

Poverty and Inequality: A Study of the Socioeconomic Causes of Conflicts in the Northcentral States of Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examines the socioeconomic causes of conflicts in the North Central states of Nigeria, with a focus on poverty and inequality as primary factors. Employing Relative Deprivation Theory, the research investigates how perceived economic disparities contribute to violent conflicts, disrupting economic activities and exacerbating poverty. The study utilises a structured questionnaire administered to residents of Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states, using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) for analysis. Findings reveal a significant positive relationship between poverty, inequality, and conflict, indicating that higher levels of deprivation correlate with increased occurrences of conflict. The study concludes that addressing socioeconomic disparities through inclusive economic growth, equitable resource distribution, and enhanced access to social services is crucial for mitigating conflict and promoting peace in the region. The research underscores the importance of targeted interventions to reduce poverty and inequality as pathways to sustainable development and conflict resolution in North Central Nigeria.

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Background to the Study

The North Central region of Nigeria, often referred to as the Middle Belt, is characterised by a rich tapestry of ethnic and religious diversity. This region encompasses the states of Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau. However, despite this diversity, the region faces deep-rooted challenges such as poverty, inequality, and recurring conflicts. These issues have persisted due to historical neglect and have been exacerbated by weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, and economic underdevelopment. Poverty in the North Central region is particularly severe, with the poverty rate standing at approximately 42% according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2020). A significant portion of the population relies on subsistence agriculture and encounters substantial barriers to accessing technology, credit, and essential infrastructure. This reliance has hindered the region's development and heightened insecurity. Rural areas are disproportionately affected, with limited government interventions further entrenching a cycle of underdevelopment and poverty.

Inequality in the region is evident across ethnic, religious, and socio-economic lines. The North Central region is home to numerous ethnic groups, including the Tiv, Idoma, Berom, and Igala, among others. Historical grievances related to land rights, political marginalisation, and resource distribution have widened the socio-economic divide. Urban centres such as Jos enjoy relative prosperity, while rural hinterlands continue to struggle with poverty. This socio-economic disparity fuels frustration and often leads to conflict, particularly over access to land and political representation (Doran, 2022).

The region has witnessed recurrent conflicts, especially between agriculturalists and pastoralists over access to land and water resources. One such example is the Fulani herdsman crisis, which illustrates how competition for scarce resources can ignite violent conflict, often exacerbated by underlying ethnic and religious tensions. Thousands have been displaced as a result of these conflicts, losing their livelihoods and further deepening the poverty crisis in the region (Crisis Group, 2017). The government's inability to effectively mediate these conflicts has perpetuated violence and instability in the area (Okuda, 2019). Poverty represents a global challenge; however, its effects are particularly pronounced in developing countries such as Nigeria. Okunlola and Okafor (2022) argue that while poverty may incite conflict, it is not the sole determinant; political, structural, and sociological factors also play significant roles. Within the African context, poverty has been associated with negative outcomes in income, education, health, and access to land, all of which contribute to the overall quality of life. The interplay between poverty, inequality, socioeconomic development and conflict in Nigeria has been the subject of extensive research. Analyses indicate that income disparities, particularly in rural areas, exacerbate the challenges associated with poverty alleviation (Toyin *et al.*, 2015). Nevertheless, there exists a substantial gap in the understanding of the causal relationships among poverty, inequality, socioeconomic development, and conflict, particularly in the North Central region (Ogbeide & Agu, 2015). Many extant studies do not adequately explore the multidimensional aspects of these challenges and their long-term implications for regional stability.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature tends to concentrate on national trends, often overlooking regional disparities. For example, while some studies examine income distribution across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, there is a dearth of empirical evidence regarding how poverty, inequality and socioeconomic development specifically contribute to conflict within the North Central region (Jaiyeola & Bayat, 2020). This oversight is troubling, particularly given that economic and political policies aimed at alleviating poverty may not adequately address the unique dynamics of conflict in this region. The application of relative deprivation theory, which posits a link between inequality and conflict, has also been underutilised in empirical research concerning Nigeria. There is a pressing need for studies that rigorously test this theory, particularly within the Nigerian context and by incorporating local data on inequality and conflict dynamics (Iheriohanma, 2010).

