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INTER-COMMUNAL CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT RECOVERY IN NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT
Inter-communal conflict remains a major challenge to peace, social cohesion, livelihoods, and development in Nigeria. This paper presents a conceptual review of inter-communal conflict and post-conflict recovery in Nigeria, examining recurring causes, consequences, peacebuilding responses, and the challenges that communities face in rebuilding after violence. The review is based entirely on secondary sources — peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and credible published accounts, with emphasis on studies by Nigerian scholars writing on communal conflict within the country. Conflict Theory (Coser, 1956) is applied as the primary analytical methods for explaining why such conflicts recur, while Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding perspective is used to interpret what sustainable recovery requires. The review finds that inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria typically arise from competition over land and natural resources, contested traditional authority, weak local conflict-resolution mechanisms, and the ease with which localised disputes become framed in group or ethnic terms; and that their consequences such as displacement, loss of lives and property, disrupted livelihoods, and eroded trust tend to outlast the violence itself. The paper argues that security intervention alone rarely produces durable peace, and that recovery requires reconciliation, livelihood restoration, institutional strengthening, and inclusive participation by traditional rulers, women, youth, and civil society. The paper closes by proposing a research design that a future empirical study could use to investigate a specific conflict-affected locality, such as Bassa Local Government Area of Kogi State, through interviews or questionnaires administered to residents with first-hand experience of such conflict.

Keywords: Inter-communal Conflict, Post-conflict Recovery, Peacebuilding, Social Cohesion, Livelihood Recovery, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Inter-communal conflict is a recurring feature of community life in many parts of Nigeria. Although such conflicts are often localised among neighbouring communities, their consequences can be far-reaching, producing loss of lives, destruction of property, displacement, disrupted livelihoods, and the breakdown of social relationships and local institutions (Anierobi et al., 2024). These effects are especially severe in rural communities where people depend on farming, fishing, and trading for their livelihoods, since violence restricts access to farms and fishing grounds, disrupts markets, and forces households to abandon homes and economic activities. The consequences of conflict frequently persist long after the fighting has stopped. Fear, mistrust, unresolved grievances, and damaged relationships make the return and reintegration of displaced people difficult, so that post-conflict recovery involves far more than rebuilding houses and roads. It also requires restoring livelihoods, rebuilding trust, and addressing grievances, strengthening local institutions, and preventing a relapse into violence. Nigeria's experience of communal conflict and mass displacement — the International Organization for Migration recorded 1,302,443 internally displaced persons across ten North-Central and North-West states, including Kogi, as of April 2024, with conflict and insecurity among the major drivers (IOM, 2024) — illustrates how significant this challenge has become.

This paper offers a conceptual review of the literature on inter-communal conflict and post-conflict recovery in Nigeria. It does not present primary data collected from any specific locality; rather, it synthesises existing scholarship to clarify the causes and consequences of inter-communal conflict, to identify what the literature suggests about effective recovery, and to build a framework that can guide future empirical research on particular conflict-affected communities. Communities in North-Central Nigeria, including parts of Kogi State, have experienced recurrent episodes of communal violence of the kind discussed here; a dedicated empirical study of any one such locality — grounded in interviews or questionnaires with residents who have direct experience of the conflict — would be a valuable and necessary complement to the conceptual account offered in this paper, and a design for such a study is proposed in the final section.

Conceptual Clarifications

Inter-Communal Conflict

Inter-communal conflict involves prolonged disagreement or violent encounters between two or more identifiable communities over land, natural resources, political influence, identity, authority, or other interests. Such conflicts occur between ethnic groups, villages, clans, religious groups, or communities competing over territory and resources, but they cannot always be attributed to ethnic difference or historical hostility alone. Autesserre (2010) observes that conflicts often described in broad ethnic or national terms typically have deeper local roots in disputes over land, resources, authority, and political power — a point that is echoed in Nigerian scholarship on communal violence, which similarly locates the roots of many disputes in competition over local resources and authority rather than in ethnicity as such (Albert, 2001; Otite, 1999).

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Post-Conflict Recovery and Peacebuilding

Post-conflict recovery is the process by which communities affected by violence rebuild their social, economic, physical, and institutional foundations: reconstructing homes and public facilities, restoring livelihoods and essential services, facilitating the return and reintegration of displaced people, strengthening local institutions, and addressing the conditions that could produce renewed violence. It differs from emergency relief, which addresses only immediate needs such as food, shelter, and protection. Peacebuilding is closely related but distinct: it is the sustained effort to prevent a relapse into violence and to establish the foundations for lasting peace, going beyond a ceasefire to address dialogue, reconciliation, justice, institution-building, and damaged relationships. Lederach (1997) argues that lasting peace requires a long-term, inclusive process involving different sections of society, rather than depending exclusively on agreements among political or military leaders, with strong emphasis on reconciliation, relationships, and local capacities.

