living standards rather than income alone. Using a machine-learning approach applied to global fragility data, they found that multidimensional deprivation has meaningful predictive value for the onset of intrastate armed

conflict, and that grievance arising from compounded deprivation is better understood as a multidimensional phenomenon than as a narrowly economic one (Akar et al., 2024). This finding matters because it establishes a tighter analytical link between economic conditions and conflict risk than income statistics alone typically reveal: a population can sit above an income poverty line while remaining severely deprived in education, health, and infrastructure, and it is this compounded disadvantage, rather than income scarcity in isolation, that appears most closely associated with conflict vulnerability.

It is important, however, not to overstate the explanatory power of economic deprivation on its own. Cross-national patterns consistently show that the world's poorest regions do not reliably produce the most durable insurgencies; poverty appears to operate as a permissive condition rather than a sufficient cause. That is, economic deprivation creates the vulnerability from which conflict can emerge, but whether it does so depend on how that vulnerability interacts with inequality, political exclusion, and ideological framing.

2.2 Social Causation: Horizontal Inequality and Relative Deprivation

Social explanations of conflict have been most influentially developed through the concept of horizontal inequality, which holds that conflict risk rises sharply when economic, social, and political disadvantage cluster along the lines of a culturally defined group, such as a region, ethnicity, or religious community, rather than being distributed randomly across a population. This differs from vertical inequality, the general gap between rich and poor within a society, in that horizontal inequality sets the context for collective action organised around group identity. A comprehensive recent literature review by Hillesund and Østby (2023) confirms that the association between horizontal inequality and violent political mobilisation is well established across dozens of studies, while showing that the pathway from inequality to organised violence depends critically on how excluded groups perceive their disadvantage relative to other groups, rather than on the mere existence of disadvantage in absolute terms (Hillesund & Østby, 2023). This distinction is analytically important: it is the comparison between groups, and the sense of structural unfairness that the comparison produces, that converts ordinary hardship into a politically mobilising grievance capable of sustaining collective action over years or decades.

This insight builds on an older tradition of relative deprivation theory, which proposed that political violence becomes most likely when a group perceives a gap between what it believes it deserves and what it actually receives. Horizontal inequality theory updates this insight by anchoring the comparison to defined social groups rather than to individual expectations, and by showing that the comparison need not be purely material. Perceived unfairness in access to justice, cultural recognition, or the conduct of state security forces can produce the same grievance dynamic as differences in income or infrastructure, and in a conflict setting, material and non-material forms of horizontal inequality tend to compound one another.

2.3 Political Causation: Exclusion, State Fragility, and the Sequencing of Response

Political theories of conflict centre on the failure of formal institutions to represent, include, or respond credibly to the demands of marginalised populations. Where state institutions function credibly, aggrieved groups can pursue their interests through parties, courts, and civil society; where institutions are captured by narrow elites, perceived as corrupt or partial, or simply too weak to govern effectively across a territory, the incentive to pursue grievance through peaceful means diminishes. State fragility, understood not merely as limited administrative capacity but as a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of specific populations, is therefore a structural condition that multiplies the conflict-generating potential of economic deprivation and social inequality rather than operating as an independent cause in its own right.

A further and often underappreciated political variable concerns the sequencing of state response to nascent unrest. Whether a state accommodates, co-opts, or represses an emergent movement in its earliest stages has been repeatedly found to have a disproportionate effect on whether that movement escalates into sustained armed conflict. Disproportionate or indiscriminate repression, in particular, tends to confirm exactly the narrative of state illegitimacy that radical movements depend upon, converting a manageable local problem into a durable insurgency. This sequencing effect is central to understanding the Boko Haram case, discussed in Section 3, where the state's response to an early wave of unrest proved decisive in shaping the conflict's subsequent trajectory.

