

INSURGENCY AND THE HAMMERING OF FARMERS' LIVELIHOODS IN BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on the livelihoods of farmers in Borno State, Nigeria. Drawing on a synthesis of recent empirical studies, humanitarian reports, and policy documents, the analysis demonstrates that the insurgency has systematically dismantled the agricultural foundation of rural Borno through four interconnected mechanisms: physical displacement of farming populations, destruction of agricultural assets and infrastructure, restriction of access to farmland, and the creation of a pervasive insecurity that renders farming economically irrational. The paper finds that the insurgency has produced statistically significant negative effects on both cultivated land area and crop production, reduced the effectiveness of agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, and driven farmers into survival-oriented coping strategies that undermine long-term livelihood sustainability. While government and humanitarian interventions have attempted to mitigate these effects, their impact remains constrained by continued insecurity and the structural fragility of the region's agricultural economy. The paper concludes by arguing that durable livelihood recovery requires not merely agricultural inputs but a fundamental restoration of security that would allow farmers to cultivate without fear of abduction, extortion, or death.

Keywords: Insurgency, Borno State, farmers' livelihoods, food security, Boko Haram, agricultural production

INTRODUCTION

The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009 and has since evolved into a protracted conflict involving splinter factions such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has transformed Borno State from the "home of peace" into the epicentre of one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. The conflict has killed thousands, displaced millions, and devastated the socioeconomic fabric of northeastern Nigeria. While much attention has rightly focused on the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis; mass displacement, food insecurity, and the suffering of populations in internally displaced persons (IDP) camp, the systematic destruction of agricultural livelihoods in Borno State represents a less visible but equally consequential dimension of the insurgency's impact. Agriculture, which employs the majority of Borno's rural population and historically served as the backbone of the state's economy, has been brought to the brink of collapse.

The livelihoods of farmers in Borno State are not merely economic activities; they are the foundation of food security, social stability, and cultural identity for millions of people. When insurgency renders farming impossible, the consequences ripple outward: food production declines, household incomes vanish, and populations are forced into displacement and dependence on humanitarian assistance. Understanding precisely how insurgency hammers farmers' livelihoods is therefore essential for designing effective responses and for grasping the full scope of the crisis.

This paper addresses the following research questions: How has the insurgency disrupted agricultural production in Borno State? Through what mechanisms does insecurity undermine farmers' livelihoods? And what coping strategies have farmers adopted in response? The analysis draws on recent empirical studies, humanitarian assessments, and policy documents to provide a comprehensive account of the insurgency's impact on farmers in Borno State.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on the Boko Haram insurgency has grown substantially over the past decade, with contributions from political science, economics, agricultural economics, and humanitarian studies. Studies have documented the conflict's origins, its evolution, and its devastating humanitarian consequences. However, the specific impact on agricultural livelihoods has received comparatively less attention until recently.

A study by Jelilov et al. (2024) examined the impact of terrorism on agribusiness in Borno State using Ordinary Least Squares methodology. The study found statistically significant negative relationships between insurgency-related killings and both the amount of cropland cultivated and annual crop production, providing quantitative evidence of the conflict's direct agricultural toll. This finding aligns with the broader literature on conflict and agriculture, which generally finds that violence reduces cultivated area, lowers yields, and disrupts market access.

More recent work from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has deepened our understanding of how conflict reshapes farmers' decision-making. A study focusing on northeastern Nigeria and published in *Agricultural Economics* found that conflict makes fertilizer less effective: farmers within 15 km of conflict events experience significantly flatter yield responses to nitrogen application compared to farmers in peaceful areas. This finding challenges conventional input subsidy strategies, suggesting that in conflict-affected environments, simply distributing fertilizer and seeds may not achieve the intended productivity gains unless security conditions are addressed.

The livelihood strategies of farmers during insurgency have also been studied. A study by Sani et al. (2024) assessed farm resources and livelihood strategies adopted in mitigating food insecurity among crop farmers in northeastern Nigeria, including Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states. The study found that reducing household expenditure and outmigration of family members were the foremost coping strategies, with Kendall's coping index of 1.72 and 1.17 at pre-peak and post-peak periods, respectively. These findings indicate that farmers are responding to insurgency-induced food insecurity through largely reversible, survival-oriented strategies rather than through transformative adaptation.

