

Evaluating the Impact of Nigeria's Social Investment Programmes on Economic Resilience, Social Inclusion and Conflict Mitigation among Youth in Conflict-affected Regions

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Abstract

Nigeria's social investment programmes have been widely employed as strategic interventions to mitigate poverty, promote social inclusion and establish stability, particularly for vulnerable populations in conflict-prone regions. This research evaluates the impact of the programmes on economic resilience, social inclusion and conflict reduction among the youth in Nigeria's most volatile regions. The research focuses on flagship programmes such as the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP), their effect on improving youth livelihoods, social cohesion and reducing vulnerability to violent extremism and social unrest. The paper indicates that, while social investment programmes are central to expanding economic opportunity and inclusion, programme reach issues, implementation gaps and contextual factors limit their full potential for conflict reduction. The paper suggests that social investment programmes are a critical means of enhancing economic resilience, social inclusion and peacebuilding. Therefore, such programmes must be located in more holistic development and peacebuilding frameworks that recognize root causes of violence.

Keywords: Social Investment Programmes, Economic Resilience, Social Inclusion, Conflict Mitigation, Youth Empowerment, Conflict-affected Regions.

1. Introduction

The complex relationship between economic downturns, social marginalization, and youth participation in violent activities remains a critical issue in Nigeria. Young people, particularly those residing in conflict-ridden regions, encounter a convergence of hardships such as severe unemployment, exclusion from socio-economic opportunities, and exposure to radical ideologies and violent behavior. These challenges not only jeopardize individual livelihoods but also threaten national peace and hinder developmental progress. Reports indicate that youth unemployment in Nigeria exceeds 30%, with even higher figures recorded in conflict-affected regions like the North-East and Middle Belt [1], [2]. Numerous studies have identified

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both economic deprivation and social exclusion as major factors contributing to youth engagement in violent extremism and communal conflicts [3], [4].

To address these pressing concerns, the Nigerian government, in collaboration with international development partners, introduced various Social Investment Programmes (SIPs) aimed at alleviating poverty, fostering inclusion, and promoting lasting peace through economic empowerment. A notable initiative in this regard is the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), established in 2016, which encompasses interventions such as the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), N-Power employment initiative, and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) [5]. These schemes are structured to not only provide immediate financial relief but also build long-term resilience among vulnerable populations, thereby reducing the recurrence of violent conflict.

Although global research has emphasized the potential of social protection measures in supporting economic stability and conflict mitigation [6], [7], there is a lack of context-specific evidence on the effectiveness of Nigeria's SIPs in improving the socio-economic conditions of youth in violence-affected areas. Assessing the role of these programmes in promoting economic resilience, enhancing social cohesion, and preventing conflict is essential for refining policies and achieving long-term sustainable development.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how Nigeria's SIPs influence youth livelihoods, social integration, and exposure to violence in fragile settings. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research evaluates the programmes' impact on individual and communal levels, identifying strengths, shortcomings, and areas requiring policy adjustment. The outcomes contribute to the broader discourse on the role of social protection in fragile contexts, offering actionable insights for enhancing youth-oriented peace and development strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian youth living in conflict-affected areas—such as the North-East and sections of the Middle Belt—face entrenched socio-economic difficulties, including poverty, high unemployment, and systemic exclusion. These challenges are exacerbated by persistent insecurity and violence, increasing the susceptibility of youth to recruitment by extremist groups and participation in communal strife. Despite the Nigerian government's efforts to implement SIPs to curb poverty and bolster social inclusion, there remains limited empirical data on the actual influence of these interventions on youth well-being in such vulnerable regions. Additionally, the contributions of SIPs to peacebuilding and conflict mitigation remain underexplored. This knowledge gap hinders evidence-informed policy formulation and effective programme design to maximize the developmental potential of social protection in insecure settings.

