

MIGRATION, SOCIAL UNREST, AND NIGERIA'S STATEHOOD CRISIS: THE SELF-DETERMINATION MOVEMENT

Ikechukwu Emmanuel Uvere Ph.D

Department of History and International Studies, Gregory University, Uturu,
Abia State, Nigeria

+2348063240375, 2348121298775

i.uvere@gregoryuniversityuturu.edu.ng

&

Adiele, Ikechukwu J. Ph.D

Department of Political, Abia State University, Uturu

+2348055083565

Iykeadiele1@gmail.com

Abstract

Nigeria's statehood has been increasingly challenged by migration-induced conflicts and self-determination movements. The influx of both internal and external migrants has intensified socio-political tensions, heightened competition for resources, and contributed to ethnic conflicts. At the same time, separatist agitations by groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation movement pose significant threats to the country's territorial integrity. This study investigates the relationship between migration, conflict, and self-determination struggles in Nigeria, aiming to understand how migration patterns exacerbate instability. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study draws on documentary analysis and historical narratives to examine the causes and consequences of migration-related tensions. The theoretical framework is anchored in the theory of relative deprivation, which explains how perceived economic and political marginalization fuels grievances that lead to conflict and secessionist demands. The findings reveal that weak governance structures, economic disparities, and inadequate migration policies have exacerbated conflicts, reinforcing calls for self-determination. The study highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to migration management, conflict resolution, and inclusive governance. It concludes that without addressing these structural issues, Nigeria will continue to face challenges to its unity and stability. To mitigate these risks, the study recommends the implementation of equitable resource distribution policies, improved governance frameworks, and inclusive national dialogue to address grievances. Strengthening migration policies and fostering inter-ethnic cohesion are also essential steps toward sustaining Nigeria's territorial integrity and social harmony.

Keywords: Migration, Conflict, Statehood, Self-determination, Ethnic Nationalism

Introduction

Statehood is conventionally defined by territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the government's capacity to maintain security and governance¹. However, Nigeria's statehood has been increasingly undermined by the complex interplay between migration and conflict². Migration, whether internal or transnational, is often driven by economic opportunities, environmental shifts, political instability, and security concerns³. While migration has historically contributed to economic and cultural diversity, it has also intensified socio-political tensions, particularly in regions where competition over land, resources, and political power is pronounced⁴.

In Nigeria, migration-induced conflicts have exacerbated ethnic and religious divisions, fostering deep-seated grievances that have fueled self-determination movements⁵. Groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation movement have intensified their demands for secession, citing perceived marginalization, economic inequalities, and government inefficiencies⁶. These agitations challenge Nigeria's territorial integrity and governance structures, raising fundamental questions about the country's ability to sustain national unity amidst escalating crises⁷.

This study examines the intricate relationship between migration, conflict, and self-determination struggles in Nigeria. It investigates how migration patterns contribute to political instability, economic disruptions, and ethno-religious violence, ultimately threatening the foundations of statehood⁸. Furthermore, the paper critically analyzes the Nigerian state's response to these crises, evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and proposing sustainable solutions. Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach that includes comprehensive migration management, conflict resolution strategies, and inclusive governance frameworks⁹. By exploring these dynamics, this study aims to provide insights into the broader implications of migration-induced instability for Nigeria's statehood and long-term national cohesion¹⁰.

Conceptual Clarifications

Understanding the interrelated concepts of migration, conflict, statehood, and self-determination is essential for analyzing Nigeria's contemporary challenges. These issues influence governance, security, and national stability, making it imperative to define and contextualize them within Nigeria's socio-political landscape. This section provides conceptual clarifications for key terms relevant to the discourse.

1. Migration

Migration refers to the movement of people from one location to another, either within a country or across international borders¹¹. Migration can be voluntary, driven by economic opportunities, or forced, resulting from conflicts, environmental disasters, or political persecution.

In Nigeria, migration patterns have significantly shaped the nation's demographic, economic, and political structures. Internal migration, particularly rural-to-urban movement, has led to rapid urbanization, putting pressure on infrastructure in major cities like Lagos, Kano, and Abuja. Cross-border migration, especially from neighboring West African countries, has contributed to demographic shifts, sometimes exacerbating ethnic tensions. Additionally, forced migration due to insurgencies, such as Boko Haram in the Northeast, has led to internal displacement and strained government resources. Migration, therefore, serves as both a driver and consequence of conflict in Nigeria.

2. Conflict

Conflict is the struggle between individuals or groups over resources, power, or ideological differences¹². It can manifest as violent confrontations, political instability, or social unrest.