Studies on displacement have documented the mass movement of farming populations. The Boko Haram insurgency has reportedly displaced millions of farmers from Borno and Adamawa since 2015. Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, has absorbed over two million internally displaced persons, expanding into agricultural areas surrounding the city. This displacement represents not only a humanitarian emergency but also a massive transfer of agricultural labour and knowledge away from productive land.

Despite this growing body of research, gaps remain. Few studies have systematically integrated the multiple mechanisms through which insurgency affects farmer livelihoods, from physical displacement to the psychological and economic rationality of farming under threat. This paper seeks to address this gap by synthesising recent evidence into a comprehensive account of the insurgency's hammering of farmers' livelihoods in Borno State.

METHODOLOGY

assessment reports, and policy documents published between 2024 and 2026. The sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) key message updates, as well as news reports from reputable outlets such as the BBC.

The analysis is organised around four thematic dimensions of livelihood impact: (1) displacement and loss of farming populations; (2) destruction of agricultural assets and infrastructure; (3) restriction of access to farmland and insecurity in farming; and (4) economic and psychological disincentives to farming. These dimensions are treated as interconnected mechanisms through which the insurgency hammers farmers' livelihoods. The synthesis prioritises sources that provide quantitative data where available, while also drawing on qualitative accounts that illuminate the human experience of livelihood disruption.

Findings and Discussion

Displacement and the Loss of Farming Populations

The most immediate and visible mechanism through which insurgency hammers farmers' livelihoods is displacement. The Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in a large number of displaced persons who were mostly farmers and traders but lost farmlands, relatives, and businesses. When farmers flee their communities, they leave behind not only their land but also their agricultural knowledge, social networks, and access to local markets; assets that are essential for agricultural production but cannot be easily relocated.

The scale of displacement is staggering. Over two million internally displaced persons have sought refuge in Maiduguri alone, leading to rapid urban expansion into surrounding agricultural areas. In Bama Local Government Area (LGA), one of the areas most affected by the insurgency, communities have faced years of social and economic disruptions that hamper livelihoods, with the insurgency having devastated the area and displaced countless families, causing widespread loss of life, destruction of property, and the collapse of critical systems such as agriculture. The displacement of farming populations represents a permanent loss of agricultural capacity in the short to medium term, as displaced farmers who settle in urban areas or camps often lack access to land and the capital needed to resume farming.

Even when displaced farmers attempt to continue farming, they face severe constraints. Women and widows, in particular, suffer disproportionately. As one widow in Bama explained, "It's the widows who suffer the most. Even when we want to farm, the lack of resources like seeds makes it nearly impossible. Most of us can only cultivate small plots, if at all. To survive, we work as labourers on other people's farms, spending everything we earn on food". This account illustrates how displacement interacts with gender and household structure to produce compounded vulnerability.

Destruction of Agricultural Assets and Infrastructure

Beyond displacement, the insurgency has directly destroyed the physical and financial assets upon which farmers depend. Livestock, a critical form of savings and income for many Borno households—has been systematically looted or killed. One displaced farmer from Konduga recounted losing over 500 heads of cattle when the conflict forced him and his family to flee their village. For pastoralist and agro-pastoralist households, the loss of livestock represents not only the destruction of a livelihood but also the elimination of a store of wealth that might have been used to rebuild after the conflict.

Rural infrastructure, including markets, roads, and storage facilities, has also been destroyed or rendered unusable. The collapse of commodity supply routes has been documented in insurgency-affected LGAs of Borno State, contributing to high food prices and insufficient food production. When farmers cannot transport their produce to markets, or when markets themselves have been destroyed, the economic viability of farming collapses even for those who manage to cultivate crops.

