



Intergroup Relations and Conflicts in Nigeria: Implications on National Development, 1914-2024

ABSTRACT

This study assessed intergroup relations, conflicts and its implications on the development of Nigeria from 1914-2024. It examined the nature, causes and consequences of intergroup interactions with a particular focus on national development. The study derived its data from the primary, secondary and multidisciplinary sources. It adopted the Historical Materialism theory of Karl Marx as a template for analysis. It revealed that Nigeria is a country marked by remarkable ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity. With over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages, the country's socio-cultural/political landscape is inherently complex. While this diversity is a source of cultural richness and identity, it has also contributed to persistent intergroup conflicts – rooted in historical, political, economic and socio-cultural dynamics that have become recurring features of the nation's experience, threatening peace, unity and national development. The study examined the Nigerian Civil War of 1967, the Farmer-herders crisis, the IPOB menace and the Niger Delta crisis. It revealed that these conflicts often stem from competition for political power and access to economic resources, identity politics and perceived marginalization by the minority ethnic groups which have had significant impact on the development of Nigeria as a nation. The study established that ethnicity and power competition, religious difference, colonial legacies, resource control, historical grievances and perceived marginalization are key factors that contribute to intergroup conflicts in Nigeria. These conflicts as the study showed has eroded and strained national consciousness/belief, impacting negatively on national cohesion and intergroup harmony. The study recommended addressing the root causes such as; poverty, unemployment, inequality, promotion of inclusive governance, improved conflict resolution mechanisms, and reconciliation between different groups, as well as supporting economic development and resource sharing initiatives that benefit all communities as a way forward. It concludes that national development and intergroup harmony can be achieved if intergroup interactions are modeled in ways that captures the essence and needs of all groups.

Keywords: Development, Intergroup Relations, Conflict, Resource Control, Competition.

**Michael Thomas Blessed
PhD**

Department of History and
Diplomatic Studies,
Ignatius Ajuru University of
Education,
Rumuolumeni,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
michaelthomasblessed@yahoo.com,
thomas.michael.iaue.edu.ng

I. Introduction

Nigeria, a nation of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, has experienced a long and complex history of intergroup relations and conflicts that have significantly impacted its development trajectory. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 by the British colonial authorities laid the foundation for a heterogeneous state, united more by administrative fiat than by shared identity or purpose (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This artificial merger of distinct ethnic nationalities, each with its own language, traditions, and governance systems, set the stage for recurring tensions, competitions, and rivalries. From the colonial period through the post-

independence era up to 2004, intergroup conflicts in Nigeria have emerged from competing claims over political power, resource control, identity, and regional autonomy, each of which has played a significant role in shaping the nation's developmental outcomes. During the colonial era, British policies of indirect rule and regional administration reinforced ethnic and regional cleavages. The colonial government's preference for governing through local traditional rulers and its unequal development of regions deepened mistrust among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups (Osaghae, 1994). The North was largely left under the control of emirs with limited Western education and infrastructural investment, while the South, particularly the Southwest, benefited from greater missionary influence and Western education. These disparities sowed seeds of inequality and competition, which would later manifest in post-colonial power struggles.

The post-independence period, notwithstanding, did little to mend these historical fissures. Rather, political elites often exploited ethnic and regional identities to mobilize support and suppress opposition. The First Republic (1960–1966) was characterized by regionalism, ethnic politics, and electoral violence, culminating in the 1966 military coup and subsequent counter-coup. These events triggered the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), one of the most devastating intergroup conflicts in Africa's post-colonial history. The war, driven primarily by the secessionist attempt of the Eastern Region to form the Republic of Biafra, exposed the fragility of Nigeria's national cohesion and resulted in the loss of over one million lives and the destruction of infrastructure (Uche, 2008). Although the post-war policy of "No Victor, No Vanquished" sought reconciliation, deep-seated grievances and marginalization remained unresolved.

