

ASSESSING THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA (2015–2025)

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Abstract

Ethno-religious conflict has been a persistent challenge in Plateau State, Nigeria, thereby affecting social cohesion, economic development and human security. The study examined the causes, consequences and coping mechanisms of ethno-religious conflicts between 2015 and 2025 with a focus on socio-economic development. The study adopted a qualitative research design to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of affected communities. A total of 48 participants were purposively selected to participate in six Focus Group Discussions comprising community leaders, religious leaders, youth, women groups and victims or internally displaced persons (IDPs) from conflict-affected areas. Data was collected using a structured FGD guide and analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and core themes related to conflict drivers, socio-economic impacts and peacebuilding responses. The findings revealed that conflicts are rooted in ethnic and religious identities, resource competition, political manipulation and youth unemployment. Consequences include displacement, economic disruption, erosion of social cohesion and stalled development. Community-driven coping mechanisms and government interventions were found to be partially effective. The study recommended integrating structural reforms, youth empowerment, interfaith dialogue and institutionalized peace mechanisms to achieve sustainable development and peace in Plateau State. The study contributes to theory by linking findings to Social Identity Theory, Horizontal Inequalities Theory, Structural Violence, and Conflict Transformation frameworks.

Keywords: Ethno-religious conflict, Ethnicity, Farmer -Herder conflict, Plateau State, Peace-building, Indigene–Settler Dichotomy

Introduction

Ethno-religious conflicts posed an enduring challenge across many regions of the world, with far-reaching implications for socio-economic development. These conflicts are frequently shaped by political rivalry, economic disparities and unresolved historical grievances (Halevy, 2021). When such tensions escalate, they weaken social cohesion, erode institutional effectiveness, and redirect public resources away from development initiatives

toward security responses (Banerjee & Iyer, 2023). In Africa, the growing intensity of internal conflicts has increasingly affected governance systems, institutional stability, and state capacity.

Ethno-religious conflict is not limited to any single region of the world; rather, it appears across different societies and historical periods. In many contexts, tensions linked to ethnic identity and religious affiliation have played a significant role in shaping political structures, social relations and patterns of governance (Daniel, 2023; Çancı&Odukoya, 2020). While Africa's rich ethnic and religious diversity represents an important cultural asset, it has also created conditions in which identity-based divisions can become sources of political contestation and conflict.

In West Africa, Nigeria represents one of the most complex cases due to its large population and remarkable ethnic and religious plurality. The country's history of political instability, coupled with uneven patterns of economic development, has often intensified identity-related tensions in several regions. The Middle Belt, where Plateau State is located, is particularly sensitive in this regard because of its demographic diversity and its position between the predominantly Muslim northern region and the largely Christian southern region (Daniel, 2023).

Plateau State, situated in Nigeria's North-Central zone, has experienced recurring episodes of ethno-religious violence in recent years. These conflicts have disrupted social relations, weakened economic activities and slowed development initiatives within affected communities. In many instances, the violence has been associated with disputes involving ethnic and religious groups competing for land ownership, political representation, religious influence and access to limited economic resources. At the local level, tensions often arise between indigenous Christian communities and predominantly Muslim Hausa and Fulani groups. Competition over land and water resources, combined with political grievances and longstanding historical mistrust, has contributed to an environment that remains fragile and prone to periodic outbreaks of violence (Akpan, 2018). As a result, the interaction between identity politics and economic inequality continues to shape the broader conflict–development relationship in the state.

Although several studies have examined the historical and political roots of ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State, relatively few provide recent empirical evidence covering the period between 2015 and 2025. In addition, much of the existing scholarship relies primarily on secondary sources and quantitative methods. Consequently, the everyday experiences of individuals and communities directly affected by these conflicts are often insufficiently represented in the literature. Perspectives from women, youth, internally displaced persons, traditional leaders and religious actors remain particularly underexplored.

