Subsistence Farming in Northern Nigeria: Insecurity, Survival, and the Struggle for Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex world of subsistence farming in Northern Nigeria, often shrouded in insecurity, employing participant observation as the primary research method. Conducted in vulnerable communities in Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto States, the study highlights how increasing violence by armed bandits has devastated livelihoods in rural areas, caused displacement, and led to food insecurity. Personal experience of engaging closely with farming households reveals how the community heavily depends on land passed down through generations, along with daily farming tasks and cultural practices that are now under threat. Thematic findings of the study indicate a decline in the agricultural system, displacement, malnutrition, social breakdown, and trauma symptoms among villagers, particularly women and children. Despite lacking formal protection or support, many communities demonstrate commendable resilience by sharing resources, maintaining spiritual faith, and refusing to abandon their homes. The findings highlight a humanitarian and development crisis that has overcome the issue of insecurity and a problem crossing family and national boundaries that affects health, education, the economy, and dignity. The paper calls for government intervention to promptly restore safety in rural areas, support displaced farmers, re-establish education, and strengthen local structures. Without such intervention, these communities risk perpetual socio-economic failure.

Keywords: food insecurity; subsistence farming; agricultural collapse; banditry

INTRODUCTION

In Northern Nigeria, subsistence agriculture is the primary source of livelihood in rural villages, where small-scale production of staple crops, including millet, sorghum, maize, cassava, yams, and root crops, is the primary practice. Most of these households engage in subsistence production, which is sold in local markets when there is an excess. About 80 per cent of the agricultural labour force in the country is composed of the labour force in this region, which does much to national food security (Majekodunmi et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, subsistence farmers in the north face widespread insecurity. Rural communities are especially prone to armed bandits and Islamist insurgency, especially Boko Haram, which raid farms and kidnap farmers, in addition to extortionate taxes being levied that prevent farming. According to a 2024 Reuters investigation, gangs in Katsina slaughter farmers and extort millions in Naira per village, creating hunger hotspots as entire villages give up their fields (Adetayo & Kingimi, 2024).

Figure 1 depicts that incidences of violence involving both Boko Haram and herder-farmer crises have been on the increase since 2010, with herder-farmer violence overtaking Boko Haram-related violence by 2018. Such a change highlights various forms of rural insecurity, accompanied by growing risks to agricultural livelihoods in Northern Nigeria.

