THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INSECURITY IN BENUE STATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/ksr.v3.i3.21

Abstract

This paper examines the political economy of insecurity in Benue State, Nigeria, between 2020 and 2025, adopting political economy and human security frameworks. The study investigates the structural drivers of violence, including land disputes, weak governance, climate-induced migration, and ethnic tensions, which together fuel recurrent farmer–herder conflicts. Using a qualitative design, through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary sources such as government reports and newspapers, the study investigate the political and economic drivers of insecurity in Benue State, examine the manifestations and dynamics of insecurity in the region, assess the impact of insecurity on sustainable development in Benue State, and evaluate the effectiveness of state and non-state responses to insecurity. Findings reveal that insecurity in Benue is systemic rather than episodic, with manifestations ranging from mass killings and displacement to the collapse of agricultural productivity. Over 500,000 persons were displaced during the period, while food production and rural livelihoods declined sharply, undermining the state's role as Nigeria's "Food Basket." Although state policies, such as the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (2017), and security deployments have been implemented, responses remain largely reactive and insufficient. Non-state interventions provide localized relief but often fail to address underlying structural issues. The paper concludes that sustainable peace in Benue requires institutional reforms, equitable land governance, inclusive dialogue, and integrated development strategies.

Keywords: Political economy, insecurity, farmer–herder conflict, Benue State, sustainable development, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Nigeria, despite its status as Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, continues to grapple with a profound and multifaceted security crisis that has become a defining characteristic of its contemporary socio-political landscape (Adeparusi, 2025). This crisis is not the result of isolated incidents but rather a complex and interconnected web of security challenges that include terrorism, armed banditry, widespread kidnapping, and persistent ethno-religious conflicts (Eneji & Agri, 2025; Smith, 2022). These threats have undermined national stability, disrupted social cohesion, and posed severe risks to the safety and wellbeing of millions of Nigerians. The manifestations of

insecurity in Nigeria have resulted in significant socioeconomic consequences, aggravating long-standing issues such as food insecurity, unemployment, poverty, and inequality (Eneji & Agri, 2025; Johnson, 2021). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023), insecurity has directly impacted economic growth by diverting government resources from critical development sectors to security operations and emergency humanitarian responses. This redirection has stifled investments in agriculture, education, infrastructure, and industrialization, sectors vital for sustainable development and poverty alleviation.

Analyzing Nigeria's insecurity through the lens of a political economy framework is essential for understanding its root causes. This perspective emphasizes that insecurity is deeply embedded in systemic issues including political choices, governance failures, institutional decay, and the unequal distribution of economic power and resources (Eneji & Agri, 2025; Adeparusi, 2025; Olaniyan, 2020). It challenges simplistic notions that frame insecurity merely as a law-and-order issue, instead positioning it as a symptom of broader structural and political-economic dysfunctions. For instance, corruption, mismanagement of public funds, and weak state institutions have eroded public trust and compromised the government's capacity to provide security and basic services (Adeparusi, 2025; Transparency International, 2023).

The state of violence and conflict has brought Nigeria to a critical juncture, significantly impairing its ability to pursue a sustainable development trajectory (Eneji & Agri, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Resources that could have otherwise been invested in modernizing agriculture—the backbone of Nigeria's economy, developing industrial capacity, and creating employment opportunities have instead been consumed by escalating security budgets and efforts to rehabilitate displaced and affected populations (Eneji & Agri, 2025; UNHCR, 2023). The ongoing insecurity has also exacerbated internal displacement, creating humanitarian crises that strain social services and regional stability (UNHCR, 2023; Adepoju, 2019). Furthermore, the persistent insecurity in Nigeria is fuelled by a complex interplay of poverty, corruption, bad governance, ethnic divisions, and competition over scarce resources (Eneji & Agri, 2025; Okeke, 2022). This multifaceted crisis poses a grave threat not only to human security but also to the economic and political viability of the Nigerian state. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing holistic policy responses that can address the root causes and promote long-term peace and sustainable development.

