

An evaluation of United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) supported livelihood programmes in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study attempts to discuss issues of development by evaluating livelihood programmes supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Benue State, Nigeria. The persistent farmer–herder conflicts and protracted displacement in the state have created fragile social relations, weakened local economies, and heightened dependence on humanitarian assistance. Using a qualitative approach involving twenty (20) interviews and focus group discussions, the study assesses how UNHCR-supported livelihood interventions contribute to social cohesion, economic recovery, and conflict mitigation among internally displaced persons and host communities. Findings indicate that skills acquisition, microenterprise support and agricultural inputs enhance household income, reduce aid dependency, and foster intergroup cooperation. However, limited coverage, weak market linkages and inadequate community participation constrain sustainability and peacebuilding outcomes. Based on these findings, the study recommends strengthening community-driven programme design, integrating conflict-sensitive development planning, expanding access to finance and markets and enhancing collaboration between government agencies, traditional institutions, and development partners. It also emphasizes the need for long-term monitoring frameworks that link livelihood outcomes to peace indicators. By aligning livelihood support with inclusive development and local peace structures, UNHCR interventions can more effectively promote durable solutions, resilience and sustainable peace in conflict-affected communities of Benue State.

Keywords: Development, evaluating, peacebuilding, supported livelihood programmes, UNHCR

Introduction

The contemporary global landscape is characterized by an increasing scale and complexity of violent conflicts, forced displacement, and humanitarian crises, particularly in developing regions of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. By the end of 2023, more than 114 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of armed conflict, generalized violence, persecution, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2023). A large proportion of these populations reside in fragile and conflict-affected states where protracted crises have eroded livelihoods, weakened institutions, and entrenched poverty and insecurity. In sub-Saharan Africa, recurrent conflicts linked to ethnic tensions, resource competition, weak governance, and climate stress have generated chronic displacement and undermined prospects for sustainable development (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2021).

The humanitarian consequences of violent conflict extend far beyond the immediate loss of life and infrastructure. Prolonged displacement often leads to the collapse of traditional livelihood systems, rising unemployment, food insecurity, and social marginalization among displaced persons and host communities (Collinson et al., 2019). In such contexts, displacement becomes not only a humanitarian emergency but also a structural development challenge that perpetuates vulnerability and fuels cycles of violence. Empirical studies demonstrate that economic exclusion and inequality heighten grievances, weaken social cohesion, and increase the risk of renewed conflict (Stewart, 2020; Blattman & Miguel, 2020). This recognition has generated a growing consensus that peacebuilding cannot rely solely on military stabilization, political agreements, or humanitarian relief. Instead, sustainable peace requires addressing the socio-economic drivers of conflict through development-oriented interventions that restore livelihoods, promote inclusion, and strengthen community resilience. This shift has crystallized in the peacebuilding through development paradigm, which integrates economic recovery, social cohesion, and institutional rebuilding as central pillars of post-conflict peacebuilding (Paris, 2024; World Bank, 2021).

Within this framework, livelihood interventions have gained prominence as strategic tools for promoting social stability, facilitating reintegration, and preventing conflict relapse in fragile settings. Programmes such as skills training, employment generation, microenterprise support, and cash-based assistance are increasingly deployed not only as poverty reduction measures but also as deliberate peacebuilding instruments aimed at reducing grievances, rebuilding trust, and fostering cooperation among formerly antagonistic groups (Mac Ginty, 2021; UNDP, 2018). By restoring economic agency and dignity, such interventions are expected to weaken the appeal of violence and lay the foundations for durable peace.

The United Nations institutionalized peacebuilding as a central pillar of its conflict management architecture, defining it as measures aimed at reducing the risk of conflict relapse by strengthening national capacities and laying the foundation for sustainable peace and development (United Nations, 2007). Similarly, the World Bank situates peacebuilding within its fragility, conflict, and violence framework, emphasizing that sustainable peace requires inclusive growth, employment, service delivery, and social cohesion alongside political settlements (World Bank, 2020). From this development-oriented perspective, peacebuilding is understood as a long-term process of addressing structural inequalities, economic marginalization, and institutional weaknesses

that generate conflict. Building on these perspectives, development-oriented peacebuilding moves beyond narrow security approaches to embrace livelihoods, inclusion, and resilience as core components of peace. Rather than treating development as a post-conflict reward, this approach views economic empowerment and social protection as preventive and transformative tools capable of interrupting cycles of violence and fragility (Duffield, 2001; UNDP, 2018).

