

COMMUNITY VIGILANTISM AND STATE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: AN EVALUATION OF LOCAL SECURITY MEASURES IN PLATEAU STATE.

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Abstract

Community vigilantism has become a central feature of local security governance in Plateau State as communities respond to persistent insecurity, slow state response and recurrent violent attacks. This study evaluated the roles, interactions and implications of community-based security mechanisms such as vigilante groups, hunters' associations and youth patrols within the broader state security architecture. It adopted a descriptive mixed-methods design, combining surveys of 422 respondents with 18 key informant interviews and 12 focus group discussions across six conflict-affected Local Government Areas (LGAs). The findings indicated that vigilante groups significantly enhance rapid response capacity and crime deterrence as they play crucial roles in securing communities alongside police and local leaders, though they also face challenges due to lack of legal backing and training. In terms of outcomes, vigilantism generally reduces violence at the local level but it blurs lines of authority and raises accountability concerns. The study concluded that while community-based security actors provided valuable support by extending 'state' security into localities, their effectiveness requires better institutional integration. Accordingly, policies should aim to address root causes of insecurity, provide formal oversight such as legal recognition, training and resources for vigilante groups and strengthen collaboration between communities and state security forces.

Keywords: Vigilantism; Internal Security; Hybrid Security Governance; Social Control; Human Security; Plateau State

Introduction

Community vigilantism has become a defining feature of the security landscape in many parts of Nigeria, particularly in conflict-prone places like Plateau State. As violent attacks escalate, ranging from banditry, violent attacks and invasions to farmer-herder confrontations, local communities increasingly turn to self-help security arrangements. Vigilante groups, neighbourhood watches, hunters' associations and youth patrols have emerged as crucial components of grassroots security governance, reflecting both community resilience and a response to longstanding gaps within the state security architecture (Meagher, 2012; Udoh, 2025). Plateau State's history of violent outbreaks since the early 2000s has exposed governance vulnerabilities and a pervasive perception among communities that formal security institutions are under-resourced, slow to respond or disconnected from local realities (Tar & Obi, 2016).

Consequently, vigilantism has expanded across urban and rural contexts, performing roles in intelligence gathering, neighbourhood patrols, dispute mediation and early warning activities. In many communities, vigilantes function as first responders and custodians of communal boundaries. At the same time, the state's response has increasingly relied on military deployments to contain internal conflict, institutionalising exceptional measures and normalising operations such as "Enduring Peace," formerly known as Operation Safe Haven (OPSH). This militarisation raises questions of authority, legitimacy and collaboration between state and non-state actors as both operate in the same terrain and shape security outcomes and public trust (Ibrahim, 2012).

This study explored how community vigilante structures interface with Plateau State's security architecture, examining complementarities, frictions and governance dilemmas to inform sustainable, community-centred security strategies that reduce violence while strengthening state authority.

The research asked:

1. What factors explain the rise and entrenchment of community vigilantism in Plateau State?
2. What roles do vigilante groups play in local security governance?
3. How do these structures interact with the state security architecture?
4. What opportunities and challenges arise from their interaction for internal security management?

The study's objectives are to analyse the evolution and drivers of vigilantism in Plateau State, examine the operational roles of vigilante groups, evaluate their interactions with state security institutions, identify challenges in this hybrid security arrangement and offer policy recommendations for coherent, accountable and community-responsive security governance.

The study contributed to scholarship on hybrid security governance, civil-military relations and community security in fragile states. It offers practical insights for policymakers, security agencies and peacebuilding organisations seeking improved coordination between formal and informal security actors.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in clear conceptual distinctions and complementary theoretical perspectives that illuminate the interface between community vigilantism and the state security architecture. Vigilantism here refers to organised or semi-organised community action to enforce order, prevent crime or respond to perceived threats in the absence of or in distrust of formal institutions. Community security refers to the mechanisms through which local populations protect themselves, including early warning, patrols, mediation and community intelligence. State security architecture on the other hand denotes the formal institutions responsible for internal security (the Nigeria Police Force, the Nigerian Army as deployed in OPSH, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence

Corps, the Department of State Services and related paramilitaries). Internal security management covers the policies and operations for preventing violence and protecting citizens.

To analyse community vigilantism in Plateau State, three theoretical perspectives are employed and each is operationalised with reference to the State's context. The first guiding lens for this study is Hybrid Security Governance Theory, foundations of which were laid by scholars such as Boege, Brown, Clements and Nolan (2009), Baker (2010) and later expanded by Meagher (2012). These theorists argue that in fragile and conflict-prone environments, security is rarely monopolised by the state; rather, it becomes a negotiated arena involving vigilante groups, traditional authorities, community networks and formal security agencies. Boege et al. (2009) introduced the idea of "hybrid political orders," demonstrating how formal and informal institutions blend to create alternative systems of governance. Baker (2010) further conceptualised how non-state actors provide everyday security in contexts where state policing is weak. Meagher (2012) deepened this perspective by showing how non-state security groups compensate for institutional weaknesses, resulting in systems marked by both cooperation and friction. Applying this theory to Plateau State helps explain why vigilante formations thrive in environments where the police and other formal agencies lack operational reach.