2. Statement of Problem

Benue State, known as Nigeria's "Food Basket," has increasingly become a hotspot for violent conflict and insecurity, particularly between 2020 and 2025. This period has witnessed a disturbing intensification of herder-farmer clashes, communal violence, and targeted attacks on rural communities. The root causes of this insecurity are deeply embedded in the political and economic structure of the region, land ownership disputes, weak governance, climate-induced migration, and ethnic polarization have all combined

to create a fragile and volatile environment. These challenges are compounded by the failure of state institutions to effectively mediate disputes or enforce laws designed to mitigate conflict, such as the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law enacted in 2017.

Recent events underscore the gravity of the situation. In June 2025, over 200 people were reportedly killed and more than 6,000 displaced in coordinated attacks on several communities in Benue State, including Yelewata and Daudu in Guma LGA (Vanguard, 2025a; Vanguard, 2025b). One of the most horrific incidents occurred at a displacement camp in Yelewata, where suspected herdsmen attacked and set fire to buildings housing internally displaced persons. Other villages, such as Udei and Tse Ivokor, also suffered deadly raids in which farmers were killed while working on their land (Vanguard, 2025a; Guardian, 2025). These attacks not only caused loss of life and property but also deepened the humanitarian crisis, with thousands forced to flee their homes, agricultural production disrupted, and entire communities plunged into fear and instability. Public protests in Makurdi following the massacres reflect growing frustration and desperation among citizens, with cries such as "Listen to us… please stop Benue killings!" expressing the population's sense of abandonment (Vanguard, 2025a).

This situation poses significant threats to sustainable development in the state. The disruption of agriculture undermines food security both locally and nationally, given Benue's critical role in Nigeria's food supply chain. Widespread displacement has eroded local economies, strained social services, and increased dependence on humanitarian aid. Insecurity has also deterred investment and weakened the capacity of local governments to plan or deliver long-term development. Yet, despite the growing severity of the crisis, there remains a lack of in-depth academic analysis on how the structural political and economic conditions of the state have contributed to this insecurity and how effective existing responses have been in reversing these trends.

Thus, there is an urgent need to explore the political economy of insecurity in Benue State, examining the interplay of governance failures, economic pressures, and environmental stressors, to understand the root causes and consequences of the violence between 2020 and 2025. Such an inquiry is essential for developing more effective policy responses that can restore stability, protect livelihoods, and advance sustainable development in one of Nigeria's most strategically important regions. Importantly, this study provides critical insights into the underlying political and economic factors driving insecurity in Benue State, a key region in Nigeria's Middle Belt. By examining the recent escalation of herder-farmer conflicts and their impact on agriculture and local development, the research highlights the broader challenges to sustainable development posed by insecurity. The findings aim to inform policymakers, security agencies, and development practitioners on effective, evidence-based strategies to address the root causes of violence and promote lasting peace and economic stability in the region.

3. Conceptual Clarification

Understanding the Concept of Security and Insecurity

The concept of security is fundamental to the existence and effective functioning of any state. As famously noted by Hobbes, the primary duty of the state is to ensure the safety and protection of its citizens, thereby justifying its own legitimacy and raison d'être (Gaskin, 1996). Security is not a static or singular condition; rather, it is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic state that involves a government's capacity to detect, manage, and counter various threats to its core values, interests, and the wellbeing of its populace (Omede, 2012). McGrew (1988) further expands this notion by identifying two essential pillars upon which national security rests: firstly, the maintenance and protection of the socioeconomic order in the face of internal and external threats; and secondly, the promotion and preservation of an international order that minimizes potential risks to the state's domestic values and political stability. These pillars underscore that security is as much about protecting internal social cohesion and economic stability as it is about managing external geopolitical threats.

However, modern conceptualizations of security have evolved well beyond the traditional military-centric paradigm. Robert Strange McNamara, the former United States Secretary of Defence, argued that security is not solely reliant on military presence, hardware, and force but also involves proactive measures such as scientific research, comprehensive stakeholder impact assessments, and inclusive participatory development initiatives (McNamara, 1966). This holistic approach is echoed by Greenfall and James (2009), who identified seven crucial components of security that encompass economic security, health security, food security, environmental security, political security, community security, and personal security. This broader conceptualization recognizes that the safety and resilience of individuals and communities depend on a wide array of factors beyond just the absence of armed conflict. Building upon this framework, contemporary studies emphasize the inclusion of communication and internet security as vital components, especially in the digital age where cyber threats have become increasingly prominent (Ijirshar, Tyovenda, & Terkimbi, 2025). Moreover, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) popularized the concept of human security, which shifts the focus from the state as the referent object to the individual, advocating for the protection of people's fundamental freedoms and well-being (UNDP, 1994). Human security highlights the importance of safeguarding individuals from both violent conflicts and socio-economic vulnerabilities, thereby broadening the discourse on security to encompass social justice and human development.