International experience provides growing, though mixed, evidence on the peacebuilding potential of livelihood interventions. In post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, employment and skills training programmes targeting youth and ex-combatants reduced participation in violence and improved reintegration, though impacts on long-term stability were uneven (Blattman & Annan, 2016; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2017). In Rwanda, livelihood support for returnees and genocide survivors helped restore household welfare and facilitated community reconciliation through cooperative associations (Ansoms, 2019). In Asia, cash-for-work and microenterprise programmes in Nepal and Sri Lanka contributed to short-term income security and reduced economic grievances, but their effects on deeper political reconciliation remained limited (Justino et al., 2022). Similarly, in Afghanistan and South Sudan, livelihood programmes reduced vulnerability but faced challenges related to insecurity, elite capture, and weak institutions (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2021). These experiences suggest that livelihood interventions can reduce conflict relapse by raising the opportunity cost of violence and rebuilding social networks. However, economic gains do not automatically translate into durable peace. Short time horizons, weak market linkages, exclusion of vulnerable groups, and poor integration with broader peacebuilding strategies often limit long-term impact (Mac Ginty, 2021; Pavanello et al., 2016).

The United Nations plays a central role in peacebuilding through its peacekeeping missions, development agencies, and humanitarian institutions. The establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund reflects efforts to bridge the humanitarian–development–peace nexus (United Nations, 2017). Within this architecture, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has a mandate to protect refugees, internally displaced persons, and returnees while promoting durable solutions through repatriation, local integration, and resettlement (UNHCR, 2019). Historically focused on emergency relief, UNHCR has increasingly adopted development-oriented approaches that emphasize self-reliance and livelihoods (Betts et al., 2017). UNHCR’s livelihood programming now includes vocational training, cash assistance, small business support, agricultural inputs, and financial inclusion initiatives aimed at reducing dependency and promoting sustainable self-reliance. These programmes increasingly target both displaced populations and host communities, reflecting the importance of livelihood integration for social stability and conflict prevention (UNHCR, 2019).

Benue State in Nigeria’s North-Central region has become a major epicentre of farmer–herder violence over the past decade. Competition over land and water, climate variability, population pressure, and weak governance have generated recurrent conflicts between farming and pastoral communities (International Crisis Group, 2017; Adekunle & Adisa, 2021). These conflicts have resulted in widespread killings, destruction of villages, and mass displacement. Tens of thousands of households have been forced into camps and host communities where access to land, employment, and basic services remains severely constrained (NEMA, 2022; UNHCR, 2023). Livelihood disruption has been profound, as farming and trading, the backbone of the rural economy, have been repeatedly interrupted by insecurity.

In response, UNHCR has implemented vocational training, cash-for-work schemes, agricultural support, and small business grants targeting internally displaced persons, returnees, and host communities. These programmes aim to promote self-reliance, enhance social cohesion, and mitigate conflict. Despite these efforts, insecurity and fragile coexistence persist. Most existing evaluations focus on economic indicators such as training and empowerment (Bemshima et al., 2024), with limited attention to qualitative peacebuilding outcomes such as trust, inclusion, and perceptions of security. Against this backdrop, this study undertakes a qualitative evaluation of UNHCR-supported livelihood programmes in Benue State to examine their contribution to peacebuilding beyond economic outcomes. By exploring beneficiaries’ narratives, social interactions, and community dynamics, the study seeks to generate context-sensitive insights into how development-oriented interventions can support sustainable peace in protracted displacement settings. This study validated with the following research questions:

1. How do beneficiaries perceive the livelihood programmes?
2. In what ways do these programmes influence social relations, trust, and conflict dynamics?

Literature review

With displacement come profound social and economic changes for individuals and communities, often transforming otherwise self-sufficient people into dependants on social provisions for survival. When individuals are displaced, they lose access to their traditional sources of support such as land, housing, and established livelihoods, which increases their vulnerability. In such contexts, social provisions become the primary source of stability on which displaced persons rely to meet their economic, educational, health, and other social needs. In supporting displaced persons to rebuild their lives, social provisions go beyond short-term relief; they have the potential to evolve into instruments for building sustainable livelihoods and resilience that enable internally displaced persons (IDPs) to recover economically and socially. For example, social provisions such as

community-based mental health programmes and peer support groups can significantly enhance the capacity of IDPs to recover from displacement-related trauma. Sambu (2015) further emphasizes the importance of emotional reassurance as a form of social support that enables displaced individuals to sustain hope and optimism, which are essential components of resilience.