This framework examined how formal (state) and informal (non-state) security providers jointly shape local order. In Plateau State, hybrid governance is evident in the way traditional rulers and the police have formally sanctioned vigilante activities. For example, field research indicated that the state often actively involves vigilante groups. Vigilante groups that emerged from the historical process of institutionalisation of plural policing actually support the state and its agencies. In other words, current vigilante structures in Plateau may function with official approval, effectively extending the reach of the state, acting 'as an extension of the state. The paper therefore examined specific interactions such as joint patrols or intelligence sharing between police and local vigilantes as instances of hybrid governance in practice.

Social Control Theory is the second framework which is attributed to Travis Hirschi (1969) in his classic work *Causes of Delinquency*, and further elaborated in his later writings (Hirschi, 2004). Hirschi posits that social order is maintained not merely through legal authority but through strong social bonds, communal norms, attachment, involvement and shared identity. In Plateau State, vigilante groups derive legitimacy from embeddedness in community life, they are kin, neighbours, youth leaders and cultural insiders. Their authority stems from trust and social cohesion rather than formal legal mandates. This theory explains why communities rely heavily on vigilantes, their proximity, shared identity and responsiveness make them more credible than distant state institutions perceived as slow or biased. Thus, Social Control Theory illuminates how collective norms and strong community ties underpin the legitimacy and operational effectiveness of vigilante actors.

Social control theory posits that individuals' attachment to societal norms and institutions deters deviance. Applied here, it suggests that community vigilantism is rooted in local norms about communal protection. In Plateau communities, strong social bonds and shared norms which are reinforced by family, religion and traditional

leadership can motivate residents to enforce local rules when official law enforcement is weak. For instance, if neighbours believe they have a collective responsibility to ensure safety, they may use informal sanctions such as community pressure, patrols, among others against suspected criminals. This theory is used here to interpret the motivations of vigilante actors as manifestations of community-based social control that fill gaps left by formal policing.

The third theoretical pillar is the Human Security Paradigm, first articulated in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP, 1994) Human Development Report, and later expanded by scholars such as Paris (2001) and Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007). The paradigm shifts the focus of security analysis from protecting the state to protecting individuals, emphasising safety from fear, safety from want and protection from sudden disruptions in daily life. Paris (2001) critically interrogated whether human security constituted a paradigm shift, ultimately affirming its relevance in analysing security at the community level. Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007) further broadened human security by highlighting how individuals, not states, experience insecurity during conflict. Applying this paradigm to Plateau State underscores why communities prefer proximate, people-centred actors such as vigilantes to safeguard farmlands, monitor boundaries, provide rapid warnings and respond immediately to threats. Vigilante groups address daily vulnerabilities that formal security institutions may overlook due to distance, bureaucracy or limited manpower.

Human security broadens the concept of security to include freedom from fear (physical violence) and freedom from want (basic needs). This perspective shifts focus from state-centric security to the welfare of individuals and communities. In Plateau State, the study assessed vigilantism's impact on human security by asking: Do vigilante activities enhance residents' sense of safety and protect livelihoods, or do they introduce new insecurities? For example, if vigilante patrols deter attackers and give people freedom from fear, they could advance human security. Conversely, if some vigilantes engage in extortion or heavy-handed punishments, they may undermine the very security they aim to ensure. By explicitly linking vigilante outcomes to dimensions like personal safety, justice and social stability, the study operationalised the human security lens through community experiences.

These frameworks guided the analysis and in subsequent sections, this paper connected each theory to the empirical data, showing how Plateau's hybrid arrangements manifest in reality. How community norms inform vigilante behaviour and how these local dynamics translate into gains or trade-offs for human security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature situates Plateau State within broader African and Nigerian debates on vigilantism, community security and state policing. Across the continent, self-help security arrangements such as Kenya's Sungusungu, South African neighbourhood watches, and West African hunters' groups have been shown to arise where policing is weak and communities face persistent threats. In Nigeria, vigilantism expanded amid

rising crime and governance deficits, with historical antecedents in Hunters' Associations and local self-defence units that provided protection where the formal security agents did not.

Scholarly research on internal security management in Nigeria underscores the significant influence of local security measures created by community, religious and political leaders on the nature and extent of military involvement in conflict-prone areas such as Plateau State. According to Tar and Obi (2016), these community-based mechanisms can either reduce or intensify military engagement. When local structures are trusted, effective and perceived as neutral, they help de-escalate disputes and limit the need for sustained military intervention. Conversely, partisan or weak local institutions often complicate security management, allowing violence to spiral and prompting more assertive military deployments. Although their contribution is theoretically compelling, much of their analysis remains broad, with limited Plateau-specific or longitudinal data that could empirically demonstrate how changes in local structures correlate with shifts in military presence.

Focusing specifically on Plateau State, Ibrahim (2012) identifies peace committees and traditional councils as pivotal actors in managing tensions and reducing reliance on military responses. He argues that when these local structures are inclusive and widely recognised, they create an environment in which early conflict resolution becomes possible and military involvement is minimised. However, when their neutrality is questioned, particularly in ethnically polarised situations, coordination with the military is hindered, and security operations can become more complex and contentious. Ibrahim's account, while insightful, does not clearly outline the operational channels such as liaison methods or communication protocols through which the military and local bodies interact in practice, nor does it offer a framework for strengthening neutrality among local actors.