In Nigeria, poverty and income inequality have emerged as significant concerns. According to the Nigerian Living Standards Survey by the National Bureau of Statistics (2019), 40.1% of the population approximately 82.9 million Nigerians live in poverty. Conflict serves to exacerbate these issues, destroying lives, farmlands, and property, thereby threatening food security (Abass, 2012). The Middle Belt, despite its agricultural potential, confronts challenges such as poverty, inequality, and conflict, which disrupt economic activities and exacerbate the poverty crisis (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2021). Economic development in this region is impeded by inadequate infrastructure, ineffective agricultural policies, and market volatility. Inequality, often manifesting along ethnic and religious lines, exacerbates social tensions and fosters violence. Recent studies suggest that conflict in North Central Nigeria perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty and violence (Adamu & Ben, 2020; Eze & Chukwu, 2022). Notably, conflicts between farmers and Fulani herders have significantly diminished the region's agricultural output, despite its designation as Nigeria's food basket (Cali, 2015). Research conducted by Okunlola and Okafor (2020) and Okunlola, Ayetigbo, and Ajiye (2021) has identified a correlation between these conflicts and deteriorating socio-economic conditions, with internal conflicts serving as a primary driver of poverty in Africa. However, none of these studies have empirically investigated the roles of poverty and inequality as significant contributors to violent conflict in these areas. This study aims to address this gap by examining how poverty and inequality contribute to conflict in the North Central region, with a specific focus on the states of Benue, Niger, Nasarawa, and Plateau. The objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis that can inform effective policy interventions for peace and development in the region. The remainder of this study is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 outlines the methodology, Section 4 presents the results and discussion, and Section 5 concludes with policy recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section reviews existing extant literature on the socio-economic impact of poverty and inequality on conflict in North Central Nigeria. The section is subdivided into the theoretical review, hypotheses development, and empirical review of existing literature on the subject matter.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives offer insight into the relationship between poverty, inequality, and conflict. Notable among these theories are the Relative Deprivation Theory and the Structural Violence Theory. The Relative Deprivation Theory, proposed by sociologist Ted Robert Gurr in his 1970 book "Why Men Rebel," posits that perceived discrepancies between expected and actual conditions can lead to feelings of deprivation, which may incite social unrest and conflict. According to Gurr, when individuals or groups perceive a gap between their entitlements and their actual economic, social, or political status, this sense of deprivation fuels grievances that can manifest in collective violence. This theory is highly relevant to discussions of conflict and inequality, as it explains why economically or socially disadvantaged groups might engage in protests, riots, or insurgencies. The theory suggests that it is not just absolute poverty or deprivation that matters, but how individuals perceive their status relative to others. Inequality and perceived injustices can exacerbate these feelings, leading to conflict as groups strive to rectify perceived imbalances. This theory is particularly pertinent in the Northcentral region, where marginalized communities feeling deprived relative to other groups may resort to violence.

The Structural Violence Theory, introduced by Johan Galtung, suggests that social structures or institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. This is relevant to the Northcentral states, where systemic inequities in resource allocation, political representation, and social services perpetuate poverty and inequality, breeding conflict. Having reviewed the two theories above, it was found that the Relative Deprivation Theory is the most relevant theory to this study. Therefore, this study is based on the Relative Deprivation Theory as its theoretical framework.

H₁: Poverty and Inequality does not significantly affect conflict in North Central Nigeria

Nigeria has one of the highest rates of poverty in the world. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line. Poverty in Nigeria is characterised by a lack of access to basic needs such as food, clean water, healthcare, and education (NBS, 2023). The prevalence of poverty varies across regions, with the northern part of the country being disproportionately affected. This geographic disparity is partly due to historical neglect, poor governance, and socio-cultural factors that have hindered development efforts in the north.

Moreover, inequality in Nigeria manifests in various forms, including income inequality, gender inequality, and regional disparities. Income inequality in Nigeria is among the highest in the world, with the Gini coefficient consistently remaining high over the years. The wealth gap is stark, with a small percentage of the population controlling a significant portion of the nation's wealth while the majority live in poverty. Gender inequality is also pervasive, affecting women's access to education, employment, and healthcare (World Bank, 2023). Regional inequality is evident in the disparity between the oil-rich South and

the impoverished North. Poverty and inequality are significant drivers of conflict in Nigeria. The relationship between these factors and conflict can be understood through several mechanisms, such as economic marginalisation, which fosters grievances among disadvantaged groups that can lead to conflict. When individuals or communities perceive that they are excluded from economic opportunities, they may resort to violence as a means of expressing their discontent. In Nigeria, this has been evident in the Niger Delta region, where the exploitation of oil resources has enriched a few while leaving the local population impoverished (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The resulting grievances have fuelled militancy and attacks on oil installations. Additionally, inequality can exacerbate social fragmentation, leading to ethnic and religious tensions. Nigeria's diversity, while a potential strength, has often been a source of conflict. When economic opportunities are unevenly distributed along ethnic or religious lines, it can deepen existing divisions and create a sense of injustice among marginalised groups. This has been a key factor in the rise of groups such as Boko Haram in the North East, which capitalises on local grievances to recruit members (Akinola, 2022; NBS, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Furthermore, high levels of poverty and inequality undermine state capacity, making it difficult for the government to maintain law and order. Poverty erodes the state's ability to provide essential services, leading to a breakdown in the social contract between the state and its citizens. In regions where the state is perceived as absent or ineffective, non-state actors, including militant groups and warlords, can gain control, further perpetuating conflict.

