The Role of Non-State Actors in Modern Conflicts: A Case Study of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Non-state actors (NSAs) have emerged as critical players in the landscape of modern conflicts, challenging traditional state-centric models of warfare and security. This paper examines the roles of non-state actors in contemporary conflicts, focusing on their motivations, methods, and impacts across various regions, with specific reference to Nigeria. Non-state actors, which include insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, private military contractors (PMCs), civil society organizations, and criminal networks, operate outside formal state structures, often exploiting governance gaps, socio-economic inequalities, and political instability to further their objectives. These actors engage in asymmetric warfare, utilizing unconventional tactics such as terrorism, guerilla warfare, and cyber-attacks, which blur the lines between combatants and civilians.

In Nigeria, non-state actors like Boko Haram, Niger Delta militants, and rural bandit groups have significantly shaped the country's conflict dynamics. Boko Haram's violent insurgency in the northeast exemplifies the role of ideologically motivated groups seeking to undermine state authority, while Niger Delta militants have employed sabotage and violence in pursuit of greater control over regional resources. The increasing involvement of non-state actors in Nigeria's conflicts underscores broader global trends, where NSAs challenge state monopoly on violence, influence conflict outcomes, and complicate traditional approaches to conflict resolution.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Mary Kaldor's "New Wars" theory and Bruce Hoffman's studies on terrorism, this paper explores how non-state actors have transformed both the nature of warfare and the mechanisms of global security. It highlights the diverse motivations of NSAs, ranging from political and ideological goals to economic incentives, and examines how these groups leverage modern technology, including social media, to recruit members, propagate their ideologies, and coordinate attacks. Furthermore, the paper addresses the implications of non-state actors' activities for state sovereignty, international security, and conflict resolution, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies that integrate state and non-state actors in peacebuilding efforts.

This study concludes that the evolving role of non-state actors in modern conflicts necessitates a reevaluation of traditional conflict management and security policies. States must engage both violent and non-violent non-state actors in efforts to mitigate conflict and restore stability, particularly in regions with weak governance structures and high levels of socio-political discontent.

Keywords: Non-State Actors, Conflict, Nigeria, Insurgency, Boko Haram, Niger Delta, Banditry

1. Introduction

The nature of conflict has evolved significantly in the post-Cold War era, with non-state actors (NSAs) becoming increasingly prominent in both national and international conflicts. Traditionally, warfare and conflict were primarily defined by interactions between sovereign states, with governments holding the monopoly on the use of legitimate force. However, in the current global landscape, non-state actors—including insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, militias, private military contractors, criminal syndicates, and civil society organizations—have become key participants in conflict dynamics, often with far-reaching consequences for state sovereignty, regional stability, and international security.

Non-state actors operate outside the formal structures of government and state military forces, but they have become highly influential in shaping modern warfare and political violence. They challenge the traditional state-centric paradigm of conflict, as articulated in Clausewitz's classical theory of war, which posits that war is a continuation of politics by other means, primarily through the organized violence of state armies. In contrast, NSAs engage in asymmetric warfare, employing unconventional tactics such as guerilla warfare, terrorism, cyber-attacks, and transnational crime. These actors often emerge in response to weak state institutions, socio-economic inequalities, and political grievances, exploiting gaps in governance and security.

In Africa, and particularly Nigeria, the role of non-state actors has been pronounced. Nigeria's security landscape has been significantly shaped by the activities of violent non-state actors such as Boko Haram in the northeast, Niger Delta militants in the south, and bandit groups in the northwest. Boko Haram, an Islamist insurgent group, has engaged in a violent campaign against the Nigerian state since 2009, seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate. The group's tactics, including suicide bombings, kidnappings, and guerrilla warfare, have devastated local communities and undermined the government's

ability to maintain security in the region. Similarly, in the Niger Delta, militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have waged a prolonged insurgency aimed at gaining greater control over the region's oil resources, using sabotage, kidnappings, and attacks on oil installations to press their demands.

The rise of non-state actors in Nigeria's conflicts reflects broader global trends. Across the globe, non-state actors are increasingly involved in conflicts that challenge the state's authority and complicate traditional security frameworks. The proliferation of NSAs has transformed the nature of modern warfare, which now involves a complex array of actors with varying motivations—political, economic, ideological, and religious. Mary Kaldor's "New Wars" theory posits that modern conflicts are not simply interstate wars fought by regular armies but are often characterized by the involvement of a diverse range of non-state actors, from warlords and private armies to transnational terrorist networks (Kaldor, 2006). Similarly, Bruce Hoffman, in his work on terrorism, emphasizes that non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, have taken center stage in global security challenges, operating across borders and employing unconventional tactics to achieve their aims (Hoffman, 2006).

Non-state actors in modern conflicts often operate in fragile or failed states where government institutions are weak, and where the state's monopoly on violence has eroded. In Nigeria, the inability of the government to effectively address grievances related to economic marginalization, political exclusion, and environmental degradation has provided fertile ground for non-state actors to emerge and thrive. In the Niger Delta, for instance, militant groups have capitalized on the region's underdevelopment and the environmental destruction caused by oil extraction to wage a campaign of violence aimed at achieving greater autonomy and resource control. Similarly, in the northern regions, Boko Haram has exploited widespread poverty, unemployment, and the lack of educational opportunities to recruit members and fuel its insurgency.