Crawford and Holloway (2024) note that displaced persons consistently rank livelihoods among their highest priorities. However, creating and sustaining a livelihood in displacement contexts is often extremely difficult. Forcible relocation, discrimination, disrupted social networks, restrictive legal and policy frameworks, and the psychological distress associated with forced displacement constitute major challenges for displaced persons attempting to rebuild their lives and provide for their families. Livelihoods programming is therefore central to facilitating the integration of displaced persons into host communities, as it supports access to employment and participation in local labour markets (UNHCR, 2022). Through social programmes, displaced persons may access wage employment, which offers opportunities for social inclusion, skills development, career progression, and stable income. In addition, financial assistance, access to education, and skill acquisition and training programmes can support their return to a more dignified and productive status. Nevertheless, access to formal employment and broader social benefits remains severely constrained by legal barriers, discrimination, weak social networks, and other structural impediments (UNHCR, 2018). Displaced persons may also face exploitation and unfavourable working conditions in both formal and informal sectors. Many of these obstacles to sustainable livelihood creation are rooted in structural and legal frameworks that generate environments that are unfavourable to the wellbeing of displaced populations. Although development initiatives often seek to address deep-rooted societal challenges, they frequently exclude displaced populations. Consequently, closer collaboration between humanitarian and development actors is required to improve the living standards of both host communities and displaced persons (Mpamah, 2024).

Sustainable livelihoods and self-sufficiency are widely recognised as the ultimate objectives of livelihoods programmes (UNHCR, 2018). Even when full self-reliance is not achieved within the lifespan of a specific project, programmes that enhance self-reliance should still be supported as meaningful and practical contributions to recovery and development. Mpamah (2024) conducted a study on the role of social provision in promoting sustainable livelihoods among displaced persons in Benue State, focusing on the associated challenges and opportunities. Using a qualitative research design guided by the Sustainable Livelihood Framework and the Welfare Regime Framework, the study assessed challenges related to the delivery, effectiveness, and long-term impact of social provisions on livelihood sustainability among IDPs. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with a total of twenty (20) participants, including IDPs, camp officials, community leaders, and non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations. The findings indicate that although social provisions such as education and healthcare have positively influenced the lives of IDPs, several challenges persist. These include shortages of essential provisions, security threats, and financial constraints. IDPs expressed the view that basic needs such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare were insufficient to sustain them in the long term, thereby reinforcing their dependence on external assistance. In recent times, social provision has increasingly incorporated the involvement of civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, and community-based groups in efforts to bridge the gap between government capacity and the availability of social services (Akanmu et al., 2016). The participation of non-state actors such as UNICEF, UNHCR, the Red Cross, Save the Children, and Médecins Sans Frontières is intended to address inefficiencies arising from limited state provision and the social exclusion associated with market-based systems (Mpamah, 2024). Their support includes the provision of food, water, protection and security, education, and healthcare services (Mile & Apinega, 2023).

Theoretical framework

The study anchored on sustainable livelihood theory. The theory was developed by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway in 1992, it provides framework for understanding how people, in this case IDPs, can attain sustainable livelihood in face of external shocks like displacement. To Chambers and Conway (1992), the foundation of the SLF is in the individual, which supports participation in rural areas (Natarajan et al., 2022). The SLF identifies five different areas which is important for livelihood to be sustained long-run: human, social, financial, physical and natural capital. According to DFID (1999), livelihood sustainability depends on its ability to cope with and recover from shocks while maintain or enhancing its capabilities and assets. In context of displacement, sustainable livelihoods become focus on restoring these forms of capital through access to resources like education, vocational trainings, healthcare and financial assistances. Thus, shows its relevance in addressing situation of IDPs in Benue State, who lost access to their traditional means of livelihood like farming, because ongoing conflict between farmers and herders.