Nigeria's conflicts are often fueled by ethnic, religious, and political differences, exacerbated by economic disparities and weak governance. Migration-induced conflicts, such as the farmer-herder crisis in the Middle Belt, have become prominent sources of violence. The influx of migrants into certain regions has triggered resource-based disputes, particularly over land, water, and political representation. Similarly, inter-ethnic conflicts and religious tensions, particularly in northern Nigeria, highlight how migration can reshape societal structures and contribute to insecurity.

3. Statehood

Statehood refers to the legal and political recognition of a defined geographical entity that possesses a permanent population, a functioning government, and sovereignty over its territory¹³. A state must have the capacity to enforce laws, maintain order, and engage in international relations.

Nigeria's statehood has been challenged by governance failures, separatist movements, and security threats. The inability of the state to control migration-related conflicts and self-determination movements raises questions about its legitimacy and territorial integrity. The rise of non-state actors, such as insurgent groups and regional militias, further undermines the authority of the state, highlighting governance deficits that weaken Nigeria's stability.

4. Self-Determination

Self-determination is the right of a people to determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development without external influence¹⁴. It can take various forms, including demands for political autonomy, regional self-governance, or outright secession.

In Nigeria, self-determination movements have gained traction due to perceived marginalization and economic inequalities. Groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation movement advocate for independence, citing political and economic exclusion as key grievances. Migration-related demographic changes have also influenced self-determination struggles, as indigenous populations fear losing political influence to migrant communities. The Nigerian government's response has been largely security-driven, leading to further tensions and crackdowns on agitators.

5. Ethnic Nationalism

Ethnic nationalism is a political ideology that prioritizes the interests, culture, and identity of a specific ethnic group, often advocating for self-rule or increased autonomy¹⁵. It emerges when ethnic groups feel politically or economically marginalized within a broader national framework.

Nigeria's history is deeply rooted in ethnic nationalism, with the country's colonial past reinforcing divisions among its major ethnic groups. The competition for political power and economic resources has fueled ethnic-based movements, with some advocating for greater regional autonomy or complete separation from Nigeria. Migration plays a significant role in ethnic nationalism, as demographic shifts often result in host communities resisting political and cultural influence from migrant populations.

Theoretical Framework: Relative Deprivation Theory

The concept of relative deprivation provides a compelling framework for understanding the link between migration, conflicts, statehood problems, and self-determination struggles in Nigeria. The theory posits that individuals or groups who perceive themselves as disadvantaged compared to others—whether in terms of economic resources, political power, or social opportunities—are more likely to experience frustration, which can escalate into conflict¹⁶. This framework is particularly relevant in analyzing the grievances of ethnic groups in Nigeria, where migration patterns, resource allocation, and governance disparities have intensified socio-political tensions.

The theory of relative deprivation was first developed by Samuel A. Stouffer et al. (1949) in their study on military morale, where they observed that soldiers' dissatisfaction was not solely based on their absolute conditions but rather on their perceived disadvantage relative to others¹⁷. Later, Ted Robert Gurr (1970) expanded this concept in his seminal work, *Why Men Rebel*, where he argued that when individuals or groups perceive a significant gap between their expectations and actual socio-political conditions, they are more likely to resort to protest, rebellion, or separatist movements¹⁸.

In the Nigerian context, the theory of relative deprivation helps explain why certain ethnic and regional groups, particularly in the South-East and South-West, have intensified calls for self-determination. The migration of various ethnic groups across regions, coupled with perceived unequal access to political representation, economic resources, and security, has heightened resentment. For instance, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East and the Yoruba Nation movement in the South-West have both anchored their separatist demands on claims of economic and political marginalization. These groups argue that despite their contributions to Nigeria's economy, they receive limited federal allocations, suffer from political exclusion, and face targeted repression by state security forces. The growing perception that other regions, particularly the North, benefit disproportionately from national resources has fueled agitation for secession.

Similarly, migration-induced conflicts, such as the Fulani herder-farmer clashes in the Middle Belt, illustrate the role of perceived deprivation in fueling ethnic violence. Farmers claim that the encroachment of herders on their ancestral lands is a direct consequence of the government's failure to

implement equitable land-use policies. This perceived injustice has led to violent reprisals and deepened ethnic divisions, further undermining Nigeria's fragile statehood.

The Nigerian government's approach to handling self-determination movements and migration-induced conflicts has often been militarized, reinforcing the grievances of marginalized groups. Security crackdowns on IPOB members and Yoruba separatist activists have heightened perceptions of systemic bias, further validating the claims of relative deprivation among these groups. Additionally, the failure of successive administrations to address the underlying issues of resource allocation, governance inefficiency, and ethnic favoritism has exacerbated separatist sentiments.

