

DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH IN BORNO STATE: A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract: *This study explores sustainable livelihood opportunities for vulnerable youth in Borno State, Nigeria, focusing on the impact of conflict and socio-economic challenges on their participation in economic activities. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 400 youth across various communities. The findings reveal that most youth are engaged in informal livelihood activities, with limited involvement in formal employment due to low educational attainment, lack of capital, and inadequate access to financial services. Regression analysis indicates that education level and financial access significantly influence youth participation in livelihood programs, while proximity to training centers poses a barrier in rural areas. Qualitative data highlights insecurity, lack of capital, and the importance of community-based approaches as key challenges. The study recommends targeted vocational training, increased access to financial resources, and decentralized, community-driven interventions to improve youth livelihoods and foster long-term economic recovery in conflict-affected regions. The results contribute to the growing body of literature on youth empowerment in post-conflict settings and provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and development practitioners.*

Keywords: *Sustainable livelihoods, vulnerable youth, financial inclusion, community-based approaches, economic recovery, youth empowerment.*

1.0 Introduction

The protracted Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria has left a devastating impact on Borno State, the epicenter of the crisis. Over a decade of conflict has resulted in widespread destruction of infrastructure, displacement of millions, and disruption of traditional livelihoods. Youth, who make up a significant proportion of the population, are disproportionately affected by this instability. Many have been left without access to education, marketable skills, or employment opportunities, making them vulnerable to exploitation, criminal activities, and further radicalization. These challenges highlight the urgent need for interventions that address the socio-economic vulnerabilities of youth in the region, particularly through sustainable livelihood development (Abubakar et al., 2022).

Unemployment among youth in Borno State has reached alarming levels, with limited options available to rebuild their lives. Many young people are trapped in a cycle of poverty and dependency, relying on humanitarian aid that is often insufficient and unsustainable. This dependency, coupled with the region's insecurity, perpetuates economic stagnation and social

unrest. To break this cycle, it is imperative to develop community-based approaches that empower youth to become self-reliant and economically active, leveraging local resources and social capital to create opportunities for sustainable livelihoods (Aliyu & Sulaiman, 2023).

The concept of sustainable livelihoods is particularly relevant in this context, as it emphasizes the resilience of individuals and communities to recover from shocks and stresses while enhancing their capabilities and assets. Sustainable livelihood approaches prioritize local participation, inclusivity, and adaptability, making them well-suited for conflict-affected settings like Borno State. For instance, interventions focusing on vocational training, agriculture, and entrepreneurship have proven effective in equipping youth with the skills and resources needed to rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities (Omar et al., 2023). However, there remains a gap in tailoring these interventions to the specific needs and challenges of youth in Borno.

The role of community-based approaches in promoting sustainable livelihoods cannot be overstated. These approaches involve local stakeholders in the design and implementation of interventions, fostering a sense of ownership and trust within the community. By leveraging existing social networks and cultural values, community-based initiatives can effectively address the unique challenges faced by vulnerable youth in Borno, including displacement, limited access to finance, and gender disparities. Such approaches have demonstrated success in other conflict-affected regions, underscoring their potential for replication in Borno State (Ahmed & Ali, 2024).

Despite the potential of these interventions, several barriers must be addressed to ensure their success. Key challenges include inadequate funding, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and persistent insecurity, which hampers the implementation of development projects. Furthermore, the diversity of needs among displaced youth, host communities, and other vulnerable groups requires a nuanced and inclusive approach. Addressing these challenges necessitates collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders to create a conducive environment for livelihood programs to thrive (Usman et al., 2022).

This paper seeks to contribute to the discourse on youth empowerment in conflict-affected settings by exploring a community-based approach to developing sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable youth in Borno State. The study aims to identify the challenges and opportunities in providing livelihood support, assess the role of community participation in enhancing program effectiveness, and offer actionable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders. By addressing these objectives, the paper provides a framework for empowering youth and fostering socio-economic recovery in one of Nigeria's most crisis-affected regions.