On the other hand, Nigeria's youth population is disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment (World Bank, 2023). With limited opportunities for education and employment, many young Nigerians are vulnerable to radicalisation. Extremist groups often exploit this vulnerability by offering financial incentives and a sense of belonging. The link between poverty, youth unemployment, and radicalisation is particularly evident in the North East, where Boko Haram has been able to attract recruits by exploiting the socio-economic despair of young people. Inequality often leads to competition over scarce resources, which can trigger conflict. In Nigeria, conflicts over land, water, and other resources are common, particularly in the Middle Belt region. The competition is often along ethnic lines, with farmers and herders clashing over access to land and water. These conflicts are exacerbated by poverty, as communities rely on these resources for their livelihoods. Based on the above, this study therefore hypothesises that poverty and inequality do not significantly affect conflict in North Central Nigeria.

H₂: Poverty and inequality do not significantly affect socioeconomic development in the North Central Nigeria

North Central Nigeria, comprising states such as Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), is a region marked by diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and natural resources. Despite its potential, the region struggles with high levels of poverty and inequality, which significantly impact its socioeconomic development. The interplay of poverty and inequality in North Central Nigeria has

profound implications for agriculture, education, healthcare, and overall economic development (Collier, 2003; Omoniyi, 2022; NBS, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

This study explores the nature of poverty and inequality in North Central Nigeria, examining how these issues affect the region's socioeconomic development. Poverty in North Central Nigeria is pervasive, with a substantial proportion of the population living below the poverty line. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) estimates that over 45% of the region's population lives in poverty, with higher rates in rural areas. Factors contributing to poverty in the region include limited access to quality education, inadequate healthcare services, poor infrastructure, and a reliance on subsistence agriculture. The region's poverty is further exacerbated by recurrent conflicts, such as farmer-herder clashes, which disrupt livelihoods and displace communities (NBS, 2023; UNDP, 2022).

Inequality in North Central Nigeria is evident in various forms, including income inequality, gender inequality, and regional disparities. Income inequality is particularly pronounced, with wealth concentrated among a small elite while the majority struggle to make ends meet. Gender inequality also significantly impacts socioeconomic activities, as women in the region often face barriers to education, employment, and land ownership. Regional disparities are evident between urban and rural areas, with rural communities having less access to essential services and opportunities (World Bank, 2023). Poverty and inequality in North Central Nigeria have profound effects on the region's socioeconomic activities, affecting agriculture, education, healthcare, and employment. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that promotes inclusive growth, strengthens social services, and reduces disparities. By tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality, North Central Nigeria can unlock its full potential and improve the livelihoods of its people. Based on the above, the study hypothesises that poverty and inequality do not significantly affect socioeconomic activities in North Central Nigeria.

H₃: Socio-economic activities do not significantly affect Conflict in North Central Nigeria

Despite the potential of North Central Nigeria to serve as the nation's food basket and contribute to increased food production, the region has been afflicted by conflicts that have disrupted its socio-economic activities. These conflicts, often rooted in ethnic, religious, and resource-based disputes, have had far-reaching impacts on agriculture, trade, education, and overall economic development. Furthermore, the region has experienced various forms of conflict, including ethnic and religious clashes, farmer-herder conflicts, and communal violence. These conflicts are frequently driven by competition over resources, historical grievances, and political marginalisation (International Crisis Group, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Among the principal types of conflict in the region, farmer-herder conflicts are among the most prevalent and destructive. These disputes are primarily driven by competition over land and water resources, which have become increasingly scarce due to population growth,

environmental degradation, and climate change. The clashes often pit predominantly agrarian communities against nomadic herders, resulting in loss of life, displacement, and destruction of property. States such as Benue and Plateau have been particularly affected, with frequent violent confrontations disrupting agricultural activities and causing food insecurity.