Moreover, the role of non-state actors in modern conflicts is not confined to violence. Non-violent actors, including civil society organizations, local community leaders, and religious groups, play significant roles in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and humanitarian assistance. In Nigeria, for example, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups have been instrumental in mediating conflicts and providing critical support to victims of violence. These actors are often at the forefront of efforts to build peace and promote reconciliation in regions affected by conflict, challenging the notion that all non-state actors contribute to violence.

This paper explores the multifaceted roles of non-state actors in modern conflicts, with a focus on Nigeria as a case study. It examines the motivations, strategies, and impacts of both violent and non-violent non-state actors, analyzing their influence on state authority, security, and governance. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Kaldor's "New Wars" and Hoffman's work on terrorism, the paper situates Nigeria's experience within the broader global context of non-state actors' involvement in conflicts. It argues that understanding the roles of non-state actors is essential for developing effective conflict management and peacebuilding strategies in regions where the state's authority is contested.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has experienced persistent and multi-dimensional conflicts, ranging from religious and ethnic violence to political instability and insurgencies, such as the Boko Haram insurgency and the Niger Delta militancy. These conflicts have resulted in significant humanitarian crises, displacement of populations, loss of lives, destruction of infrastructure, and economic stagnation. While violent non-state actors (VNSAs) like Boko Haram, ethnic militias, and criminal groups have received substantial attention due to their direct role in exacerbating conflicts, the contributions of non-violent non-state actors (NVNSAs) have often been overlooked, underfunded, or inadequately integrated into peacebuilding frameworks (Agbiboa, 2015).

Non-violent non-state actors—including civil society organizations, religious groups, non-governmental organizations, and traditional leaders—play a critical role in mitigating conflict, promoting dialogue, and advocating for human rights. These actors are often better positioned to reach the grassroots and understand the local dynamics of conflict, especially in communities where state institutions are either absent or distrusted (Obi, 2009). However, despite their efforts, NVNSAs face significant obstacles, such as limited financial resources, lack of political influence, and inadequate coordination with state actors and international agencies. Furthermore, their peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives are often marginalized in the predominantly militarized responses of the Nigerian government to conflicts (Boege et al., 2009).

The failure to effectively integrate NVNSAs into the national conflict resolution framework undermines sustainable peace efforts. The reliance on military solutions, particularly in response to insurgencies in the northeast and militancy in the Niger Delta, has not addressed the root causes of these conflicts— such as poverty, marginalization, political exclusion, and human rights violations. As a result, the conflicts have persisted or worsened, leading to prolonged instability in affected regions (Alao, 2013). This underscores the need to critically examine the roles that NVNSAs can play in achieving durable peace and how they can be empowered to contribute more effectively to conflict resolution.

The problem, therefore, is twofold: first, the marginalization of non-violent non-state actors in Nigeria's conflict resolution strategies; and second, the absence of a comprehensive framework that integrates their peacebuilding efforts with state-led interventions. Addressing this problem is crucial for breaking the cycle of violence in Nigeria and ensuring long-term peace, stability, and development.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to explore the role of non-violent non-state actors (NVNSAs) in modern conflicts, with a specific focus on Nigeria. The research aims to understand how these actors contribute to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and the broader stabilization process in Nigeria's complex conflict environment. To achieve this, the following specific objectives are outlined:

1. To identify the key non-violent non-state actors involved in conflict resolution in Nigeria,

2. To examine the strategies employed by non-violent non-state actors in mitigating conflicts and promoting peace,

3. To assess the challenges faced by non-violent non-state actors in conflict resolution in Nigeria,

4. To evaluate the relationship between non-violent non-state actors and state institutions in conflict management,

5. To explore the potential for greater integration of non-violent non-state actors into Nigeria's national and regional conflict resolution frameworks,

6. To analyze case studies of non-violent non-state actor interventions in specific conflicts in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. Who are the main non-violent non-state actors involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria?

2. What strategies and approaches do non-violent non-state actors employ in mitigating conflicts in Nigeria?

3. How effective are the strategies used by non-violent non-state actors in resolving conflicts in Nigeria?

4. What challenges do non-violent non-state actors face in their efforts to resolve conflicts in Nigeria?

5. How do non-violent non-state actors collaborate with or oppose state institutions in Nigeria's conflict management?

6. In what ways can non-violent non-state actors be better integrated into Nigeria's national and regional conflict resolution frameworks?

Research Methodology

The research methodology for examining the role of non-violent non-state actors (NVNSAs) in modern conflicts, using Nigeria as a case study, will be a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research techniques. This approach is chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the roles, strategies, challenges, and effectiveness of NVNSAs in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The research will rely on primary and secondary data collection methods, including fieldwork, interviews, surveys, and content analysis.

1. Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design. Descriptive research is essential for mapping out the key non-violent non-state actors and their interventions in Nigeria, while exploratory research will help uncover deeper insights into the effectiveness of these actors in conflict resolution. The mixed-method approach allows the research to draw on both the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders and the empirical data on conflict dynamics.