2.0 Review of Literatures

2.1 Concepts

2.1.1 Youth Vulnerability

Youth vulnerability encompasses the economic, social, and psychological challenges that young people face, particularly in conflict-affected and impoverished regions. Vulnerability in youth often stems from factors such as poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and exposure to violence or displacement. In Borno State, the prolonged Boko Haram insurgency has compounded these issues, leaving many young individuals without access to formal education or marketable skills. Vulnerable youth are at heightened risk of exploitation, radicalization, and social exclusion, which can perpetuate cycles of poverty and instability. Addressing youth vulnerability requires a

multi-dimensional approach that prioritizes education, psychosocial support, and economic empowerment. Effective interventions must consider the unique needs and aspirations of youth while fostering a sense of agency and resilience. Empowering vulnerable youth through targeted programs is essential not only for their well-being but also for promoting peace and socio-economic recovery in affected communities (Aliyu & Sulaiman, 2023).

2.1.2 Sustainable Livelihoods

Sustainable livelihoods refer to the capabilities, assets, and activities required for individuals and households to maintain their means of living in a manner that is resilient to shocks and stresses. The concept emphasizes sustainability in economic, social, and environmental dimensions, ensuring that livelihood strategies do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. In conflict-affected regions like Borno State, sustainable livelihoods are crucial for fostering long-term recovery and stability. They involve equipping individuals with the skills, resources, and networks necessary to generate income while enhancing their resilience to adverse conditions. This approach often includes vocational training, access to credit, and market linkages tailored to the local context. By promoting self-reliance and reducing dependency on humanitarian aid, sustainable livelihood programs can empower vulnerable populations, particularly youth, to rebuild their lives and contribute to community development (Ahmed & Ali, 2024).

2.1.3 Community-Based Approaches

Community-based approaches focus on involving local stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development initiatives. This participatory strategy leverages the knowledge, resources, and social networks within a community to address its unique challenges and priorities. In Borno State, where social structures have been disrupted by conflict, community-based approaches are critical for fostering trust and ownership of development programs. These approaches ensure that interventions are culturally relevant and aligned with the needs of the target population. For example, engaging local leaders, youth groups, and women's associations in livelihood projects can enhance their acceptance and effectiveness. Community-based initiatives also promote social cohesion and inclusivity, particularly in diverse or displaced populations. By empowering communities to take an active role in their development, this approach lays the foundation for sustainable change and strengthens resilience against future crises (Usman et al., 2022).

2.1.4 Vocational Training

Vocational training is a targeted educational approach that equips individuals with practical skills and knowledge for specific trades or professions. In regions like Borno State, where formal employment opportunities are limited, vocational training offers a viable pathway for economic empowerment and self-reliance. Such programs can cover a wide range of skills, including agriculture, tailoring, carpentry, and digital skills, tailored to local market demands. For vulnerable youth, vocational training provides an opportunity to acquire marketable skills, enhance their employability, and build sustainable livelihoods. Effective training programs often integrate entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and mentorship to maximize their impact. Additionally, vocational training can serve as a tool for social reintegration, helping displaced youth and former combatants rebuild their lives. However, the success of such programs depends on their accessibility, quality, and alignment with local economic opportunities, as well as the provision of post-training support such as tools and startup capital (Jibril et al., 2023).

2.1.5 Entrepreneurship Development

Entrepreneurship development is the process of equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to start and manage successful businesses. In conflict-affected regions like Borno State, entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical strategy for fostering economic recovery and youth empowerment. It offers an avenue for self-employment, reduces dependency on limited formal job opportunities, and promotes innovation. Programs aimed at entrepreneurship development often include training in business planning, financial management, and marketing, alongside access to credit and mentorship. For vulnerable youth, these initiatives can transform their lives by providing them with the means to create and sustain their enterprises. Furthermore, entrepreneurship fosters economic diversification, reduces poverty, and enhances community resilience. However, challenges such as insecurity, limited market access, and inadequate infrastructure must be addressed to enable youth entrepreneurs to thrive. A supportive policy environment and collaboration among stakeholders are essential for scaling entrepreneurship initiatives (Omar et al., 2023).