Ethnic and religious clashes are also common in North Central Nigeria, where diverse ethnic groups and religious communities coexist. Historical grievances, competition for political power, and economic inequalities frequently fuel these conflicts. The city of Jos in Plateau State has been a flashpoint for ethnic and religious violence, with clashes between Christian and Muslim communities leading to significant casualties and displacement (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These conflicts have undermined social cohesion and disrupted economic activities, particularly in urban centres. Communal conflicts in North Central Nigeria often arise from disputes over land ownership, resource control, and chieftaincy matters. These conflicts are typically localized but can escalate into broader violence, affecting entire communities. Resource-based conflicts, particularly in mining areas, involve disputes over access to minerals and revenues from mining activities. The lack of clear regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms exacerbates these conflicts, resulting in illegal mining operations and environmental degradation. Furthermore, the conflicts in North Central Nigeria have profound impacts on the region's socio-economic activities, influencing agriculture, trade, education, and overall economic development. Conflicts, particularly farmer-herder clashes, have severely affected agriculture in the region. Violent confrontations lead to the destruction of crops, loss of livestock, and the displacement of farming communities. The resultant food insecurity not only impacts the local population but also has broader implications for the national food supply (Collier, 1999; International Crisis Group, 2022). Additionally, insecurity in rural areas discourages investment in agriculture and disrupts the supply chains for agricultural inputs and outputs. Furthermore, conflict-induced insecurity hampers trade and commerce in North Central Nigeria. Frequent outbreaks of violence disrupt transportation routes, complicating the movement of goods between markets. This not only affects the livelihoods of traders but also leads to increased prices for goods, exacerbating economic hardship for consumers. Insecurity also deters investment in the region, as businesses are hesitant to operate in conflict-prone areas.

Similarly, the mining sector in North Central Nigeria is affected by conflict, particularly communal and resource-based disputes. Illegal mining activities, often linked to local conflicts, pose environmental and safety risks. Conflicts over resource control and revenue sharing between communities and the government create an unstable environment for mining operations, deterring potential investors and limiting the sector's contribution to the local economy (NBS, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Moreover, conflicts in North Central Nigeria disrupt education by causing displacement, damaging infrastructure, and creating an environment of fear and insecurity. Schools in conflict-affected areas are often closed or operate at reduced capacity, negatively impacting students' learning outcomes. The disruption of education has long-term implications for

human capital development and the region's economic prospects, as a poorly educated workforce limits opportunities for economic diversification and growth. Based on the above, the study hypothesises that socio-economic activities do not significantly affect conflict in North Central Nigeria.

Methodology

The study covers some selected states of North Central Nigeria, which include; Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau State. The rationale for selecting these states was based on the persistent increase in violent conflicts in those states. The population of this study consisted of the estimated population of four North Central States of Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Niger States (NBS, 2019). The study adopted the use of the Taro Yamane formula to determine the sample size of 400 that was administered equally across the four States of Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Niger States. A pilot test was conducted. This is a preliminary, small-scale study conducted to evaluate the feasibility, time, cost, risk, and adverse events involved in research work. It also assisted the researchers to refine their methodology, identify potential problems, and make necessary adjustments before carrying out the full-scale study. After a pilot study had been conducted, the researcher distributed one hundred (100) questionnaires in each of the selected states. The researcher decisively administered the questionnaire in specific local government areas where the incidence of violent conflicts is more severe. Out of the total questionnaire of 400 administered, 360 were correctly filled and returned. This shows a response rate of 90% and formed the bases of the analysis of this study.

Source of Data

The primary data source was employed for this study. A structured questionnaire was designed to elicit information from citizens and residents of the central region of Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau States of Nigeria. The estimated population of each state was used to determine the population and size by Wikipedia and other credible sources. The purposive sampling techniques method was adopted for this study. The questionnaire was designed using the Five Scale of Likert ranging from strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Uncertain (U), Strongly Disagree (SD), and Disagree (D). The research instruments were submitted for validation to the experts in this area.

Common Method Bias

Common method bias (CMB) was a potential concern addressed throughout the research process. Following Kock's (2015) recommendations, statistical procedures were implemented to assess and mitigate CMB in the final dataset. Specifically, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were calculated, and all obtained values fell below the recommended threshold of 5 (Hair *et al.*, 2019), thus alleviating concerns about a substantial CMB influence.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using a two-pronged approach. First, descriptive statistics generated by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)

provided an overview of the respondents' demographics. Second, SmartPLS v4.0.1.8 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2016) was employed for inferential statistics using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis. The justification for using PLS-SEM lies in its established utility across various disciplines, including management information systems (Owusu *et al.*, 2017; Weli, 2019) and advertising/marketing (Abdurrahman & Osman, 2016; Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

Variable	Item	No. of Response	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	200	56%
	Female	160	44%
	Total	360	100%
Age	20-40	200	56%
	41-60	100	28%
	60 above	60	16%
	Total	360	100%
Marital Status	Married	100	28%
	Single	50	14%
	Widow	100	28%
	Widower	60	16%
	Separated	50	14%
	Total	360	100%
Occupation	Farming	120	33%
	Trading	50	14%
	Civil Servant	80	22%
	Artisan	60	17%
	Security Personnel	50	14%
	Total	360	100%
Level of Education	Primary	80	22%
	Secondary	170	47%
	Tertiary	50	14%
	Vocational Training	60	17%
	Total	360	100%
Monthly Income	#10,000-#20,000	100	28%
	#21,000- #30,000k	100	28%
	#31,000- #40,000k	50	14%
	#41,000- #50,000k	50	14%
	#51,000 - above	60	16%
	Total	360	100%