2. Data Collection Methods

a. Primary Data Collection

- **Interviews**: In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious leaders, traditional rulers, government officials, and international organizations involved in conflict resolution in Nigeria. The interviews will explore the strategies employed by NVNSAs, their challenges, and their collaborations with state institutions.

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs will be organized with local communities, peacebuilding organizations, and displaced populations affected by conflict. These discussions will provide valuable insights into the grassroots-level impact of NVNSA interventions and community perceptions of their effectiveness.

- **Surveys/Questionnaires**: Structured surveys will be administered to a sample of actors involved in or affected by conflict resolution efforts. Surveys will focus on assessing the impact of NVNSAs, the challenges they face, and their perceived effectiveness in mitigating conflict.

b. Secondary Data Collection

- **Documentary Analysis**: Secondary data will be collected from existing literature, reports, and databases of relevant organizations such as the United Nations, African Union, ECOWAS, and Nigerian government agencies. Key documents such as reports on conflict intervention strategies, peace agreements, and scholarly articles on NVNSAs will be analyzed.

- **Content Analysis**: The research will also analyze media reports, policy briefs, and academic papers to examine the narratives and discourses around the role of non-violent non-state actors in Nigeria. This will help identify gaps in the existing literature and provide contextual information on conflict dynamics.

3. Sampling Strategy

- **Purposive Sampling**: A purposive sampling technique will be used to select interview participants, such as leaders of relevant NVNSAs, government officials, and conflict resolution experts. This will ensure that participants with significant knowledge and involvement in Nigeria's conflict landscape are included.

- **Stratified Sampling**: For the surveys, a stratified sampling method will be employed, targeting regions affected by different types of conflict (e.g., Northeast for Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta for oil-related conflicts, and Middle Belt for ethno-religious conflicts). This will ensure diversity in the sample and allow for comparative analysis of different conflict zones.

4. **Data Analysis**

- **Qualitative Analysis**: Data collected from interviews and focus groups will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This method will allow the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and insights related to the roles of NVNSAs, their strategies, and their effectiveness. Qualitative analysis software, such as NVivo, may be used to facilitate the coding and categorization of interview data.

- **Quantitative Analysis**: Survey data will be analyzed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, will be used to summarize the responses. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, will be applied to explore the relationships between variables such as the effectiveness of NVNSA interventions and the nature of the conflicts.

5. **Case Studies**

- **Case Study Method**: Detailed case studies of specific conflicts in Nigeria (e.g., **Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, Niger Delta militancy, and Banditry in North West**) will be conducted to illustrate how NVNSAs have intervened in these conflicts. The case study method allows for an in-depth examination of particular instances where NVNSAs have played critical roles in conflict resolution, providing real-world examples of their impact.

6. **Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitivity of conflict-related research, ethical considerations will be strictly observed. The research will ensure:

- Informed Consent: All participants will be fully informed of the research objectives, and their consent will be obtained before participation.

- **Confidentiality**: The identities of interviewees and focus group participants will be kept confidential to protect their privacy and safety, especially in regions with ongoing conflict.

- **Cultural Sensitivity**: The research will be conducted with respect for local customs and traditions, particularly in regions where traditional rulers and religious leaders play a significant role.

7. **Limitations of the Study**

- **Security Risks**: Conducting fieldwork in conflict zones such as the Northeast or Niger Delta may pose security risks to both the researcher and participants. Mitigation strategies, such as collaborating with local organizations and conducting remote interviews, will be considered.

- **Access to Key Stakeholders**: Access to certain NVNSAs and government officials may be limited due to political or logistical reasons, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of the research. Establishing partnerships with local organizations will help address this challenge.

2. Conceptual Framework: Defining Non-State Actors in Conflict

The rise of non-state actors (NSAs) in contemporary conflicts necessitates a robust conceptual framework to understand their roles, motivations, and impacts on both national and international security dynamics. Non-state actors, by definition, operate outside the formal structures of the state and are not officially sanctioned by any government. Yet, they have become pivotal in shaping the nature of modern conflicts, which are increasingly characterized by asymmetric warfare, transnational criminal activities, and complex humanitarian crises.

Non-state actors (NSAs) in modern conflicts refer to individuals, groups, or organizations that are not officially affiliated with any government but nonetheless play significant roles in influencing, initiating, or participating in conflict dynamics. These actors operate independently of state structures and often challenge the traditional state-centric model of warfare and security. NSAs can be violent or non-violent, and their goals, methods, and impacts vary widely depending on the specific conflict.

Violent NSAs include insurgents, terrorist organizations, and militias, while non-violent actors encompass civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local community leaders involved in mediation or conflict resolution.

This conceptual framework seeks to structure the analysis of non-state actors by exploring key dimensions such as their typologies, motivations, modes of operation, and their impact on state sovereignty and conflict dynamics. Using Nigeria as a case study, it aims to place local conflicts within the broader global trends that have emerged in the post-Cold War era. The framework is informed by several theoretical perspectives, including the *New Wars* theory (Kaldor, 2006), theories on the erosion of state authority, and insights from the field of terrorism studies (Hoffman, 2006). Kaldor's concept of "new wars" illustrates the rise of these actors, arguing that modern conflicts are increasingly fought not just by states but by a variety of armed groups and informal networks. In this context, NSAs can serve as both perpetrators and mitigators of violence.

