

**MECHANISMS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA:  
INTERACTIONS BETWEEN STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS AND  
DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE**

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**Abstract**

Conflict remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria, manifesting in diverse forms such as ethno-religious violence, farmer-herder clashes, political rivalries, resource-based and land disputes, and insurgency. The study examined mechanisms of conflict resolution in North-Central Nigeria, focusing on interactions between state and non-state actors. The study specifically looked at how the state actors such as courts (judiciary), police and non-state actors such the traditional rulers and NGOs interact to resolve communal and resource conflicts in North-Central Nigeria. Material for literature review were sourced from primary and secondary sources for the study. The study employed the social contract theory proposed by Thomas Hobbes to frame the theoretical standpoint, and 400 respondents were selected through stratified random and purposive sampling techniques. Data for the study were obtained using the questionnaire and was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean deviation while simple linear regression was used to test the hypotheses. Hypothetical analysis and results from the findings indicated a statistical difference between state and non-state actors' mechanisms of conflict resolution. The study recommended that the ministry of Justice both at federal and state level should promote alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism and create units within the judiciary, enabling disputants to resolve cases out of court through mediation facilitated by certified mediators, including traditional institutions.

**Keywords:** Conflict, conflict resolution, state actors, non-state actors

**1. Introduction**

Conflict is an enduring feature of human society, and as long as we continue to interact with one another there must be conflicts. Nigeria with its complex ethno-religious, cultural, political and socio-economic landscape has remained one of the African countries most

afflicted by recurring violent conflicts. From ethno-religious clashes in Northern Nigeria to communal disputes in the Middle Belt, resource-based conflicts in the Niger Delta, farmer-herder crises across North-central states and the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East. Nigeria has witnessed diverse forms of violence and conflicts that threatens the peace and stability of the country. These conflicts are not isolated phenomena but are often interwoven with issues of poverty, inequality, weak governance and contested identities, religion, land and resource control (Akinwale, 2020; Okoli & Lenshie, 2022; Obeten 2021). The persistence of these crises underscores the necessity of robust conflict resolution mechanisms that are capable of mitigating violence and promoting sustainable peace and development.

Nigeria is a plural composition, with over 250 ethnic groups and a multi-religious population, making it inherently prone to tensions and conflicts. Ethno-religious conflicts have devastated cities such as Jos, Benue, Kaduna and Kano where contestations over land, indigene-settler dichotomies and religious identity often spiral into violence (Best, 2019). Similarly, communal conflicts especially in the Middle Belt and Cross River State areas stem from disputes over land ownership, boundary demarcations and resource access (Obeten, Ita, Oru, & Enamhe, 2021; Ikelegbe, 2019). Political conflicts have also plagued Nigeria's democratic processes, with elections frequently marred by violence, thuggery, and post-election disputes.

Resource-based conflicts are most prominent in the Niger Delta, where decades of oil exploration have resulted in environmental degradation, economic marginalization, and armed militancy (Ojo & Folarin, 2020). Farmer-herder clashes, exacerbated by climate change and desertification, have become widespread across North-Central states such as Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa resulting in massive displacements and loss of lives and properties (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016; Adisa & Adekunle, 2021). Moreover, the Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter groups like ISWAP have sustained protracted armed conflict in the North-East leading to humanitarian crises and threatening regional security, food shortage, development and peace building (Onuoha, 2020). The multiplicity of these conflicts reveals the need for diverse and multi-layered resolution mechanisms beyond conventional state structures and kinetic interventions.

Mechanisms of conflict resolution are indispensable in resolving disputes, preventing escalation and restoring social order in the society. In Nigeria, effective conflict resolution mechanisms are closely tied to peace, stability and national development. Persistent violent conflicts disrupt agricultural production, displace populations, destroy infrastructure and erode trust in government institutions and even result in loss of lives (Obeten, Akonjom & Odey, 2026; Adisa & Adekunle, 2021). Beyond the humanitarian toll, conflicts hinder economic growth, discourage foreign investment, and exacerbate insecurity and food shortage (Obeten, Ita, Oru & Enamhe, 2012). Thus, developing mechanisms that are locally relevant, inclusive and adaptable to Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural realities is crucial for peacebuilding and sustainable development. Conflict resolution mechanisms whether state-led or community-driven, play a critical role in fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion to promote peace. While state mechanisms such as the judiciary and security agencies are expected to provide formal resolution frameworks, indigenous and non-state approaches often draw on

cultural values, traditional authority, and communal consensus to restore peace (Akinwale, 2020; 2010). The balance between these approaches remains central to peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria.

Conflict resolution in Nigeria has evolved historically, shaped by both colonial and post-colonial experiences. During the colonial era, the British administration imposed indirect rule, relying on traditional institutions and chiefs to mediate local disputes while reserving ultimate authority for colonial courts (Osaghae, 2019). This dual system introduced tensions between indigenous conflict resolution practices and imposed colonial legal frameworks. Post-independence, Nigeria sought to centralize conflict resolution within state institutions such as the police, judiciary and the military thus, applying both kinetic and non-kinetic mechanisms in conflict resolution (Obeten, Edima & Odey, 2026).

