

ARMED GROUPS, SECURITY CHALLENGES, AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH EAST, NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The South East region of Nigeria has always been known for making developmental progress. In recent times, however, especially as from 2015, there has been an escalation of insecurity within the zone occasioned by armed groups. This came on the heels of renewed agitation by some groups within the region based on the perceived marginalization of the South East by the Federal Government as well as some other factors. This study examined the armed groups and non-state actors in the South East with a view to ascertaining how the security challenges arising from their activities have impacted on South East development. Though unbiased observations by the authors served useful purposes, this study relied mainly on qualitative descriptive method in generating data and, by implication, extracted documentary evidence from secondary sources whereupon content analysis was adopted in analyzing the data. The Tragedy of the Commons theory was adopted as the framework for analyzing the issues raised. The study found out that the insecurity occasioned by the activities of the armed groups poses great danger to South East development. We recommend that both the government and other stakeholders should make concerted efforts to reverse the trend of insecurity in the region for development to thrive.

Keywords: South east region, armed groups, agitation, insecurity, development.

Introduction

It may not be out of place to say that Nigeria has gained notoriety in the international arena over the activities of armed groups and the worrisome state of insecurity in the country. In recent years, the country has turned into a theatre of recurring violent attacks emanating from armed groups, which usually claim lives and property. Tales abound over the activities of armed groups that manifested in the form of Boko Haram insurgents and terrorists (Saliu & Saka, 2019), herdsmen-farmers' fighters (Kinge & Nweke, 2019), Cattle rustlers (Alemika, 2013; Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014), armed groups agitating for ethnic identity (Odum, 2018; Omemma, 2017), armed groups engaging in inter religious war (Dode & Ita, 2018), organized kidnapping syndicates, etc. By and large, it is the activities of groups such as these that account for the incident of proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria, as observed by Ezirim, Onuoha & Nwogu (2014). It is quite agreeable that the escalation of the seeming unrestrained activities of armed groups and the attendant high level of insecurity constitute one of the main

reasons the country is being classified, in some quarters, as a failed state. According to Beland (cited in Iwuno, Emennaa, Uzor, Nebolisa & Esieme (2025), insecurity entails lack of protection from crime (being unsafe) and lack of freedom from psychological harm (unprotected from emotional stress resulting from paucity of assurance that an individual is accepted, has opportunity and choices to fulfill his or her own potentials including freedom from fear

The South Eastern part of Nigeria, like the other parts of the country, is going through peculiar security challenges arising from violent attacks by different brands of armed groups. Whereas some of the cases are traceable to spillover effects from the activities of the armed groups from other locations in the country, there are others that can be linked to the activities of armed groups that sprang up from within the zone. For instance, it is a general belief that some of the cases of kidnappings and violent attacks occurring in the zone are ripple effects of the activities of the Niger Delta militants fighting for resource control, Boko Haram insurgents fighting for religious domination, or Fulani herdsman fighting for grazing lands. On the other hand, there are cases of violent attacks occasioned by intra/inter community land-related conflicts, local armed robbery/kidnapping groups, cult groups, etc. It is equally the belief of many people that there are violent attacks occurring within the zone due to the actions of separatist agitators.

Though there are different factors that contributed to the emergence of armed groups and related violent activities, it is worth mentioning that the escalation of this brand of violence and insecurity in the Southeast region became prominent with the renewed agitation for secession and the poor handling of the situation by the Federal Government. The attitude of the Federal Government heightened the perception of marginalization by many a great number of South Easterners and rekindled their sense of disappointment over lack of inclusion and abandonment of the post-civil war stabilization policy tagged the three Rs, which stands for Reintegration, Reconstruction and Reconciliation (Odum, 2023). It was against this backcloth that the group known as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) took the centerstage in demanding for an independent state of Biafra. On her own part, the Federal Government took a non-negotiable and violent stance in addressing the issues raised by IPOB and mobilized forces to crush the group and, perhaps, instill fear in the minds of South Easterners to avoid further protestations from the area. The face-off between the FG and IPOB led to series of events that triggered off recurring violence in the South East.

In the light of the foregoing, one can say that it was the actions of the Federal Government towards the South East zone that precipitated the recent escalation of insecurity related to armed groups within the region. The incident of separatist agitation can be seen as a reaction against real or perceived marginalization by the Federal Government. That is to say, the separatist agitation can be seen as a reaction to the incident of marginalization by people who felt that they do not have any other option than to apply self-defence mechanisms as a means of surviving the existential threats surrounding them.

To say the least, the consistency of the attacks in the South East has exacerbated the waves of insecurity and uncertainty within the region. Beyond the known clashes between IPOB and Nigeria's security operatives, new dimensions of armed groups' attacks have emerged. Since

December 2020, multiple attacks by those branded as "unknown gunmen" have been recorded within the region. While the Nigerian government, through the security agencies, has consistently pointed accusing fingers at IPOB for the assaults targeted at government establishments and innocent citizens, the group has remained consistent in denying responsibility (Lawal, 2025). Either way, the fact remains that the zone is increasingly becoming an endangered area and the situation spells doom for meaningful development. To what extent has armed groups posed security challenges in the South East region? How has the security challenges occasioned by the armed groups affected development in the South East region? The thrust of this study is to ascertain the extent to which armed groups have posed security challenges and how the situation has affected the developmental state of the South East.