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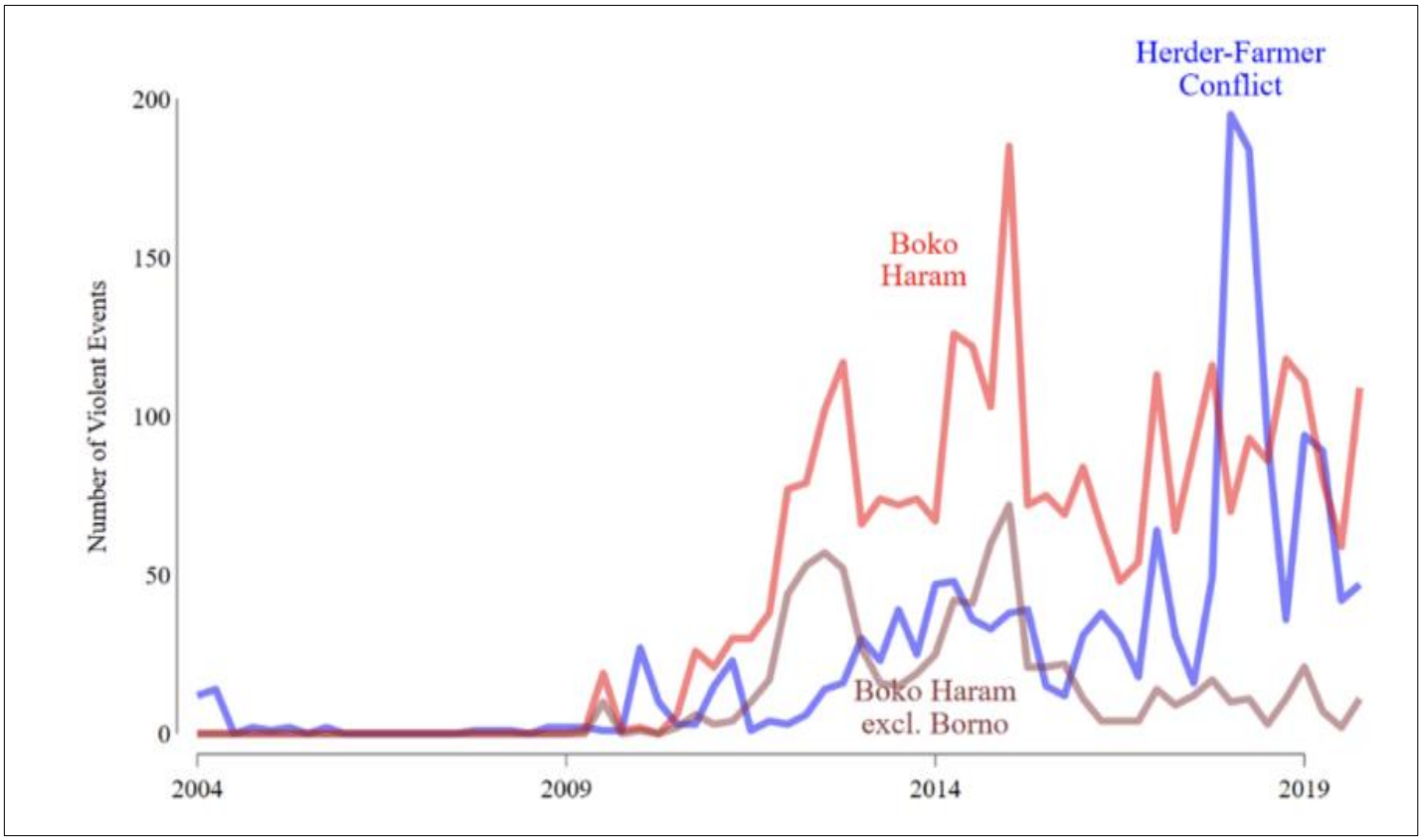
Figure 1. Violent Events in Nigeria, 2004-2019



Source:(Bloem et al., 2025)

The effects of violence on agriculture are known. Numerous reports indicate that due to the presence of insurgencies, such as Boko Haram, the production intensity is significantly reduced, together with employed farm labour in the agricultural economy (especially in the cultivation of key staples such as rice, sorghum, maize, cassava, yams, and soybeans) (Adelaja & George, 2019). With the activities of insecurity, for example, in Benue State, crop and livestock yields were found to have declined significantly, which verifies the negative impact on household income (Ushahemba Ijirshar et al., 2025).

Adding to these menaces is the pressure on the environment. Northern Nigeria is situated in the Sudano-Sahelian region, facing a desertification process, unreliable rainfall, and water scarcity, which are exacerbated by climate change, thereby affecting the potential of agriculture (Kamta et al., 2020). These ecological stressors disrupt the planting cycle, lower soil fertility, and contribute to the fragility of subsistence farmers. However, some farmers have managed to survive by adopting adaptive livelihoods, including crop-livestock integration, alternative sources of income off the farm, crop diversification, and migration to safer areas. Agroforestry, indigenous practices, use of *zai* pits, and water harvesting are some climate-smart practices that are gaining adoption to strengthen against climatic fluctuations (Akinkuolie et al., 2024). Giant-sized projects, such as the World Bank's Agro-Climatic Resilience in Semi-Arid Landscapes (ACReSAL) project, have undertaken efforts to restore degraded land, streamline water use, and reconfigure land access rights and interests to mitigate conflicts between herders and farmers.

The study presents an exclusive contribution to the literature by studying intersection points between insecurity, agricultural practices, and resilience strategies in the day-to-day experiences of subsistence farmers in Northern Nigeria. This area does not have such a thorough analysis. In contrast to earlier studies that address insecurity, environmental stress, or livelihood adaptation independently, this research aims to integrate them within the context of understanding how farmers utilise locally based coping strategies and knowledge systems to maintain their livelihoods. Participant observation allows for the recording of the subtle and contextually sensitive practices in informal networks and institutions to offer an insight into resilience processes in the persisting circumstances of insecurity.

