



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PEACEBUILDING AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO ENGAGING NON-STATE ACTORS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria has faced continual conflicts in recent decades, involving not only state actors but also non-state actors such as armed groups, religious leaders, and community militias. Despite these actors' significant roles, traditional state-led approaches, which rely heavily on military operations, have failed to address the root causes of conflict, leaving social and political grievances unresolved. This study examines peace-building as an alternative approach to conflict resolution, with a focus on the potential of engaging non-state actors in conflict resolution. The study builds upon key theoretical frameworks, including Lederach's conflict transformation theory, which advocates addressing underlying structures and relationships that fuel violence. Drawing on secondary data from journals, books, internet sources and relevant literature, the study highlights how peace-building transcends state-centric methods by prioritizing dialogue, reconciliation, and local participation. By integrating non-state actors who possess local authority, knowledge, and influence peace-building can bridge gaps between communities and formal state structures. However, the study also identifies challenges, such as the dual role of non-state actors as both peace-builders and spoilers and the lack of trust between the state and local communities. Despite these challenges, the study argues that an inclusive, community-based peace-building approach can break cycles of violence and promote social cohesion, offering a more legitimate and effective pathway to lasting peace in Nigeria. The findings underscore the urgent need for policymakers and peace practitioners to shift from exclusive, state-led security responses to participatory frameworks that recognize the vital roles of non-state actors in addressing the complex roots of conflict.

Keywords: Peace-building, non-state actors, conflict resolution, armed conflict, Nigeria.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has faced numerous violent conflicts over the past few decades, including communal clashes, religious tensions, farmer-herder disputes, secessionist movements, insurgencies, and ethnic and religious conflicts. These issues have involved not only state actors but also a range of non-state actors, such as armed groups, community militias, insurgents, terrorists, vigilante organisations, religious leaders, and traditional authorities, all of whom play crucial roles in either fuelling or resolving conflicts (Lambon, 2025). Conventional methods of conflict resolution have generally focused on state-led responses, including military interventions, law enforcement, and peace enforcement measures. However, these approaches often fail to tackle the deep-seated social, economic, and political grievances that sustain conflict, leading to ongoing violence with serious repercussions for peace, development, and social unity (Adeleke, 2025). Alfakoro, Kolawole, and Salawu (2025) observed that the inability to effectively engage non-state actors in conflict resolution efforts arises from their frequent exclusion from formal peace processes, leaving their potential contributions to peacebuilding largely overlooked and undermining the long-term success of peace initiatives. Similarly, Uvere and Adiele (2025) noted that state-led security and conflict resolution strategies often do not involve non-state actors, failing to recognise their legitimacy and influence within local communities. This exclusion limits the reach of conflict resolution efforts and fuels cycles of violence and revenge (Adeleke, 2025).

Regrettably, these repeated cycles of violence have stifled economic development, disrupted socio-economic activities, and worsened poverty and unemployment that allowed armed non-state actors to recruit foot soldiers and engage in activities like insurgency, terrorism, banditry, secessionist movements, kidnapping, and farmer-herder conflicts (Uvere & Adiele, 2025). Such actions have weakened Nigeria's security architecture, deterred foreign investment, and claimed countless lives and properties. Additionally, thousands have been forced from their homes, seeking refuge in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and neighbouring communities, resulting in a humanitarian crisis (Dakwat and Osiogogu, 2020). Alfakoro et al., (2025) further noted that fear of violence has prevented people from carrying out their daily activities whereas parents are unable to provide for their families, pushing them into destitution and vulnerability to diseases caused by malnutrition and could not afford to send their children to school, contributing to high dropout rates.

Considering the severe impact of insecurity, exploring peacebuilding as an alternative approach offers promise because peacebuilding aims to tackle the root causes of conflict by promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and community involvement, fostering trust and addressing not only the immediate violence but also its deeper sources (Akintayo, 2025). Involving non-state actors in peacebuilding can draw on local knowledge, networks, and capacities, lending greater authority and effectiveness to conflict resolution efforts as well as offering a pathway to long-lasting peace and creating a framework for integrating non-state actors such as community leaders, religious figures, armed group and civil society



organisations into peaceful resolution by addressing what makes them carry arms against the state. (Yusuf, 2025). Akintayo (2025) confirmed that such integration can bridge the divide between the state and local communities, bolstering the legality and sense of ownership of peace efforts and contributing to broader discussions about inclusive governance and sustainable peace in divided societies. Academically, this study adds to a substantial body of work on conflict resolution, non-state actors, and peacebuilding. Scholars like Lederach (1997) have stressed the significance of bottom-up approaches for enduring peace, while Galtung (1996), as cited by Dilts, Winter, Biebricher, Johnson, Vázquez-Arroyo, and Cocks (2012), highlighted the need to address structural violence through inclusive processes. In Nigeria, studies by Adetula (2015) and Omeje (2008) have shown how traditional institutions and local actors can support peace efforts. Building on these perspectives, this study aims to explore practical ways to implement a peacebuilding approach to engage non-state actors in achieving more sustainable conflict resolution.