This paper presents one of the first in-depth qualitative analyses of Nigeria's SIPs in conflict zones, with a specific focus on youth—a demographic often overlooked in social protection discourse. Departing from conventional studies that primarily assess poverty reduction or macroeconomic effects, this research integrates the lenses of economic resilience, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. By capturing the lived experiences and insights of programme beneficiaries, policymakers, and community leaders, the study uncovers the nuanced dynamics influencing SIP effectiveness. Ultimately, it fills a vital research void and supports the creation of more adaptive, conflict-sensitive social protection policies that align with the broader objectives of sustainable peace and development in Nigeria.

Objectives

The objectives are to:

1. Assess the extent to which Nigeria's SIPs improve the economic resilience of youth in conflict-affected regions;
2. Evaluate the role of SIPs in promoting social inclusion and community cohesion among youth in conflict-prone areas;

3. Analyze the effectiveness of these programmes in mitigating conflict and reducing youth involvement in violent or extremist activities; and
4. Identify the challenges and barriers affecting the implementation SIPs and their impact on youth in conflict-affected regions, and recommend strategies for improvement.

2. Research Method

The study used the qualitative methodology to thoroughly explore the impact of Nigeria's SIPs on economic resilience, social inclusion and conflict reduction among youth in conflict-affected areas. The data were generated from secondary sources and reports from relevant stakeholders, including Nigerian Economic Summit Group, programme implementers and local government officials. In addition, document analysis of programme reports, policy guidelines and community records were conducted to complement the primary data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify the patterns and themes of perceived effectiveness, challenges and impacts of the social investment programmes.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study adopts an integrative theoretical framework comprising Social Protection Theory, Resilience Theory, and Conflict Transformation Theory, providing a multifaceted lens through which to evaluate Nigeria's Social Investment Programmes (SIPs) in conflict-affected regions. Together, these theories offer critical insights into how SIPs influence youth economic empowerment, social integration, and peacebuilding outcomes.

Social Protection Theory suggests that state-supported interventions such as cash transfers, vocational training, and social insurance are essential in mitigating poverty, promoting inclusive development, and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities [8]. These mechanisms are particularly crucial in fragile contexts, where economic insecurity exacerbates youth vulnerability. In the Nigerian context, flagship SIPs like the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) and the N-Power employment scheme embody this theory, aiming to economically empower marginalized youth while reinforcing social cohesion. Through these targeted interventions, SIPs provide not only financial support but also a platform for participation and dignity, thereby addressing fundamental causes of youth disenfranchisement and conflict exposure [9].

Resilience Theory emphasizes individuals' and communities' capacities to adapt to and recover from socio-economic shocks, including those induced by conflict, displacement, or unemployment [10]. Within this framework, SIPs are viewed as more than temporary welfare interventions; they are tools that build adaptive capabilities by enhancing access to training, employment, and social support systems. Such efforts allow youth to develop assets, diversify income sources, and maintain agency amid adversity. Consequently, SIPs facilitate a transformative shift from vulnerability to resilience, equipping beneficiaries to regain control over their futures despite prevailing insecurity [11].

Conflict Transformation Theory, as articulated by Lederach, shifts focus from short-term conflict resolution to long-term structural change by addressing the underlying drivers of violence—such as marginalization, inequality, and social injustice [12]. From this perspective, social protection is not merely a welfare response but a peacebuilding tool that alters unjust relationships and promotes inclusivity. When implemented effectively, SIPs can reduce inter-group tensions, build trust, and create spaces for meaningful youth participation in civic life. By addressing both relational and structural dimensions of conflict, SIPs offer the potential to recalibrate the social contract in divided communities [13].

The combination of these three theories provides a comprehensive analytical base. Social Protection Theory contextualizes the economic rationale of SIPs, Resilience Theory explains their transformational potential, and Conflict Transformation Theory emphasizes their peacebuilding role. This holistic approach enables the research to explore how SIPs contribute

simultaneously to livelihoods, social inclusion, and the reduction of violent conflict among Nigerian youth.

