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Internally Displaced Persons and Their Impacts on Host Communities in Nigeria's North Central Zone:A Humanitarian and Socioeconomic Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the multidimensional impacts of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on host communities in Nigeria's North Central zone, where displacement is driven principally by farmer–herder conflict, banditry, and climate stressors. The analysis draws on primary data from key informants (village heads, local government officials, household heads, market leaders, and IDP coordinators) and secondary datasets from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix and UNHCR. It assesses four domains: livelihoods and socioeconomic outcomes, public health, social cohesion, and local governance.

Results show that host communities absorb disproportionate and largely uncompensated costs associated with displacement, including heightened competition for land and natural resources, greater food insecurity, increased burden on health services, and deterioration of social cohesion. Evidence also indicates limited and uneven support from federal and state authorities to mitigate these impacts.

The paper concludes by recommending a dual-focused humanitarian–development policy framework that simultaneously addresses the needs of displaced populations and host communities, consistent with Nigeria's National IDP Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals. It offers specific, actionable recommendations for federal and state governments, humanitarian agencies, and development partners.

Keywords: ***internally displaced persons, North Central Nigeria, Middle Belt, farmer-herder conflict, host communities, food security, social cohesion, humanitarian-development nexus, Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa.***

Introduction

Internal displacement represents a major humanitarian challenge of the twenty-first century. Globally, over 70 million people are internally displaced due to conflict, violence, and disasters, a number that continues to rise amid intensifying climate change and geopolitical instability. Nigeria is among the most severely affected countries in Africa, with an estimated 3.6 million displaced persons. Although scholarly and policy attention has largely focused on the northeastern insurgency led by Boko Haram, a similarly severe yet less examined crisis has emerged in Nigeria's North Central geopolitical zone, also known as the Middle Belt. In this region, IDPs place significant strain on socioeconomic systems, particularly in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Niger, Kogi, Kwara states, and the Federal Capital Territory. Unlike other contexts where displacement is camp-based, most IDPs in this zone reside within host communities, resulting in disproportionate burdens on impoverished local populations who lack sufficient institutional support.

As of May 2025 reporting cycle, the IOM DTM identified a precise total of 1,252,042 IDPs across ten states in the North Central and North West geopolitical zones. Of this total, 77% (approximately 964,000 individuals) were living within host communities rather than organized camps, representing a massive 'invisible' displacement crisis that strains local resource management. This zone has been at the epicenter of a protracted and escalating displacement crisis rooted primarily in violent clashes between sedentary farming communities and nomadic Fulani pastoralist, banditry, and kidnapping. Since 2001, farmer-herder conflicts in North Central Nigeria have claimed more than 50,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people (Kukah Centre reports). The conflict has been compounded by desertification along the Lake Chad basin, demographic pressure, and the erosion of traditional conflict mediation mechanisms,

producing a lethal confluence of environmental and social drivers.

This statistic indicates that the costs of displacement are being absorbed often without commensurate support by receiving communities that are frequently impoverished, resource-constrained, and socially fragile. Despite the scale of the crisis, the impacts of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on host communities in North Central Nigeria remain comparatively understudied in humanitarian and development literature. Existing research typically examines IDP needs in isolation or focuses on displacement in northeastern Nigeria. This paper addresses that gap through a systematic, multidimensional analysis of how IDP influxes affect host communities in Nigeria's North Central zone across socioeconomic, public health, social cohesion, and governance dimensions.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Section 3 describes the methodological approach. Sections 4–7 present thematic findings. Section 8 provides targeted policy recommendations. Section 9 concludes.

Literature Review

The relationship between Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and host communities in Nigeria's North Central Zone is traditionally framed through the lenses of security, resource competition, and state fragility. However, a critical engagement with these frameworks reveals a deep-seated tension between the material reality of scarcity and the political construction of "threat". Resource competition theory (Homer-Dixon, 1999) explains how scarcity exacerbated by IDP influxes fuels tension in land-scarce North Central Nigeria. Simultaneously, the humanitarian-development nexus urges integrated responses beyond short-term relief, while securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998; Nwankwo, 2022) frames pastoralist mobility and displacement as existential threats, shaping exclusionary policies that hinder host-IDP integration. These combined lenses reveal how unaddressed host burdens perpetuate cycles of conflict.

