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THE STATE AND HUMAN SECURITY FAILURES: INTERROGATING THE ROOTS OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, presents a troubling paradox: a state richly endowed with human and natural resources where more than half the population lives in poverty. This paper interrogates the relationship between state failure, human security, and poverty in Nigeria, arguing that the persistence of mass poverty is not simply an economic accident but a direct consequence of the Nigerian state's chronic failure to guarantee the seven dimensions of human security identified by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Drawing on state failure theory and the human security paradigm, and relying on secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the World Bank, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, and a broad range of scholarly literature, the paper demonstrates how weak institutions, corruption, elite predation, insurgency, banditry, and the erosion of the social contract have combined to entrench poverty across the country. The paper further shows that poverty and insecurity operate in a mutually reinforcing cycle in which deprivation breeds violence and violence deepens deprivation. At the same time, the Nigerian state's response has remained heavily militarised and inattentive to the structural, human-centred roots of insecurity. The paper concludes that reversing Nigeria's poverty crisis requires a fundamental reorientation of statecraft away from regime security towards genuine human security, anchored in institutional reform, inclusive governance, economic diversification, and accountable leadership.

Keywords: State Failure, Human Security, Poverty, Nigeria, Governance, Insecurity

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria occupies a peculiar and troubling position in the community of nations. It is Africa's most populous country, home to over 200 million people, its largest economy by nominal Gross Domestic Product for much of the last decade, and one of the world's leading oil producers. Yet, alongside this profile of demographic and economic weight sits a starkly different reality: a nation in which the majority of citizens live in conditions of severe deprivation. According to the World Bank, the share of Nigerians living below the national poverty line rose sharply from 40.1 percent in 2018/19 to an estimated 54 to 56 percent by 2024, meaning that well over 100 million Nigerians are now classified as poor (World Bank, 2024). When poverty is measured multidimensionally, capturing deprivations in health, education, living standards, and exposure to shocks rather than income alone, the picture is even bleaker: the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), working with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, found that 63 percent of Nigerians, or 133

million people, were multidimensionally poor, with the figure rising to 72 percent in rural areas and above 90 percent in some northern states.

This paradox of resource abundance and mass deprivation has attracted extensive scholarly attention, much of it framed around governance failure, corruption, and mismanagement. This paper takes a related but distinct analytical route. It situates Nigeria's poverty crisis within the broader theoretical architecture of human security and state failure, arguing that poverty in Nigeria is best understood not as an isolated economic pathology but as the cumulative outcome of the state's failure to perform its most basic function: the protection and promotion of the security of its people across every dimension of their lives. The human security paradigm, first systematised in the UNDP's Human Development Report 1994, broadened the referent of security from the state to the individual and identified seven interlocking dimensions of security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political, whose simultaneous erosion produces the conditions for chronic poverty and instability (UNDP, 1994). Through this lens, Nigeria's poverty crisis appears not as a technical development problem awaiting a technocratic fix, but as the visible symptom of a deeper, more structural failure of the state itself.

Since independence in 1960, the Nigerian state has repeatedly demonstrated an inability, and at times an unwillingness, to translate its considerable resource endowments into broad-based welfare for its citizens. Decades of military rule, entrenched corruption, weak institutions, and a political economy organised around the capture and distribution of oil rents rather than productive economic activity have combined to produce a state that is simultaneously overbearing in its capacity for coercion and strikingly absent in its capacity for welfare provision (Ake, 1996; Achebe, 1983). This asymmetry, a state strong enough to repress but too weak to provide, lies at the heart of Nigeria's human security failures and, by extension, its poverty crisis. This paper examines that asymmetry in detail, tracing how failures across each dimension of human security have combined to entrench poverty, and considers what a genuine reorientation of the Nigerian state towards human security might require.

