

BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency has generated a protracted internal displacement crisis in Nigeria, particularly in the Northeast region, with serious implications for humanitarian management. Despite extensive national and international interventions, internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to face persistent vulnerabilities, reflecting gaps between policy frameworks and practical implementation. This study examines the relationship between Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement, with a focus on its implications for humanitarian management in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative research design and relies on documentary sources of data, which are analysed using qualitative content analysis. The study is anchored on the Theory of Social Production of Material Wealth and Human Security Theory to explain the structural and human dimensions of displacement. Findings revealed that internal displacement is driven by a combination of violent insurgency, structural economic inequalities, weak institutional capacity, and emerging climate-related shocks. The study further showed that institutional inefficiencies, corruption, coordination challenges, and declining international funding support constrain humanitarian response mechanisms. The study concluded that effective humanitarian management in Nigeria requires institutional reform, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and the integration of human security and climate resilience approaches. It recommended legislative strengthening of IDP protection frameworks, improved coordination among humanitarian agencies, and the adoption of community-based and localised response strategies to ensure sustainable support for displaced populations.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Insurgency, Crises, Displacement.

Introduction

Nigeria's geopolitical integrity and social stability have been significantly undermined for over a decade by the persistent insurgency of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, popularly known as Boko Haram (OCHA, 2025). What began as a localised religious movement in the late 1990s has evolved into one of the most violent non-state armed conflicts globally, with far-reaching consequences for human security and settlement patterns across Northern Nigeria (Nwankpa, 2015). The insurgency reached a critical turning point in 2009 following the extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, by state security forces, an event widely regarded as a catalyst for the

group's radicalisation and subsequent intensification of violence (Johnson, 2016). Since then, the conflict has resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and has generated a humanitarian crisis of considerable magnitude (Ilerhunmwuwa, 2025).

A central manifestation of this crisis is the large-scale internal displacement of populations. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 2.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are concentrated in the Northeast states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, with Borno State alone hosting over 1.7 million displaced individuals (OCHA, 2025). Notably, displacement in the region has become increasingly protracted, as a significant proportion of IDPs have remained displaced for extended periods, often exceeding a decade (IOM, 2025). This transition from temporary displacement to a prolonged condition of vulnerability highlights deeper structural and institutional challenges within Nigeria's humanitarian response system.

Despite the scale and persistence of internal displacement, existing responses by the Nigerian state—primarily coordinated through the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMA), have been widely criticised for inefficiency, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate legal protection frameworks for IDPs (Michael et al., 2025). These challenges are further compounded by allegations of corruption and the emergence of a “war economy,” in which certain political and security actors benefit from prolonged insecurity through access to humanitarian and security resources (Nwankpa, 2015). Consequently, a significant gap exists between established humanitarian policies and their practical implementation, resulting in limited effectiveness in addressing the needs of displaced populations.

In addition, the humanitarian context in Nigeria is increasingly shaped by overlapping and reinforcing crises. Environmental shocks, particularly the devastating floods of 2024 and 2025, have triggered secondary displacement and further weakened rural livelihoods in the affected regions (SIDA, 2025). At the same time, global donor fatigue has led to a decline in humanitarian funding, thereby constraining the capacity of international and local actors to respond effectively. This has given rise to a strategic shift toward the localisation of humanitarian interventions, often described as the “Humanitarian Reset,” which aims to transfer greater responsibility for aid coordination and delivery to national and sub-national institutions by 2028 (Abubakar & Amurtiya, 2023).

While existing studies have extensively examined the causes and consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency, as well as the scale of internal displacement, limited scholarly attention has been given to the implications of this protracted crisis for humanitarian management within a context of declining external support and evolving governance frameworks. It is within this gap that this study is situated. Accordingly, the study aims to examine the relationship between Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement,

with particular emphasis on its implications for humanitarian management in Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to analyse the drivers of displacement, evaluate the effectiveness of institutional responses, and explore emerging challenges and opportunities in humanitarian governance.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing an integrated analysis that links insurgency, displacement, and humanitarian management through a political economy and human security lens. By doing so, it offers critical insights into the structural and institutional factors that sustain displacement and undermine effective humanitarian response, while also highlighting policy-relevant strategies for improving the management of internally displaced populations in Nigeria.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The scholarly discourse on the Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement in Nigeria has evolved around interconnected themes that reflect the complexity of insecurity, governance failure, and humanitarian response. Rather than treating these themes in isolation, this section integrates empirical insights with theoretical perspectives to provide a coherent analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of displacement and the challenges of humanitarian management in Nigeria.