2.0. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Clarification

Peacebuilding as a Comprehensive Process

According to Akintayo (2025) in his work titled Sulhu as local peacebuilding in Nigeria found that peacebuilding goes beyond simply stopping violence rather it involves addressing the root causes of conflict, fostering reconciliation, and building social and economic structures that support long-term peace. Similarly, Alfakoro et al, (2025) support this view by saying that peacebuilding includes dialogue, trust-building, community participation, and institutional reforms that not only tackle immediate hostilities but also work towards resolving issues such as poverty, social inequality, and exclusion, which often underlie conflict. Thus, Johnson (2023) stated that peacebuilding is seen as a holistic effort that not only addresses immediate violence but also tackles the root causes of conflict and fosters reconciliation through the framework that involves:

- Dialogue and mediation at multiple levels.
- Addressing social and economic inequalities.
- Building institutions that support peaceful coexistence.
- Promoting cultural and religious understanding.

For instance, the above definition means that peacebuilding is going beyond military or police-led operations to embrace processes that build trust, heal divisions, and promote sustainable peace. Given peacebuilding as a comprehensive process, it encompasses inclusivity, good governance, equality, equal political representation equity, fear distribution of resources and creates avenues for participation in governance and decision marking as well as eliminates every form of injustice, human rights violation and corruption (Alfakoro et al, 2025).



The Role and Significance of Non-State Actors

Non-state actors comprise traditional and religious leaders, community-based organisations, civil society groups, as well as local militias, insurgents, bandits, kidnappers, farmers, and herders, who are instrumental in either sustaining or resolving conflicts (Azubuike, Ojo & Shedrack, 2023). These non-state actors are deeply rooted in local communities, possess valuable local knowledge, have an understanding of the geographical landscape, and engage in information sharing, which grants them significant legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Azubuike et al., 2023). Therefore, acknowledging their potential as non-state actors and involving them in peacebuilding initiatives that respect their cultural, traditional as well as religious contexts will promote conflict resolution approaches that are accepted by local populations (Albert, 2017).

The ability of non-state actors to contribute effectively to peacebuilding depends on the existence of good governance that upholds fairness, trust, justice, equitable resource distribution, and political representation, along with robust institutions that can provide compensation to victims of violence (Lambon, 2025). Furthermore, it is crucial to create avenues for non-state actors to express their grievances, encourage forgiveness, repair broken relationships, and promote social cohesion. Without these, non-state actors may instead contribute to insecurity and withhold information that could help state actors address security challenges.

Previous Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Non-State Actors

Scholarly discussions on peacebuilding revealed the shortcomings of approaches that focus solely on the state and stress the need to involve non-state actors. Lederach (1997) is known for his emphasis on conflict transformation, highlighting the importance of grassroots actors in achieving lasting peace. He argues that sustainable peacebuilding requires the inclusion of local communities and non-state actors who have an in-depth understanding of the conflict and are often trusted mediators in their communities. Similarly, Galtung's (1996) concept of 'positive peace' supports this idea, calling for efforts to tackle structural inequalities and social injustices that drive conflict. In contrast to these perspectives, Adeleke (2025) pointed out that state interventions in conflict resolution often rely on the use of force and overlook the role of informal institutions such as traditional leaders, religious figures, and civil society organisations, armed militias in resolving disputes and fostering social harmony.

To Yusuf (2025), vigilante groups and community militias have emerged in response to these shortcomings in state security, positioning them as both potential allies and challenges in peacebuilding processes. These insights highlight the importance of involving armed and unarmed non-state actors in peacebuilding to address the root causes of conflict. Moreover, Albert (2017) observed that peacebuilding approaches reflect a diversity of cultural, religious, and ethnic identities, and promote community-based dialogue and participatory methods for



resolving communal and ethnic disputes. Shehu (2023) also emphasised the vital role of religious leaders in interfaith dialogues and in countering extremist ideologies through prioritising inclusivity and local participation to make peace efforts more likely to succeed and endure.

