

Search For Common Ground and Peace Building in North Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of violent conflict has shifted from primarily interstate to intrastate, often mobilised around identity, ethnic, and religious lines. Nigeria reflects this trend, with persistent farmer–herder clashes, ethno-religious tensions, kidnapping, banditry, and resource-based disputes affecting multiple geopolitical zones. These conflicts have generated displacement, loss of lives, and socio-economic disruption. State responses have largely been militarised, achieving temporary stability or “negative peace,” while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increasingly stepped in to foster sustainable, “positive peace.” This article examines the role of NGOs in peacebuilding in North Central Nigeria, with a particular focus on Search for Common Ground (SFCG). Using John Paul Lederach’s Conflict Transformation Theory as an analytical lens, the study emphasises relationship-building, inclusive dialogue, and structural change as pathways toward sustainable peace. Fieldwork was conducted in 6 Local Government Areas of Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa States, employing 29 key informant interviews and 12 focus group discussions with men and women. Findings reveal that SFCG has advanced peacebuilding through dialogue facilitation, youth empowerment, intergroup mediation, media programming, and capacity building of local actors. These interventions contributed to rebuilding trust, reducing tensions, and improving intercommunal relations. However, challenges remain, including limited funding, weak collaboration with government institutions, and difficulties in mainstreaming local initiatives into broader policy frameworks. The study highlights the complementary role of NGOs in bridging the gap between negative and positive peace, providing lessons for more integrated, community-driven, and sustainable peacebuilding strategies in Nigeria.

Key Words: Peacebuilding, Non-governmental Organisations, conflict, North Central Nigeria

Introduction

Violent conflict continues in the North Central region of Nigeria despite decades of state-led interventions and military deployments, highlighting the urgent need to examine the role of non-state actors, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in promoting sustainable peace. Since the end of the Cold War, conflict patterns have shifted from interstate wars to predominantly intrastate violence, often rooted in identity-based divisions. In Nigeria, this shift is most evident in the Middle Belt, where indigene–settler disputes, farmer–herder clashes, and ethnoreligious tensions intersect with political exclusion and competition over natural resources, creating one of the country’s most volatile conflict zones (Best, 2008; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The North Central zone, also known as the Middle Belt, covers Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Niger, Kogi, Kwara, and the Federal Capital Territory. It embodies Nigeria’s ethnolinguistic and religious diversity, making it particularly vulnerable to violent contestations over land, political authority, and cultural identity (Azad, Crawford, & Kaila, 2018). The region has witnessed repeated cycles of killings, displacement, and destruction of livelihoods, with estimates pointing to thousands of deaths annually

between 2011 and 2016 (Blacklock, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2018). While government responses, including military operations such as *Operation Safe Haven* and *Operation Whirl Stroke*, have restored temporary order, they have been criticised for human rights abuses and for failing to address the underlying drivers of violence (Musa, 2018; Amnesty International, 2021).

Against this backdrop, NGOs have emerged as significant actors in peacebuilding, complementing state security efforts by engaging directly with communities. Organisations such as Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Mercy Corps, and local peace networks have invested in grassroots dialogue forums, mediation, reconciliation initiatives, and peace education. These interventions aim not merely at suppressing violence but at advancing “positive peace” in Galtung’s (1964) terms, addressing structural and relational dimensions of conflict rather than sustaining the fragile “negative peace” of militarised calm.

This article examines the contributions of NGOs to peacebuilding in North Central Nigeria, with a specific focus on SFCG’s interventions in Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue States from 2011-2023. By situating NGO led initiatives within the region’s broader conflict dynamics, the study seeks to advance scholarly understanding of non-state peacebuilding while offering insights for more integrated and sustainable strategies for conflict transformation. At a time when Nigeria faces escalating insecurity across multiple regions, reassessing the role of NGOs in fostering resilient and inclusive peace has never been more urgent.

1.1 Overview of Search for Common Ground

SFCG, founded in 1981, is the world’s largest dedicated peacebuilding organisation, with programs in over 30 countries worldwide. Its mission is to transform how societies manage conflict, shifting from adversarial approaches to cooperative solutions through its “common ground” approach (SFCG, 2023). SFCG interventions are guided by several principles and mechanisms, which are;

1. Conflict as Natural but Transformable: SFCG views conflict as a natural part of society, but emphasises constructive, non-violent responses to conflict rather than adversarial ones.
2. Locally driven Solutions: SFCG prioritises community ownership of peace processes through the engagement of local actors from design to implementation of peace processes to ensure cultural relevance, build trust and ensure transparency.

3. Inclusivity and interdependence: Peace is approached as a collective, long-term process that must include multi-stakeholders, such as the marginalised groups, including women, youth, and minority communities.
4. Key mechanisms and programs:
 - Early Warning and Response Systems: Developing community-based mechanisms for timely reporting and mediation to prevent escalation.
 - Peace Education and Media Outreach: Using radio, television, and digital platforms to counter hate speech, spread messages of tolerance, and build public support for peace.
 - Peace Architectures: Establishing community-based structures for dialogue and conflict resolution.
 - Capacity Building and Training: Strengthening local peace committees, women's groups, and youth networks for sustainable conflict resolution.
 - Digital Peacebuilding Tools: Leveraging technology to foster collaboration and monitor conflict trends.
 - Conflict Research and Learning: Conducting in-depth conflict analyses to guide interventions (SFCG, 2023).