Existing studies trace the origins of Boko Haram to a combination of religious extremism, political marginalisation, and entrenched socio-economic deprivation in Northeast Nigeria (Akowe, 2024; Ilerhunmwuwa, 2025). The transformation of the group from a non-violent religious movement into a violent insurgency following the 2009 state crackdown is widely attributed to governance failure and the use of coercive security strategies that failed to address underlying grievances (Johnson, 2016). This transition significantly altered the pattern of population movement, as displacement shifted from short-term migration associated with localised conflicts to large-scale, protracted displacement driven by extreme violence, including mass killings, abductions, and destruction of livelihoods (Oladeji, 2018).

From the perspective of the Theory of Social Production of Material Wealth (Marxian Dialectics), these developments can be understood as outcomes of structural inequalities embedded within the Nigerian political economy. The theory posits that control over the means of production and the distribution of material resources shape social relations and stability (Omoyibo, 2020). In the context of Northeast Nigeria, decades of economic neglect, limited state presence, and unequal access to productive resources have created conditions of deprivation that make populations vulnerable to both insurgent recruitment and displacement (Ada & Abdullahi, 2022). The destruction of agricultural systems, restriction of trade routes, and loss of livelihoods caused by the insurgency further reinforce this structural vulnerability. Consequently, internal displacement is not merely a

humanitarian outcome of violence but also a manifestation of deeper economic dislocation and class-based marginalisation (Akanmu et al., 2023).

This political economy perspective is further reinforced by emerging literature on the “war economy,” which suggests that the persistence of the insurgency is partly sustained by economic incentives available to certain state and non-state actors (Nwankpa, 2015; World Peace Foundation, 2024). The allocation of substantial resources to security operations, humanitarian interventions, and post-conflict reconstruction has created opportunities for rent-seeking and resource diversion. Within this framework, the management of internal displacement becomes entangled in broader systems of accumulation, where the prolonged existence of IDP camps and humanitarian crises may inadvertently serve vested interests. This helps to explain the observed gap between policy commitments and actual outcomes in humanitarian response, as institutional inefficiencies and corruption undermine effective service delivery (Akawu et al., 2023; Michael et al., 2025).

While the Marxian perspective explains the structural and economic drivers of displacement, Human Security Theory provides a complementary lens for understanding the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of internally displaced persons. By shifting the focus from state-centric security to individual well-being, the theory emphasises the importance of “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” (O’Connor et al., 2021). In the Nigerian context, the Boko Haram insurgency represents a dual violation of these principles. IDPs are exposed to continuous threats of violence, insecurity, and exploitation, while simultaneously facing deprivation in terms of food, shelter, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities (Oladeji, 2018).

Empirical evidence from IDP camps and host communities illustrates the multidimensional nature of these vulnerabilities. Limited access to basic services, overcrowded living conditions, and inadequate protection mechanisms contribute to heightened risks, including gender-based violence, disease outbreaks, and psychological trauma (Akawu et al., 2023). These conditions highlight the failure of existing humanitarian structures to adequately address the core domains of human security—economic, food, health, personal, and community security (Udomisor et al., 2025). The persistence of such conditions underscores the inadequacy of responses that prioritise emergency relief without addressing long-term human development needs.

The relevance of Human Security Theory is further evident in the analysis of humanitarian management frameworks in Nigeria. Institutions such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMA) are mandated to provide protection and assistance; however, their interventions often fall short of ensuring comprehensive human security for displaced populations. The “theory–practice disconnect” identified in the literature reflects a situation in which

policy frameworks acknowledge human security principles, yet their implementation fails to translate into tangible improvements in the lives of IDPs (Michael et al., 2025). This disconnect is manifested in inadequate coordination, limited institutional capacity, and weak accountability mechanisms.

