Local Governance Failure and Insecurity in Africa: Nigeria in Perspective

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ABSTRACT:
This paper examines the relationship between local governance failure and persistent insecurity in Nigeria. Using a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis, the study applies Fragile State Theory to explain how weak local institutions, poor service delivery, corruption, exclusionary politics, and the erosion of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms undermine community resilience and facilitate violence. The analysis traces the evolution of local governance in Nigeria and explores contemporary security challenges, including ethno-religious conflicts, insurgency, banditry, farmer–herder clashes, secessionist agitations, and urban criminality. Findings indicate that policy responses have achieved limited results due to centralized security structures, weak institutional capacity, and restricted fiscal and political autonomy at the local level. Comparative insights from South Africa and Brazil highlight how decentralized governance and community-based security approaches can strengthen local resilience. The study therefore advocates restructuring Nigeria's local governance architecture to enhance grassroots participation, accountability, and sustainable security outcomes.

Keywords: Community Policing, Devolution, Local Government Autonomy, Local Governance, Insecurity

Introduction

In recent decades, Nigeria has experienced escalating insecurity, including insurgency and terrorism in the North-East, banditry and kidnapping in the North-West, communal violence in parts of the North-Central, separatist agitations in the South-East, and militant activities in the South-South. Consequently, few regions remain unaffected by the country's expanding security crisis (Izu, 2024). Despite successive government interventions, insecurity persists, raising concerns about the effectiveness of local governance as a foundation for national security.

Local governments, theoretically the tier of government closest to citizens, are expected to play a central role in service delivery, conflict resolution, and the promotion of social cohesion (Agba et al., 2013). In practice, however, many Nigerian local governments suffer from structural inefficiencies, corruption, weak institutional capacity, and political interference, all of which undermine their ability to respond effectively to security threats (Afegbua et al., 2018).

The weakness of local governance institutions has created vacuums in grassroots security and development, often filled by non-state actors such as vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and insurgents (Iloh & Nwokedi, 2019). Although these actors occasionally provide local protection, their activities frequently intensify

violence and further erode state legitimacy. As Levine and Posner (1981) observe, the concentration of political authority and resources at federal and state levels often leaves local governments financially and administratively dependent, limiting their ability to respond autonomously to local crises.

Expectations initially emerged that the "Renewed Hope" administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu would prioritize reforms aimed at strengthening local government autonomy as part of a broader strategy to improve governance and security. These expectations were reinforced by a recent Supreme Court ruling affirming the financial and administrative autonomy of local governments (Premium Times, 2024).

Although widely celebrated as a landmark decision capable of revitalizing grassroots governance, the ruling has had limited practical impact. State governments continue to exert significant control over local government finances and administration, particularly through manipulation of the State Joint Local Government Account (Sanusi et al., 2013; Izu, 2024b) and the appointment of caretaker committees in place of elected officials (Eze & Muanya, 2013). Such practices undermine constitutional provisions for local autonomy and weaken local governments' capacity to address community-level security challenges, infrastructure decay, and social unrest (Koko et al., 2023).

Several studies have identified a strong relationship between local governance failure and rising insecurity in Nigeria (Mukhtar et al., 2017; Ogbu & Chukwuemeka, 2024). When local authorities fail to address underlying drivers of insecurity such as poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and inadequate infrastructure, conditions conducive to criminality and extremism emerge. Against this backdrop, a critical examination of the relationship between local governance failure and insecurity is both timely and necessary. This study therefore investigates the structural factors driving governance failure at the local level and assesses their implications for security, stability, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Local Governance

Local governance refers to the processes through which decisions are made and implemented at the community level by government institutions, elected officials, civil society organizations, and citizens (World Bank, 2000). It involves systems of authority, responsibility, and accountability that operate at the grassroots to promote development and maintain social order.

In Nigeria, the 1976 Local Government Reform formally recognized local government as the third tier of governance, granting it constitutional authority to operate within defined jurisdictions. Local governments are responsible for services such as primary education, healthcare delivery, waste management, local road maintenance, and community-level security coordination (Agba et al., 2013).