Statement of the Problem

Successive Nigerian governments have adopted a long list of poverty-reduction programmes, from the Structural Adjustment Programme of the 1980s, through the National Poverty Eradication Programme, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme, to the National Social Investment Programme and its various cash-transfer schemes. Despite this sustained policy attention, poverty in Nigeria has not merely persisted; it has deepened. The number of poor Nigerians has grown in both absolute and, in recent years, relative terms, even as the country's Gross Domestic Product expanded for much of the 2000s and 2010s (World Bank, 2024). This suggests that the problem lies less in the absence of policy instruments than in the underlying character of the state that designs and implements them. A state whose institutions are captured by narrow elite interests, whose security apparatus is unable to guarantee the safety of ordinary citizens, and whose social contract with its population has substantially broken down cannot be expected to sustain the kind of inclusive governance that poverty reduction requires. The problem this paper interrogates, therefore, is the extent to which the chronic and multidimensional failure of the Nigerian state to secure the human security of its

citizens, rather than the absence of resources or policy ideas, constitutes the principal driver of poverty in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

This paper pursues four interrelated objectives. First, it clarifies the conceptual relationship between the state, human security, and poverty, situating Nigeria's experience within the broader theoretical literature on state failure and human security. Second, it examines the specific ways in which the Nigerian state has failed to guarantee each of the seven dimensions of human security identified by the UNDP. Third, it evaluates empirical evidence linking these human security failures to Nigeria's poverty trajectory over the past two decades. Fourth, it proposes policy directions through which the Nigerian state might reorient itself towards genuine human security as a foundation for sustainable poverty reduction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design based on secondary data. The design is appropriate because the study examines an existing social and economic phenomenon without manipulating the variables under investigation. It enables the researcher to examine evidence concerning insecurity and its effects on economic development in Nigeria. The study focuses on identifying patterns and relationships between insecurity and major indicators of economic development, including agricultural production, employment, investment, income, poverty, food security, infrastructure, and livelihoods.

Sources of Data

The study relied primarily on secondary sources of data. These include publications and reports of the National Bureau of Statistics, Central Bank of Nigeria, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization, National Population Commission, and other relevant national and international organisations. Academic journals, books, conference proceedings, policy documents, research reports, and other credible scholarly materials were also consulted. Particular attention was given to literature addressing insecurity, poverty, human security, state failure, economic development, agriculture, displacement, and governance in Nigeria.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary review. Relevant publications were examined to obtain information concerning the nature and extent of insecurity and its economic consequences. Information was organised around the major forms of insecurity and their effects on productive activities and human welfare.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis and descriptive analysis. Information obtained from the various sources was categorised according to major themes corresponding to the objectives of the study.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The State

In classical political theory, the state is conceived as an entity with sovereignty over a defined territory and population, a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, and responsibility for the security and welfare of its citizens. Max Weber's foundational definition emphasises the state's monopoly of legitimate violence, but subsequent scholarship has stressed that a functioning state must pair this coercive capacity with the institutional capacity to extract resources, regulate society, and distribute public goods (Migdal, 1988). Migdal's (1988) analysis of "strong societies and weak states" is particularly instructive for the Nigerian case: he argues that many post-colonial states possess the outward trappings of sovereignty—flags, bureaucracies, armies—without the actual capacity to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, or extract resources in ways that translate into effective governance. Such states are frequently strong enough to dominate and repress but too weak to develop and provide for their populations, a description that resonates closely with the Nigerian experience.

Robert Rotberg's (2004) typology of state performance offers a further useful analytical tool. Rotberg distinguishes between strong states, weak states, failing states, and collapsed states, based primarily on their capacity to deliver core political goods—security, rule of law, economic opportunity, health, education, and infrastructure—to their citizens. On this continuum, Nigeria is frequently classified, including by indices such as the Fragile States Index, as a fragile state: one that retains formal sovereignty and functioning central institutions but suffers from serious governance deficits, contested legitimacy in parts of its territory, and demonstrable inability to secure its population against violence, want, and deprivation (Fund for Peace, 2024).

Human Security

The concept of human security emerged out of dissatisfaction with the narrowly state-centric and militarised understanding of security that dominated Cold War international relations. The UNDP's Human Development Report 1994 is widely credited with popularising the concept, defining human security as freedom from fear and freedom from want, and identifying seven interconnected dimensions: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (UNDP, 1994). Economic security refers to an assured basic income, typically through productive and remunerative work or, failing that, a publicly financed safety net. Food security concerns physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. Health security involves protection from disease and unhealthy lifestyles as well as access to basic healthcare. Environmental security addresses the degradation of local and global ecosystems that threaten livelihoods. Personal security concerns protection from physical

violence, whether from the state, other states, other groups, or individuals. Community security refers to protecting people's membership in families, communities, and groups that provide a supportive cultural identity. Political security, finally, concerns the extent to which citizens live in a society that respects their basic human rights and enables their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Subsequent scholarship has debated the scope and analytical utility of human security. Roland Paris (2001) famously questioned whether the concept was so broad as to become analytically vacuous, "hot air" rather than a rigorous paradigm, while Mary Kaldor (2007) has defended human security as a necessary reframing of security in an era in which the primary threats to most people's lives come not from interstate war but from a mixture of criminal violence, economic deprivation, disease, and environmental degradation. For this paper, human security is used as the UNDP originally intended: an analytical framework for assessing state performance against the totality of economic, physical, and social threats that affect the everyday security of ordinary citizens, rather than merely the security of the state or regime.