Recent shifts in humanitarian policy, particularly the transition toward localisation and the “Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus,” further illustrate the application of both theoretical perspectives. On one hand, the push for localisation reflects an attempt to address structural inefficiencies and reduce dependency on external actors, aligning with the Marxian critique of centralised control over resources. On the other hand, it represents a move toward enhancing human security by empowering local institutions and communities to take ownership of their recovery and resilience processes (Humanitarian Action, 2025). However, the success of this transition remains uncertain, given the persistent insecurity and institutional weaknesses in many affected areas.

Overall, the integration of the Theory of Social Production of Material Wealth and Human Security Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement in Nigeria. While the former explains the structural and economic conditions that produce and sustain displacement, the latter highlights the multidimensional vulnerabilities experienced by displaced populations. Together, these perspectives offer critical insights into the limitations of current humanitarian management approaches and underscore the need for more holistic, accountable, and context-sensitive interventions.

Dynamics of Displacement and Humanitarian Needs

The dynamics of internal displacement in Nigeria reflect a complex interaction of violent conflict, institutional limitations, and environmental shocks, all of which have intensified humanitarian needs across affected regions. The scale of displacement remains both protracted and geographically concentrated, although recent trends indicated a gradual expansion beyond the Northeast into the Northwest and North-Central zones due to overlapping security and climatic pressures.

Scale, Patterns, and Protracted Nature of Displacement

Available data indicated that internal displacement in Nigeria has reached unprecedented levels, with the Northeast (Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States) remaining the epicentre of the crisis. As shown in Table 1, the region accounts for over 2.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), while significant displacement is also recorded in the Northwest due to banditry and in the North-Central region due to farmer–herder conflicts and climate-related shocks (OCHA, 2025; IOM, 2025a; IOM, 2025b).

Table 1: Regional Distribution of IDPs and Drivers of Displacement (2024–2025 Estimates)

Region	IDP Population	Primary Drivers
Northeast (BAY States)	2,252,348–2,305,335	Boko Haram/ISWAP, counter-insurgency operations, and flooding
Northwest	~700,000– 1,100,000	Banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence
North-Central	Included in NWNC totals	Farmer–herder conflict, climate shocks
Total Nationwide	~3.5 million	Overlapping crises

Source: OCHA (2025); IOM (2025).

Borno State alone hosts approximately 1.7 million IDPs and about 886,000 returnees, underscoring its centrality to the crisis (OCHA, 2025). Notably, displacement is increasingly protracted, with many individuals remaining displaced for extended periods. Approximately 60 per cent of IDPs reside within host communities, placing considerable pressure on already limited resources, while about 40 per cent live in formal or informal camps characterised by inadequate access to water, sanitation, healthcare, and electricity (UNHCR, 2024).

In addition, recent studies highlight a strong desire among IDPs to return to their places of origin despite persistent insecurity. Survey data indicate that about 77.3 per cent of displaced persons express willingness to return, although only 22.2 per cent consider such return to be safe (ALNAP, 2025). This suggests that economic necessity and deteriorating living conditions in camps often outweigh security concerns, reinforcing the argument within Human Security Theory that “freedom from want” can, in practice, take precedence over “freedom from fear.”

Institutional Response and Humanitarian Management Challenges

The Nigerian state’s response to internal displacement is primarily coordinated through the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMA). However, existing literature consistently highlights significant institutional weaknesses, including limited capacity, mandate overlaps, and poor coordination (Akawu et al., 2023; Michael et al., 2025).

A major challenge is the persistent gap between policy frameworks and implementation. Although Nigeria is a signatory to the Kampala Convention and has developed a National Policy on IDPs, implementation remains weak and inconsistent (Udomisor et al., 2025). This “theory–practice disconnect” has resulted in what can be described as a protection vacuum, where displaced populations lack effective access to rights and services guaranteed under national and international frameworks.