Research Objective

To explore how local subsistence farmers face insecurity in Northern Nigeria and adapt to it with locally situated survival mechanisms and resilience, by surveying day-to-day coping mechanisms in agricultural means of living through participant observation.

Research Questions

1. How does ongoing insecurity influence the agricultural practices and livelihood decisions of subsistence farmers in Northern Nigeria?
2. What specific coping and survival strategies do these farmers adopt in response to armed violence and environmental stressors?
3. How do local knowledge systems, community networks, and informal institutions support farmers' resilience under conditions of prolonged insecurity?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Subsistence Farming and Rural Livelihoods

Smallholders ' subsistence farming in Northern Nigeria is low-input, labour-intensive, and mainly for household consumption (E Sadiku et al., 2019). Traditional approaches, low mechanicalization, and the use of seasonal rain constitute the life of farmers. Research also points to the fact that these farming populations are further vulnerable to land tenure insecurity, inability to access credit facilities, and poor infrastructure (Bloem et al., 2025). Violent conflict is becoming a more prominent source of vulnerability for smallholder farming households. This is particularly true in nations with little ability to manage these disputes.

There are at least two variables that increase this risk. First, agricultural seasons, droughts, and disputed access to natural resources like land and water are frequently strongly associated with temporal and spatial patterns of conflict, bringing agricultural households close to one another. Second, banks and insurance markets, among other financial markets in low- and middle-income nations, frequently perform poorly in rural and agricultural environments, and conflicts further impede their functioning (Bloem et al., 2025).

Impacts on Agricultural Production

There is always evidence in the studies that bandit occupancies drive the farmers out of their farms, eradicating crops and animals. Numerous reports document cases of entire villages being deprived of their farmers. It is also observed that bandit raids usually result in instances of villages and farms being left abandoned as the granaries are burnt and the cattle are stolen (Thompson, 2025). The quantitative surveys validate steep drops in yields. As such, average farm income decreased by approximately a third, and maize yields dropped by about half during bandit attacks in Katsina State (Ibrahim et al., 2023). They indicate that maize production decreases by 6,751.5 kg to 3,069 kg per farm because of bandit assaults (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Such losses translate to significant losses for many small farms when raided, causing their production to drop to zero.

Farmlands have been deserted, crops burned down, and market access corrupted with the help of armed conflict and violence (Baba Mamman, 2020). The farmers are under constant attack, especially in the Borno, Zamfara, and Kaduna regions, which makes them unable to plant or harvest. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022), it is estimated that more than 8 million citizens of the Northeast region of Nigeria require food security. Many of them were independent farmers until recently. Insecurity has even touched agricultural extension services, limited access to humanitarian aid, and investments in rural regions (Nwankpa, 2024). Moreover, the absence of male breadwinners in war violence or migration to seek livelihoods elsewhere has subjected more women and children to farming activities that lack support.

Effects on Food Security and Livelihoods

The immediate destruction of farming in bandit-stricken land destroys food security. Researchers associate annual violence with immediate food shortages and increased market prices. According to (Nwankpa, 2024),

food shortages, rising prices, malnutrition, and poverty are associated with the eruption of banditry. (Owigho et al., 2023) Also, records show that farmer attacks have tremendously affected the prices of staple foodstuffs due to limited supply. In most cases, attacks interfere with local markets and transport corridors, hence even the food available does not reach the rural shops, leading to the communities being driven into hunger. This, in practice, implies that during lean periods, many households in rural areas cannot afford or even access staple foods unless they are aided externally.

Crop effects on livelihood are not the only impact. Bandits frequently steal livestock and agricultural equipment, further weakening rural prosperity. When draft animals are lost and there is no credit, even non-destroyed farmers are without resources to recover. The infrastructure is also destroyed. (Thompson, 2025) records that banditries have blocked roads and markets, thus disconnecting the domestic food chains. Besides, communities experiencing siege sometimes must import emergency food or depend on aid, pointing to the loss of local self-sufficiency.