The theory of relative deprivation provides a strong analytical lens through which to examine Nigeria's statehood crisis, migration-induced conflicts, and self-determination struggles. When groups perceive that their economic, political, or social standing is being eroded while others benefit disproportionately, frustration builds, often leading to protests, violence, and demands for autonomy. Addressing these grievances requires a more inclusive governance framework, equitable resource distribution, and meaningful political dialogue to prevent the further fragmentation of Nigeria.

The theory of relative deprivation provides a compelling framework for understanding the intricate links between migration and conflict in Nigeria. This theory posits that individuals or groups experience discontent when they perceive a disparity between their expectations and their actual socio-economic or political conditions. In the Nigerian context, migration—whether internal or transnational—has often exacerbated these feelings of deprivation, fueling ethnic tensions, insecurity, and resource-driven conflicts.

Internal Migration, Relative Deprivation, and Ethnic Clashes

Internal migration in Nigeria has significantly altered demographic structures, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas where economic opportunities are more abundant. However, as people move in search of better livelihoods, they often encounter systemic barriers that prevent them from fully integrating into their new communities. The case of Jos, Plateau State, exemplifies this phenomenon, where indigene-settler tensions have repeatedly resulted in violent confrontations¹⁹.

From the perspective of relative deprivation, the Berom indigenes perceive themselves as entitled to political and economic privileges within their ancestral lands. The influx of Hausa-Fulani settlers, who gradually gain economic footholds through trade and commerce, creates a sense of competition over resources and political representation. The settlers, on the other hand, experience deprivation due to systemic discrimination, such as being denied access to land ownership, political appointments, and government employment²⁰. This mutual perception of deprivation fosters resentment on both sides, culminating in cycles of ethnic violence.

A similar dynamic unfolds in Kaduna State, where indigenous southern Kaduna communities and the migrant Hausa-Fulani population vie for economic and political control. The indigenous groups feel that migration has marginalized them in their own land, while the settlers perceive themselves as victims of exclusionary practices. The resulting tensions, driven by both real and perceived inequalities, align with the core tenets of relative deprivation, wherein groups that feel disadvantaged relative to others are more likely to engage in conflict.

Transnational Migration and Perceived Insecurity

Nigeria's porous borders have facilitated cross-border migration from neighboring countries such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, contributing to economic and cultural exchange. However, when migration coincides with growing insecurity, it often triggers xenophobic sentiments and violent reactions from local communities²¹. The theory of relative deprivation helps explain how such security concerns are amplified by perceived economic threats posed by foreign migrants.

In northern Nigeria, the unchecked movement of people across borders has been linked to increased banditry, terrorism, and armed conflicts. Boko Haram and ISWAP have capitalized on migration routes to recruit members, transport weapons, and stage attacks on Nigerian communities²². Local populations, already struggling with economic hardship, view migrants as contributors to worsening security conditions. This perception of increasing deprivation—whether through physical insecurity, loss of livelihoods, or displacement—provokes hostility toward migrants, reinforcing cycles of violence.

Similarly, the migration of Fulani herders, driven by climate change and desertification, has intensified competition over grazing lands in central Nigeria. Indigenous farming communities, particularly in Benue, Taraba, and Nasarawa states, view the migrating herders as existential threats to their economic stability. The herders, facing dwindling resources in their traditional grazing areas, also experience deprivation, fueling violent clashes over land access. Both groups perceive themselves as victims of economic and environmental changes, leading to a deep-seated conflict rooted in perceived injustice and inequality.

Resource Control, Migration, and Conflict in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta presents another case where migration-induced conflicts can be understood through the lens of relative deprivation. The region's vast oil reserves have attracted a steady influx of migrants seeking employment in the oil sector. However, rather than experiencing economic upliftment, many local communities feel increasingly marginalized as they witness wealth being extracted from their lands without corresponding benefits²³.

The Ijaw, Ogoni, and Itsekiri ethnic groups perceive the Nigerian government and multinational oil corporations as agents of economic exploitation. Despite their proximity to oil wealth, these communities suffer from environmental degradation, unemployment, and poor infrastructure. The arrival of migrants further compounds these grievances, as locals see outsiders taking advantage of opportunities while they remain excluded. This perceived deprivation has fueled resentment, leading to the rise of militant groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA). These groups, feeling economically and politically dispossessed, resort to attacks on oil installations and kidnapping of workers as a form of protest and retribution.

Migrants in the Niger Delta also experience relative deprivation. Many relocate to the region expecting lucrative opportunities but instead find themselves in exploitative labor conditions with limited rights and protections. This dual deprivation—where both locals and migrants feel disadvantaged—creates a volatile environment prone to conflict and militancy.