Notably, while Chambers and Conway's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) may have simplified the complexities around livelihood systems by overlook unpredictable nature of livelihood strategies such as interplay of social, environmental, and political forces (Natarajan et al., 2022), the framework still remain critical lens through which people can understand livelihoods and sustainability. In Nigeria, specifically Benue, where displacement significantly alters social frame and disrupt local economies, together with current inflation

situation, more diverse framework is necessary to understand how individuals navigate livelihoods under such conditions. Small (2007) also argue that ignoring key social factors like market forces, class differences, gender roles, and ethnic influences makes it difficult to fully understand the complex social realities and power structures in rural and IDP communities. For internally displaced persons, these factors can affect their access to resources and ability rebuild livelihoods. Benue State, known for agricultural strength, having many displaced individuals without means of income generation creates significant strain on state's productivity and economic output (Erunke and Aku, 2022).

For this study, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) is adopted to help provide a detailed and critical prism through which people can understand the complex connections that exist between social provision and sustainable livelihoods for displaced people in Benue State. UNHCR's approach includes vocational training for displaced persons and hosts like tailoring, carpentry and agro-processing, business and financial literacy training, and health and psychosocial support to improve productivity. These interventions align with SLT's emphasis on enhance skills and knowledge to improve economic opportunities, reduce dependency, and build self-reliance, key drivers of peacebuilding, because economic marginalization often fuel grievance and conflict. SLT recognize that social networks and community relationships are critical to sustainable livelihoods. UNHCR applied this by facilitate community-level peace dialogues alongside livelihood activities, encouraging collaborative group enterprises that include both displaced persons and host community members, and create cooperative savings and loans associations (VSLAs) that foster mutual trust and collective action. By intentionally building bridges between divided communities through shared economic interests and social networks, social capital becomes peacebuilding asset.

Addition, UNHCR support cash grants and seed funding for micro-business start-ups, provision of agricultural inputs (seeds, tools), especially for displaced farmers returning to cultivation and support for storage facilities and market access. These increase financial capital and reduce barriers to productive activities. Access to physical assets help stabilize livelihoods and reduce pressures that can lead to economic rivalry and conflict. Moreover, SLF consider how various factors like policies, institutions, and cultural backgrounds interact with people's livelihood strategies, giving opportunity to critically analyze how social provision can either help or hinder their ability to build sustainable lives, especially within Benue spatiality (Natarajan et al., 2022). Oteyi (2020) emphasize that many IDPs in Benue State require external support to resume their livelihoods because destruction of their economic assets. Hence, exploration of the livelihoods of IDPs in Benue through SLF imbues this research with potential to reveal linkages between social provision, livelihood resources, and adaptability of displaced people in Benue State. The goal is to provide details to facilitate effective interventions, which can foster sustainable livelihoods as well improve overall well-being.

Methodology

Research design

For this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative research design and a case study approach. According to Bryman (1984) and Yin (2009), this approach is appropriate for engaging with complex social situations in real-life settings. This method enabled the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the role of social provisions in enhancing the livelihoods of internally displaced persons in Benue State, including how the current socio-economic conditions among displaced persons' manifest. It also allowed for the collection of rich data from key stakeholders, IDPs, government officials, and humanitarian actors. In collecting the data, the researcher employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method helped to group similar ideas into categories and facilitated systematic interpretation of the findings. In this way, the results were grounded in the actual words and experiences of the participants.

Study area

This study was carried out in Makurdi, Benue State, located in north-central Nigeria, and known for its significant role in Nigeria's agricultural productivity. The state is confronted with a large population of displaced persons arising from the ongoing conflicts between herders and farmers. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Benue State had a population of 6,687,706 people as of 2024. This situation, combined with persistent crises, has resulted in significant internal displacement and makes the state an ideal case study for understanding the impact of social provisions on displaced persons (NBS, 2016). The study focuses on the IDP camps located in Abagana and Ichuwa, both in Makurdi, Benue State, as they are among the largest camps in the state, with a significant number of displaced persons in each camp. These camps experience serious congestion due to continuous conflicts, repeated displacements, and limited access to basic amenities. The selection of these camps was therefore important for understanding how available social provisions are distributed and whether they are effective in supporting livelihoods in the context of ongoing conflicts.