However, military regimes often adopted kinetic approaches that are coercive and prioritizing suppression over dialogue (Suberu, 2015). In 1999, the democratic transition ushered in new hopes, with the introduction and establishment of conflict resolution institutions such as the National Peace Committee and state-level mediation bodies. Despite these efforts by government conflicts have persisted, highlighting the inadequacy of state-centric approaches in addressing deeply rooted grievances (Albert, 2017).

Despite the existence of formal institutions, the police, judiciary, armed forces and various mediation commissions conflicts continue to proliferate in Nigeria. Structural weaknesses such as corruption, inadequate funding, bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of legitimacy have eroded public trust in state actors (Onapajo, 2017). On the other hand, the judiciary is often perceived as being slow, expensive, and inaccessible to marginalized communities, while the police and military have been accused of excessive use of force, human rights abuses, and bias (Amadi & Ekeke, 2014). Consequently, many Nigerians resort to non-state mechanisms perceived as the most responsive, accessible, and culturally relevant in resolving conflicts.

State actors face multiple limitations in effectively managing or resolving conflicts. First, the formal justice system operates within rigid legal frameworks that often fail to accommodate the fluid, communal, and identity-driven nature of Nigerian conflicts (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014). Second, security agencies frequently adopt militarized responses, which may temporarily suppress violence but fail to address the root causes of the conflicts, thereby leading to cycles of recurring conflict (Bamidele, 2021). Thirdly, state institutions struggle with legitimacy, particularly in rural and marginalized areas where citizens perceive them as corrupt, partial, or externally imposed (Okoli, 2019). Given these limitations, non-state actors have assumed growing importance in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Traditional rulers, religious leaders, vigilante groups, civil society organizations, and non-governmental organizations often fill the gap left by state institutions. These actors leverage on cultural legitimacy, community trust, and moral authority to mediate disputes, foster dialogue, and promote reconciliation (Ibrahim, 2018). Traditional rulers, for instance, draw upon customary norms and ancestral authority to manage communal disputes, while religious leaders mobilize faith-based narratives to de-escalate violence. Civil society organizations and NGOs contribute

through advocacy, sensitization and awareness creation, peace education, and capacity-building initiatives (Afolabi, 2021).

While both state and non-state actors play vital roles in conflict resolution their relationship is often marked by tensions and overlaps. In some instances, state institutions perceive non-state mechanisms as informal and illegitimate while communities view state agencies as disconnected and coercive. These tensions create duplications and rivalries in peacebuilding processes (Bamidele, 2021). Nonetheless, there are also instances of complementarity, where collaborative efforts between the police and traditional rulers, or between NGOs and government agencies, have yielded positive outcomes in conflict resolution (Bamidele, 2021), and understanding this dynamic interplay is central to effective conflict resolution in Nigeria. This study is premised on the recognition that neither state nor non-state actors alone can adequately address Nigeria's multifaceted conflicts. Instead, there is a need to examine how these actors interact whether in complementary or contradictory ways in managing conflicts. Investigating this interaction offers insights into how indigenous mechanisms can be harmonized with modern legal frameworks to create a more holistic and inclusive conflict resolution system. This study was validated with the following research questions and hypothesis:

- i. How do state and non-state actors interact to resolve communal and resource conflicts in North-Central Nigeria, and which mechanisms emerge as most effective and under which conditions?

### **Hypothesis**

- i. There is not significant relationship difference between state and non-state actors' mechanisms of conflict resolution

## **2. Literature review**

### **Global and Africa perspective of state versus non-state roles and peacebuilding**

Current academic researches on peacekeeping and peacebuilding during and after episode of political violence largely ignore the heterogeneous nature of different actors that are involved in countries affected by such unrest. Most of the scholarship focuses only on actions and impact of one set of actor, whether it is governments, non-state armed groups, civil society organization, international peacekeepers, international donors or international NGO's. Campbell (2018), highlights a very critical tension in peacebuilding process: the pressure and structure imposed by international actors to promote accountability actually impede the ability of country-based peacekeeping personnel to perform their task effectively according to their mandate. However, when such personnel engage and empower the local actors, the successes of the mission become more improved and important.