SFCG began its work in Nigeria in 2004, focusing on building peace architectures, digital peacebuilding, strategic communication, and conflict research while strengthening locally driven peace initiatives.

1.2 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the contributions of SFCG to peacebuilding in the North Central region of Nigeria, focusing on its operations in Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue States. The specific objectives are to:

1. Analyse the nature of SFCG's interventions in North Central Nigeria.
2. Assess the effectiveness of the intervention of SFCG in advancing the peacebuilding process in North Central Nigeria.
3. Identify the challenges faced by SFCG as an NGO in peacebuilding in North Central Nigeria.

1.3 Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study will address the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the SFCG intervention in North Central Nigeria?
2. How effective have the interventions of SFCG been in advancing the peacebuilding process in North Central Nigeria?
3. What challenges are faced by SFCG as an NGO in Peacebuilding in North Central Nigeria

1. NGOs Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding

In contemporary peacebuilding, NGOs are critical actors for peacebuilding, considering they operate through a mix of grassroots engagement, advocacy, and conflict prevention. NGOs operate independently from the government and often are the first responders in crisis settings, delivering humanitarian aid such as food, medical care, shelter, and psychosocial support to communities affected by violence (Paffenholz, 2010; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). NGOs gather and disseminate conflict-related information, such as monitoring early warning indicators, documenting human rights abuses, and raising awareness among policymakers and the public (Paffenholz, 2010; Amnesty International, 2021).

NGOs often possess significant operational flexibility with the ability to mount rapid responses, which is a result of their independence from state oversight and the absence of rigid bureaucratic constraints. This flexibility enables NGOs to engage effectively in evolving and sensitive environments (Chigas, 2007). Also, their ability to be culturally sensitive, embedded in local contexts, makes it easier to gain the trust of diverse stakeholders, facilitate dialogue, and act as impartial mediators. These are roles that formal state institutions or diplomatic channels may struggle to fulfil (TheLaw.Institute, 2024; Myilitary.com). Beyond immediate crisis management, NGOs are agents of social transformation as they contribute to long-term peacebuilding by empowering communities and strengthening social cohesion. Local NGOs utilize bottom-up approaches that target the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, through peace education, youth engagement, and collaborative community projects (Lederach, 1997; Paffenholz, 2010).

NGOs' contemporary roles align with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and the building of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions (United Nations, 2015). By mediating disputes, fostering dialogue across divides, and strengthening local governance mechanisms, NGOs contribute directly to reducing violence, improving access to justice, and enhancing institutional legitimacy (International Crisis Group, 2018). Moreover, through advocacy and policy engagement, NGOs ensure that the

perspectives of marginalized groups are integrated into broader peace processes, reinforcing the inclusive and participatory governance central to SDG 16 (Amnesty International, 2021).

SFCG is an NGO involved in peacebuilding. SFCG works through a multi-level and multi-actor strategy. At the grassroots, it empowers local actors, particularly youth, women, and marginalized groups, to mediate disputes and build reconciliation. At the institutional and national levels, it engages governments, policymakers, and security actors to reform structures, enhance accountability, and strengthen governance legitimacy (SFCG, n.d.).

What sets SFCG apart is its commitment to multi-partiality: deliberately engaging all sides of the conflict, be it ethnic, religious, or political, to ensure inclusive transformation. SFCG builds balanced teams to foster trust across divides, for example, in Nigeria, SFCG works with both a Christian and a Muslim team. Also, more than 90% of SFCG staff work in their home countries, ensuring interventions are locally led, contextually relevant, and rooted in lived experiences (SFCG, n.d.; Shankar, 2023).

SFCG also prioritizes innovation and partnerships. Its programs use media, participatory theatre, technology, and sports to spread peace messages and foster collaboration. It partners with local NGOs, civil society, governments, and international actors to address complex conflicts in ways that are adaptive and sustainable. Through this model, SFCG has become a global leader in peacebuilding, bridging divides, rebuilding trust, and strengthening resilience in fragile and conflict-affected societies.

SFCG has been operating in the North Central Region since 2011, where it has implemented different programs. Plateau State has the largest SFCG interventions as well as the first intervention in the North Central Region with the project Preventing Inter-Religious Violence Project. The project worked to reduce interfaith tensions by strengthening collaboration between Christian and Muslim leaders through conflict transformation trainings in collaboration with the University of Jos Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies. There were also community dialogues, peace football matches among polarised communities, and the production of peace media content. The initiative has built trust across divides and promoted coexistence through interfaith committees and joint youth activities (SFCG, 2011).

Another initiative of SFCG was the Building Bridges Between Farmers and Herders (2015–2018) in Plateau, Nasarawa, Kaduna, and Benue States. This was a 36-month initiative aimed at strengthening engagement and understanding to reduce conflict between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farming communities in six flashpoint local governments in the three states by fostering dialogue platforms, cooperative resource management, community theatre, cultural exchange programs, and media advocacy. The

project empowered community leaders to negotiate local peace agreements and diffuse tensions (SFCG, 2018). This was the only project SFCG implemented in Nasarawa State. The interventions in Benue focused on mitigating farmer-herder conflicts, Early Warning Early Response systems, media for peace and cross-border dialogue platforms. The activities in the three states complemented each other.