3. Key Types of Non-State Actors:

1. **Insurgent Groups and Militias**: These are armed groups that challenge state authority, often pursuing political or ideological goals through violent means. Examples include Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the FARC in Colombia.

2. **Terrorist Organizations**: These groups employ terror tactics, such as bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings, to further ideological or political aims. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are prominent examples of global terrorist non-state actors, while Boko Haram represents a regional case in Nigeria.

3. **Rebel Movements**: These groups often aim to overthrow existing regimes or achieve secession for a particular region. Examples include the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in South Sudan and the M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

4. **Criminal Organizations**: Drug cartels and human trafficking rings, although primarily motivated by economic gain, also challenge state authority and contribute to destabilizing regions. In some cases, criminal networks collaborate with or support insurgent groups.

5. **Private Military Contractors (PMCs)**: These are for-profit organizations that provide military services, including combat support, logistics, and training. Companies like Blackwater (now Academic) represent PMCs, and their role has expanded in many conflict zones where state armies are overstretched.

6. **Civil Society and Humanitarian Organizations:** These non-violent actors can include NGOs, religious groups, and local community leaders involved in conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and peacebuilding. While they are not directly involved in violence, they play significant roles in modern conflict environments, particularly in mediation and rebuilding post-conflict societies.

7. **Militias and Paramilitary Groups**: These are often local or regional groups that serve as alternative sources of security or governance in areas where the state has limited control. They can sometimes act as proxies for state actors. In Nigeria, local militias have been involved in both inter-communal violence and armed responses to insurgencies

4. Characteristics of Non-State Actors in Modern Conflicts

- **Independence from State Authority**: NSAs operate independently of any government and are not constrained by the rules that typically govern state actors, such as international laws and norms.

- **Diverse Motivations**: The motivations of non-state actors range from political and ideological goals (e.g., secession or regime change) to economic incentives (e.g., control of natural resources or drug trafficking) and religious extremism.

- **Asymmetric Warfare**: Many non-state actors engage in asymmetric warfare, using tactics such as guerilla warfare, terrorism, and cyber-attacks to challenge more conventional state military forces.

- **Global Reach**: Some NSAs, especially terrorist organizations, operate transnationally, recruiting members from various countries and launching attacks beyond their local regions (e.g., ISIS, al-Qaeda).

- **Use of Technology and Media**: Non-state actors often employ modern technology, including social media, to recruit members, spread propaganda, and conduct cyber-attacks.

5. Theoretical Perspectives on Non-State Actors

1. **New Wars Theory (Mary Kaldor)**: In her seminal work **New and Old Wars** (2006), Kaldor argues that modern conflicts are increasingly characterized by the involvement of non-state actors. Unlike traditional wars fought between states, "new wars" involve a range of actors, including insurgents, terrorist groups, and criminal organizations, often blurring the lines between war, crime, and human rights violations.

She opines:

*"In these new wars, the distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, between the local and the global, and between the political and criminal are blurred." — **Mary Kaldor, New and Old Wars** (2006).*

2. **Global Governance and Non-State Actors (David Held and Anthony McGrew)**: Held and McGrew's work emphasizes the increasing importance of non-state actors in shaping international relations and global governance. NSAs, especially NGOs and civil society groups, play critical roles in international policy discussions, humanitarian aid, and post-conflict reconstruction.

*"The rising influence of non-state actors is reshaping the structure of global governance and security, challenging the monopoly of states in decision-making processes." — **David Held and Anthony McGrew, Global Transformations** (1999).*

3. **Terrorism Studies (Bruce Hoffman)**: In **Inside Terrorism** (2006), Hoffman provides a detailed analysis of how non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups, have evolved in the modern era. Hoffman argues that the rise of global terrorist networks has shifted the nature of contemporary conflicts from state-based wars to irregular warfare led by ideologically driven non-state actors.

*"Terrorism in the modern age is increasingly transnational, with non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and ISIS seeking to transcend traditional state boundaries in pursuit of global ideological objectives." — **Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism** (2006).*

4. **Weak State and Governance Gaps**: Non-state actors often flourish in regions where the state is weak or has limited reach. Reno (2011) discusses how states with fragile institutions, such as Nigeria, create opportunities for NSAs to operate. In Nigeria, Boko Haram and bandit groups have exploited governance vacuums, particularly in the northeastern and northwestern regions where state control is minimal.

Asymmetric Warfare and Terrorism (Bruce Hoffman): Hoffman (2006) highlights how terrorist organizations like Boko Haram have shifted the nature of warfare, employing asymmetric tactics to challenge more conventionally armed state forces. Terrorist groups often operate transnationally and use modern technologies to recruit and coordinate attacks, further complicating traditional security strategies.

