

Mastering Nigeria's 21st-Century Social and Security Challenges: Terrorism as a Case Study

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Abstract

Terrorism has become one of the most difficult manifestations of contemporary insecurity because its causes, methods and consequences extend beyond conventional military threats. Nigeria illustrates this complexity particularly well. Although counter-terrorism operations have degraded the capabilities of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), terrorism continues to exploit poverty, unemployment, weak public services, social exclusion, institutional distrust, porous borders and local grievances. This article examines Nigeria's contemporary terrorism challenge through a social-policy and security perspective. Using a qualitative case-study and documentary research design, it analyses recent evidence from the Global Terrorism Index, Nigerian official statistics, United Nations agencies, the World Bank, International Organization for Migration and other credible sources published between 2021 and 2026. The study finds that Nigeria's terrorism problem cannot be sustainably addressed through kinetic operations alone. In 2025, terrorism deaths in Nigeria increased by 46% to 750, returning the country to fourth place globally on the Global Terrorism Index, while ISWAP and Boko Haram accounted for approximately 80% of terrorism deaths. At the same time, 62.9% of Nigerians were multidimensionally poor, with severe regional disparities. The article argues for an integrated model combining intelligence-led security operations with employment, education, social protection, community resilience, accountable governance and regional cooperation. It concludes that social policy should be treated as a strategic component of Nigeria's long-term counter-terrorism architecture.

Keywords: Terrorism; Social Policy; Insecurity; Human Security; Nigeria

1. Introduction

The character of insecurity in the twenty-first century has changed considerably. Contemporary security threats are no longer confined to conventional wars between states. Terrorist organisations, violent extremist networks, organised criminal groups, lone actors and digitally connected communities can operate across physical and virtual borders, exploit local grievances and rapidly adapt to government countermeasures. The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026 recorded 5,582 deaths from terrorism and 2,944 terrorist attacks globally in 2025, representing a 28% decline in deaths and almost a 22% decline in attacks from the preceding year. Yet this apparent global improvement masks a striking geographical concentration: nearly 70% of terrorism deaths occurred in only five countries, while six of the ten countries most affected were in sub-Saharan Africa (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2026).

The global picture is therefore paradoxical. Terrorism has declined in aggregate, but its most destructive forms have become increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected environments. The same period has also witnessed a transformation in the methods of radicalisation. Digital platforms, encrypted communications, artificial intelligence, online propaganda and small autonomous cells increasingly allow individuals to radicalise and mobilise without direct physical

contact with established terrorist organisations. The European experience provides an instructive illustration. In 2025, youth and minors accounted for 42% of terrorism-related investigations in Europe and North America, three times the proportion recorded in 2021 (IEP, 2026).

Europe, however, demonstrates another important dimension of contemporary terrorism: the threat can remain significant even where state institutions are relatively strong. Europol reported 45 terrorist attacks in the European Union in 2025, while 486 people were arrested for terrorism-related offences. Jihadist terrorism accounted for 24 of those attacks and 347 arrests. Europol further observed that online environments increasingly facilitate propaganda, radicalisation and mobilisation, particularly among young people (Europol, 2026). The European experience therefore suggests that economic development and institutional capacity can reduce some vulnerabilities but cannot eliminate terrorism. Prevention must also address social isolation, online radicalisation, identity crises, grievance and political narratives.