The destruction of agricultural assets is compounded by the broader collapse of socioeconomic activities in Borno State. As Jelilov et al. note, the presence of Boko Haram since 2009 has led to the collapse of socio-economic activities, with millions displaced from their homes and forced to live in camps in neighbouring states. The agricultural economy cannot function when the broader economy is in ruins.

Restriction of Access to Farmland and Insecurity in Farming

Perhaps the most insidious mechanism through which insurgency hammers farmers' livelihoods is the restriction of access to farmland combined with the persistent threat of violence for those who attempt to farm. This mechanism operates through multiple channels: direct attacks on farmers, abduction and ransom demands, extortion by militant groups, and military movement restrictions.

Direct attacks on farmers have escalated dramatically. The number of people killed in targeted attacks on farmers in Borno State more than doubled between 2024 and 2025, according to research by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) monitoring group. Farmers report being abducted from their fields, forcing many to abandon cultivation entirely. One farmer, kidnapped along with nine others, described the ordeal: "There was one that got killed because he couldn't pay the ransom. His family could not meet the time given. He was killed and thrown away". Such accounts underscore that farming in Borno State is not merely economically risky but potentially life-threatening.

Militant groups also extort farmers in areas they control, demanding payments as a condition for allowing cultivation. This extortion functions as a de facto tax on agricultural production, reducing already thin margins and diverting resources from productive investment. For subsistence farmers, who operate with minimal surpluses, extortion can mean the difference between survival and destitution.

Military movement restrictions further compound the problem. In inaccessible areas of Abadam, Guzamala, Kukawa, and Marte LGAs, households face severely limited income earning opportunities, no humanitarian assistance, and no access to dry season cultivation. Movement restrictions prevented meaningful cultivation during the 2026 season in Abadam, Guzamala, and Marte LGAs, contributing to Emergency (IPC Phase 4) outcomes. Even when security forces do not actively restrict movement, the fear of attacks can deter farmers from travelling to distant fields. As one farmer explained, "We have been hearing people are being kidnapped. Some are killed. That is why I'm scared and don't want to come without security protection".

The result of these restrictions is a dramatic reduction in cultivated land. A decline in the percentage of farmers actively cultivating land has been documented, with a significant decrease in the number of households depending on farming as a livelihood source. When farmers cannot access their land, the agricultural foundation of rural livelihoods is undermined at its most basic level.

Economic and Psychological Disincentives to Farming

The cumulative effect of displacement, asset destruction, and restricted access is the creation of an environment in which farming becomes economically irrational and psychologically untenable. This section examines how insurgency reshapes farmers' risk calculations and undermines the incentives that normally drive agricultural production.

IFPRI's research provides compelling evidence that conflict fundamentally alters the economics of farming. The study found that conflict makes fertilizer less effective: farmers within 15 km of conflict events experience yield responses to nitrogen application that are only about 57% of what would

be expected in peaceful conditions. More fundamentally, conflict impedes access to inputs, lower returns from those inputs, and alters farmers' risk calculations in ways that make investment in productivity-enhancing technologies unattractive. A farmer who fears being killed or abducted is unlikely to invest in improved seeds or fertilizer that will only yield returns months later, if the farmer survives to harvest them.

The economic disincentives extend beyond input use. Conflict-affected households in the North-East recorded between 8 and 14 per cent lower expenditure per adult equivalent when violent incidents occurred within two years before the survey, indicating a broad-based erosion of purchasing power and living standards. For farmers, this means that even when they manage to produce a crop, the returns may be insufficient to meet household needs, let alone reinvest in the next season.

The psychological dimension of these disincentives should not be underestimated. Farmers in Borno State describe living in constant fear. "There is fear, we fear for our souls," said one farmer tending her crops under armed guard. This pervasive fear not only deters farmers from cultivating but also erodes the social trust and community cooperation that underpin traditional agricultural systems. When farmers cannot safely gather, share labour, or access communal resources, the social infrastructure of agriculture deteriorates alongside its physical infrastructure.

Coping Strategies and Their Limitations

In response to these pressures, farmers in Borno State have adopted a range of coping strategies. The most common strategies documented in the literature include reducing household expenditure, outmigration of family members, increased reliance on livestock sales, and off-farm income generation. These strategies are largely reversible and survival-oriented, indicating that farmers are attempting to endure the crisis rather than adapt to it in a transformative way.