From the 1970s through the 1980s, Nigeria oscillated between military regimes, which, while suppressing overt ethnic conflicts, often perpetuated structural imbalances through patronage and favoritism. The return to civilian rule in 1999 under the Fourth Republic was met with renewed ethnic, religious, and communal violence, especially in the Middle Belt and Niger Delta regions. These conflicts were largely fueled by disputes over land, identity, and political representation, as well as struggles over resource allocation, especially oil revenue (Ibeanu, 2005). The rise of ethnic militias and vigilante groups such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Boko Haram Insurgency, Fulani-Herdiers Crisis, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) underscored the erosion of state authority and the failure of the post-colonial state to manage diversity effectively. The cumulative effect of these conflicts on Nigeria's development has been profound. Intergroup violence has diverted resources away from socio-economic development to security, reduced investor confidence, displaced populations, and destroyed lives and property. In regions such as the Niger Delta, the legacy of violent agitations has hindered human capital development and environmental sustainability (Watts, 2004). Moreover, political instability and ethnic polarization have weakened state institutions and undermined efforts at national integration. This study, thus, examined intergroup relations and conflict in Nigeria, analyzing how these interactions and conflicts have impacted Nigeria's national development.

II. Statement of Problem

Since the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, Nigeria has grappled with deep-seated intergroup tensions arising from ethnic, religious, and regional differences. The colonial administration's policy of indirect rule and regionalism sowed seeds of division that continued to fester after independence. These divisions were often reinforced by uneven development, perceived marginalization, and the struggle for access to political power and economic resources. Despite efforts at nation-building and integration, the Nigerian state has witnessed recurring conflicts, ranging from the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), ethnic riots, religious clashes, to violent communal disputes, many of which are rooted in the failure to effectively manage intergroup relations. These conflicts have not only threatened national unity but have also significantly impeded economic development, weakened state institutions, and eroded public trust in government. In particular, the post-independence period up to 2004 saw persistent instability in regions such as the Middle Belt, the Niger Delta, and the northern states, underscoring the inability of successive governments to forge a cohesive national identity. Furthermore, the manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments for

political gain exacerbated tensions and widened societal fractures. The problem, therefore, is that despite Nigeria's rich diversity, the absence of a sustained and inclusive framework for managing intergroup relations has allowed conflicts to flourish, undermining national integration and socio-economic development. This study, therefore, investigated how these intergroup dynamics and their attendant conflicts have shaped Nigeria's developmental trajectory from 1914 to 2024.

III. Methodology

The data for this study was gathered via the primary and secondary sources. A multidisciplinary approach was also employed, integrating insights from related fields to enhance and supplement the existing historical data. The method of analysis is based on qualitative approach and the historical narrative. Apart from the methodological analysis, the work is also analytic exuding a comprehensive professional touch in the canons of historical methods that is encompassing to avoid mono-causal explanations of historical events.

IV. Conceptual Review

Intergroup Relations

Intergroup relations refer to the patterns of interaction, cooperation, competition, and conflict between different groups in a society. Sherif et al. (1961) define intergroup relations as "the social psychological processes involved when two or more groups perceive themselves to be in opposition to each other's goals, status, or resources." This definition emerges from the Robbers Cave Experiment and emphasizes the role of group identity and competition in shaping intergroup behaviour.

According to Brewer and Brown (1998), "intergroup relations refer to the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours that individuals hold and display towards groups that they do not belong to, based primarily on their identification with an in-group." Their definition draws from Social Identity Theory, where individuals categorize themselves and others into groups, forming an in-group and an out-group dynamic. This perspective highlights the importance of perceived group membership in fostering favouritism or prejudice, emphasizing that intergroup relations are influenced not just by objective factors but also by subjective identification and group affiliation.

Olzak (1992) frames intergroup relations in the context of social structure and competition. She defines it as "the patterned interactions among ethnic, racial, religious, or other identity-based groups, especially in the context of political and economic contestation." Her perspective, rooted in conflict theory, examines how structural inequalities and group mobilization around identity influence relations. Olzak's work is particularly relevant in pluralistic societies where institutional arrangements and access to resources are unequally distributed, leading to group tensions.