Conceptual Framework: Displacement and Host Community Burden

The relationship between displaced populations and their host communities has been theorized through multiple disciplinary lenses. Resource competition theory, drawing on the foundational work of Homer-Dixon (1999), posits that scarcity of natural resources (such as land and water)—often generated or exacerbated by large population influxes—creates conditions conducive to social tension and conflict. Applied to the North Central Nigerian context, where arable land is already a contested resource between farmers and herders, this framework has particular explanatory power.

The Scarcity Debate: Homer-Dixon vs. Resource Optimism

Homer-Dixon's environmental scarcity thesis remains a dominant, albeit contested, paradigm for explaining conflicts in the Middle Belt. He identifies three primary forms of scarcity: supply-induced (depletion of land), demand-induced (population growth), and structural (unequal distribution). In host communities, these scarcities can lead to "resource capture," where powerful groups marginalize displaced populations to secure valuable environmental assets. This perspective suggests that conflict between IDPs and hosts over water and land is an inevitable result of ecological pressure and population density.

However, "resource optimists" (or Cornucopians) challenge this neo-Malthusian determinism, arguing that scarcity does not automatically trigger conflict; instead, human agency and social institutions can adapt through technological innovation and market mechanisms. In Nigeria, political ecologists argue that "scarcity" is often artificially engineered or used as a narrative to mask more complex causes of degradation, such as mining or poor land management. Thus, the conflict is not merely about the lack of resources but rather the distribution and management of those resources.

The Securitization of Displacement: Buzan and the Threat Multiplier

Buzan's securitization framework posits that issues are moved into the security realm when they are presented as existential threats to a referent object, typically the state. In the context of North Central Nigeria, the influx of IDPs is often securitized by host communities who perceive them as "undocumented" outsiders and a "menace to peace". This framing shifts the discourse from humanitarian responsibility to one of risk management.

Empirical evidence suggests that members of host communities often view IDPs as "threat multipliers". This perception is not merely a reaction to increased crime but is rooted in the "security of spaces and resources" where different interest groups compete for dominance. The securitization process is further reinforced by the state's ad-hoc response, which fails to provide "durable solutions," thereby leaving both hosts and displaced persons in a precarious state of human insecurity. Consequently, host communities may resort to "closed networks" to protect economic opportunities, which inadvertently exacerbates social exclusion and deepens the security divide.

Beyond Materialism: Higazi and the Institutional Lens

Engaging with Adam Higazi's perspective requires moving beyond Homer-Dixon's focus on physical scarcity to examine the socio-political mediation of conflict. Higazi's work emphasizes that the pastoralist-farmer conflicts fueling displacement in the North Central zone are as much about "state failure" as they are about land. While Homer-Dixon focuses on the scarcity of resources, Higazi and local researchers point to the scarcity of mediation and inclusive governance.

The "host community burden" is intensified by the fact that many IDPs lack access to social services and remain dependent on humanitarian aid. This dependency, which some scholars term "spoon-feeding," prevents long-term socioeconomic recovery and can breed resentment among host populations who are themselves struggling with poverty. Furthermore, the security implications are often driven by "inequality shocks"where the inflow of IDPs increases local inequality and decreases aggregate wealth rather than a simple lack of food or water. By synthesizing these views, it becomes clear that the impact of IDPs on host communities is not an automatic outcome of demographic shifts, but a consequence of how those shifts are governed and interpreted by local and national actors.

Applying the securitization lens, economic competition is not merely a market interaction but is often framed by host communities as an existential threat to their "economic security". When IDPs enter the local labor market, they are frequently perceived as "threat multipliers" who drive down daily agricultural wages and increase competition for finite resources like firewood and water. From a Homer-Dixon perspective, this is a classic "demand-induced scarcity" where population growth exceeds the carrying capacity of local land. In North Central Nigeria, this manifests as "resource capture," where host elites may restrict IDP access to farmlands to protect their own yields, engineering a structural scarcity that deepens the host community burden. This economic friction is often the first step in the "threat construction" process, as host households witness a decrease in aggregate wealth and a rise in local inequality following these displacement shocks.

The strain on social services can be interpreted through Higazi's institutional lens, which shifts focus from the "threat" of the IDP to the "failure of the state". Host communities often securitize the presence of IDPs by presenting the overcrowding of primary healthcare centers and schools as a threat to the community's well-being. For instance, increased wait times at clinics and the depletion of medical supplies are frequently cited by hosts as evidence of a humanitarian crisis that undermines their own human security. Rather than viewing this as a demographic challenge, host narratives—supported by Buzan's framework—often label the displaced as an "encumbrance" on limited public infrastructure. This securitization of social services justifies the exclusion of IDPs from long-term development planning, as they are viewed as temporary "outsiders" rather than legitimate users of the system.