The African situation is substantially more severe. Sub-Saharan Africa has emerged as the principal global epicentre of terrorism. The GTI 2026 reports that terrorism deaths in the Sahel alone accounted for more than half of global terrorism fatalities in 2025. The region remains affected by political instability, weak state presence, porous borders, armed groups and competition over land and resources (IEP, 2026). UNDP's *Journey to Extremism in Africa* provides an important corrective to explanations that reduce violent extremism to religious ideology. Based on interviews with nearly 2,200 respondents, including former members of violent extremist groups, the study found that one-quarter of voluntary recruits identified employment opportunities as their primary reason for joining, a 92% increase compared with the earlier study (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

The significance of this finding is difficult to overstate. It does not mean that poverty automatically produces terrorism, nor that unemployed young people are inherently predisposed to violence. Rather, it demonstrates that social and economic conditions can create environments in which extremist organisations can make recruitment offers attractive. UNDP's research further indicates that extremist organisations exploit areas where the state is weak, public services are limited and communities experience exclusion or distrust. In such environments, armed groups can sometimes present themselves as alternative providers of protection, justice, livelihoods or social identity (UNDP, 2023). Nigeria sits directly within this African security environment. The country is simultaneously dealing with terrorism in the North-East, armed banditry and kidnapping in the North-West, communal and farmer-herder violence in parts of the North-Central region, separatist-related violence in the South-East and maritime and criminal threats in the South-South. These threats should not be treated as identical. Nevertheless, their interaction has created a wider environment in which insecurity, displacement, poverty, weak public services and declining confidence in institutions can reinforce one another.

Nigeria's terrorism problem is particularly serious. The Global Terrorism Index 2026 ranked Nigeria fourth globally, following a sharp increase in terrorism fatalities during 2025. Terrorism deaths increased by 46% to 750, the largest absolute increase recorded by any country that year. ISWAP and Boko Haram accounted for approximately 80% of terrorism deaths in Nigeria, while IS attacks in the country increased from 20 in 2024 to 92 in 2025 (IEP, 2026).

The human consequences extend well beyond fatalities. The Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa's six-year assessment reported 79,323 killings and 34,773 abductions in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 in contexts it classified as terror-related (Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa [ORFA], 2026). Meanwhile, displacement has become a persistent social consequence of violence. In its June 2024 assessment of North-Central and North-West Nigeria, the International Organization for Migration identified 1,302,443 internally displaced persons across ten states, with 78% living in host communities rather than camps (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024).

The social-policy context is equally troubling. Nigeria's 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index found that 62.9% of the population—approximately 133 million people—were multidimensionally poor. The incidence reached 72% in rural areas and was particularly severe in northern states. Sokoto recorded a multidimensional poverty incidence of 91%, while 65% of multidimensionally poor Nigerians—about 86 million people—lived in the North (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). These figures do not establish a simple causal relationship between poverty and terrorism. Most poor people do not become terrorists. The argument is more nuanced: persistent social deprivation can

weaken resilience, increase vulnerability to recruitment, reduce confidence in government and create spaces in which violent actors can exploit grievances. The World Bank similarly notes that poverty in Nigeria is spatially unequal, with northern regions facing particularly high levels of deprivation and limited access to productive employment (World Bank, 2024).

The youth dimension deserves particular attention. Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics reported that 14.4% of young people aged 15–24 were neither in employment, education nor training (NEET) in the first quarter of 2024 (NBS, 2024). In a country with a very young population, this is more than an employment statistic. It represents a pool of young people whose connection to productive economic and educational institutions is weak. Where this condition intersects with insecurity, exclusion and weak social protection, the risk of manipulation by criminal or extremist networks increases.

The Nigerian experience consequently raises a central policy question: Can terrorism be sustainably contained if the social conditions that enable vulnerability to violent mobilisation remain inadequately addressed? This article argues that Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategy requires a deliberate synthesis of security policy and social policy. Military force remains indispensable against organisations that possess weapons, territory and the capacity to kill civilians. However, military pressure cannot by itself create jobs, rebuild schools, restore displaced livelihoods, repair damaged social relationships or rebuild public trust. Conversely, social programmes cannot substitute for effective intelligence and security operations where armed groups are actively attacking communities.

The central argument of this article is therefore that Nigeria needs to move from a predominantly reactive counter-terrorism model towards an integrated security-development framework in which social policy functions as a preventive instrument of national security.