Conflict

Coser (1956) defines conflict as "a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources in which the objectives of the adversaries are to neutralise, injure, or eliminate their rivals" (Coser, 1956, p. 8). Coser thinks that conflict is an inherent aspect of social interaction and is not inherently unhealthy. He differentiates between actual and unrealistic conflict. The former is anchored in specific, tangible grievances, while the latter is expressive and emotional.

Conflict according to Galtung (1969) is "a dynamic process involving contradiction, attitude, and behaviour". His conflict triangle posits that latent structural injustices (contradictions) generate negative perceptions (attitudes) and aggressive acts (behaviour). Galtung introduces the concept of structural violence, wherein social structures systematically harm or disadvantage individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.

Development

Todaro and Smith (2015) define development as "a multidimensional process involving the reorganisation and reorientation of entire economic and social systems." This term underscores economic expansion, structural transformation, and enhancements in social metrics. The authors contend that progress encompasses not just increasing wages but also improving quality of life and broadening human options.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) characterises development as "the enhancement of individuals' freedoms to lead long, healthy, and creative lives; to pursue other

objectives they deem valuable; and to participate actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet” (UNDP, 2010, p. 2). The human-centered perspective was popularised by Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, emphasising the substantial freedoms individuals possess to pursue valued lifestyles. This worldview prioritises empowerment, fairness, sustainability, and participation over mere income or material growth, in contrast to the traditional economic strategy.

V. Theoretical Framework

Historical Materialism Theory

Historical Materialism, as advanced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, is a theoretical framework that explains societal development through the lens of economic structures and class relations. Central to this theory is the idea that the material conditions of a society—its mode of production and economic base—shape its political and ideological superstructures (Marx & Engels, 1845). The core principles include dialectical change, class struggle, and the primacy of the economic base in determining historical outcomes (Althusser, 1969). In regard to the topic of discourse, the theory offers a lens to understand how colonial and post-colonial capitalist interests fostered ethnic divisions. The amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 was driven by British economic motives, not the socio-cultural unification of diverse groups. This imposed structural inequality, privileging certain regions economically and politically, thereby sowing seeds of ethnic resentment and conflict (Ake, 1981). During the post-independence era, competition for control of state power and resources reflected the underlying class struggle masked by ethnic identity. For instance, the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) and recurrent ethno-religious conflicts stemmed from disparities in access to economic resources and political representation, rather than mere cultural differences. Historical Materialism, thus, reveals that these intergroup tensions were manifestations of deeper struggles over material control, which hindered national cohesion and sustainable development (Osaghae, 1994). In sum, the Historical Materialism theory elucidates how economic structures and class dynamics underpinned Nigeria's intergroup conflicts, with profound implications for national development.

Patterns of Intergroup Relations and Conflicts in Nigeria since Precolonial Times

Nigeria's intergroup relations have evolved through a complex historical trajectory marked by cooperation, competition, conflict, and transformation, deeply rooted in the country's diverse ethno-linguistic composition and shaped by external and internal dynamics since precolonial times. Prior to colonial contact, the Nigerian region was a mosaic of autonomous political entities such as the Sokoto Caliphate in the north, the Oyo and Benin Empires in the west, and the Igbo acephalous societies in the southeast, each with distinct social, political, and economic systems (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Interactions among these groups were facilitated by trade, religion, and migration. For instance, the trans-Saharan trade networks linked the Hausa city-states with North Africa, spreading Islam and facilitating cultural exchange, while in the southern regions, inter-ethnic trade and diplomatic relations, such as between the Benin Kingdom and neighboring communities, promoted interdependence and relative peace (Adegbulu, 2011). However, these precolonial relations were not devoid of tensions. Conflicts over trade routes, territorial expansion, and religious propagation, such as the Fulani Jihad in the early 19th century, often reconfigured intergroup dynamics and power relations (Last, 1967).