In practice, however, Nigeria's local governance system is characterized by structural weaknesses, fiscal dependency, and persistent political interference from state governments (Odigbo, 2013; Uhunmwuangho & Aibieyi, 2013). Many local governments function largely as administrative extensions of state authorities, lacking the financial autonomy and institutional capacity required to effectively implement development policies. The State Joint Local Government Account, widely criticized for enabling the diversion of local government funds by state authorities, continues to undermine service delivery and weaken local administrative legitimacy (Sanusi et al., 2013). As a result, local governance institutions have struggled to promote participatory development or support community-level security management, contributing to public disillusionment and the rise of informal or violent alternatives to state authority (Akhakpe et al., 2012).

Concept of Insecurity

Insecurity describes a condition in which individuals or communities face threats and vulnerabilities that undermine their safety and stability (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013). In Nigeria, insecurity has evolved from localized incidents of armed robbery and communal conflict into widespread challenges including insurgency, terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, and separatist violence.

Between 2015 and 2023, insecurity expanded significantly across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, undermining national cohesion and economic productivity (Ogbu & Chukwuemeka, 2024). Key drivers include youth unemployment, poverty, ethno-religious tensions, corruption, weak judicial institutions, porous borders, and failures in governance at the grassroots level (Mukhtar et al., 2017; Akhakpe et al., 2012).

Local government institutions, which should function as frontline mechanisms for early warning, conflict resolution, and human development, have increasingly become ineffective. This institutional weakness erodes public trust in the state and contributes to the persistence of insecurity (Koko et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three related theoretical perspectives: Systems Theory, Fragile State Theory, and Governance Theory. While each provides valuable insights, Fragile State Theory serves as the primary analytical framework due to its direct relevance to the institutional weaknesses observed in Nigeria's local governance system.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory views society as an interconnected structure composed of interdependent institutions that must function collectively to maintain stability (Easton, 1965). Within this framework, local governments operate as sub-systems responsible for translating grassroots demands into policy responses. When local governance institutions fail due to weak resources, elite capture, or institutional neglect, systemic imbalances emerge, often manifesting as insecurity, social unrest, and developmental stagnation (Page & Wando, 2022).

Fragile State Theory

Fragile State Theory explains how weaknesses in state institutions, including limited administrative capacity, weak legitimacy, and inadequate service delivery, undermine a government's ability to maintain order and meet citizens' needs (Rotberg, 2003). Applied to Nigeria, this framework highlights how political interference, financial dependence on state governments, and limited institutional autonomy constrain the effectiveness of local authorities (Uhunmwuangho & Aibieyi, 2013).

African-centered scholarship also cautions that state fragility should be understood within the historical context of colonial state formation. Many African states inherited centralized administrative systems and artificial political boundaries that disrupted indigenous governance structures. Contemporary governance challenges may therefore reflect tensions between imported institutional frameworks and historically rooted systems of local authority.

Governance Theory

Governance Theory emphasizes the processes through which decisions are made and implemented, focusing on accountability, transparency, participation, and institutional effectiveness (Rhodes, 1996). Effective local governance requires the active participation of community stakeholders and responsive institutions capable of addressing citizens' needs.

In Nigeria, however, governance structures remain highly centralized and often exclusionary. Local government leaders are frequently appointed rather than elected, while development priorities are determined largely by state authorities (Sunday & Chinedum, 2014). This disconnect weakens public trust and creates opportunities for extremist or criminal actors to establish alternative forms of authority (Mukhtar et al., 2017).

Among these perspectives, Fragile State Theory offers the most suitable framework for analyzing the relationship between local governance failure and insecurity in Nigeria because it directly addresses the institutional fragility, legitimacy deficits, and governance vacuums evident in many local government systems. Accordingly, it serves as the primary analytical lens for this study.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between local governance failure and insecurity in Nigeria. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables deeper analysis of complex political and institutional dynamics, allowing for contextual interpretation of how weak local governance contributes to security challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, government publications, books, and credible media analyses. These materials were examined to trace historical developments, assess institutional structures, and analyze contemporary patterns of governance and insecurity in Nigeria.

The analysis is guided by Fragile State Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how weak, under-resourced, and politically constrained local governments contribute to insecurity through failures in service delivery, authority enforcement, and institutional legitimacy (Rotberg, 2003). Applying this perspective enables the study to identify patterns of fragility within Nigeria's local governance system and link them to the persistence of security challenges across different regions.