2. Problem Statement

Nigeria has invested substantial resources in counter-terrorism over the past decade and a half. Military operations have degraded terrorist formations, recovered territory, disrupted logistics and facilitated the surrender of thousands of insurgents and associates. Yet the persistence and geographical evolution of terrorism demonstrate that tactical success has not automatically translated into strategic resolution.

The problem is partly one of adaptation. Boko Haram's insurgency has evolved into a more fragmented ecosystem involving Boko Haram factions, ISWAP and associated criminal economies. At the same time, terrorist activity increasingly interacts with kidnapping, arms trafficking, illicit taxation, smuggling and local conflicts. The 2026 GTI finding that Nigeria experienced a 46% increase in terrorism fatalities during 2025, despite years of sustained military operations, illustrates the difficulty of treating terrorism as a purely military problem (IEP, 2026).

The second problem is social. Terrorism has damaged the very social structures required for resilience. Communities have lost family members, livelihoods, schools, farms and markets. Displacement has separated households from their traditional economic activities. Children have experienced disrupted education, while young people have encountered fewer legitimate opportunities for economic advancement.

The third problem concerns state legitimacy. Where citizens experience insecurity but receive inadequate protection or services, confidence in government can decline. This creates precisely the environment in which extremist and criminal organisations can exploit grievances. UNDP's research across Africa demonstrates that recruitment is influenced not simply by ideology but also by economic opportunity, governance failures and experiences with state institutions (UNDP, 2023). The resulting policy challenge is therefore not simply how to defeat terrorists but how to reduce the social space in which terrorism can regenerate.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

- i. examine the changing character of terrorism as a twenty-first-century security challenge;
- ii. assess the relationship between social conditions and terrorism vulnerability in Nigeria;
- iii. examine the limitations of predominantly kinetic approaches to counter-terrorism;
- iv. analyse the role of social policy in preventing radicalisation, strengthening resilience and supporting post-conflict recovery; and

v.propose an integrated policy framework for combining security operations with social and developmental interventions.

4. Conceptual Clarifications

4.1 Social Policy

Social policy refers to organised governmental and societal interventions designed to improve welfare, reduce vulnerability, expand opportunities and protect individuals and communities from social risks. In this study, social policy encompasses employment, education, social protection, healthcare, housing, livelihood support, youth development, reintegration and community development.

Its relevance to terrorism lies in its capacity to influence the social conditions within which recruitment, grievance and resilience develop.

Social policy should not therefore be understood as charity. Properly designed social policy is an instrument of state capacity. It strengthens the relationship between citizens and government by demonstrating that the state can provide security, opportunity and basic services.

4.2 Terrorism

Terrorism in this article refers broadly to the deliberate use or threatened use of violence by non-state actors against civilians or other targets for political, ideological or religious purposes. The study focuses principally on Boko Haram and ISWAP because of their sustained impact in Nigeria's North-East. It recognises, however, that Nigeria's wider insecurity landscape contains other forms of armed violence that should not automatically be classified as terrorism.

4.3 Dynamic Security Challenges

Dynamic security challenges are threats whose actors, methods, geography and technologies change rapidly. Contemporary terrorism demonstrates this characteristic through decentralised networks, online recruitment, improvised weapons, illicit financial systems, cross-border movement and alliances with criminal actors.

The concept is important because a static security response is unlikely to remain effective against an adaptive threat.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Human Security Theory

The study is primarily anchored in Human Security Theory. The human-security approach moves analysis beyond the protection of territorial boundaries towards the protection of individuals and communities from threats to survival, livelihood and dignity.

This perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria because terrorism affects far more than physical safety. It disrupts education, healthcare, food security, livelihoods, family structures and community relationships. A counter-terrorism strategy that reduces attacks but leaves communities impoverished and displaced cannot be regarded as a complete security solution. Human security therefore provides the conceptual bridge between security policy and social policy.