Social Cohesion and Livelihood Recovery

Social cohesion refers to the extent to which individuals and groups within a community can live together peacefully, maintain trust, and cooperate on shared concerns; conflict weakens this by generating fear, suspicion, and social division, so that rebuilding cohesion requires dialogue, inclusive participation, and transparent local governance. Livelihood recovery, in turn, focuses on restoring the productive assets and economic opportunities — farming, fishing, livestock, trading, and wage employment — that conflict disrupts through destroyed assets, restricted movement, and disrupted markets. Together, these concepts indicate that sustainable recovery from communal conflict requires more than restored security: it depends on rebuilt livelihoods and infrastructure, strengthened institutions, addressed grievances, and restored trust, so that affected communities can coexist peacefully and participate again in local development.

The Pattern of Inter-Communal Conflict in Nigeria

Nigeria's ethnic and cultural diversity has long encouraged interaction among communities through trade, marriage, migration, and cultural exchange, but these relationships have also been accompanied by competition over land, natural resources, political influence, traditional authority, and economic opportunity. Inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria take various forms, including land and chieftaincy disputes, farmer–herder conflict, boundary disputes, political competition, and contests over access to natural resources. Poverty, unemployment, weak local institutions, resource competition, ineffective dispute-resolution mechanisms, political interference, and the proliferation of small arms are widely identified factors that increase the likelihood of a local disagreement escalating into violence (Omitola, Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023; Johnson, 2023).

Communities in Bassa Local Government Area of Kogi State, where Ebira-Mozum and Bassa Kwomu communities have coexisted through long-standing economic and social ties, illustrate this wider pattern. Nigerian print and broadcast media have reported repeated episodes of violent confrontation involving these communities including clashes reported in 2016, renewed violence around 2018–2019 coinciding with attempts to resettle previously displaced residents, and a further outbreak in 2022 reportedly triggered by the killing of two individuals and followed by retaliatory attacks (Tribune; The Guardian, June 5 & 10, 2022). These media reports are noted here only as

illustrations of the wider dynamic under discussion, and not as verified findings of this paper: no primary data or documentary verification of casualty figures, property loss, or attribution of responsibility was collected for this review, and any such details would need to be independently confirmed through fieldwork before being treated as established fact. This gap is precisely why the paper closes by proposing a design for a dedicated empirical study of this locality.

Theoretical Framework

This review is anchored in Conflict Theory, which understands society as composed of groups whose interests, access to resources, and power may differ, and treats conflict as likely wherever groups compete for limited resources or perceive their interests or identity to be under threat. Coser (1956) notes that conflict can strengthen unity within a group while reinforcing divisions between groups, particularly where each side comes to view the other as a threat — a dynamic that runs through the causes reviewed above: competition over land and resources creates the underlying grievance; group identity converts individual disputes into collective ones; and the resulting perception of threat is precisely what sustains cycles of retaliation once violence has begun. Conflict Theory therefore does the analytical work of section 4 above: it is the lens through which competition, identity, and retaliation are read as a connected causal chain rather than as separate, unrelated causes.

Application and Relevance of Conflict Theory to the Study

The theory is relevant because it explains conflict as a natural outcome of differences in interests, unequal access to resources, competition for power, and the struggle to protect group interests. According to this perspective, conflict is likely to occur when different groups compete for scarce resources or when they believe that their interests, identity, or position within society are threatened. The theory is particularly applicable to the study of inter-communal conflict in Nigeria because many conflicts between neighbouring communities are associated with competition over land, natural resources, traditional authority, territorial boundaries, political influence, and other valuable resources. Conflict Theory helps to explain why disagreements that may initially involve a few individuals can gradually develop into wider communal confrontations. Once a dispute becomes connected to group identity, members of the affected communities may begin to see the conflict as a collective struggle, thereby encouraging solidarity within each group and increasing hostility between them.

The theory also provides a useful explanation for the recurring nature of inter-communal violence. When the underlying causes of a conflict, such as unresolved grievances, unequal access to resources, or disputes over authority, are not properly addressed, temporary peace may only suppress the immediate violence without removing the conditions that caused it. This situation can create a cycle in which an act of violence leads to retaliation, counter-retaliation, displacement, and the development of new grievances. In relation to post-conflict recovery, Conflict Theory demonstrates that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through security intervention alone. While security agencies may be necessary to stop immediate violence and protect lives and property, lasting recovery requires attention to the underlying interests and grievances that caused the conflict.