2.4 Religious and Ideological Causation: Motive, Identity, and Organisational Resilience

Religious and ideological explanations of conflict focus on the role of belief systems in supplying both moral justification for violence and the organisational structure through which violence is sustained over time. Ideology performs an explanatory function that purely material accounts cannot easily replicate: it renders the costs of prolonged conflict, including death, displacement, and material sacrifice, worthwhile by embedding them within a larger narrative of duty or righteousness. Using a global dataset of intrastate armed conflicts since 1946, Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman (2022) demonstrate that ideology performs two distinct functions in sustaining conflict. First, it supplies motive, a sense of sacred or historically legitimated purpose that helps combatants tolerate the costs of extended fighting. Second, it affects organisational capacity, since ideologically driven movements are often able to mobilise material and human resources, including transnational support networks, that are unavailable to purely opportunistic or criminal armed groups (Basedau et al., 2022). Their analysis further finds that, although ideology increases conflict duration, religious framing in particular became increasingly associated with protracted conflict after the Cold War, in contrast with the secular ideological conflicts that had tended to be longer during the Cold War period itself. This has direct relevance for understanding why religiously framed insurgencies such as Boko Haram have proved comparatively difficult to end through military means alone: a movement whose ideology can reinterpret battlefield losses as

tests of faith retains a capacity for continued mobilisation that a purely materially motivated group typically lacks.

2.5 Gender as a Cross-Cutting Dimension

Gender does not operate as a fifth, independent cause of armed conflict in the way that the four dimensions above do. Instead, an emerging body of scholarship treats gender as a cross-cutting analytical lens that shapes how conflicts, once underway, are conducted, sustained, and terminated. Pre-existing patriarchal social structures, including unequal access to education, restricted economic autonomy for women, and customary practices such as early marriage, do not themselves cause insurgency, but they constitute a resource that insurgent movements can exploit once conflict has begun. Recent research on Boko Haram's operational history documents how the group has drawn on precisely these structural conditions, using the abduction, forced marriage, and instrumentalisation of women and girls as a tactic that simultaneously supplies labour, fighters, and propaganda value, while also disproportionately burdening women with the caregiving and survival costs of displacement (Akpan, Adeyiga, Mkhize, & Ishabiyi, 2024). Because gender interacts with, rather than stands apart from, the economic, political, and religious dimensions already discussed, the gendered dimension of a conflict such as Boko Haram's is best understood as evidence of how thoroughly interlinked the causal system of a durable insurgency becomes once it is established.

Table 1. Summary of Causal Dimensions in Multi-Causal Conflict Theory

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Core Mechanism</i>	<i>Illustrative Recent Source</i>
Economic	Multidimensional deprivation lowers the opportunity cost of armed mobilisation	Akar, Saripek, & Cerev (2024), <i>Social Inclusion</i>
Social	Inequality clustered along group lines converts hardship into politically mobilising grievance	Hillesund & Østby (2023), <i>Journal of Economic Surveys</i>
Political	Institutional exclusion and repressive sequencing convert grievance into organised violence	Basedau et al. (2022); reintegration literature discussed in Section 4
Religious/Ideological	Belief systems supply motive and organisational resilience, prolonging conflict duration	Basedau, Deitch, & Zellman (2022), <i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i>
Gender (cross-cutting)	Patriarchal structures are instrumentalised as recruitment, propaganda, and tactical resources	Akpan, Adeyiga, Mkhize, & Ishabiyi (2024), <i>African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research</i>

None of these dimensions, considered alone, reliably predicts sustained armed conflict. Many societies experience severe poverty without civil war; many multi-ethnic states contain horizontal inequalities without organised violence; religious belief is rarely a cause of violence by itself; and patriarchal social structures, while unjust, are common to many societies that do not experience insurgency. What appears to differentiate conflict-prone settings from stable ones is the interaction and mutual reinforcement of these dimensions over time, a process examined empirically in the sections that follow.

3. The Boko Haram Insurgency: Origins and Trajectory

Boko Haram began in Maiduguri, Borno State, around 2002 as a local movement combining Islamic preaching with charitable and educational activity under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf. Its character changed decisively in 2009, when a violent government crackdown, during which Yusuf was killed while in custody, led the movement to reorganise around armed insurgency rather than peaceful proselytisation. Awah, Xue, Ngoye, and Achonwa (2024) trace how the insurgency subsequently expanded from its Borno State base into the wider Lake Chad Basin, spreading into Chad, Niger, and Cameroon and later splintering into rival factions, including Islamic State West Africa Province, while continuing to generate one of the region's most severe humanitarian crises (Awah et al., 2024).