Conceptual Clarifications

Armed Groups

Generally speaking, it is the State that has the monopoly of force and as such, the regular security agents of the State are the groups that can bear arms. However, security agencies/groups of the state do not form part of those being treated as armed groups in this study. Here, we refer to armed groups as organized groups of armed individuals operating outside the confines of the state law in pursuit of their objectives. Hence, they are armed actors that operate without the tacit approval of the government and not affiliated with state entity. They recruit and arm their members in a military fashion to confront the regular security agents or fight against other armed groups in advancement of their objectives.

As rightly observed by Mousseau (2016), armed groups have become increasingly prominent in recent years. They dominate contemporary conflict environments. Their degree of dispersion, influence, and effect on international politics make it necessary to establish strategies for interaction with them (Yakubu, 2024). Their impact has become more pronounced in the post-Cold War era due to factors such as globalization, technological advancements, and the weakening of state institutions (Acosta, 2018). As noted by Gates (2019), armed groups can exert significant influence in conflicts despite lacking the formal recognition and resources of state actors. The existence of armed groups in Nigeria is a well-established fact. They exert significant influence and create serious impact on the country in general. For instance, some of the well-known armed groups include Boko Haram Terrorists, cattle rustlers, gangs of kidnappers/armed robbers, armed wing of the Fulani herdsmen, Niger Delta Avengers, Eastern Security Network, Biafra Liberation Army, etc. The ones operating in the South East include the Eastern Security Network, Biafra Liberation Army, armed wing of Fulani herdsmen, and others classified generally as unknown gunmen.

Security

When we talk about security, what readily comes to mind is being safe from harm. In this sense, it limits the understanding to having physical protection harm and being safe from it. But it goes

deeper than this. Just as Francis (2006) admitted that security is a contested concept, Odum (2016) describes it as a nebulous term that cannot easily be pinned down to a specific definition. Fischer and Green (1998) explain the concept as a stable, relatively predictable environments in which an individual or group may pursue its ends without disruption or harm and without fear of disturbance or injury. Nnoli's (2006) avers that security has not always been seen from the same viewpoint across ages. According to him, the traditional meaning of security differs from what it represents in contemporary world where the term represents three additional elements that include the protection of the environment, shift of emphasis from the UN's traditional peace keeping role to war-detering role, and the issue of poverty in all its ramifications. It is in an attempt to capture the contemporary view that *UNDP* (1994) redefined security to highlight the centrality of the people and development rather than national territories and arms. As such, human security was coined to represent the centerpiece of security concerns or ultimate concern about security.

Nnoli (2006) holds that security can be seen from the objective sense as well as from the subjective sense. He states that the objective sense can be measured by the absence of threat, anxiety, or danger while the subjective sense can be measured by the absence of fear that threat, anxiety, or danger will materialize. This goes to show that no matter the level of safety that exist in the objective sense, one cannot say that there is security unless there is the feeling of confidence about the existence of such safety.

The views expressed above capture the situation being discussed in this study. The security challenges refer to the threat, anxiety, and danger the people are facing in the hands of the armed groups. The threat, anxiety, and danger exist in objective sense because people are being harmed or killed. Based on the killings, the people develop anxiety even when the government gives assurance about their safety and urge them to move around on days declared as sit-at-home.

Development: Early contributors to the meaning of development usually explain it from the economic sense that look at certain economic variables and isolate them so as to rely on that yardstick for measuring development. For a better understanding, Rodney (1986) explained that development can be seen from two angles – the biological angle and the social scientific angle. Seen from the biological angle, development represents the natural process of transformation of organisms, such as human beings, from a simpler stage of infancy to a more complicated stage of maturity that involves increase in size, cells, organs, and refinement in terms of ideas and behavior. On the other hand, the social scientific angle relates to societal transformations from a very simple stage to a higher stage of advancement. In this study, we are dealing with the social scientific perspective to development, that is, the societal transformations that move the society to a higher stage of advancement. It is by studying development from this angle that the early contributors dwelt on certain variables to determine whether the society is developing or not.

Todaro and Smith (2011) captures the traditional view for measuring development, which dwells on variables such as achieving sustained rates of growth of income per capita that would enable a nation expand its output rate faster than the growth rate of its population. For those that operate with this mindset, it does not necessarily matter whether this growth in income per capita has any

meaningful impact on the wellbeing of the population. That is to say, one can make judgment about whether a country is developing by merely looking at the national economy, without looking at how the citizens are faring and whether they are enjoying a more qualitative life. This pitfall noticed in assessing development led to a reevaluation of the variables to be employed in determining whether development is being achieved or not. Hence, contributors like Seers (1972) saw the need to deemphasize the relevance of per capita income and shift emphasis towards the issues of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. For him, society is deemed to be developing when these critical elements have declined from high levels. Other scholars like Brinkman (1995) and Sen (1999), as well as institutions like *World Bank* (1991), agree with this human-centred approach to the understanding development. It is against this backdrop that Todaro and Smith (2011) view development as both a physical reality and a state of mind, which is made possible when a society secures the means of obtaining a better life for its citizens. This study adopts the human-centred view of development because the essence of the study is to ascertain how armed groups and the security challenges they pose are contributing to or adversely affecting the welfare and well-being of the individuals within the area of study.

