

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN WEST AFRICA: ASSESSMENT OF NIGERIA'S DILEMMA

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex nexus between youth unemployment and violent extremism in West Africa with specific reference to Northern Nigeria, drawing on the Relative Deprivation and Frustration–Aggression theories to provide a conceptual lens. It argues that socio-economic exclusion (manifested in poverty, lack of education, and unemployment) has created fertile ground for radicalization among youth in the region. The study assesses the historical evolution and dynamics of violent extremism, including ideological insurgency and politically driven religious violence. It also evaluates governmental and donor-led interventions aimed at youth empowerment and counter-radicalization. Despite the proliferation of programs such as N-Power, the Industrial Training Fund (ITF), and Mafita, their impacts have been constrained by fragmentation, inadequate funding, and poor coordination. The paper concludes that sustainable solutions require a shift from reactive, security-heavy strategies to inclusive, development-oriented policies. It proposes a coordinated national framework for youth employment, strengthened education systems, enhanced civic engagement, and locally embedded peacebuilding mechanisms as pathways toward addressing both unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Northern Nigeria, Youth Unemployment, Violent Extremism, Radicalization, Peace-building, Vocational Training

Introduction

Violent extremism in northern Nigeria has increasingly captured scholarly and policy attention. More than ever, there is an urgent need for practical efforts and sustainable action plans that address the socioeconomic conditions fueling such radicalization, a pursuit that has become a priority across all tiers of government. While multiple factors sustain this trend, high unemployment rates among youth in northern Nigeria have escalated the crisis to unprecedented levels. Violent extremism represents a complex, multifaceted challenge driven by uneven distribution of resources, economic dislocation, and widespread corruption in public service. These conditions create a disillusioned and vulnerable young population that becomes susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Matfess, 2017; Hamidu, 2020).

Just as it is evident in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the developmental paradox looms large in Northern Nigeria: a youth-dominated population coexisting with limited economic opportunities and underperforming institutions. Although specific youth unemployment data for the region are scarce, national statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that youth (ages 15–35) constitute a majority of the population in Northern Nigeria and dominate the region's labor force. Also, that northern states frequently record above-average unemployment rates, it is reasonable to infer that youth account for a substantial portion of the unemployed in the region. The resultant impact on many young people becomes a deepened sense of exclusion and disenfranchisement, as many lack access to quality education, vocational training, or sustainable livelihoods. Such frustration and perceived injustice persistently serve as fertile ground for radical ideologies that promise belonging, purpose, and retribution (Aghedo & Osumah, 2015).

Consequently, extremist organizations in the region have skilfully transformed socioeconomic grievances such as state neglect, inequality, and the perceived failure of secular government into compelling recruitment narratives that resonate with vulnerable young population. For young people confronting persistent unemployment and social invisibility, such narratives can offer not only an outlet for frustration but also a semblance of agency and identity (Mercy Corps, 2016a). Although it would be reductive to assert a direct causal relationship between unemployment and violent extremism, research has demonstrated that economic factors interact with political, psychological, and cultural variables to increase the likelihood of radicalization in fragile contexts (Bjørge, 2011; Mercy Corps, 2016a).

It is within this complex matrix of structural deprivation and ideological contestation that this paper seeks to explore the relationship between youth unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature and empirical evidence, the paper argues that addressing youth unemployment must be a central pillar in any sustainable counter-extremism strategy. The analysis further contends that securitized approaches alone are insufficient and must be complemented by inclusive development policies that prioritize youth empowerment, education, and economic participation.