The sequencing of this trajectory illustrates the theoretical model outlined in Section 2. In its early years, Boko Haram functioned primarily as a social welfare and religious education movement among economically marginalised youth in northern Nigeria; it was not, at that stage, an armed insurgency. What converted the movement from a religious welfare organisation into an armed insurgency was not a change in the underlying economic or religious conditions, which had been present for years, but a specific political event: the extrajudicial killing of Muhammad Yusuf during the 2009 crackdown. This sequencing matters because it demonstrates that the state's response to nascent unrest functioned as more than a background factor; it operated as the mechanism that converted latent economic and religious grievance into organised armed violence. Had the Nigerian state responded differently in 2009, whether through a measured legal process or sustained engagement with the movement's underlying grievances, the counterfactual literature on comparable movements suggests Boko Haram might plausibly have remained one of many small, unarmed religious groups in northern Nigeria rather than developing into one of the most durable insurgencies in recent African history. This does not mean that the state's response was the sole cause of the conflict; rather, it functioned as the trigger that activated a set of economic, social, and religious conditions that had already accumulated over preceding decades.

4. The Interaction of Causal Dimensions in the Boko Haram Case

4.1 Economic and Social Interaction: Poverty, Inequality, and Grievance

North-eastern Nigeria has historically experienced higher levels of deprivation, illiteracy, and unemployment than other regions of the country, and this economic disadvantage has consistently featured in scholarly accounts of Boko Haram's emergence. However, economic hardship alone does not straightforwardly produce violent conflict; it becomes more consequential for conflict when it is experienced within a framework of perceived social and political exclusion. In Nigeria, socio-economic disparities have long tended to mirror a wealthier, more religiously mixed south and a poorer, more heavily Muslim north, and this alignment of economic and cultural markers has encouraged many in the north to interpret their disadvantage as a sign of deliberate neglect by the state rather than as a general developmental problem. Hillesund and Østby's (2023) review supports this interpretation, noting that grievances organised around group-based inequality tend to be more politically mobilising than individually experienced poverty, precisely because group-based comparison generates a shared sense of injustice capable of sustaining collective mobilisation over time.

The multidimensional character of this poverty compounds its significance. Consistent with the broader pattern identified by Akar et al. (2024), the areas of north-eastern Nigeria most associated with Boko Haram recruitment combine low educational attainment, limited healthcare access, weak infrastructure, and high unemployment simultaneously, rather than experiencing any one of these deprivations in isolation. This compounding of disadvantage created conditions that Boko Haram was able to exploit directly by offering welfare functions, including food distribution, financial assistance, and religious education, that gave it early legitimacy in communities where state services were largely absent.

The interaction between economic deprivation and horizontal inequality is also visible in the way in which the conflict has affected different sub-populations of the north-east unevenly. Communities located closest to the Nigeria–Chad–Cameroon border, where formal state presence has historically been weakest and cross-border trade has long formed a significant part of the local economy, have experienced disruption on two fronts simultaneously: the loss of legitimate trade and livelihood opportunities as security restrictions have tightened, and heightened exposure to recruitment and taxation efforts by insurgent factions operating across the same porous boundaries. This pattern illustrates a point made more generally by Akar et al. (2024), namely that conflict vulnerability is best understood not as a fixed regional attribute but as a function of how multiple deprivations, in this instance economic marginality compounded by weak border governance, interact within a specific locality over time.

A further mechanism connecting economic deprivation to recruitment vulnerability involves the Almajiri system, a traditional form of Islamic education in which children are sent to live and study away from their families, often under conditions of significant material hardship. Recent public-health-oriented research on this system documents how what began as a respected educational

tradition has, under conditions of colonial disruption and continued policy failure, evolved into a structure associated with child neglect, street begging, and heightened vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups (Umar & Maaji, 2025). Umar and Maaji's analysis is careful to note that the Almajiri system is not itself a Boko Haram creation and long predates the insurgency; rather, the economic insecurity and social marginalisation it produces among the children and youth who pass through it leaves them without stable family support, formal education, or reliable livelihoods, conditions that insurgent movements can and do exploit by offering an alternative structure of belonging, material support, and purpose. This illustrates how a social institution that is not itself violent can nonetheless function as a conduit through which economic and social vulnerability is channelled toward armed mobilisation.