Similarly, Okonji (2018) highlights how traditional institutions in Jos influence the scale and pattern of military deployment. He finds that legitimate, respected traditional rulers can mediate conflicts before they require military intervention, whereas situations marked by diminished legitimacy or perceived bias tend to produce prolonged or intensified military operations. While his analysis underscores the need to strengthen traditional leadership and enhance local conflict-resolution skills, the study would benefit from concrete examples demonstrating how traditional mechanisms either averted or escalated crises.

A broader national lens is provided by Olonisakin and Ismail (2011), who examine civil-military relations in Nigeria's volatile regions and conclude that military effectiveness improves significantly when operations are coordinated with local actors who understand historical grievances and community dynamics. They argue that empowering local institutions enhances trust, reduces friction and fosters stable long-term peace. While their contribution is foundational, it offers limited region-specific operational detail for Plateau and lacks concrete strategies for integrating local actors into structured security frameworks.

The interactions between local institutions and military forces in the Middle Belt which include Plateau State are further examined by Mimiko (2020), who shows that faith-based organisations and NGOs can mediate conflicts, build dialogue platforms and ultimately reduce reliance on military solutions. However, she also observes that resource shortages, coordination challenges and organisational weaknesses among these actors often limit their effectiveness, thereby increasing the probability of escalated conflict and extended military intervention. Despite these insights, her recommendations do not sufficiently specify the types of resources or capacity-building programmes required to strengthen these institutions.

More recent analyses reinforce these earlier findings. Studies of Operation Safe Haven (OPSH) and military interventions in Plateau indicate that the security landscape remains deeply hybrid, with military operations relying heavily on informal liaison with vigilante groups, hunters and community peace committees (Dasam, 2022; Ibrahim, 2023). These studies stress that local actors provide vital intelligence, early warning and cultural access, although formal coordination mechanisms remain weak. Comparative work on vigilante and self-defence groups in West Africa also illustrates that these actors bring legitimacy and local knowledge but can contribute to insecurity if unregulated, politicised or poorly integrated into formal security systems (Hagberg, 2019). Contemporary assessments of community policing in Nigeria similarly argue that institutionalising community-oriented security practices can reduce militarisation, though implementation across Nigerian states remains inconsistent (Okoka, 2024).

Despite valuable contributions, the literature still lacks Plateau-focused, empirical analyses that detail how specific local actors interact with the military during operations, how trust is built or eroded, and how coordination varies across crises. There is also limited quantifiable evidence linking strengthened local structures to reductions in military deployment, civilian casualties or long-term conflict recurrence. Finally, the expanding role of vigilante groups which is central to Plateau's grassroots security remains under-researched despite their critical influence on intelligence gathering, boundary protection and rapid mobilisation.

These gaps justify the present study, which examines the operational interactions between vigilante groups and state security institutions in Plateau State, identifies structural and relational factors shaping their cooperation and conflict, and proposes integrated frameworks to improve internal security governance, reduce militarisation and support sustainable peace.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods research design, which is appropriate for examining complex social phenomena and answering “what,” “how,” and “where” questions related to community vigilantism and state security architecture. The choice of descriptive research design is because it facilitates systematic examination of

behaviours and interactions within specific contexts (Smith, 2010; Babbie, 2012), while the mixed-methods approach strengthens the study by integrating the statistical rigour of quantitative data with the contextual depth of qualitative insights. Quantitative data support measurement of key variables and trends, whereas qualitative data capture lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations among key security actors. Together, these methods provide a holistic understanding of the interplay between vigilante groups and formal security institutions in Plateau State. This design is indeed well-suited for complex security topics because it allows triangulation of statistical patterns with rich contextual narratives. A similar study on vigilante groups in Nigeria by Lawal and Offorha (2026) used mixed methods to collect survey data from 432 community members and interviews with officials to assess vigilante efficacy.

The population of the study comprises actors involved directly or indirectly in security governance across six conflict-affected Local Government Areas of Plateau State (Bassa, Riyom, Bokkos, Mangu, Shendam and Wase), representing a projected population of 1,716,400 persons (NPC, 2025). The population includes vigilantes, hunters, neighbourhood and community watch groups as well as military and paramilitary personnel, police officers, civil defence operatives, government officials, community leaders and residents of communities experiencing recurring violence. These groups provide diverse yet complementary perspectives necessary for analysing the dynamics of community vigilantism and state security structures.

The sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula, yielding 384 respondents, to which 10% was added to compensate for non-response, resulting in a final sample of 422 survey participants. Samples were proportionately distributed across the six LGAs. For the qualitative strand, the study conducted 18 Key Informant Interviews and 12 Focus Group Discussions, guided by recommendations for qualitative saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). These participants were purposively selected for their expertise, authority or lived experience in civil-military relations and internal security management.

A multi-stage sampling technique was applied to ensure representation of crisis-prone areas across the state. Two LGAs were selected from each senatorial district, followed by the purposive identification of politically significant wards with notable civil-military interactions. Within each ward, respondents, community leaders, youth representatives, women's groups, security personnel and civil society organisations were purposively selected to ensure inclusion of relevant stakeholders.