By critically examining the interplay between economic exclusion and violent extremism, this study contributes to ongoing debates on peacebuilding, development, and human security in West Africa. It also aims to inform policy interventions that can address the root causes of youth radicalization, thereby promoting long-term stability and social cohesion in Northern Nigeria.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment extends beyond the simple unavailability of work. It represents a systemic dysfunction affecting a substantial population segment aged 15-35—a demographic that should be in its most economically productive phase. This phenomenon results in the exclusion of young people from meaningful economic participation, limiting both their personal economic development and their contribution to broader societal economic growth. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), youth unemployment encompasses both open unemployment (the complete absence of work) and underemployment (the engagement in jobs that do not match one's skills, education, or desired time commitment). In Nigeria, youth unemployment is a chronic and systemic issue, fuelled by factors such as poor governance, inadequate infrastructure, rapid population growth, and an educational system poorly aligned with labor market demands (Ajakaiye et al., 2016).

In Northern Nigeria, these challenges are magnified by a host of additional constraints, including persistent insecurity, religious conservatism, cultural barriers to female education and labour participation, and the near-collapse of local industries and agriculture due to conflicts and the adverse impact of climate change. Consequently, the inability to find work is not just an economic burden, it is also a source of psychological distress, social exclusion, and political alienation (Samuel, 2018). In such a context, Hogg (2014) opines that the prospect of joining a group that offers financial compensation, ideological purpose, and social identity can become dangerously appealing.

Violent Extremism

Violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of individuals or groups who endorse and employ violence as a legitimate means to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals (Christodoulou & Nesterova, 2019). Unlike mere radical dissent, which may remain within non-violent bounds, violent extremism actively seeks to undermine state authority, dismantle existing societal norms, and impose alternative systems, often through terror tactics, insurgency, or armed rebellion (UNODC, 2018). It is ideologically motivated violence aimed at forcing systemic change or enforcing exclusive ideologies through coercion.

In Northern Nigeria, violent extremism has manifested primarily through the activities of Boko Haram, its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and though not entirely new, but the Lakurawa sect have been known to be affiliated to terrorists in the Sahel, particularly from Mali and Niger Republic. These groups combine hardline ideology with powerful narratives of grievance—against state corruption, Westernization, and socio-economic inequality. What makes them particularly potent is their ability to integrate spiritual, economic, and emotional appeals. For marginalized youth, the promise of a new social order, financial incentives, and a sense of brotherhood or divine mission can outweigh the risks associated with insurgency (Matfess, 2017).

Theories Linking Unemployment and Violence

Although violent extremism is multi-causal, social science literature offers a range of theoretical frameworks to explain how and why youth unemployment may increase the likelihood of engagement in extremist violence. The following theories highlight both the structural conditions and psychological processes through which economic marginalization can lead to radicalization.

Frustration–Aggression Theory

Originating from Dollard et al. (1939), the frustration–aggression hypothesis posits that aggression is often the outcome of goal blockage, that is when individuals' path to achieving valued objectives (e.g., employment, status, security) is obstructed, aggression becomes pathway for pursuing the same. Hence, aggression is always preceded by frustration. In Northern Nigeria, widespread youth joblessness (and especially among those with formal education) often results in psychological frustration. Richardson (2011) explains how educated youth may feel an acute sense of unmet expectations compared to peers, which can manifest as anger or aggression.

This dynamic has been observed in conflict zones across Nigeria. In-depth analysis of Boko Haram shows the group skilfully channels frustrated youth's grievances (born from unemployment, poverty, and state neglect) into collective violence. Such economic frustration and wealth inequality fuel recruitment, offering a narrative that frames violence as a justified response to structural injustice. Thus, youth facing persistent joblessness

are particularly susceptible to extremist groups that offer a channel for expressing frustration and achieving a sense of empowerment—even through violence.

Relative Deprivation Theory

The relative deprivation theory as developed by Gurr (1970), asserts that individuals are prone to grievance not simply when they lack resources absolutely, but when they perceive themselves as unfairly disadvantaged compared to others. Disparities in government service delivery, infrastructure, and economic investment between regions and social groups (even between kins) can foster deep-seated feelings of injustice, especially among persons who qualify for such yet has nothing to show for it.