5.2 Relative Deprivation Theory

The study also draws upon Relative Deprivation Theory. The theory does not suggest that poverty mechanically causes violence. Rather, it proposes that perceived injustice, exclusion and the gap between expectations and lived realities can produce frustration and grievance.

This is useful for understanding communities in which young people observe economic opportunities but have limited access to them. Where such frustrations coincide with political exclusion, discrimination or perceived state neglect, extremist narratives may gain greater traction. UNDP's 2023 research reinforces this perspective by demonstrating that employment opportunities can be a significant factor in recruitment into violent extremist organisations (UNDP, 2023).

5.3 Social Disorganisation Perspective

Social Disorganisation Theory provides a third analytical lens. Communities experiencing displacement, weakened family structures, poor institutions and limited social cohesion may have reduced capacity to regulate behaviour collectively. Terrorism can both exploit and deepen this

disorganisation. Boko Haram's attacks in the North-East, for example, have disrupted farming, education, markets and community leadership structures. Displacement then produces another layer of vulnerability. The three theoretical perspectives collectively suggest that sustainable counter-terrorism requires both protection from violence and investment in the social conditions that make communities resilient to violence.

6. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative case-study and documentary research design, using terrorism in Nigeria as the principal case. The approach was selected because the study is concerned with understanding the relationship between terrorism, social conditions and public policy rather than estimating a single causal coefficient.

Data were obtained from official and institutional sources published between 2021 and 2026, including the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, International Organization for Migration, Europol, Institute for Economics & Peace and Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa. Recent peer-reviewed literature and relevant government policy documents were also consulted.

The analysis followed a thematic approach. Evidence was organised around five themes: social vulnerability; recruitment and radicalisation; terrorism and displacement; security responses; and social-policy interventions. The study does not claim that poverty, unemployment or social exclusion directly cause terrorism. Instead, it examines how these conditions interact with governance weaknesses, institutional distrust, grievances and security deficits to create environments that violent extremist organisations can exploit.

7. Terrorism in a Changing Global Security Environment

The most important feature of contemporary terrorism is its adaptability. The 2026 GTI demonstrates both a decline in global terrorism and a concentration of violence in fragile conflict environments. Global terrorism deaths fell to 5,582 in 2025, but nearly 70% of fatalities were concentrated in five countries: Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (IEP, 2026). This concentration matters for Nigeria because it demonstrates that terrorism is increasingly associated with weak governance, unresolved conflicts, porous borders and social vulnerability rather than with a single global battlefield. Technology has also altered the threat. Europol's recent assessments show that terrorist actors increasingly use online environments to disseminate propaganda, recruit young people and facilitate mobilisation.

The 2026 European report found that jihadist terrorism remained the largest category of terrorist activity in the EU in 2025, but many perpetrators were increasingly self-radicalised or loosely connected to formal organisations (Europol, 2026). The implication for Nigeria is clear: counter-terrorism can no longer be confined to conventional battlefield intelligence. It must include social intelligence, digital literacy, community engagement and early identification of radicalisation.

8. Africa: Where Security and Development Intersect

Africa's terrorism challenge is inseparable from its development challenge. The Sahel has become the global epicentre of terrorism. The GTI 2026 records that terrorism deaths in the Sahel accounted for more than half of global terrorism fatalities in 2025 (IEP, 2026). The region's difficulties are interconnected: political instability, weak institutions, unemployment, poverty, climate pressures, porous borders, organised crime and limited state presence reinforce one another. UNDP's *Journey to Extremism in Africa* is particularly significant because it challenges the assumption that ideology is always the primary driver of recruitment. Among almost 2,200 respondents, job opportunities emerged as the leading reason cited by voluntary recruits, while the study also found evidence of distrust in government and experiences of state abuse (UNDP, 2023).

The implication is not that governments should replace counter-terrorism with welfare programmes. Rather, security and social development should operate as mutually reinforcing strategies. UNDP's wider analysis similarly argues that extremist groups exploit areas in which the formal state is weak and sometimes position themselves as alternative providers of services, protection or economic opportunities (UNDP, 2023). For Nigeria, this has direct relevance in remote communities around the Lake Chad Basin, where state presence has historically been weaker than in major urban centres.