Poverty

Poverty has traditionally been measured in monetary terms, as the proportion of a population living below a defined income or consumption threshold. The World Bank's international poverty lines, most recently set at $2.15 and $3.65 per day in 2017 purchasing power parity terms, remain widely used for cross-country comparison (World Bank, 2024). However, Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach reframed poverty as a deprivation of basic human capabilities and freedoms, not merely a shortfall of income, an insight that has informed the development of multidimensional poverty measurement. Building on this tradition, Sabina Alkire and James Foster (2011) developed the Alkire-Foster methodology that underlies the global Multidimensional Poverty Index, which assesses poverty across indicators of health, education, and living standards. Nigeria has adopted this approach in its National Multidimensional Poverty Index, which in 2022 found that poor Nigerians experienced deprivation across an average of just over one-quarter of all possible indicators, with deprivations concentrated in the same domains, health, education, and living standards, that overlap substantially with the human security framework's dimensions of health, economic, and community security (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). This conceptual overlap is not coincidental: poverty and human insecurity are, in important respects, two descriptions of the same underlying condition of deprivation, viewed from different analytical angles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts a composite theoretical framework combining state failure theory and the human security paradigm. State failure theory, associated with scholars such as Rotberg (2004) and Migdal (1988), provides a macro-level lens for understanding why the Nigerian state has been unable to perform its core functions. According to this theory, states fail along a continuum rather than through a single dramatic collapse; failure typically begins with the erosion of the state's capacity to deliver political goods, particularly security, and proceeds through weakening institutions, rising corruption, and declining legitimacy, eventually producing zones of ungoverned or contested

territory even where central government institutions formally persist. Nigeria's experience with insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, and militancy in the Niger Delta illustrates precisely this pattern of partial, territorially uneven state failure rather than complete state collapse.

The human security paradigm provides a micro-level, normative lens, redirecting analytical attention from the survival of the state to the survival, dignity, and welfare of the individual citizen (UNDP, 1994; Kaldor, 2007). Combining the two frameworks allows this paper to argue that state failure and human security failure are mutually constitutive processes in the Nigerian case: the erosion of state capacity produces failures across the seven dimensions of human security, and the resulting insecurity, particularly economic and personal insecurity, further undermines state legitimacy and capacity, producing a self-reinforcing cycle. Poverty, in this framework, is best understood as both a cause and a consequence of this cycle: a population deprived of economic and food security becomes more vulnerable to recruitment into insurgent, criminal, and militant networks, while the resulting violence further destroys livelihoods, displaces communities, and diverts scarce public resources away from welfare provision and towards militarised security spending.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial and growing body of scholarship has examined the relationship between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria. Udoh, Ekwuribe, and Dike (2019), employing relative deprivation theory, argue that rising poverty in Nigeria between 2007 and 2015 created fertile conditions for violence, banditry, and popular agitation against the state, while also showing that many of the government's own poverty alleviation programmes were captured by the political class and became instruments of elite enrichment rather than genuine welfare provision. This finding is echoed by Amila and Luka (2020), who examine poverty through the explicit lens of the seven dimensions of human security and identify unemployment, corruption, poor education, and environmental degradation as the principal drivers of poverty in Nigeria, concluding that all seven dimensions of human security are simultaneously threatened by the country's poverty crisis.