Theoretical Foundation

In making a better explanation of the issues surrounding the activities of the armed groups and the security challenges they pose vis-a-vis development, this study adopts the Tragedy of the Commons theory as the framework of analysis. Spiliakos (2019) and the *CFI Team* (nd) credited this theory to William Forster Lloyd, who introduced it in 1833. While addressing the issue of population problem and the necessity to bring in morality in addressing the problem, Hardin (1968) popularized the theory. What this theory tends to project is a situation where individuals that have access to public resources act in a selfish manner that depletes the resources without caring about how to replenish it. According to Bryant & Friedi (2023), the tragedy of commons can be defined as a theory asserting that the unregulated use of commonly held resources by self-interested individuals will inevitably lead to the ruin of those resources. For Spiliakos, this theory explains individuals' tendency to make decisions based on their personal needs, regardless of the negative impact it may have on others. The *CFI Team* explains the theory using the concept of global warming as an example. Whereas there is substantial amount of scientific evidence to prove the adverse impact of power generating plants and vehicles that release toxic chemicals into the air on the ozone layer, companies that operate such plants continue to do so because it allows them to make profit, just as vehicle owners with same offensive impacts continue driving them for the sake of personal convenience, without minding its impact on the general population. This theory can equally be explained using the example of miners who mine natural resources without minding the general impact on the population and the society in general. It is worthy to note that the 'commons' in this theory stands for the resources owned generally.

Though the examples advanced above in explaining the theory borders on natural resources, it can be adapted as a framework in explaining the activities of armed groups, the security

challenges they pose, and its implication on the development of South East region. Here, we are looking at how the armed groups operating in South East have, whether intentionally or otherwise, contributed in destroying the resource base and developmental prospects of the region in the course of pursuing their agenda, which can be interpreted as being parochial. To begin with, these armed groups operate within the public space. Again, they have specific motives to achieve and strategies of achieving them, which even if well-intended, may not be in the general interest of the society. As they operate within the public space to advance their interests, their activities may have been causing problems for the generality of the people. Taking the IPOB for instance, they have always claimed that their basic interest is to save the region from the menace of herdsmen and the enemies. In doing so, however, they resorted to declaring sit-at-home and enforcing it in a manner that appears hurtful to those they claim to be protecting. Not minding that their membership covers only a small fraction of the South East population, they fix and enforce sit-at-home as they please. As for the Fulani herdsmen, their basic reason for straying into unwanted areas and invading farmlands is to graze their cattle. In doing so, they do not care about how the farmers feel. As for the criminal elements such as kidnappers and armed robbers, their ultimate goal is to make profits from their victims. As each of the groups operates in the south east space, it does not matter to them whether the zone is suffering developmentally.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. We employed an ex-post facto research design with mixed methods of data collection. Documentary evidence was gathered through secondary sources such as books, journal articles, periodicals, government publications, and research reports. Content analysis was adopted in analyzing the data generated from these sources. Aside from the data drawn from secondary sources, primary data generated from unbiased observations of the researchers equally came in handy. This mixed method helped a great deal in validating the findings. In choosing the framework of analysis, this study relied on the Tragedy of the Commons theory, which helped in explaining how the infrastructural facilities and resources being depleted by the destructive activities of the gunmen as they pursue their parochial interests and operate in the public space (without replenishing them) constitute serious danger to development.

Armed Groups and Security Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria has been plagued by various forms of insecurity emanating from the activities of armed groups in the different parts of the country. As pointed out by Ezemenaka (2021), security in Nigeria has remained a salient issue and problem for the Nigerian government and has also decreased the nation's economy through major deterioration of channels such as tourism and investment in the country. The security challenges have continued to fuel various forms of violence. This trend can be linked to different factors such as the country's inability to foster a sense of unity among the different ethnic groups or nationalities and the consequent attempts by

some of the groups to secede from the federation and form an independent state. Then, there were the calls for secession that birthed and heralded the Nigerian civil war. The government promised to embark on a post-conflict stabilization strategy. However, it appeared to be a vain promise, which eventually failed to achieve positive outcomes because the government did not pursue the plan with sense of seriousness. This explains the reason perceptions and accusations of marginalization, structural imbalance, and lack of inclusion still emanate from some parts of the country and form the basis for the agitation for self-determination. It is against this backcloth that certain groups like MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, MASSOB (Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra) OPC (Odua People's Congress), IPOB (Independent People of Biafra), etc had to sprout many years after the civil war had ended. Based on the non-negotiable stance usually taken by the federal government over Nigeria's unity (Odum, 2018), those embarking on the agitations usually resort to forming armed groups to drive home their agitations.