Social cohesion is similarly undermined when IDPs are successfully framed as "security risks" or "menaces to peace". In the North Central zone, ethnic and religious differences allow host communities to form closed social networks that exclude IDPs, effectively treating them as a threat to the established social order. The lack of trust toward those from different backgrounds often leads to intercommunal distancing. Host communities may perceive the influx of displaced populations as a precursor to broader insecurity, leading to a "security of spaces" conflict where hosts and IDPs compete for dominance over community governance. Where institutions fail to mediate these perceptions, the relationship becomes one of hostility and resentment, particularly when aid is perceived as being distributed unequally.

Finally, the National IDP Policy and the SOLID Project can be critiqued for their

security-first orientation. While the theoretical goal is "durable solutions," implementation often reflects a securitized approach that prioritizes containment in camps or specific non-camp settings to minimize the perceived threat to host stability. Following Higazi's argument, the theory-practice disconnect in Nigeria's policy framework stems from a failure to view displacement as a human security issue. Instead of fostering social integration, state-level responses often reinforce the "outsider" status of IDPs, leaving them in a state of aid dependency that continues to fuel host resentment. A shift from a securitized risk management model to an inclusive governance model—as suggested by the institutional lens is required to move beyond the current cycle of intercommunal friction and state fragility.

The Displacement Crisis in North Central Nigeria

Academic and policy literature consistently identifies the farmer-herder conflict as the primary driver of displacement in North Central Nigeria, while acknowledging its complex, multi-causal character. Higazi (2016) traces the historical roots of farmer-pastoralist tensions on the Jos Plateau to colonial-era land tenure arrangements and the politics of indigeneity. More recent scholarship emphasizes how climate changeparticularly the desertification of the Sahel and changes in rainfall patterns—has intensified southward pastoral migration, driving Fulani herders into competition with settled farming communities across Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa states.

The IOM (2025) reports that Benue State has recently experienced conflicts resulting in thousands of deaths and displacements, with over 300 new IDPs recorded in January 2026 alone, triggered by bandit attacks and farmer-herder clashes in Guma and Ukum LGAs. Concurrently, over 18,000 IDPs were reported in Nasarawa State alone following the January 2018 violence. Subsequent years brought sustained escalation: over the past decade, conflict has displaced an estimated half a million people in Benue State alone, with the majority seeking refuge in host communities rather than formal camps.

The enactment of Benue State's Anti-Open Grazing Law in 2017 intended to curb violence by mandating ranching has itself generated controversy. Otu et al. (2024), employing qualitative interviews across two local government areas, including IDP camp residents in Guma and Gwer-West, found that farmers largely framed the law as protective, while herders perceived it as exclusionary, threatening their cultural identity and livelihoods. These divergent perceptions underscore the governance complexity that humanitarian actors must navigate in designing interventions. The crisis across the North Central zone cannot be generalized, as displacement dynamics vary significantly across states.

Regional Heterogeneity: Divergent Displacement Dynamics

While the North Central zone is often treated as a single analytical unit, a critical examination reveals significant variations in how displacement is securitized and managed. Treating states like Benue and Kwara as homogeneous ignores the distinct shocks and institutional responses that define the host community experience.

Benue State: The Epicenter of Resource Scarcity

In Benue State, the displacement crisis is characterized by acute herdsmen-farmer conflicts, which align with Homer-Dixon's "demand-induced scarcity". Benue's status as Nigeria's "food basket" makes land competition an existential issue for both displaced and host populations. Research in Benue indicates that the influx of IDPs has profoundly affected social cohesion, with resettlement efforts often failing due to persistent insecurity. The host community burden here is not just economic but demographic, as long-term camp-dwelling populations strain local development and infrastructure.

The high volume of displacement leads to what scholars term "humanitarian aid dependency," which can create resentment among host community members who perceive themselves as equally vulnerable but excluded from aid networks. This aligns with Higazi's institutional lens, where the theory-practice disconnect in crisis management fails to protect the human security of both groups.

Kwara State: Non-Camp Settings and Urban Integration

Kwara State presents a contrasting dynamic where displacement is comparatively limited and less centered on active combat zones. Here, the securitization of displacement follows a different trajectory. A significant portion of IDPs in Kwara reside in non-camp

settings rather than formal government-managed centers. Host communities in Kwara express specific security concerns regarding the untracked nature of these displaced populations, fearing that they may serve as threat multipliers for crime or social instability. Unlike the land-based conflicts in Benue, friction in Kwara is more likely to manifest as competition for low-wage labor and urban resources. Applying Buzan's framework, the threat is constructed not through direct violence but through the perceived risk that displaced populations pose to the state's existing relative stability.