5.1 Pre-colonial and Colonial Local Administration

Local governance in Nigeria predates colonialism and was embedded in indigenous socio-political institutions emphasizing community participation and collective responsibility. Across the diverse ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria, governance systems were locally legitimate and socially rooted. Among the Hausa-Fulani, the emirate system operated under centralized authority with clear administrative hierarchies. Yoruba kingdoms practiced consultative governance through councils of chiefs advising the Oba, while Igbo societies maintained decentralized and republican governance through village assemblies, lineage heads, and age-grade institutions (Afigbo, 1972; Ajaegbo, 2014).

These arrangements functioned as context-specific systems of grassroots administration and conflict resolution that were participatory and responsive to community needs. They also demonstrate that African societies possessed functional governance traditions prior to colonial intervention. The colonial policy of indirect rule altered these institutions by subordinating traditional authorities to colonial officials and restructuring local administration along centralized bureaucratic lines (Coleman, 1958; Vaughan, 2000).

Modern local government structures in Nigeria therefore emerged from the colonial Native Authority system. By the 1940s, the responsibilities of these authorities expanded to include native police forces and prisons (Aiyede, 2024). Although the system incorporated traditional rulers into colonial governance, they remained subordinate to colonial administrators (Vaughan, 2000). The Native Authority Ordinance of 1916 formalized this arrangement, institutionalizing colonial control over local administration through traditional institutions (Coleman, 1958). Consequently, the colonial framework entrenched a top-down administrative structure that limited genuine citizen participation in local governance.

Post-Independence Local Government Reforms

Following independence in 1960, reforming local government became central to Nigeria's effort to reconcile inherited colonial structures with federal governance. A major turning point occurred with the 1976 Local Government Reform under the military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo. The reform

formally recognized local governments as the third tier of government, introduced direct federal allocations, and established the Uniform Local Government System to standardize administrative structures nationwide (Okafor & Orjinta, 2013).

Subsequent constitutional developments, including the 1979 and 1999 Constitutions, reaffirmed the legal status of local governments. The Fourth Schedule of the 1999 Constitution assigns them responsibilities such as primary education, healthcare, sanitation, and community development. Despite these constitutional provisions, however, local government autonomy has remained largely nominal. Attempts to strengthen autonomy through constitutional amendments—including proposals in 2010 and 2018—have faced resistance from state governments that benefit from maintaining control over local structures. Although Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees democratically elected local councils, many states continue to appoint caretaker committees in violation of this provision (Obidimma & Obidimma, 2016).

Thus, while reforms such as the 1976 Local Government Reform and constitutional recognition sought to institutionalize local governance, they have not produced fully autonomous or effective institutions. As Aiyede (2024) argues, addressing the challenges of local governance requires moving beyond debates over financial autonomy toward more inclusive, accountable, and responsive local governance systems.

Current Structure and Legal Framework of Local Governance

Nigeria currently has 774 constitutionally recognized Local Government Areas (LGAs) across its 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. Each LGA is expected to operate with an elected chairman, vice-chairman, and councillors responsible for grassroots development, local infrastructure, primary education, healthcare, and aspects of community security. In practice, however, state governments exercise significant control over local appointments, finances, and functions.

On 11 July 2024, the Supreme Court of Nigeria ruled that federal allocations to local governments should be paid directly to LGAs rather than through state governments, a mechanism long used by states to control or divert local funds (Premium Times, 2024). The ruling was widely celebrated as a major step toward strengthening local government autonomy and restoring grassroots governance. Nevertheless, several state governments have resisted its implementation, citing administrative and fiscal concerns (Aiyede, 2024). Beyond fiscal considerations, this resistance reflects deeper political economy dynamics within Nigeria's federal system. Control over local governments provides state governors with significant political leverage, enabling them to influence local elections, appoint caretaker committees, and maintain patronage networks that consolidate their political dominance at the grassroots. Consequently, debates over local government autonomy extend beyond financial management to struggles over political control of local democratic space. This pattern reflects what scholars describe as elite capture of local governance institutions, where subnational elites limit the independence of grassroots authorities to maintain political influence. Ironically, despite exercising financial and administrative control over local governments, state authorities often claim limited capacity to address insecurity due to the centralized structure of the Nigerian Police Force. This creates a governance contradiction: states control local political and financial structures but lack direct security authority. Meanwhile, local governments (arguably the institutions closest to affected communities) remain politically marginalized and institutionally weak (Jamo & Yakasai, 2017).