Aside from the armed groups that emerged clearly on the grounds of self-determination, there are others that appeared to have emerged on religious grounds. A clear example is the Boko Haram sect. By and large, the various armed groups have posed security challenges in various ways. According to Brechenmacher (2019), the activities of Boko Haram insurgency led to forced displacements, loss of sources of livelihood, loss of lives, etc. A breakdown from studies by different scholars (Abiodun, Opatoki, Adeyemo & Obi, 2020; Shola, 2020) reveal that 2.5 million people were displaced, about 224,000 turned refugees, lots of girls were kidnapped from their schools and forced into marriage, and an estimated 952.029 children were forced to drop out of school, which projected the Northeast as having 60 percent (i.e. 6.3 million of the 10.5 million) of the out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Added to the armed groups that emerged on self-determination and religious grounds, there are also armed groups that lay claim to economic reasons as the purpose of their existence. For instance, the Fulani herdsmen that started bearing guns and engaging in violent attacks and clashes with farmers cite the protection of their cows (business) as their driving force. As a response to the menace of the herdsmen, some armed groups also emerged based on security and self-defence reasons. Though these herders-farmers conflicts have been prominent in the North Central region in recent times, the problem has been experienced in some other regions of the country. As stated by Ajibefun, (2018), the killings recorded by Fulani herdsmen and farmers clash has rampaged most communities, displacing them of their farmlands and pushing them into losing their main source of livelihood. Aside from the Fulani herdsmen, there are also the militants in Niger Delta area within the South-South region of the country that hinge their operations on reasons of environmental protection, economic survival and struggle for the control of oil wealth generated from their area. The Niger Delta Avengers, for instance, is known for attacking oil-producing facilities in the deltas, causing the shutdown of oil terminals and a fall in Nigeria's oil production to its lowest level in twenty years (Bamidele, 2017).

One of the major fallouts of the armed groups that lay claim to self-determination, religious, and economic reasons as their driving force is that they have given vent to groups that operate on purely criminal reasons such as bandits, armed robbers, kidnappers, rapists, ritualists, organ

harvesters, etc. Indeed, there is no part of the country that is spared of armed groups that operate under different umbrella. In the north-eastern, north-western and north-central regions, the armed groups there are prominent for violent crimes such as terrorism, banditry, cattle rustling, armed robbery, murder, kidnapping, rape, etc (Okwuwada, 2023). This state of affairs has a great negative effect on food security in the affected areas. It reduces food production and other farming activities, destroys livestock, distorts commercial activities, causes food shortages, and heightens the feeling of insecurity among the citizenry.

The activities of armed groups in the southern part of the country differ in some ways from what is obtained in the northern part. Whereas the major reasons for the emergence of the notable armed groups in the north are religious and economic, most of the groups in the south lay claims to fight for freedom, self-defence, or economic reasons. Indeed, the escalation of the activities of armed groups in the southern part of the country can be traced to the era of renewed agitation for resource control, self-determination, and defence against Fulani herdsmen, especially when it became obvious that the State has failed to check their excesses. For instance, whereas there is the Eastern Security Network in the South East, the South Westerners formed the Amotekun group and gave it a legal backing through their various state governments in order to fight against the menace of Fulani herdsmen. Regarding agitation for self-determination, there is MEND in the South-South, IPOB in the South East, and OPC in the South West. It is worth noting that there is no religion-based group in the south operating in the manner of the North's Boko Haram.

Indeed, Nigeria is currently witnessing serious security challenges that pose significant risk factors to development. Despite the promises of the Nigerian security operatives to restore peace and safety, the security situation in the country is not improving. Some of the security challenges that had hitherto been limited to particular sections of the country have spread to other parts.

South Eastern Nigeria and Developmental Initiatives

As at the period the Nigerian State rested on a three-region structure (Eastern, Northern, and Western Regions), the area currently designated as the South East was part of the Eastern region. At onset, Calabar served as the regional capital but at some point, Enugu became the capital. As captured by Akpan (2019), the Eastern Region covered 45,065 square miles and the people consisted of the Igbo, the Ibibio, and the Ijaw. At the moment, however, the South East zone is one of the six geopolitical groupings in Nigeria and consists of the Igbo speaking people. Aside from the South East, the other geo political zones in the country include the South-West, South-South, North-East, North-West, and North-Central.

With the state creation exercise that took place in 1967, the Eastern Region was split into three new states namely, East Central State, Rivers State, and South Eastern State. Enugu retained the capital of the East Central State. Subsequent state creation exercise that took place in the country at various times saw the splitting of the East Central State into smaller States. The area formerly known as the East Central State, which is known as the South East zone under the present Nigeria's geopolitical arrangement, is made up of five states, namely: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi,

Enugu and Imo. The area is known for its commercial activities, with agriculture and trading constituting the major economic activities of the people. From the accounts of Asita (2022), the area can boast of natural resources and minerals such as crude oil, natural gas, clay, coal, etc in commercial quantity. Added to these, the zone can boast of some industrial clusters in areas like Nnewi, Onitsha, Aba, Enugu etc.