Insecurity, conversely, refers to the pervasive state of fear, threat, and vulnerability that individuals, groups, or entire societies face (Saliu, Luqman, & Abdullahi, 2007). It is defined broadly as the absence or insufficiency of safety and protection (Beland, 2005), manifesting most visibly in physical insecurity, such as

violence and armed conflict. This visible insecurity often serves as a catalyst that exacerbates other forms of insecurity, including economic deprivation, social instability, and political disenfranchisement (Achumba, Ighomereho, & Akpor-Robaro, 2013). In the Nigerian context, insecurity is not only a threat to human lives but also a driver of broader societal dysfunction. Ajodo, Adebanjoko, and Ugwuoke (2014) highlight how insecurity can provoke an arms race and militarization as the state and non-state actors strive to defend their interests, further intensifying cycles of violence and instability.

Nigeria's security crisis is both profound and multifaceted, affecting nearly every aspect of national life. The Global Peace Index (GPI, 2020) ranked Nigeria 148th out of 163 countries globally in terms of peacefulness, illustrating the country's precarious security situation. More alarmingly, Nigeria ranks as the third most terrorized nation worldwide, trailing only Iraq and Afghanistan (GPI, 2020), which points to the severity of violent extremism and insurgency challenges. Demographically, Nigeria is a youthful nation with an estimated population of nearly 199 million people, of which 65% are youths (Worldometers, 2019). This demographic reality has significant implications, as the youth population is disproportionately affected by unemployment, which stood at 23.10% nationally in 2019, with the 20-35 age group experiencing an even higher rate of 36.5% (Trading Economics, 2019). Such high levels of youth unemployment have been linked to increased susceptibility to recruitment by armed groups and criminal networks, fuelling insecurity (Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025; Ifedayo, 2023).

3.2 Implications of Insecurity on Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The Nigerian state continues to grapple with deep-rooted socio-political challenges, including ethnic and religious conflicts, which undermine national unity and cohesion (Egbefo, 2015; Obaro, 2011). These conflicts often have historical antecedents intertwined with issues of marginalization, unequal resource distribution, and competition for political power (Anyidoho, 2009). Attah (2011) notes that insecurity is a direct manifestation of these social, political, and economic dynamics, where scarcity, poverty, and environmental degradation compound the crisis (Crammer, 2002). The complex interplay between these factors creates an environment conducive to recurring cycles of violence and instability.

One of the most pressing dimensions of Nigeria's security challenges is insurgency. According to the United States Department of Defence (2007), insurgency is an organized movement that seeks to overthrow a constituted government through subversive means, including armed conflict (as cited in Hellesen, 2008). These insurgent groups often aim to control power, resources, or seek inclusion in governance structures through violent means (Siegel, 2007). In Nigeria, this definition is directly relevant to groups like Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen militias, whose activities have devastated communities, disrupted livelihoods, and displaced thousands. The impacts of insurgency on Nigeria's development,

particularly its critical agricultural sector, are severe and well-documented. Adebisi, Azeez, and Oyediji (2017) found that the Boko Haram insurgency significantly reduced the agricultural sector's contribution to GDP, undermining food security and economic stability. Similarly, Ojogho and Egware (2015) demonstrated that transitions from peaceful conditions to insurgency due to Boko Haram, Niger-Delta militancy, and Fulani herdsmen attacks resulted in a substantial decline in agricultural output, with Boko Haram alone decreasing agriculture's GDP share by 17.56%. Moreover, insurgencies have caused declines in food production—an average drop of 4.69 tonnes linked to Fulani herdsmen conflicts—further exacerbating food insecurity (Ojogho & Egware, 2015). The environmental consequences, such as increased CO2 emissions linked to these conflicts, also indicate how insecurity harms sustainable development (Ojogho & Egware, 2015).