1.1 Conflict overview in the North Central States of Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States

North Central Nigeria, home to Abuja and six other states, which are Benue, Plateau, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, and Kwara, has long been plagued by ethnic, religious, and resource-based conflicts (Ojewale, 2021). The region serves as a boundary between the predominantly Muslim North and Christian South, making it a flashpoint for violence. The North Central's diverse mix of ethnic and religious groups has been exploited by various actors, deepening divisions.

Since 2001, Plateau State has seen repeated ethnoreligious clashes, including riots that killed 1,000 people in 2001 and 7,000 more by 2016 (Karuse, 2011, 2018). Nasarawa has also faced violence, though to a lesser extent, and there are increasing land disputes along state borders (IFIT, 2022). Religious tensions trace back to colonial rule and intensified after Nigeria's independence in 1960. The Maitatsine riots (1980–1985) and later conflicts entrenched Muslim-Christian divisions (Ojo, 1985). Since the return to democracy in 1999, violence has escalated, with 95% of religious crises occurring in northern Nigeria, including the North Central region (Ezeanokwasa, 2009, as cited in Ashdown, 2021). Groups like Boko Haram and the Fulani militia have amplified the conflict, combining ethnic, religious, and ideological motives. Rising Islamist extremism across the Sahel further fuels violence in the region, intensifying sectarian attacks and displacement (Ashdown, 2021).

Another major driver of conflict is the recurring clashes between farmers and herders over land and water. These disputes have resulted in widespread death, displacement, and destruction. Between January and June 2018, 314 villages were attacked, with 404 people killed, over 24,000 homes and 539 churches destroyed, and more than 242,000 displaced in Plateau and Nasarawa states (HART, 2019). Plateau alone saw 54 communities destroyed between 2015 and 2018, with attacks largely targeting Christian areas. In Benue, over 100,000 children have been forced out of school, and more than 500 churches have been attacked since 2011. The International Organization for Migration (2019) reports that Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa host some of the country's highest numbers of internally displaced people outside the northeast, with at least 160,000 displaced in Benue alone (ReliefWeb, 2019).

While farmer-herder clashes are common across Africa, Nigeria records some of the highest death tolls, much of it concentrated in the Middle Belt (Blacklock, 2023). The Fulani attribute the conflict to ethnicity, religion, and resentment over their economic prosperity, while farming communities cite destruction of crops by cattle as the main trigger (Best, 2007). Also narratives of religious domination have fuelled tensions. Many in the North Central and southern states believe Fulani encroachment is part of an Islamic agenda to Islamize Nigeria (Akinola, 2023). However, underlying issues of climate change and resource scarcity are often overshadowed by these narratives. Importantly, there is a distinction between peaceful Fulani groups and violent factions referred to as the “Fulani militia,” whose attacks have predominantly targeted Christian communities (HART, 2021; Ashdown, 2021). From 2011 to 2021, these attacks displaced over 300,000 people and claimed more than 10,000 lives (Ashdown, 2021).

To address these conflicts, several measures have been implemented by both state and non-state actors to mitigate conflict in North Central Nigeria. The Nigerian government bears the primary responsibility of protecting citizens against internal and external aggression. According to Sections 215(3) and 215(4) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), “the Nigeria Police Force shall maintain and secure public safety and public order, ensure internal stability, and prevent threats to national security.” The Nigerian Police Force (NPF), alongside other federal agencies such as the Department of State Services (DSS), is charged with maintaining internal security. However, these institutions have struggled to contain the violent conflicts that have erupted across the North Central region, leading to the deployment of military forces (Musa, 2018).

The inability of the NPF to manage these conflicts has been attributed to several factors, including the highly centralized security architecture, inadequate funding and mismanagement of resources, insufficient manpower and logistics, pervasive corruption, negative public perception, rapid population growth, and institutional weaknesses within law enforcement agencies. These challenges have created a profound crisis of confidence between citizens and the police (David & Salifu, 2020, p. 171).

Military intervention in internal security matters has become a recurring feature of Nigeria’s democratic governance. While the military’s constitutional role is to defend the country against external aggression, there has been an increasing reliance on military forces for internal humanitarian and peacekeeping operations in recent years (Ughulu & Ihaza, 2023). In the North Central region, several military operations have been launched, such as *Operation Safe Haven* in Plateau State to foster peace and reconciliation among warring communities, *Operation Whirl Stroke* and *Operation Thunder Strike* to address terrorist activities in Niger State, and *Operation Ayem Akpatuma (Cat Race) I, II, and III*, which spans Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, and other northern states. Additionally, *Operation*

Nutcracker was established to restore order, maintain peace, and combat criminality and banditry in the region (Mac-Lava, Mutum, & Ibrahim, 2020).

These military operations have achieved some positive outcomes, including the restoration of order in conflict-prone areas, the arrest of criminal gangs, and the prevention of planned attacks (Nigerian Tribune, 2018, 2020). However, there have also been significant criticisms. The military has faced allegations of human rights violations, disobedience of court orders, disregard for human dignity, and destruction of lives and property. Such issues have contributed to the protracted nature of conflicts, eroded public trust, and deepened divisions among communities and regions (Amnesty International, 2021; Daily Post, 2018).