The North Central Transition: Ethno-Religious and Institutional Nuance

The broader North Central zone, including states experiencing pastoralist-farmer friction, demonstrates how inequality shocks impact host communities. Across the zone, the success of resettlement is heavily dependent on state-level interpretations of the National IDP Policy. While some states focus on immediate containment, others struggle with the "spoon-feeding" model of aid that prevents long-term integration.

Furthermore, the ability of host communities to absorb IDPs is often mediated by existing social ties. In areas where ethno-religious differences are pronounced, intercommunal hostility is more likely to arise as resources become scarce, whereas areas with shared social networks may exhibit higher resilience.

Synthesis of Intra-Zone Variation

Table 1 synthesizes these divergent dynamics, highlighting that the host community burden is a function of both the intensity of resource scarcity and the success or failure of local institutional mediation.

Table 1: Intra-Zone Variations in Displacement Dynamics

State / Context	Primary Driver	Nature of Displacement	Host Community Perception
Benue	Farmer-Herder Conflict (Iorbo, 2024)	Large-scale, camp-based	Existential threat to land and food security (Zamani et al., 2025).
Kwara	Spillover / Secondary Displacement (MBOMBO & SHITTU, 2024)	Small-scale, non-camp	Concerns over urban security and lack of tracking (MBOMBO & SHITTU, 2024).
General North Central	Pastoralist-Farmer (Mbah et al., 2021)	Mixed / Resettlement-focused	Institutional failure leading to "aid dependency" (Iorbo, 2024; Okajare, 2025).

Impacts on Host Communities: Global and Regional Evidence

Globally, research consistently demonstrates that host communities particularly those in low-income settings bear substantial and often unrecognized costs when large numbers of IDPs settle among them. Springer et al. (as cited in Data Futures Exchange, 2022) found that displacement exacerbates inequalities and the potential for conflict, especially in areas with limited access to services and economic opportunities. Adeola (2020), in a study of northeastern Nigeria, found that host communities, which are often poor with limited basic services and infrastructure, have been largely forgotten despite being significantly strained by the presence of IDPs.

In the North Central context, the socioeconomic burden is compounded by the destruction of agricultural livelihoods. The ReliefWeb thematic report (2025) documented that farmland destruction in Benue, Plateau, and Kaduna states disrupted the livelihoods of thousands of farming households, with food insecurity reaching IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) levels for hundreds of thousands of residents across these states. UNDP (n.d.) synthesizes the broader impacts, noting that the conflict results in significant loss of lives and livelihoods, undermines food security, permits the proliferation of small arms, and displaces large numbers of people, with women, children, youth, and indigenous communities being particularly impacted.

Public health literature documents severe consequences of displacement for both

IDP populations and the health systems of receiving communities. Ekezie et al. (2019) note that the absence of adequate sanitation and vaccination in IDP settings leads to poorer quality of life and creates disease outbreak risks that spill over into host communities. A qualitative study by Ekezie (2022) in northern Nigeria found that most IDP camps lacked sufficient medical resources and access to skilled health staff, with primary health care facilities managed by low-skilled workers and IDPs frequently requiring referral to secondary care facilities placing additional burdens on already strained district hospitals.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining primary key informant interviews with a systematic qualitative secondary data analysis of academic literature and institutional reports pertaining to internal displacement and host community impacts in Nigeria's North Central zone. This methodology was selected in recognition of both the ethical challenges of purely primary data collection in active conflict-affected settings and the substantial body of existing documentation produced by international organizations, government agencies, and academic researchers.

Data Sources

Primary data collection relied on structured responses from key informants—including household heads, community leaders, market leaders, and IDP coordinators—to gather firsthand insights. Interview instruments were structured around four distinct analytical domains: Socioeconomic Impacts, Food Security and Coping Strategies, Public Health and Social Service Impacts, Social Cohesion and Inter communal Relations and Governance and Policy

Secondary data consisted of documentary sources, including reports and datasets from the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM DTM), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ReliefWeb, and the World Bank. Academic literature was retrieved through systematic searches of Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, and Taylor & Francis Online using search terms such as *"IDPs North Central Nigeria,"*"farmer-herder conflict displacement Benue Plateau,"*"host community burden Nigeria,"and *"food security Middle Belt displacement"*.