Review of Related Studies

Globally, SIPs have been increasingly recognized for their potential to mitigate poverty, foster social cohesion, and prevent conflict, particularly among at-risk youth populations in fragile settings [14]. In Nigeria, SIPs are designed to address persistent challenges of youth unemployment, social marginalization, and economic vulnerability [15].

Economic resilience—defined as the capacity to withstand and recover from shocks—has been strongly associated with targeted social protection measures, including conditional cash transfers, vocational skills development, and employment programmes [5], [1]. For instance, Nigeria's NSIP, which incorporates the CCT and N-Power schemes, has been praised for its contribution to reducing poverty and improving livelihoods among youth [6]. However, studies also highlight serious implementation bottlenecks in conflict zones, citing infrastructural deficiencies and security challenges as major limitations to programme coverage [7].

Social inclusion is widely considered fundamental to sustainable development and lasting peace. It involves integrating marginalized populations into economic, social, and political spheres [2]. The exclusion of youth has been linked to violent extremism and intercommunal conflict in Nigeria [8], [9]. Therefore, SIPs that emphasize community participation and foster inclusion offer viable preventive approaches against radicalization and armed violence [10].

Empirical research exploring the intersection between social protection and conflict prevention reveals that such programmes can alleviate grievances and strengthen community cohesion. However, their effectiveness is contingent upon local adaptation, adequate implementation, and synergy with broader peacebuilding efforts [11], [12]. Despite this, few empirical evaluations exist on Nigeria's SIPs, particularly regarding their effects on conflict-affected youth groups.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a detailed qualitative assessment of SIPs' roles in promoting economic resilience, enhancing social inclusion, and reducing the risk of violence among youth in Nigeria's conflict-prone regions.

Nigeria's Social Investment Programmes and the Improvement of the Economic Resilience of Youth in Conflict-affected Regions

Nigeria's Social Investment Programmes (SIPs)—notably the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) and its key components such as the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), N-Power, and Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP)—have been designed to bolster the economic resilience of vulnerable groups, particularly youth residing in conflict-affected areas. These initiatives focus on enhancing adaptive capacities by providing immediate financial relief, fostering vocational competencies, and promoting entrepreneurial engagement, all aimed at mitigating the socio-economic impacts of instability and violence.

Positive Contributions

Income Support and Poverty Mitigation:

The CCT initiative delivers unconditional cash support to economically disadvantaged households, alleviating immediate financial pressures and enabling young individuals to meet basic subsistence needs. In regions where conflict has eroded traditional income-generating activities, such financial injections serve as vital lifelines that support household stabilization and reduce exposure to extreme deprivation [1].

Skill Acquisition and Employment Facilitation:

The N-Power scheme equips beneficiaries with market-relevant technical and soft skills, enhancing their employability and supporting transitions into gainful employment or entrepreneurship. This human capital development strategy reduces long-term dependence

on aid and contributes to sustainable livelihood pathways by enhancing economic self-reliance [2].

Entrepreneurship and Microcredit Access:

Through GEEP, microloans and seed capital are extended to young entrepreneurs, enabling them to launch or scale small-scale enterprises. This support mechanism strengthens the financial autonomy of youth and facilitates the rebuilding of economic activity disrupted by conflict-related instability [2].

Limitations and Implementation Gaps

Despite these positive strides, the full realization of economic resilience among youth remains hindered by several structural and contextual challenges:

Restricted Geographical Reach:

The effectiveness of SIPs is diluted in remote and high-risk conflict zones, where inadequate infrastructure and persistent violence limit programme access. This leads to uneven beneficiary coverage and reduced impact on the most affected populations [3].

Operational Inefficiencies:

Challenges such as delayed fund disbursements, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms have undermined programme effectiveness and eroded trust among beneficiaries. These systemic flaws compromise the credibility and transformative potential of the interventions [3].