Galadima (2006) situates Nigeria's human security deficit within a longer historical trajectory, arguing that decades of economic mismanagement and the corrosive effects of prolonged military rule created deeply rooted threats to human security that have persisted into the democratic era since 1999, notwithstanding the formal transition to civilian government. This argument is reinforced by more recent doctoral research by Uzomah (2022), who examined Nigeria's internal security policy in the post-military era from 2006 to 2021 and found that the state's persistent prioritisation of physical security and infrastructure over human security and welfare has left human insecurity, expressed through crime, poverty, unemployment, inequality, and corruption, largely unabated. Similarly, work on the Niger Delta by Ibeanu (2000) and Ikelegbe (2005) demonstrates how environmental degradation from oil extraction, combined with the state's failure to share oil revenues equitably or remediate environmental damage, transformed a resource-rich region into one of the most conflict-prone and impoverished parts of the country, illustrating how the environmental, economic, and personal dimensions of human security interact to produce chronic poverty and violence.

Taken together, this literature converges on several recurring themes: first, that poverty and insecurity in Nigeria are mutually reinforcing rather than separate phenomena; second, that the Nigerian state's own institutions and elites are frequently implicated in perpetuating rather than resolving these conditions; and third, that policy responses focused narrowly on physical security or short-term economic palliatives, without addressing the underlying institutional and governance failures, are unlikely to produce durable improvements in either security or poverty outcomes. This paper builds on these themes, offering a more systematic mapping of Nigeria's poverty crisis onto the full seven-dimensional human security framework.

THE NIGERIAN STATE: HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

Understanding Nigeria's contemporary human security failures requires attention to the historical formation of the Nigerian state. The colonial state, established primarily to facilitate resource extraction and administrative control rather than to promote citizen welfare, bequeathed to independent Nigeria a set of institutions, a centralised, extractive bureaucracy, an ethnically fragmented federation, and a political culture oriented towards the capture of state resources that proved poorly suited to the demands of inclusive development (Ake, 1996). Chinua Achebe's (1983) enduring diagnosis that Nigeria's troubles are simply and squarely a failure of leadership remains a widely cited, if contested, summary of this structural inheritance: a state whose leaders have, with important exceptions, treated public office as an avenue for private accumulation rather than public service.

The discovery and exploitation of crude oil from the late 1950s onward compounded these structural weaknesses by transforming Nigeria into a classic rentier state. Oil revenues, flowing directly to the federal government rather than being generated through broad-based taxation of a productive economy, weakened the accountability relationship between the state and its citizens; where governments depend on citizens' taxes for revenue, they are compelled to answer to those citizens, but where governments depend instead on oil rents, this accountability linkage is substantially attenuated. This rentier character helps explain why decades of oil wealth, which by conservative estimates have generated hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue since the 1970s, have coexisted with, and arguably contributed to, deepening mass poverty. Prolonged periods of military rule between 1966 and 1999, interrupted only briefly by civilian interludes, further entrenched authoritarian, top-down, and unaccountable patterns of governance whose legacies persist in the country's democratic institutions today (Galadima, 2006).

As a result, the state scores poorly on nearly every recognised measure of governance quality and fragility. Nigeria has consistently ranked among the more fragile states on the Fragile States Index, reflecting weak state legitimacy, uneven public service delivery, and significant security challenges across multiple regions (Fund for Peace, 2024), while Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has repeatedly placed Nigeria in the bottom half of the global rankings, reflecting persistent and systemic corruption within public institutions (Transparency International, 2024). These indicators are not abstract; they translate directly into the state's demonstrated incapacity to guarantee its population's human security, as the following section details.

HUMAN SECURITY FAILURES IN NIGERIA: A DIMENSION ANALYSIS

Economic Security

Economic security, understood as an assured basic income through productive work or an adequate social safety net, is arguably the most acutely compromised dimension of human security in Nigeria. Youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high, and the formal economy has proven incapable of absorbing the roughly four to five million young Nigerians who enter the labour market each year. The naira's sharp depreciation and the removal of long-standing fuel subsidies since 2023, while widely regarded by economists as necessary macroeconomic corrections, have in the short term intensified economic insecurity, with the World Bank (2024) reporting that headline inflation peaked at an average annual rate above 30 percent in 2024, eroding real incomes and pushing an additional 42 million Nigerians into poverty since 2018/19. Nigeria's social protection system, though it has expanded in recent years through conditional cash transfer programmes, remains far too limited in coverage and value to function as an effective safety net for a population of this size, leaving the overwhelming majority of poor and near-poor Nigerians without any meaningful buffer against economic shocks.