Population of the study

The population in my study consists of IDPs in Benue State, Nigeria, where according to data from Benue State Emergency Management Agency (BSEMA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), thousands of individuals have been displaced due to violent attacks, among other factors. My participants were between 25-60 aged and have lived in IDP camps who have lived in camps for the last six months, to ensure that those with direct experiences of social provision and long-term livelihood needs are focused on. I selected the Abagana camp with 3,025 IDPs and the Ichuwa camp, with 3,523 residents as of 2023 especially because it was easy, safe to get to and the large numbers made it easy to also quickly see the problems with the social provision in these camps (BSEMA, 2023).

Sample size

The sample size for this study consisted of 20 participants and was considered adequate to provide greater depth in understanding the research questions while effectively managing the data collection process. The sample was purposively selected to involve various stakeholders and to capture diverse perspectives on displacement and social provisioning. The composition of the sample included:

1. Two (2) camp officials who discussed the everyday administration and delivery of social services in the camps. In my opinion, this provided insider insight into the challenges and successes associated with the management of social provisions.
2. Three (3) village chiefs who discussed community displacement and offered local insight into how displacement affects traditional social structures and livelihoods.
3. Six (6) IDPs—three men and three women—who directly benefited from supported livelihood programmes and initiatives, and who provided first-hand information on their individual experiences with social provisions and how these affect their livelihoods.
4. Six (6) IDP participants (three women and three men) who were engaged in two focus group discussions. The FGDs allowed for a collective understanding of the social provisions provided and how these affect their livelihoods.
5. Three (3) policymakers involved in the development and implementation of supported livelihood programme initiatives, who discussed the challenges associated with policy implementation.

Overall, a sample size of 20 participants was used to allow for detailed data collection, ensuring that the findings reflect the perspectives of the different groups included in the study.

Sampling techniques

In this study, the researcher used purposive sampling to determine the participants (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that only individuals with relevant experiences were selected, including male and female internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had lived in the camp for over five months, as well as humanitarian workers involved in the provision of social services, such as government officials, humanitarian actors, and local community leaders. This approach ensured that a cross-section of the population was represented.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with selected participants to gather data. The researcher travelled to Benue State to conduct the interviews and facilitate the focus group discussions with the support of a research assistant in order to enhance interaction among participants. Before the commencement of the interviews, the researcher engaged the services of a research assistant to assist with translation during the interviews and interactions, as the local language is Tiv, which the researcher did not understand. A letter of approval was obtained from the Benue State Emergency Management Agency for the selected IDP camps, which granted the researcher access to the camps. The interviews were semi-structured to allow the exploration of specific issues while also giving participants the opportunity to express themselves freely.

Data analysis

Data collected were subjected to thematic analysis, for the identification, analysis and interpretation of meaning of the collated qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was coded manually, and key themes were identified, which includes the role of social provisions, the impact on livelihoods, and the displacement challenges. The process used for coding involved a constant reviewing of the data, coding the recurring or imbedded concepts, and the organization and development of these concepts into broader themes, allowing the researcher to capture both explicit contents and participant's responses and their underlying patterns of meaning.

Using triangulation, I compared the findings with secondary data from reports and literature materials to verify the accuracy of the information received from participants, while providing an understanding of how social provisions contribute to sustainable livelihoods. Also, the use of thematic analysis allowed me focus on the individual experiences of participants, and the collective patterns that came up as I talked to different groups of stakeholders.

Results

Respondent Data

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 20 participants State with at least six months of displacement experience in Benue State. The demographic data collected provides a diverse cross-section of the population, focusing on gender, age, and occupation as shown in table 1. Before displacement, 80% of the participants were engaged in farming, but only 40% continued farming afterwards due to the loss of their land and resources as depicted in table 2. The demographic composition reflects the impact of displacement on livelihoods, providing context for interpreting how social provisions have supported or failed these individuals.

Category	Number of participants	Percentage
Total participants	20	100
Sex		
Male	12	60
Female	8	40
Age		
25-35	6	30
35-45	8	40
45-60	6	30
Occupation	Before displacement	After displacement
Farming	80%	40%
Craft/skills (e.g bead making)	10%	35%
Others (e.g trading)	10%	25%

Beneficiaries perceive the livelihood programmes

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Benue State have experienced prolonged socio-economic disruptions as a result of violent conflicts and forced displacement. In response, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in collaboration with government agencies and non-governmental organizations, has implemented a range of livelihood programmes aimed at restoring self-reliance, reducing dependency on humanitarian aid, and promoting sustainable reintegration. These programmes typically include vocational skills training, small business support, agricultural input distribution, cash-for-work schemes, and the formation of savings and loan groups.