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The theory also supports the need for dialogue, reconciliation, and fair management of contested resources, effective conflict-resolution mechanisms, institutional strengthening, and the active participation of affected communities in the recovery process. Consequently, Conflict Theory is relevant to this study because it provides a clear framework for understanding the relationship between competition, group interests, identity, grievances, and recurring violence. It helps the study explain both the causes of inter-communal conflict and the importance of addressing its underlying drivers as part of any meaningful and sustainable post-conflict recovery strategy.

Causes of Inter-Communal Conflict

Drawing on the wider Nigerian literature, several interrelated causes recur across studies of communal conflict.

Competition over Land and Natural Resources

Because farming, fishing, and other livelihoods in many Nigerian communities depend substantially on access to land and water, disputes over these resources are a persistent source of tension, and become more volatile when interpreted through ethnic or communal identity (Omitola, Ayeni, Olatoye, Omitola, Akinrinde & Alo, 2023).

Historical Grievances and Group Identity

Past grievances become difficult to resolve once they are closely bound to communal identity: an incident involving individuals is easily perceived as an attack on an entire group, encouraging collective retaliation rather than individual accountability, and deepening the fear and suspicion that later obstruct reconciliation (Coser, 1956).

Retaliation and the Cycle of Violence

A recurring pattern in the Nigerian literature on communal violence is a cycle in which an initial incident produces a perceived injustice, which produces retaliation, then counter-retaliation, wider communal violence, displacement, and renewed grievance — a cycle that security intervention alone rarely interrupts, because it addresses the immediate violence without resolving the grievance that sustains it (Johnson, 2023).

Weak Traditional and Political Leadership Structures

Political authorities and traditional rulers can prevent and manage communal disputes through dialogue, mediation, and discouragement of retaliation, but their effectiveness depends on whether affected communities regard them as fair, neutral, and responsive; where this trust is absent or contested, leadership structures that might otherwise contain a dispute instead become part of it.

Weak Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms and Availability of Arms

The recurrence of communal violence across Nigeria suggests that many localities lack accessible mechanisms through which grievances can be raised and resolved before they turn violent, and

that the circulation of small arms increases the severity and lethality of disputes that might otherwise be contained through dialogue or traditional mediation (Omitola et al., 2023).

Effects of Inter-Communal Conflict

The Nigerian literature identifies a consistent set of consequences that flow from communal conflict, extending well beyond the immediate violence.

Loss of Life, Property, and Displacement

Communal conflicts in Nigeria have repeatedly produced deaths, injuries, and the destruction of homes and community structures, alongside the displacement of residents. Displacement interrupts access to farms, fishing grounds, education, and family and community networks, and its effects persist well beyond the initial flight, particularly where the causes of displacement remain unaddressed (Anierobi et al., 2024).

Disruption of Livelihoods

Farming and fishing are especially vulnerable to insecurity, since violence can prevent access to farms and fishing grounds; studies of conflict-affected Nigerian communities show that this reduces household income, affects food production, and disrupts local markets (Omitola et al., 2023).

Erosion of Trust and Social Relationships

Violence damages relationships built over generations. Fear, suspicion, and resentment can replace earlier cooperation in trade, social interaction, and intermarriage, and these effects tend to persist unless addressed through deliberate reconciliation, since memories of past attacks continue to shape how communities perceive one another.

Disrupted Services and Reduced Investment

Schools, health centres, and markets are affected when residents are displaced or movement becomes unsafe, and persistent insecurity discourages investment and delays economic recovery, producing a cycle in which conflict causes destruction and economic decline, which in turn produces unemployment, poverty, and further grievance — increasing the risk of renewed conflict (Omitola et al., 2023).

Post-Conflict Recovery: Lessons from Nigerian Experience

The Limits of Security-Centred Intervention

Government responses to communal conflict in Nigeria have typically centred on deploying security personnel to contain violence and protect lives and property. Such intervention is necessary during active conflict, but the literature is consistent that it does not by itself resolve the underlying grievances, resource disputes, and damaged relationships that produce renewed violence (Johnson, 2023). The return of displaced persons illustrates this limitation clearly: physical return does not automatically restore livelihoods or rebuild trust, and where insecurity

and unresolved grievance persist, resettlement can be followed by renewed tension rather than stability.

Dialogue, Reconciliation, and Livelihood Restoration

Community dialogue addresses mistrust and competing narratives by providing a structured opportunity for affected communities to discuss grievances and develop mutually acceptable terms for coexistence, consistent with Lederach's (1997) emphasis on relationship-building and local participation. Livelihood restoration — helping affected households resume farming, fishing, and trading — is equally central, since conflict typically strips households of their main income source, and restored livelihoods contribute directly to household welfare and community stability.