Many studies of Boko Haram attributes the group's growth in part to relative deprivation—observing that corruption, inequality, employment scarcity, and state failure collectively created fertile grounds for radicalization. Extending this, studies have connected the theory to broader youth deviance in Nigeria, showing how unemployment and income inequality predict social unrest. Youth who perceive their socio-economic situation as unjustly inferior are more likely to view extremism as a legitimate means to reclaim dignity or voice protest.

Strain and Anomie Theories

Strain theory (Merton, 1938) posits that when societal goals outpace individuals' legitimate means to achieve them (e.g., education without jobs), frustration can lead to deviant behavior. Durkheim's (1951) concept of anomie reflects a broader normative breakdown during societal transition or institutional collapse. In the under-governed rural and peri-urban spaces of Northern Nigeria, where education systems and job markets are failing, these theories help explain why young people may turn to extremist groups that offer alternative structures and identities. Aghedo & Osumah (2015) show that extremist movements in Nigeria (including Boko Haram) have thrived in conditions where institutional decay has triggered normative voids. More so, even without institutional failures, the existence of ungovernable spaces where governance or its structures are lacking. In this instance, young people join these groups not merely out of rebellion, but in search of social order and meaning in places where the state has retreated.

Radicalization and Recruitment Theories

Contemporary radicalization theories (e.g., McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008) highlight how extremist behaviour emerges through complex interactions among personal grievance, group influence, and ideology. Analysts note that individuals aren't necessarily born believers; many are drawn in gradually through connections, narratives, or incentives. Bloom (2017) argues that extremist groups prey on economic vulnerabilities, offering recruitment incentives like money, food, or protection—with youth often lacking both prospects and networks. In Northern Nigeria, this dynamic is pronounced: impoverished youth (especially those from failed almajiri systems) are offered immediate economic support and a sense of belonging.

Studies of Boko Haram recruitment further confirm that a significant proportion of members were young, unemployed, educated to various levels, and motivated by unmet material or psychological needs. Radicalization is frequently a product of exploitative recruitment, in which youth unemployment serves as the entry point into extremist networks.

Among the theories examined above, Relative Deprivation Theory provides the most comprehensive lens for analyzing the link between youth unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria. It captures both the material and psychological dimensions of grievance, emphasizing how unmet expectations and perceived inequalities—particularly in a region marked by socio-economic disparities—can fuel discontent. This theory also explains how such grievances are harnessed by extremist groups to mobilize vulnerable youth. To enrich the analysis, Frustration-Aggression Theory will serve as a complementary framework, illustrating how economic frustration may escalate into aggressive or violent behaviors. Together, these theories offer a balanced foundation for exploring the structural and emotional pathways to radicalization.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing a descriptive and analytical approach to explore the relationship between youth unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria. The choice of methodology is guided by the complex socio-political nature of the subject, which requires interpretive insights into social experiences, structural dynamics, and ideological processes.

Secondary data were obtained through a structured review of relevant literature, including academic journal articles, policy briefs, government publications, NGO reports, and statistical data from reputable agencies such as the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO) amongst others. The selection focused on publications from 2010 to 2024 to ensure both historical and contemporary relevance.

The analysis is guided by Relative Deprivation Theory, supported by Frustration-Aggression Theory. The study employs thematic content analysis to identify patterns and explanations linking unemployment, socio-economic grievance, and radicalization. Themes such as economic exclusion, perceived inequality, and ideological exploitation are examined within the Northern Nigerian context.

The study focuses on Northern Nigeria, comprising the North-East, North-West, and North-Central geopolitical zones. It does not incorporate primary data due to logistical and security constraints. While this limits direct

engagement with affected individuals, the use of well-documented secondary sources allows for a robust theoretical and structural analysis of the subject matter.