Food Security

Food insecurity in Nigeria has worsened considerably over the past decade, driven by a combination of conflict, climate variability, and macroeconomic instability. The World Bank (2024) reports that children between the ages of zero and fourteen have the highest poverty rate of any demographic group, at over 72 percent, with direct implications for nutritional status and household food access. Conflict-affected states in the North-East and North-West have experienced repeated disruptions to planting and harvest cycles, as farmers have been displaced or killed by insurgents and bandits, while the farmer-herder conflicts that have intensified across the Middle Belt have similarly disrupted agricultural production in what was once considered Nigeria's food basket. The National Security Adviser and senior military officials have explicitly identified hunger and poverty as drivers, rather than merely consequences, of insecurity, underscoring the extent to which food insecurity and violent conflict have become mutually reinforcing in contemporary Nigeria.

Health Security

Health security failures in Nigeria are reflected in the country's persistently poor health outcomes relative to its income level and in the systemic weaknesses of its healthcare infrastructure. The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) Multidimensional Poverty Index identifies health as one of the four core dimensions of deprivation experienced by poor Nigerians, alongside education, living standards, and exposure to shocks, with rural populations experiencing markedly higher rates of health-related deprivation than urban populations. Chronic underinvestment in primary healthcare infrastructure, an acute shortage of health workers relative to population, many of whom have emigrated in search of better opportunities abroad, and out-of-pocket healthcare financing that pushes households further into poverty when illness strikes, combine to leave the majority of Nigerians without reliable access to essential health services. Insecurity compounds these deficits

directly: conflict in the North-East and North-West has repeatedly forced the closure of health facilities and disrupted immunisation and maternal health programmes in affected areas.

Environmental Security

Environmental security failures are most starkly illustrated in the Niger Delta, where decades of oil extraction have produced extensive land and water pollution, destroying the fishing and farming livelihoods on which local communities depend (Ibeanu, 2000). The state's failure to enforce environmental regulation on oil companies, to remediate contaminated sites, or to ensure that oil-producing communities receive an equitable share of the wealth extracted from their land, has entrenched poverty in a region that is, paradoxically, the source of the greater part of the country's export revenue (Ikelegbe, 2005). Beyond the Niger Delta, desertification in northern Nigeria, erratic rainfall patterns associated with climate variability, and recurrent flooding illustrate how environmental degradation and climate vulnerability compound existing poverty and livelihood insecurity across different regions of the country. In 2022, severe flooding affected millions of Nigerians, displaced more than 2.4 million people, and devastated approximately one million hectares of farmland, with significant consequences for food security and rural livelihoods. (Nigerian Meteorological Agency [NiMet], 2024; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024; World Bank, 2026)

Personal Security

Personal security, protection from physical violence, has deteriorated dramatically over the past two decades and represents perhaps the most visible dimension of Nigeria's human security crisis. The Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province insurgency in the North-East has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions since 2009; banditry and mass kidnapping for ransom have engulfed large parts of the North-West and North-Central regions; farmer-herder violence has claimed thousands of lives across the Middle Belt; and separatist agitation and its violent suppression have destabilised parts of the South-East. Each of these conflicts has direct and severe poverty consequences: displaced populations lose access to land, livelihoods, and assets; insecurity deters investment and disrupts commerce in affected states; and the diversion of scarce public resources towards security spending crowds out investment in the health, education, and infrastructure that might otherwise reduce poverty (Uzomah, 2022).

Community Security

Community security, concerning the protection of people's membership in supportive social groups and networks, has been undermined by the scale of displacement generated by Nigeria's various conflicts. Millions of internally displaced persons, concentrated particularly in the North-East, have lost not only their homes and livelihoods but also the community networks, extended family support systems, and traditional institutions that historically provided informal social protection in Nigerian society. The breakdown of these networks leaves displaced and conflict-affected populations disproportionately vulnerable to chronic poverty, as they lack both the physical assets and the social capital that might otherwise support recovery.

Political Security

Political security, which concerns citizens' ability to live with dignity and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives, remains constrained by weak institutions, limited government responsiveness, and periodic infringements on civil liberties. Widespread perceptions of electoral malpractice, the marginalisation of certain ethnic and regional groups from political power, and the state's frequently heavy-handed response to protest, including the 2020 EndSARS protests against police brutality, have combined to erode public trust in government institutions. This erosion of political security matters for poverty outcomes because it weakens the accountability mechanisms through which citizens might otherwise compel their government to prioritise welfare provision and equitable resource distribution.