Corruption and mismanagement further exacerbate these challenges. Empirical studies document the diversion of relief materials, irregularities in humanitarian funding, and exploitative practices within IDP camps, including the widely reported “sex-for-food” phenomenon (Akawu et al., 2023; Oladeji, 2018). These practices not only undermine the credibility of humanitarian institutions but also deepen the vulnerability of displaced populations.

Table 2: Key Humanitarian Management Challenges and Implications

Management Challenge	Description	Consequences
Corruption	Diversion of food, MPCA, and relief materials	Hunger, malnutrition, loss of trust
Mandate Gaps	Overlap between NEMA and NCFRMI	Delays, duplication of efforts
Coordination Failures	Weak inter-agency collaboration	Ineffective DDDR and rehabilitation
Access Constraints	Attacks on aid workers and restricted areas	Limited access to vulnerable populations

Source: Akawu et al. (2023); Michael et al. (2025); Oladeji (2018).

Socio-Economic and Environmental Dimensions of the Crisis

The socio-economic consequences of displacement are particularly severe in the Northeast, where agriculture, the primary source of livelihood, has been significantly disrupted. Persistent insecurity and restrictions on movement have rendered farming activities unsafe, thereby increasing dependence on humanitarian aid (Akintayo, 2025). This situation is further compounded by rising inflation, estimated at between 35 and 39.9 per cent by 2025, which erodes household purchasing power and deepens food insecurity (Adah & Badey, 2024).

The health and education sectors have also been adversely affected. Approximately 31 per cent of health facilities in conflict-affected areas remain non-functional, while funding cuts have led to the closure or scale-down of essential services, affecting hundreds of thousands of vulnerable individuals (Humanitarian Action, 2025). In the education sector, although over 500,000 displaced children have been enrolled in intervention programs, challenges such as trauma, language barriers, and financial constraints continue to limit effective learning outcomes (OCHA, 2026).

Environmental factors, particularly flooding, have emerged as significant drivers of secondary displacement. The 2024 floods affected 34 states nationwide, with Borno State experiencing severe impacts following the Alau Dam breach. These events resulted in extensive agricultural losses, destruction of infrastructure, and heightened public health risks.

Table 3: Major Environmental Shocks and Humanitarian Implications (2024–2025)

Disaster Event	Impacted Population	Humanitarian Consequences
Alau Dam Breach (Borno)	419,000 people	Secondary displacement, WASH crisis
Nationwide Flooding (2025)	~3 million people	Crop losses estimated at \$1 billion
2025 Lean Season	~33 million food-insecure	Crisis-level food insecurity (IPC 3–4)

Source: OCHA (2025); SIDA (2025); Humanitarian Action (2025).

Flood-related impacts include the loss of approximately 1.1 million tonnes of staple crops, destruction of over 226,000 homes, and outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, with over 14,000 suspected cases reported (OCHA, 2025). These developments underscore the intersection between climate change and conflict, further complicating humanitarian response efforts.

Humanitarian Financing and the Shift Toward Localisation

The humanitarian response in Nigeria is increasingly constrained by declining global funding. Reports indicate that global humanitarian assistance declined by approximately 11 per cent in 2024, with significant reductions in contributions from major donors such as the United States (OCHA, 2025). This funding shortfall has necessitated a shift toward “hyper-prioritisation,” where only the most critical life-saving interventions are supported (Humanitarian Action, 2025).

In response, a strategic transition toward localisation, referred to as the “Humanitarian Reset”, has been proposed. This approach emphasises increased responsibility for state and local actors in humanitarian coordination, improved cost efficiency, and the integration of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts (Abubakar & Amurtiya, 2023).

However, concerns persist regarding the capacity of local institutions to effectively manage this transition. In some cases, state-led initiatives, such as relocation programs in Borno State, have been criticised for exposing IDPs to renewed insecurity, with an estimated 160,000 individuals relocated to areas with ongoing armed group activity (Abubakar & Amurtiya, 2023). This raises critical questions about the balance between policy intentions and the protection of displaced populations.