Socio-Economic Profile of Northern Nigeria

Demographic Overview

Northern Nigeria (comprising the North-West, North-East, and North-Central geopolitical zones) plays a central role in Nigeria's demographic landscape. It is home to over half of Nigeria's population and is characterized by a pronounced youth bulge. Nationally, approximately 70% of Nigerians are under 30, while nearly 42% are under 15 (Kaba, 2020; Aina, 2024), while 37 million voters (39.6%) are aged 18–34 (Premium Times, 2023). Furthermore, fertility rates in the northern regions remain among the highest in the country—most notably, approximately 6.6 births per woman in the North-West, compared to 3.9 in the South-West (ISS African Futures, 2025).

This demographic context (characterized by both a surging youth population and persistently high fertility) is critical for understanding youth unemployment and related extremism in Northern Nigeria. More young people entering working age each year intensifies competition for scarce employment and public services. Indeed, the “youth bulge” in Northern Nigeria, while offering long-term demographic potential, has so far translated into demographic pressure, which places more pressures on the already overwhelmed infrastructure, education, and economic systems.

The variance in the density of Nigeria's geopolitical zones, has northern states showing a broadly even rural spread, smaller urban hubs, and notably lower economic infrastructure compared to the densely populated southern states (ISS African Futures, 2025). These patterns signal structural challenges: rural-agrarian areas with limited access to quality education, healthcare, and formal employment—particularly for youth.

Collectively, these demographic dynamics establish a context where a large youth cohort faces constrained opportunities, setting the stage for socio-economic exclusion that serves as fertile ground for radicalization.

Educational Attainment and Skills Gap

Education in Northern Nigeria remains a significant development challenge. Children in this region consistently face lower access to quality education compared to national averages. Only about 53% of children aged 6–11 attend primary school, and over half of girls in the North East and North West do not attend school at all (Graetz et al., 2018). These trends are echoed in more recent data: according to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, over 50% of children aged 6–11 in these zones are out of school, and less than 40% transition from primary to secondary school (MICS, 2021). Literacy and educational attainment reflect this divide—while the national adult literacy rate stands at approximately 69%, Northern states, particularly in the North East and North West, often report substantially lower figures (Adeniran et al., 2020).

Educational attainment and skills acquisition remain among the most critical determinants of youth economic inclusion and long-term employability in Northern Nigeria. However, the region faces structural barriers in both education and vocational training. These challenges contribute to a growing pool of undereducated and underemployed youth who are vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups. Inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited exposure to foundational skills further restrict opportunities for self-reliance and employment.

While various governmental and donor-supported initiatives have sought to bridge the skills gap (such as programs by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF) and donor-led interventions like the Mafita Programme), these are discussed in greater detail in the policy response section of this paper. At present, it suffices to note that despite the presence of such initiatives, their reach, sustainability, and effectiveness remain constrained by inadequate funding, fragmented certification systems, and weak private sector collaboration. It must also be stated at this juncture that education and vocational training are not complete solutions, they serve as vital buffers against the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that extremist groups exploit. Strengthening access to these systems will be critical to fostering youth resilience and promoting regional stability.

Poverty, Governance, and Infrastructure Deficits

Northern Nigeria is marked by persistent poverty, weak governance institutions, and critical deficits in infrastructure. These conditions collectively shape an environment of socioeconomic precarity that has disproportionately affected young people, rendering them vulnerable not only to unemployment but also to radicalization and violent extremism.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), the North-West and North-East geopolitical zones record the highest levels of multidimensional poverty in Nigeria, with poverty incidences of 76.5% and 75.8% respectively. States such as Sokoto (90.5%), Jigawa (84.3%), and Zamfara (78.0%) rank among the worst affected. The Multidimensional Poverty Index measures deprivations across key indicators, including access to healthcare, education, clean water, sanitation, housing, and employment. These high poverty rates reflect severe structural deficits that disproportionately affect young people, who face limited access to formal credit, productive employment, and effective social protection systems (NBS, 2022). The convergence of these deprivations not only constrains economic mobility for youth but also fuels feelings of exclusion and discontent that extremist groups may exploit.