Some farmers have diversified their livelihoods by combining crop cultivation with pastoralism or by engaging in irrigation farming alongside rain-fed agriculture. Others have turned to wage labour on other people's farms, as in the case of widows in Bama who work as labourers because they lack the resources to cultivate their own plots. While these strategies provide short-term survival, they do not constitute a sustainable livelihood pathway.

The limitations of coping strategies are evident in the persistence of crisis-level food insecurity. Despite coping efforts, households in inaccessible areas of Borno State continue to face Emergency (IPC Phase 4) outcomes, with stocks depleting by November and households relying on market purchases for their food needs. The resettlement packages distributed by the Borno State government—comprising 50 kilograms of rice and 100,000 NGN per household—have already been depleted, leaving households dependent on markets that they cannot afford. Coping strategies, in short, are not preventing crisis; they are merely delaying its worst consequences.

Intervention Efforts and Their Constraints

Both governmental and humanitarian actors have implemented interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of insurgency on farmers' livelihoods. The Borno State government, under Governor Babagana Zulum, has launched several agricultural support initiatives, including the distribution of subsidised fertilizer, free agricultural inputs, and mechanisation services. The 2026 wet season farming launch included the provision of 100 truckloads of NPK fertiliser, 250 state-owned tractors, and free mechanisation services for internally displaced persons, returnees, and vulnerable farming households. The government has also implemented a resettlement agenda aimed at returning displaced populations to their communities to resume farming.

Humanitarian organisations have complemented these efforts. FAO has distributed farming inputs, including improved seeds and fertilizer, to vulnerable households across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states. In 2026, FAO began distributing agricultural inputs to approximately 210,000 people affected by insurgency across Borno State, reaching 30,000 farming households with seeds, livestock feed, and fertilizer. The ICRC has implemented a cash-based livestock restocking programme in Borno State since 2022, expanding to Adamawa and Yobe, which has reached more than 3,300 families.

However, these interventions face significant constraints. The most fundamental constraint is the persistence of insecurity itself. As the IFPRI study demonstrates, input distribution alone cannot overcome the productivity losses caused by conflict. When farmers cannot safely access their fields, improved seeds and fertilizer are of limited value. Moreover, some aid agencies have expressed concern that the government's relocation agenda to boost agriculture has moved too fast, putting internally displaced people in danger. Resettlement without durable security risks exposing farmers to renewed attacks and further displacement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The insurgency in Borno State has hammered farmers' livelihoods through a combination of displacement, asset destruction, restricted access to farmland, and the creation of economic and psychological conditions that make farming untenable. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that the conflict has produced statistically significant negative effects on cultivated land area and crop production, reduced the effectiveness of agricultural inputs, and driven farmers into survival-oriented coping strategies that do not constitute a pathway to sustainable livelihood recovery. The human cost of these impacts is borne disproportionately by women, widows, and female-headed households, who face compounded vulnerabilities in accessing land, inputs, and markets.

The policy implications of this analysis are clear. First and foremost, durable security restoration must precede or accompany agricultural recovery efforts. Without security, input distribution and resettlement programmes risk exposing farmers to renewed violence and further undermining their livelihoods. Second, interventions should be designed with an explicit recognition of conflict dynamics, including the ways in which conflict alters the economics of input use and the viability of farming as a livelihood. Third, support for farmers' livelihoods should extend beyond agricultural inputs to include asset restoration, market access, and the rebuilding of social infrastructure. Fourth, the specific vulnerabilities of women farmers, widows, and female-headed households must be addressed through targeted interventions that recognise the gendered dimensions of livelihood disruption.

Future research should examine the long-term livelihood trajectories of displaced farmers, the effectiveness of different intervention modalities in conflict-affected settings, and the conditions under which farmers can safely return to farming. Such research is essential for designing policies that not only address the immediate humanitarian crisis but also lay the foundation for durable agricultural recovery in Borno State.

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