Overall, the trajectory of local governance in Nigeria reveals a persistent tension between constitutional intentions and political realities. Centralization, elite capture, and institutional contradictions continue to undermine the potential of local governments to function as

effective agents of grassroots development and local security.

Nature and Dimensions of Insecurity in Nigeria

Nigeria faces a complex and multifaceted security crisis characterized by violent extremism, communal conflicts, and organized criminality. These threats often intersect with the country's ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, producing conflicts that reflect deeper structural tensions within the Nigerian state. The persistence and overlap of these security challenges reveal systemic weaknesses in governance and security provision across all levels of government. This section examines the major dimensions of insecurity in Nigeria, including ethno-religious conflicts, banditry and kidnapping, insurgency and terrorism, farmer-herder clashes, and urban criminality.

Ethno-religious Conflicts

Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt, are driven by complex interactions between identity politics, resource competition, and institutional failure (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). Tensions between predominantly Christian farming communities and Muslim Fulani pastoralists have intensified over time due to climate change, population pressures, and insecure land tenure systems (Kwaja, 2011; Ngwoke & Odukoya, 2025). Environmental pressures such as drought and desertification in northern Nigeria have forced pastoralist migration southward, increasing competition over land and water resources in farming communities (Okoye et al., 2020).

Violence reached a tragic peak during the December 2023 Plateau attacks, when coordinated assaults across Bokkos and Barkin Ladi LGAs killed more than 155 civilians and displaced over 6,000 residents (Daily Trust, 2023). Earlier in May 2023, attacks in Mangu LGA resulted in the deaths of more than 130 villagers in violence attributed to Fulani militias (The Nation, 2023). These incidents illustrate how identity-based divisions have increasingly been weaponized in rural conflicts.

A 2025 Amnesty International report further indicates that more than 1,500 civilians were killed in the first half of 2025 due to attacks by armed groups. The report highlights widespread failures by Nigerian authorities to investigate or prosecute perpetrators, fostering a climate of impunity in states such as Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, and Zamfara (Amnesty International, 2025). These recurring attacks reflect the fragility of state institutions: weak and under-resourced local governance structures lack the capacity to mediate conflicts or protect vulnerable communities. As traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms erode, non-state actors increasingly fill the security vacuum, often pursuing ethno-political agendas that deepen instability. Strengthening local governance institutions therefore remains essential for sustainable peace and community protection (Aiyede, 2024).

Banditry and Kidnapping

Banditry and kidnapping have emerged as some of Nigeria's most pervasive security threats, particularly in the North-West and parts of the North-Central regions. Initially associated with cattle rustling and rural armed robbery, these activities have evolved into organized criminal enterprises involving heavily armed groups that conduct mass abductions, raid villages, and demand ransom payments (Ojo et al., 2023).

According to SBM Intelligence (2023), more than 4,800 people were kidnapped across Nigeria in 2023, with ransom demands exceeding ₦13.6 billion. Kidnapping has increasingly expanded beyond rural areas to highways and peri-urban zones. Kaduna, Niger, Zamfara, and Katsina remain among the most affected states, with over 1,100 abductions recorded in Kaduna during the first half of 2023. Bandit groups frequently operate from forest enclaves such as Rugu, Kamuku, and Kuyambana, areas that remain largely outside the effective reach of security forces.

The political economy of kidnapping also reveals the scale of the crisis. Between May 2023 and April 2024, ransom payments in Nigeria were estimated at ₦2.23 trillion (Punchng,

2024). The persistence of this phenomenon reflects both the limitations of centralized security institutions and the marginal role assigned to local governments in community security, despite their proximity to affected populations.

Table 1 below summarizes key statistics illustrating the scale and trajectory of violent insecurity across Nigeria in recent years.