4.2 Political and Religious Interaction: Exclusion, Framing, and Mobilisation

The political and religious dimensions of the conflict interact directly and, importantly, reciprocally. Political exclusion in northern Nigeria, resulting from decades of perceived underinvestment, unresponsive federal governance, and limited translation of national oil revenue into regional development, created the underlying grievance that religious framing later organised into a coherent ideological narrative. Analysing Boko Haram's sermons, publications, and public statements between 2008 and 2016 using critical discourse analysis and social movement theory, Omeni and Al Khathlan (2024) show that the movement constructed what they term an injustice master frame: a narrative structure that identifies the corruption and perceived ungodliness of the Nigerian state as the central problem requiring redress and that supplies religious justification for followers to act against that state (Omeni & Al Khathlan, 2024). Their analysis demonstrates that Boko Haram's ideologists deliberately connected their cause to historical precedents within the region's Islamic scholarly tradition, embedding the movement's claims within a narrative of continuity with earlier, locally legitimate religious authority rather than presenting the insurgency as a novel or illegitimate departure.

This reciprocal relationship between political exclusion and religious framing helps explain why negotiated political solutions, including amnesty programmes and development initiatives targeted at the north-east, have repeatedly struggled to end the insurgency. Once a conflict has been cast in explicitly religious rather than purely civic terms, incremental improvements in governance or economic conditions do not straightforwardly resolve the underlying grievance, because the religious frame has made continued resistance appear obligatory in a way that ordinary political concessions cannot address. The same framing also confers a degree of organisational resilience on the movement. Basedau et al.'s (2022) finding that ideologically driven movements can reinterpret battlefield losses as tests of faith rather than as evidence of failure helps explain the apparent capacity of Boko Haram and its offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province, to persist

and even regroup following significant leadership losses, including the death of long-time leader Abubakar Shekau in 2021.

4.3 Gendered Violence as Tactic and Symptom

The gendered dimension of the conflict, introduced theoretically in Section 2.5, finds concrete expression in the movement's operational history. Recent scholarship on the roles of women within the insurgency documents how the group has employed the systematic abduction of women and girls, including forced marriage, domestic and sexual exploitation, and, in a further and disturbing escalation, the coercion of abducted women and girls into carrying out suicide bombings (Akpan et al., 2024). This tactical pattern is best understood not as an incidental feature of the conflict but as a load-bearing element that links its economic, religious, and political dimensions into a single operational strategy. Abductions have supplied the movement with a category of forced labour and combatants that male recruitment alone could not provide, while forced marriage has served the internal function of biological reproduction of the movement and reward for male combatants. Politically, the scale and visibility of episodes such as the 2014 abduction of schoolgirls from Chibok functioned as propaganda that reinforced the same narrative of state illegitimacy embedded in the movement's broader ideological framing, since the state's evident inability to protect its citizens was itself taken as confirmation of its failure. The gendered dimension of the conflict is therefore not a secondary or peripheral feature but is woven directly into the mechanisms that sustain the insurgency's economic, political, and ideological functioning.

4.4 The Reintegration Challenge: Why Military and Individual Interventions Have Not Ended the Conflict

A further and increasingly central strand of recent scholarship concerns the difficulty of translating military gains or individual defections into a durable resolution of the underlying conflict. Since 2016, the Nigerian government has operated a deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration programme intended to process former low-level Boko Haram combatants who voluntarily surrender. Evaluations of this and related community-level processes reveal that the same multi-causal dynamics that produced the insurgency continue to obstruct its resolution at the reintegration stage.

Using an interpretative phenomenological approach with community members in Borno, Adamawa, and Kaduna states, Ike, Jidong, Ike, Francis, and Ayobi (2022) found that unresolved trauma among affected communities substantially limits successful reintegration and fuels ongoing scepticism about whether former combatants can genuinely reform (Ike, Jidong, Ike, Francis, & Ayobi, 2022). Their study emphasises that trauma is not confined to the individuals directly affected by violence but extends through the community more broadly, meaning that reintegration programmes focused solely on the psychological transformation of the returning combatant are

unlikely to succeed unless they also address the trauma and mistrust present within the receiving community itself.