Analytical Framework

Data were analyzed thematically across four domains derived from the humanitarian-development nexus framework: (i) socioeconomic livelihoods and food security; (ii) public health and social services; (iii) social cohesion and intercommunal relations; and (iv) governance and policy. Within each domain, evidence was triangulated across multiple source types to strengthen analytical validity. Where primary data from key informants were available, they were utilized to contextualize and validate qualitative findings drawn from institutional reports and ethnographic literature.

Scope and Limitations

This study's limited by the Geographic focus and generalizability, The data sources and depth, Intra-regional heterogeneity of the area of study, Limited quantitative precision and causal inference.

Recommended directions for future research are Large-scale household surveys. Implement stratified, representative household surveys across the North Central zone that explicitly sample urban, semi-urban, and rural host communities and displaced households. Include modules on livelihoods, service access, social networks, security perceptions, displacement history, coping strategies, and intentions (return, relocate, integrate).

Localized ethnographic fieldwork. Conduct extended ethnographic case studies in selected sites (e.g., Jos, Makurdi, a peri-urban settlement, and a remote rural community) to document everyday experiences, governance interactions, informal coping mechanisms, and intergroup relations. Ethnography will surface contextual meanings and mechanisms that surveys cannot capture.

Longitudinal designs. Use panel surveys or repeat qualitative fieldwork to track households over time and measure dynamics of integration, well-being, and conflict exposure. Longitudinal data will improve causal inference about drivers and consequences of displacement.

Mixed-methods integration. Combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, focus groups, and participatory methods (community mapping, timelines) to triangulate findings and identify contextually relevant indicators for monitoring.

Geospatial and administrative data linkage. Integrate high-resolution satellite imagery, mobile phone or mobility data (where ethical and feasible), and administrative records to map settlement growth, service coverage, land use change, and displacement flows at fine spatial and temporal scales.

Comparative sub-regional studies. Design multi-site comparative research across other Nigerian geopolitical zones and selected sub-Saharan settings to test the transferability of findings and to identify region-specific versus general patterns.

Policy-oriented and implementation research. Undertake evaluations of local and state policy responses (cash transfers, land allocation, IDP protection measures) using experimental or quasi-experimental methods where possible, and implementation research to identify bottlenecks in service delivery.

Ethical and participatory approaches. Ensure future primary research follows strong ethical protocols, obtains informed consent, and uses participatory methods that involve displaced and host communities in research design, indicator selection, and dissemination.

Socioeconomic Impacts on Host Communities

Livelihoods and Economic Competition

The arrival of large numbers of IDPs in host communities in North Central Nigeria creates immediate and persistent pressures on local economies. In a region where the vast majority of both displaced and host community residents depend on subsistence agriculture and informal trade, a sudden increase in population without a commensurate growth in productive resources intensifies competition for land, labor, and markets. IDPs who have fled conflict zones are typically unable to return to their farmlands, while their settlement in host communities reduces the acreage available to long-term residents.

The economic dimensions of this pressure are stark. ACCORD (2018) reports that farming along the Benue River accounts for over 20,000 tonnes of grain annually a highly productive system whose disruption sends negative multiplier effects throughout the regional food economy. The ReliefWeb thematic report (2025) documented that as of October 2025, at least 464,543 people had been displaced in Benue State alone, with IDPs sheltering in poor communities and placing additional strain on scarce resources. Farmland destruction across multiple farming villages is estimated to have contributed to food production drops of 33% to 65% in the most severely affected areas.

Host community members employed in informal trade and petty commerce also face heightened competition as displaced persons enter local markets seeking daily survival wages. Unlike international refugee contexts, where humanitarian cash transfers may generate local economic stimulus, IDP support in North Central Nigeria is poorly funded and inconsistently delivered. Consequently, economic benefits to host communities from IDP presence are minimal, while competitive costs remain substantially high.

Food Security

The impacts on food security are perhaps the most immediate and severe consequence of displacement for host communities. Benue State—which styles itself as the "food basket of the nation"—has experienced dramatic disruptions to its agricultural output due to the farmer-herder conflict. Research by Gever and Essien (2019) and Otu et al. (2024) confirms that the displacement of farming populations has contributed to acute food scarcity across Benue and Nasarawa states, with households across both IDP and host community populations experiencing food insecurity of crisis severity.