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Closely linked to poverty is the issue of governance. The region is characterized by widespread perceptions of institutional neglect, corruption, un-governed spaces and uneven development. Fragile state capacity in parts of Northern Nigeria has contributed to a legitimacy crisis, particularly among youth who perceive the state as distant or predatory. As Agbiboa (2013) argues, poor governance and perceived state failure foster a sense of abandonment, encouraging disillusioned youths to seek alternative sources of authority and belonging—including extremist groups that claim to offer justice and moral order.

Infrastructure deficits further compound these vulnerabilities. Northern Nigeria significantly lags behind the southern zones in key infrastructure indices, including road networks, electricity supply, digital connectivity, and access to public services. According to the World Bank (2020), Nigeria's overall electricity access stood at 55% in 2020, but significant disparity exists between urban (84%) and rural (25%) areas. Given that Northern Nigeria has a predominantly rural population, it is reasonable to infer that electricity access in this region is considerably lower than the national average (likely below 30%) though no disaggregated data are currently available from credible sources. Poor infrastructure not only inhibits private investment and job creation but also limits access to education and training opportunities, effectively entrenching cycles of exclusion.

The cumulative effect of poverty, weak governance, and infrastructure deficits creates a structural ecosystem in which violent extremism can thrive. Mudasiru & Fatai (2020) notes that the inability of the state to deliver basic services erodes trust, while the lack of economic alternatives incentivizes youth participation in insurgent or criminal networks that offer income, status, or retribution. Such dynamics underline the importance of addressing the root causes of insecurity through inclusive governance and equitable development policies, rather than through militarized responses alone (Luckham, 2018).

Evolution and Dynamics of Violent Extremism in Northern Nigeria

Violent extremism in Northern Nigeria has deep and multifaceted historical roots. While extremist expressions in the region can be traced to precolonial religious reform movements such as the 19th-century Sokoto Jihad, contemporary violent extremism took shape in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, particularly with the emergence of Boko Haram. Also known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, the sect was formed in the early 2000s under Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State. Boko Haram initially positioned itself as a religious and social reform movement rejecting Western education ("Boko Haram" meaning "Western education is forbidden") and promoting a return to Sharia-based governance (Peters, 2014).

The group's transformation from a fringe sect to a violent insurgent force followed the state's repressive response in 2009, culminating in the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf. His death catalyzed the radicalization of the group under Abubakar Shekau, who adopted violent strategies including bombings, mass abductions, and targeted killings. One of the most internationally recognized atrocities was the 2014 kidnapping of over 270 schoolgirls from Chibok, which drew global outrage and reinforced the group's symbolic targeting of education and women.

By 2015, the group had fractured, with one faction pledging allegiance to the Islamic State and becoming known as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP adopted more strategic and locally tailored tactics, seeking to win support from communities by providing services, settling disputes, and focusing attacks on military and government targets rather than indiscriminate civilian violence (Berlingozzi & Stoddard, 2020). This serves as the most distinguishing factor between both groups.

Recruitment Strategies and Youth Mobilization

Youth recruitment remains a cornerstone of extremist group operations in Northern Nigeria. Both Boko Haram and ISWAP leverage the region's structural inequalities to target young people, particularly those who are unemployed, poorly educated, or socially marginalized. Recruiters often use a mix of ideological, financial, and coercive means.

The Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970) provides an explanatory framework for how perceived injustices, especially in access to jobs, education, and public services, foster resentment and feelings of exclusion among youth. These perceptions are not always based on objective poverty, but on comparisons with other regions or expectations fuelled by political promises.

The Frustration-Aggression Theory (Dollard et al., 1939) complements this by showing how prolonged inability to achieve socially approved goals, like economic independence, triggers frustration that can manifest as aggression, especially when channelled by charismatic leaders or group ideologies.