The study utilised both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires administered physically and through Google Forms, with assistance from trained field researchers proficient in local languages. Semi-structured interviews and FGDs complemented the survey data, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions. All qualitative sessions were recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed and anonymised. Secondary data were derived from government reports, policy documents, media publications and academic literature relating to internal security management in Plateau State.

Conducting research in conflict-prone places such as Plateau State usually pose significant challenges. In carrying out this study, certain security risks such as the possibility of violence, including armed clashes or kidnappings, especially in remote areas were faced. To mitigate this, field visits were undertaken after confirming security situation, liaised closely with local officials for safe passage and avoided high-risk zones at night. Some rural communities had poor road connectivity, requiring long and difficult travel. Also, gaining the trust of communities with low literacy involved careful community entry, often relying on introductions by respected local leaders.

Given the sensitivity around vigilante and security topics, respondents were assured of confidentiality. Interview guides were approved by an institutional review board and all participants gave informed consent. Care was taken not to lead participants into disclosing incriminating details; instead, questions were framed in general terms about community experiences. There was a risk of social desirability bias where informants portraying vigilantes or state forces more positively. This was addressed this by cross-validating accounts such as comparing what community FGDs said with what officials claimed. Triangulating sources (survey, interview, discussion) helped check consistency of narratives.

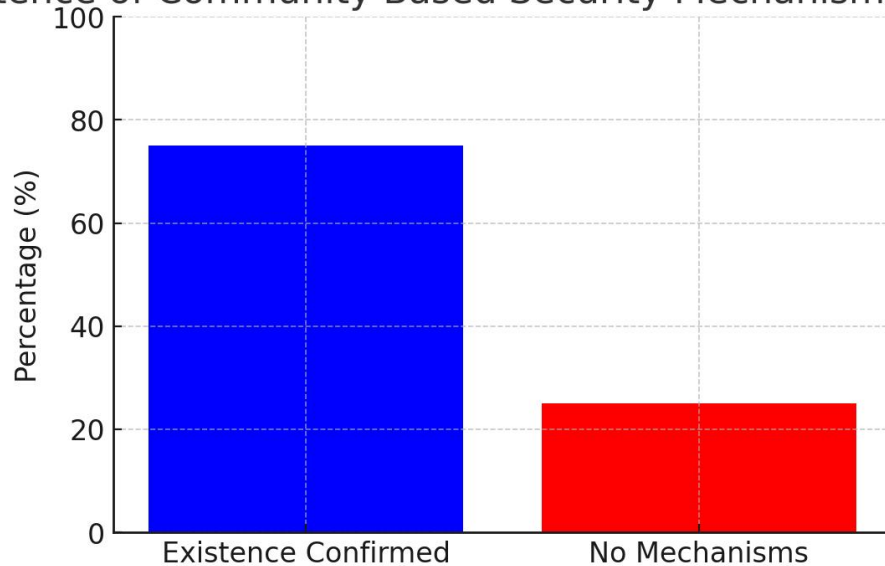
For analysis, quantitative data were processed using SPSS version 27, applying descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations to summarise respondents' characteristics and key variables. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo, following systematic coding and theme development. This analytical integration enabled triangulation, enhancing reliability and producing a comprehensive interpretation of community vigilantism and its interaction with state security structures.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1. Factors Explaining the Rise and Entrenchment of Community Vigilantism in Plateau State

The findings show that community vigilantism has become entrenched in Plateau State primarily because of the persistent insecurity affecting most communities and the limitations of formal security agencies. Both civilian and military respondents indicated that community-based security mechanisms exist in nearly all communities, with approximately 65 - 80% confirming the presence of vigilante groups, hunters' associations, youth watch teams and traditional councils. This widespread existence reflects the reality that local actors constitute the first line of defence before formal intervention. As several civilians explained, *"We have vigilante and hunters as our traditional or local measures... I commend their efforts. They are very active"* (Civilian Key Informant). Others echoed the same sentiment, noting that their presence is normalised because *"they know every road and part of the community"* (Focus Group Discussion).

Existence of Community-Based Security Mechanisms (Approx.)



These mechanisms have grown largely in response to the recurrent cycles of violence, including farmer–herder clashes, night attacks and land-related conflicts, which have created an environment of constant alertness. As formal security forces remain overstretched and unevenly distributed, communities find themselves compelled to rely on indigenous arrangements for immediate protection. The military acknowledged this logic, with one respondent noting: *“We have such groups as vigilante, civilian JTF, hunters... they are very effective in the supply of intelligence”* (Military Key Informant). These go to say that community vigilantism survives because it fills the operational and trust gaps created by limited state presence and because it builds on a long tradition of community self-protection.