From the perspectives of beneficiaries, the impact of these livelihood interventions extends beyond immediate income generation to include improvements in dignity, self-esteem, household stability, and social integration. Many IDPs perceive the programmes as providing a pathway out of extreme vulnerability by equipping them with practical skills and productive assets. For instance, vocational training in tailoring, carpentry, soap making, and food processing has enabled beneficiaries to establish small-scale enterprises within and outside the camps. Agricultural support, such as the provision of seeds, fertilizers, and basic tools, has also enhanced food production and reduced reliance on food assistance.

Economically, beneficiaries report modest but meaningful increases in household income, which have improved their ability to meet basic needs such as food, healthcare, children's education, and shelter. The availability of start-up kits and conditional cash grants has helped some participants to reopen or start new livelihood activities that were lost due to displacement. In this regard, UNHCR livelihood programmes are widely perceived as contributing to economic recovery and household resilience. Socially and psychologically, the programmes are perceived to have restored a sense of purpose and normalcy among displaced persons. Participation in group-based trainings and savings associations has strengthened social networks, trust, and collective support among IDPs. Several beneficiaries note that being productive again has reduced feelings of hopelessness and dependency, while increasing confidence and motivation to plan for the future.

However, despite these positive perceptions, beneficiaries also identify significant limitations. Common concerns include the small scale of support, irregular follow-up, limited access to markets, and the exclusion of some vulnerable groups due to funding constraints. In addition, insecurity, land access problems, and weak local infrastructure continue to constrain the sustainability of livelihood outcomes. Consequently, while UNHCR livelihood programmes are perceived as impactful, their long-term effectiveness depends on sustained support, market linkages, and broader peacebuilding and development interventions. Overall, IDP beneficiaries in Benue State perceive UNHCR livelihood programmes as an important foundation for rebuilding their lives. The programmes are seen not only as economic interventions but also as instruments of empowerment and social recovery in a fragile post-displacement context. Reacting on this assertion, key informant interviewees participated has this to say:

Before the UNHCR programme, I depended only on food aid. When they gave me seeds and farm tools, I started cultivating again. The harvest was small, but it helped my family to eat and sell some. I now feel I can work for myself again, not just wait for assistance.

I received training in tailoring and a sewing machine. This changed my life because I now sew clothes for people in the camp and nearby communities. With the little money I make, I pay my children's school fees and buy food. It has reduced my suffering. The cash grant helped me to start a small phone-charging business. It is not enough to make me rich, but at least I have daily income. The problem is that there is no stable electricity and the market here is very small. Joining the savings group gave me hope. We save together and borrow small money to trade in food items. It has improved our unity and helped me to survive without begging. But many women like me were not selected because the programme cannot carry everyone. They gave me two goats to rear. One has reproduced, and I sold one kid to solve a family problem. It is helping, but insecurity and lack of land make it difficult to expand. If there is more support, it will be better.

Programmes influencing social relations, trust, and conflict dynamics

Benue State has been significantly affected by internal displacement resulting from violent conflicts, particularly between farmers and herders. Before displacement, most of the population were farmers who contributed substantially to the state's agricultural productivity. However, many internally displaced persons (IDPs) reported that the violence, especially attacks by Fulani herdsman, forced them to flee, leaving their farms and homes behind. Participants shared traumatic experiences of losing family members, property, and their means of livelihood, emphasizing the suddenness and intensity of the displacement. Isa, one of the respondents, vividly recounted:

The Fulani herdsman have committed a lot of atrocities by killing many of our farmers and making those who were left flee for their lives, leaving their major source of income and their homes to reside in IDP camps.

Since arriving at the camps, IDPs have relied on social provisions from the government and non-state actors such as NGOs, humanitarian agencies, and local communities. However, participants indicated that the provision of basic amenities such as food, shelter, and clothing has been inconsistent and often insufficient for camp residents. Participants described having to share limited resources with the host community, leading to further strain on already scarce supplies. Despite the efforts of organizations such as the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) and various NGOs, IDPs expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency and adequacy of the aid they received. Doshima shared that,

We receive bags of rice and beans occasionally, but it is never enough to last. We have to go out and beg sometimes because what we are given does not last long.