Extremist groups offer more than just ideology—they provide identity, belonging, status, and income. Reports from Mercy Corps (2016b) show that material incentives, group protection, and anger over state abuses often outweigh religious motivations. Youth are also influenced by peer networks, social media propaganda, and promises of heroism. Moreover, a lesser-discussed but important factor is the role of elite manipulation. There is growing evidence that some political actors in Northern Nigeria have historically incited or exploited religious extremism and militancy for political advantage. This further aligns with the thoughts of Mshelia (2024), that historical and political factors, including pre-colonial empires, colonial legacies, and post-colonial power struggles, have made religion a volatile phenomenon in Nigeria. In this context, violent extremism becomes a tool of regional contestation or a means to undermine opponents.

Expanding the Concept of Violent Extremism

While the international community often focuses on insurgency-related extremism (e.g., Boko Haram, ISWAP), violent extremism in Northern Nigeria also includes ethno-religious violence, herder-farmer conflicts, and sectarian clashes. Periodic eruptions of religious violence in Kaduna, Kano, and Plateau States are examples where youth mobilization is fuelled by deep-seated sectarian grievances. These incidents, though less formally organized than jihadist movements, exhibit traits of violent extremism: ideological justification, targeting of civilians, and deliberate efforts to polarize communities. Youths are often at the frontline of these clashes, mobilized through mosques, neighbourhood associations, or political networks. The religious framing of local disputes is instrumentalized to justify violence, deepen divisions, and deflect attention from structural issues. Framing violent extremism narrowly as insurgency risks overlooking these localized but devastating manifestations. A more holistic approach requires recognizing that extremist violence, whether organized by insurgents or triggered during communal riots, thrives in contexts where youth feel alienated, powerless, and underrepresented.

At this juncture, it becomes worthy to note that, northern Nigeria's violent extremism is embedded in broader regional instability. Groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP exploit porous borders in the Lake Chad Basin to operate across Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad (Fatokun & Ibitoye, 2019). These cross-border linkages complicate counter-terrorism efforts, especially given the weak governance capacity in many border communities.

The allegiance of ISWAP to ISIS further internationalizes the conflict. Although the operational control remains largely local, the ideological and propaganda tools borrowed from global jihadist movements increase the appeal and tactical sophistication of local actors (Pham, 2016).

Efforts such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have had some success, but face limitations due to funding constraints, national interests, and lack of coherent regional strategy. Moreover, military-focused responses often exacerbate grievances when they result in civilian casualties, arbitrary arrests, or destruction of livelihoods, thus feeding into the radicalization loop.

The dynamics outlined above find strong resonance with our theoretical framework. Relative deprivation explains the sense of exclusion and marginalization that pervades Northern Nigerian youth. Frustration-aggression theory accounts for the emotional and behavioral outcomes of unmet aspirations and systemic failures.

The manipulation of youth by elites, and their participation in both ideological and sectarian violence, further illustrates that violent extremism in Northern Nigeria cannot be seen merely through a security lens. It is a product of interlocking factors (economic, social, political, and psychological) which need integrated and context-specific responses.

Policy Responses, Gaps, and the Way Forward

Security vs Development-Oriented Approaches

Nigeria's response to violent extremism in the North has predominantly been militarist in nature. Military campaigns under Joint Task Forces and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have focused on degrading Boko Haram and ISWAP capabilities. While these operations have achieved tactical successes, such as reclaiming territories and eliminating high-profile leaders, they fall short in addressing the underlying socio-economic causes of extremism. Furthermore, incidents of collateral damage, human rights abuses, and mass displacement linked to military operations have fuelled local grievances and further eroded state legitimacy (Amnesty International, 2024).

Conversely, development-oriented approaches have remained underdeveloped and poorly coordinated. Initiatives targeting the rebuilding of schools, healthcare systems, and livelihood support in conflict-affected communities lack both adequate funding and strategic coherence. The North-East Development Commission (NEDC), tasked with facilitating post-insurgency recovery, has faced criticism for administrative inefficiencies and insufficient grassroots impact (Boye & Abubakar, 2021). An effective counter-extremism framework must thus balance kinetic interventions with human development strategies tailored to regional realities.