9. Nigeria's Terrorism Challenge

Nigeria's terrorism landscape has changed substantially since the emergence of Boko Haram in the late 2000s. The conflict initially centred on the North-East but subsequently developed into a complex security environment involving Boko Haram factions, ISWAP, criminal networks, kidnappers, arms traffickers and cross-border actors.

The scale of the challenge is reflected in the latest GTI data. Nigeria recorded 750 terrorism deaths in 2025, a 46% increase from the previous year, making it the country with the largest absolute increase in terrorism fatalities during that period. Nigeria consequently ranked fourth globally on the 2026 Index (IEP, 2026). More revealing is the changing operational pattern. IS attacks in Nigeria increased from 20 in 2024 to 92 in 2025, indicating an important expansion in the activity attributed to Islamic State networks (IEP, 2026). This suggests that Nigeria's security challenge is not simply the survival of an old insurgency. It is an adaptive threat capable of exploiting new environments.

10. Social Vulnerability and the Nigerian Context

Nigeria's social conditions provide an important backdrop to the security problem. The 2022 MPI found that 62.9% of Nigerians—almost 133 million people—were multidimensionally poor. The dimensions included education, health, living standards, employment-related conditions, sanitation, food security and housing (NBS, 2022).

The regional distribution is particularly significant. Approximately 65% of multidimensionally poor Nigerians lived in the North, while rural poverty was substantially higher than urban poverty. In Sokoto, multidimensional poverty reached 91% (NBS, 2022). Again, these figures should not be misread. Poverty is not terrorism. Millions of poor Nigerians reject violence every day. The significance of poverty is that severe and persistent deprivation can reduce people's resilience when extremist organisations offer money, protection, identity or belonging.

The labour-market situation adds another layer. NBS reported that 14.4% of Nigerians aged 15–24 were not in employment, education or training in Q1 2024 (NBS, 2024). This is important because youth are simultaneously the principal demographic resource of Nigeria and a population frequently targeted by extremist recruiters. The policy challenge is therefore to convert Nigeria's demographic advantage into a security asset.

11. Displacement: The Social Cost of Terrorism

Terrorism does not end when an attack stops. A village attacked by terrorists may lose farmers, teachers, traders and health workers. Families may relocate. Children may leave school. Agricultural production may collapse. Markets may close. Host communities may become overstretched. The IOM's June 2024 assessment identified more than 1.3 million internally displaced persons across ten North-Central and North-West states, with 78% living outside camps in host communities (IOM, 2024).

This illustrates a critical policy point: displacement is not only a humanitarian issue. It is also a security issue. A displaced young person without education, employment or stable family support can become vulnerable to criminal recruitment. A farmer unable to return to land may lose the economic foundation of the household. A community receiving large numbers of displaced people may experience competition over scarce services.

Social policy must therefore become part of post-conflict stabilisation.

12. Assessing the Military Response

Nigeria's military remains indispensable to the counter-terrorism effort. Where armed groups possess weapons, conduct attacks and occupy territory, the state must have the capability to protect citizens and destroy or disrupt terrorist formations. Intelligence-led operations, air support, special operations, border security and military pressure have prevented terrorist groups from achieving the type of territorial control once feared.

However, military effectiveness should be measured against strategic outcomes rather than the number of operations conducted. The 2025 increase in Nigerian terrorism fatalities demonstrates that tactical successes have not eliminated the underlying threat (IEP, 2026). The answer is not to weaken military operations. It is to connect them to what happens after military success. A cleared community

that receives no school, healthcare, livelihood support, justice or functioning local administration remains vulnerable to renewed instability. This is where social policy becomes strategically relevant.