In addition to federal interventions, some states have established localized security initiatives and peacebuilding institutions. For example, Plateau State created *Operation Rainbow*, a community-based security outfit tasked with intelligence gathering and early warning. Similarly, the *Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN)*, also known as *Amotekun*, was launched in the six southwestern states to address insecurity in that region (PM News, 2020). Furthermore, state-level peace commissions such as the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA), the Benue State Peace Commission, the Kaduna State Peace Commission (KDPEACECOM), and the Adamawa State Peace and Conflict Resolution and Social Mobilization Commission have been established to address deep-rooted ethno-religious and communal divisions. Their mandates include facilitating mediation and peace interventions, establishing grassroots conflict resolution mechanisms, and developing early warning and response systems in collaboration with local governments and traditional authorities (Emmanuel, 2021; Kew, 2021; PPBA, 2018).

Despite these initiatives, many state-led interventions have been undermined by poor implementation and lack of political will. For instance, multiple Commissions of Inquiry (COIs) were established in Plateau State between 1997 and 2014 to investigate violent conflicts and propose solutions. However, their recommendations were largely ignored. Similarly, calls for justice and prosecution of perpetrators of violence have often gone unanswered (Kwaja, 2011; Oosterom & Pam, 2019). A comparable trend is observed in Benue, Niger, Kwara, and Kogi States.

Legal reforms have also been introduced, such as the Open Grazing Prohibition Law in Benue State, aimed at curbing clashes between farmers and herders (Ojewale, 2021). Other states, including Ebonyi, Abia, Bayelsa, Rivers, Oyo, Ekiti, and Ondo, have enacted similar laws. Moreover, in 2021, Plateau State joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP) to foster citizen engagement and collaboration on key issues, including peacebuilding, with a thematic focus on gender, peace, and security (OGP, 2021).

Nonetheless, the increasing frequency and complexity of intra-state conflicts have overstretched the capacity of the NPF and other security agencies. Most state responses have been highly militarized, resulting in a predominance of “negative peace” which is defined as the mere absence of direct violence rather than “positive peace,” which entails the integration of human society and the creation of structures that sustain harmony and justice (Galtung, 1964, p. 2). Positive peace is the ultimate aim of peacebuilding and requires inclusive, sustainable interventions that address the root causes of conflict (Lederach, 1997, p. 75).

To achieve this, a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach is needed, involving both state and non-state actors. NGOs play a vital role in this process due to their access to grassroots communities and ability to implement bottom-up peacebuilding strategies. In the North Central region, NGOs have engaged in humanitarian assistance, dialogue facilitation, peace education, and conflict resolution workshops. They have also established accountability forums and promoted reconciliation through interreligious dialogue, mediation, and community-based truth and reconciliation initiatives. By working alongside traditional leaders, women, youth, pastoralists, farmers, and government actors, NGOs have helped foster tolerance, solidarity, and sustainable peace (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). This article focuses on one of such NGOs which is the SFCG.

2. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted to understand SFCGs' peace-building intervention in the North Central regions and the impact of these interventions on the peace process. The study made use of primary and secondary data. For primary data, Key informant interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to get the lived experiences, as well as involvement in the peace-building interventions of SFCG.

2.1 Research Setting

The article is based on field research in Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue States. A total of six communities were engaged in the three states. The three states have similar conflict dynamics in the form of ethnoreligious and resource conflicts.

2.2 Sampling Strategy and Engagement of Participants

A three-stage purposive sampling was used to select the three North Central States. The second stage focused on selecting the Local Government Areas where SFCGs projects were implemented, and the last stage focused on purposively selecting respondents for the KII. The snowballing technique was used to identify additional study

participants for the KII and FGDs. The choice of the purposive sampling technique reflects the purpose and questions guiding the research (Punch, 1994).

The ethical approval for the research was obtained from the university where the authors are affiliated. Verbal informed consent was obtained for the purpose of anonymity of the research, the voluntary nature of the study, their right to withdraw, data management, and data privacy. Data was collected from willing participants, and no form of inducement was provided for participation. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected were 29 KIIs and 12 FGDs. A total of 2 FGDs were conducted per community, with one female group and the other an all-male group, making it a total of 4 FGDs per state. There was a total of 12 people in each group, comprising 6 adults and 6 youths in both the male and female FGDs.

The interviews were conducted by the first author and one research assistant. The interviews were conducted at suitable locations for the respondents, and via phone calls, which were recorded and transcribed with the informed consent of the respondent. English and Hausa were used interchangeably depending on the preference of the respondents.

Descriptive analysis was used to understand the context of SFCG interventions. Content analysis was used to collate and analyse documents and interviews to identify trends and patterns relevant to the study objectives. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data, which made it possible to compare opinions, responses, and perceptions of respondents as they relate to conflict and SFCGs' peacebuilding interventions.

3. SFCG Peace-building interventions in North Central Nigeria

4.1 Nature of SFCGs Interventions in North Central Nigeria

SFCG interventions in North Central Nigeria sought to transform violent conflicts, which are largely resource-based conflicts that have manifested in ethno-religious, farmer-herder clashes, criminality, and human rights violations. SFCG-1 said, 'Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau fall within the middle belt region, which has been impacted by resource-based conflict, which also takes religious, ethnic, and political colouration'.