UNDP (n.d.) summarizes these macro-level consequences: the conflict results in a significant loss of livelihoods and undermines food security on a large scale, with vulnerable groups—women, children, youth, and indigenous populations—bearing disproportionate burdens. UNHCR (2024b) reports that IDPs at the Ichwa camp near Makurdi, Benue State, are forced to rent small plots of land near the camp to grow food, thereby competing directly with host community farmers for agricultural access.

These effects are compounded by climate change: severe flooding caused by unpredictable rainfall and dam releases has

repeatedly destroyed crops belonging to both IDPs and host communities, eliminating any fragile income generated by displaced families seeking to rebuild their livelihoods. The food security crisis in the North Central zone carries national implications. Nigeria's commitment under SDG 2 to end hunger and achieve food security by 2030 is directly imperiled by continued displacement, as Benue State's productive agricultural capacity—historically a cornerstone of national food supply—is systematically eroded by conflict-induced land abandonment and rural exodus.

Public Health and Social Service Impacts

Health Infrastructure

The influx of IDPs into host communities in North Central Nigeria places immediate and sustained pressure on already underfunded public health systems. In a region where health infrastructure was already characterized by inadequate staffing, limited pharmaceutical supplies, and deteriorating physical facilities, the addition of large displaced populations without corresponding resource transfers rapidly overwhelms local capacity. Qualitative research conducted by Ekezie (2022) in northern Nigeria found that IDP camps in the region lacked sufficient medical resources and skilled health staff, with no doctors stationed in any of the camps visited and primary healthcare facilities managed predominantly by community health workers of limited qualification. As a result, IDPs and their health needs are systematically referred to secondary and tertiary facilities in host community urban centers, placing additional demand on district and state hospitals that serve resident populations.

Conditions at IDP sites in the North Central zone reflect these systemic failures. Research cited by UNHCR and ReliefWeb documents that camps such as Abagena in Makurdi, Benue State, are overcrowded and lack safe drinking water, with open defecation compounding sanitation risks and contributing to communicable disease outbreaks, including measles fatalities among children. The absence of robust water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in and around IDP settlements creates spillover public health risks for host community residents who share water sources and market spaces with displaced populations.

Maternal and Reproductive Health

Women and children represent approximately 80% of Nigeria's IDP population, and this demographic concentration shapes the public health profile of the displacement crisis in significant ways. A qualitative study conducted in four IDP camps in Abuja and Benue State in early 2024 (Faronbi et al., as cited in IJRISS, 2025) found that women of reproductive age in IDP settings face profound barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, antenatal care, and safe delivery. The study found that IDPs competed with host community women for the same limited reproductive health services, often at a disadvantage due to missing documentation requirements and absence from community health insurance registers.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a further dimension of the public health burden borne by both IDP and host community women. Research by Ojengbede et al. (2019) documented high rates of sexual and gender-based violence across IDP camps and host communities in Nigeria, including northeastern and north-central sites. GBV risk is elevated by overcrowding, inadequate lighting in settlements, disrupted social protection networks, and the breakdown of traditional community surveillance mechanisms—all conditions endemic to the current crisis in the North Central zone.

Education

Displacement disrupts the education of children both within IDP populations and, through school overcrowding and resource competition, within host communities. Research on climate-induced displacement in Nigeria documents that children in displacement settings face poor physical infrastructure, inadequate supplies, and limited learning resources. Families in both IDP and host community contexts frequently prioritize immediate economic survival over educational continuity, leading to elevated school dropout rates in affected local government areas. UNHCR's Annual Results Report for Nigeria (2024c) documents progress in some areas—the gross enrollment rate at the primary level in supported areas increased by five percentage points between 2023 and 2024—but notes that these gains remain insufficient relative to the scale of educational disruption and are heavily dependent on volatile international funding rather than resilient government systems.

Social Cohesion and Intercommunal Relations

Ethnic and Religious Dimensions

The displacement crisis in North Central Nigeria is not merely a humanitarian emergency; it is also a crisis of social cohesion rooted in deep-seated ethnic, religious, and political cleavages. The farmer-herder conflict has taken on explicit ethno-religious dimensions, with affected farming communities predominantly comprising Christian ethnic groups such as the Tiv, Berom, and Ngas, while pastoralist communities are predominantly Muslim Fulani. This cleavage has led to widespread securitization of displacement the framing of IDP influxes not merely as a humanitarian need but as an ethno-religious threat which complicates integration and community acceptance of displaced persons within host communities.