Ethno-Religious Conflict

Ethno-religious conflict is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond simple disagreements between ethnic or religious communities. In plural societies such as Nigeria, particularly in Plateau State, these conflicts are deeply embedded in historical grievances, identity construction, political competition, economic inequalities, and socio-cultural distinctions. A thorough understanding of these dimensions is necessary for developing effective peacebuilding and development interventions.

Religion occupies an important place in the formation of individual identity and the organization of social life. In many societies, religious beliefs provide individuals with moral guidance, a sense of purpose and a framework through which people interpret social reality. Beyond personal spirituality, religious institutions have historically functioned as spaces where communities interact, maintain shared values and reinforce collective identity. Nevertheless, religion does not always operate as a unifying force. When religious affiliation becomes entangled with political competition or struggles over resources, it can contribute to divisions between groups.

The concept of ethnicity is equally central to understanding identity-based conflicts. The word “ethnic” originates from the Latin term *ethnicus* and the Greek *ethnikos*, both referring broadly to a people or nation (Harper, 2019). In sociological discussions, however, ethnicity is not simply about ancestry. Rather, it refers to a socially constructed form of identity that emerges from shared language, cultural traditions, historical experiences, and perceptions of common origin. The sociologist Max Weber emphasized that ethnicity is often sustained by a *subjective belief* in common descent, regardless of whether such ancestry can be historically verified (Isah et al., 2018). In practice, ethnicity operates through both self-identification and recognition by others within a broader social environment. As Mustapha and Christian (2022) observe, ethnic identity creates a sense of belonging among members of a group while simultaneously distinguishing them from other groups within the same society.

Conflicts described as ethno-religious usually emerge when ethnic identities and religious affiliations overlap and become politically mobilized. In such circumstances, differences that might otherwise remain cultural markers begin to shape political alliances and patterns of competition. Historical experiences, particularly those associated with colonial administration, have contributed to this dynamic in many African states. Colonial authorities often governed through indirect rule and created administrative boundaries that privileged certain communities over others. These arrangements sometimes left behind structural inequalities and contested notions of citizenship. In addition, competition over scarce resources especially land and employment, can intensify tensions among groups whose identities are already politicized.

The situation in Plateau State reflects many of these broader dynamics. The state is home to several indigenous ethnic communities, including the Afizere, Berom, and Anaguta peoples, alongside settler populations such as Hausa-Fulani groups. In many cases, ethnic affiliation also corresponds with religious identity, with indigenous groups largely identifying as Christian and Hausa-Fulani populations predominantly identifying as Muslim (Adamu, 2024; Garkuwa, 2025). When political competition and economic pressures intersect with these identity markers, divisions between communities can deepen. As Gambo, Mashal, Nanlop, Yakubu and Nanlung (2025) noted, the convergence of ethnic and religious identities within competitive socio-political contexts creates conditions that may facilitate mobilization and, at times, violent confrontation.

Socio-Economic Consequences

Empirical research also demonstrates that recurring ethno-religious violence has significant socio-economic implications. A large cross-sectional study by Shipurut, Danasabe, and Damian (2024), which examined farming communities in Plateau State, found

that violent conflicts had severe effects on agricultural production. Displacement of farmers, destruction of infrastructure, and insecurity in rural areas reduced farm output and disrupted local food systems. Data collected from approximately 400 residents and key informant interviews showed that these disruptions contributed to rising poverty and food insecurity.

While many studies provide evidence of conflict causes and consequences, few have explicitly covered the full period 2015–2025. Studies such as those by Garkuwa (2025) and Shipurut et al. (2024) capture more recent trends but gaps remain in capturing longitudinal changes over the entire decade. Additionally, while many empirical analyses use cross-sectional designs, there has been limited panel or longitudinal studies examining how socio-economic indicators evolve before, during and after major conflict episodes in Plateau State, a gap this research will address.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, which makes it suitable for exploring perceptions, experiences and meanings associated with ethno-religious conflicts. Collection of data was through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with community leaders, religious leaders, youth and women groups, civil society members and IDPs from conflict-affected areas. A total of 8 participants were recruited per session and discussions lasted for about 60–90 minutes. Sessions were conducted in English, Hausa or local dialects, with translation as necessary.