Indeed, the South East zone falls within the area that has been on an upward developmental trajectory from the early days of Nigeria's independence. According to *SEREDEC* (nd), the Eastern Region of Nigeria enjoyed rapid industrialization in the 1960's and was acknowledged to be one of the fastest growing economies in the World. However, the impressive developmental state of the zone was arrested by certain factors. *SEDEREC* observes that the economic growth of the zone was halted by the 3-year Civil War in Nigeria (1967-1969), and that the economy of the South East, as well as the industries of the region have not recovered ever since. It is worth noting that the war was actually fought on the South Eastern soil and major destructions occurred there. On the other hand, Akpan (2019, p.84) blamed the military intervention for the reversal in the zone's economic development as he asserts thus: "if not for the military intervention that truncated the democratic process in 1966, the area would have achieved tremendous developmental success".

To some extent, the South East witnessed quick recovery from the devastations of the civil war. In view of the fact that the federal government abandoned the 3Rs and even undertook some policies that were viewed as punitive on the side of the South Easterners, one can say that the economic recovery was largely due to self-effort of the people from the area. The rebuilding process and the ability of the zone to witness some levels of economic stability serve as indicators that the zone has developmental potentials.

The absence of seaport till date and the long number of years it took before the Federal Government gave approval for the establishment of an international airport in the zone, which seems as a deliberate policy to frustrate developmental efforts and slow down economic progress within the area, poses some levels of obstacles for the zone. It was only in 2010, under the incumbency of President Goodluck Jonathan, that the federal government upgraded the existing Enugu Airport to international status (Balal, 2010). The airport received her first international flight in 2013 (Anichukwu, 2013).

In all, some of the actions and inactions of the federal government gave cause for people from the zone to raise fears and concerns about marginalization. Studies such as the one carried out by Nnaeto (2019) reveals that although the South East zone has the least number of states vis a vis other zones in Nigeria while the highest number of military check points and police road blocks are found in the zone. Such development creates in the people the impression that they are being treated as conquered zone.

Armed Groups and Security Question in the South-East

Concerns about marginalization and other ugly incidents that adversely affected the development of the South East zone mounted higher and higher after the civil war owing to the abandonment of the post-war promises by the Federal Government. Apart from the failure to reconstruct the industries and other infrastructure destroyed during the war, the Federal Government also refrained from taking up any meaningful measure that would make the South Easterners feel that they have been truly reintegrated into the country. Certain actions and inactions of the federal government kept creating the impression among the South Easterners that they are seen and treated like second class citizens in the country. Rather than abate, the conditions and incidents that triggered the war remained in the system and even got worse. This led to a recrudescence of agitations for self-determination and formation of pro-separatist groups, which gained momentum in the late nineties through such group as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). The group made waves within the region and eventually caught the attention of the government and country at large through her activities and demands. While the government was still trying to contend with the activities of MASSOB, the IPOB emerged in 2012 and adopted a more radical approach in its activities. Ukpon's (2021) report indicates that, as at 2021, over 30 separatist groups were observed to exist in Southeast Nigeria.

The government's immediate response to the agitation and struggle for self-determination was to adopt a suppressive and militaristic approach rather than dialogue. For instance, the leader of MASSOB, Ralph Uwazurike, was arrested by the Obasanjo government in 2005 and detained on treason charges for two years. Besides his arrest, the group accused the government at various times of indiscriminate arrests or killing of its members. Beyond Obasanjo's tenure that ended in 2007, the government continued to rely on suppressive methods in handling the issue. Hence, members of IPOB and other agitating groups were arrested and detained at different times and they also raised alarms about the harassment and killing of their members at various times.

The government, under the incumbency of Obasanjo and Jonathan, was accused of using a suppressive approach in dealing with the agitation matter. However, the militaristic measures adopted under the incumbency of President Buhari got more severe and exacerbated the tension within the zone. While still battling with challenges occasioned by the deployment of security forces to the South East and the suppressive approach of the government towards the agitation, the zone started experiencing the menace of Fulani herdsmen that not only invade farmlands with their cattle but also raid villagers that dare to challenge the destruction of their crops, attacking and killing people with impunity. Being of the Fulani ethnic stock, and in view of his utterances and body language towards the atrocities of the herdsmen, many people began to nurse the feeling that Buhari was taking sides with the herdsmen and using government's forces to advance their cause. This is against the backcloth that the security forces do not usually respond to distress calls and are even being accused of aiding the herdsmen in committing their crimes across the country (Nnochiri, 2017; *Sahara Reporters*, 2022). The seeming complacent attitude of the security forces and their inability to check the herdsmen's menace reinforced the widespread belief about the Buhari-led government's complicity in the murderous acts. It was

the general opinion of people that the government and security agents turned blind eye to the fact that the herdsmen were brandishing assault rifles and using them against their victims yet the latter were not allowed to acquire and use such weapons for self defence.