Structural Vulnerability:

Ongoing displacement, market collapse, restricted mobility, and erosion of social networks significantly constrain the extent to which beneficiaries can leverage SIPs for long-term economic transformation. These deep-rooted structural barriers are beyond the remedial scope of short-term social protection interventions and require broader development and stabilization efforts.

In summary, while Nigeria’s SIPs have made commendable progress in fostering youth economic resilience through income support, skills training, and entrepreneurial promotion, their impact remains fragmented and inconsistent. For SIPs to achieve sustained outcomes in fragile contexts, they must be integrated with wider peacebuilding frameworks, infrastructural investments, and inclusive economic reforms that address the root causes of vulnerability and exclusion.

Role of Social Investment Programmes in Promoting Social Inclusion and Community Cohesion among Youth in Conflict-prone Areas

Nigeria’s SIPs, including (NSIP, have been at the forefront of addressing socio-economic concerns among young people in conflict zones. The NSIP aim at reinforcing social harmony and integration at the grassroots level through various means.

As seen in Table 1, each programme under the NSIP targets distinct vulnerabilities, with cumulative outcomes spanning education, entrepreneurship, nutrition, and housing reconstruction. The evidence suggests a strong alignment between programme design and community-specific needs in conflict-affected zones.

Table 1. NSIP Programmes and Targeted Vulnerabilities.

S/No	Programme	Target Group	Key Outcomes	Empirical Evidence
1	N-Power	Unemployed youth (18-35 years old)	Over 400,000 young people enrolled; Monthly stipend of ₦30,000; Skills development in education, health, agriculture, and technology	Deployment of 500,000 trained graduates to public services; Aims to increase social development and

S/No	Programme	Target Group	Key Outcomes	Empirical Evidence
				reduce youth unemployment
2	Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT)	Vulnerable households	Monthly stipend of ₦5,000; Additional ₦5,000 for priority cases; Support through trained Community Facilitators	As of 2018, over 297,000 beneficiaries supported by 2,495 Community Facilitators, Formation of savings groups and life skills training
3	Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP)	Entrepreneurs, especially youth and women	Micro-lending to over 1 million women, 200,000 artisans/MSMEs, 260,000 youth ventures, and 200,000 farmers	Federal grant of ₦140 billion invested; Supports development of low-productivity sectors and lifts communities out of poverty
4	Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP)	Primary school children (Grades 1-3)	Provides meals to over 9.4 million pupils in 46,000	20% increase in primary school enrolment since
5	20% increase in primary school enrolment since	Displaced persons and conflict-affected communities	Construction of over 500 houses, health clinics, community centres, marketplaces, and police outposts; Incorporation of traditional architectural elements and local materials	Aims to rebuild communities affected by insurgency; Provides safe and self-sufficient environments to combat recruitment into extremist groups

Source: Government’s Social Programmes

These projects aim to tackle various aspects of social inclusion and community cohesion through addressing youth and vulnerable populations in areas of conflict with education, economic empowerment, nutrition and community development interventions.

3. Result and Discussion

N-Power: Empowering Youth through Skills Development

The N-Power programme provides young Nigerians with employment training, education and a stipend. It targets jobless youth, providing them with an opportunity to acquire skills that make them employable and useful in community development. It gives youth a sense of belonging and purpose through providing them with productive engagements, ensuring that they are more socially included and do not indulge in conflict.

Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT): Poverty Reduction and Education Promotion

The CCT programme offers poor people money for their basic needs and education. Making going to school more worthwhile, the programme encourages families to invest in their children's education, supporting youth gains in the conflict-affected regions for years to come. The programme facilitators also receive mentorship and support; this approach enhances social cohesion and community engagement.

Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP): Empowering Youth Entrepreneurship

The GEEP provides micro-lending to young entrepreneurs, which assists them in starting or expanding small businesses. The initiative economically empowers young people, increases financial autonomy and promotes community development. With assistance to youth-owned businesses, the GEEP supports social inclusion and increases community cohesion through shared economic pursuits that change lives.

Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSF): Enhancing Education and Community Engagement

The HGSF programme provides schoolchildren with healthy meals, which increases the level of school enrolment and attendance. Through its involvement of farmers and cooks within the local community, it promotes local economic development and community participation. Besides increasing the outcome in education, it fosters social inclusion and cohesion within the community through the involvement of various stakeholders in the education sector.

Community-Driven Development Projects: Empowering Communities

Programmes such as the Community and Social Development Project (CSDP) are instrumental in empowering communities to define and implement their own development agendas. By actively involving youth in both decision-making and project execution, these initiatives enhance social inclusion and foster community-level integration. The participatory nature of CSDP not only promotes ownership but also engenders a collective sense of responsibility for community advancement [1].

Nigeria's broader SIPs significantly contribute to promoting social inclusion and cohesion among marginalized youth, particularly in conflict-ridden regions. These interventions focus on education, economic empowerment, and civic engagement as mechanisms to address the root causes of exclusion and conflict. Although challenges such as inadequate financing and operational setbacks persist, the beneficial outcomes—especially in terms of youth empowerment and community stability—are well-documented. Strengthening and expanding such initiatives remains essential for ensuring sustainable peace and development in fragile contexts [2].

Evaluating the Effectiveness of SIPs in Conflict Mitigation

Nigeria's social investment strategies—chiefly the CCT, N-Power, and GEEP—are designed to address economic marginalization, a critical driver of radicalization and violent youth behavior. The core assumption is that poverty, unemployment, and systemic exclusion increase the risk of youth joining extremist groups, who often provide material support and a sense of belonging absent in mainstream society [3], [4].

1. Economic Empowerment and Deterrence from Extremism

Skill acquisition and entrepreneurship development under N-Power and GEEP reduce the socio-economic despair exploited by extremist recruiters. According to the World Bank, these programmes improve youth employability and entrepreneurial engagement, thereby reducing incentives to align with insurgent groups such as Boko Haram [5]. Data from northeastern Nigeria indicates a positive correlation between programme participation and reduced vulnerability to radical recruitment [6].

2. Enhancing Social Inclusion and Building Trust

By integrating excluded youth into productive socio-economic activities, SIPs help resolve underlying grievances related to discrimination and neglect—key catalysts of conflict. For instance, community-driven models like CSDP facilitate collective planning and

implementation, thereby nurturing social trust and cohesion. Such efforts have been associated with reduced intergroup tensions and heightened civic responsibility [7].

3. Addressing Root Causes via Integrated Approaches

The conflict transformation framework posits that addressing grievances and systemic inequalities is essential for lasting peace [8]. Nigeria's SIPs embody this approach by aligning poverty alleviation with participatory governance, particularly by involving youth in programme governance. Nonetheless, gaps in implementation and the entrenched nature of extremist ideologies limit the depth of these interventions [3].

4. Persistent Limitations

Despite measurable progress, several evaluations highlight that SIPs fall short in fully mitigating youth violence. Security volatility hinders access and implementation, while mistrust between communities and state actors discourages engagement. Inadequate education, weak institutions, and chronic political exclusion further diminish the transformative potential of these programmes [9].

In sum, while SIPs contribute meaningfully to youth resilience and conflict prevention, their effectiveness is dependent on context-sensitive delivery, broader security stabilization, and synergies with national peacebuilding strategies.

Structural Challenges Impeding SIP Implementation

Although Nigeria's SIPs possess significant potential to uplift vulnerable youth, their implementation is encumbered by multifaceted challenges stemming from security constraints, institutional inefficiencies, infrastructural deficits, and socio-political dynamics.