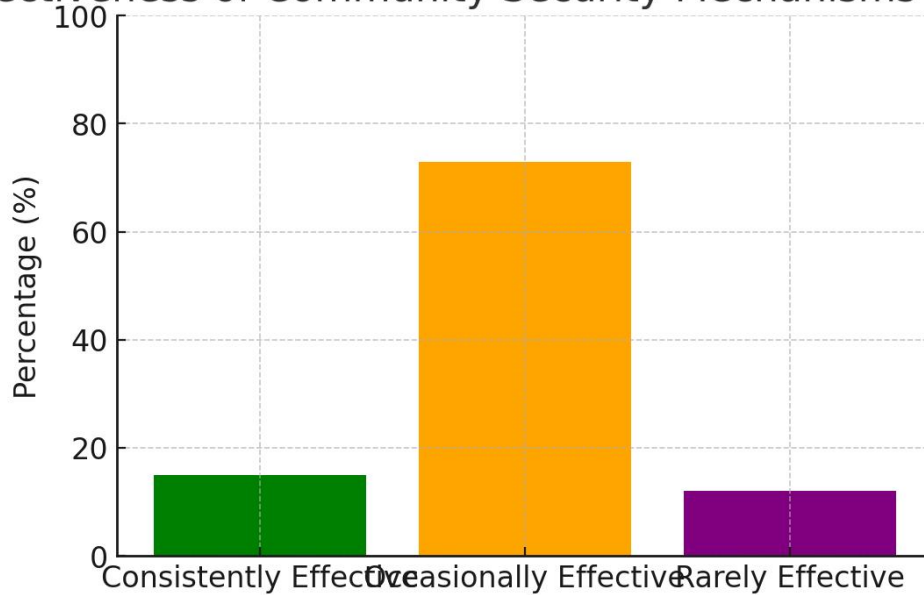
2. Roles of Vigilante Groups in Local Security Governance

The study demonstrates that vigilante groups play significant and multi-dimensional roles in Plateau State’s internal security management. Their most important contribution is intelligence gathering, which both civilian and military respondents described as indispensable. Because vigilantes and hunters live within the communities they protect, they possess the social embeddedness necessary to detect suspicious movements and identify unknown persons. This capacity is repeatedly relied upon by the military: *“Operation Safe Haven use the local securities to get information and direction in the community”* (Civilian Key Informant). Their knowledge of bush paths and farmlands further strengthens this role. As one civilian key informant noted, *“When the vigilantes are going out for patrol one of the military will be there with them... for the past one month there’s no record of farm destruction or killing.”*

In addition to surveillance, vigilante groups serve as local mediators and conflict-prevention actors. They are often the ones called upon to intervene in minor disputes before these escalate into violent confrontations. Military personnel themselves confirmed this, particularly in relation to the Agro Rangers, who *“mediate between farmers and herders... very effective where deployed”* (Military Key Informant). Their

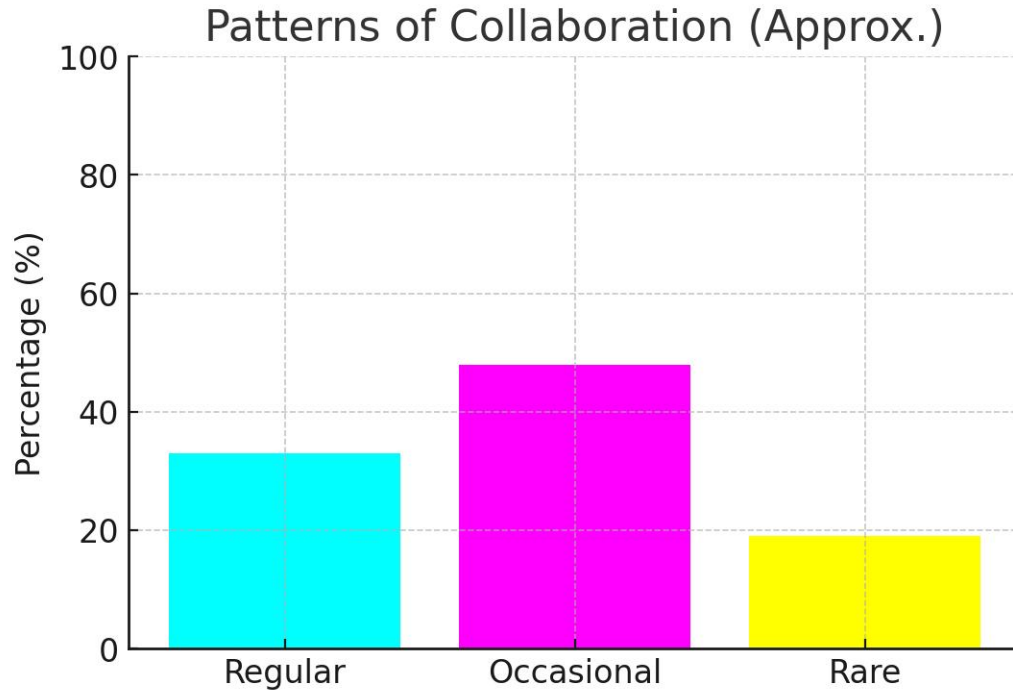
presence as rapid responders is critical in rural areas where formal forces cannot arrive immediately. This is because they reside in the communities, vigilantes respond within minutes, often making the difference between escalation and stability. Quantitative findings revealed that 72 - 75% of respondents rated these groups as “occasionally effective,” while a smaller proportion regarded them as consistently successful. This mixed perception reflects their uneven access to training and resources but underscores their functional importance in the broader security ecosystem.