Table 1: Selected Statistics on Violent Conflict and Kidnapping in Nigeria

Year / Period	Incident Type	Location	Reported Impact
2001–2024	Farmer–herder conflict	Various states (Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria)	Over 60,000 deaths recorded from recurring clashes
May 2023	Communal violence	Mangu LGA, Plateau State	Over 130 villagers killed in coordinated attacks
Jan–Jun 2023	Kidnapping	Kaduna State	More than 1,100 abductions reported
2023 (total)	Kidnapping	Nationwide	Over 4,800 people kidnapped with ransom demands exceeding ₦13.6 billion
Dec 2023	Ethno-religious violence	Bokkos & Barkin Ladi LGAs, Plateau State	Over 155 civilians killed, thousands displaced
May 2023 – Apr 2024	Kidnapping economy	Nationwide	Ransom payments estimated at ₦2.23 trillion
2024 (total)	Armed violence	Nationwide	2,194 deaths recorded
Jan–Jun 2025	Banditry / insurgent violence	Nationwide	2,266 people killed
Early 2025	Armed group attacks	Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, Zamfara	Over 1,500 civilians killed

Source: Daily Trust (2023); The Nation (2023); SBM Intelligence (2023); Punch (2024); Omolaoye (2023); Agbakwuru (2024); Amnesty International (2025); Eboh (2025).

Banditry is worsened by weak intelligence coordination, low police-to-citizen ratios, and the absence of effective community policing. The proliferation of small arms, porous borders, and compromised local officials further compound the situation (Ebaye & Bassey, 2021). Victims are often selected indiscriminately, particularly schoolchildren, travellers, and rural residents. Incidents such as the mass abduction of students in Kankara (Katsina), Jangebe (Zamfara), and Tegina (Niger State) illustrate the impunity with which these groups operate.

The persistence of banditry and kidnapping reflects fragile state dynamics and governance failures. Local governments, who should serve as first responders or liaisons between communities and security apparatuses, are structurally incapacitated. Their limited autonomy and financial dependence on states

prevent meaningful grassroots intervention. Moreover, local knowledge that could support security planning is often ignored or underutilized.

The rise of vigilante groups such as the Yan Sakai in the North-west and the Amotekun Corps in the South-West reflects growing public distrust in formal institutions and a shift toward self-help security mechanisms.

Insurgency and Terrorism

Insurgency and terrorism remain major security threats in Nigeria, primarily driven by Islamist extremist groups such as Boko Haram**,** Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and newer splinter factions. What began as a religious movement in Borno State in the early 2000s evolved into a protracted insurgency that has claimed over 100,000 lives and displaced more than 2 million people (Aliyu et al., 2015). Despite military offensives, the North-East remains volatile, with attacks on military posts, IDP camps, and civilian infrastructure.

The shifting geography of terrorism also reveals evolving threats. While Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa remain hotspots, ISWAP has expanded its reach into the Lake Chad Basin and even parts of the North-West, often exploiting ungoverned rural spaces. A growing trend is the convergence of jihadist insurgency with organized crime such as cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, blurring the lines between ideological and economic violence (Okoli & Abubakar, 2021; Okoli & Nwangwu, 2022). Recent figures from Nigeria's human rights agency reveal that 2,266 Nigerians were killed by bandits or insurgents in just the first half of 2025**,** already exceeding the total deaths for all of 2024 (2,194) (Eboh, 2025). This spike reflects the increasing lethality of armed non-state actors and weak state responses. Local governments remain largely powerless, often excluded from security decision-making despite being the closest to affected communities.

The Governance Theory perspective highlights that insurgency thrives where state legitimacy is weak and governance is absent (Jones, 2008**)**. The inability of local governments to deliver basic services, rebuild destroyed infrastructure, or provide alternatives to radicalization has created fertile ground for extremist narratives and recruitment. As insurgents often serve as de facto authorities in some areas, offering justice, food, and protection, they fill a vacuum left by the state (Mercy Corps, 2016; Ojo, 2020).

Farmer–Herder Clashes

Farmer-herder conflicts are among Nigeria's most persistent forms of communal violence, particularly across the Middle Belt states like Benue**,** Nasarawa**,** Taraba**,** Plateau, and Adamawa. These conflicts are rooted in historical land-use competition, aggravated by population growth, climate change-induced desertification, and weak land tenure systems (Buba, 202**1).** As arable land and water resources become increasingly scarce, nomadic pastoralists (largely of Fulani origin) migrate southward in search of grazing areas, often clashing with sedentary farming communities.

Between 2001 and 2024, over 60,000 people were killed in farmer-herder-related violence, with tens of thousands displaced (Omolaoye, 2023; Agbakwuru, 2024). In states like Benue, the scale and frequency of attacks have drawn comparisons to ethnic cleansing, with 2024 witnessing another wave of deadly assaults in Guma and Logo LGAs. Many of these clashes are retaliatory, fuelled by cycles of vengeance and state inaction.