Ngaruiya and Scheffran (2016) and Springer (as cited in social network literature) find that where IDPs belong to the same ethnic and religious community as host residents, integration tends to be smoother, drawing on pre-existing kinship and solidarity networks. However, where ethnic or religious boundaries are crossed which is increasingly the case as conflict spreads across administrative boundaries hostility, discrimination, and social exclusion become more prevalent. In some North Central localities, host community residents have blamed IDPs for heightened insecurity, crime, and resource competition, generating secondary conflict dynamics within receiving communities.

Land and Resource Conflicts

The arrival of IDPs in host communities intensifies pre-existing tensions over land access, particularly in areas where land tenure systems are already contested or informally governed. IDPs who cannot return to their home communities require land for shelter construction and small-scale farming, which in agrarian host communities creates direct competition with resident farmers whose own land holdings may be minimal. The Social Network Analysis conducted by Adeola (2020) in northeastern Nigeria found that resource constraints in host communities, intensified by the extra pressure brought by IDPs, may in the long run create animosity and structural tensions between both groups a dynamic equally applicable to the North Central zone.

Climate change adds a further dimension to resource conflict. UNHCR (2024b) reports that changing rainfall patterns and desertification continue to drive Fulani herders further south into North Central Nigeria, even as existing farming land contracts due to flooding and soil degradation. This environmental squeeze, tightening the availability of productive land for both farmers and herders, is structurally embedded in the displacement crisis and is unlikely to be resolved without both conflict-sensitive land use policies and climate adaptation investment.

6.3 Social Capital and Community Resilience

Despite the substantial negative impacts documented above, host communities are not passive recipients of displacement burdens. Research from across sub-Saharan Africa and within Nigeria demonstrates that communities draw on existing social capital kinship networks, religious solidarity, community-based organizations, and traditional mediation mechanisms to manage the pressures of an IDP influx.

UNHCR's Nigeria Annual Results Report (2024c) documents that 5,200 host community members, including 2,900 women, participated in social cohesion decision-making processes supported by humanitarian programs in 2024, and that 15 women-led organizations were established to advance joint economic empowerment. These examples of community resilience provide a foundation for humanitarian programming that is too often overlooked in crisis response. Effective social cohesion interventions including community dialogue platforms, joint infrastructure projects that benefit both IDPs and host community residents, and inclusive livelihood programs have demonstrated the capacity to mitigate the risk of secondary conflict while generating co-benefits for both displaced and resident populations.

Governance and Policy Dimensions

The National IDP Policy Framework

Nigeria ratified the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention) in 2012 and formally adopted a National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons in 2021. These frameworks establish clear legal and policy obligations for the protection, assistance, and durable solutions for IDPs, as well as the duties of state actors toward host communities. However,

implementation has been characterized by fragmentation, underfunding, and limited coordination between federal, state, and local government actors.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) has consistently rated national responses to the plight of IDPs in Nigeria as fragmented, uncoordinated, and grossly inadequate (as cited in Osagioduwa & Olusegun, 2016). Emergency management agencies—NEMA at the federal level and SEMAs at the state level—operate with insufficient resources and without robust mechanisms for targeting support to host communities alongside IDP populations. The result is that the host community's needs remain largely invisible in humanitarian needs assessments and resource allocation decisions.

State-Level Responses

State governments in the North Central zone have adopted varied approaches to the displacement crisis. Benue State's 2017 Anti-Open Grazing Law represents one of the most significant legislative interventions, with evidence suggesting a reduction in conflict fatalities following its enactment (International Crisis Group, 2018). The Nasarawa State Government has implemented a resettlement strategy that includes transportation, transit camps, and the provision of food and non-food items to IDPs—a model of state-led response that has received international attention, though severe funding constraints limit its reach.

However, state government responses have at times been characterized by a narrow focus on IDP camp management to the exclusion of host community support. Where IDPs reside in host communities—as the vast majority do—state social protection systems typically lack the data systems, institutional mandates, and financial resources to extend targeted assistance to hosting households or to compensate host community infrastructure for the additional demands placed upon it.

International Response and the SOLID Project

International actors have increasingly recognized the dual imperative of addressing both IDP and host community needs simultaneously. UNHCR's Nigeria programming in 2024 emphasized social cohesion, livelihood support, and civil status registration that benefit host and displaced populations together. The most significant recent development is the World Bank's approval in 2025 of $300 million in financing for the Solutions for the Internally Displaced and Host Communities Project (SOLID).