6. Motivations and Drivers of Non-State Actors

Understanding the motivations behind non-state actors' involvement in conflicts is critical for comprehending their strategies and impacts. NSAs are driven by a variety of factors, including:

- **Political Motivations**: Insurgent groups often emerge with the explicit goal of achieving political change, such as regime overthrow or secession. In Nigeria, the Niger Delta militancy was largely driven by demands for greater political representation and resource control. The political marginalization of certain regions often gives rise to non-state actors who contest the state's authority through violent or non-violent means.

- **Economic Incentives**: Many non-state actors are motivated by the desire for economic gain. Criminal networks and warlord-led insurgencies frequently exploit natural resources in conflict zones. The concept of the "resource curse" is applicable to the Niger Delta, where control over oil wealth has fueled both militancy and criminal activities (Watts, 2008).

- **Ideological and Religious Drivers**: Groups like Boko Haram are driven by religious extremism and seek to impose their ideological worldview through violence. These groups challenge not only the state but also the cultural and religious practices of the broader society, aiming to reshape the socio-political landscape based on their fundamentalist beliefs.

7. Impact of Non-State Actors on State Sovereignty and Conflict Dynamics

Non-state actors have profound implications for state sovereignty and the traditional understanding of warfare:

- **Erosion of State Sovereignty**: Non-state actors challenge the state's monopoly on violence and its ability to maintain law and order within its borders. In Nigeria, the state's inability to effectively combat Boko Haram or contain Niger Delta militancy has called into question the government's control over large swathes of territory.

- **Asymmetric Warfare and Security Dilemmas**: The tactics employed by non-state actors, such as guerrilla warfare and terrorism, often create asymmetric security challenges for state forces. States may struggle to adapt their military and law enforcement strategies to counter these unconventional threats, leading to prolonged conflicts. For example, Nigeria's military has faced significant difficulties in countering Boko Haram's use of suicide bombings, hit-and-run tactics, and the exploitation of civilian populations for concealment.

- **Humanitarian Impact**: The rise of non-state actors also has devastating humanitarian consequences, including mass displacement, civilian casualties, and the destruction of critical infrastructure. In Nigeria, both Boko Haram and militant groups in the Niger Delta have exacerbated already severe socio-economic conditions, contributing to widespread poverty, food insecurity, and displacement of local populations.

8. The Roles of Non-State Actors in Nigeria's Conflicts

8.1. The Roles of Non-Violent Non-State Actors in Nigeria's Conflict

In Nigeria's complex conflict landscape, non-violent non-state actors (NVNSAs) play a crucial role in mitigating violence, promoting peace, fostering development, and addressing the root causes of conflict. While violent non-state actors such as insurgent groups, militias, and criminal organizations have garnered much attention for their destructive impacts, NVNSAs—comprising civil society organizations (CSOs), religious groups, traditional leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and advocacy groups—have been instrumental in peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and governance reforms. This paper explores the diverse roles played by non-violent non-state actors in addressing Nigeria's multifaceted conflicts, focusing on their strategies, challenges, and contributions to national stability.

1. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Peacebuilding

Civil society organizations in Nigeria have been at the forefront of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and advocacy for governance reforms. These organizations act as intermediaries between communities, governments, and international actors, fostering dialogue and creating platforms for peaceful conflict resolution.

a.   Conflict Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation

One of the most significant roles played by CSOs is mediation between conflicting parties. In regions such as the Niger Delta, where violent clashes between militants and the government have escalated, CSOs have facilitated dialogue between community leaders, armed groups, and the government to broker peace agreements. For example, organizations like the **Niger Delta Professionals for Development (NIDPRODEV)** and the **Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)** have mediated talks between militant leaders and government officials, contributing to peace initiatives such as the 2009 amnesty program for militants (Obi, 2009). In the context of Boko Haram's insurgency, civil society organizations, particularly local and faith-based groups, have played a key role in promoting reconciliation between former Boko Haram members and their communities. Reintegration programs, designed in collaboration with the government and international partners, have facilitated the return of repentant Boko Haram fighters through community-level dialogues that encourage forgiveness and reconciliation.

b.   Human Rights Advocacy and Protection of Civilians

CSOs also play a critical role in advocating for human rights and protecting civilians in conflict zones. The **Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC)**, the **Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNNGO)**, and similar groups have exposed human rights abuses committed by both violent non-state actors and state security forces. These organizations work to ensure that local populations are protected from atrocities such as extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances, and sexual violence, which have been rampant in conflict-ridden regions like the northeast. Furthermore, civil society actors have monitored government responses to conflict and advocated for the protection of civilians caught in the crossfire. Reports by organizations such as **Amnesty International** and **Human Rights Watch** have highlighted human rights abuses, pressuring the government to hold security forces accountable and improve the conduct of military operations.

2. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Humanitarian Assistance

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both local and international, have been pivotal in delivering humanitarian aid and providing critical services to conflict-affected populations in Nigeria. In regions where state capacity is limited or overwhelmed by violence, NGOs step in to fill the gap by offering food, healthcare, education, and shelter.

a.   Humanitarian Relief in Conflict Zones

In the context of Boko Haram's insurgency, international NGOs like **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)**, the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)**, and the **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** have provided lifesaving services to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northeastern Nigeria. These organizations deliver essential supplies such as food, clean water, and medical care to communities ravaged by conflict. The **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** and the **World Food Programme (WFP)** have been instrumental in coordinating aid delivery to IDP camps, where hundreds of thousands of Nigerians displaced by Boko Haram and other conflicts have sought refuge (UNHCR, 2021). Local NGOs, such as the **Borno Women Development Initiative** and **ActionAid Nigeria**, have also been integral to ensuring the delivery of humanitarian assistance, particularly in hard-to-reach areas where international organizations may face access challenges. These local groups are often better positioned to navigate the complexities of local politics and gain the trust of communities in need.

b.   Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Combatants

A critical role played by NGOs is the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants, including ex-militants from the Niger Delta and former Boko Haram members. NGOs have worked closely with the Nigerian government to create vocational training programs, psychosocial support services, and education initiatives designed to help ex-combatants transition back into society. For instance, **Search for Common Ground** and **Mercy Corps** have implemented programs that focus on transforming the lives of young people who have been involved in violence, providing them with skills training and alternative livelihoods that steer them away from further conflict (Mercy Corps, 2016). These programs help break the cycle of violence by addressing the economic and social conditions that often drive individuals to join violent groups in the first place.

3. Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Organizations

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations (FBOs) hold significant influence in Nigeria, a country deeply rooted in religious traditions. Both Christian and Muslim leaders have played crucial roles in promoting peace, advocating for tolerance, and mediating in conflicts, especially where religious tensions are involved.

a.   Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation

Religious tensions between Muslims and Christians have fueled violence in various parts of Nigeria, particularly in the central region, known as the **Middle Belt**, and in northern states affected by Boko Haram's activities. In these areas, interfaith dialogue facilitated by religious leaders has been essential in de-escalating tensions and promoting mutual understanding between conflicting groups. For example, the **Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)**, which brings together Christian and Muslim leaders, has worked to foster religious tolerance and mediate conflicts in volatile regions. In the aftermath of religiously motivated violence, NIREC has facilitated community-level reconciliation, encouraging leaders from different faiths to speak out against violence and promote peaceful coexistence (Olojo, 2021).

b.   Peace Advocacy and Conflict Resolution

Religious organizations such as the **Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)** and the **Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI)** have also been active in advocating for peace and resolving local conflicts. Their involvement in conflict resolution has been particularly evident in addressing the long-standing farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, where competition over land and resources has often been framed in religious terms. Faith-based actors leverage their moral authority to promote dialogue and mediation between herders and farmers, encouraging peaceful solutions rather than violent confrontation. In addition, religious leaders have used their platforms to counter extremist narratives, particularly in regions affected by Boko Haram; by promoting moderate interpretations of Islam that reject violence (Agbiboa, 2015).

4. Traditional Leaders and Customary Institutions

Traditional rulers and customary institutions in Nigeria remain powerful actors in many communities, particularly in rural areas where state presence is limited. These leaders often command respect and legitimacy from their communities, making them critical players in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

a. Customary Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Traditional leaders, such as village chiefs and emirs, have been involved in resolving local disputes through customary conflict resolution mechanisms that prioritize negotiation, dialogue, and restorative justice. In many rural areas, traditional justice systems operate alongside formal legal institutions, offering a culturally relevant and accessible means of resolving disputes (Boege et al., 2009). In northern Nigeria, for instance, **Emirs** have used their authority to mediate on land disputes, inter-communal conflicts, and other local tensions, often preventing them from escalating into larger violent confrontations.

b. Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion

In addition to their roles in resolving disputes, traditional leaders play a significant role in promoting social cohesion within their communities. Their influence extends beyond conflict resolution to maintaining order and harmony within their jurisdictions. By fostering dialogue and encouraging respect for cultural norms and traditions, traditional rulers help to prevent violence and reinforce peaceful coexistence. In the context of Nigeria's conflict with Boko Haram, traditional leaders in the northeastern states have worked to counter radicalization efforts by promoting religious tolerance and discouraging youth from joining extremist groups. Their position as custodians of local traditions gives them unique insight into the needs and concerns of their communities, enabling them to play a proactive role in conflict prevention (Thurston, 2017).

5. International Organizations and Multilateral Actors

International organizations such as the **United Nations (UN)**, the **African Union (AU)**, and the **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)** have been actively involved in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and capacity-building efforts in Nigeria.

a. Peacekeeping and Mediation Efforts

ECOWAS, in particular, has a long history of involvement in conflict resolution in West Africa, including Nigeria. The organization has supported mediation efforts, provided technical assistance for conflict resolution, and coordinated regional peacekeeping missions. In Nigeria's northeastern region, the **Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)**, a regional military coalition supported by ECOWAS, has been involved in efforts to combat Boko Haram and restore security (Zenn, 2020).

b. Capacity Building and Governance Reforms

International actors have also been involved in building the capacity of Nigerian civil society and government institutions to manage conflicts. The UN's **Peacebuilding Support Office** and various development agencies have provided financial and technical assistance to local organizations involved in peacebuilding, governance reforms, and capacity building for conflict prevention. These efforts aim to strengthen Nigeria's institutions and empower local actors to address the root causes of conflict and build sustainable peace.