The underlying factors fuelling conflict and insecurity across Africa, and Nigeria in particular, are multifaceted and deeply entrenched. Anyidoho (2009) outlines that these include systemic marginalization, inequitable distribution of national resources, ethnic and religious divisions, poverty, unemployment, corruption, and the enduring negative legacies of colonialism. The collapse of traditional structures that previously mediated inter-ethnic relations has intensified competition and conflict over access to land, political power, and economic opportunities (Onov, 2024). These complex and interlinked challenges have created fragile states and communities that remain vulnerable to violence and insecurity, with serious implications for sustainable development and national stability (Ijirshar, Tyovenda, & Terkimbi, 2025; Shaibume & Ayangealu, 2025).

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two major theoretical frameworks: Political Economy Theory and Human Security Theory.

Political Economy Theory

The Political Economy Theory, as a framework for analyzing conflict and insecurity, was notably advanced by scholars such as Paul Collier, Christopher Cramer, and David Keen, but its roots can be traced to classical thinkers like Karl Marx, who emphasized the centrality of material interests and class struggles in shaping social relations and political outcomes. In its modern form, political economy theory views conflict not merely as a breakdown of order but as a product of competing interests, structural inequalities, and the manipulation of resources and identities by powerful actors. Paul Collier (2000), for example, introduced the influential "Greed vs. Grievance" model, arguing that civil conflicts are often economically motivated, even when they appear ideologically or ethnically driven. Cramer (2002) reinforces this view by asserting that economic and environmental crises are deeply embedded in social and political contexts. Keen (2008) similarly argues that violent conflicts, far from being chaotic, often serve rational purposes for certain groups, especially those who profit from instability.

The key assumptions of the Political Economy Theory include the belief that conflict arises from competition over scarce resources, economic disenfranchisement, state failure, and the uneven distribution of political power. It assumes that actors in a conflict—whether state officials, rebel groups, or economic elites, are rational agents who pursue their interests within a structurally unequal system. The theory also presumes that institutions can be deliberately weakened or manipulated to serve the interests of dominant groups, leading to chronic insecurity and underdevelopment. Another fundamental assumption is that identity (ethnic, religious, regional) is often instrumentalized by elites to mobilize support or justify violence, rather than being the root cause of conflict itself. These assumptions shift the focus of analysis from individual grievances or cultural misunderstandings to broader questions of who controls resources, who benefits from conflict, and how political power is distributed.

In the context of Benue State, Nigeria, the Political Economy Theory offers critical insights into the dynamics of insecurity, particularly the herder–farmer conflicts that have plagued the region in recent years. The theory helps to unpack how land disputes, economic marginalization, youth unemployment, and climate-induced migration intersect with weak governance structures, ethnic polarization, and the instrumentalization of state policies to create and sustain conflict. For instance, the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (2017), while ostensibly a legal response to violent clashes, can also be understood through this lens as a politically strategic move shaped by elite interests, rather than a purely neutral or technical solution (Ioryue, 2024; Ifedayo, 2023). Furthermore, the inability of state institutions to enforce the law effectively reflects the kind of institutional weakness that the theory identifies as a driver of insecurity. By highlighting the interdependence between economic structures, political interests, and violent outcomes, the Political Economy Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both the root causes and the persistent nature of insecurity in Benue and similar conflict-prone regions in Nigeria.

4.2 Human Security Theory

The Human Security Theory was first formally introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its landmark 1994 Human Development Report. It marked a paradigm shift from traditional, state-centric notions of security which focus primarily on territorial integrity and military power to a more people-centered approach that emphasizes the protection and empowerment of individuals. Prominent scholars such as Amartya Sen and Sabina Alkire further developed the concept by linking it to broader human development concerns, including poverty, inequality, and social justice. According to the UNDP, security should not be limited to defending borders but should encompass freedom from fear, want, and indignity. This broadened definition has made human security a crucial framework for understanding the complex and interrelated threats that individuals face in today's world ranging from armed conflict to hunger, disease,

environmental degradation, and political oppression.