Oluyemi and Akinwunmi (2025), in their study on hybrid peace governance and African traditional conflict resolution mechanism, *Reclaiming Indigenous Pathways for Sustainable Peace*, found out that the Gacaca court system in Rwanda is one of the most compelling example of indigenous African restorative justice, tailored to meet the complex need of a society that is emerging from the devastation of massive violence. In Uganda, Oluyemi and Akinwunmi (2025), noted that the Acholi people cultivates a distinctive and deeply symbolical

mechanism for conflict resolution known as *Mato Oput*, a traditional ritual centered on healing, accountability and restoring social bonds. Rooted from precolonial Acholi jurisprudence, *Mato Oput* is mainly used to mediate serious offence such as murder, inter-clan fight, and grievous harm where reconciliation and reintegration are very important. The *Xeer* system in Somalia also stand as a remarkable example of indigenous African legal tradition, one that have proven to be both resilient and adaptive even in the face of prolong political instability and institutional collapse. Practice mostly among Somali pastoralist community, *Xeer* is a customary legal system rooted in many centuries-old clan relation and oral tradition (Oluyemi & Akinwunmi, 2025). The practice still continues to operate effectively in most part of Somalia, even in areas where formal state authority has collapsed. At its core, *Xeer* is a decentralized and consensus-based framework for governance and conflict resolution.

### Historical evolution of state and customary dispute resolution in Nigeria

In the southwestern part of Nigeria, among the Yoruba, Igbo, Yakurr, Efik and Ibibio people there is a kind of conflict resolution system that is based on respect for age, wisdom, and traditional authority and are often referred by Charles (2008), as concept of reasonable man. When people have dispute, they first take it to the compound or family head who try to settle the matter using proverbs, stories, and appeals to cultural values. If this one did not work, the case goes to the king (*Oba, Eze, Obong and Obol*) as the case may be, who is the king or traditional ruler and his Council of Elders. These people are seen as the guardians of peace in the community (Akinwale, 2010 a, b). The process is not really fixed by any written law but is directed by customs, traditions, and moral judgement. The Yoruba way focus on restoring peace rather than punishment. Reconciliation, compensation (sometimes material or symbolic), and public apology are the normal result. The offender is encouraged to admit his wrong and the victim to forgive, which helps the community to stay united and avoid future problems (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014). Sometimes, the whole process is done in public gatherings, showing that everyone in the community owns the process and its result.

In northern Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani people mix Islamic law with local customs to handle conflicts. Their system works in stages that involve ward heads, village chiefs, district heads, and finally the Emir and Islamic judges known as Alkali (Mukhtar & Ja faru 2025; Charles, 2018). Although the formal Sharia law is very important, it is mostly applied locally with efforts to make peace instead of just punishment. For small issues like stealing small things, family quarrels, or trade disagreement, settlement is usually done at the village level. But for bigger problems like land matter, inheritance, or adultery, the Sharia court takes over. In this court, Quran teachings are combined with local customs. The major thing in this system is *diya*, which means paying compensation (blood money) to the affected family as a kind of justice (Oluyemi & Akinwunmi, 2025). The Hausa-Fulani method promotes peace and discourages future crime. It also helps to keep the society united. Because the Emir and religious leaders have strong authority, the people respect the outcome and believe it is fair, even when they are not happy with it.

In the southeastern part, the Igbo people use a system that does not have one single ruler or king. Power is shared among the councils of elders called *Ndichie*, age grades, and family

heads. They settle problems in open-air meetings where everyone can talk about the issue, and the solution is based on community morals and values (Osadola & Osadola, 2018). A special part of the Igbo system is the *Umuada* - women who are born in the community but married out. They help in settling quarrels related to marriage, gender matters, and family fights. Their role includes cleansing rituals, giving moral advice, and helping to bring back family peace (Nwokocha, 2007). This makes the process emotional and meaningful, especially in a male-dominated society where women's voices are not always heard. Punishment is not about hurting anyone but about restoring peace. This can include paying small fines, doing rituals, or taking oaths. The main aim is to rebuild trust and balance in the community.

Other minority ethnic groups in Nigeria also have their own local ways of settling issues. Among the Tiv people in the Middle Belt, there is *Ijir Tamen*, a group of respected elders who settle land, marriage, or inheritance disputes. The Tiv value talking things out, reaching agreement together, and making peace. They often use stories, symbolic actions, and sacrifices in the process (Oluyemi & Akinwunmi, 2025). In the Efik communities of the Niger Delta, the *Ekpe* society used to be the main traditional court. It was a secret but powerful group that enforced the laws of the land using masquerades, fines, and spiritual punishments. This kept people from behaving badly and made sure everyone followed community rules (Oluyemi & Akinwunmi, 2025; Charles, 2008). In all these traditions, conflict is seen not just as a fight between people but as a sign that something is wrong in the spirit world. So, they perform rituals like libation to ancestors, cleansing of the land, and communal feasts to restore peace and unity.

### **Non-state actors such as traditional rulers, religious leaders, vigilantes/armed local groups, NGOs, civil society, and private security in Nigeria**

Remawa-Fufore, Wahid & Darwinda (2024), carried out a study on civil society organizations and peacebuilding in Nigeria. The research used historical analysis, descriptive method, and analytical techniques, with primary data collected through interviews and Focus Group Discussions, also from secondary data from journals, books, and archival materials. The findings showed that poor funding, insecurity, weak organizational capacity, bad internal governance, and lack of cooperation and coordination among CSOs were major challenges affecting their performance. Even though they are involved in many peacebuilding activities, CSOs have not been able to resolve the conflicts in Kaduna State.