This community-level finding is corroborated and theorised more systematically by Godefroidt and Langer (2023), whose large-scale conjoint experiment among approximately two thousand Nigerian university students examined which categories of former Boko Haram fighters the public is willing to support for reintegration. Their study finds that public attitudes are governed by two underlying heuristics, which the authors label danger and deservingness: respondents are considerably more willing to support the reintegration of former combatants who can be shown to have joined the insurgency involuntarily, to have left voluntarily out of genuine remorse, and to have subsequently taken concrete conciliatory action such as assisting security forces, while they are markedly less willing to support the reintegration of fighters who joined voluntarily for ideological reasons or who show no sign of reconciliatory intent (Godefroidt & Langer, 2023). Godefroidt and Langer further find that having joined the insurgency specifically to establish a religious caliphate is the single attribute most damaging to public willingness to support reintegration, a finding that underscores how thoroughly the religious framing of the conflict, examined in Section 4.2, has shaped not only combatants' own motivations but also the wider public's perception of which combatants can plausibly be forgiven.

Taken together, these two studies indicate that reintegration faces a structural obstacle directly traceable to the multi-causal interaction model developed in this article. Even as Nigerian security forces continue to neutralise Boko Haram fighters or persuade individual members to surrender, the horizontal inequalities between the north-east and the rest of the country, the community-level trauma generated by the conflict, and the deeply embedded religious framing of the insurgency all remain largely unaddressed by programmes that focus on individual deradicalisation alone. A mistrustful reception of a returning fighter by his home community is, in this sense, a small-scale reflection of the same causal system that produced the insurgency in the first place.

4.5 An Environmental-Economic Amplifier: The Lake Chad Dimension

A further layer of interaction emerges when environmental change is considered alongside the economic and political dimensions already discussed. Okpara and Yunus (2025), in a systematic review of climate-conflict scholarship focused specifically on the Lake Chad region, document how the basin's temperatures are rising markedly faster than the global average, contributing to the long-term shrinkage of the lake and the agricultural and fishing economies that depend on it (Okpara & Yunus, 2025). Their review is careful to argue that this environmental stress does not operate as an independent cause of conflict; rather, it interacts with pre-existing fragility, weak state authority, and contested group identity to intensify the conditions that sustain violence along what they describe as a continuum of conflict rather than a single discrete event.

In practical terms, the shrinkage of the lake has displaced the livelihoods of large numbers of people across the four countries of the Lake Chad Basin, and insurgent actors have in some documented instances been able to recruit from among those left without agricultural or fishing income by offering small material incentives, a sense of belonging, and forms of support that the state and the declining local economy have been unable to provide. The environmental dimension therefore functions as a facilitator of the economic deprivation that lies at the core of the conflict's religious and political dimensions, helping to explain why the insurgency has proved difficult to extinguish even after the deaths of several Boko Haram leaders and the military's recapture of substantial territory.

This environmental amplifier also illustrates a broader analytical point: the conditions responsible for a conflict's initial onset need not be identical to the conditions that sustain the conflict over time. The core drivers of the Boko Haram insurgency were substantially domestic in origin, but its persistence over more than two decades has been increasingly shaped by transboundary environmental change that continues to generate new populations of economically vulnerable people across national borders. Okpara and Yunus (2025) further note a complicating dynamic in which security operations intended to restrict insurgent supply chains around the lake have, in some cases, also curtailed the fishing, farming, and trading activities of the civilian population, thereby deepening the very economic deprivation that sustains the conflict. This produces a self-reinforcing cycle in which military responses to one dimension of the conflict can inadvertently intensify another, underscoring the danger of treating any single dimension of a multi-causal conflict in isolation from the others.

5. Synthesis: Why Interaction, Not Isolation, Sustains Conflict

The Boko Haram case demonstrates that sustained armed conflict is best understood as the product of compounding rather than additive causation. Economic deprivation alone cannot explain why violence has persisted for more than two decades, since many equally impoverished regions of the world do not experience comparable insurgency. Horizontal inequality alone cannot explain the conflict's specifically religious character or its capacity to recruit and operate across national borders. Political alienation alone cannot explain why repeated negotiated settlements and development initiatives have failed to end the violence. Religious ideology alone, absent the material and political conditions that make its narrative plausible to potential recruits, would not have produced the sustained recruitment and degree of local tolerance that has kept the movement functional despite substantial military losses. And the gendered violence that has come to characterise much of the conflict would not be intelligible without reference to the patriarchal social order that long preceded the insurgency and that the movement has systematically exploited.