Furthermore, the advent of British colonial rule in the late 19th century fundamentally altered these indigenous patterns. Through a policy of indirect rule, the British reinforced pre-existing hierarchies in the north and created new political structures in the south, often arbitrarily merging culturally diverse groups into single administrative units (Afigbo, 1972). This colonial amalgamation, particularly the 1914 unification of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, laid the foundation for modern Nigeria's intergroup tensions. The colonial administration's uneven development policies, favoring the south in education and bureaucratic inclusion while entrenching traditional rule in the north, exacerbated regional disparities and fostered mutual suspicions among Nigeria's major ethnic groups: Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo (Osaghae, 1994). Colonial censuses and electoral systems further deepened ethnic consciousness, transforming identity from a cultural to a political weapon.

Subsequent to independence Nigeria, however, acquired these structural imbalances, and intergroup ties were rapidly challenged by political rivalries and ethno-regional competitiveness. The

First Republic (1960–1966) had significant ethnic mobilisation, with political organisations primarily representing regional interests, such as the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), rather than national ideology (Sklar, 2004). Tensions escalated in the 1966 military coups and the subsequent Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), instigated by the Eastern Region's separatist endeavour to establish the Republic of Biafra. This battle, resulting in over a million fatalities, revealed the fragility of intergroup interactions and the postcolonial state's inability to cultivate national unity (Uche, 2008).

In the post-war era, successive military and civilian administrations endeavoured to address Nigeria's ethnic diversity through various strategies, including the establishment of new states and local governments to satisfy minority demands, the introduction of the federal character principle, and the implementation of quota systems in public service and education. Although these initiatives sought to enhance inclusiveness and equal representation, they frequently solidified ethnic identity as a criterion for resource distribution and political bargaining (Suberu, 2001). The emergence of ethnic militias and identity-driven movements, including the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and Arewa People's Congress (APC), underscores profound grievances and feelings of marginalisation across various regions. Furthermore, the restoration of democratic governance in 1999 reignited aspirations for enhanced intergroup cohesion; yet, ethno-religious and communal strife continued unabated. The Sharia law dispute in northern Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and persistent violence in the Niger Delta about resource management highlight the complex character of Nigeria's intergroup issues (Ibeanu, 2008). These conflicts are fuelled by intersecting factors of race, religion, economic disparity, and environmental deterioration. Nonetheless, significant occurrences of intergroup cooperation and solidarity have emerged, particularly during national emergencies, sporting events, and collective political movements, indicating the potential for civic nationalism.

Contemporary efforts at nation-building have increasingly emphasized intergroup dialogue, peacebuilding, and inclusive governance. Civil society organizations, traditional rulers, religious leaders, and state institutions have played roles in fostering reconciliation and promoting interethnic understanding. Initiatives such as the National Orientation Agency's campaigns, interfaith forums, and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms have yielded modest gains. However, the persistence of elite manipulation of identity, weak institutions, and poor governance continue to hinder the development of a truly integrative national identity (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Nature, Causes, and Actors of Major Intergroup Conflicts in Nigeria from 1914 to 2024

The amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 by the British colonial administration laid the foundation for Nigeria's modern intergroup conflicts by merging culturally, religiously, and linguistically distinct communities into an artificial geopolitical entity (Osaghae, 1994). The nature of these conflicts has evolved from intra-ethnic competition during the colonial era to ethnic, religious, and regional hostilities in the post-independence period, often manifesting as violent confrontations, secessionist agitations, insurgencies, and communal clashes. The early causes of intergroup conflicts were rooted in colonial policies of indirect rule, which reinforced ethnic identity over national consciousness. This was evident in the emergence of ethnically based political parties in the pre-independence era such as the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) which mirrored regional divisions and sowed seeds of political competition along ethnic lines (Suberu, 2001). The post-independence period witnessed the intensification of these conflicts, culminating in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), arguably the most devastating intergroup conflict in the country's history. The war was triggered by the secession of the Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra, following perceived Igbo marginalization, economic exclusion, and ethnic pogroms in the North (Achebe, 2012). This conflict illustrated the intersection of ethnicity, political power, and control over oil resources as major conflict drivers, with the Nigerian state and Biafran actors as primary belligerents.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria continued to experience intergroup conflicts, especially in the Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria, where ethno-religious tensions between Christians and Muslims led to repeated outbreaks of violence in cities like Kaduna, Jos, and Kano. These