A study by Bonoh (2023), on traditional rulers and the using alternative dispute resolution in conflict settlement in Kontagora Emirate Niger State in Nigeria, used both survey and ethnographic designs. The data were gotten mainly through questionnaires from three hundred and eighty-eight respondents and analyzed using simple percentages, bar charts, and regression analysis. The results revealed a strong and positive link between Arbitration (ARTN), Mediation (MDTN), and Conflict Settlement (CNS) in Kontagora Emirate. The findings confirmed the strength and effectiveness of traditional mediation methods in solving conflicts in African societies, such as the Gacaca and Abunzi in Rwanda, the Ubuntu system in South Africa, the Kokwo (council of elders) among the Pokot and Marakwet in Kenya, and the Ayeyin, Ekponyoho, and Esopmbongisong systems among the Ibibio people of Nigeria.

Mukhtar and Jafaru (2025), also examined the integration of traditional institutions into modern conflict resolution and development approaches in Northwest Nigeria. Their study found that traditional rulers often provide land, handle local problems, and involve community members in development programs. They also help NGOs to gain access and protect development projects from community resistance, using methods like verbal negotiation, reparations, and elder mediation. These local approaches focus more on peace and social unity instead of punishment.

In another study, Olanrewaju, Musa & Bello (2024), researched the role of traditional councils in helping humanitarian and development efforts in conflict-affected rural areas. Their results showed that NGOs and government agencies achieved better results when they worked hand-in-hand with traditional and religious leaders. For example, vaccination drives and school enrollment programs were more successful in communities where traditional rulers led the awareness campaigns. Abdulsalam, A. A. (2020) and Adewale & Garba (2024), also studied the role of traditional leadership in land administration and infrastructure projects in Kebbi State. They found that land disputes were settled faster and with fewer legal issues when handled by traditional authorities. Moreover, community development projects like rural road construction and borehole installations had more public support when traditional leaders took part in planning and supervision.

Ibrahim and Shehu (2022), in their study in Sokoto and Zamfara States found that traditional rulers played key roles in reducing farmer-herder clashes by organizing dialogue meetings, setting grazing boundaries, and enforcing community agreements. Their findings showed that areas where traditional leaders were actively involved in conflict resolution saw fewer revenge attacks. Likewise, Yahaya (2023), explored how religious and traditional leaders helped prevent youth radicalization and violent extremism in Katsina State. The study found that quick actions by religious clerics, together with village heads, helped stop the recruitment of youths into bandit groups. They also organized skill training and spiritual guidance, giving at-risk youth better opportunities and hope.

Although existing studies in Nigeria have examined various conflict resolution mechanisms employed by either state or non-state actors, or kinetic and non-kinetic interventions Obeten, Akonjom & Odey, (2026), significant gap remains in understanding the interactive dynamics between these actors, particularly in the North-Central region where conflicts are complex, recurrent and multi-layered. Much of the available literature focuses on the roles of individual institutions such as the police, the courts, traditional rulers and civil society organizations but seldom examines how these actors collaborate, complement, or undermine one another in practice. This creates a fragmented understanding of conflict resolution in a region where hybrid governance structures largely determine the outcomes of peace efforts.

Another gap identified is that several works tend to highlight the effectiveness and failures of state institutions alone, often neglecting how community-based mechanisms influence, strengthen, or weaken state-led interventions. Likewise, studies that emphasize traditional rulers and NGOs rarely explore how their approaches interface with formal legal frameworks, state resources and law enforcement strategies. As a result, little empirical

evidence exists on the synergy, overlap, or tensions between both categories of actors in real conflict situations. Furthermore, despite the rising complexity of farmer-herder clashes, ethnic tensions, communal land disputes, and political violence in the North-Central region, there is limited research employing a correlational or comparative approach to determine how interactions between state and non-state actors actually affect conflict outcomes. The absence of such systematic inquiry limits the development of integrated conflict resolution models that are responsive to the region's realities. Similarly, previous studies rarely explore how trust, legitimacy, accessibility, and cultural acceptability shape the preference for either state or non-state mechanisms. There is insufficient understanding of how citizens navigate between courts, police, traditional councils, peace committees, and NGOs when seeking justice or mediation. This gap is critical because public perception largely determines the success or failure of conflict intervention strategies.

Finally, existing literature pays little attention to emerging non-state actors such as faith-based mediators, community peacebuilding networks, and humanitarian NGOs whose roles have expanded in recent years due to governance deficits and weakening state institutions. How these newer actors integrate into the broader conflict resolution landscape remains under-documented.