Read together, the literature reviewed in this article, spanning multidimensional poverty research (Akar et al., 2024), horizontal inequality theory (Hillesund & Østby, 2023), the political and social

history of the movement (Awah et al., 2024), ideological analysis (Basedau et al., 2022; Omeni & Al Khathlan, 2024), gendered conflict dynamics (Akpan et al., 2024), community trauma and reintegration research (Ike et al., 2022; Godefroidt & Langer, 2023), and the climate-conflict nexus (Okpara & Yunus, 2025), suggests a conflict system that is durable precisely because it is interactive. Economic deprivation and horizontal inequality supplied the initial grievance and gave it a group identity; political exclusion foreclosed peaceful avenues for redress while religious framing supplied a historically legitimated and self-renewing justification for continued resistance; pre-existing gendered social structures supplied both a tactical and a recruitment mechanism once violence began; and environmental degradation has continued to supply new recruits to a movement whose original economic and political drivers have not been resolved. Each dimension has lowered the activation threshold of the others, producing a conflict system considerably more resilient than an assessment of any individual dimension would predict.

This synthesis carries two significant implications for the evaluation of conflict interventions. First, military success in recapturing territory, disrupting financing, or eliminating leadership, including the death of Abubakar Shekau in 2021, has not translated into a durable resolution of the conflict, because such successes leave the structural conditions that make recruitment possible and the ideology credible substantially unaddressed. Military action can suppress the visible manifestation of a multi-causal conflict without altering the causal system that sustains it. Second, individual-level deradicalisation programmes face a comparable limitation. As the reintegration literature discussed demonstrates, even where individual combatants can be persuaded to disengage from the movement's ideology, the communities to which they return often continue to express the same underlying grievances, coloured by trauma and conditioned by the same religious and political framing, that helped produce the insurgency in the first place. Durable resolution therefore appears to require intervention at multiple levels simultaneously: individual combatants must be genuinely disengaged from the movement's ideology, but this is insufficient on its own, because the receiving communities and the structural conditions that produced the conflict remain otherwise unchanged.

Table 2. Interacting Dimensions and Corresponding Intervention Requirements

Dimension	Reinforcing Mechanism in the Boko Haram Case	Intervention Implied
Economic	Multidimensional poverty and the Almajiri system supply a population vulnerable to recruitment	Economic opportunity paired with reduction of regional and group-level inequality, not income growth alone
Political	Repressive sequencing after 2009 converted grievance into organised insurgency; exclusion persists	Institutional reform that creates credible mechanisms for redress, not only rhetorical inclusion

Religious/Ideological	Injustice master frame renders continued resistance appear obligatory regardless of material improvement	Sustained engagement with the ideological frame itself, not military disruption alone
Gendered	Patriarchal structures instrumentalised for abduction, forced marriage, and propaganda	Reintegration programmes that explicitly account for gender-based victimisation and community trauma
Environmental	Lake Chad shrinkage continually regenerates economically vulnerable recruitment pools	Regional environmental governance and livelihood restoration alongside security operations

Policy responses that address only one of these dimensions at a time are, on this reading, likely to shuffle the elements of the causal system from one location to another rather than dismantling it. A durable peace requires interventions that address the interaction between dimensions: economic programmes that reduce group-level inequality rather than aggregate poverty alone; political reforms that establish credible mechanisms for redress rather than symbolic inclusion; sustained engagement with the religious and ideological frames that continue to legitimate violence even where material conditions improve; reintegration programmes that engage host communities and account explicitly for gendered patterns of victimisation rather than focusing solely on individual combatants; and, where environmental degradation is implicated, regional environmental governance and livelihood restoration that does not inadvertently deepen the economic deprivation on which the insurgency continues to draw.

This has a further, more general implication for how conflict interventions are sequenced and evaluated. Because each dimension of a multi-causal conflict lowers the activation threshold of the others, an intervention that succeeds in one dimension without corresponding progress in the others may generate only temporary or localised improvement. A development programme that raises aggregate income in the north-east without reducing the region's disadvantage relative to the rest of the country, for instance, may do little to address the horizontal inequality that Hillesund and Østby (2023) identify as central to sustained political mobilisation. Similarly, a counter-messaging campaign that challenges Boko Haram's religious framing without addressing the underlying political exclusion that gave that framing its initial purchase is unlikely to durably weaken the movement's appeal. Evaluating interventions against this compounding logic, rather than against dimension-specific metrics alone, would represent a meaningful shift in how policy success in protracted, multi-causal conflicts is measured.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The analysis presented here is subject to several limitations that suggest useful directions for future research. First, because the article relies on a single, illustrative case, the specific sequencing observed in the Boko Haram insurgency, in which a political trigger converted pre-existing economic and religious conditions into organised violence, cannot be assumed to generalise to all multi-causal conflicts. Comparative research examining whether similar sequencing patterns hold in other prolonged insurgencies, including those with different religious or ideological characteristics, would help establish how far the interaction model developed here travels beyond the Nigerian case.