From a governance lens, these clashes expose the weakness of local dispute resolution mechanisms and the politicization of land management. Local governments, which should serve as frontline arbiters, are too often side-lined or under-resourced. This reflects Fragile State Theory, where institutional breakdown creates conditions for protracted, identity-based violence.

Urban Criminality

Urban criminality in Nigeria has become a complex challenge, particularly in megacities such as Lagos**,** Port Harcourt**,** Kano**,** Abuja**,** Onitsha**,** and Aba. Key urban crimes (such as armed robbery, cultism, cybercrime, street

extortion, and gang violence) thrive amid youth unemployment, urban poverty, inequality, and weak local governance. Gangs like "One Million Boys" exploit surveillance gaps and civil unrest in Lagos, while in the Southeast Unknown Gunmen (UGM), linked to separatist agitation, have enforced sit-at-home orders through assassinations and arson, severely disrupting economic life in Onitsha and Aba (Okoroafor et al., 2023**).**

A recent study by Illah, Onyegbulum, and Zhebago (2022) found that urban crime is driven by factors including staggered and inefficient policing**,** social fragmentation**,** declining family values**,** and widespread fear and ignorance among residents. Employing the Routine Activity Theory, the authors show how the absence of consistent guardianship and the presence of motivated offenders catalyse criminal activities in urban centres.

Nigerian urban centres have seen widespread dissatisfaction with policing. According to Afrobarometer Round 9 data, only about 15% of Nigerians trust the police 'somewhat' or 'a lot,' while 73% perceive police as corrupt and 61% felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood at least once in the prior year (Afrobarometer, 2023). The disconnect is rooted in the centralized nature of policing, which side-lines local councils despite their comparative advantage in neighbourhood-level coordination. Local authorities thus remain marginalized in decisions related to prevention and rapid response.

Moreover, bureaucratic inefficiencies and police under-resourcing exacerbate urban crime. Nwambuko and Nnaeto (2024) observed that policing agencies struggle with logistical issues, poor training, and reactive strategies, undermining socio-economic security. Their study concluded that strengthening local government–police partnerships and decentralizing urban policing could significantly reduce crime and foster trust between state actors and citizens (Nwambuko & Nnaeto, 2024).

Linkages between Local Governance Failure and Insecurity in Nigeria

Local governments were constitutionally designed as the third tier of governance, responsible for grassroots development and service delivery. However, institutional weaknesses have rendered them largely ineffective. Most LGAs suffer from inadequate funding, poor staffing, limited technical capacity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Agba et al., 2013). These shortcomings hinder the delivery of basic services such as healthcare, education, water, and rural infrastructure, breeding local frustration and alienation. According to David (2023), over 60% of rural communities in Nigeria lack access to primary healthcare and potable water, critical services that fall under LGA jurisdiction. This represents a breakdown of institutional legitimacy, where the state (through local governments) cannot meet its core obligations, creating a permissive environment for insecurity (Rotberg, 2003).

Corruption has significantly undermined local governance in Nigeria. Monthly federal allocations meant for LGAs are frequently diverted by state governments through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), leaving local councils financially handicapped (Sanusi et al., 2013). Furthermore, a culture of impunity and lack of accountability at the local level permits massive financial leakages. A 2021 report by BudgIT (2022) revealed that of the 1,071 projects tracked across 26 states, only 508 were completed, a completion rate of 47%, while the rest were either ongoing, abandoned, or not started. Corruption erodes trust and legitimacy essential for governance and conflict mitigation. Citizens lose faith in local authorities' ability to manage resources, which aggravates grievances and can contribute to unrest (Ibrahim & Cheri, 2015).

Another one of the most glaring symptoms of governance failure is the near-total absence of locally driven security mechanisms. While there have been repeated calls for community policing, and even some pilot initiatives, these efforts remain underfunded, poorly coordinated,

or politically stalled. As of 2024, the Nigerian Police Force remains a highly centralized institution with little collaboration with local governments. Critics of decentralization fear state governors might weaponize local police units against political opponents—a concern that has hindered policy reform. Theoretically, the failure to adapt policing to local contexts further alienates communities and provides room for vigilante groups, militias, and criminal gangs to fill the vacuum, often with dire security consequences.