The key assumptions of Human Security Theory include the idea that the individual not the state is the primary referent of security. It assumes that threats to human security are multidimensional and often interlinked, meaning that economic insecurity, political instability, health crises, and violence are not separate issues but parts of a broader continuum of vulnerability. Another central assumption is that development and security are mutually reinforcing that is, a society cannot be secure without development, and vice versa. The theory also contends that security must be proactive, not just reactive, and must include preventive measures, local participation, and inclusive governance. Finally, human security is seen as universal applicable to all people everywhere, rather than just populations in conflict zones emphasizing a global responsibility to safeguard human dignity.

In relation to this study, Human Security Theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing the impact of insecurity on sustainable development in Benue State, Nigeria, especially in sectors like agriculture, livelihoods, and community wellbeing. The theory allows the study to go beyond the statistics of conflict and displacement, focusing instead on how insecurity disrupts daily life through loss of farmland, internal displacement, hunger, loss of income, and restricted access to healthcare and education. In Benue, widely known as Nigeria's "Food Basket," recurrent herder–farmer conflicts have not only led to deaths and displacement but have severely undermined food security and local economic resilience, especially among women and children. This aligns with the human security perspective that emphasizes freedom from want and fear as essential conditions for development. Furthermore, the failure of security agencies and humanitarian interventions to adequately protect vulnerable populations highlights the need for people-centered responses and more inclusive policymaking, both of which are central to the human security framework. As such, this theory complements the Political Economy approach by shifting focus to the lived experiences of affected populations and the long-term developmental consequences of insecurity.

5. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a political economy approach to explore the political and economic drivers of insecurity and their impact on sustainable development in Benue State, Nigeria. Focusing on the period between 2020 and 2025, the study targets Benue because of its strategic role as Nigeria's "Food Basket" and its vulnerability to herder-farmer conflicts and related violence. Primary data are gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders, including displaced persons, local farmers, community leaders, government officials, security personnel, and representatives from civil society organizations. Participants are selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight. Secondary data complement this through official reports, academic literature, and newspaper

articles from reputable Nigerian sources *such as* Daily Trust*,* The Guardian Nigeria*, and* Premium Times*.* Data analysis utilizes thematic content analysis to identify patterns related to governance, resource competition, and security challenges, anchored within the Political Economy and Human Security theoretical frameworks.

6. Discussion of Findings

Political and Economic Drivers of Insecurity

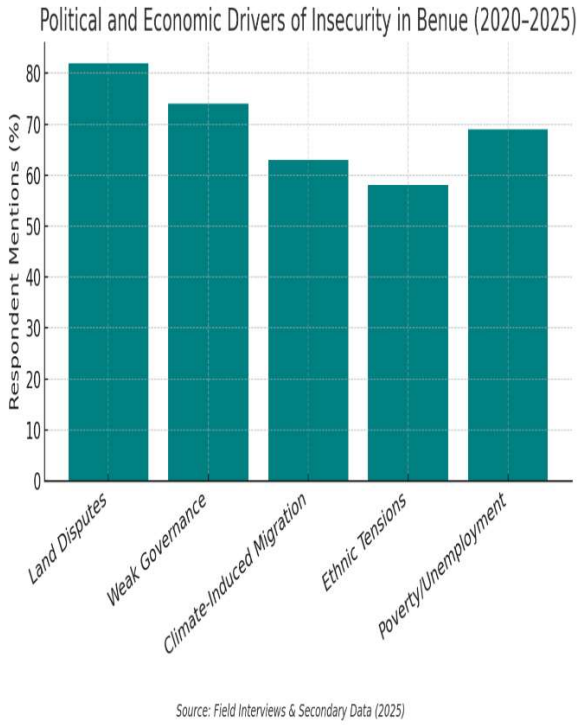
Agrarian livelihoods in Benue have long coexisted with pastoralist herders, but desertification and population growth in northern Nigeria have pushed Fulani herders southward in search of grazing (HumAngle, 2023a). From interviews conducted, land competition emerged as a dominant theme. One farmer lamented, *"Our fields are no longer safe, herders roam where they will, and the law offers us little protection."* The absence of clear land-tenure records or grazing reserves amplifies these disputes, as noted by analysts: *"the absence of clear land tenure policies… often leads to encroachment on local farmlands, deepening tensions"* (HumAngle, 2023a). The state's 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition law was intended to regulate grazing, but enforcement has been weak (Daily Trust, 2023a). Respondents blamed corrupt or ineffective local governance, noting that political patronage and under-resourced institutions fail to resolve disputes. For example, one community leader observed, *"We set up a farmers' vigilante, but without state support we cannot stop the next raid."* The Para-Mallam Peace Foundation, a local NGO, similarly argues that fair implementation of anti-grazing laws requires registered land records for all parties (HumAngle, 2023a).