Source: Author's Computation, (2024)

Table 1 above provides the demographic information of the respondents. The sample shows a slight predominance of male respondents (56%) over female respondents (44%). This gender distribution indicates that males were slightly more available or willing to participate in the survey compared to females. The slight male predominance may be justified by cultural factors or the nature of occupations surveyed. On the age distribution of the respondents between the age of 20-40 years 200 respondents (56%), 41-60 years 100 respondents (28%), years 60 and above respondents (16%). The majority of respondents

fall in the 20-40 age range (56%), suggesting that a large proportion of the sampled population is in their productive, working age. The lower proportion of respondents in the older age groups may reflect a younger demographic focus or a lower willingness of older individuals to participate. The prevalence of younger respondents could reflect population trends where younger demographics are more engaged in economic activities and surveys.

On the marital status, there is a relatively even distribution between different marital statuses, with the married and widowed categories each accounting for a significant portion (28% each). The presence of a notable proportion of widowed individuals (44% when combined) may highlight specific socio-economic challenges or demographics in the surveyed area. Similarly, on the occupation of the respondents, farming is the most common occupation (33%), which may reflect a predominantly rural or agrarian economy. Civil servants and artisans together make up a significant portion, suggesting a mix of formal and informal employment.

On the level of education of the respondents, the majority of respondents have attained a secondary level of education (47%). This suggests a moderate educational attainment level, while only a small portion of respondents (14%) have tertiary education, possibly indicating limited access to higher education. The majority of respondents with secondary education aligns with the educational structure in many developing regions where higher education is less accessible. Lastly, on the income earnings of the respondents, a significant portion (56%) earns between ₦10,000 and ₦30,000 per month, reflecting low-income levels among respondents. Only a small proportion (16%) earns ₦51,000 and above, indicating limited high-income earners in the sample. The data reflects a predominantly low-income population, which is consistent with socio-economic trends in regions heavily dependent on farming and small-scale occupations. These results provide valuable insights into the socio-economic characteristics of the sampled population, which can inform policy recommendations or further analysis.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha Test

S.No.	Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	rho	A	CompRel	AVE	Q ²
1	Conflict	0.68	0.682	0.806	0.51		
2	Poverty-Inequality	0.786	0.786	0.834	0.34	0.195	
3	Social Economic	0.701	0.7	0.816	0.526		

Source: Author's Computation, (2024)

This table 2 presents the reliability metrics for the constructs, Conflict, Poverty-Inequality, and Socio-Economic factors. The Cronbach's Alpha values for all variables are above 0.68, indicating acceptable internal consistency of the research instrument. The Cronbach's Alpha Conflict is 0.68, which is slightly below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.7 but

still within a range that suggests moderate reliability. This has also been widely accepted by scholars such as (Nunnally, 1978; Hair *et al.*, 2006; Kline, 1999; DeVellis, 2016) who opined that Cronbach alpha within the threshold of 0.68 is also acceptable. For Poverty-Inequality the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.786, indicating good reliability. The Composite Reliability (CompRel) is 0.834, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is 0.34. The lower AVE suggests that while the construct is reliable, it may not capture a high level of variance among the items. Also, for the socio-economic is Cronbach's Alpha is 0.701, suggesting good reliability. The AVE of 0.526 indicates that the construct has an acceptable level of convergent validity, as it exceeds the 0.5 threshold.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

	CONFL	Socioecn	Pov-Inq	SocioecnPov-Inq
CONFL				
Socioecn	0.607			
Pov-Inq	0.578	0.563		
Socioecn*Pov-Inq	0.2	0.527	0.286	

Source: Author's Computation, (2024)

The Table 3 above, show the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio is used to assess discriminant validity. For adequate discriminant validity, HTMT values should ideally be below 0.85. conflict and socio-economic (HTMT = 0.607). This value suggests a moderate level of discriminant validity between these constructs. For conflict and poverty-inequality (HTMT = 0.578). This value also supports acceptable discriminant validity. The socio-economic and poverty-inequality (HTMT = 0.563). This indicates that socio-economic and poverty-inequality constructs are distinct from each other. The HTMT ratios demonstrate that the constructs are sufficiently distinct from one another, which is essential for the validity of the structural model

Table 4: Path Coefficients

Path Coefficient

Hypotheses	Beta Value	Standard Error	T Stat	P Value	Decision
Pov-Inq->CONF	0.333	0.055	6.061**	0.000	Rejected
Pov-Inq ->Socio-e	0.484	0.046	10.448**	0.000	Rejected
Socio-e->CONF	0.263	0.059	4.455**	0.000	Rejected
R Square	26%				

Source: Author's Computation, (2024) *** p< 0.01; **p< 0.05; *p <0.1 represents the level of significance.