8.2 The Roles of Violent Non-State Actors in Nigeria's Conflict

Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) have played a pivotal role in shaping Nigeria's security landscape over the past few decades. These actors include insurgent groups, militant organizations, criminal syndicates, and other entities that operate outside the formal state structure and engage in violence to achieve their objectives. Their activities have had profound impacts on national security, state sovereignty, economic development, and regional stability. This paper explores the roles of violent non-state actors in Nigeria's conflicts, focusing on key groups like Boko Haram, Niger Delta militants, bandits, and other insurgent factions. It also discusses their motivations, tactics, and the broader implications of their activities for Nigeria's stability.

1. Boko Haram: Ideologically-Driven Insurgency

Perhaps the most notorious violent non-state actor in Nigeria is **Boko Haram**, an Islamist insurgency that has wreaked havoc in the northeastern part of the country since 2009. The group's name loosely translates to "Western education is forbidden," and it seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate governed by Sharia law, rejecting Western values and secular governance.

a. Origins and Motivations

Boko Haram's origins can be traced to the socio-economic and political marginalization of northern Nigeria, where widespread poverty, unemployment, and weak governance created fertile ground for the rise of radical Islamist ideologies (Thurston, 2017). The group was initially founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf but became a fully-fledged insurgency after Yusuf's extrajudicial killing by the Nigerian police in 2009, which radicalized its members and led to a violent confrontation with the Nigerian state.

The ideological foundation of Boko Haram is rooted in a rejection of Western education and government, which the group views as corrupt and un-Islamic. It draws support from disaffected youth who have been excluded from economic and educational opportunities, exploiting their grievances to recruit fighters. Boko Haram's leadership aligns itself with broader global jihadist movements, particularly after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, renaming itself **Islamic State in West Africa Province** (ISWAP).

b.   Tactics and Impact

Boko Haram's tactics include suicide bombings, armed assaults, kidnappings, and guerrilla warfare. One of its most infamous attacks was the kidnapping of 276 school girls from Chibok in 2014, a crime that drew international condemnation and spotlighted the group's modus operandi of targeting civilians, particularly women and children, to achieve political and psychological impact.

The conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian state has had devastating effects. By 2020, the group was responsible for over 37,000 deaths and the displacement of millions of people across the Lake Chad Basin (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021). The destruction of infrastructure, the collapse of local economies, and the creation of a humanitarian crisis have compounded the effects of Boko Haram's insurgency on Nigeria and neighboring countries like Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

c.   Regional and International Dimensions

Boko Haram operates not only within Nigeria but also in the broader Lake Chad Basin, making it a regional threat. The group's ability to move across porous borders and establish transnational networks, including smuggling and arms trafficking, highlights the role of VNSAs in exploiting weak state capacities in border regions (Zenn, 2020).

2. Niger Delta Militants: Resource-Driven Conflict

While Boko Haram is ideologically driven, the Niger Delta conflict is an example of a resource-driven insurgency. **Militant groups in the Niger Delta** have waged violent campaigns against the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies since the early 1990s, aiming to gain greater control over the region's oil wealth.

a.   Motivations and Grievances

The Niger Delta is the heart of Nigeria's oil industry, which accounts for the majority of the country's revenue. Despite its wealth, the region remains impoverished, with high levels of unemployment, environmental degradation from oil spills, and a lack of basic services like clean water and healthcare. These grievances led to the formation of militant groups such as the **Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)**, which framed its struggle as a fight for economic justice and political autonomy for the region (Watts, 2008).

b.   Tactics and Economic Impact

Niger Delta militants engage in a variety of violent tactics, including sabotage of oil infrastructure, kidnapping of foreign oil workers, and attacks on security forces. Oil pipelines, refineries, and export terminals have been frequent targets, with militants often demanding ransom payments or a greater share of oil revenue as conditions for ceasing hostilities.

The impact of these activities on Nigeria's economy has been severe. The country loses billions of dollars annually to oil theft and pipeline sabotage, which disrupts production and creates uncertainty in global oil markets. At the height of the militancy in the mid-2000s, Nigeria's oil production dropped by nearly a third, contributing to an economic crisis (Ikelegbe, 2006). In addition to the economic costs, the violence has led to significant environmental damage, further exacerbating the grievances of local communities.

c.   Resolution Efforts

In 2009, the Nigerian government introduced an amnesty program that offered militants money and job training in exchange for laying down their arms. While the program initially reduced violence, underlying issues such as corruption, inadequate reintegration of ex-combatants, and continued environmental degradation have allowed low-level conflict to persist. New militant groups, like the **Niger Delta Avengers**, have emerged in recent years, indicating that the root causes of the conflict remain unresolved.