Overlapping claims to farmland and water are chronic. Farmers cite declining fallow land, while herders cite shrinking pasture. Analysts attribute the crisis partly to environmental pressures (climate change, desertification, population rise) that *"have rendered many rural communities… ungovernable"* (HumAngle, 2023a). The Benue government's peace commissioner echoes this, urging that *"all lands be registered and documented"* so that ranches and farming can be fairly allocated (HumAngle, 2023a). Similarly, interviewees pointed to weak state capacity. Security forces often respond only after attacks, and political leaders are blamed for inconsistent action. One local elder said, *"Our governor prays with us after a massacre, then goes silent."* Indeed, media reports note that even federal security chiefs' visits have yielded little concrete protection (Daily Trust, 2023b; Daily Trust, 2023c). Broadly, the vacuum left by inadequate policing and unresolved legal disputes allows armed groups to operate with impunity.

While competition over resources is primary, underlying ethnic and religious divides amplify tensions. Many Benue farmers are from the Tiv and Idoma ethnic groups (mostly Christian), whereas the incoming herders are predominantly Fulani (mostly Muslim). Historical mistrust and retaliatory cycles were frequently mentioned: for example, a Tiv community leader commented *"This is not just about cows – it's about who belongs here."* Thematic analysis shows that such

identities reinforce perceptions of exclusion and vengeance, continuing decades-old rivalries. Furthermore, chronic poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods also drive conflict. Interviewees noted high youth unemployment, which offers incentives for youth to join armed vigilantes or militias. Earlier academic research on Benue observes that insecurity *"restricts access to farmlands, [causes] displacement of farming communities, and disruption of supply chains, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty"* (Aondowase et al., 2024). In sum, the political economy of Benue features competing land uses, failing institutions, and demographic pressures. These drivers emerged repeatedly in the study as root causes of the escalating violence as represented below:

Figure 1:



Source: Field Interviews & Secondary Data (2025)

Manifestations and Dynamics of Insecurity

Violence in Benue State intensified evidently after 2020, with nearly every rural area affected. Data from the study corroborate open-source reports of mass casualty attacks. For example, Reuters reported that *"42 people have been killed in four communities"* in May 2025 (The Guardian, 2025a), and local media documented roughly 200 deaths in the June 2025 Yelwata massacre (Daily Trust, 2023b). Between April and June 2025 alone, an estimated 270 people were killed across 10 LGAs in successive raids (Daily Trust, 2023c). Amnesty International figures similarly place Benue's death toll at 6,896 killed in the previous two years (Daily Trust, 2023d), the highest in Nigeria for that period. Nationwide, an independent database recorded 2,347 casualties in 359 farmer-herder incidents from 2020–2024 (The Guardian, 2025b), underscoring that Benue is a focal point of this crisis.

In many communities every civilian seems at risk. A Gwer West official told press that *"we are still recovering corpses"* days after one attack (The Guardian, 2025c). Likewise, Amnesty and UN data indicate widespread displacement – on the order of hundreds of thousands of IDPs within the state. For instance, a June 2024 IOM report cited over 500,000 registered IDPs in Benue (spread across some 41 camps) (HumAngle, 2024a), whereas other sources claim figures up to 1.5 million (Adejo et al., 2024).