In addition to the foregoing, despite being constitutionally recognized, local governance in Nigeria is often undemocratic. Many LGAs are administered by caretaker committees appointed by governors, bypassing democratic elections and excluding local voices from decision-making. This political manipulation contributes to widespread apathy and alienation, especially among youth, women, and minority groups (Obidimma & Obidimma, 2016). This exclusion fuels grievance-based mobilization, particularly in volatile regions. Its absence weakens social cohesion and encourages rebellion or criminality as alternative forms of expression and redress.

These linkages cannot be fully understood without recognizing the historical role of traditional institutions such as village heads, emirs, and obas in dispute resolution and community security. Prior to the expansion of centralized state institutions, these authorities served as custodians of local justice and social order, mediating conflicts and maintaining communal harmony. However, colonial restructuring, post-colonial centralization, and political interference have gradually weakened their authority. In many local government areas today, traditional rulers operate within politicized environments that limit their effectiveness and disconnect communities from indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms. From an African Renaissance perspective, the marginalization of these culturally embedded institutions has contributed to the erosion of grassroots governance and the widening vacuum in local security management.

Policy and Institutional Responses

Nigeria's insecurity crisis has prompted responses at federal, state, and local levels. At the federal tier, frameworks such as the National Security Strategy (2019), the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST), and reforms like the Police Act 2020 sought to modernize and streamline internal security. However, these frameworks often fail in practice due to limited inter-agency coordination, resource constraints, and poor accountability (Ogbeide, 2011). State-level interventions, including security networks like Amotekun in the South-West and Ebube Agu in the South-East, reflect regional efforts to plug operational gaps. Without constitutional backing or funding, their impact remains limited (Otodo et al., 2025). The state's military-centric approach, though occasionally effective in decimating insurgent leadership, has often led to civilian casualties and rights violations, eroding trust in government forces.

In resolving the farmer-herder clashes, the Nigerian government has responded with policies like the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), designed to encourage ranching and reduce open grazing. However, implementation has been slow, marred by poor funding, resistance from herder groups, and lack of political will from many state governments (Ibeh et al., 2022). Additionally, state-level anti-open grazing laws, such as those in Benue and Ekiti, while well-intentioned, have led to further tension and sometimes violent resistance from pastoralist communities

Alternative models such as community policing have shown promise in reducing urban criminality. In Umuahia (Abia State), pilot programs improved intelligence sharing and trust, but were hamstrung by minimal state support, internal resistance from conventional officers, and a lack of sustained community mobilization (Otodo et al., 2025). These findings reinforce evidence that urban crime reduction requires community policing, even though the clamour for the same has failed to be see actionable policies.

Critics however, warn of potential abuse by governors who may deploy such forces against political opponents or dissenting voices, thereby undermining civil liberties and deepening authoritarian tendencies at the subnational level. This fear has often been used to justify the retention of the current unitary policing structure. Nevertheless, the issue has re-emerged in the ongoing constitutional review public hearings, where state policing is back on the agenda. There is cautious optimism that this time, the momentum might be sufficient to overcome longstanding resistance.

Local governments (critical for grassroots security) efforts remain severely underpowered. Their dependence on state-controlled joint allocation accounts undermines fiscal and administrative autonomy, leaving them ill-equipped to deliver essential services or enforce local security initiatives (Agba et al., 2020; Aiyede, 2024). They remain weak losing the monopoly over violence and legitimacy, and ceding space to informal actors whose actions further fragment state authority (Rotberg, 2003).

Comparative Analysis: Nigeria and Other Federal Contexts

The intersection between local governance failure and insecurity in Nigeria reflects patterns seen in other multi-ethnic federal or post-colonial states, particularly where centralized state structures undermine subnational agency. In Nigeria, the constitutional ambiguity over local government autonomy, combined with a unitary policing system, has constrained community-based security responses, leading to a disconnect between state apparatus and grassroots needs (Agba et al., 2020). This situation finds parallels in India, another federal democracy with deep social cleavages, where failures in Panchayati Raj institutions (local self-governments) in tribal regions have fuelled insurgencies like the Maoist (Naxalite) movement (Nandwani, 2018). In both cases, weakened local governance correlates strongly with increased internal instability.