3. Banditry and Communal Conflicts: Criminal Networks and Local Militia

In addition to insurgent and militant groups, Nigeria faces growing threats from banditry and inter-communal violence, particularly in the northwestern and central regions. **Armed bandit groups** have increasingly engaged in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and attacks on rural communities, leading to widespread insecurity.

a.   Drivers of Banditry

The rise of banditry is driven by a combination of economic hardship, the collapse of traditional agricultural economies, and the proliferation of small arms in the region. Many bandit groups operate as loosely organized criminal networks, exploiting the absence of effective law enforcement in remote areas. These groups often engage in violent clashes with local vigilante militias, further escalating insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2020).

b. Tactics and Impact

Bandits typically target rural communities, cattle rustling, kidnapping civilians, and destroying property. In recent years, the frequency and intensity of bandit attacks have escalated, with some groups employing similar tactics to insurgent organizations, including the use of heavy weapons and military-style operations. Banditry has led to widespread displacement, with thousands of people forced to flee their homes, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria.

4. Non-State Actors and the Erosion of State Authority

One of the central roles of violent non-state actors in Nigeria's conflict is the erosion of state authority. In many regions of the country, the government has been unable to maintain effective control, allowing NSAs to operate with impunity. The proliferation of armed groups has weakened the state's monopoly on violence, undermined the rule of law, and contributed to widespread lawlessness.

This erosion of authority is particularly evident in areas where Boko Haram controls territory or where bandit groups operate freely. In such regions, violent non-state actors often provide alternative forms of governance, dispensing justice, enforcing security, and collecting taxes in a manner reminiscent of state functions. This has led to the creation of "ungoverned spaces" where the Nigerian state's presence is minimal, and its ability to protect citizens is severely compromised (Reno, 2011).

9. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The involvement of non-state actors in Nigeria's conflicts presents a multifaceted challenge for policymakers. These actors are not easily addressed through traditional military solutions, as they often draw on local grievances, ethnic tensions, and socio-economic inequities. A more nuanced approach is required to effectively manage NSAs, one that integrates military, political, and developmental strategies.

9.1 Strengthening Governance and Rule of Law

The Nigerian state must address the governance deficits that allow NSAs to thrive. Weak institutions, corruption, and poor service delivery exacerbate insecurity and create opportunities for NSAs to gain influence. Strengthening rule of law, improving access to justice, and addressing local grievances are critical to reducing the appeal of non-state actors.

9.2 Community Engagement and Inclusion of Non-Violent Actors

Civil society organizations and traditional leaders, as non-violent non-state actors, can play a vital role in conflict resolution. These actors should be included in peace negotiations and efforts to mediate conflicts, as they often have deeper insights into local dynamics. Community engagement can foster trust and facilitate more sustainable peace agreements.

9.3 Holistic Counterinsurgency Strategies

Socio-economic development programs must complement military responses to insurgency and militancy. Addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion, is essential to undermining the support base of violent NSAs. The Nigerian government should invest in education, healthcare, and infrastructure in conflict-prone regions to foster stability.

10. Conclusion

The role of non-violent non-state actors (NVNSAs) in addressing Nigeria's complex conflict dynamics cannot be overstated. These actors, including civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and international agencies, have played a pivotal part in promoting peace, advocating for human rights, delivering humanitarian aid, and facilitating conflict resolution. In a country where violence and instability have been driven by a myriad of factors—ranging from religious extremism and ethnic tensions to economic deprivation and poor governance—NVNSAs serve as critical mediators and agents of change.

Civil society organizations have taken the lead in mediating conflicts and advocating for dialogue between communities and state actors. Their capacity to bridge gaps and create platforms for conversation has been instrumental in defusing tensions, particularly in the Niger Delta and Boko Haram-affected regions. Humanitarian organizations, both local and international, have provided lifesaving aid to internally displaced persons and communities trapped in conflict zones, often filling the gap left by the state's limited capacity to deliver essential services.

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations have contributed significantly to promoting interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, and tolerance in regions where religious tensions threaten to escalate into violence. Their moral authority and deep connection to local communities allow them to act as

peacebuilders and counter extremist narratives. Similarly, traditional rulers and customary institutions have utilized their influence to mediate local disputes and promote social cohesion through time-tested customary mechanisms.

The involvement of international organizations and multilateral actors, such as the United Nations and ECOWAS, has further strengthened Nigeria's conflict resolution efforts. These entities provide technical and financial support, help coordinate regional peacekeeping missions, and work to build the capacity of local actors to address the underlying causes of conflict.

However, despite their significant contributions, non-violent non-state actors face numerous challenges, including insecurity, lack of adequate funding, political interference, and restricted access to certain conflict zones. To maximize their impact, these actors require greater institutional support, better coordination with state actors, and an enabling environment that guarantees their independence and security. The Nigerian government must recognize the value that these non-violent actors bring to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, ensuring that their roles are complemented by strong governance, transparency, and accountability.

In conclusion, while Nigeria's conflict landscape remains deeply entrenched, the diverse and impactful contributions of non-violent non-state actors offer a glimmer of hope. By fostering dialogue, protecting human rights, delivering humanitarian assistance, and addressing the root causes of violence, these actors play an indispensable role in steering Nigeria toward a more peaceful and stable future. Their efforts represent a vital complement to state-led initiatives, and their sustained involvement is essential for building long-term peace in the country. For Nigeria to overcome its myriad conflicts, it is imperative that the work of non-violent non-state actors be supported, enhanced, and integrated into national and international strategies for peace and development.

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