The Nimbo, Enugu state, attack that occurred in 2016 served as an eye opener to the people of the Southeast about the menace of Fulani herdsmen and how close it had gotten to their doorsteps. It was in the light of the seeming combined attack of the government forces and the menace of Fulani herdsmen within the zone that some of the groups agitating for self-determination got radicalized. For example, IPOB formed the Eastern Security Network as a self-defensive mechanism – since the security agents of the government have not only failed in offering security but also appear as accomplices to the murderous herdsmen. From Opejobi's (2020) report, ESN was launched to protect the Southeast from the marauding Fulani herdsmen and other criminal elements. Hence, it was also branded the Shield of Biafra. Simon Ekpa who declared himself the leader of Biafran Government in Exile (BGIE) also formed the Biafran Liberation Army, claiming that it was aimed at defending the Biafra territory against external aggression and invasion of oppressors (*Vanguard*, 2023). The formation of the armed groups triggered constant violent clashes between them and the security agents. The consistency of the clashes exacerbated the insecurity situation within the zone.

As part of the measures adopted to drive home their struggle, the groups for self-determination have at various times declared sit-at-home, which began with their recognition of 30th May as a day set aside for sit-at-home. This Annual 30th May Remembrance Day was aimed at honouring Biafran men and women who died during the Nigerian-Biafran war. At some point, however, the sit-at-home shifted from being an annual event to becoming a more regular one. This started after the IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu, was apprehended in Kenya in 2021 and brought back to Nigeria to face trial. The group declared sit-at-home that would take place from 6am to 6pm every Monday, starting from August 9, 2021 until he is released from detention (Eleke, 2021). Added to the sit-at-home that would be taking place every Monday, the group equally resorted to declaring sit-at-home any day Nnamdi Kanu would appear in court as a show of solidarity to him. As such, there were occasions the people had to observe sit-at-home for three or four days in a week (Omeihe, 2022). The sit-at-home began to pose serious security challenge as enforcers, following the initial directives of Nnamdi Kanu, unleashed violence against those seen along the road or their business areas and believed to be violating the order. At a point when the violence and insecurity got escalated, IPOB announced the group's cancellation of the sit-at-home that holds on Mondays, saying that it can only hold on the days Nnamdi Kanu would appear in court. Despite the announcement about the cancellation, the forceful enforcement continued. However, IPOB denied involvement in the continued enforcement of the Monday sit-at-home, blaming it on infiltrators and criminals working for the government to tarnish the peaceful image of the group (Nwokwu, 2024).

Truly, the activities of the armed groups heightened insecurity in the South East. Whereas the security agents accused IPOB for the attacks, the latter kept denying the involvement of their members in the murderous activities and even made counter accusations against the security agents. General opinion points in the direction that though it was IPOB that started the sit-at-

home exercise and saw to its initial enforcement, other criminal elements may have continued to carry out the attacks within the region even after IPOB had announced the stoppage of the exercise (Barnidge, 2021). Since the real perpetrators of the continued enforcement and violent attacks remain largely unknown, they were generally branded unknown gunmen. While the accusations and counter accusations about the sit-at-home enforcers were on, the high level of insecurity continued unabated. Meanwhile, the menace of the murderous herdsmen kept spreading within the zone, as different communities came under attacks from time to time. The South East residents appeared helpless and continued to live in fear due to the wide range of violent activities by the Fulani herdsmen and unknown gunmen. In the circumstance, the region became notorious for such crimes like killing of innocent citizens and security agents, attacking of security posts, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, destruction of crops and properties, etc.

Armed Groups, Security Challenges, and Development in South-East

It goes without saying that the activities of the armed groups heightened insecurity and instilled fear in the minds of residents. The sit-at-home declaration usually witness high level of compliance and this is not necessarily because the people were too willing to comply but mainly because of the instances of violent attacks unleashed on those who violated it and the consequent fear the residents have been subjected to (Odunze, 2025). As reported by Nwafor (2021) on one of such occasions, residents complied because they decided to act with caution since the areas have been enveloped by fear following the attack on a facility of one of the security agencies few days earlier by gunmen.

Declaration of sit-at-home and its compliance (whether done willfully or out of fear) have affected the zone in various ways. The first major noticeable impact is that it cripples commercial or economic activities because people do not step out to ply their trade on any of the days declared as sit-at-home. On such days, markets, shops, banks, and other business centres remain shut.

The sit-at-home and its compliance just like extra-judicial killings and security crises in South-East Nigeria is profound, affecting key sectors such as trade, investment, agriculture, and business operations, (Iwuno, 2025). The transporters stay off the roads and farmers cannot go to their farms outside their homes. In fact, economic activities usually remain standstill on such days (Aliuna, 2021; *The Cable*, 2022; Adonu, 2024; Obianeri, 2024). Besides private businesses, government offices and schools equally remain locked on the days of sit-at-home. It is worthy to note that since 2021 when the Monday sit at home was first introduced, Mondays have remained constant for sit-at-home. As such, every Monday remains an unproductive day. Aside from Mondays, the irregular ones had come up from time to time at indeterminate intervals. Ogunjuyigbe (2025) cites SBM Intelligence as reporting that the sit-at-home crisis has cost South East N7.6 trillion in four years.