Second, the empirical literature reviewed in this article is itself unevenly distributed across the five dimensions discussed. Quantitative, cross-national evidence is comparatively well developed for the economic and social dimensions, particularly through the multidimensional poverty and horizontal inequality literatures, whereas the gendered dimension of the conflict remains documented primarily through qualitative and case-specific research. Future research that develops comparable quantitative measures of gendered instrumentalisation across multiple conflicts would strengthen the cross-cutting analytical status claimed for gender.

Third, while methodologically rigorous, draws on samples, such as Nigerian university students in the case of the conjoint experiment reported by Godefroidt and Langer (2023), that may not fully represent the attitudes of the rural, north-eastern communities most directly affected by reintegration decisions. Future research conducted directly within affected host communities, building on the qualitative work of Ike et al. (2022), would help clarify whether the danger and deservingness heuristics identified in student samples hold with comparable strength among populations bearing the direct costs of reintegration.

Finally, the environmental dimension of the conflict, while increasingly well documented in reviews such as that of Okpara and Yunus (2025), remains difficult to disentangle causally from the economic and political dimensions with which it interacts. Longitudinal research tracking specific communities across periods of environmental stress, economic deprivation, and conflict exposure would help clarify the precise causal weight that environmental degradation carries relative to the other dimensions discussed in this article.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that sustained armed conflict typically arises from the interaction of multiple causal dimensions rather than from any single condition operating in isolation. Drawing on recent research into the poverty-conflict nexus, horizontal inequality theory, the political and ideological history of Boko Haram, gendered conflict dynamics, community-level reintegration research, and the climate-conflict literature, the analysis of the insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria shows how economic deprivation, social and regional inequality, political alienation, religious

framing, and gendered violence have reinforced one another for more than two decades, with environmental degradation around Lake Chad acting as a continuing amplifier of underlying economic grievance and unresolved structural conditions continuing to obstruct reintegration even where individual combatants are willing to disengage.

The central implication of this framework is that an analytically sound approach to a prolonged armed conflict should not search for the single most important causal dimension, since it is the reinforcing interaction between dimensions, and not the presence of any one dimension, that renders an armed struggle durable. The Boko Haram case indicates that this cycle can continue without a decisive military victory, without a change in political leadership, and without fragmentation of the insurgent movement, precisely because progress on the personal level, such as the successful individual deradicalisation of a combatant, does not automatically translate into resolution at the community or structural level to which that combatant returns. For researchers and policymakers alike, the practical implication is that interventions addressing only one dimension of such a conflict, whether military, economic, religious, or reintegrative, are unlikely to succeed on their own. Durable peace instead requires interventions that engage the interaction between dimensions directly, recognising that the causal system sustaining a conflict such as Boko Haram's is considerably more resilient, and more interdependent, than a single-factor analysis would suggest.

8. REFERENCES

- Akar, Ç., Sariipek, D. B., & Cerev, G. (2024). Poverty–armed conflict nexus: Can multidimensional poverty data forecast intrastate armed conflicts? *Social Inclusion*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8396>
- Akpan, U. J., Adeyiga, A. A., Mkhize, S. M., & Ishabiyi, A. O. (2024). The complexity of women's roles in Boko Haram terrorist activities in North-East Nigeria. *African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research*, 5(2), 97–113. <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/items/cba02538-8cfa-4838-9dd3-abf98d579784>
- Awah, J., Xue, F., Ngoye, S., & Achonwa, E. (2024). The evolution and impact of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin in a multipolar world. *Conflict Studies / Nota Bene*, (2), 28–40. <https://doi.org/10.7256/2454-0617.2024.2.70646>
- Badurdeen, F. A., Aroussi, S., & Jakala, M. (2023). Lived realities and local meaning-making in defining violent extremism in Kenya: Implications for preventing and countering violent extremism in policy and practice. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2121021>
- Basedau, M., Deitch, M., & Zellman, A. (2022). Rebels with a cause: Does ideology make armed conflicts longer and bloodier? *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 66(10), 1826–1853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027221108222>