Efforts to provide social provisions have been supported through partnerships between the government and various actors, including international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While these partnerships have helped to address some of the challenges faced by IDPs, issues such as poor coordination, inadequate funding, and insecurity continue to hamper the effectiveness of these provisions. Mr. Lami, one of the SEMA officials at the Abagana camp, highlighted this challenge during our conversation when he stated:

One of the challenges we face, aside from funding, is coordination during meetings and the distribution of provisions for the IDPs. For instance, my boss has not been to the office for months, and his absence delays our operations.

Although many participants acknowledged the presence of various organizations working in the camps to support displaced persons, they also noted that the irregular nature of assistance, particularly food and medical supplies, often left them without basic resources for extended periods. Kator, an IDP at the Abagana camp, argued: We do not always have enough supplies. The ones provided for us can barely go round for everyone for even a month. If you look at the camp, we are a large number, and some families have many children. Before the month runs out, we start borrowing from each other to make up for what we do not have, but we cannot always do that." As such, IDPs continue to face significant hardships, particularly in securing food and shelter, despite the presence of multiple actors in the camps.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study set out to examine peacebuilding through development by evaluating the livelihood programmes supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Benue State. By focusing on how livelihood interventions shape the everyday experiences, coping strategies, and social relations of displaced persons and host communities, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the development–peace nexus in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Rather than treating peace as merely the absence of violence, the findings reinforce the view that sustainable peace is built through the gradual restoration of livelihoods, dignity, and social inclusion. In terms of contribution to knowledge, this study adds empirical evidence from a sub-national context that is underrepresented in the literature on peacebuilding through development in Nigeria. While previous studies have emphasized the macro-level role of humanitarian and development actors in post-conflict recovery, this research demonstrates how micro-level livelihood interventions such as skills training, cash assistance, and small enterprise support can directly influence social cohesion, reduce dependency, and mitigate the risk of renewed conflict among displaced populations. By documenting beneficiaries' perceptions and lived

experiences, the study extends existing scholarship beyond policy intentions to the practical realities of programme implementation.

The qualitative research approach adopted in this study proved particularly important. Peacebuilding and livelihood recovery are deeply embedded in social relations, power dynamics, cultural norms, and personal histories of loss and displacement. A qualitative design made it possible to capture these complexities in ways that quantitative indicators alone could not. Through in-depth interviews and stakeholder narratives, the study illuminated how beneficiaries interpret assistance, how trust is rebuilt, and how development interventions are negotiated within fragile community settings. In this sense, the qualitative method was not only appropriate but essential for understanding the processes, meanings, and unintended consequences that shape peacebuilding outcomes.

With respect to the state of scholarly consensus, the findings largely corroborate prior research that emphasizes livelihoods as a critical pillar of sustainable peace in post-conflict contexts. There is now broad agreement in the literature that humanitarian relief, when linked to longer-term development interventions, can reduce vulnerability, strengthen resilience, and address some of the structural drivers of conflict. This study confirms that development-oriented livelihood programmes are not peripheral but central to peacebuilding efforts among displaced populations. However, the study also suggests that the time for merely demonstrating this relationship is giving way to a more urgent phase of action. While further research remains necessary to refine strategies and assess long-term impacts, the accumulated evidence points clearly to the need for scaling up, better coordination, and more context-sensitive programming. In this regard, the study concludes that the primary challenge is no longer whether livelihoods matter for peacebuilding, but how to design, fund, and implement such programmes more effectively and sustainably.

In sum, this study underscores that peacebuilding through development in Benue State is both possible and necessary. By highlighting the lived experiences of displaced persons and the practical effects of UNHCR-supported livelihood programmes, it calls for a shift from fragmented humanitarian responses to integrated development strategies that place livelihoods, social cohesion, and local ownership at the centre of peacebuilding practice.

To ensure equitable access to livelihood opportunities for refugees, IDPs, and host community members, the Benue Emergency Management Agency with the collaboration of UNHCR should prevent tensions arising from perceived exclusion.

The UNHCR should target vulnerable groups such as women, youth and persons with disabilities with tailored support such as skills training, seed capital, and business startup packages.

The UNHCR should align vocational training with local market demand by partnering with local businesses, cooperatives and agricultural value-chains.

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