Another cost of the sit-at-home, aside from the losses incurred by locking down the area and denying people the opportunity of engaging in their business, is the challenge posed by forceful

enforcement, which usually takes the form of the armed men wreaking havoc within the zone through destruction of lives and property. On several occasions, there were reports about how unknown gunmen attacked traders and motorists, burning vehicles and goods belonging to traders for violating the sit-at-home order (Nnachi, 2023; Okolie, 2023; Duruiheoma, 2024; Ilozue, 2024).

Again, the activities of the armed men equally constitute serious threat by making the zone lose its appeal as a hub of industrial and commercial activities. Due to the situation, some of the businessmen and industrialists resorted to either relocating their businesses to other areas considered safer or refraining from establishing new ones in the zone. Onyekwelu (2025) painted the picture about how numerous businesses that were formerly operating in Onitsha were relocated wholly, or in part, to Asaba. In the same vein, many of the customers that usually come from outside the region to buy goods stopped and headed to other areas considered safer (Ugwu, 2022). Also, those supplying goods to the area developed fear. For instance, the trailer drivers conveying food items such as rice, yam, tomatoes, potatoes, and other agricultural products from the north to the East stopped moving into the region completely while those that continued supplying stayed away on the days of sit-at-home or even days preceding the main date. This is in view of the fact that the sit-at-home enforcers sometimes burn down trucks or Lorries conveying items even when they were parked by the roadside in observance of the sit-at-home order. In effect, a vehicle that broke down along the road on a day preceding the date of sit-at-home exercise and could not be fixed so as to get to its destination stands the risk of being burnt down or the goods being conveyed plundered.

As already observed, there are indications that some criminal elements that do not have anything to do with the agitation for self determination capitalized on the activities of IPOB to engage in nefarious activities. Hence, acts of kidnapping, robbery, and other criminal acts also became the order of the day. The activities of this class of armed groups equally constitute threat to the development of South east. Some of them occupy forests within the zone and use it as their den where they keep their victims until ransom is paid. As observed by Onyekwelu (2025), the activities of kidnappers forced many people into relocating to Asaba from Onitsha and Nnewi – another commercial and industrial hub. There are communities that got deserted as the indigenes had to flee following the occupation of the forests around their villages by the gunmen/kidnappers. In some instances, the villagers would be levied in order to perform ceremonies such as burials or weddings (Okoli, **Ujumadu, Agbo, Alaribe, Adonu, Alozie, Odu, Oko & Iheaka, 2022**). The situation got so bad that some of the areas were tagged the 'Sambisa forest' of the South East (*Vanguard*, 2024). For clarity purposes, Sambisa forest is the major base of the Boko Haram insurgents and the area is widely seen as a no-go-area. There is no doubt that the residents of those areas that were forced into becoming internally displaced persons by the activities of gunmen suffer untold hardship.

The activities of the armed groups linked to herdsmen equally constitute threat to the development in the zone. The first major coordinated attack by herdsmen in the South East, generally referred to as the Nimbo massacre or Enugu massacre, occurred in the early hours of 25th April, 2016 at Ukpabi Nimbo community in Uzo Uwani Local Government Area of Enugu

State where more than forty people were reportedly killed and others fatally injured (Obiagwu & Njoku, 2016; *The Nation*, 2016). Ever since then, more herdsmen-related attacks have occurred in Nimbo and other parts of the South East (Chukwu, 2021; Okoye, 2021; Ugwueze, 2024). Owing to the inability of the government at both the federal and the state level to contain the menace, the farmers in such areas have been living under fear. Some of them have abandoned their farms, especially those located in isolated areas, and the trend has adversely affected agricultural production.

The activities of the armed groups have equally created upheavals at the political arena. There have been several incidents involving the attack of INEC offices and officials or those participating in the electoral process. While Igwe (2022) gave reports about the attack on INEC officials in Igboeze North Local Government Area of Enugu State, Ugwu (2022a) reported the killing of INEC staff in Ihitte Uboma council area of Imo. Several other attacks targeted at the office of the Election Management Body or its officials have also occurred at various times in other South East states of Ebonyi (Akpa, 2023), Anambra (Nwaiwu, 2023), and Abia (Sampson, 2021). In some cases, the gunmen have dispersed, harmed, or even killed some people participating in voters registration exercise with a view to discouraging the participants (Okeoma, 2022). Usually, these attacks put fears in both the officials of the EMB and residents of the area. On several occasions, such attacks have resulted in the suspension of one exercise or the other in the electoral process. In the light of the fact that IPOB succeeded in convincing a large number of South Easterners to destroy their voters cards or refrain from acquiring new ones until the federal government conducts a referendum, the violent acts of the gunmen equally forces some people to stay away from participating in the electoral process thereby shrinking the space for political participation.