Displacement, Socioeconomic Consequences, and Psychological Impact

The personal cost of bandit violence is huge. Massive displacement has been caused by bandit attacks, which have taken subsistence farmers off their land. According to (Okoli et al., 2025), more than 2,600 people were killed and approximately 1 million new internally displaced individuals (IDPs) in 2021 in northern Nigeria because of banditry. The movement of people on a large scale is equally observed by (Adeola Aderayo et al., 2025) in other states. Such upheavals form a humanitarian crisis, as the displaced farmers lose access to their fields and require emergency aid to survive. Fear propagates even in the so-called relatively stable regions: too many families are moving out, leaving fields empty during the planting season. According to (Owigho et al., 2023), bandits destroyed the livelihood of farmers by stealing goods, extortion, and threatening people. A place in the traditional economy of the country is becoming bankrupt: markets are getting smaller in the local area, schools are closing, and the informal safety net is disappearing in the eyes of observers.

Banditry's psychological and social consequences are drastic yet not measured as frequently. One of the few direct evaluations is offered by (Oru Takim et al., 2024), who report the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and PTSD-like symptoms in raid survivors. They tell us that their endless fear of the bandits' attacks is a source of chronic stress, which destroys not only their family life but also their mental health. There is also an indication of severe trauma based on surveys: e.g., Ibrahim et al. (2023) find that farmers assessed psychological trauma almost at the same level as physical displacement (mean 4.41/5). This reinforces that fear and stress are almost as important as material losses among the affected communities.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach, utilising long-term participant observation, to investigate how subsistence farmers in Northern Nigeria navigate insecurity and develop effective survival strategies. Unlike short-term research or studies reliant on secondary data, this approach leverages the researcher’s lived experience as a native who has resided in the community for 27 years, allowing for a profound understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dynamics influencing agricultural practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Emerson et al., 2011).

As an insider, the researcher has direct access to the everyday lives of farmers, including their farming routines, risk management practices, and social interactions in the face of persistent insecurity. This positionality provides experiential data often inaccessible to external researchers, ensuring authenticity and cultural sensitivity (Ellis et al., 2010). Observations have been conducted continuously and naturally over several years through active engagement in farming activities such as land preparation, planting, harvesting, and participation in community meetings. These observations extend beyond technical agricultural practices to encompass the influence of insecurity and environmental pressures on decision-making and adaptive strategies.

Data collection relied on reflexive field notes, which documented detailed descriptions of the researcher's activities, conversations, and lived experiences. The data were analyzed thematically, identifying patterns related to livelihood adaptation, resilience, and the role of local knowledge systems in coping with insecurity (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). The credibility of the findings was strengthened through triangulation of the researcher's experiential insights, community narratives, and local artefacts (LINCOLN & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Farming on the Edge: Rural Livelihood Realities in Northern Nigeria

The presence of participant observation within rural societies in Northern Nigeria reveals an agrarian culture deeply ingrained in the society and a necessity in balancing economic interests. In this part of the country, farming is a profession and a way of life. Though insecurity and poor infrastructure are increasing, the farmers continue to feed their families generation after generation.

Most of the population is subsistence farming, whereby families grow tomatoes, chilli, onions, maize, sugar cane, sesame, ground nuts, and rear animals and poultry. These traditional implements (hoes, huge ridge makers, and rakes) are still prevalent, which shows a lack of mechanisation. The farming system is organised based on men and women: men go to the fields early enough by 6 am, and women stay back to cook at home and later take the food to the farm. The patrilineal propensity in most farming territories is transmitted or acquired through informal land buy-up or rental. In one of the cases witnessed, land under farming had been held for four generations.

One of the most notable ones was the family of "Jaju" (pseudonym). He has 14 children, not all of whom were in formal school. They went to the farm as soon as the dawn prayers were over. They then start the whole day working, coming home at 4:00 p.m. to prepare to go to madrasa (Islamic schooling). Notably, the children showed evident excitement and pleasure in working on a farm, even though it is labour-intensive, which indicated that the activity is ingrained in their socialisation process and overall identity.