conflicts were often sparked by issues such as political representation, land ownership, and religious supremacy, but were underpinned by the structural inequality inherited from colonial rule and deepened by the military regimes' failure to address grievances equitably (Ikelegbe, 2005). The military's manipulation of ethnic identities for regime survival further complicated intergroup relations. From 1999 onward, with the return to democracy, conflicts took new forms and new actors emerged, especially in the oil-rich Niger Delta. Militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) arose in response to environmental degradation, economic exploitation, and perceived neglect by the federal government. Here, resource control and environmental justice were central causes, with multinational oil companies, the federal government, local elites, and militant groups as key actors (Watts, 2008). Simultaneously, the North witnessed a different trajectory with the rise of Boko Haram in 2009. Originally a socio-religious movement, Boko Haram evolved into a jihadist insurgency protesting corruption, Westernization, and marginalization of Northern youths. The insurgency, concentrated in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, escalated into a large-scale humanitarian crisis with the Nigerian military, regional allies, and international bodies becoming involved actors (Walker, 2012). The ideological nature of Boko Haram's violence distinguished it from earlier ethno-political conflicts, introducing a religious terrorism dimension into Nigeria's conflict landscape.

In recent years, however, the farmer-herder conflict has become one of the deadliest and most persistent intergroup crises in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt and North-Central zones. Climate change, desertification, population growth, and weak land tenure laws have fueled violent clashes between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and largely Christian farming communities over access to land and water resources (International Crisis Group, 2018). This conflict's decentralized nature has made it difficult to resolve, as actors range from individual pastoralists and farmers to local vigilante groups, state security forces, and ethno-religious interest groups. The government's perceived partiality, especially during President Muhammadu Buhari's tenure, was widely criticized for fueling further polarization. Additionally, secessionist agitations by groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Nnamdi Kanu have re-ignited the Biafra discourse; reviving grievances related to political exclusion and perceived Igbo marginalization. Though non-violent in its early stages, IPOB's confrontations with security forces have led to fatalities and state repression, with IPOB designated a terrorist group in 2017 by the Nigerian government (Akinyele, 2021). The rise of armed ethnic militias and self-determination groups in the South-West (e.g., the Oodua People's Congress) and South-South (e.g., Niger Delta Avengers) further reflects the fragmentation of Nigeria's national identity and the contestation of the state's legitimacy.

From 1914 to 2024, the actors in Nigeria's intergroup conflicts have ranged from ethnic communities, religious sects, regional elites, political parties, state and non-state armed groups, to external factors such as colonial authorities, multinational corporations, and international aid organizations. The persistence of these conflicts underscores the failure of successive governments to institutionalize inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and justice mechanisms. National integration efforts, such as the federal character principle, creation of new states, and revenue-sharing formulas, have often yielded limited success due to corruption and political manipulation. Ultimately, Nigeria's intergroup conflicts are symptomatic of a larger structural crisis of nation-building, requiring not only security-based interventions but also comprehensive political reforms, inter-ethnic dialogue, and a redefinition of citizenship and identity in a multi-ethnic state.

Impact of Intergroup Conflicts on Nigeria's National Unity, State Formation, and Democratic Development

Nigeria's colonial origins sowed the seeds of intergroup tensions. The British colonial strategy of indirect rule emphasized ethnic and regional identities, privileging certain groups over others, thereby institutionalizing division (Afigbo, 1989). The artificial fusion of culturally and historically distinct entities without meaningful integration mechanisms fostered distrust and rivalry. This legacy became evident in the post-independence period, particularly during the First Republic (1960–1966), where political competition took a deeply ethnic and regional character, culminating in the 1966 military coups and the devastating Biafran War (1967–1970) (Osaghae, 1998). The Nigerian

Civil War remains a landmark illustration of how intergroup conflict undermined national unity. The war deepened ethno-regional distrust and disrupted the process of building a cohesive national identity. Efforts to rebuild national unity after the war through policies such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and federal character principles have had limited success due to continued elite manipulation of identity politics (Suberu, 2001).