Across Nigeria, migration and conflict are deeply intertwined, with the theory of relative deprivation offering a valuable lens for understanding these tensions. Whether in the context of indigene-settler disputes in Jos and Kaduna, insecurity linked to transnational migration in the North, or resource-driven conflicts in the Niger Delta, perceived disparities between expectations and reality drive much of the hostility and violence.

The Self-Determination Issue in Nigeria: A Perspective from Relative Deprivation Theory

The quest for self-determination in Nigeria has been fueled by long-standing grievances, including economic exclusion, political marginalization, and historical injustices. Various ethnic and regional movements have emerged, advocating for greater autonomy or outright secession from the Nigerian state. The Biafra agitation, the Yoruba Nation movement, and the Niger Delta struggle are among the most prominent self-determination movements, each rooted in distinct historical and economic contexts but sharing a common desire for self-governance and control over resources.

The theory of relative deprivation, which explains social movements as reactions to perceived discrepancies between expected and actual living conditions, provides a useful lens through which to analyze these movements. Relative deprivation occurs when a group perceives itself as disadvantaged compared to another, leading to resentment and collective action. In Nigeria, self-determination movements have arisen in response to perceived inequalities in economic opportunities, political

representation, and access to resources. The agitation for Biafra, Yoruba Nation, and Niger Delta autonomy can all be understood as manifestations of relative deprivation, where ethnic groups believe they have been systematically denied their fair share of power and resources in the Nigerian federation.

The Biafra Agitation and Relative Deprivation

The Biafra movement, led by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), is rooted in the historical and contemporary grievances of the Igbo people. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which resulted from the failed secession of Biafra, ended in military defeat for the secessionists but left unresolved tensions regarding the status of the Igbo within Nigeria²⁴. The Igbo people have long argued that successive Nigerian governments have marginalized them politically and economically, particularly in terms of infrastructure development, access to federal appointments, and control over economic opportunities.

From a relative deprivation perspective, the Igbo compare their socio-political status to that of other ethnic groups, particularly the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, and perceive a significant gap between their expectations and reality. The southeastern region, despite its economic potential, has faced persistent underdevelopment, leading many Igbos to believe that their region is deliberately sidelined²⁵. IPOB, under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, has capitalized on these grievances, mobilizing support for Biafran independence through protests, advocacy, and, at times, confrontations with security forces. The Nigerian government's militarized response—through mass arrests, killings, and the designation of IPOB as a terrorist organization—has only reinforced the perception of systematic oppression, further fueling secessionist sentiments.

The Igbo's sense of relative deprivation is also heightened by Nigeria's political structure, which has historically marginalized them in national decision-making. Many argue that since the end of the civil war, no Igbo person has been allowed to occupy the highest office in the land, reinforcing the belief that they are excluded from national governance. This perceived exclusion has strengthened the push for self-determination as a means of escaping systemic discrimination and achieving political and economic self-sufficiency.

The Yoruba Nation Movement and Relative Deprivation

The agitation for a Yoruba Nation, spearheaded by groups such as Ilana Omo Oodua, is rooted in the Yoruba people's dissatisfaction with Nigeria's federal structure. Although the Yoruba have historically played a significant role in Nigeria's economic and political landscape, many Yoruba nationalists argue that the centralization of power has stifled regional development and autonomy²⁶.

Relative deprivation theory helps explain why the Yoruba Nation movement has gained momentum in recent years. The Yoruba compare their current political and economic realities to their past experiences, particularly in the pre-independence and early post-independence eras when regional governments had greater autonomy. The perception that their region was once prosperous but has now been reduced to a state of insecurity and economic stagnation fuels resentment against the federal government.

The rise of insecurity, particularly the activities of bandits and Fulani herdsmen in the southwest, has further deepened the Yoruba sense of deprivation. Many Yoruba nationalists believe that the federal government has failed to protect their communities from attacks and that security forces have been biased in handling conflicts involving Fulani herders and local farmers²⁷. This perception of neglect has led to increased calls for self-rule, as many Yoruba believe they would be better able to govern and secure their region if they were independent.

Additionally, the struggle for resource control and economic autonomy has been a major driver of the movement. Yoruba nationalists argue that the southwest, being an economic hub, generates significant revenue for Nigeria but receives little in return. This perceived economic imbalance further reinforces feelings of relative deprivation, strengthening the call for a separate Yoruba nation where the region can control its resources and policies without interference from the central government.