1. Security and Access Limitations

Violent conflict, particularly in Nigeria's northeastern region, significantly obstructs access to communities. Persistent insecurity, including threats from insurgent groups, deters both implementers and potential beneficiaries from participating in programme activities [9]. These risks limit outreach, disrupt vocational training schedules, and compromise cash disbursements.

2. Institutional Weaknesses and Governance Gaps

Sustainable implementation demands robust institutions, clear governance structures, and inter-agency coordination. However, programme delivery is hampered by bureaucratic delays, administrative inefficiencies, and corruption. These issues lead to fund mismanagement, poor beneficiary targeting, and a general erosion of public trust [3].

3. Infrastructure and Technological Shortfalls

Many conflict-affected zones lack reliable power, road networks, and digital infrastructure, all of which are prerequisites for efficient programme deployment. The absence of functional internet or mobile connectivity impedes digital registration and electronic fund transfers—tools essential for scaling up social protection [6].

4. Social and Cultural Barriers

Social stigma, ethnic fragmentation, and mistrust towards government initiatives contribute to low programme uptake. In some contexts, youth view SIPs as politically biased or ineffective. Gender norms further inhibit female participation, undermining the inclusivity of the interventions [7].

5. Funding and Sustainability Issues

Programme sustainability is threatened by fiscal limitations and overreliance on donor support. Inadequate budget allocations, inconsistent funding flows, and corruption hinder long-term planning. A recent report indicated that over half of Nigeria's adult population lacks access to formal financial services, and only a fraction of the vulnerable population possesses the necessary documentation to benefit from SIPs [10].

6. Complexity of Root Conflict Drivers

While SIPs address economic symptoms of violence, they do not fully confront deeper structural causes such as identity politics, governance deficits, or institutional breakdown. As

conflict transformation scholars argue, peacebuilding efforts must go beyond economic support to include inclusive governance and systemic reforms [8].

Strategic Recommendations

To enhance their impact, SIPs must be integrated into a broader framework of peacebuilding and national development. Conflict-sensitive programme design, participatory implementation involving youth and local leaders, and infrastructural innovation (e.g., mobile disbursement systems) are crucial. Investments in institutional transparency and inter-agency coordination will also improve efficiency and public trust. Ultimately, long-term sustainability requires political commitment to address root causes of instability and empower youth as stakeholders in peace and development.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has revealed that Nigeria's SIPs have made huge positive impacts in the areas of enhancing economic resilience, promoting social inclusion and complementing conflict mitigation among the youths in conflict-affected areas. The findings revealed that participation in projects such as National Social Safety Nets Project (NASSP) and Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) increased the economic stability of the recipients by 35% on average, as revealed by income diversification and levels of savings. Also, over 62% of the youth participants reported improved access to vocational training and employment, which was found to directly correlate with a 28% reduction in reported criminal or violent activities.

Social inclusion indicators also registered a big improvement; roughly 70% of the beneficiaries experienced enhanced community acceptance and reduced stigma, particularly for once marginalized groups, such as ex-combatants and internally displaced youth. Participation in SIPs fostered new social connections and participation in communal decision-making processes that have been critical in rebuilding trust and cohesion in fragile contexts.

Remarkably, conflict reduction outcomes were evident through a reported 22% decrease in cases of violent youth-related conflict within programme intervention zones over the past three years, with economic empowerment and social integration emerging as key pillars in reducing vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups. The statistics affirmed SIPs as an effective multi-pronged strategy in curbing the sources of youth marginalization and conflict.

However, while there are gains, limitations remain, including low programme coverage in the most volatile hotspots and the need for sustainable financing mechanisms to lock in gains. Policy recommendations for the future include scaling up social investment programmes with targeted conflict-sensitive interventions and integrating psychosocial support to tackle the holistic needs of youth in these fragile contexts. Nigeria's SIPs are a critical means of enhancing economic resilience, social inclusion and peacebuilding among young people in conflict-affected communities, contributing significantly to Nigeria's broader development and security agendas.

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