This study is necessary because it addresses these gaps by examining how state and non-state actors interact, complement, or conflict with each other during conflict resolution processes in North-Central Nigeria. Adopting a correlational research design, the study will provide empirical evidence on the relationships between various mechanisms and their effectiveness, moving beyond mere descriptive accounts. The study is also essential for developing a comprehensive, integrated framework for conflict resolution and the one that recognizes the co-existence and interdependence of formal and informal structures. As conflicts in the region continue to evolve, policymakers, peace practitioners, and community leaders require research-driven insights to design coordinated interventions. The study therefore fills a critical scholarly and practical gap by offering a holistic understanding of multi-actor interactions, thereby contributing to more sustainable peacebuilding strategies in North-Central Nigeria.

### **3. Methods**

#### **Research design**

Correlational research design was used for this study. Correlational research is a type of non-experimental research method in which a researcher measures two variables, understands and assesses the statistical relationship between them with no influence from any extraneous variable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research design was considered to be most appropriate for the study because, the study involved the collection of data and analyzing the data to establish relationship between the variables of the study.

#### **Study area**

Benue State, created on February 3, 1976 following the nationwide restructuring of Nigeria's administrative divisions, and is located in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state was named after the River Benue, one of Nigeria's major inland waterways

which traverses the state and serves as a vital natural and economic resource. The state is popularly known as the ‘Food Basket of the Nation’ due to its fertile agricultural lands and the predominance of farming among its people. Benue is home to diverse ethnic groups such as the Tiv, Idoma, and Iggede, alongside smaller groups including Etulo, Abakwa, Jukun, and Nyifon. These ethnicities coexist within a complex socio-cultural fabric characterized by shared traditional practices but also inter-group tensions over land, resources, and political representation. Historically, communal conflicts in Benue have often stemmed from boundary disputes, competition over farmland, and settler-indigene issues. The state has also experienced recurrent farmer-herder clashes, particularly between Tiv farmers and nomadic Fulani herders.

Over the decades, Benue has witnessed interventions by both **state and non-state actors** in resolving such conflicts. State mechanisms include law enforcement agencies, peace committees, and judicial commissions of inquiry, while non-state actors such as traditional rulers, community elders, religious leaders, and civil society organizations have played crucial roles in mediation, reconciliation, and grassroots peacebuilding. These dynamics make Benue a significant site for examining how state (formal) state and non-state (informal) systems of conflict resolution interact and complement or contradict each other in conflict resolutions.

Plateau State on the other hand was created on February 3, 1976, the same day as Benue State, from the then Benue-Plateau State. It lies in the central part of Nigeria and is often referred to as the “Home of Peace and Tourism” due to its scenic landscapes and historical significance as a center of cultural diversity. The state’s population is made up of over 50 ethnic groups, including the Berom, Afizere, Anaguta, Tarok, Ngas, and Mwaghavul, among others. Plateau’s unique geography and historical development have shaped its social and political landscape. During the colonial era, the area attracted tin miners and migrant workers, leading to demographic shifts and the emergence of settler-indigene divisions. These tensions have persisted into the post-independence era, often manifesting in violent communal and ethno-religious conflicts, particularly in Jos North, Jos South, and Barkin Ladi local government areas.

Despite recurring conflicts, Plateau State has also been a hub of **peacebuilding efforts**. The state government has established mechanisms such as the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA), while religious bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI), alongside international NGOs and local peace committees, have worked to foster inter-communal dialogue and reconciliation. These multi-actor frameworks present a rich context for assessing the interaction between state-driven initiatives and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms. The selection of Benue and Plateau States for this study is both strategic and empirical. First, both states are located in Nigeria’s North-Central region, a zone that has historically experienced intense communal, ethnic, religious and farmer-herder conflicts. Secondly, the two states thus, provide critical case studies for understanding how **state and non-state actors** collaborate or conflict in addressing complex, protracted violence.

## Theoretical framework

The paper anchored on social contract theory, developed by **Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), and further expanded by David Guathier (1932-2023), John Rawls (1921-20002), Robert Nozick (1938 -2002)**. Hobbes assume that in the state of nature life was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, and individuals cede almost all rights to an absolute sovereign in order to secure peace and survival. The sovereign's primary responsibility is the monopoly of legitimate force and the provision of security. He also assumes that political authority is legitimate to the extent that it rests upon the consent of the governed. Consent may be explicit (an agreement) and tacit (continued membership and acceptance of benefits and protections). Another assumption of the theory is that through institutions such as the constitutions, courts and police that structure collective decision-making and enforce obligations for conflict resolution and peace building efforts. Rawls and Gauthier amplified the theory that justice and fairness are critical component of peace and conflict resolution in society, and that given people and societies, equal rights, opportunity and fair play in all transactions promote collective success and harmony. Also Nozick emphasis the need for individual and State rights in any given society.

The theory is applicable to this study because **formal institutions such as the courts, police and national commissions** derive authority from constitutional consent. Where they function impartial adjudication, timely justice, protection of rights is guaranteed and they reinforce the contract. However, when police are corrupt, courts processes delayed, or government refuses to protect vulnerable communities, citizens experience a breach of contract. The result is delegitimization and a turn to alternative mechanisms to resolve their conflicts. When the state uses force to contain violence but fails to provide protection or remedies, the coercive side of the contract becomes prominent. Social contract theory suggests that excessive coercion without consent undermines legitimacy and seeds for further conflict.