The Niger Delta Struggle and Relative Deprivation

Unlike the Biafra and Yoruba Nation movements, the Niger Delta struggle has historically centered on resource control rather than outright secession. The Niger Delta region is the economic backbone of Nigeria, supplying the bulk of the country's oil revenue. However, despite contributing significantly to the national economy, the region remains one of the poorest in the country²⁸.

Relative deprivation is evident in the grievances of the Niger Delta people, who compare their region's wealth in natural resources with their actual living conditions. The environmental degradation caused by oil exploration, combined with a lack of infrastructure and widespread poverty, has led to deep resentment against both the federal government and multinational oil corporations. Many people in the region believe that while their land generates billions of dollars in revenue, they receive little benefit, as oil wealth is largely controlled by the central government and distributed disproportionately.

Militant groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have taken up arms to demand greater control over the region's resources. Attacks on oil pipelines, kidnappings of expatriate workers, and sabotage of oil facilities have been used as tactics to draw attention to the Niger Delta's plight. While the federal government has attempted to address these grievances through programs like the Presidential Amnesty Program, many activists believe these efforts have failed to address the root causes of deprivation and economic exploitation.

The demand for fiscal federalism, which would grant oil-producing states greater control over their resources, is a direct response to the region's sense of relative deprivation. Many Niger Delta activists argue that local communities should have a greater share of the revenue generated from oil exploration and that federal policies should prioritize environmental restoration and economic development in the region.

The self-determination issue in Nigeria is a direct consequence of deep-seated grievances and perceived inequalities, which can be effectively analyzed through the lens of relative deprivation theory. The Biafra movement stems from the Igbo people's sense of political and economic marginalization, the Yoruba Nation movement arises from frustrations with federal dominance and insecurity, and the Niger Delta struggle is driven by resentment over resource control and environmental degradation.

The Nigerian government's response to these movements has largely been repressive, often exacerbating rather than resolving tensions. Military crackdowns, arrests of activists, and refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue have only reinforced feelings of deprivation and alienation.

The Relative Deprivation Theory provides a compelling framework for analyzing the impact of migration and conflicts on Nigerian statehood. This theory posits that conflicts arise when individuals or groups perceive a significant gap between their expectations and actual social, economic, or political conditions. In Nigeria, migration-induced conflicts, self-determination struggles, and economic disparities have fueled grievances that align with this theory, leading to weakened national unity, security challenges, economic disruptions, and declining public trust in government institutions.

Weakening of National Unity and Relative Deprivation

Nigeria's ethnically diverse composition, while a source of strength, has also bred tension, particularly when certain groups feel marginalized²⁹. The perception that some ethnic or regional groups have more access to political power, economic opportunities, and government resources has fueled resentment. Migration has intensified these disparities, as settler communities often face discrimination from indigenes who perceive them as economic or political threats. For example, in the Middle Belt, indigenous communities frequently feel deprived when migrants gain political influence, access to land, or employment opportunities.

Self-determination movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation movement, are direct manifestations of relative deprivation. Many Igbos and Yorubas believe that their regions are economically disadvantaged and politically sidelined in federal governance, fueling

agitation for autonomy or secession. Rather than fostering national cohesion, migration has heightened ethnic exclusivity, reinforcing perceptions of deprivation and alienation.

Political elites have further deepened these grievances by exploiting ethnic sentiments for electoral gains, creating a cycle where perceived deprivation translates into real political alienation. The classification of citizens as either "indigenes" or "settlers" institutionalizes exclusion, limiting migrants' access to social services, employment, and political representation. This exclusion strengthens regional identities at the expense of national unity, leading to increasing calls for self-rule.

Security Challenges and the Role of Relative Deprivation

The escalation of violence linked to migration-related conflicts and self-determination struggles can be attributed to perceived economic and political inequalities³⁰. The Relative Deprivation Theory suggests that when groups feel systematically disadvantaged compared to others, they resort to violent means to address these imbalances. In Nigeria, migration patterns have exacerbated conflicts over land, resources, and political representation, particularly in states like Plateau, Benue, and Kaduna.

For instance, Fulani herders, facing climate-induced displacement and shrinking grazing lands, migrate into farming communities, leading to violent clashes. Farmers, in turn, perceive the herders as land usurpers, while herders feel unfairly excluded from land ownership and economic resources. This mutual perception of deprivation has escalated conflicts from isolated disputes to widespread communal violence, often drawing in militias and vigilante groups.

Similarly, separatist movements in the South-East (IPOB) and South-West (Yoruba Nation movement) arise from the perception that these regions are politically and economically marginalized. The frequent military crackdowns on these groups further reinforce their sense of injustice, prompting violent resistance. The South-East, for example, has become heavily militarized due to IPOB's agitations, with the state's repressive response deepening hostility between the region and the federal government.