Effectiveness of Community Security Mechanisms (Approx.)



3. Interactions Between Community Vigilantism and the State Security Architecture

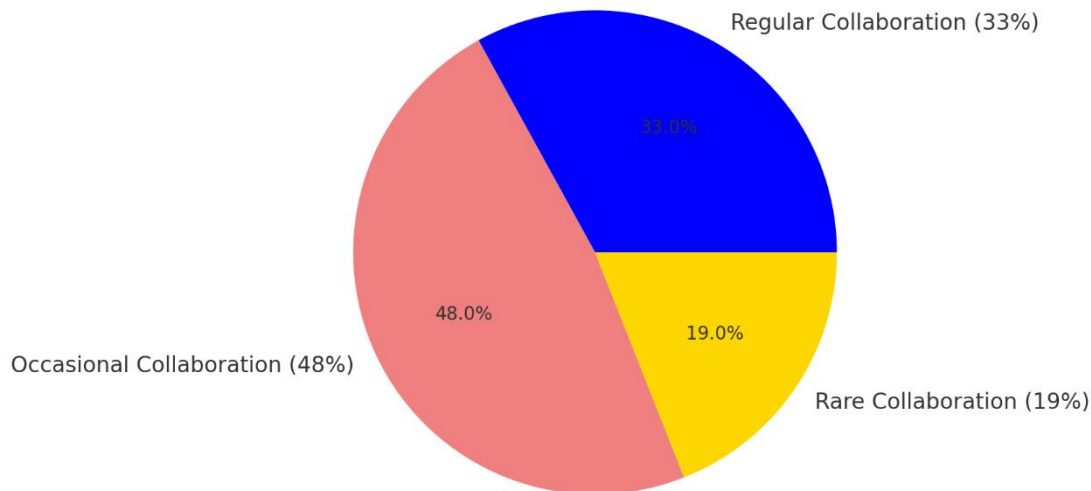
The interaction between vigilante groups and formal security agencies such as Operation Safe Haven (OPSH) which is now christened, “Operation Enduring Peace”, the police and Agro Rangers reveals a hybrid security arrangement characterised by both cooperation and friction. Quantitative data show that 33% of respondents experienced regular cooperation, 48% occasional cooperation, and 19% little or no cooperation. The nature of collaboration appears highly dependent on the operational culture of individual military commanders, local trust dynamics and the structure of community groups.



In many communities, the relationship is symbiotic. Vigilante groups provide intelligence, terrain navigation and early warning, while military personnel and police provide armed capacity and legal authority. The military repeatedly acknowledged this interdependence. One respondent explained: *“Agro Rangers collaborate very well with both the conventional and non-conventional security personnel... the non-conventional are from the communities and know the terrain better”* (Military Key Informant). Similarly, civilians observed that collaboration leads to clear improvements in security outcomes, as noted by one of the civilian key informants, *“The new commandant formed collaboration with the local securities... for the past one month no farm destruction or killings.”*

However, significant points of friction weaken this relationship. Civilians in some communities reported that they were barred from forming local security groups, with one lamenting: *“We are not allowed to form such groups... we are always suspected and prevented from being enrolled”* (Focus Group Discussion). Others complained that the military had become increasingly distant: *“The military started isolating themselves... said it was an order from above”* (Focus Group Discussion). These concerns were mirrored by military respondents who emphasised the need for transparent recruitment and credible leadership within vigilante groups to avoid infiltration or politicisation. One of the military key informants explained that, *“Effectiveness of internal security management through the local mechanisms starts from the recruitment process... Let the selection be transparently done... persons with questionable character must not be selected.”*

Distribution of Collaboration Between Vigilante Groups and State Security Actors



The analysis therefore shows that vigilantism and formal security institutions interact through a necessity-driven, but inconsistently coordinated, partnership that affects internal security outcomes.