13. From Kinetic Response to Integrated Security Governance

Nigeria does not face a choice between military force and social development. It needs both. The military can clear an area from terrorist control. Police and intelligence agencies can prevent infiltration. Courts can prosecute offenders. But social institutions must help communities recover. An integrated approach should therefore operate across three stages.

i. Prevention

Prevention should address the conditions that increase vulnerability to recruitment. This includes employment, education, social protection, youth engagement, community dialogue and digital literacy.

ii. Protection

Protection requires intelligence-led military and law-enforcement operations capable of disrupting terrorist organisations and protecting civilians.

iii. Recovery

Recovery should restore schools, markets, livelihoods, healthcare, family structures and local governance in affected communities.

This creates a simple policy principle: “Security protects the space in which development can occur; social development reduces the vulnerabilities that allow insecurity to regenerate.”

14. Local Lessons from Nigeria

Several Nigerian experiences demonstrate why this integrated approach matters.

14.1 The Lake Chad Basin

Communities around Borno and the Lake Chad Basin have experienced prolonged disruption of agriculture, fishing, education and trade. Counter-terrorism operations may remove armed groups from particular locations, but sustainable stability depends upon restoring the livelihoods that make communities economically viable. The 2026 GTI's identification of the Lake Chad Basin as an important terrorism environment reinforces the continuing significance of this area (IEP, 2026).

14.2 North-Central and North-West Displacement

The IOM's finding of more than 1.3 million displaced persons in ten North-Central and North-West states illustrates how violence beyond the conventional terrorism theatre can create comparable social consequences (IOM, 2024). This does not mean all violence in those states is terrorism. It means that Nigeria's social-policy response must be sufficiently flexible to address overlapping forms of insecurity.

14.3 Youth Vulnerability

The 14.4% NEET rate among 15–24-year-olds reported in Q1 2024 illustrates the scale of youth disengagement (NBS, 2024). The appropriate response is not simply to warn young people against terrorism. The state must create credible alternatives. A young person who has access to education, vocational skills, employment, community participation and a sense of future is not immune to radicalisation, but is less socially isolated and potentially more resilient to extremist recruitment.

15. Social Policy as a Counter-Terrorism Instrument

The central contribution of this article is the argument that social policy should be regarded as part of Nigeria's counter-terrorism architecture.

15.1 Employment

Employment is perhaps the most obvious intervention. But employment programmes must move beyond short-lived empowerment schemes. The World Bank's 2024 Nigeria Development Update emphasised that productive jobs are essential for enabling households to move out of poverty and that Nigeria's demographic structure makes job creation particularly urgent (World Bank, 2024). Counter-terrorism policy should therefore prioritise employment in high-risk communities, particularly for young people.

15.2 Education

Education is both a developmental and preventive security instrument. Schools provide more than literacy. They provide social networks, structured routines, critical thinking, aspirations and connection to formal institutions. Rebuilding schools destroyed by insurgency should therefore be considered part of security stabilisation rather than merely an education-sector project.

15.3 Social Protection

Social protection can prevent temporary economic shocks from becoming permanent exclusion. Households affected by displacement, death, disability or loss of livelihoods require targeted support. Without such support, vulnerability can persist for years after the terrorist incident itself.

15.4 Community Resilience

The state cannot monitor every village continuously. Communities therefore constitute an important layer of early warning. Community leaders, teachers, religious institutions, women's groups and youth organisations can identify emerging grievances and suspicious recruitment patterns before they become violent.

15.5 Reintegration

The long-term management of persons who surrender or disengage from terrorist organisations is another social-policy challenge. Reintegration without security screening can create risks. But indefinite exclusion can also create resentment and social rejection. A credible system requires screening, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, vocational preparation, family engagement and community acceptance.

16. Digital Radicalisation and the New Security Environment

One of the clearest lessons from Europe is that terrorism is increasingly being decentralised through technology. Europol's recent reporting indicates that terrorist organisations increasingly exploit online platforms for propaganda, communication and recruitment, while emerging technologies, including generative artificial intelligence, can amplify extremist narratives (Europol, 2025, 2026).