Interpretation of Results

This table 4 presents the path coefficients from the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis. The correlation between conflict (CONF) and poverty-inequality (Pov-inq) has a path coefficient of 0.333. This indicates a positive and significant effect of poverty-

inequality on conflict occurrences in the North Central Nigeria. The T-statistic of 6.061, with a corresponding P-value of 0.000, confirms the statistical significance of this relationship. The P-value which is less than 5% level of significance implies that hypothesis one which states that poverty-inequality does not significantly affect conflict in the North Central was rejected therefore, the alternative hypothesis which states that poverty-inequality significantly affect conflict in the North Central Nigeria was therefore accepted. This implies that the higher the level of poverty and inequality may aggravate inhabitants in this environment, reflecting how this disparity can stifle overall economic activity and to result to violent conflict.

Additionally, the association between socio-economic and conflict (CONF) has a path coefficient of 0.263. This suggests that Conflict incidences (CONF) have a positive and substantial impact on the socio-economic activities in the North Central Nigeria. The statistical importance of this association is confirmed by the T-statistic of 4.455 and the associated P-value of 0.000. The P-value which is less than 5% level of significance implies that hypothesis two of the study which states that poverty and inequality does not significantly affect socio-economic activities was rejected, the alternative hypothesis which state that poverty-inequality significantly affect socio-economic activities in the North Central was therefore accepted. This means that the higher the level of poverty and inequality amongst the inhabitants in the North Central, there is a high tendency to worsen the socio-economic activities of the inhabitants of citizens in this region.

Furthermore, the path coefficient for the relationship between socio-economic and violent conflict is 0.263. This also indicates a positive and significant effect of socio-economic on violent conflict. The T-statistic of 4.455, with a corresponding P-value of 0.000, confirms the statistical significance of this relationship. The P-value which is less than 5% level of significance implies that hypothesis three of the study which states that socio-economic does not significantly affect conflict was rejected, the alternative hypothesis which states that socio-economic significantly affect conflict was therefore accepted. Therefore, as socio-economic activities increase, individuals are more likely to have a higher competition for few economic resources which have a tendency of increasing the level of conflict in the region. The R-squared value of 26% indicates that the model explains a moderate portion of the variance in conflict levels, suggesting that while significant, other factors outside the model also contribute to conflict dynamics

Figure 1: Bootstrapping Direct Relationship Result

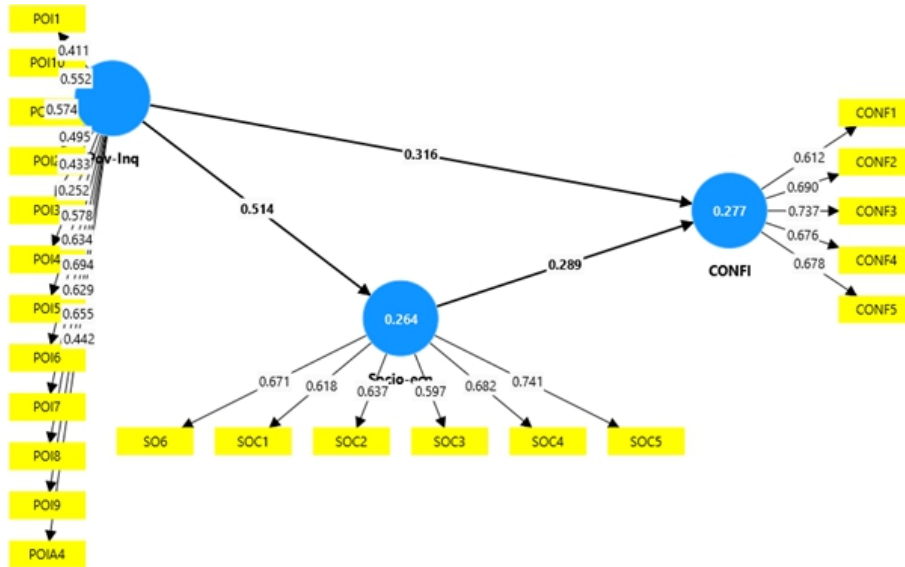


Figure 2: Bootstrapping Direct Relationship Result When 20 percent of the construct was deleted