State formation in Nigeria has also been shaped by intergroup tensions. The demand for state creation often reflected efforts by minority groups to escape perceived domination by larger ethnic groups within regional structures. Between 1967 and 1996, Nigeria created 36 states, ostensibly to accommodate ethnic pluralism and promote administrative efficiency. However, the proliferation of states did not resolve the fundamental issues of marginalization and inequality. Instead, it reinforced ethnic claims and competition over state resources (Ekeh, 1975).

Democratic development has suffered due to persistent intergroup conflicts. Electoral processes are frequently marred by ethno-religious violence, vote rigging, and elite manipulation of ethnic sentiments. For instance, the 2011 post-election violence in northern Nigeria highlighted how ethnic and religious grievances can destabilize democratic processes (Ibeanu, 2013). These conflicts reduce citizens' faith in the democratic system and contribute to voter apathy, electoral fraud, and militarization of politics.

Furthermore, the rise of ethno-religious militias and insurgencies—such as Boko Haram in the Northeast, IPOB in the Southeast and banditry in the Northwest—exacerbate national insecurity and challenge the state's monopoly on violence. These insurgencies are often framed around historical grievances of marginalization, exclusion, and failure of the state to deliver justice and equitable development (Alao, 2013). Their persistence has weakened state authority and complicated democratic governance.

Conflict Management and National Integration Efforts Since 1914

Since its amalgamation in 1914, Nigeria has faced persistent challenges in forging national unity among its diverse ethnic, religious, and regional groups. As a multi-ethnic state with over 250 ethnic groups and varied cultural identities, Nigeria's national integration efforts have been complicated by recurring internal conflicts. The foundation of Nigeria's integration challenges was laid during British colonial rule. The 1914 amalgamation united the Northern and Southern Protectorates with little regard for ethnic, cultural, or administrative differences. The colonial system entrenched divisions through indirect rule and regionalism, which later became fault lines for post-independence conflicts (Osaghae, 1998). The regional structure encouraged competition among the North, East, and West, fostering suspicion and ethnic rivalry that culminated in the first major post-independence crisis: the 1966 military coup and the counter-coup, which led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970).

The Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War) was a significant event that tested the country's unity. The war resulted from grievances over marginalization, resource allocation, and political exclusion, particularly from the Igbo ethnic group (Uche, 2008). In the aftermath, the federal government adopted the policy of “No Victor, No Vanquished” and launched the 3Rs—Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation as an effort to reintegrate the secessionist region. These policies, while well-intentioned, had limited success due to uneven implementation and the absence of sustained economic and political inclusion. To address structural imbalances and promote unity, successive governments have implemented various measures. One notable effort is the creation of states, which began in 1967 with the creation of 12 states and eventually expanded to 36 states by 1996. This move was intended to reduce regional dominance, bring government closer to the people, and give minority ethnic groups a stronger voice (Suberu, 2001). While it alleviated some grievances, state creation has also increased competition for federal resources and political appointments, occasionally exacerbating inter-state and intra-state conflicts.

Another major strategy for national integration is the Federal Character Principle, enshrined in the 1979 Constitution and retained in subsequent constitutions. It mandates equitable representation of ethnic and regional groups in public institutions and political appointments. The goal is to ensure inclusivity and foster a sense of belonging among all Nigerians (Ekeh & Osaghae, 1989). However,

critics argue that the principle has promoted mediocrity and ethnic loyalty over meritocracy, leading to inefficiency in public service.

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), established in 1973, remains one of Nigeria's most enduring tools for integration. The program deploys university and polytechnic graduates to states other than their own to promote cross-cultural understanding and national unity. Although the NYSC has facilitated inter-ethnic friendships and marriages, its impact has waned in recent years due to security concerns and declining enthusiasm among participants (Adeyemi, 2018). Moreso, democratic governance since 1999 has offered new avenues for conflict management and integration. Civil society organizations, traditional institutions, and religious leaders have become more active in conflict resolution. Mechanisms such as peace-building commissions, truth and reconciliation committees (e.g., in Plateau State), and community dialogue initiatives have helped manage ethnic and religious tensions (Albert, 2011). However, political elite manipulation of ethnic and religious identities for electoral gains continues to undermine integration efforts.