4. *Opportunities and Challenges for Internal Security Management*

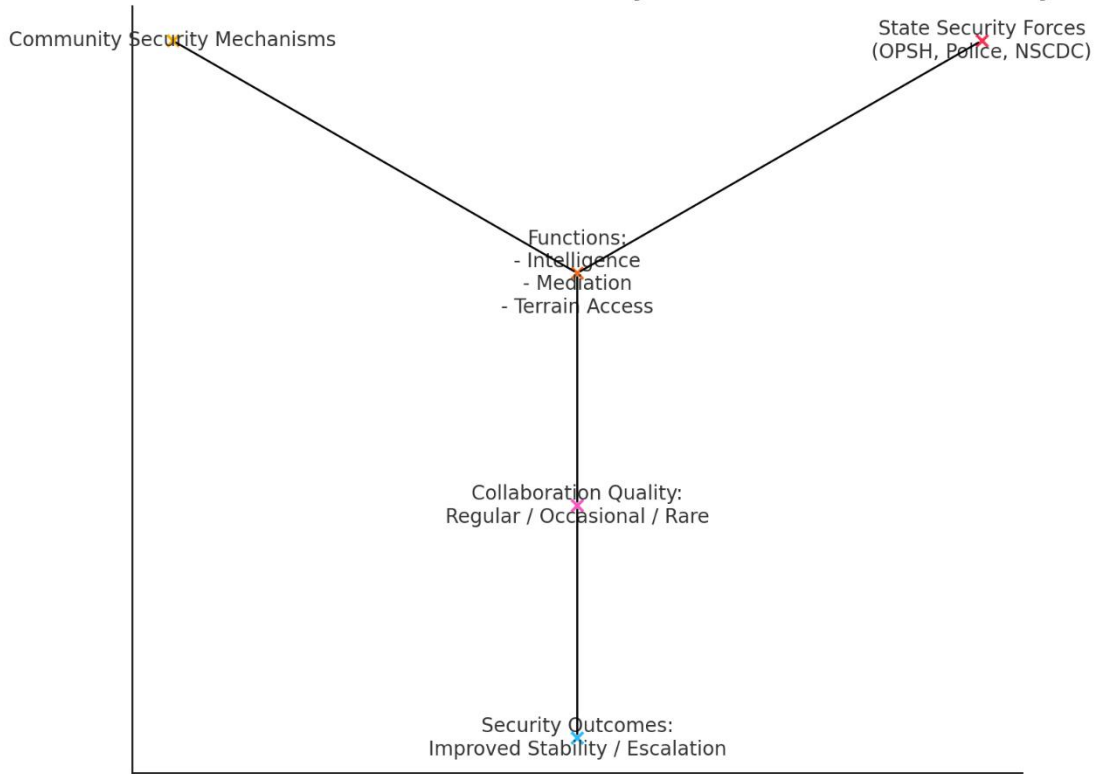
The interactions between local and formal security structures create several opportunities for strengthening internal security in Plateau State. The most prominent opportunity is the enhancement of early warning and rapid response. Vigilante groups provide real-time information that the military could not otherwise obtain quickly, reducing the frequency and impact of attacks. Many respondents emphasised that collaboration reduces fear and boosts civilian confidence, with a civilian key informant attributing recent calm in their community to the joint patrols between vigilantes and OPSH. Another opportunity lies in the potential for cost-effective security governance, as community structures reduce the logistical and operational burdens on military deployments.

All that as it is, these opportunities are undermined by persistent challenges. Mistrust remains a central obstacle, especially when communities feel excluded from decision-making or suspect bias in military operations. Politicisation of vigilante recruitment also weakens neutrality and erodes confidence among state actors. Additionally, vigilante groups suffer from resource limitations, lack of protective equipment and absence of training opportunities. One respondent expressed frustration that, “*Local security is deprived of the use of ammunitions and sometimes the military refuse to involve them in meetings and decision-making*” (Civilian Key Informant).

Another major challenge is the absence of a formal coordination framework. Existing collaboration is personality-driven, varying significantly depending on the attitude of the local commandant or community leadership. This creates episodic rather

than sustained cooperation. Respondents overwhelmingly called for structured arrangements. 100% recommended regular joint meetings, 79% advocated training for local leaders and another 79% supported the establishment of liaison units. Some even proposed empowering vigilantes more formally: *“Train and arm these local securities... to protect our communities from attackers who come with powerful weapons”* (Focus Group Discussion).

Thematic Interaction Model of Community-based and State Security Actors



In all, the findings show that while community-based security mechanisms are essential for sustaining internal security in Plateau State, their effectiveness depends heavily on improved coordination, institutional support, transparent recruitment and inclusive engagement between communities and the state security architecture.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that community vigilantism in Plateau State is both a response to persistent insecurity and a manifestation of long-standing indigenous security traditions. The widespread presence of vigilante groups confirmed by 65 - 80% of respondents demonstrates that communities have developed robust internal mechanisms to fill the protection void left by overstretched formal security agencies. This aligns with scholarship by Boege et al. (2009) which argues that when state capacity is weak or unevenly distributed, communities resort to self-help security arrangements, thereby

creating hybrid systems where state and non-state actors coexist. The study found that vigilante groups are entrenched because they address immediate survival needs. The relevance of the groups is reinforced by their proximity to the population, deep terrain knowledge and perceived trustworthiness, attributes formal security institutions often lack. This supports the argument that legitimacy, rather than coercive capacity, is a key driver of community reliance on local security actors in conflict-prone societies (Dasam, 2022; Ibrahim, 2023; Okoka, 2024).

The roles played by vigilantes underscore their centrality in local security governance. Intelligence-gathering as one of their functions is indispensable to military operations, as demonstrated by statements such as “*Operation Safe Haven use the local securities to get information and direction*” (Civilian Key Informant). Their capacity for early warning, rapid response and conflict mediation positions them as frontline actors in preventing escalation of violence. The fact that 72 - 75% of respondents rated them as “occasionally effective” suggests that while they are generally functional, their performance is constrained by resource and training limitations. This reflects broader theoretical debates on the strengths and vulnerabilities of informal security actors.

Interactions between vigilantes and state security agencies form a complex landscape marked by cooperation, interdependence and tension. The data show that 33% of respondents experience regular collaboration, 48% occasional collaboration and 19% minimal or no collaboration. These patterns reaffirm the hybrid nature of internal security management in Plateau State, where neither state nor community actors can independently manage emerging security threats. Yet the frictions reported, particularly mistrust, exclusion and politicisation indicate that hybrid security governance is far from seamless. Complaints such as “*We are not allowed to form such groups... we are always suspected*” (Focus Group Discussion) and concerns about poor recruitment standards show that collaboration remains vulnerable to local politics and institutional inconsistencies.