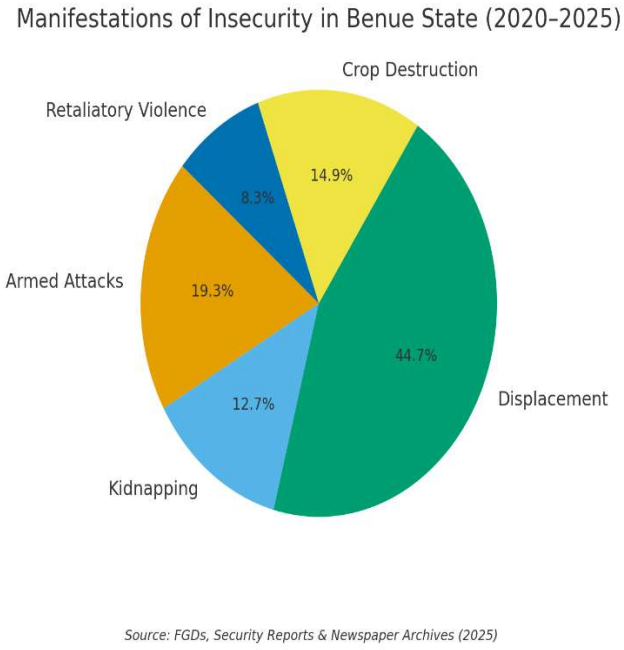
Figure 2: Aerial View of an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in Benue State, Nigeria



Source: Adapted from humanitarian field documentation, Benue State (2025).

In these camps, basic facilities are stretched thin. The aerial image above shows the newly built "Mega Camp" in Gbajimba (Guma LGA) as of late 2024, part of a state effort to consolidate thousands of displaced persons (HumAngle, 2024a). Despite such efforts, living conditions remain harsh: one camp resident lamented, *"When we arrived at the camp, we didn't receive any aid for weeks… we had to work on farms just to eat,"* illustrating that many IDPs now rely on meagre farm labour for survival (HumAngle, 2024b). Surveying the conflict's pattern, the study notes that attacks have been both widespread and systematic: For instance, mid-April 2025 saw a concentrated wave in the Sankera (Katsina-Ala/Logo/Ukum) area (83 fatalities in five days) and periodic raids elsewhere (e.g., Otukpo LGA, 16 killed between April–May 2025) (Daily Trust, 2023e). Assaults often target rural villages and farmlands, and victims include women and children (The Guardian, 2025d). The study also observed that violence tends to spiral because a single ambush can provoke reprisal raids. One journalist noted villagers forming militias after assaults, and researcher's interviews confirmed this cycle – as one victim put it, *"They kill our families, then we chase them next time with guns of our own."* Such dynamics (documented also in Plateau and Nasarawa) mean insecurity ripples through the region.

Figure 3:

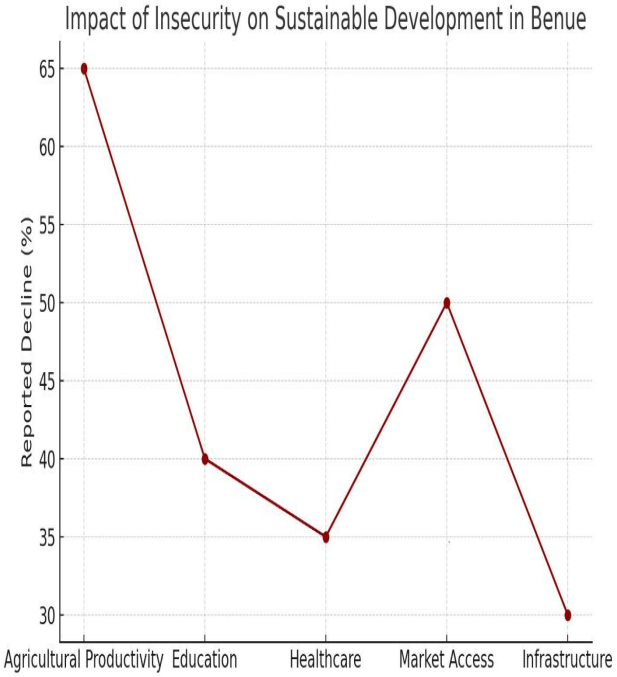


Impact on Sustainable Development

The toll on Benue's development has been severe. Benue long nicknamed the "Food Basket of the Nation" for its contributions of yams, maize, soybeans,

and other staples – has seen agricultural output plummet. Quantitative studies indicate a "significant decline in agricultural productivity, marked by reduced crop yields, livestock losses, and abandoned farmlands" due to insecurity (Aondowase et al., 2024). Research fieldwork confirms this: nearly all local farmers reported finding cultivation (e.g., cassava, rice, and tomato) too dangerous in the past year. Interrupted planting and harvest have immediate food-security effects: scarce harvests drive up market prices, compounding national inflation. One NGO analysis warns that conflict-driven farm abandonment "decreased food availability and [has] increasing prices," worsening hunger (Preprints, 2025). In practice, displaced farmers send dependents back to other states to seek work. A female FGD participant noted that *"children now beg or drop out of school because there's no food at home."* Many IDPs spoke of having lost entire seasonal incomes. As one camp resident explained, *"We ate well before the attack…we sent our kids to school. Now everything is a struggle"* (HumAngle, 2024b).