Furthermore, ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt, Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, and secessionist agitations in the Southeast (e.g., IPOB) further highlight the fragility of Nigeria's unity. The government's response has largely been security-focused, but scholars argue for a more comprehensive approach that includes justice, inclusive governance, and socioeconomic development (Ibeanu, 2006). For instance, the Niger Delta amnesty program (2009) combined disarmament with economic reintegration, achieving relative stability in the region. In recent years, however, the call for restructuring Nigeria's federalism has gained momentum as a means of addressing grievances rooted in perceived marginalization. Advocates argue that true federalism where states control more of their resources and development priorities could reduce dependency on the center and enhance accountability and local integration (Ayoade, 2000).

VI. Recommendations

Promote Inclusive Governance and Equitable Resource Distribution: One of the root causes of intergroup tensions in Nigeria is the perception of marginalization by certain ethnic or regional groups. To mitigate this, the federal government must strengthen inclusive governance by ensuring fair representation of all ethnic, religious, and regional groups in key political and economic institutions. Additionally, the equitable distribution of resources—especially revenues from oil and natural gas—should be enshrined in a transparent fiscal federalism framework. A more inclusive political structure will reduce grievances, foster a sense of belonging, and increase national unity.

Strengthen Civic Education and National Integration Programs: The Nigerian government should revamp civic education and national orientation programs to emphasize mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and shared national identity over ethnic or religious affiliations. Institutions like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) should be improved and better funded to serve as genuine platforms for intercultural exchange. By targeting youths with curricula that promote tolerance, historical awareness, and conflict resolution skills, future generations can be better equipped to bridge Nigeria's complex intergroup divides.

Institutionalize Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms: There is a pressing need to establish robust, community-driven conflict early warning systems that can proactively detect signs of rising tensions between groups. These systems should involve local traditional rulers, religious leaders, women's groups, and civil society organizations who often have firsthand knowledge of brewing disputes. Establishing a national conflict management agency with decentralized structures in conflict-prone zones can help coordinate mediation efforts, provide rapid response, and deescalate violence before it erupts into full-blown crises.

Support Grassroots Peace-building and Intergroup Dialogue: Government agencies, NGOs, and international partners should invest in sustained intergroup dialogue forums and peace-building initiatives at the local level, particularly in regions historically affected by ethno-religious violence such as the Middle Belt, Niger Delta, and parts of the North-East. These dialogues should involve representatives from all identity groups and focus on trust-building, historical reconciliation and collaboration on shared development projects. Long-term peace is most sustainable when it is rooted in community ownership and collective responsibility.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the trajectory of intergroup relations and conflicts in Nigeria from 1914 to 2024 reveals a complex interplay between colonial legacies, ethnic pluralism, economic disparities, and governance challenges. The amalgamation of diverse ethnic nationalities without adequate mechanisms for integration laid a fragile foundation, which successive governments have struggled to consolidate. While periods of cooperation and national unity have emerged, they have often been undermined by structural inequalities, political marginalization, and identity-based grievances. These intergroup tensions have impeded Nigeria's developmental aspirations by fostering instability, diverting resources from development to conflict management, and eroding trust in national institutions. Nevertheless, the resilience of civil society, the efforts toward federal restructuring, and the growing discourse on inclusivity offer hope for a more cohesive and prosperous Nigeria. Moving forward, sustainable development will require deliberate policies that promote equity, justice, dialogue, and interethnic understanding to transform Nigeria's diversity from a source of conflict into a pillar of national strength.