Nonetheless, this farming cycle is getting jeopardised, whereby insecurity has been raised as the most critical issue among agriculturalists. Cases of kidnapping, murder, rape, and theft of crops and animals by armed groups (popularly known as bandits) were reported by the interviewees, as well as being observed by the participants. Not only have these attacks interfered with farming timelines, but they have also caused fear and insecurity among the communities. This forces farmers to leave their productive farms to seek refuge, and this significantly lowers production and causes poverty. Such also was the plea of one farmer who said, "*muna bukatar taikon gwamnati*" (we need the government to intervene), and with this expression of need, there seems to be a call from the community to seek government protection and support.

This insecurity is formidable, unlike other ordinary challenges farmers face, such as poor roads and a lack of capital. The bandits are well armed compared to the primitive tools used by the farmers (hoes and cutlasses); hence the farmers remain helpless and unprotected. They live together, despite being ethnically diverse, because households of Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and minority groups coexist and share borderlands, as well as collaborate during the planting and harvesting seasons. This interethnic collaboration has strong roots in the system of mutual interdependence and concerted effort that has been vivid despite violence.

In short, Northern Nigerian farming is undertaken under pressure, and that pressure is not merely a creature of poverty and infrastructure but also a life-and-death struggle. However, the attachment of people to lands, their position in food sources, and their cultures hold them to the soil. They are extreme and commendable; however, there is an imminent need to provide them with structural support, especially regarding security, as their livelihoods remain in balance.

Fields Under Fire: Insecurity and The Collapse of Agricultural Systems

Through participant observation and field interviews, it can be said that subsistence agriculture in Northern Nigeria is unwinding to the perpetuated violence of banditry and armed conflict. Thousands of farming families have left their farms, especially in Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto. In such states, farm abandonment is not a local phenomenon but a collapse of rural agricultural systems at the regional level.

Farms are desolated now as a whole. No tool had touched the farmlands covered with ridges in Zamfara and southern Katsina, where I traversed farmlands that had not been tilled in months because of the maize and sesame harvests. According to the residents, the recent attacks have also chased away any farming activity. The villagers reported numerous assassinations, kidnappings, and looting of their farm produce. An old farmer once told me, in a mixture of his local language and the national language, as it were, “ba mu iya zuwa gona ba muna tsoro za a sace mu ko mu mutu” (we cannot go to the farm because of fear-we may be kidnapped or killed).

Most farmers I have seen do not even go to their farms anymore. Some of them, however, venture still in the deeper short hours of early morning and all the way home before noon. Other people have just given up, out of the fear of violence that will be assured over the uncertainty of life. This insecurity has not only transformed the farming activity but has also caused the complete suspension of agricultural practice in various communities I visited. Other families have gone on the run altogether, and others who have not gone on the run are running in much fear, such that they hardly get out of their compounds.

The results of such a fall apart can be seen through the lack of harvest and the increasing influence of humanitarian aid. This is what most of the farmers told me during my discussions, and they were not lying because, as some of them told me, they even stopped selling produce not because they are lacking, but because they are not ready to go back to the farm, as they regard it as suicidal. One man explained that even what little can be found is kept in-house by the day to prepare against future uncertainty; we are not sure whether tomorrow will enable them to return. These families had previously been self-sustaining through independent farming but were rationing their food and depending on relief food. Others were displaced to IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camps within the states of Sokoto and Zamfara, where lack of food, overcrowding, and traumatization are prevalent.

The most moving incident was that of a mom who was separated from her only child in the aftermath of a horrific attack. She explained, through sobs, how they ran in opposite directions and never met again. She has already reported her daughter's disappearance to the police, but she has yet to receive any information. She lives with other family members in a town and cannot return to her village.

The stage I had a peek of is more than just hunger; it is the breakdown of an entire way of life. There are no coping strategies for rural populations. Villagers explained that they cannot own firearms or afford to hire any security company. The local authority appears to be non-existent. One man said, "*muna bukatar taimakon gwamnati*" (we need the government's help). However, I noticed that aid had not been provided.