Economic disruptions extend beyond food. Rural markets and supply chains are fractured: trucking crops to cities is riskier and costlier, and investors shy away. A recent review observed that insecurity "displaces rural communities, reduced farming activities, [and] leading to a decline in crop yields and overall development" (Preprints, 2025). We saw this firsthand: local clinics and schools were closed in conflict zones, and many public works (road maintenance, electrification projects) have stalled. In sum, Benue's human development indicators are eroding as violence upends livelihoods. Observers warn that without peace, decades of growth will be reversed. One government official lamented that *"our roads, schools and hospitals lie empty on market days, because people won't travel in fear"* (The Guardian, 2025e). All these impacts, from abandoned fields and hungry children to capital flight, underscore how insecurity is now a direct brake on the state's sustainable development prospects (The Guardian, 2025e; Preprints, 2025).



Source: Stakeholder Interviews & NGO Reports (2025)

7. Conclusion

This study examined the political economy of insecurity in Benue State (2020–2025) through political economy and human security lenses. Insecurity was found to be driven by land disputes, weak governance, ethnic grievances, economic marginalization, and climate-induced migration, all reinforcing cycles of farmer–herder conflict. The manifestations of

killings, displacement, and collapsing rural economies highlight the crisis's multidimensional nature. With over half a million IDPs, declining agricultural output, and weakened social services, insecurity has severely constrained sustainable development. Current state and federal responses remain inadequate, often reactive rather than structural, while some non-state interventions risk worsening fragility. The Benue case shows that insecurity in Nigeria's Middle Belt is a structural political economy problem. Lasting solutions require institutional reform, fair resource governance, and inclusive dialogue, not just short-term military or humanitarian measures.

8. Recommendations

To effectively respond to the perennial insecurity and ensure sustainable development in Benue State, a coordinated and holistic strategy must be pursued. There needs to be a complete land registration and cadastral system undertaken by the state that will supplant competing claims between herders and farmers that represent the core of most bloody conflicts. Community-based, adequately funded ranching programmes must be instituted to prevent open grazing conflicts and ensure stable rural livelihoods. Strengthening the capacity of security agencies with improved funding, training, and equipment is also necessary to ensure the provision of effective protection of communities.

Early warning and rapid response systems should be established in high-risk local government units to detect and deal with potential conflicts in their incipient phase before such conflicts become full-blown. These systems should be backed by robust accountability structures to ensure that security forces act responsibly and transparently. Institutionalizing community peace committees composed of farmers, herders, traditional leaders, and religious leaders will build confidence and sustain local peace efforts. NGOs, interfaith communities, and civil society groups are also important neutral facilitators in facilitating mediations of conflict and de-polarization of ethnic and religious tensions by means of continuous dialogue.

Economic and social interventions are no less imperative. Training and vocational education, youth employment, and support to enterprise development will generate diversified incomes and reduce reliance on agriculture and pastoralism. Infrastructure improvement in the affected areas, including roads, schools, and health centres, will not only result in improved service delivery but also restore people's confidence and drive post-war recovery. Internally displaced persons (IDP) camp living conditions should be upgraded through proper provision of food, medicine, education, and psychosocial interventions. Internally displaced persons must also be brought into long-term development planning to avert extended displacement and dependency.

Finally, existing state-level laws, such as the 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition Act, must be reconciled with federal agriculture and security policy in order to assist in the avoidance of confrontations and confusion in implementation. Collateral security operations across Middle Belt states are also crucial to the prevention of cross-

border attacks and stabilizing the area. Through these efforts, a sustainable basis of peace, security, and development can be achieved for Benue State, the broader region, and Nigeria.

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