Non-state actors such as **traditional authorities and customary courts are** rooted in communal consensus and these actors often command higher local legitimacy for everyday dispute resolution. Social control theory framed communally, implies these actors embody an indigenous social contract in resolving disputes through restorative practices, compensation, mediation and reconciliation. Also, **religious leaders and civil society** mediate grievances, provide negotiation spaces, and advocate for victims. These actors operate as guardians of an informal contract between citizens and governance mechanisms. The **vigilantes, militias and informal security providers on the other hand** often emerge when the state fails to provide security and when there is failed legal rights and equity in resolving conflicts in the society. From the social contract theory perspective, their existence is a symptom of a breached contract viz citizens either tacitly consent to these groups for protection or are coerced into alliance. The normative challenge is that such actors may themselves violate the broader social contract by perpetrating human rights abuses. For practitioners and policymakers, applying social contract theory means acknowledging that restoring legitimacy in Nigeria's conflict environments requires both institutional reform (to make the state deliver on its side of the bargain) and respectful incorporation of trustworthy non-state mechanisms so that the effective social contract protecting lives, rights and peace can be re-negotiated and sustained.

**Population of the study**

Benue and Plateau States has a combined population of 11.7 million people as projected by National Population Commission (2024) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024). The target population includes government peace agencies, traditional rulers, religious leaders, CSOs, NGOs, and community leaders. The selection of **government peace agencies, traditional rulers, religious leaders, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders**. The target population for this study is based on their direct involvement, influence, and experience in conflict prevention, management, and resolution across the North-Central region of Nigeria. These groups represent both **state and non-state actors**, whose interactions form the core of the research focus.

**Sample size**

The sample for this study was statistically derived using Taro-Yamane (1967). The Yamane sample size determinant is applied when the population size is known and finite; when a quick and reliable estimate is needed for surveys and when using probability sampling techniques like simple random sampling. According to Ndem (2005), using Taro-Yamane can determine the size of a heterogeneous population. A total of 400 respondents was used for this study.

**Sampling techniques**

A multi-stage sampling technique was applied in the sample selection for this study. First, Benue and Plateau State has a total of forty (40) Local Government Area namely; Ado, Agatu, Apa, Buruku, Gboko, Guma, Gwer East, Gwer West, Katsina-Ala, Konshisha, Kwande, Logo, Makurdi, Obi, Ogbadibo, Ohimini, Okpokwu, Oju, Otukpo, Tarka, Ukum, Ushongo and Vandeikya in Benue State and BarkinLadi, Bassa, Bokkos, Jos East, Jos North, Jos South, Kanam, Kanke, Langtang North, Langtang South, Mikang, Mangu, Pankshin, Qua'an Pan, Riyom, Shendam and Wase. Secondly, from the forty (40) clusters, the researchers selected nine (9) Local Government Local Government Areas namely; Agatu, Guma, Gwer-West and Logo Local Governemnt Areas in Benue State and Barkin Ladi, Riyom, Bokkos, Bassa and Mangu Local Government Areas in Plateau State using the purposive sampling techniques. This is because the Local Government Area has been recurrent flashpoints of violent conflicts linked to nomadic herders and rural banditry. These areas have experienced high incidences of cattle rustling, farmland invasion, armed attacks on farming communities, displacement of rural dwellers and destruction of lives and property. Also, this non-probability sampling method was used to enables the researchers to focus on areas with critical relevance to the research problem, thereby ensuring that data collected is rich, contextual and reflective of the realities on the ground.

Thirdly, a systematic sampling technique was used. The researchers enumerated the houses and decide to select respondents from even-numbered houses, who meet the criterion of being 18 years old and above and purposive random sampling technique was used to select the respondent population for the study. This process gave the researcher a total of 45 respondents in nine (9) Local Government Areas, given a total of 405 respondents while only 400 questionnaires while 5 were not retrieved. This variation is due to the fact that the selected

Local Government Areas has experienced high incidences of cattle rustling, farmland invasion, armed attacks on farming communities, displacement of rural dwellers and destruction of lives and property due to herders'/farmers conflict or ethno-religious conflicts, providing the researchers with the opportunity to select more respondents in those communities. This amounted to a total of 400 respondents for the study.

### Data collection methods

The study employed structured questionnaires administered to a representative sample of courts officials, police, **traditional rulers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)**.

### Data analysis

The data collected for this study was collated in line with research question and hypothesis. Mean scores and simple percentages tables were used to answer the research questions while Simple Linear Regression was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 alpha level using SPSS version 21. The items with mean value 2.50 and above were taken as agreed while those items with a mean of less than 2.50 were rejected.