Conclusion

This study has examined the nexus between the Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on its implications for humanitarian management. The findings demonstrated that internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria is not merely a temporary humanitarian emergency but a protracted and structurally embedded crisis shaped by conflict dynamics, institutional weaknesses, and environmental pressures.

Drawing on the Theory of Social Production of Material Wealth, the study revealed that displacement is deeply rooted in structural inequalities, economic dislocation, and the erosion of productive livelihoods. The emergence of a “war economy,” in which insecurity generates economic benefits for certain actors, further complicates efforts toward sustainable conflict resolution and humanitarian effectiveness. In parallel, the application of Human Security Theory highlights the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by internally displaced persons, who continue to experience severe deficits in access to food, shelter, healthcare, and protection. These conditions underscore the persistence of both “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” deficits within Nigeria’s humanitarian landscape.

The study also revealed that existing humanitarian management frameworks, particularly those coordinated through NEMA and SEMA, are constrained by limited institutional capacity, weak coordination mechanisms, and governance challenges, including corruption and policy implementation gaps. These limitations have contributed to a persistent disconnect between formal policy commitments and actual outcomes for displaced populations. Furthermore, the convergence of declining global humanitarian funding, ongoing insecurity, and climate-induced shocks, such as widespread flooding, has intensified the complexity of the crisis and placed additional strain on already overstretched response systems.

Within this context, the ongoing transition toward the “Humanitarian Reset” and the localisation of aid present both opportunities and risks. While localisation offers the potential for greater efficiency, contextual responsiveness, and community participation, its success is contingent upon the capacity, accountability, and transparency of domestic institutions. Without these safeguards, there is a risk that policy shifts may reproduce existing inequalities or expose displaced populations to further vulnerabilities, including unsafe returns or secondary displacement.

In sum, the study concluded that effective humanitarian management in Nigeria requires a shift from short-term relief-oriented interventions to a more integrated and accountable framework that addresses the structural drivers of displacement while prioritizing the human security needs of affected populations. Such an approach must combine institutional reform, economic recovery strategies, and climate-resilient planning to ensure that durable solutions for internally displaced persons are both sustainable and rights-based.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- i. Institutional Centralisation and Legislative Reform:** There is an urgent need for the Nigerian National Assembly to enact a comprehensive legal framework for internally displaced persons (IDPs) that fully domesticates the Kampala Convention and provides a clear constitutional basis for their protection. In addition, the overlapping mandates of key humanitarian institutions, particularly the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), should be streamlined through institutional centralisation to ensure improved coordination, accountability, and efficiency in humanitarian response.
- ii. Dismantling the War Economy through Accountability Mechanisms:** Addressing the political economy of the conflict requires deliberate efforts to enhance transparency in both security and humanitarian expenditures. Anti-corruption agencies should prioritise investigations into the diversion of relief materials, financial mismanagement, and the exploitation of IDPs within camps. Establishing robust monitoring and accountability frameworks will help reduce incentives that sustain the “war economy” and undermine effective humanitarian intervention.
- iii. Climate-Resilient Humanitarian Planning:** Given the increasing role of environmental shocks, particularly flooding, in triggering secondary displacement, humanitarian planning must integrate climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies. Agencies such as NEMA and SEMA should incorporate

- climate-smart agricultural recovery programmes, early warning systems, and the reinforcement of critical infrastructure, including flood control mechanisms such as the Alau Dam, into their operational frameworks.
- iv. **Strengthening Community-Based and Localised Protection Mechanisms:** In line with the ongoing shift toward localisation, humanitarian interventions should prioritise community-driven approaches that leverage indigenous knowledge and local coping strategies. This includes strengthening the role of IDP-led organisations, enhancing community participation in decision-making processes, and promoting the inclusion of women in leadership roles within humanitarian governance structures. Such approaches are likely to improve responsiveness, ownership, and sustainability of interventions.
- v. **Integration of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS):** Humanitarian responses must extend beyond the provision of basic needs to address the psychological and social impacts of prolonged displacement. State governments and humanitarian actors should institutionalise mental health and psychosocial support services within primary healthcare systems in both IDP camps and return communities. This will contribute to long-term recovery, social reintegration, and overall human security.

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