- Bilal, F. E., Abbas, R., & Rashid, M. A. (2022). Terrorism in Pakistan: A critical analysis. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, 6(2), 1003–1013. [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022\(6-II\)85](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022(6-II)85)
- Ehiane, S. O., Caleb, A., & Mkhize, G. (2022). Boko Haram conflict dynamics and gender-based violence in the Lake Chad region. *Alternation*, 29(2), 204–222. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366506278_Boko_Haram_Conflict_Dynamics_and_Gender_based_Violence_in_the_lake_Chad_Region
- Godefroidt, A., & Langer, A. (2023). What drives attitudes towards the reintegration of former fighters? Insights from a conjoint experiment in Nigeria. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(3), 410–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221087070>
- Hillesund, S., & Østby, G. (2023). Horizontal inequalities, political violence, and nonviolent conflict mobilization: A review of the literature. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 37(5), 1589–1635. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12539>
- Huvé, S., O'Neil, S., Hoinathy, R., Van Broeckhoven, K., Bukar, M., Badu, F. Y. A., Tayo, T., Caus, J., & Faye, A. (2022). Preventing recruitment and ensuring effective reintegration efforts: Evidence from across the Lake Chad Basin to inform policy and practice. <https://undir.org/publication/preventing-recruitment-and-ensuring-effective-reintegration-efforts-evidence-from-across-the-lake-chad-basin-to-inform-policy-and-practice/>
- Ike, T. J., Jidong, D. E., Ike, M. L., Francis, C., & Ayobi, E. E. (2022). Reintegration of former Boko Haram members and combatants in Nigeria: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of community members' experiences of trauma. *Third World Quarterly*, 43(12), 2811–2829. <https://research.tees.ac.uk/en/publications/reintegration-of-former-boko-haram-members-and-combatants-in-nige/>
- Kamais, C. E., Mulu, F., & Macharia, H. M. (2023). Economic marginalization aspects influencing radicalization of youth in Mombasa County, Kenya. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 7(3), 80–97.
- Kanol, E. (2023). The role of socioeconomic marginalization in the radicalization of jihadi foreign fighters from Europe. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 48(9), 935–958. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2153504>
- Makki, M., & Akash, S. A. (2022). Poverty, regional inequality, and the role of governance: Tracing geographies of violent extremism in Pakistan. *GeoJournal*, 88, 2701–2718. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10766-6>
- Mesok, E. (2022). Counterinsurgency, community participation, and the preventing and countering violent extremism agenda in Kenya. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33(4–5), 720–741. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2037908>

Okpara, U. T., & Yunus, S. (2025). The nexus of climate and conflict in the Lake Chad Region: What we know, don't know and need to know. *Climatic Change*, 178, Article 185. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-025-04024-0>

Omeni, A., & Al Khathlan, A. (2024). "Framing" contentious activism: A sociological analysis of Boko Haram's ideology, through its discourse (2008–2016). *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2319737>

Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2022). Individual differences in personality moderate the effects of perceived group deprivation on violent extremism: Evidence from a United Kingdom nationally representative survey. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 790770. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.790770>

Samuel, M. (2022). *Boko Haram's deadly business: An economy of violence in the Lake Chad Basin*. <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/boko-harams-deadly-business-an-economy-of-violence-in-the-lake-chad-basin>

Tafida, A. A., Tukur, A. L., Adebayo, E. F., Ndaghu, A. A., Onu, J. I., & Momodu, J. A. (2023). Boko Haram insurgency and livelihood vulnerability of rural households in Northern Adamawa State, Nigeria. *Research in Globalization*, 6, 100116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resglo.2023.100116>

Umar, S. I., & Maaji, S. M. (2025). From sacred education to street exploitation: The Almajiri crisis in Nigeria as a nexus of public health failures, legal paralysis, and global security risks. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s13010-025-00191-1>

United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Conflict analysis in the Lake Chad Basin*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/publications/conflict-analysis-lake-chad-basin>