In contrast, South Africa's post-apartheid municipal system, while also strained by service delivery protests, has made more progress in institutionalizing local participation and constitutional backing for municipal policing powers. This has allowed for more integrated urban safety plans in cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg, which (despite challenges) perform better on crime prevention metrics than Nigerian cities (Marks, 2002).

Another instructive comparison is Brazil, where urban insecurity is similarly rooted in poverty, the drug trade, and weak state presence in favelas (informal settlements often described as slums or shantytowns). However, Brazil's Pacifying Police Units (UPPs), 24-hour police units that maintain a physical presence in each favela or group of favelas, aim to eliminate visible manifestations of the drug trade and armed violence while making the streets safer for residents. These units, along with broader community policing frameworks, though imperfect, reflect a strategic effort to embed security within local development processes (Muggah, 2015). In contrast, Nigeria's continued reliance on reactive policing, rather than preventive and community-rooted frameworks, highlights gaps in local governance vision and implementation.

An important African example of community-centred governance can be found in Rwanda through the institutionalization of Umuganda, a nationwide monthly community service programme that brings citizens together to participate in local development activities such as environmental sanitation, infrastructure maintenance, and community dialogue. Rooted in traditional practices of collective labour, Umuganda has been adapted into a modern governance mechanism that strengthens citizen participation, promotes social cohesion, and enhances interaction between local authorities and residents (Chemouni, 2014; Turok, 2019). While Rwanda's broader governance model differs significantly from Nigeria's federal structure, the programme illustrates how culturally grounded civic participation can reinforce grassroots accountability and community ownership of development initiatives. This suggests that integrating

indigenous collective practices into governance frameworks can contribute to stronger community resilience and local institutional legitimacy.

From the lens of Fragile State Theory, Nigeria's challenges underscore a pattern of vertical disconnection and horizontal fragmentation. The state's failure to deliver localized security and services breeds legitimacy crises, creating vacuums increasingly filled by ethnic militias, insurgents, and non-state actors. Comparative evidence suggests that institutional resilience at the local level, combined with functional devolution, is central to managing complex security environments in multi-ethnic polities.

In sum, Nigeria's experience is not unique, but its persistent refusal to constitutionally empower local governments, reform policing structures, and institutionalize grassroots participation sets it apart unfavorably from peers. As debates over constitutional restructuring and state policing continue, comparative lessons emphasize that decentralization, when strategically implemented, can be a driver of both security and legitimacy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the nexus between local governance failure and rising insecurity in Nigeria, employing Fragile State Theory as a guiding analytical framework. From ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt to insurgency in the Northeast, banditry in the Northwest, separatist agitations in the Southeast, Militancy in the South-south and urban criminality in metropolitan centres, the analysis reveals a breakdown of local governance structures. The inability of local governments to deliver services, enforce security, and build legitimate institutions has created vacuums exploited by non-state actors, criminal gangs, and armed groups.

Evidence suggests that weaknesses in Nigeria's local governance framework is not merely a consequence of limited financial resources but a product of systemic institutional fragility, elite capture, and constitutional ambiguities. The joint allocation system has rendered local councils fiscally dependent on states, while the centrally controlled security architecture has made proactive community-level policing nearly impossible. The result is a disjointed system that is neither locally responsive nor nationally coherent.

Comparative insights from contexts such as India, South Africa, and Brazil show that while local insecurity is not unique to Nigeria, institutional innovations (such as devolution of policing powers, community policing, and integration of traditional authorities) have shown promise elsewhere. Nigeria's failure to adapt similar models reflects a governance imagination constrained by political self-interest, legal inertia, and fear of elite fragmentation.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing discussions, the following policy recommendations are advanced:

I. That deeper institutional reforms be implemented to complement the recent Supreme Court ruling in favour of local government financial autonomy, as true third-tier entities with legislative, administrative, and fiscal independence.

II. That there be a constitutional devolution of security functions from the national level, establishing a framework for state and community policing, backed by clear accountability mechanisms.

III. That institutional capacity building become a continuum at the local level, to improve administrative and technical capacities for improved service delivery and boost public trust.

IV. That traditional institutions remain apolitical and revert to its true function of being the custodian of the customs and traditions of the people, ensuring that traditional titles are not over-monetized.

V. That revenue allocation to local government (as instituted by the recent Supreme Court Judgement) be performance-based, using such indicators as transparency, security responsiveness, and improved service delivery.

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