Youth Employment and Empowerment Policies

Multiple initiatives have been introduced by government and donor actors to address youth unemployment in Northern Nigeria, recognizing it as a critical structural driver of radicalization. These efforts, while commendable, often face limitations in scale, coordination, and sustainability.

- **National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP):** This flagship initiative includes the N-Power scheme, which targets skill acquisition and temporary employment for graduates and non-graduates. While it has created job opportunities for many youths, the program faces persistent concerns regarding transparency, sustainability, and regional equity in implementation (Ademeso et al., 2025).
- **Mafita Programme:** Supported by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Mafita initiative aimed to equip out-of-school and marginalized youth (including Almajiris, girls, and youth with disabilities) with market-relevant vocational and life skills. By 2020, it had engaged over 60,000 beneficiaries, with more than 20,000 youths trained through community-based apprenticeships delivered by Master Craft Persons. The program emphasized inclusion and local

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ownership, utilizing Community Skills Development Centres (COSDECs) for training. However, post-training integration into the labor market was constrained by limited certification, weak private sector engagement, and insufficient access to finance (Business Day, 2019; Devex, 2017; GOV.UK, 2022).

- **Industrial Training Fund (ITF):** As a long-standing national skills development agency, the ITF has played a central role in vocational training. In 2024 alone, its National Industrial Skills Development Programme (NISDP) trained over 4,000 youth participants in diverse trades, while the Skill Up Artisans (SUPA) initiative aimed to reach an additional 100,000 artisans nationwide (The Nation, 2024; Daily Trust, 2024). Despite these milestones, the ITF continues to face constraints such as limited funding, inadequate alignment with private sector needs, and underrepresentation of youth-specific outcomes in Northern Nigeria.

Although these programs demonstrate the potential of vocational and technical education to foster youth empowerment and economic inclusion, systemic challenges persist. Fragmented planning, insufficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and the politicization of implementation undermine effectiveness. Moreover, the exclusion of youth voices from policy design and feedback loops reduces the contextual relevance and acceptability of interventions.

A major policy vacuum is the lack of an integrated national strategy that connects youth employment creation with broader peacebuilding, social cohesion, and resilience goals. Without this strategic convergence, the risk remains that promising employment schemes may not translate into long-term stability or prevent youth vulnerability to violent extremism.

Peacebuilding and Counter-Radicalization Strategies

Rehabilitation and deradicalization programs have formed a core pillar of Nigeria's counter-extremism architecture. The Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) offers psychological support, vocational training, and civic education to repentant ex-combatants. While this model is innovative, it has been met with public distrust and controversy, especially among victims and host communities who perceive it as unjust and lacking accountability (Salihu, 2021; Owonikoko, 2022).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith-based groups have played complementary roles in fostering inter-religious dialogue, community reconciliation, and youth leadership programs. Noteworthy successes exist, but many of these are hyper-local and threatened by insecurity, weak institutional support, and financial constraints. Moreover, their activities are not integrated into broader national strategies.

Strategic communication remains an underutilized domain. Violent groups deploy persuasive narratives around victimhood, empowerment, and religious duty (Furlow & Goodall, 2011). Yet, the state lacks a robust counter-narrative apparatus that resonates with marginalized youth or reflects their lived realities. There is an urgent need for youth-led media and messaging platforms that promote non-violence, civic engagement, and opportunity.

Policy Gaps and Governance Challenges

A significant shortfall in Nigeria's response lies in policy incoherence. Existing employment, education, and security policies operate in isolation, lacking synergy or a common results framework. Overlapping mandates, poor coordination among ministries and agencies, and duplication of efforts hinder long-term impact.

Corruption and elite capture remain entrenched, diverting resources and distorting priorities. Alarming, Akinyetun (2021) observes that youth are often excluded from policy dialogues and governance platforms, treated more as passive recipients than as partners in development. This exclusion not only entrenches apathy but also fuels perceptions of injustice and alienation—key elements in both Relative Deprivation Theory and the Frustration-Aggression framework.