Another critical security issue linked to migration is the ease of cross-border movement. Nigeria's porous borders have facilitated the entry of armed groups, illicit arms, and criminal networks. Many of these groups, including Boko Haram and bandits, thrive on local grievances, recruiting marginalized youths who feel deprived of economic and social opportunities. The inability of the Nigerian government to effectively address these security threats has further weakened public trust in state institutions.

Economic Disruptions and Relative Deprivation

Economic disparities, exacerbated by migration-induced conflicts, align with the Relative Deprivation Theory, as affected communities perceive economic exclusion as a form of systemic injustice³¹. In conflict-prone regions like the South-East and Niger Delta, economic activities have been severely disrupted due to violence, further widening economic inequalities and fueling resentment.

The weekly sit-at-home orders enforced by IPOB, for instance, have crippled businesses and discouraged investment in the South-East. Many residents feel economically deprived compared to other regions, attributing their hardships to federal government policies that they perceive as neglectful or discriminatory. This economic frustration strengthens support for separatist movements, as many believe that self-rule would bring better economic opportunities.

Similarly, persistent violence in the Niger Delta has disrupted oil production, Nigeria's main revenue source. Militants in the region, motivated by a perceived lack of economic benefits from oil wealth, have engaged in pipeline vandalism, oil theft, and kidnappings. These activities have led to declining investor confidence, job losses, and government revenue shortfalls. The failure to equitably distribute oil wealth has fueled resentment among local communities, reinforcing separatist sentiments.

Agriculture has also suffered due to herder-farmer conflicts, with many farmers abandoning their farmlands for fear of attacks. The displacement of farming communities has led to food shortages,

inflation, and increased rural poverty, further entrenching economic deprivation. As a result, migration-induced conflicts have created economic instability, reinforcing grievances that drive further agitation.

Declining Public Trust in Government and Perceived Deprivation

One of the most severe consequences of migration-induced conflicts and separatist movements is the erosion of public trust in the government³². Relative Deprivation Theory explains how perceived injustices—whether in security, economic opportunities, or governance—can lead to disillusionment with state institutions.

In the South-East, IPOB's self-determination rhetoric resonates because many Igbo people feel economically and politically marginalized. Repeated military crackdowns, economic neglect, and unfulfilled federal promises have deepened the region's sense of exclusion, increasing support for separatist agendas. In the Niger Delta, years of government failures to address environmental degradation and economic development have fueled demands for autonomy or outright secession.

The Japa Syndrome, or the mass emigration of Nigerian youths, reflects a broader loss of confidence in the country's future. Many skilled professionals leave Nigeria due to a lack of job opportunities, insecurity, and poor governance, all of which are symptoms of perceived deprivation. Those who remain often align with alternative governance models, such as regional autonomy or self-determination movements, as potential solutions to their frustrations.

The failure of the Nigerian government to address grievances related to migration, conflicts, and economic disparities has led to a fragile state where separatist movements thrive, security forces are overstretched, and economic stability is threatened. The Relative Deprivation Theory thus provides a crucial lens to understand why migration-induced conflicts persist in Nigeria—when people feel deprived of economic opportunities, security, or political representation, they seek alternatives, sometimes through violent means or demands for self-determination.

Migration and conflicts have significantly shaped Nigerian statehood, posing critical challenges to national unity, security, economic stability, and governance legitimacy. Relative Deprivation Theory helps explain why ethnic tensions, self-determination struggles, and economic discontent continue to fuel unrest—marginalized groups, perceiving a gap between their aspirations and realities, turn to violent resistance, separatism, or mass emigration.

State Responses and Challenges in Managing Migration and Self-Determination Movements

The Nigerian government's responses to migration-related conflicts and self-determination movements can be extensively analyzed through the lens of Relative Deprivation Theory. This theory, which explains social unrest and conflict as a consequence of perceived disparities between expected and actual conditions, provides a critical framework for understanding why ethnic groups, separatist movements, and marginalized communities engage in agitation against the state.

At the heart of Relative Deprivation Theory is the notion that when individuals or groups perceive themselves as being deprived of economic, political, or social opportunities relative to others, they become more likely to express dissatisfaction through protests, violence, or separatist movements. In Nigeria, this perceived deprivation manifests in multiple ways, fueling self-determination struggles and migration-induced conflicts.