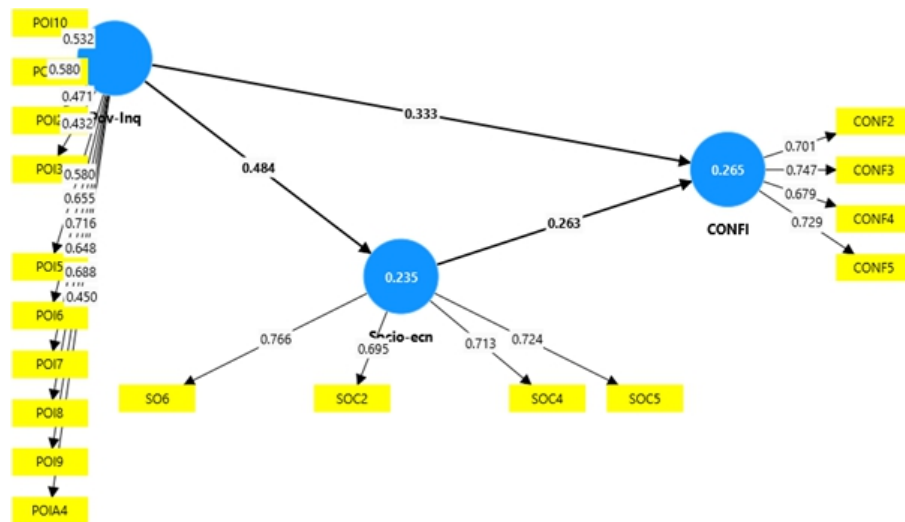
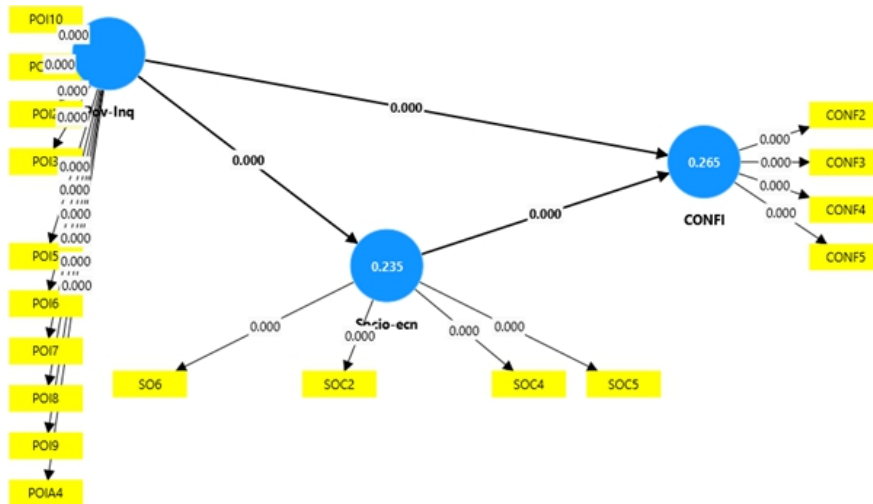


Figure 3: Bootstrapping Direct Relationship Result After Deleting 20 percent of the construct



Bootstrapping analysis

The result in Figure 1 shows the bootstrapping analysis that provides robustness checks for the path coefficients and confirms the direct relationships among the constructs with confidence intervals that do not cross zero, reinforcing the significance of the relationships observed in Table 4. The result of this analysis showed that most of the construct reliability and validity were below the acceptable thresholds of 0.70 above hence, the need to remove some outer loadings to achieve a better model fit for indices (Chin, 1998; Hair *et al.*, 2017; Henseler *et al.*, 2015). In other to improve the result in Figure 1, expert has suggested that construct which have weak loadings should be deleted up to 20% of the total construct. Furthermore, the result in Figure 2, show the direct relationship among the construct when deleting 20 percent of the construct as suggested by various scholars such as (Chin, 1998; Hair *et al.*, 2017; Henseler *et al.*, 2015). A total of 5 construct was deleted two constructs were deleted from poverty-inequality constructs, two constructs were also deleted from socio-economic construct while one construct were deleted from conflict construct in other to enhanced the reliability of the research instrument. The result of the shows the bootstrapping analysis after the deleting 20% of the construct as suggested by (Chin, 1998; Hair *et al.*, 2017; Henseler *et al.*, 2015). This result shows a statistically significant relationship among the various constructs, this implies that poverty-inequality, and socio-economic significantly impact violent conflict in the North Central Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that poverty and inequality significantly contribute to violent conflicts in North Central Nigeria, a region characterised by deep-seated socio-economic disparities and historical grievances. These findings are consistent with a substantial body of literature that examines the intricate relationship between poverty, inequality, and

conflict, particularly in fragile and conflict-prone regions. Scholars such as Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011) have emphasised that poverty and inequality are critical drivers of conflict, as they exacerbate social tensions and grievances by limiting access to economic opportunities and increasing competition over scarce resources. This relationship is particularly pronounced in regions like North Central Nigeria, where the socio-economic infrastructure is weak, and ethnic and religious tensions further complicate the dynamics of resource distribution and access. The research aligns with the Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that individuals or groups who perceive a significant gap between their expected and actual socio-economic conditions are more likely to experience grievances that can incite violent conflict. This theory provides a robust framework for understanding the findings of this study, as the data indicate a significant positive relationship between poverty, inequality, and conflict. The path coefficient of 0.333 between poverty, inequality, and conflict underscores the strong correlation between these variables, suggesting that as poverty and inequality rise, so too does the likelihood of conflict. This empirical evidence supports the broader theoretical argument that socio-economic disparities, particularly when perceived as unjust or when they prevent access to critical resources, are potent catalysts for conflict (Cederman *et al.*, 2011).