Furthermore, religious identity is often instrumentalized by political elites in the region to gain electoral advantage or consolidate power. These dynamics have sometimes blurred the lines between religious activism, communal conflict, and violent extremism. For example, ethno-religious crises in states like Kaduna and Plateau may begin as localized disputes but are often exacerbated by elite manipulation and state neglect.

Gender, Identity, and Intersectionality

Youth unemployment and violent extremism are not monolithic experiences. Young women in the North face distinct challenges—early marriage, limited mobility, lower literacy rates, and gender-based violence—that restrict their participation in the economy and civic life. Programs like Mafita did make efforts to reach female beneficiaries, but entrenched patriarchal norms and structural inequalities remain largely unaddressed. Intersectionality also plays a role in vulnerability to extremism. Ethnic minorities, nomadic populations, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) often suffer overlapping disadvantages. Failure to consider these identities can result in exclusionary policies that inadvertently deepen grievances.

In light of the above, resolving the dual crisis of youth unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria requires a rethinking of both strategy and execution. A whole-of-society approach, grounded in justice, inclusion, and opportunity, is essential. Also, ethnic and regional identities intersect with economic grievances. Marginalized ethnic groups within the North may be more vulnerable to recruitment or displacement. Recognizing these intersecting identities is vital for crafting inclusive and equitable solutions.

Major Findings

This study has revealed several key findings regarding the complex interplay between youth unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria:

- I. First, that a large pool of idle, disenfranchised youth provides fertile ground for extremist groups to recruit, particularly in regions marked by systemic neglect and inequality.
- II. Second, that violent extremism is not only insurgent-led but often tied to elite manipulation of religious identity for political gains.
- III. Third, that existing employment and peacebuilding interventions have limited reach and are undermined by poor coordination, lack of post-training support, and failure to meaningfully involve the youth they target.
- IV. Fourth, that gender and identity factors deepen vulnerabilities, hence young women and marginalized ethnic groups face multiple layers of exclusion that heighten their susceptibility to both violence and economic marginalization.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the intricate relationship between youth unemployment and violent extremism in Northern Nigeria, guided by the Relative Deprivation and Frustration–Aggression theories. It has demonstrated how socio-economic marginalization—characterized by poverty, lack of education, infrastructure deficits, and exclusion from political and economic systems—feeds a cycle of frustration among youth, which extremist groups skilfully exploit.

Evidence from government and donor programs highlights commendable efforts in skills development and reintegration, but the impact remains limited due to policy fragmentation, poor implementation, and the absence of a coordinated national framework. Additionally, the political instrumentalization of religious identity and the failure to include youth meaningfully in decision-making processes have undermined sustainable peacebuilding.

Violent extremism in the region is not a homogenous phenomenon. It manifests through ideological insurgency (e.g., Boko Haram and ISWAP), local religious conflicts, and elite-manipulated political violence. Addressing this complexity requires a nuanced, inclusive approach that bridges immediate security concerns with long-term socio-economic transformation.

Policy Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, the following policy recommendations are being advanced to remedy the challenges of youth unemployment which leads to violent extremism.

- I. That the Nigerian government consolidate all youth-focused interventions under a unified framework that links employment generation to peacebuilding objectives, built on evidence-based planning and monitored through robust evaluation mechanisms.
- II. That basic and post-basic education become revitalized and mandatory in underserved Northern regions, with curricula that integrate peace education, civic values, and skills relevant to the labor market to reduce youth vulnerability to extremist ideologies.
- III. That effective models like Mafita and ITF be scaled up by strengthening certification systems, improving access to post-training credit and employment, and leveraging public-private partnerships for sustainability.
- IV. That there be an equitable distribution of national resources across regions, while local governments must be empowered to design and implement youth-responsive solutions through a decentralized governance approach.
- V. That all interventions mainstream gender and identity inclusion, ensuring that young women and marginalized ethnic or religious groups are not excluded from educational, economic, and peacebuilding opportunities.

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