Security Crackdowns and Military Operations

One of the key responses of the Nigerian government to self-determination movements and migration-induced conflicts has been the deployment of security forces to quell agitations, often through military operations³³. This heavy-handed approach is particularly evident in the South-East, where the military has consistently targeted the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN). From the perspective of Relative Deprivation Theory, the IPOB movement is driven by a collective sense of injustice among the Igbo people, who perceive political and economic marginalization within Nigeria's federal system. The aggressive military crackdowns, including mass

arrests and extrajudicial killings, further reinforce this sense of deprivation, pushing more individuals toward radicalization.

Similarly, in the Niger Delta, militant groups have emerged due to grievances over environmental degradation and economic exclusion. The military's interventions in the region, rather than addressing the root causes of the agitation, have often resulted in cycles of violence. While some militants have been pacified through amnesty programs, the failure to address the broader economic inequalities has ensured the persistence of unrest. The same dynamic is evident in the North-Central region, where security interventions in herder-farmer conflicts have been perceived as biased, deepening ethnic and religious hostilities.

By relying primarily on force to suppress dissent, the Nigerian government has often exacerbated the very grievances that fuel separatist and migration-related conflicts. The theory of Relative Deprivation suggests that when groups feel targeted and their concerns remain unaddressed, they are more likely to escalate their resistance rather than abandon their demands.

Political Negotiations and Dialogue

In response to growing separatist pressures and migration-related conflicts, calls for political dialogue and constitutional reforms have emerged as potential solutions³⁴. Many ethnic nationalists advocate for restructuring Nigeria's governance system to grant more autonomy to states and regions. This push for decentralization is rooted in the perception that the existing system disproportionately benefits certain regions while marginalizing others, a core aspect of Relative Deprivation Theory.

For instance, the demand for restructuring resonates strongly among groups that feel economically and politically sidelined. The Igbo, for example, argue that they have been excluded from key political positions and national development plans, making self-determination an attractive alternative. Similarly, Yoruba nationalist groups advocating for Oduduwa Republic see their movement as a response to systemic neglect and economic injustice.

Despite these demands, the Nigerian government has been resistant to restructuring efforts, largely due to opposition from elites who benefit from the current centralized system³⁵. The lack of genuine commitment to constitutional reforms further reinforces the perception that certain groups are permanently disadvantaged within Nigeria's political framework. This political exclusion, when coupled with economic disparities, intensifies the sense of deprivation and sustains the momentum of self-determination movements.

Additionally, failed negotiations with IPOB and other separatist groups highlight the limitations of political dialogue when mutual distrust exists. IPOB's refusal to engage in negotiations is rooted in a long history of broken political promises, reinforcing the idea that peaceful advocacy yields no tangible results. This aligns with Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that when groups perceive political channels as ineffective in addressing their grievances, they are more likely to resort to extreme measures, including violence.

Border Control and Migration Policies

Nigeria's migration-related conflicts, particularly those involving transnational movements of Fulani herders, are deeply tied to perceptions of economic and territorial deprivation³⁶. The influx of foreign pastoralists, facilitated by Nigeria's porous borders, has intensified tensions between indigenous farming communities and Fulani herders. Many local communities perceive these migrations as encroachments on their ancestral lands, exacerbating resource conflicts.

The government's attempt to regulate migration through border security measures and anti-open grazing laws has been met with resistance. Some Fulani groups argue that such laws disproportionately target them, further alienating them from the broader Nigerian society. In regions where anti-open grazing laws have been enforced, violent clashes between security forces and herders have escalated. This

highlights how perceived exclusion from economic opportunities—such as access to grazing land—fuels resistance and deepens migration-induced conflicts.

From a Relative Deprivation perspective, when pastoralist communities perceive government policies as favoring sedentary agricultural communities at their expense, they are more likely to resist compliance. This resistance often takes the form of illegal migration, defiance of grazing regulations, or even violent confrontations with security forces.

Economic and Social Interventions

Recognizing that economic grievances lie at the heart of many migration-related conflicts and self-determination agitations, the Nigerian government has implemented various social intervention programs³⁷. Initiatives such as the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) in the Niger Delta, TraderMoni, and N-Power have been introduced to alleviate poverty and create employment opportunities. However, the uneven distribution of these programs, combined with corruption and mismanagement, has limited their effectiveness.

In the Niger Delta, for example, while PAP has reduced large-scale militancy, it has been criticized as a tool for political patronage, benefiting a select few while ignoring broader economic injustices. Many youths in the region still perceive themselves as deprived of economic opportunities, leading to periodic resurgences of militant activities.

Similarly, the North-East rehabilitation programs for former Boko Haram members have generated skepticism among local communities. Many civilians who suffered from Boko Haram's violence view these interventions as unjust, as they perceive former insurgents as receiving government support while victims remain neglected. This creates a paradox where communities feel further deprived, fostering resentment rather than reconciliation.