Nigeria is not insulated from this development. Counter-terrorism strategies should therefore include:

- i. digital literacy;
- ii. counter-messaging;
- iii. online monitoring subject to law;
- iv. community-based prevention;
- v. youth media education; and
- vi. partnerships with technology companies.

The objective should not be indiscriminate censorship. It should be to prevent terrorist organisations from turning digital platforms into recruitment environments while protecting legitimate expression.

17. Regional Cooperation

Nigeria's terrorism problem cannot be solved entirely within its borders. The Lake Chad Basin connects Nigeria to Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Terrorist organisations exploit these borders for movement, logistics, recruitment and trade. The Sahel crisis further demonstrates the importance of regional cooperation. The GTI 2026 describes the Sahel as the global centre of terrorism and identifies the interaction of political instability, weak governance and armed groups as major drivers of the regional problem (IEP, 2026).

Nigeria therefore needs stronger cooperation through ECOWAS, the Multinational Joint Task Force and bilateral arrangements with neighbouring countries. However, regional cooperation should go beyond military operations. It should include:

- i. intelligence sharing;
- ii. border-community development;
- iii. coordinated social protection;
- iv. cross-border livelihood programmes;
- v. counter-radicalisation;

- vi. refugee and displacement management; and
- vii. joint responses to trafficking and illicit economies.

18. Discussion

The evidence examined in this study points towards an important conclusion: terrorism is simultaneously a security problem, a governance problem and a social-policy problem. The security dimension cannot be ignored. The 750 terrorism deaths recorded in Nigeria in 2025 demonstrate that armed groups retain substantial destructive capacity (IEP, 2026).

But the social dimension is equally impossible to ignore. The existence of almost 133 million multidimensionally poor Nigerians in the 2022 MPI, severe northern poverty, youth disengagement and more than one million displaced persons in ten North-Central and North-West states reveals a society carrying substantial vulnerability (NBS, 2022; IOM, 2024). The evidence does not support the simplistic proposition that poverty causes terrorism. Rather, it supports a more defensible conclusion: social deprivation becomes a security concern when it intersects with grievance, weak institutions, exclusion, conflict and opportunities for violent mobilisation.

This distinction is important for policy. If poverty alone caused terrorism, every poor society would be highly terrorist. That is not the case. Similarly, if ideology alone caused terrorism, improving economic conditions would have little preventive value. The evidence from UNDP and European counter-terrorism experience suggests that recruitment is multidimensional (UNDP, 2023; Europol, 2026).

Nigeria therefore needs a more sophisticated doctrine. The first principle should be force where force is necessary. Terrorist organisations cannot be negotiated out of existence simply through development programmes.

The second should be development where deprivation creates vulnerability. Schools, employment, social protection and livelihoods are not substitutes for security; they are part of the conditions that make security sustainable. The third should be legitimacy in the exercise of state power. Where citizens perceive security institutions as abusive or indifferent, counter-terrorism can unintentionally generate the grievances that extremist organisations exploit. The GTI 2026 reports that 71% of surveyed recruits in sub-Saharan Africa identified human-rights abuses by state security forces as the tipping point for joining violent extremist groups, while about one-quarter cited lack of job opportunities (IEP, 2026). This is perhaps the most uncomfortable lesson. The state must defeat terrorism without reproducing the conditions that sustain it.

19. Recommendations

Recommendation One:

The Federal Government should institutionalise an integrated framework that links counter-terrorism, social protection, employment, education, displacement management and community resilience in high-risk areas.

Implementation Strategies

i. The Office of the National Security Adviser, in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning, Federal Ministry of Finance, Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction, Federal Ministry of Education, Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, state governments and relevant security agencies, should designate high-risk communities for integrated security-development interventions based on verified vulnerability data.

ii. The National Counter-Terrorism Centre should develop an annual security-development assessment that measures not only terrorist incidents but also employment, school attendance, displacement, livelihood recovery, social-protection coverage and community trust in affected areas.