Additionally, Uvere and Adiele (2025) argued for the necessity of inclusive and collaborative peacebuilding approaches that engage non-state actors alongside state institutions to help build trust, encourage shared ownership of peace initiatives, and ensure that the concerns of affected communities are fully addressed by creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration to bridge the gap between formal state structures with the various informal networks within society. Likewise, Azubuike et al., (2023) noted that peacebuilding approaches recognise the influence of non-state actors and the limitations of purely state-driven responses, stressing the need to carefully design and assess conflict resolution processes to ensure inclusivity while avoiding the risk of legitimising violence or entrenching existing power imbalances.

Challenges in Engaging Non-State Actors in Conflict Resolution

Although non-state actors often enjoy legitimacy within their local communities, their interests do not always align with the broader goals of national peacebuilding. As Albert (2017) noted, these actors can play dual roles as peacebuilders and spoilers depending on their perceived interests and grievances. This complexity is further compounded by the tendency of state-led efforts to rely heavily on military and law enforcement measures, which often overlook the need for dialogue and reconciliation and fail to address the underlying issues that fuel conflict, leaving social divisions and deep-seated grievances unresolved (Albert, 2017). Consequently, state actors lack the trust and legitimacy required to effectively engage non-state actors, who typically exert strong influence at the local level (Dakwat and Osiogun, 2020). Moreover, the widespread distrust between the state and local communities, coupled with the alienation felt by these communities, exacerbates cycles of violence as many local populations perceive state interventions as external impositions rather than genuine efforts to resolve conflict (Adeleke, 2025). These challenges underscore the need for carefully crafted strategies that not only engage non-state actors meaningfully but also build trust, encourage collaboration, and ensure that these actors become positive contributors to peacebuilding efforts and conflict resolution.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Conflict Transformation Theory developed by John Paul Lederach (1997). By utilising this theory, the study examines peacebuilding as an alternative approach that goes beyond merely halting violence, focusing instead on transforming the relationships and structures that have historically contributed to conflict. Peacebuilding sees conflict not solely as an issue to be resolved but as a chance to fundamentally reshape relationships, social structures, and cultural patterns that enable violence. Unlike traditional conflict



resolution models that seek quick remedies, peacebuilding recognizes the importance of long-term processes aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering inclusive dialogue, trust-building, restructure of damage structure and reconciliation.

This theory is particularly relevant to this study because it highlights the need to engage local actors and promote community-based peacebuilding initiatives. In the Nigerian context, where non-state actors such as traditional leaders, religious figures, and civil society organisations have a significant influence on conflict dynamics, the theory of conflict transformation offers a framework for understanding how these actors can be engaged in meaningful and sustainable peace efforts. Additionally, it stresses the necessity of moving beyond reactive, security-focused approaches to address the deeper social and economic injustices that drive conflict.

3.0. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilised only secondary data, which comprised journals, books, internet materials, and relevant literature. These sources were carefully selected to ensure relevance and credibility, and they provided a comprehensive view of the subject matter. This approach enabled the study to draw upon a wide range of scholarly works and policy documents, forming the basis for the review and discussion of peacebuilding as an alternative approach to engaging non-state actors in conflict resolution in Nigeria

4.0. DISCOURSES

4.1. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the persistent challenges of conflict in Nigeria, particularly the failure of state-centric approaches that rely heavily on military operations and law enforcement to resolve violent conflicts. As noted by Lambon (2025) and Adeleke (2025), such interventions often neglect the complex social, economic, and political grievances that drive these conflicts, leading to their continued escalation and devastating consequences for peace, development, and social cohesion. A significant insight from this study is the crucial role of non-state actors, including religious leaders, traditional authorities, civil society groups, vigilante organisations, and local militias, in either fuelling or resolving these conflicts. Despite their local legitimacy and deep understanding of community dynamics, these actors are frequently excluded from formal peace processes. This exclusion, as observed by Alfakoro et al. (2025) and Uvere and Adiele (2025), undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of conflict resolution efforts and creates gaps in engagement that contribute to cycles of violence and retaliation. The study also underscores the devastating impact of persistent conflict on Nigeria's socioeconomic landscape, including displacement, poverty, unemployment, and the disruption of social services such as education and healthcare.