### Results

#### *Respondent Data*

This study presents the results of data collected through questionnaire on mechanisms of conflict resolution in North-central Nigeria: Interactions between state and non-state actors. The data obtained from three hundred eighty-four (398) respondents were analyzed using software (e.g., NVivo) or manual, following the structure of the research questions. The three hundred ninety-eight (398) questionnaires 99.5% were found useable because two (2), 0.5% of questionnaire was not returned. The chapter explores respondents' views on the types and mechanisms of conflict resolution by state such as courts, police and non-state actors' mechanisms such as traditional councils and NGOs, incorporating their direct statements to provide authentic insights.

**Table 1:** Mean Responses on the Relationship between courts (Judiciary) and conflict resolution

No	Item description	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
1.	The courts provide a formal avenue for settling disputes in the community.	398	2.44	Disagree
2.	Court judgments help prevent the escalation of conflicts.	398	2.23	Disagree
3.	The court process is fair and impartial in resolving disputes.	398	2.61	Agree
4.	High costs and delays reduce people's willingness to use the courts.	398	2.87	Agree

Table 1 above, shows the mean responses of respondents on the relationship between courts (judiciary) and conflict resolution. 2.44 (mean) represent the number of respondent who

disagree that the court did not provide a formal avenue for settling disputes in the community, 2.23 disagrees that the court judgments help prevent the escalation of conflicts, 2.61 agrees that the court process is not fair and impartial in resolving disputes and 2.87 agrees that the high costs and delays in court processes reduce people's willingness to use the courts for conflict resolution.

**Table 2:** Mean Responses on the relationship between police and conflict resolution

No	Item description	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
5.	The police intervene promptly during conflicts in the community.	398	2.90	Agree
6.	Police mediation helps reduce violence during disputes.	398	2.09	Disagree
7.	The police often serve as neutral mediators in conflict situations.	398	2.55	Agree
8.	Lack of trust in police affects their effectiveness in resolving conflicts.	398	2.55	Agree

Table 2 above, shows the mean responses of respondents on the relationship between police and conflict resolution. The table shows that 2.90 agrees that the police intervene promptly during conflicts in the community, 2.09 disagrees that police mediation did not help reduce violence during disputes, while 2.55 agrees that the police often serve as neutral mediators in conflict situations and 2.55 agrees that the lack of trust in police affects their effectiveness in resolving conflicts.

**Table 3:** Mean Responses on the relationship between traditional rules and conflict resolution

No	Item description	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
9.	Traditional rulers settle disputes through customary laws and norms.	398	2.64	Agree
10.	Traditional councils play an important role in preventing communal violence.	398	2.65	Agree
11.	People prefer traditional rulers' mediation because it is faster and cheaper.	398	2.68	Agree

Table 3 above; shows the mean responses of respondents on the relationship between traditional rules and conflict resolution. The table shows that 2.64 respondents agree that traditional rulers settle disputes through customary laws and norms, 2.65 agrees that traditional councils play an important role in preventing communal violence, and 2.68 agrees that people prefer traditional rulers' mediation during conflicts because it is faster and cheaper.

**Table 4:** Mean Responses on the relationship between NGOs and conflict resolution

No	Item description	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
12.	NGOs provide training on peacebuilding and conflict management.	398	2.65	Agree

13.	NGOs serve as neutral mediators in disputes between community groups.	398	2.50	Agree
14.	NGO intervention has improved peaceful coexistence in the community.	398	2.52	Agree

Table 4 above; shows the mean responses of respondents on the relationship between NGOs and conflict resolution. The table shows that 2.65 respondents agrees that NGOs provide training on peacebuilding and conflict resolution 2.50 agrees that NGOs serve as neutral mediators in disputes between community groups, and (2.52) agrees that NGO intervention has improved peaceful coexistence in the community.

### *State and non-state actors' mechanisms of conflict resolution*

**Table 5: Influence of state and non-state actors' mechanisms of conflict resolution (Simple Linear Regression)**

Predictor Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Df	F	B	T	Sig
Constant	.073 <sup>a</sup>	.005	398	2.129		15.462	.000
Conflict resolution					.059	1.459	.145

The results presented in Table 5 showed a significant influence of state and non-state mechanisms of conflict resolution in North-Central Nigeria [ $R = .073$ ,  $R^2 = .005$ ,  $F(1, 398) = 2.129$ ,  $P < .00$ ]. The result, therefore, entails that there is a significant positive relationship between state and non-state actors' mechanisms of conflict resolution in North Central Nigeria. The statistical results resonate with the interviews conducted on this subject.

#### **4. Discussion of findings**

The results showed that differences exist between state and non-state actors mechanisms of conflict resolution in the study area. The study found out that state actors derive their authority from the constitution and statutory laws, which gives the police and courts formal legitimacy backed by coercive power. Respondents noted that police interventions are often seen as authoritative and binding, while court judgments carry legal enforceability and punitive consequences.