The fieldwork has revealed that the insecurity in Northern Nigeria is not a faraway or abstract crisis. It is a direct and forceful interruption of everyday life, one that has murdered farming systems that supported families over generations. It is all there: the silence of the fields, the panic of the remaining voices that tell the terror of the loss and separation of a rural economy, and a rural identity being attacked.

Recent Attacks on Farmers

(Amnesty International, 2025) indicates that 638 of the total 973 villages in the state of Zamfara and 725 villages continue to be under the de facto control of the armed bandits. Such massive displacement has wreaked havoc on agricultural livelihoods. A 2025 National Bureau of Statistics assessment reveals that agricultural production has plummeted by 35 % in Zamfara and Katsina, and the market activity in Sokoto and Kaduna has dropped by more than half because of continued security interference. These figures are further corroborated by such anecdotal considerations on the ground. The agricultural cycle has been distorted, and it is plausible to see the evidence of it in many villages where the way farming is done has disappeared; the farmlands are uncultivated and barren.

The recent cases indicate an increasing number of focused attacks on farmers. On July 28, 2025, there was an abduction of seven farmers, who were picking palm fruits at Itaogbolu, Akure North Local Government Area of Ondo State, by suspected gunmen (Sahara Reporters, 2025). A day after, Abubakar Musa claimed that there were still some attacks in the Kanam LGA in Plateau State, with farmers complaining that they cannot reach their farms due to insecurity. They were afraid of being kidnapped, and livestock rustling has been propounded

even further to cripple the farming and animal husbandry too. Approximately 15 communities have been ruined, including Garga, Dadin Kowa, Gada, Keram, Gyanbahu, Dungur, Wanka, Kukawa, and Shuwaka (Ado Abubakar, 2025). Overall, these results reflect a profound collapse of rural livelihoods with ongoing violence not only jeopardizing agricultural production but also exacerbating the exposure of rural populations to displacement, hunger, and exploitation, especially those of women and children.

From Harvest to Hunger: Food Security Under Siege

Strolling through some of the rural homes in Northern Nigeria, what caught my attention, aside from the lack of farming, was the silent way hunger was observable on the faces, bodies, and even the voices of the people I met. After sustaining themselves through the land, most cannot get even a bowl of food a day. The families no longer have three square meals a day but live on what is accessible- in most cases, that is a handful of food to many people.

I saw visibly tired women, especially women who had lost the power to breastfeed their children owing to their poor nutritional status. Some of the children had obvious symptoms of kwashiorkor, which included bloated abdomens, bald heads, and emaciated limbs. The health workers whom I interviewed affirmed that malnutrition was rampaging at high rates, especially in the internally displaced camps and the remote villages that were inaccessible to help.

In such societies, food is no longer grown but provided by non-governmental organisations. I saw mothers queuing around temporary distribution centres to get basic food such as millet, rice, or cooking oil. “We are starving” (*Muna fama da yunwa*), said one of the women in a strangled voice.

Given that there is no seasonal hope, the situation is aggravated. Under regular seasons, the families could anticipate harvesting in October and late November. However, there is nothing to plant this time, according to several residents, so there is nothing to turn up. The farmland became deserted, and visions of full barns changed to how the children will eat tomorrow.

Food deficits are not only nutritional; they are emotional and social. The sharing of meals and cultural forms that used to be enjoyed during meals takes place in the form of scarcity and silence. The children I observed were not complaining; they were just used to it, just as one might see it, they sat down in an empty set of bowls without asking for them to be filled.

In my opinion, this was the most painful reality as an observer. These people are not only deprived of the land they have been farming on, but they are also robbed of something so simple and at the same time fundamental to what is said to be a human right and the ability to feed themselves. They dwell in the siege, not of nature, but of armed men whose work is to impose planting by their disturbances, to break a crop by plundering it, to ensure dissolution by the destruction of homes. The people are, nevertheless, helpless. One old man said, “we are no match, they bring in guns--we only have hoes”.