As Akintayo (2025) and Yusuf (2025) argue, peacebuilding emerges as a promising alternative approach by addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and community participation. Furthermore, the study revealed the importance of integrating non-state actors into peacebuilding efforts, drawing on their local knowledge and legitimacy to rebuild trust and transform relationships within communities. The work of scholars such as Lederach (1997) and Galtung (1996), as cited in this study, reinforces the value of inclusive, bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. Ultimately, the findings highlight that achieving sustainable peace in Nigeria requires a comprehensive, inclusive peacebuilding framework that bridges the gap between state actors and local communities, leveraging the strengths of non-state actors to create more legitimate and effective conflict resolution processes.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The article examines peacebuilding as an alternative approach to involving non-state actors in conflict resolution in Nigeria. The country has faced persistent violent conflicts, often driven by socio-economic and political grievances that state-led security measures have failed to address effectively. Non-state actors including religious and traditional leaders, vigilante groups, civil society organisations, and community militias play significant roles in either fuelling or resolving these conflicts. However, they are frequently excluded from formal peace efforts, limiting the legitimacy and reach of such initiatives. The study argues that peacebuilding offers a more promising strategy by focusing on the root causes of conflict, fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and community participation. Unlike conventional security measures, peacebuilding emphasises inclusivity, social justice, good governance, and equitable resource distribution.

The approach recognises the potential of non-state actors, who possess local knowledge, cultural legitimacy, and networks that can enhance peace efforts. Involving these actors not only bridges the gap between state institutions and local communities but also creates more resilient and sustainable peace. Drawing on theories by scholars like Lederach (1997) and Galtung (1996), the study highlights the importance of bottom-up approaches that address structural violence and promote participatory conflict resolution. It also reviews studies showing how traditional institutions can contribute to peace and stresses that non-state actors can either support or sabotage peacebuilding efforts, depending on how they are engaged.

The study adopts the Conflict Transformation Theory, which sees conflict as an opportunity to reshape relationships and structures that perpetuate violence. It argues for a shift from military and law enforcement responses to inclusive peacebuilding strategies that foster trust, tackle socio-economic disparities, and address longstanding grievances. The study utilises secondary data from academic and internet sources, the study provides a comprehensive



discussion of peacebuilding's potential to engage non-state actors and promote sustainable conflict resolution in Nigeria.

This study has underscored the critical role of non-state actors in both perpetuating and resolving violent conflicts in Nigeria. While the country has historically relied on state-led, security-focused approaches to manage violence, these strategies have consistently fallen short of addressing the underlying economic, social, and political grievances that drive conflict. Such limitations are exacerbated by the exclusion of non-state actors from formal peace processes, which diminishes the legitimacy of state-led initiatives and hampers the sustainability of peace efforts.

The findings reveal that non-state actors, such as traditional and religious leaders, civil society organisations, vigilante groups, and even community militias, possess significant local legitimacy and knowledge of community dynamics when engaged meaningfully, these actors can serve as vital partners in peacebuilding efforts, contributing to dialogue, reconciliation, and the transformation of relationships within communities. Their participation also helps ensure that the needs and aspirations of local populations are genuinely addressed, thereby promoting more durable and inclusive peace. Furthermore, the study highlights the devastating impact of persistent conflict on Nigeria's social and economic fabric, including the displacement of thousands, the destruction of livelihoods, and the erosion of trust between citizens and the state.

In this context, peacebuilding emerges as a holistic approach that not only seeks to end immediate violence but also addresses deeper issues of inequality, exclusion, and injustice. This involves fostering community participation, strengthening institutions, and building trust between state and non-state actors through integration into peacebuilding processes is essential for achieving sustainable conflict resolution. Also, peacebuilding bridges the gap between state authority and local communities, ensuring that peace efforts are legitimate, locally owned, and responsive to the root causes of conflict. Moving forward, prioritising inclusive peacebuilding that engages all stakeholders offers a promising pathway to addressing Nigeria's complex security challenges and fostering long-term stability and development.

5.2. Recommendations

- i. The Nigerian government and other stakeholders should enhance inclusive structures and processes that actively engage non-state actors such as community leaders, religious figures, and civil society organisations in peacebuilding efforts.
- ii. Security agencies should shift from security-focused responses to comprehensive peacebuilding approaches and reorient conflict resolution efforts towards holistic peacebuilding strategies that prioritise dialogue, reconciliation, and community-based engagement.



- iii. The federal government should promote good governance and socio-economic development as foundations for Peace.

Competing Interest

The authors have declared that no conflicting interest exist in this study

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