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

Developed by Chambers and Conway (1992), the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) provides a holistic approach to understanding the assets, strategies, and outcomes associated with livelihoods in vulnerable contexts. The framework identifies five key assets: human, social, physical, financial, and natural capital, which individuals use to pursue livelihood strategies. It emphasizes resilience, sustainability, and the capacity of households to recover from shocks and stresses. SLF is particularly relevant in conflict-affected regions like Borno State, where youth face unique challenges in accessing these assets. The framework helps in identifying interventions that enhance their resources, minimize vulnerabilities, and support long-term economic recovery.

2.2.2 Social Capital Theory

Proposed by Putnam (2000), Social Capital Theory highlights the importance of social networks, trust, and shared norms in facilitating collective action and improving socio-economic outcomes. The theory underscores the value of community relationships and local participation in fostering cooperation and resource sharing. In the context of community-based approaches to sustainable livelihoods, social capital plays a vital role in building trust among stakeholders, enhancing the acceptance of programs, and ensuring their sustainability. This theory is particularly relevant in post-conflict settings, where rebuilding social cohesion is critical for the success of development interventions.

2.2.3 Human Capital Theory

Introduced by Becker (1964), Human Capital Theory posits that individuals' knowledge, skills, and experiences are critical assets that influence their productivity and economic outcomes. Investing in education and training enhances these attributes, leading to improved employability and income generation. For vulnerable youth in Borno State, vocational training and entrepreneurship development align closely with the principles of this theory, emphasizing the role of skill acquisition in breaking the cycle of poverty and dependence. The theory provides a rationale for interventions that focus on capacity building and skills development.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) underpins this study. It offers a comprehensive lens to analyze the vulnerabilities of youth in Borno State, their access to resources, and the strategies they can adopt to achieve sustainable livelihoods. SLF aligns closely with the study's focus on resilience, community-based approaches, and the development of long-term solutions for youth empowerment. By integrating various forms of capital and acknowledging the external environment's influence, SLF provides a robust foundation for designing and evaluating interventions that support sustainable livelihood opportunities in conflict-affected regions.

2.3 Empirical review

A study conducted by Jibril, Aliyu, and Usman (2023) explored the impact of financial inclusion on youth entrepreneurship in northern Nigeria. Their research revealed that access to financial services, such as microfinance loans and digital banking, is a key enabler for young people to start and sustain businesses. According to the study, youth who had access to financial resources were significantly more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The authors recommended that expanding financial services tailored to youth needs could create new economic opportunities, boosting job creation and contributing to recovery in conflict-affected regions.

Furthermore, Usman, Yusuf, and Ali (2022) investigated how community-based approaches can enhance youth empowerment in the northeastern part of Nigeria. Through interviews with local leaders and young people, the researchers found that initiatives driven by community leaders were more successful in meeting the specific needs of vulnerable youth. These grassroots programs fostered trust and cooperation, which are vital for creating sustainable livelihoods. Usman and colleagues stressed that involving local communities in program design and implementation can strengthen social cohesion and resilience, which is crucial for long-term economic stability.

Similarly, Ahmed and Ali (2024) focused on the role of the informal sector in driving economic recovery in post-conflict northern Nigeria. Their findings highlighted that informal activities such as small-scale farming, trading, and services have been vital for providing livelihoods to young people who are often excluded from formal employment. The authors noted that while formal sectors were slow to recover due to persistent security challenges, the informal sector had proven to be a lifeline for many. They suggested that fostering entrepreneurship in the informal sector through vocational training and resource access could significantly enhance youth employment opportunities and contribute to economic resilience.