Recommendation Two

The Federal Government should reposition targeted youth employment, vocational training and enterprise development as preventive instruments in communities exposed to terrorism and violent extremism.

Implementation Strategies

- i. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, National Directorate of Employment, National Board for Technical Education, state governments and private-sector partners should establish employment and technical-skills programmes targeted at young people in high-risk local government areas, with priority given to sectors linked to local economic opportunities.
- ii. The Federal Government should link youth-support programmes to measurable employment outcomes rather than beneficiary numbers, including job placement, enterprise survival, income generation and sustained participation in legitimate economic activity.

Recommendation Three:

The Federal Government should institutionalise community-based mechanisms for identifying radicalisation, recruitment, emerging grievances and early indicators of violent mobilisation.

Implementation Strategies

- i. The National Orientation Agency, National Counter-Terrorism Centre, state governments, traditional institutions, religious organisations, women's groups and youth organisations should establish community-level prevention networks capable of reporting emerging threats while promoting dialogue, tolerance and counter-narratives.
- ii. The Federal Government should expand digital-literacy and counter-radicalisation programmes for young people, teachers and community leaders, with particular attention to online propaganda, misinformation, extremist recruitment and responsible use of emerging technologies.

Recommendation Four:

The Federal Government should treat the recovery of conflict-affected communities and the lawful reintegration of eligible former associates of terrorist groups as integral components of national counter-terrorism policy.

Implementation Strategies

- i. The Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction, North-East Development Commission, state governments and development partners should coordinate programmes that restore livelihoods, education, healthcare, housing and local markets in communities affected by terrorism and displacement.
- ii. The Nigerian military, intelligence agencies, Nigerian Correctional Service, state authorities and relevant civil-society organisations should strengthen structured screening, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, vocational preparation and community-based reintegration for persons who surrender or disengage from terrorist organisations, subject to applicable law.

Recommendation Five:

The Federal Government should deepen regional cooperation by combining intelligence-led counter-terrorism operations with cross-border social and economic interventions in vulnerable border communities.

Implementation Strategies

- i. Nigeria should work through ECOWAS, the Multinational Joint Task Force and bilateral mechanisms with neighbouring states to strengthen intelligence sharing, border surveillance, joint operations and coordinated action against terrorist financing, arms trafficking and illicit economies.
- ii. The Federal Government should promote cross-border programmes in education, livelihoods, youth employment, displacement management and community resilience in vulnerable borderlands, recognising that terrorist networks exploit social and economic gaps as effectively as physical borders.

20. Conclusion

Nigeria's terrorism challenge cannot be addressed through conventional security responses alone. Contemporary terrorist groups are adaptive, networked and increasingly capable of exploiting digital technologies, local grievances, criminal economies and weak state presence. The 2026 Global Terrorism Index recorded a 46% increase in terrorism deaths in Nigeria in 2025, reaching 750 and

placing the country fourth globally (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2026). Behind these figures are displaced families, disrupted education, lost livelihoods and communities whose confidence in the future has been weakened. Nigeria's wider social vulnerability is also significant, with about 133 million people estimated to be living in multidimensional poverty (NBS, 2022).

The central argument is not that social policy should replace military action, but that security and social development must operate together. Terrorist organisations must be confronted through intelligence-led operations, effective policing, secure borders and credible prosecution, while government addresses the conditions that facilitate recruitment and radicalisation. This requires employment and education opportunities, stronger social protection, support for displaced communities, rehabilitation of affected areas and mechanisms for addressing grievances. Ultimately, social policy is not merely a post-conflict intervention; in vulnerable communities, it is an instrument of prevention. Nigeria can master contemporary challenges only by combining effective protection with inclusion, justice, opportunity and public trust

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