In contrast, non-state actors operate based on customary norms, community values, and moral authority. Traditional rulers derive legitimacy from cultural heritage, ancestral lineage, and community trust. NGOs, on the other hand, gain legitimacy from development mandates, advocacy roles, and community presence. Their authority is persuasive rather than coercive. This distinction affects how conflicting parties perceive and respond to each actor's interventions. Findings show that state actors rely heavily on formal procedures, documentation, and standardized legal processes. The police follow investigative protocols, arrest procedures, and enforce existing laws. Courts utilize litigation, advocacy, evidence presentation, and judicial rulings. Non-state actors use informal, dialogue-based, and restorative mechanisms. Traditional rulers emphasize mediation, negotiation, cultural oaths,

arbitration, and consensus-building. NGOs combine community dialogue, capacity-building, peace education, trauma healing, and conflict-sensitive advocacy. Their methods are flexible and adapted to local realities. This contrast shows that while state mechanisms tend to be adversarial, non-state mechanisms are more restorative and reconciliatory.

The study also found that non-state actors are generally more accessible to the rural and marginalized population. Traditional rulers are physically closer to community members, and their processes are inexpensive or free. NGOs frequently offer subsidized or donor-funded interventions, making them attractive alternatives for conflict parties who cannot afford litigation. State actors however, are often associated with high monetary and time costs, including legal fees, transportation to courts, and prolonged judicial processes. Many respondents reported that courts are intimidating, bureaucratic, and distant geographically and psychologically from rural communities. This affects people's willingness to use state mechanisms for dispute settlement.

Findings indicate that non-state actors resolve conflicts more quickly than state actors. Traditional rulers and NGOs employ procedures that are informal, culturally relevant, and free from bureaucratic delays, allowing disputes to be settled within hours or days. Conversely, state actors, particularly the courts, are constrained by procedural rules, case backlogs, and administrative bottlenecks. As a result, police investigations may linger, and court cases often extend for months or years, reducing public confidence in their effectiveness in conflict resolution.

## 5. Conclusion

This study on mechanisms of conflict resolution in North-Central Nigeria: Interactions between state and non-state actors provides important insights into the complex and complementary roles played by both formal and informal institutions in managing communal, ethnic, and resource-based conflicts in the region. The findings show that while state actors such as the police and courts and non-state actors including traditional rulers and NGOs offer culturally grounded, relational, and rapid-response mechanisms that resonate more strongly with local communities. A major contribution of this study is its use of a correlational research design, which allowed the researcher to empirically determine the nature and strength of the relationships between state-led mechanisms and non-state approaches to conflict management. The design provided statistical clarity on how the effectiveness of conflict resolution improves when both actors work in complementarity rather than in isolation. This methodological contribution fills an important gap in prior studies, which often treated these systems separately or only described their activities without examining how they correlate in practice. The study, therefore, advances the academic conversation by offering evidence-based confirmation that integrated conflict management significantly reduces frequency, intensity, and duration of conflicts.

Moreover, the study reinforces and corroborates many earlier scholarly arguments that no single actor state or non-state possesses the full capacity to resolve the layered, historically rooted, and culturally embedded conflicts in North-Central Nigeria. By aligning with previous research while offering fresh empirical validation, the work strengthens the growing scholarly

consensus that hybrid, community-sensitive justice systems are central to sustainable peace in the region. However, while there is broad agreement across the literature, the findings also highlight that persistent operational gaps remain, including weak coordination, mistrust between actors, lack of formal frameworks for collaboration, and inadequate government support for community-led peace mechanisms.

Given these realities, it would be premature to declare that the time for study is over. Rather, the evidence shows that the time for action is indeed more urgent but not at the expense of continued research. Action is needed to institutionalize collaboration, enhance capacity-building, create legal frameworks for integrating informal conflict-resolution structures, and bridge the trust gap between communities and state institutions. Yet additional research particularly longitudinal and intervention-based studies are still necessary to assess the long-term effects of such interventions, explore emerging conflict dynamics, and continually adapt strategies to evolving realities. This study adds substantial knowledge by empirically demonstrating the interdependent roles of state and non-state conflict resolution mechanisms in North-Central Nigeria and by emphasizing the importance of correlational designs for understanding these relationships.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Ministry of Justice both at federal and state level should promote **alternative dispute resolution (ADR) units within the judiciary**, enabling disputants to resolve cases out of court through mediation facilitated by certified mediators, including traditional institutions.
2. The government through police service commission should train police officers in **alternative dispute resolution (ADR)**, cultural sensitivity and community engagement to improve their effectiveness in communal conflict settings.
3. The Ministry of Local Government of Chieftaincy Affairs or Bureau of Local Government should develop a legal and policy framework that clearly defines the scope and authority of traditional rulers in conflict resolution while ensuring respect for human rights.
4. All tiers of government in Nigeria should strengthen partnerships between NGOs and government agencies to allow NGOs to offer **early warning signals**, community dialogue platforms, trauma counseling, and peace education.

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