The findings also demonstrate the adverse impact of conflict on socio-economic activities, such as agriculture and trade, which are critical to the livelihoods of many residents in North Central Nigeria. The path coefficient of 0.263 between socio-economic activities and conflict suggests that violent conflict significantly disrupts economic activities, thereby perpetuating a cycle of poverty and violence. This aligns with Justino's (2009) assertion that economic deprivation fuels conflict by restricting access to vital resources and intensifying competition over limited assets. In regions where agriculture is the primary source of income, the disruption of farming activities due to conflict not only increases poverty but also diminishes the community's ability to recover economically, further entrenching the socio-economic disparities that fuel future conflicts.

Moreover, the study highlights the broader implications of socio-economic deprivation on peace and security, particularly in regions such as North Central Nigeria, where long-standing inequalities and poverty have left communities vulnerable to conflict. Addressing these socio-economic disparities is essential for mitigating conflict and promoting sustainable development. The findings of this study reinforce the need for comprehensive policy interventions that focus not only on conflict resolution but also on economic development and poverty alleviation as fundamental strategies for fostering long-term peace in the region. These insights contribute to the growing body of evidence that emphasises the importance of addressing root socio-economic causes to achieve lasting conflict reduction and stability in fragile regions (Cederman *et al.*, 2011; Justino, 2009).

Conclusion

This study has established that poverty and inequality are significant drivers of violent conflict in North Central Nigeria. The findings clearly demonstrate that socio-economic

disparities foster grievances, heightening social tensions and precipitating conflicts. The implications of these results underscore the urgent need for policy interventions aimed at addressing poverty and inequality to mitigate conflict and promote sustainable peace in the region. Specifically, policies that foster inclusive economic growth, equitable resource distribution, and enhanced access to basic services are essential for creating a more stable and cohesive society. Empirically, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the socio-economic underpinnings of conflict in Nigeria. It provides robust evidence that poverty and inequality are not merely peripheral or background conditions but are active and dynamic forces driving violent conflict. The study enhances the empirical understanding of how economic marginalisation can escalate tensions, disrupt social order, and lead to violence, particularly in regions with a history of socio-political instability. Theoretically, the study reinforces the validity of Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that perceived discrepancies between expected and actual socio-economic conditions generate grievances that can lead to conflict. This theoretical framework has proven valuable in explaining the correlation between inequality, deprivation, and conflict in North Central Nigeria. The study highlights the importance of addressing perceived inequalities and economic deprivation in designing conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies. These insights offer critical lessons for policymakers, conflict resolution practitioners, and international development agencies, providing a basis for formulating comprehensive approaches to conflict prevention that prioritise socio-economic inclusion. In conclusion, reducing poverty and inequality is not only vital for improving living standards but is also crucial for fostering long-term peace and stability. By addressing the root causes of conflict through targeted socio-economic interventions, it is possible to create a more equitable society, thereby mitigating the conditions that fuel violence in North Central Nigeria.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made to address the underlying socio-economic drivers of conflict in North Central Nigeria. Government and policymakers must prioritise the formulation and implementation of inclusive economic growth strategies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. Specific investments in agriculture, infrastructure, and education are critical to creating economic opportunities, particularly in rural areas where poverty is most severe. Additionally, addressing long-standing land ownership issues, especially in agrarian communities, could significantly reduce conflicts between farmers and herders, as competition over land is a major source of violence.

A key strategy for mitigating conflict is improving access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and social services. Policymakers should focus on providing equitable access to these services across North Central Nigeria, as such measures would address the root causes of poverty and inequality. Enhanced social infrastructure will not only improve the overall quality of life for residents but will also diminish the socio-economic disparities that exacerbate tensions and fuel conflict. It is imperative for the government to establish comprehensive and sustainable conflict resolution and

peacebuilding frameworks. These mechanisms should incorporate community-based approaches, emphasising dialogue and engagement between conflicting parties. Community involvement in the mediation process fosters understanding, cooperation, and trust, which are essential for long-term conflict resolution. Moreover, policymakers should ensure that conflict resolution efforts are tailored to the unique socio-political and economic conditions of the region, thereby ensuring more effective and lasting peace.

Suggestions for Further studies

Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how changes in poverty and inequality levels over time affect conflict dynamics in North Central Nigeria. Also, other future studies should consider a comparative study across different regions in Nigeria that could help identify specific contextual factors that exacerbate or mitigate the relationship between poverty, inequality, and violent conflict in Nigeria.

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