Integrated Recovery Programming

Experience from other conflict-affected parts of Nigeria points toward integrated recovery programming that combines infrastructure rehabilitation with livelihood assistance, basic services, and social cohesion initiatives. The World Bank's Multi-Sectoral Crisis Recovery Project and relevant UNDP programming illustrate this integrated approach, combining livelihood support with skills development, local governance, and community security (World Bank, 2017; UNDP, 2021). These programmes were not implemented specifically in Kogi State or Bassa Local Government Area, and are cited here only as illustrations of an approach, not as evidence of what has occurred in any particular Nigerian locality; nonetheless, they offer transferable lessons for designing recovery strategies elsewhere.

Institutional and Stakeholder Roles in Recovery

Sustainable recovery from communal conflict in Nigeria depends on coordinated action across several levels. The federal government provides the overall security, emergency-management, and humanitarian framework; state governments coordinate assistance to affected communities and support reconstruction, livelihood restoration, and early-warning mechanisms; and local government councils, because of their proximity to affected communities, are well placed to facilitate communication among stakeholders and ensure that recovery programming reflects local needs. Traditional institutions contribute cultural authority and local knowledge to mediation and reconciliation, while civil society organisations support peacebuilding through dialogue, peace education, and livelihood programming.

The literature further emphasises that meaningful recovery depends on the participation of those directly affected. Traditional rulers can encourage dialogue and discourage retaliation; women, who often bear disproportionate social and economic costs of conflict, and youth, who may otherwise be drawn into violence or serve as agents of peace, both need clearly defined roles in recovery programming; and religious leaders can promote reconciliation and discourage messages that deepen communal division. Farmers and fishers, whose livelihoods are most directly affected by disputes over land and water, should be directly involved in discussions of resource management and boundaries.

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Discussion

Generally, the literature reviewed above supports three linked conclusions. First, consistent with Conflict Theory, the causes of inter-communal conflict in Nigeria are structural and relational rather than simply ethnic: they lie in competition over resources and authority, in the ease with which individual disputes are read as collective ones, and in the weakness of local mechanisms for resolving disagreement before it turns violent. Second, the consequences of such conflict displacement, loss of livelihood, and eroded trust tend to outlast the immediate violence, which is why recovery cannot be measured simply by the cessation of fighting. Third, consistent with Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding perspective, durable recovery depends on addressing both dimensions together: rebuilding the relationships and local institutions that Conflict Theory identifies as having broken down, while also restoring the security, livelihoods, and services that communities need to function.

This synthesis suggests that a coordinated recovery framework for Nigerian communities affected by inter-communal conflict should combine security and early-warning measures with reconciliation and dialogue, fair and transparent management of contested resources, livelihood restoration, infrastructure rehabilitation, and inclusive governance that involves traditional rulers, women, youth, religious leaders, and civil society alongside government agencies. Whether such a framework holds for any specific locality, however, is an empirical question that this conceptual review cannot answer on its own; it requires direct engagement with the residents of that locality, which is the gap the final section addresses.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the Nigerian and comparative literature on inter-communal conflict and post-conflict recovery, using Conflict Theory to explain why such conflicts arise and recur, and Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding perspective to explain what durable recovery requires. The review indicates that competition over resources and authority, group identity, and weak local conflict-resolution mechanisms combine to produce cycles of violence and retaliation, and that the resulting displacement, loss of livelihood, and eroded trust persist well beyond the fighting itself. It further indicates that security intervention, while necessary, is not sufficient: durable recovery depends on reconciliation, livelihood restoration, institutional strengthening, and the inclusive participation of traditional rulers, women, youth, religious leaders, and civil society.

Recommendations

The recommendations drawn from the paper's argument include:

1. Government intervention should pair the deployment of security personnel with deliberate efforts at dialogue, reconciliation, and grievance resolution, since security presence alone stops violence without removing the conditions that cause it to recur.
2. Recovery programmes should prioritize helping affected households resume farming, fishing, and trading, since restored economic activity is central to household welfare and to preventing renewed grievance and instability.

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3. Traditional and political leadership structures need to be made more accessible, fair, and trusted so that disputes can be raised and resolved before they escalate into communal violence; this includes fair and transparent management of contested land and resources.
4. Traditional rulers, women, youth, religious leaders, and civil society organizations should be given clearly defined roles in peacebuilding and recovery programming, alongside government agencies, rather than leaving recovery to be designed and delivered top-down.

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