References

- Achebe, C. (2012). *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*. Penguin Press.
- Adegbulu, F. (2011). Pre-colonial inter-group relations in Nigeria: The case of the Yoruba and the Itshekiri. *Journal of African Studies and Development*, 3(5), 87-94.
- Adeyemi, B.O. (2018). National integration and the National Youth Service Corps scheme: An appraisal. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(2), 45-56.
- Afigbo, A. E. (1989). *The making of modern Nigeria*. Longman Nigeria.
- Afigbo, A.E. (1972). *The warrant chiefs: Indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria, 1891–1929*. Longman.
- Ake, C. (1981). *A political economy of Africa*. Longman.
- Akinyele, R. T. (2021). Secessionist movements in Nigeria and the challenge of national integration. In O. O. Olutayo et al. (Eds.) *The political economy of national integration in Nigeria*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alao, A. (2013). Islamic radicalisation and violent extremism in Nigeria. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13 (2), 127-147.
- Albert, I.O. (2011). Whose turn is it to be disadvantaged? Interrogating the political marginalization of northern Christians in Nigeria. In Eghosa Osaghae and Victor Adetula (eds.), *Marginalization and crisis of citizenship in Nigeria*. CODESRIA.
- Althusser, L. (1969). *For Marx*. New Left Books.
- Ayoade, J.A.A. (2000). The federal character principle and the search for national integration. In K. Amuwo et al. (Eds.) *Federalism and political restructuring in Nigeria*. Spectrum Books.
- Brewer, M. B., & Brown, R. J. (1998). Intergroup relations. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology*. McGraw-Hill.
- Coser, L. A. (1956). *The functions of social conflict*. Free Press.
- Ekeh, P. P. (1975). Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: A theoretical statement. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17 (1), 91–112.
- Ekeh, P.P. & Osaghae, E.E. (1989). *Federal character and federalism in Nigeria*. Heinemann.
- Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2008). *A history of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191.
- Ibeanu, O. (2005). Oil, conflict and security in rural Nigeria: Issues in the Ogoni crisis. *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 5(1), 11–34.
- Ibeanu, O. (2006). *Civil society and conflict management in the Niger Delta*. CLEEN Foundation.

- Ibeanu, O. (2008). Affluence and affliction: The Niger Delta as a critique of political science in Nigeria. An Inaugural Lecture of the University of Nigeria.
- Ibeanu, O. (2013). Elections and the paroxysms of violence in Nigeria. *Journal of African Elections*, 12(2), 15-32.
- Ikelegbe, A. (2005). The economy of conflict in the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 14(2), 208–234.
- International Crisis Group (2018). Stopping Nigeria's spiralling farmer-herder violence. Africa Report No. 262.
- Last, M. (1967). *The Sokoto caliphate*. Longman.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1845). *The German ideology*.
- Olzak, S. (1992). *The dynamics of ethnic competition and conflict*. Stanford University Press.
- Osaghae, E. (1994). *Ethnicity and its management in Africa*. CASS.
- Osaghae, E. E. (1998). *Crippled giant: Nigeria since independence*. C. Hurst & Co.
- Osaghae, E. E., & Suberu, R. T. (2005). *A history of identities, violence, and stability in Nigeria*. Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), Oxford University.
- Sherif, M., Harvey, O. J., White, B. J., Hood, W. R., & Sherif, C. W. (1961). *Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The robbers cave experiment*. University of Oklahoma Book Exchange.
- Sklar, R. L. (2004). *Nigerian political parties: Power in an emergent African Nation*. Africa World Press.
- Suberu, R. T. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Todaro, M. P., & Smith, S. C. (2015). *Economic development*. Pearson.
- Uche, C. (2008). Oil, British interests and the Nigerian Civil War. *Journal of African History*, 49(1), 111-135.
- UNDP. (2010). *Human development report 2010: The real wealth of nations: Pathways to human development*. United Nations Development Programme.
- Walker, A. (2012). *What is Boko Haram?* United States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 308.
- Watts, M. (2004). Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Geopolitics*, 9(1), 50–80.
- Watts, M. (2008). *Anatomy of an oil insurgency: Violence and militants in the Niger Delta, Nigeria*. In K. Omeje (Ed.), *Extractive economies and conflicts in the global south*. Ashgate.