The interventions in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau varied but also had some connection to each other. In Benue, SFCG interventions focus on mitigating farmer-herder conflict, reducing human rights abuse, through media for peace, and cross-border dialogue platforms. A project beneficiary stated

“SFCGs' intervention in Benue was to mitigate the Herder-Farmer conflict and human rights violations through the 'United in Security: A Collaborative Approach to Civilian Protection in Nigeria,' project, which promoted collaborative multi-stakeholder engagement and advocacy processes to reduce human rights abuses by police forces in Benue and Adamawa State. SFCG provided an opportunity for the people to draw close to the security personnel, which was lacking before. There were human rights abuses and violations, and with the help of SFCG, the issues have greatly reduced. We now have fewer cases of civilians attacking security and vice versa. I actively participated in the Strengthening Human Rights Monitoring Platforms for Stakeholders in Benue State. The training was aimed at strengthening the capacity of selected participants from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the media, and the Government to improve coordination and collaboration as well as synergy to address and advocate human rights issues in Benue”(Journalist).

In Nasarawa state, the intervention focused on the farmer-herder clashes through the project Building Bridges between herders and farmers in Plateau, Nasarawa, and Kaduna States. The initiative's success encouraged its extension into Benue State, affirming its potential for broader impact. The Local governments for the intervention were Barkin-Ladi and Riyom local government areas (LGAs) in Plateau State; Doma and Keana in Nasarawa State; Zango Kataf and Kachia in Kaduna State. A respondent who was an implementing partner stated

“In Nasarawa State, SFCG intervention focused on the Farmer-herders conflict through the project Building Bridges Between Herders and Farmers in Nasarawa, Plateau, and Kaduna. Then the conflict was high over the green grass and water. Local approaches that are practical to address the conflict were used, such as the celebration of joint festivals, community theatre, and others. Even though the focus was on farmer-herder conflicts, the approach built people's capacity to deal with conflicts in all areas of life beyond just farmers' and herders' issues” (Implementing Partner).

In Plateau State, SFCG interventions ranged from the mitigation of ethnoreligious violence, the reduction in human rights abuses, mitigating the herder-farmer conflict, freedom of religion and beliefs, electoral violence issues, promoting early warning and early response, and youth programming.

‘SFCG interventions focused on addressing inter-religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims, Farmer-herder conflicts related to natural resources, with climate change as the cause, and competition for economic activities, then Human rights abuses by Security forces. SFCG did these through the Preventing inter-religious violence project, Plateau will Arise (PWA) I&II Project, Elections work where women were supported for electoral participation, coalition building to reduce HR abuses by security

forces, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) projects, and Youth programming such as the ‘Naija Girls Unite project” (SFCG 2).

“SFCG’s ‘Building Bridges’ project played a transformational role in our community in reducing farmer-herder tensions by fostering trust and promoting locally led peace mechanisms. For us, this was a build-up on SFCG’s Plateau Will Arise Project (PWA), which sought to address the conflict confronting us in that period. Through the Community Security Architecture Dialogues (CSDA), trainings on mediation and conflict resolution, and the voices of peace program on radio” (FGD Male Barkin-Ladi).

4.2 Effectiveness of interventions in advancing the peacebuilding processes in North Central Nigeria

To determine how effective the interventions of SFCG in the three North Central States contributed to the peacebuilding process, respondents revealed that the common ground approach was central to all SFCG’s peacebuilding gains in the North Central. Another staff member of SFCG stated

“What constitutes an effective peacebuilding intervention for Search for Common Ground is the common ground approach. The Common Ground Approach is grounded on the pillars of conflict analysis, behaviour transformation, and conflict sensitivity. These are explained briefly as:

1. Conflict Analysis- SFCG seeks to understand the local dynamics of the conflict by conducting and transforming the behaviour of actors to reduce violence. This SFCG does so through the conduct of conflict scans to have a deep contextual understanding of the conflict while working with local actors to analyse the challenges and create programs to address them. Thereby empowering communities to take ownership. This also provides an avenue to know the root causes of conflict and how to address them. SFCG does this through the conduct of needs assessments, baselines, evaluations, and other forms of research.

2. Behavioural Transformation- SFCG seeks to transform the approach to conflict through conflict transformation training, mediation, and others, build trust, strengthen collaboration, ensure inclusivity, and strengthen local capacities. This facilitates changes in behaviour and attitudes

3. Conflict Sensitivity: This has to do with understanding the context, understanding how interventions relate with the context by considering local dynamics to prevent harm to local communities, and adhering to the Do No Harm principle. (SFCG Director)”.

SFCG also measures the impact of its work through the lens of the peace impact framework, which looks at 5 major themes which are reduction in violence, polarization, agency, legitimacy, and peace investments” (SFCG 3).

Community members acknowledged the peacebuilding efforts of the government and how the interventions of SFCG complemented government peacebuilding efforts across the three states such as support in the establishment of the Plateau Peace Building Agency. The increased awareness for the need for peace, contribution in reduction of violence and enhanced collaboration between state and non-state actors.

“SFCG is one of the foremost organizations that were doing excellent work and it was a result of the Peace Architecture Dialogue (PAD) work they were doing with the office of the Special Adviser Peace Building under the then Governor Jang, and when Jang left they work of SFCG became integrated to the work of the Special Adviser peacebuilding and when Governor Lalang came to the PPBA was formed (CSO Plateau’).