According to Relative Deprivation Theory, when economic interventions are perceived as unfairly distributed or inadequate in addressing deep-rooted inequalities, they can further alienate marginalized groups. The persistence of self-determination movements and migration conflicts in Nigeria underscores the limitations of these interventions when structural issues—such as governance inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of inclusivity—remain unresolved.

The Nigerian government's responses to migration conflicts and self-determination movements have been multifaceted, involving security crackdowns, political negotiations, border control measures, and economic interventions. However, each of these strategies has faced significant challenges, often reinforcing rather than resolving the underlying grievances.

Through the lens of Relative Deprivation Theory, it is evident that many of these conflicts stem from perceptions of economic, political, and social marginalization. The use of military force exacerbates grievances rather than addresses them, political negotiations remain ineffective due to mutual distrust, migration policies are perceived as exclusionary, and economic interventions are often mismanaged or unequally distributed.

Conclusion

Migration and conflicts present profound challenges to Nigeria's statehood, intensifying ethnic divisions and fueling self-determination struggles. Over time, internal migration, resource competition, and political dissatisfaction have contributed to regional fragmentation, widespread insecurity, and a growing loss of confidence in governance. These tensions have exacerbated perceptions of ethnic marginalization, leading to increased agitation for self-determination across different parts of the country. The inability of the government to effectively manage these conflicts has weakened national cohesion, posing serious threats to Nigeria's territorial integrity.

The federal government has responded to these crises primarily through military crackdowns and security operations. While these measures have provided temporary relief in some instances, they have

failed to address the root causes of migration-related conflicts and separatist agitations. In many cases, military interventions have led to human rights violations, deepening resentment among affected communities and further radicalizing separatist movements. The failure of this security-driven approach underscores the urgent need for a more comprehensive response—one that combines security measures with political reforms, economic interventions, and efforts to foster national unity.

One of the most significant consequences of migration and conflicts in Nigeria is the weakening of national unity. Ethnic divisions have been reinforced by repeated clashes between different groups, such as the ongoing tensions between indigenous farming communities and nomadic herders in the Middle Belt. Similarly, in the South-East, the agitation for Biafra has been fueled by long-standing grievances related to economic marginalization and political exclusion. In the Niger Delta, demands for greater resource control have sometimes evolved into calls for outright secession, driven by frustrations over environmental degradation and neglect by the federal government. These tensions have created a climate of mistrust, making it increasingly difficult to achieve a sense of national belonging.

In addition to fostering disunity, migration-induced conflicts have also overstretched Nigeria's security forces. The country is simultaneously dealing with multiple security crises, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, herder-farmer clashes in the Middle Belt, and separatist movements in the South-East and Niger Delta. The government's attempts to contain these crises through military deployment have strained the capacity of security agencies, leaving many areas vulnerable to criminal activities and insurgent attacks. This overstretch has reduced the effectiveness of law enforcement, allowing violence to persist in many conflict-prone regions.

Beyond security concerns, migration and conflicts have also disrupted economic activities, particularly in regions that rely heavily on agriculture and resource extraction. The instability in the Niger Delta has frequently disrupted oil production, leading to revenue losses for the government. Similarly, persistent insecurity in the North has negatively impacted agricultural output, contributing to rising food prices and inflation. In the South-East, frequent clashes between separatist agitators and security forces have discouraged investment and disrupted trade. These economic disruptions have worsened poverty and unemployment, creating conditions that further fuel radicalization and conflict.

Perhaps most critically, the government's inability to provide lasting solutions to migration-related conflicts and separatist movements has eroded public trust in state institutions. Many Nigerians perceive the government as either indifferent or incapable of addressing their concerns, leading to widespread disillusionment. In regions where the state has failed to provide security and economic opportunities, alternative governance structures—such as ethnic militias and separatist groups—have gained legitimacy. This weakening of state authority threatens Nigeria's long-term stability, as it creates an environment where non-state actors wield increasing influence over local populations.

Recommendations

- Strengthening National Integration Programs
- Promoting unity through education, cultural exchanges, and inclusive policies can help bridge ethnic divisions.
- Enhancing Conflict Resolution Mechanisms
- The government should adopt community-based conflict resolution mechanisms to address migration disputes and self-determination agitations.
- Decentralization and Regional Autonomy
- Granting more powers to states and local governments may reduce the appeal of separatist movements by allowing regions to have greater control over their affairs.
- Addressing Socio-Economic Inequalities
- Investing in underdeveloped regions and providing employment opportunities can mitigate the economic grievances that fuel migration conflicts and self-determination demand

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