Despite these challenges, vigilante-military collaboration presents significant opportunities for strengthening internal security. Improved early warning systems, enhanced public confidence and cost-effective patrols are notable benefits. However, these opportunities are undermined by systemic deficiencies, such as the absence of a formal coordination framework, inconsistent leadership approaches and inadequate support for community structures. Respondents’ calls for regular meetings (100%), training (79%), and liaison units (79%) demonstrate a clear desire for institutionalising community-state collaboration.

Generally, the discussion points to the need for a coordinated, transparent and mutually respectful hybrid security architecture that leverages the strengths of community actors while establishing safeguards against abuse, bias and fragmentation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined community vigilantism and its interaction with state security architecture in Plateau State, revealing a security environment shaped by both necessity and structural limitations. Community vigilantism has risen and become entrenched due

to systemic insecurity, limited state presence and the enduring legitimacy of traditional protection systems. Vigilante groups have emerged as essential security actors, providing intelligence, rapid response and conflict mediation that formal agencies cannot always deliver. The interactions between community vigilantes and formal security agencies demonstrate both productive collaboration and significant friction. While joint patrols, intelligence-sharing and terrain guidance contribute to improved safety outcomes, mistrust, exclusion, politicisation and lack of structured coordination hinder the effectiveness of this partnership. The findings indicated that sustainable internal security in Plateau State requires a deliberate integration of community-based and state-led security structures.

Community-based security actors are indispensable but insufficient on their own. Their effectiveness and legitimacy depend on appropriate institutional frameworks, coordinated engagement with state forces and investment in their capacity and neutrality. Strengthening the hybrid arrangements as recommended below, can provide a pathway to enhancing resilience, improving response capabilities and fostering long-term stability across communities in Plateau State.

1. Addressing the Factors Behind the Rise and Entrenchment of Community Vigilantism

To address the conditions that have driven the rise and entrenchment of community vigilantism in Plateau State, it is essential to strengthen formal security presence across rural and conflict-prone areas. Improved deployment of police personnel, enhanced mobility and quicker response times would reduce communities' reliance on self-help mechanisms. Efforts to rebuild trust between residents and state security agencies are equally important and should involve institutionalised community-security dialogue platforms that allow for regular communication and feedback. Given the longstanding legitimacy of traditional protection systems, these mechanisms should be formally recognised and documented so that their unique strengths can be integrated into local and state security planning. Also, early-warning infrastructure should be expanded by linking community intelligence systems with digital reporting tools, ensuring that information flows quickly and efficiently from communities to formal agencies.

2. Enhancing the Roles of Vigilante Groups in Local Security Governance

Training should be provided in areas such as intelligence gathering, conflict de-escalation, human rights and proper reporting procedures in order to improve the effectiveness of vigilante groups in local security governance. Such training would help professionalise their operations and reduce the risk of abuse. Beyond training, vigilante groups require appropriate non-lethal equipment such as communication gadgets, flashlights, protective gear and uniforms to enhance their operational capacity without militarising them. A community security code of conduct should be developed to guide their activities, promote accountability and minimise arbitrary actions. Their role in conflict mediation, particularly in farmer–herder relations, should also be formalised and supported through structured collaboration with government agencies and peacebuilding institutions.

3. Improving Interactions Between Vigilante Groups and State Security Architecture

Improving the interaction between vigilante groups and formal security institutions will require the establishment of formal liaison units in each Local Government Area. These units would coordinate information-sharing, joint patrols and rapid response mechanisms, reducing operational fragmentation. Regular joint meetings involving vigilante leaders, community leaders and state security agencies should be institutionalised at ward and LGA levels in order to promote mutual understanding and consistent coordination. Equally important is the creation of a transparent recruitment and vetting process for vigilante members to prevent infiltration by individuals with criminal or partisan motives, echoing one of the military key informant's emphasis on credible selection. Lastly, the development of clear operational guidelines for hybrid security operations would help reduce the misunderstandings and inconsistencies currently observed in interactions between OPSH, Agro Rangers and community groups.

4. Harnessing Opportunities and Mitigating Challenges in Internal Security Management

To fully harness the opportunities and address the challenges identified in the study, Plateau State should develop a comprehensive Community Security Policy Framework that formally outlines the roles, responsibilities and boundaries of both state and non-state actors. Addressing resource shortages will be crucial, and this can be achieved by establishing community security support funds jointly managed by government institutions, traditional authorities and civil society groups. Reducing politicisation in vigilante recruitment is also necessary and can be achieved through community-led consensus processes and transparent screening mechanisms that limit partisan influence. Strengthened accountability measures, such as community-level reporting structures and performance monitoring systems, would further help ensure that vigilante groups operate responsibly. Scaling up joint patrol arrangements and integrating community intelligence with military rapid-response capabilities would greatly enhance early-warning systems and improve the speed and effectiveness of security interventions across the state.

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