THE POVERTY-INSECURITY NEXUS: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The evidence reviewed above points to a clear, mutually reinforcing relationship between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria. On one side of this nexus, poverty functions as a driver of insecurity: young men facing chronic unemployment and economic exclusion have proven vulnerable to recruitment by insurgent groups, criminal gangs, and militias offering income, status, or a sense of belonging that the formal economy and the state have failed to provide (Udoh et al., 2019). On the other side of the nexus, insecurity drives poverty: violent conflict destroys physical and human capital, displaces populations from productive land, disrupts markets and supply chains, deters domestic and foreign investment, and forces governments to reallocate scarce fiscal resources from development to security spending. Nigeria's own security officials have explicitly acknowledged this cyclical relationship, with the National Security Adviser and Chief of Defence Staff describing hunger and poverty as catalysts for insecurity, crime, and social disintegration rather than as separate or downstream concerns. (Odeniyi, 2025).

This cyclical dynamic is visible in the geographic distribution of poverty within Nigeria. The states most affected by insurgency and banditry in the North-East and North-West consistently register the highest rates of multidimensional poverty in the country, with the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) recording poverty incidence as high as 91 percent in Sokoto State, compared with 27 percent in Ondo State in the relatively more peaceful South-West. Sixty-five percent of Nigeria's multidimensionally poor population, some 86 million people, live in the northern regions that have borne the brunt of insurgency, banditry, and farmer-herder violence over the past fifteen years (NBS, 2022). While regional poverty differentials in Nigeria have deep historical roots predating the current security crisis, including long-standing disparities in colonial and post-colonial investment in education and infrastructure between the north and south, the correlation between contemporary conflict intensity and poverty incidence strongly supports the argument that insecurity has become a significant independent driver of poverty over and above these historical patterns.

Governance Failures and Institutional Weakness

Underlying each of the dimensional failures examined above is a common thread of institutional weakness and governance failure. Corruption diverts public resources that might otherwise fund

healthcare, education, and social protection into private hands; Udoh et al. (2019) specifically document how Nigeria's poverty alleviation programmes have themselves become vehicles for elite enrichment rather than effective instruments of welfare provision. Weak rule of law and an overstretched, under-resourced security apparatus have left the state unable to project authority uniformly across its territory, producing what Rotberg (2004) would characterise as territorially uneven state failure: pockets of relatively functional governance in parts of the country coexisting with near-total absence of effective state authority in others. Federal fiscal arrangements that concentrate the bulk of revenue, particularly oil revenue, at the centre have limited the capacity and incentive of state and local governments, which bear primary constitutional responsibility for many welfare-relevant services such as primary healthcare and basic education, to respond effectively to local needs. These institutional weaknesses are not incidental to Nigeria's poverty crisis; this paper argues they are its principal proximate cause, mediating between the country's considerable resource endowments and the persistently poor welfare outcomes experienced by most citizens.

CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

The North-East Insurgency

The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009 in Borno State and subsequently spread across the North-East, illustrates with particular clarity the poverty-insecurity nexus at the heart of this paper. The insurgency emerged in a region that already suffered from some of the country's highest poverty and lowest educational attainment rates, conditions that scholars have identified as contributing to the movement's initial recruitment success. Fifteen years of conflict have since killed tens of thousands of people, displaced millions internally and across borders, and devastated the region's agricultural economy, entrenching a cycle in which pre-existing poverty facilitated the emergence of violent extremism, which has in turn produced far deeper and more entrenched poverty than existed before the conflict began.

Banditry and Farmer-Herder Conflict

Since the mid-2010s, large-scale banditry involving mass kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and village raids has engulfed significant parts of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and neighbouring states in the North-West, while farmer-herder conflicts, driven partly by competition over increasingly scarce land and water resources amid climate variability and population growth, have intensified across the North-Central Middle Belt. Both phenomena have displaced farming communities, disrupted agricultural production in regions historically responsible for a substantial share of the nation's food supply, and imposed a further layer of economic insecurity on already impoverished rural populations.

The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta case illustrates a different but related pathway from human security failure to poverty. Here, the state's failure lies not primarily in an inability to prevent violence, though militancy and inter-communal conflict have also afflicted the region, but in its failure to regulate the environmental and economic conduct of the extractive industry on which the national economy

substantially depends. Decades of oil spillage, gas flaring, and inadequate remediation have devastated local fishing and farming livelihoods, while the concentration of oil revenue at the federal level has left many oil-producing communities without commensurate benefit from the resources extracted from beneath their land (Ibeanu, 2000; Ikelegbe, 2005). The result is a region simultaneously central to national wealth generation and characterised by some of the country's most acute local poverty and periodic violent unrest.