‘Incidentally, you know there is a peace commission in Benue state now all that’s to NGOS which was heralded by SFCG. Incidentally as far as the humanitarian crisis is concerned the NGOs did more than the government. SFCG platform is a neutral ground, and facilitators ran away from their personal basis as it never reflected in their interactions. They have done very well’ (CSO Benue)

The FGDs in Bokkos (Plateau), Keana (Nasarawa) and Guma (Benue) LGAs revealed that the interventions of SFCG contributed to a reduction in violence, thereby complementing the government's kinetic security approach.

“We have experienced a decline in incidents of violence, though there are still pockets of attacks. I would attribute the decline to the interventions of SFCG and other NGOs who later came after SFCG. SFCG trained us on conflict resolution. They brought us women, youth, farmers, and herders together to discuss issues and proffer possible solutions rather than violence. Though there is still violence, it has shifted from how it used to be; reprisals have reduced (FGD participants, Women Group Bokkos)

“In Keana LGA, efforts made by the government to tackle the herder-farmer issues were the imposition of fines for any destruction by cattle to farm lands. Sadly, extortion became the order of the day, which in turn made the situation worse with reprisals because herders were made to pay beyond the damage caused by cattle on farmlands. Thankfully, SFCG came in with Early Warning Early Response (EWER), and SFCG proposed that when an act of farm damage was done in error, there is a need to seat the two parties and resolve the issues fairly. SFCG encouraged pre-farming meetings to ensure no encroachment on cattle routes, which led to a decline in the destruction of farmlands (FGD Women Keana).”

Violence in Guma reduced during the period of the herder-farmer intervention by SFCG. Some areas were no-go areas before SFCG came and through SFCG efforts, we were able to dialogue both herders and farmers. For instance, when we returned, there were few instances where crops were destroyed by the cattle, and the assigned herder to the community was engaged on the matter, and they fished out the perpetrators, however that does not mean the killings stopped but our capacity to resolve conflict was enhanced. The intervention also improved our relationship with security personnel was before the intervention was really poor (FGD Male, GumaLGA).

4.3 Challenges faced in peacebuilding Interventions by SFCG

The peacebuilding interventions were not without challenges in the three states. These challenges ranged from changing conflict dynamics, funding, sustainability, low political will in addressing conflicts as the nature of conflict such as the herder-famer conflicts require a holistic approach which goes beyond the scope of NGOs. Respondents feedback revealed the following

“The intervention was not so sustainable as government did not continue but as an organisation, we are using what we learnt to facility and also promote peace from the grassroots as with the Bassa Irigwe crisis’ (KII Implementing Partner, Nassarwa

“Sustainability has been a major issue from the intervention of SFCG- KII Otukpo”

‘The inadequate political will of the government to address issues of conflict beyond the scope of NGOs has been another challenge. For instance, the Farmer Herder conflict is one conflict that goes beyond the scope of an NGO to address. The inability of the government to implement white papers from commissions of inquiry promoted impunity, as perpetrators of violence have not been brought to book’ (KII-CSO).

‘Funding was never enough, and this limited the scope of work SFCG could do. There was the issue of SFCG staff’s lack of impartiality and lack of political neutrality. Also, the conflicts in Plateau were very dynamic and sometimes difficult to imagine if the work of SFCG and others was making any impact. As the dynamics kept changing-(KII-SFCG 4).

There were also implementation gaps which were revealed from the SFCGs intervention. Findings revealed that in the initial stage of the intervention in Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau there were insufficient structures at the state and local government level with the mandate to address conflict and people who could promote and advocate for peacebuilding to government were few. Over time this improved with the creation of the PPBA, the Benue Coalition for Human Rights Protection, and the Peace Commission in Benue. However, there are still gaps.

‘SFCG needs to focus more on capacity building, especially in the North Central. We need more NGOs with capacity in peacebuilding; the number of NGOs has grown, but we need more capacity as the North Central is a conflict-prone area. The government needs the training too, just because they are highly mobile. I know funds are scarce, but it is the greatest place to invest. Communities we have worked with are all now quiet, but we still need to keep working with these people, stressing the importance of dialogue’ (Implementing Partner KII, Nasarawa).

‘SFCG did great in stakeholders’ engagement, however, it would be good if there can be more targeted programs for disadvantaged youths and youths at risk, more programs focusing on women, religious leaders and security actors, as when kept away from the peacebuilding space can cause more damage. There is a need to bring them closer to transform negative energy to positive energy (CSO KII, Plateau).

‘There was inadequate participation of perpetrators of conflict. Some have been part of it, but more needs to be done. Herder women’s participation was also low due to cultural barriers, so some were excluded not due to non-invite by SFCG but due to cultural barriers’ (JDPC Implementing Partner).

4. Discussions

5.1 *Nature of SFCG’s Interventions in North Central Nigeria*

SFCG’s interventions in North Central Nigeria reflect Lederach’s Conflict Transformation Theory, which conceptualises sustainable peace as more than simply ending violence. Instead, it involves addressing the root causes of conflict, transforming relationships, and fostering constructive narratives that support long-term reconciliation (Lederach, 1997). Findings revealed that violent conflicts in the region are primarily resource-based, frequently manifesting as farmer-herder clashes, ethno-religious violence, human rights abuses, and criminality. These conflicts are further intensified by political competition and socio-economic inequalities. One respondent explained, “*Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau fall within the middle belt region, which has been impacted by resource-based conflict, which also takes religious, ethnic, and political colouration*” (KII, SFCG 1).