The SOLID Project is designed to enhance access to essential services and economic opportunities for IDPs and host communities in selected local government areas across Northern Nigeria. It adopts an integrated development strategy that seeks to help both groups move toward greater self-sufficiency and resilience (World Bank, 2025). The project is expected to benefit up to 7.4 million people, of whom up to 1.3 million are identified as IDPs. While the SOLID Project represents a landmark commitment, its success will depend on effective coordination across government tiers, sustained political will, conflict-sensitive implementation, and meaningful community participation—all of which represent ongoing challenges in the North Central Nigerian context.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, this paper advances the following recommendations for governments, humanitarian actors, and development partners:

Dual-focused humanitarian programming:*All humanitarian and development interventions in North Central Nigeria should simultaneously target IDP and host community populations. Needs assessments, resource allocation, and monitoring frameworks should explicitly disaggregate data for host community residents and track the collective burden they absorb from IDP presence.

Agricultural restoration and food security investment:*Given the catastrophic impact of displacement on agricultural output in the Middle Belt, targeted investment in agricultural rehabilitation—including land restoration, input support, and access to credit for both returning IDPs and host community farmers—is urgently needed. Benue's national role as a food-producing state should frame the strategic and resource case for such investment.

Health system strengthening:*Federal and state governments should invest in strengthening primary healthcare facilities in displacement-affected local government areas, with specific attention to maternal health, communicable disease prevention, WASH infrastructure, and mental health services. Mobile health outreach, as demonstrated in Northwest Nigeria, should be expanded to

reach the host community and IDP populations in geographically isolated areas.

Social cohesion and peacebuilding:*Community-level dialogue platforms, peace committees, and joint economic initiatives that bring together IDP and host community members should be prioritized and adequately funded. Traditional and religious leaders should be formally integrated into peacebuilding structures. The UNDP Peace Project model in Benue and Nasarawa provides a tested framework for replication and scale.

Land governance and resource management:*Federal and state governments should invest in conflict-sensitive land use planning, including the demarcation of grazing reserves and cattle corridors, as an alternative to prohibition-based approaches that may deepen pastoralist marginalization. Land governance reforms should be developed through inclusive multi-stakeholder consultations that include both farming and herding communities.

Climate adaptation:*Given the role of climate change in driving the southward migration of pastoralists and intensifying resource competition, international climate finance should be directed toward adaptation programs that support both farming and herding communities. This includes drought-resistant crop varieties, water-harvesting infrastructure, and alternative livelihood diversification for climate-affected pastoralists.

Data and accountability systems:*The IOM DTM and IDMC should expand their North Central Nigeria coverage to include detailed host community burden assessments, capturing impacts on land, livelihoods, health service utilization, and social cohesion at the local government level. This evidence base is essential for data-driven advocacy and strategic resource mobilization.

Conclusion

Nigeria's North Central zone represents one of the most complex and underacknowledged displacement crises on the African continent. Driven by a lethal confluence of farmer-herder conflict, ethno-religious tension, and climate-induced resource scarcity, mass displacement has positioned over one million IDPs within host communities that are ill-equipped to absorb the social, economic, and institutional costs. This paper has documented, across four analytical domains, how host communities in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, and adjacent states are bearing disproportionate and largely uncompensated costs: food insecurity has deepened, health systems are overwhelmed, social cohesion is strained, and governance frameworks have largely failed to respond at the required scale.

The central argument of this paper is that an effective humanitarian response to internal displacement in North Central Nigeria cannot be constructed around IDP populations alone. As the majority of IDPs in the region live not in formal camps but within host communities, the distinction between 'displaced' and 'resident' populations is practically and morally untenable as an organizing principle for programming and resource allocation. Addressing the crisis in a manner consistent with Nigeria's National IDP Policy, the Kampala Convention, and the Sustainable Development Goals requires a fundamentally dual-focused approach—one that invests in the resilience, services, and livelihoods of both displaced persons and the communities that receive them.

The $300 million World Bank SOLID Project, approved in 2025, signals growing international recognition of this imperative. However, sustained political will, adequate domestic resource mobilization, conflict-sensitive implementation, and meaningful community participation will determine whether this commitment translates into durable change. Without these conditions, the North Central displacement crisis risks becoming an entrenched feature of Nigeria's humanitarian landscape—deepening poverty, stifling agricultural potential, and eroding the social fabric of one of West Africa's most historically significant regions. The time for integrated, sustained, and adequately resourced action is now.

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