These studies underscore the importance of integrated approaches combining financial inclusion, community involvement, vocational training, and informal sector support to provide sustainable livelihoods for youth in conflict-affected regions. By focusing on these areas, policymakers and development agencies can create effective programs that address the immediate needs of vulnerable youth while laying the groundwork for long-term socio-economic recovery in northeastern Nigeria.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to explore sustainable livelihood opportunities for vulnerable youth in Borno State. The research design is descriptive and exploratory, aimed at understanding the socio-economic conditions of youth, identifying effective livelihood strategies, and assessing the role of community-based approaches. The target population includes vulnerable youth between the ages

of 15 and 35 in conflict-affected and host communities across Borno State. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select participants, starting with the identification of Local Government Areas (LGAs) severely impacted by the insurgency, followed by the selection of communities based on accessibility and population density. In total, 400 respondents were surveyed using structured questionnaires, while 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including community leaders, government officials, and representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Data collection was conducted over three months, ensuring adequate representation of diverse perspectives.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, such as means and frequencies, were used to summarize respondents' socio-economic characteristics and livelihood activities. Inferential statistics, including regression analysis, were employed to identify factors influencing youth participation in livelihood programs. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted to extract patterns and insights from interviews. The results were triangulated to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, ensuring that both numerical trends and contextual nuances were captured. Ethical considerations were prioritized, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and minimizing potential risks to participants. This methodology provides a robust framework for assessing the challenges, opportunities, and outcomes of sustainable livelihood initiatives for youth in Borno State.

4.0 Presentation and Analysis of Data

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study surveyed 400 youth participants from conflict-affected and host communities across Borno State. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	240	60.0
Female	160	40.0
Age Group (Years)		
15–20	120	30.0
21–25	140	35.0
26–30	100	25.0
31–35	40	10.0
Educational Level		
No Formal Education	100	25.0
Primary Education	80	20.0
Secondary Education	150	37.5
Tertiary Education	70	17.5

Source: Field survey, 2024

The data reveal that 60% of respondents were male, while 40% were female, reflecting a gender imbalance in participation in economic activities. The majority of respondents (65%) were within the 21–30 age bracket, highlighting the youthfulness of the sample. Educational attainment was low, with 45% having no formal or primary education, which underscores the barriers to accessing formal livelihoods.

4.2 Current Livelihood Activities

The respondents engaged in various livelihood activities, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Livelihood Activities of Respondents

Livelihood Activity	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
Farming	120	30.0
Petty Trading	100	25.0
Vocational Skills (e.g., tailoring, welding)	80	20.0
Formal Employment	50	12.5
Unemployed	50	12.5

Source: Field survey, 2024

Farming and petty trading were the most common livelihood activities, accounting for 55% of all respondents. Only 12.5% of respondents were formally employed, while another 12.5% were unemployed. This indicates a reliance on informal economic activities and highlights the limited availability of formal job opportunities.

4.3 Factors Influencing Participation in Livelihood Programs

A regression analysis was conducted to identify the factors influencing youth participation in livelihood programs. Table 3 presents the regression results.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Participation

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	p-value
Gender (Male=1, Female=0)	0.245	0.058	0.001
Age	-0.031	0.013	0.021
Education Level	0.420	0.074	0.000
Access to Credit	0.365	0.060	0.000
Proximity to Training Centers	-0.150	0.045	0.002

Source: Authors computation

The results indicate that education level and access to credit significantly influence participation in livelihood programs, with positive coefficients ($p < 0.001$). Proximity to training centers was negatively associated with participation, suggesting that youth in remote areas face challenges accessing opportunities.

4.4 Qualitative Insights

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed three key themes:

- **Barriers to Livelihoods:** Participants cited insecurity, lack of infrastructure, and inadequate access to capital as major challenges.
- **Community-Based Support:** Many respondents emphasized the importance of community involvement in program design, which fosters trust and inclusivity.
- **Desire for Vocational Training:** Youth expressed a strong interest in skills acquisition programs tailored to market demands.

The integration of these findings highlights the multi-dimensional challenges and opportunities for developing sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable youth in Borno State. These results provide actionable insights for policymakers and development practitioners.

4.5 Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for sustainable livelihood opportunities tailored to the socio-economic realities of vulnerable youth in Borno State. The demographic data reveal significant gender disparities and low levels of formal education, which limit the ability of youth to access stable employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. These findings align with the work of Aliyu and Sulaiman (2023), who highlighted that gender imbalances and educational deficits are critical barriers to youth empowerment in conflict-affected regions. Addressing these disparities through targeted educational programs and gender-sensitive interventions is vital for fostering inclusive economic growth.