Forty-eight (48) participants were purposively selected from the communities based on their knowledge of and experience with local conflicts. Demographic data included gender, age, marital status, occupation, ethnicity, religion and residence duration. Thematic analysis was employed with coding and categorization of responses into themes aligned with the study objectives. Tables were constructed to present findings while narrative interpretations were linked to relevant theories.

Findings and Discussion

Causes of ethno-religious conflict

Table 1: Causes of ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State (2015–2025)

Theme/Category	Description of Participant Responses	Emphasis
Ethnic and religious identity	Conflicts often arise from perceived threats to ethnic or religious groups	High
Land disputes/resource competition	Competition over farmland, grazing areas, and water resources	High
Political manipulation	Political elites exploiting ethnic/religious divisions for power	Medium
Youth unemployment	Lack of jobs makes youth susceptible to recruitment into violence	High
Historical grievances	Long-standing disputes and mistrust between communities	Medium

Media and external influence	Sensational reporting, political propaganda, and external interference	Low-Medium
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Interpretation:

Table 1 highlights that ethnic and religious identity, resource disputes as well as youth unemployment are the most frequently cited causes of ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State. Participants emphasized that these factors often intersect revealing that a land dispute is rarely purely economic but is often symbolically tied to group identity. The data indicate that ethnic and religious identity and also resource competition are primary conflict drivers. Political elites often exacerbate tensions for electoral or personal gain while youth unemployment increases susceptibility to recruitment into violence. This aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how in-group and out-group dynamics intensify conflict while Horizontal Inequalities Theory (Stewart, 2008) highlights the role of unequal access to resources and power.

4.2 Socio-Economic Consequences

Table 2: Socio-economic consequences of ethno-religious conflict

Impact Area	Participant Observations	Emphasis
Loss of life and property	Deaths, destruction of homes, businesses, and religious centers	High
Displacement / migration	Movement of IDPs to safer areas	High
Economic disruption	Decline in agriculture, trade, and investment	High
Social fragmentation	Erosion of trust and social cohesion	Medium-High
Disruption of education & health	Closure of schools, reduced healthcare access	Medium
Stalled local development	Infrastructure and public services neglected due to insecurity	Medium

Interpretation:

The findings summarized in Table 2 show that the socio-economic consequences of ethno-religious conflict are multifaceted and severe. Agricultural productivity is disrupted, businesses closed and communities experienced heightened poverty. Displacement exacerbates social vulnerability and creates dependency on aid. These impacts can be understood through Galtung's Structural Violence framework (1969), which explains that social structures such as inequitable access to resources, lack of education and unsafe environments, indirectly harm human well-being and development. This framework helps to conceptualize the long-term, indirect harm that recurrent conflicts impose on Plateau State's socio-economic trajectory.

4.3 Coping Mechanisms and Peacebuilding Strategies

Table 3: Coping mechanisms and peacebuilding strategies

Strategy / Mechanism	Participant Insights	Effectiveness (Perceived)
Interfaith dialogue & education	Workshops, sermons, and community awareness programs	Medium-High
Traditional mediation	Involvement of elders, chiefs, and community leaders	Medium
Vigilante/community security networks	Neighborhood watches to prevent attacks	Medium
Government & NGO intervention	Peacekeeping, emergency relief, and mediation	Low-Medium
Youth and women groups participation	Promoting reconciliation and community cohesion	Medium
Religious leader engagement	Sermons and advocacy for peace	Medium-High

Interpretation:

Table 3 reveals that local and community-driven strategies dominate coping and peacebuilding, with interfaith dialogue and traditional mediation are the most prominent. Participants noted that these efforts are often reactive rather than preventive, revealing the gaps in formal structures for early warning and conflict resolution. The findings resonate with Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997), which emphasizes building relationships, trust and sustainable structures for peace rather than focusing solely on ending violence. The data also suggest a need for integration of formal governance with community mechanisms, bridging local knowledge with state-level policy enforcement.

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate earlier research on the complex interplay between ethnicity, religion and economic inequality which drives conflict in Plateau State (Egwu, 2015).

Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflict

The study's findings underscore multiple, inter-locking causes of ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State: historical indigene/settler dichotomies, competition over land and resources, religious intolerance, and socio-economic marginalisation (particularly youth unemployment).

For instance, participants frequently referenced deep-rooted "indigene vs. settler" tensions that mirror the findings of Gambo, Mashal, Nanlop, Yakubu & Nanlung (2025) who argue that the indigene/settler dichotomy remains a primary driver of conflict in Jos and surrounds. Similarly, the FGDs emphasised land and resource competition (e.g., farming land, grazing routes) as triggers of violence. This pattern was supported by the study by Adamu (2024) who found that residential segregation and resource contestation increase the likelihood of conflict in Jos metropolis.

Furthermore, the study found that youth unemployment and socio-economic frustration contribute significantly to conflict participation. This aligns with broader Nigerian research showing that socio-economic marginalisation (especially of youths) magnifies vulnerability to mobilization for violence. For example, the study of Ishaq and Shousha (2021) on Nasarawa State found that youth alienation from economic opportunities facilitated their involvement in ethno-religious conflict. This interplay of identity (ethnic and religious), economics and structural exclusion is consistent with theoretical understandings of conflict rooted in structural inequality and unmet human needs.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State stems from a complex interaction of factors including identity politics, competition over resources, socio-economic marginalization, and weaknesses in governance structures. The resulting consequences are extensive, ranging from disrupted development and destroyed livelihoods to declining social trust among communities. Although various coping strategies and peacebuilding initiatives exist, many of them remain limited in scope and are largely reactive rather than preventive.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is detrimental to socio-economic development, creating a cycle in which conflict fuels underdevelopment while underdevelopment, in turn, exacerbates tensions. Consequently, efforts to promote sustainable development in Plateau State must incorporate conflict prevention strategies, inclusive governance practices, youth-focused economic empowerment programmes and initiatives that strengthen intergroup relationships. Without addressing the underlying drivers of conflict and integrating peacebuilding into development policy, meaningful socio-economic progress in the region will remain difficult to achieve.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that ethno-religious conflicts in Plateau State arise from multiple interconnected factors, including identity differences, competition over resources, political manipulation and high levels of youth unemployment. These conflicts have produced serious consequences such as socio-economic disruption, population displacement and weakened social cohesion, all of which obstruct sustainable development.

While community-based initiatives such as traditional mediation and local peacebuilding efforts have had some positive effects, they remain insufficient without stronger institutional support. The study also contributes to theoretical discussions by connecting local experiences with perspectives from Social Identity Theory, Horizontal Inequalities Theory, Structural Violence, and Conflict Transformation frameworks. These perspectives highlight that peace is not only a social necessity but also a structural requirement for sustainable development.

Addressing the challenges posed by ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State therefore requires a comprehensive approach that combines government action, community participation and development-oriented strategies.

1. At the policy level, government authorities must prioritize the resolution of land and resource disputes through clear territorial demarcation, enforcement of property rights

and equitable allocation of resources. Such measures can reduce long-standing grievances that frequently trigger violent confrontations.

2. Equally important is the creation of economic opportunities for young people. Expanding vocational training programmes, supporting entrepreneurship and providing access to microfinance can help reduce unemployment and limit the likelihood of youth involvement in violent activities.
3. Beyond government initiatives, strengthening both institutional and community-based peacebuilding mechanisms is essential. Traditional leaders, religious institutions and interfaith platforms already play important roles in mediating disputes at the local level. However, their efforts should be integrated with formal systems that provide early warning mechanisms, structured mediation processes and coordinated conflict resolution strategies. A combination of traditional and institutional approaches could enable Plateau State to shift toward a more proactive model of conflict prevention.
4. At the community level, promoting interfaith education and dialogue remains critical for encouraging tolerance, mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse groups. Educational institutions, religious organizations and community associations can contribute significantly to cultivating a culture of peace. In addition, community vigilance groups, working in collaboration with law enforcement agencies, may help strengthen local security and prevent the escalation of tensions.

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