In Benue State, SFCG implemented the United in Security Project to build collaboration among civilians, civil society organizations (CSOs), the media, and security agencies, thereby reducing mistrust and human rights abuses. A journalist highlighted the shift this created in relationships with security forces: “*SFCG provided an opportunity for the people to draw close to the security personnel, which was lacking before... With the help of SFCG, the issues have greatly reduced. We now have fewer cases of civilians attacking security and vice versa*” (KII, Journalist, Benue). This reflects Lederach’s

(1997) emphasis on transforming destructive interactions into constructive engagement through dialogue and trust-building.

In Nasarawa State, the Building Bridges Between Herders and Farmers Project tackled structural drivers of conflict, particularly land and water disputes, through dialogue platforms, joint festivals, and community theatre. An implementing partner noted, *“Even though the focus was on farmer-herder conflicts, the approach, built people's capacity to deal with conflicts in all areas of life beyond just farmers-herders issues”* (KII, Implementing Partner, Nasarawa). This aligns with Lederach's perspective that peacebuilding must address deeper social patterns and empower communities to manage conflicts constructively.

SFCG also sought to transform conflict narratives through initiatives like Preventing Inter-religious Violence and Plateau Will Arise (PWA), using mediation training, Community Security Architecture Dialogues (CSADs), and media platforms such as the *Voices of Peace* radio program to promote coexistence. A focus group participant from Barkin-Ladi described the impact of these efforts: *“SFCG's 'Building Bridges' project played a transformational role in our community in reducing farmer-herder tensions by fostering trust and promoting locally led peace mechanisms”* (FGD, Barkin-Ladi).

Through these initiatives, SFCG's work addressed both the visible expressions of violence and the underlying relational and structural issues sustaining conflict, embodying Lederach's (1997) vision of holistic and transformative peacebuilding.

5.2 Effectiveness of Interventions in Advancing the Peacebuilding Process in North Central Nigeria

The effectiveness of Search for Common Ground's (SFCG) peacebuilding interventions in North Central Nigeria aligns with Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasizes addressing the root causes of conflict, transforming relationships, and fostering inclusive, locally owned peace processes (Lederach, 1995, 1997, 2003).

Field data from Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States indicate that SFCG's Common Ground Approach, built on conflict analysis, behavioural transformation, and conflict sensitivity was widely perceived as effective. Conflict analysis enabled SFCG to identify and address underlying drivers of violence, such as land and resource disputes, through community-led dialogue. As one staff member explained, *“Conflict scans help us deeply understand the context, identify root causes, and create programs that empower communities to own the peace process”* (KII, SFCG-2). This reflects Lederach's (1997) call for locally driven solutions that tackle systemic sources of conflict.

Behavioural transformation was achieved through initiatives that promoted dialogue, mediation, and joint problem-solving. In Bokkos, Plateau State, women, youth, farmers, and herders collaborated to address local disputes: “*We have experienced a decline in violence... SFCG trained us to discuss issues and proffer solutions rather than resorting to violence*” (FGD, Women’s Group, Bokkos). Similarly, a participant in Guma, Benue State, described how dialogue fostered trust and improved relationships: “*Some areas were no-go zones before SFCG came. Through dialogue, our capacity to resolve conflict was enhanced, and our relationship with security personnel improved*” (FGD, Guma LGA). These changes resonate with Lederach’s (2003) view that peacebuilding is relational, requiring the transformation of destructive relationships into constructive ones.

Conflict sensitivity was also central to SFCG’s approach, ensuring interventions were contextually appropriate and avoided harm. In Keana, Nasarawa State, SFCG introduced early warning systems and pre-farming meetings to prevent disputes over land and cattle routes, replacing punitive government fines with community led dialogue. A participant noted, “*Pre-farming meetings helped prevent encroachments, which reduced farmland destruction and subsequent violence*” (FGD, Women’s Group, Keana). This reflects Lederach’s (1997) emphasis on understanding local dynamics and fostering constructive engagement to prevent escalation.

SFCG further bridged grassroots peace efforts with formal state structures, contributing to the establishment of agencies such as the Plateau Peace Building Agency and the Benue Peace Commission. As one respondent stated, “*SFCG’s work was integrated into government peacebuilding structures, leading to the establishment of the PPBA*” (KII, CSO Representative, Plateau). This multi-level engagement aligns with Lederach’s (1997) framework, which highlights the importance of linking community initiatives with institutional mechanisms to ensure sustainability.

To measure its impact, SFCG applied its Peace Impact Framework, tracking indicators such as reductions in violence, improved relationships, enhanced trust, legitimacy, and peace investments. Field data revealed tangible outcomes, including decreased violence and strengthened relationships between farmers, herders, and security forces. These community-driven achievements complemented government-led security measures by offering non-violent, sustainable alternatives, embodying Lederach’s (2003) vision of holistic and transformative peacebuilding.

5.3 Challenges Faced in Peacebuilding Interventions by SFCG

While SFCG’s interventions in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States were impactful, findings revealed significant challenges that limited their depth, scope, and sustainability. According to Lederach’s Conflict Transformation Theory, sustainable peace requires long-term, multi-level engagement and strong local ownership (Lederach,

1997, 2003). When these conditions are absent, there is a high risk of relapse into violence.