DISCUSSION

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports the central argument that poverty in Nigeria cannot be adequately understood, or addressed, without reference to the state's broader failure to guarantee human security across its full range of dimensions. The persistence and, in recent years, the worsening of poverty despite decades of dedicated anti-poverty programming suggests strongly that Nigeria's poverty crisis is not primarily a technical problem of insufficient policy design, but a structural problem rooted in weak institutions, elite capture, and the state's demonstrated inability to guarantee basic economic, physical, and social security to the majority of its population. This finding has significant implications for how Nigeria conceives and pursues poverty reduction. Approaches that treat poverty reduction as a narrowly economic or technocratic exercise, disbursing cash transfers, expanding microcredit, or pursuing macroeconomic stabilisation, while important, are unlikely to achieve durable success unless accompanied by parallel efforts to restore personal security in conflict-affected regions, strengthen institutional accountability, and rebuild the frayed social contract between the Nigerian state and its citizens.

At the same time, the analysis suggests that security-sector responses focused narrowly on the physical suppression of insurgency and banditry, without corresponding investment in the economic, food, health, and political dimensions of human security in affected regions, are similarly unlikely to produce lasting peace or poverty reduction. Uzomah's (2022) finding that Nigerian authorities have persistently prioritised physical security and infrastructure over human security and welfare captures precisely this imbalance, and helps explain why years of intensified military operations against Boko Haram and banditry have not yet translated into a durable reduction in either violence or poverty in the affected regions.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, this paper advances the following recommendations.

1. First, Nigeria's security strategy should be reoriented from a narrowly militarised, regime-security posture towards a genuinely human security-centred approach that addresses the economic, food, and health deprivations that fuel recruitment into insurgent and criminal networks alongside continued efforts to degrade the operational capacity of armed groups.
2. Second, the federal government should pursue a substantial and well-targeted expansion of social protection coverage, ensuring that cash transfer and safety-net programmes reach the most vulnerable populations, particularly in conflict-affected and rural areas, while strengthening the transparency and accountability mechanisms that govern their implementation to prevent the elite capture documented by Udoh et al. (2019).

3. Third, sustained investment in economic diversification away from oil dependence, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and the digital economy, is essential to generating the productive employment opportunities that genuine economic security requires.
4. Fourth, institutional reforms addressing corruption, strengthening the independence and capacity of anti-corruption agencies and the judiciary, and improving fiscal federalism to give subnational governments both the resources and the accountability incentives to deliver welfare-relevant services are indispensable complements to any anti-poverty strategy.
5. Fifth, targeted investment in environmental remediation and climate adaptation, particularly in the Niger Delta and the increasingly climate-stressed north, is necessary to address environmental security failures that continue to entrench poverty in specific regions. Finally, sustained investment in inclusive political processes, credible elections, protection of civil liberties, and responsive governance is essential to restoring the political security and institutional legitimacy on which durable poverty reduction ultimately depends.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that poverty in Nigeria is best understood as the cumulative product of the state's persistent failure to secure the human security of its citizens across economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political dimensions. Drawing on state failure theory and the human security paradigm, the paper has shown that Nigeria's poverty crisis and its multiple, overlapping security crises are not separate phenomena but mutually reinforcing expressions of the same underlying institutional weakness: a state that, notwithstanding its considerable resource endowments, has proven unable to translate national wealth into broad-based citizen welfare, unable to guarantee the physical safety of large segments of its population, and unable to sustain the institutional accountability that effective welfare provision requires. The empirical evidence, from the concentration of extreme poverty in conflict-affected northern states to the persistent underdevelopment of the oil-rich but environmentally devastated Niger Delta, consistently supports this argument. Reversing Nigeria's deepening poverty crisis will require more than incremental adjustments to existing anti-poverty programmes; it will require a fundamental reorientation of the Nigerian state towards the protection and promotion of human security in its fullest sense, anchored in institutional reform, accountable and inclusive governance, economic diversification, and a renewed social contract between the state and its citizens. Absent such a reorientation, Nigeria risks remaining trapped in the self-reinforcing cycle of insecurity and poverty that has characterised much of its post-independence history.

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