The analysis of current livelihood activities demonstrates a heavy reliance on informal sectors such as farming and petty trading, with limited participation in formal employment. This pattern reflects the findings of Ahmed and Ali (2024), who observed similar trends in post-conflict settings, where the disruption of formal economic structures pushes individuals toward subsistence activities. However, the high interest in vocational skills among respondents suggests an untapped potential for diversifying livelihood options. Vocational training programs tailored to local market demands, such as tailoring, welding, and digital skills, can serve as a pathway for youth to transition from subsistence to sustainable income generation.

Regression analysis identified education level and access to credit as significant determinants of participation in livelihood programs. These results are consistent with Jibril et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of financial inclusion and human capital development in enhancing youth economic participation. The negative association between proximity to training centers and program participation highlights the infrastructural challenges in rural and conflict-affected areas. This finding underscores the need for decentralized and mobile training programs to ensure equitable access for remote communities.

The qualitative insights further enrich the understanding of barriers and opportunities for livelihood development. The recurring themes of insecurity, lack of capital, and community involvement highlight the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by vulnerable youth. Usman et al. (2022) similarly noted that community-based approaches are critical for rebuilding trust and fostering inclusivity in post-conflict regions. Integrating community leaders and stakeholders in program design can enhance the relevance and sustainability of interventions.

5.0 Summary and Recommendations

5.1 Summary

This study aimed to explore the sustainable livelihood opportunities for vulnerable youth in Borno State, Nigeria, focusing on the impact of conflict and its aftermath on youth participation in economic activities. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather data from 400 youth respondents across various communities in the state. The findings revealed that the majority of youth participants were engaged in informal livelihood activities such as farming and petty trading, with only a small percentage involved in formal employment. The study also found significant barriers to livelihood opportunities, including low educational attainment, limited access to credit, and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in remote areas. Regression analysis identified education level and access to financial resources as key factors influencing youth participation in livelihood programs, while proximity to training centers was found to be a limiting factor for youth in rural areas.

Qualitative insights indicated that insecurity, lack of capital, and the need for community-based approaches were central themes in the youth's experiences. Despite these challenges, there was a strong desire for vocational training, entrepreneurship development, and greater community involvement in livelihood interventions. These findings align with broader literature on youth livelihoods in conflict-affected areas, highlighting the importance of education, financial inclusion, and community engagement in fostering sustainable economic recovery.

5.2 Recommendations

- **Investment in Vocational and Entrepreneurial Training:** There is a pressing need to establish more vocational training centers in both urban and rural areas of Borno State. These centers should offer practical skills training that aligns with local market demands, such as tailoring, carpentry, welding, and digital skills. Programs should be designed to cater to both male and female youth, with special attention given to gender-sensitive training that addresses the unique challenges faced by women.
- **Improvement in Access to Credit and Financial Services:** To foster entrepreneurship and self-employment, it is crucial to improve access to financial services, particularly for youth in conflict-affected areas. Microfinance institutions, local banks, and development agencies should collaborate to offer youth-friendly credit facilities, including small loans and grants for business start-ups. This will help mitigate the barriers posed by the lack of capital for youth who want to engage in entrepreneurial activities.
- **Community-Based Interventions:** Given the importance of social capital and community cohesion, livelihood programs should adopt a community-based approach. Engaging local leaders, community groups, and youth associations in the design and implementation of livelihood programs will increase program effectiveness and ensure that interventions are culturally relevant and well-received. This approach can also strengthen social networks and trust, which are critical for long-term sustainability.
- **Mobile and Decentralized Training Programs:** To address the challenge of proximity to training centers, mobile and decentralized vocational training programs should be implemented. These programs can be delivered through community centers, local partnerships, or mobile training units that travel to remote areas. This will ensure that youth

in rural and hard-to-reach communities are not excluded from opportunities to build sustainable livelihoods.

- Focus on Education and Skills Development: Addressing the educational deficits of vulnerable youth in Borno State should be a top priority. Expanding access to both formal and informal education, including literacy programs for those without formal schooling, will build the human capital necessary for successful livelihood activities. Governments and NGOs should collaborate to provide scholarships and educational support to youth in conflict-affected areas.

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