A key challenge was the lack of sustainability after project closure. While SFCG succeeded in building dialogue platforms and strengthening local capacities, government institutions often failed to continue these efforts, leaving communities vulnerable to recurring violence. As one implementing partner observed, “*The intervention was not so sustainable as government did not continue, but we are using what we learnt to promote peace at the grassroots*” (KII, Nasarawa). Similarly, a respondent from Otukpo stated, “*Sustainability has been a major issue from the intervention of SFCG*” (KII, Otukpo). This reflects Lederach’s (1997) argument that sustainable peace requires institutionalized structures and long-term commitment by local and national actors.

Weak political will and government inaction were also significant barriers. Many conflicts, particularly the farmer-herder clashes, require government-led policy reforms and enforcement of accountability mechanisms, which lie beyond the scope of NGOs. As a civil society representative emphasized, “*The inadequate political will of the government to address issues of conflict beyond the scope of NGOs has been another challenge. The inability of the government to implement white papers from commissions of inquiry promoted impunity, as perpetrators of violence have not been brought to book*” (KII-CSO). This aligns with Lederach’s (2003) view that sustainable conflict transformation must involve policymakers and political leaders to achieve systemic change.

Funding limitations further constrained the reach and impact of interventions. According to an SFCG staff member, “*Funding was never enough, and this limited the scope of work SFCG could do*” (KII, SFCG 4). Without sustained financial resources, interventions often focused on short-term needs rather than addressing the structural causes of conflict, which, as Lederach (1997) argues, undermines long-term peacebuilding.

The constantly shifting dynamics of conflict in the North Central region also created challenges. Conflicts evolved in form and intensity, making it difficult for interventions to remain relevant. One participant noted, “*The conflicts in Plateau were very dynamic and sometimes difficult to imagine if SFCG’s work was making any impact, as the dynamics kept changing*” (KII, SFCG 4). This highlights Lederach’s (1997) understanding of conflict as a dynamic process requiring adaptive strategies and continuous context analysis.

Despite SFCG’s commitment to inclusive participation, certain groups were still underrepresented, such as perpetrators of violence, disadvantaged youth, and herder women, whose participation was limited by cultural barriers. As a respondent explained,

“There was inadequate participation of perpetrators of conflict. Some have been part of it, but more needs to be done. Herder women's participation was also low due to cultural barriers, so some were excluded not due to non-invite by SFCG but due to cultural barriers” (JDPC Partner). Another civil society representative added, *“SFCG did great in stakeholders' engagement. However, it would be good if there can be more targeted programs for disadvantaged youths, women, religious leaders, and security actors, as when kept away from the peacebuilding space they can cause more damage”* (CSO KII, Plateau). Lederach (1997) emphasizes that broad-based participation is essential for transforming relationships and avoiding cycles of exclusion and violence.

Finally, initial interventions were hindered by weak institutional structures at the state and local government levels. While agencies such as the Plateau Peace Building Agency and the Benue Peace Commission were later established, governance and coordination gaps persist. An implementing partner stressed, *“SFCG needs to focus more on capacity building, especially in the North Central. We need more NGOs with capacity in peacebuilding... The government also needs training. I know funds are scarce, but it is the greatest place to invest”* (KII, Nasarawa). This reinforces Lederach's (1997) argument that building formal and informal peace infrastructure is essential for sustaining long-term transformation.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study confirms Lederach's (1997, 2005) argument that sustainable peace requires a multi-level, comprehensive strategy that addresses the deeper causes of conflict. SFCG's integration of grassroots dialogue, mid-level capacity building, and policy-level engagement exemplifies this theory in practice. Best's (2006) emphasis on institutionalizing peacebuilding structures is reflected in the creation of the PPBA and Benue Peace Commission, which serve as long-term platforms for collaboration.

6.1 Recommendations

1. Strengthen collaboration between state and non-state actors to institutionalize peace.
2. Invest in local capacities, especially among marginalized groups such as women and youth.
3. Ensure sustainable funding and accountability mechanisms to prevent reversals of progress.
4. Address inclusivity gaps by engaging traditionally excluded stakeholders, including perpetrators of violence.
5. Enhance government commitment to implementing policies that tackle root causes of conflict.

In conclusion, while SFCG's interventions have made remarkable progress in mitigating violence and fostering coexistence, lasting peace in North Central Nigeria will depend on embedding conflict transformation principles into governance and social structures. Only through a fully integrated and inclusive approach can the cycle of violence be broken and a just, stable society be achieved.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

This study focuses solely on SFCG peacebuilding interventions in Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa States. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalised to other regions of Nigeria or SFCG operations globally. The research adopted a qualitative approach, using KIIs, FGDs, and desk reviews to provide depth, however, this may not fully capture the overall impact of the interventions. Additionally, the study's exclusive focus on SFCG, without systematic comparison to other NGOs or state actors, limits its scope. Time and financial constraints prevented broader coverage of all NGOs operating in the North Central region or across Nigeria.

6.3 Suggestions for Further Study

Future research should examine how insights from NGO led peacebuilding initiatives can be translated into government policies and identify strategies to overcome barriers to implementation. Studies are also needed to assess the collective impact of multiple NGOs operating in the North Central region, offering a broader perspective on how their interventions complement or overlap with state efforts.

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