This crisis cannot be treated just as a collapse of the agriculture sector; it is a humanitarian emergency happening in rural Nigeria in total silence. There is no drought or pest here, but violence and neglect trigger hunger. What used to be a season of harvesting has now turned into a season of waiting, waiting to be aided, safe, and waiting for hope.

Displacement and Disruption: Social, Economic, and Psychological Costs

Moving through the rural communities in Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto, I started to see not only the physical absence of farms but also the emotional absence of homes, schools, and other places of social activity. People were killed, kidnapped, or vanished, and entire families were uprooted. Those who remained could only talk of the indescribable sorrow. What were once tight-knit villages, where many people stayed up late and told stories about their past, were now flats, and some homes were filled with fear and sorrow.

Schooling has completely broken down into sections for Zamfara and Katsina. The constant kidnapping of pupils and teachers has resulted in abandoned schools where children's voices once echoed. Some residents described

how they withdrew their children from school until peace. Nearly all the youngsters I met who were once enrolled in the community school are no longer in school; some are begging, while others work manual labour to help their families survive.

Economically, having been displaced, they have been bereft of the ability to work or even sustain themselves. Even in more stable adjacent villages where the displaced must eke out a livelihood, I saw a significant increase in child labour, particularly among boys working as hawkers and on construction sites. Others, primarily women and children, have moved to cities such as Lagos and Abuja, where some are begging on the streets. In the worst-case scenario, families sold whatever property they had left, including their homes, to travel or obtain food.

The emotional and psychological consequences were tremendous. People I saw had traumatized faces, especially youngsters; many of them appeared to be on edge, apprehensive, terrified, and confused. The displaced youngsters were known to have nightmares and wept a lot. The ladies I met reported that even their youngest children were no longer laughing and playing. Health care was likewise in poor condition; village clinics did not operate, and the necessary medical aid could only be acquired after going several miles to the nearest metropolis.

Nothing, however, was more shocking than the tales given to me by women who had been victims of gender-based immorality. Some of the ladies recalled being raped in front of their family in quiet tones, sometimes in tears. One of the most horrific stories indicated that even after the rape, acid was dripped down the woman's vagina as a form of humiliation. I will never forget the woman's horrified voice when she told me this. They are more than just violations; they are instruments of intimidation and subordination.

As a spectator, I found this to be quite distressing. The psychological traumas caused by such assault are immeasurable. I observed the complete disintegration of social order, as I saw schools, houses, and support in the centre of society go. The individuals appeared in limbo, with no clear path to the previous situation. The most alarming aspect, however, is that these communities are powerless to oppose or collaborate with it. One cannot obtain trauma counselling, social support, or justice: no words, no hell, only existence.

The humanitarian crisis we see here is more than just displacement; it is also about the loss of identity, dignity, and hope. The silence of the moms and the acceptance of the elders in the eyes of the youngsters, I saw a nation within a nation, a forgotten nation, a damaged nation, but still a nation, because they have no other option.

Seed of Survival: Community Networks and Resilience Pathways

Amidst all the violence, hunger, and displacement, I realised that the history of these communities is not only one of destruction but also of resilience. Many refused to completely give up, even when their homes were burnt down, children taken out of school, and their lives were constantly under threat. I observed a silent, often unseen struggle: surviving as a community.

In the camps and villages I visited, I met people who had lost everything and had their homes burned down, while those who had spare space in their homes provided a place for those impacted to stay. People shared food, even during times of scarcity. These modest goodwill gestures carried far more weight than their numbers, demonstrating that the community was not destroyed.

Although formal education was no longer practiced in most regions, the Islamic clerics helped keep people united. I attended various tafsir (religious conferences) where the clerics would read verses of the Quran that addressed the actual state of the people. They would quote verses to the effect that, “wamman yatawakkal ‘alal-Lahi fahuwa hasbuhu” (whoever puts their trust in Allah, He will be enough for them) and “La yukallifullāhu nafsan illā wus‘ahā” (Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear).

Their familiar language and cadence visibly calmed those who heard these spiritual messages. They were believed, not merely uttered. Subtle adaptations were also present. At a time when the markets were far away, I came across families who used to eat what they liked but suddenly ate whatever they could get their hands on, such as foraged greens or grains without sauce. Others began growing quick-growing plants like spinach and okra in little vegetable gardens along the side of their shelters. Even though these home plots were not as good as their farms, they provided dignity and sustenance.

Nevertheless, the five daily prayers had never ceased and were unassailable. The mosque was one of the few structures that still brought people together in a peaceful rhythm. I witnessed the men and women bringing their mattresses, travelling barefoot to the mosque, silently performing wudu (ablution), and bending down in groups. This ritual was anchoring a place where routine was no longer present.

As an observer, what most surprised me was how resilient the people who stayed were. Some people also told me they did not want to leave because they were not scared, but rather because they had nowhere to go and hoped or believed that everything would return to normal. Their patience was characterised by strong faith rather than a refusal to believe. One of the elders told me that while there was some chance of restoration if they remained here, danger and poverty would eventually overcome them if they left.

Because of this, these seeds of faith, survival, sharing, and adaptation are insignificant compared to the extent of pain. However, they contain the whisper of the bravery of communities that have lost nearly everything save their tenacity.

CONCLUSION

Through participant observation, this paper identifies the tough change in subsistence life in Northern Nigeria due to increases in insecurity. What was once the calm rhythm of planting, harvesting and community living is dissolved into the rhythm of fear, displacement and deprivation. Once self-sufficient families can no longer count on ancestral land and now witness their fields lie fallow, as hunger and trauma have found their way into homes, schools and even places of worship. It is however, in the shadows of violence that the moments of resilience of food sharing, spiritual faith and home gardening become the silent testimonial to life. These societies are not only fighting poverty, but they are struggling with the disintegration of the whole social and cultural fabric. They continue to survive not in the name of safety but of hope, however feeble and tenacious that hope might be, that someday, things will be normal.

To transition to sustainability, there must be direct and multi-level solutions. In practice, the Nigerian government needs to enhance security in the countryside and restore community trust with the help of community-based protection, as well as offer agricultural recovery packages to ensure that farmers are enabled to take their lands back. Mobile services and trauma care, like educational systems and healthcare systems are also destabilized and need to be strengthened with respect to the displaced families. Local networks and faith leaders should be used as peace and recovery agents. In practice, it is necessary that future studies place practical emphasis ranked highly on participatory, place-sensitive research that gives more weight and voices to those required to be impacted. These lived realities must inform the development of policies and interweave various bodies of knowledge, as well as become intersectional to ensure that their frameworks are not dismissive of indigenous frameworks and spiritual resilience. Unless there is emergency relief and encompassing recovery planning, these communities stand to be devastated- not only economically but biologically as well. The multi-layered policy interventions are needed to address the failure of subsistence farming in Northern Nigeria. First, the reform of the security sector needs to focus on rural communities based on community policing and prompt response strategies. The local peace committees' experience in Kenya shows that the local security structures can lower the number of farmers and herders clashing and restore trust (Bloem et al., 2025). Second, there must be the creation of localised food aid systems that would be administered in wards and villages to avoid diversion and ensure equitable accessibility. This type of decentralised food distribution has been successful in South Sudan and Somalia, where it has been tried before. Third, micro-credit and input-support plans to displaced farmers are required to initiate production. An example of how small-scale credit helped in agricultural recovery and reinstatement of livelihoods is the revolving loan funds in post-conflict Uganda. Such programs are to be associated with the climate-sensitive activities, such as agroforestry and zai pits that enhance resilience to environmental stressors (Akinkuolie et al., 2024). Fourth, there is comparative evidence that rural conflict generally decreases agricultural productivity by 30-50 per cent, such as in Darfur and in Northern Uganda, and Nigeria decreased agricultural output by 35 per cent, in Zamfara and Katsina (Amnesty International, 2025). Lastly, it is essential to invest in mobile trauma-care units and community counselling, as many survivors have PTSD and depression (Oru Takim et al., 2024).

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