Another aspect of development that the activities of the armed groups have adversely affected is the social and psychological development of the youths and its implication on the society. The manner the armed groups go about perpetrating violence and killing people reduces the premium placed on human life. They kill people indiscriminately and litter the streets with corpses, exposing the gory scenes to both the old and young. Passersby often record these gory scenes and upload them to the social media. Sometimes, the armed men do the recording of the torture, killing and dismembering of their victims, which eventually find its way to the social media space for people to see. For instance, the social media space witnessed the video of suspected cultists who killed, beheaded, and used the head of their victim to play football in Anambra State (Ovat, 2021). There was another incident where gunmen killed, beheaded, and took the head of their victim to a public Motor Park where they placed it, apparently, for public display (*Reuters*, 2022). Other incidents relating to indecent display of victims of the armed groups abound. Having been so much exposed to these ugly incidents, sights of spilling of human blood no longer appear gory or seriously disturbing to many a great number of youths within the area. In some cases, people that rush to the scene after the gunmen's attack appear to be more interested in videoing the victims and uploading it as a 'Breaking News' or 'Happening Now' instead of showing empathy and offering help that might lead to the survival of the victims.

Indeed, the undue exposure to crime scenes and criminality has adversely affected the psyche of

many youths in the zone. Due to the prevalence of the incidents of violence, some of them see violence as an acceptable way of life. Those that have formed this mindset become easy prey for recruitment into the nefarious groups and willing tools for the continued perpetration of violence. Whether they were lured into joining an armed group on the grounds of fighting in defence of their land or that they were attracted by the ostentatious lifestyle of the kidnappers/armed robbers that have made money through the ransom paid by victims and open robbery, the fact remains that their activities constitute grave danger to the society because not only does it help in worsening the security situation, it also takes away their eyes from the productive sector and directs it to the criminal side. It is quite believable that the rising wave of kidnapping and ritual murder in the area was a consequence of the activities of the earlier armed groups that escalated violence and criminal lifestyle.

It is worth noting that the activities of the armed men relating to the declaration and enforcement of the sit-at-home exercise are waning down gradually with the attendant positive effects on the business environment (Omotere, 2025). The continued insistence by IPOB that the group is no longer declaring or enforcing sit-at-home on Mondays has played some role in assuring some residents that the armed groups that had continued with the enforcement are not actually doing so because they share same dreams of self-determination with IPOB. As such, those with this mindset no longer see defying sit-at-home as a betrayal of the struggle for self-determination and would willingly defy it if the security concerns are addressed. Again, the spate of violent attacks occurring on Mondays has reduced since the arrest of Simon Ekpa (Yakubu, 2025; Mom, 2025). Though random attacks are still being witnessed from time to time, there is no doubt that the intensity has reduced drastically. Consequently, more and more people have started coming out as business activities are gradually picking up on Mondays in most parts of South East. On the other hand, cases of kidnapping and the menace of herdsmen (or those that parade as herdsmen) still persists. Many communities in the South East zone have started forming vigilante groups to tackle the security problem. Though these vigilante groups have limited capacity and appear to be overwhelmed in some cases, they are making some impacts in handling the security challenge.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the South East cannot achieve meaningful development if it continues to be exposed to violent activities of the armed groups and high level of insecurity. While the atmosphere of insecurity drives away existing investors and scares away intending ones, thereby retarding economic development, the deaths and the disorientation of the youths occasioned by the activities of the gunmen deplete the available human resources needed for development.

Conclusion

Nigeria is not at peace. As at 2023, Nigeria was ranking 144 in Global Peace Index and 37 in Africa (Arogbonlo, 2023). The south east is not spared. The peculiar cases in the zone are not helping matters. The country is facing serious security challenges owing to the activities of different armed groups and non-state actors that wreak havoc in the country. The inability of the

government and her security agents to bring the groups under control has not only led to the continuation and exacerbation of the trend of insecurity in the country but also the expansion of these groups in terms of their number and operations.

The South East is having a taste of insecurity with its peculiarities. After a detailed appraisal, it can be seen that the activities of the armed groups have posed serious security challenges to the zone and made it seem like a place under siege. This has in turn constituted serious threat for development through such means as endangering and destroying existing businesses, hindering economic growth, endangering human lives, scaring away intending investors, disorienting the youths, and destroying peace generally. Unless drastic steps are taken by the government, the security challenge will continue and this will jeopardize the developmental dreams of the zone.

Recommendations

As a way forward, we recommend as follows:

- 1). The federal government must take positive actions to address the issues that generated the age-long sentiments about marginalization and non-inclusion, which constitute the driving force for the self-determination agitations. There is need for the federal government to embrace the dialogue alternative rather than the militaristic approach so as to provide platforms for aggrieved groups to present their grievances with a view to addressing them satisfactorily and forestall violent agitations.
- 2). If, for any reason, the federal government believes that it is difficult to allow the country operate on the basis of equity, justice and fairness, then efforts should be made to allow any group seeking to leave the federation to do so peacefully. But even at that, there is need to provide security and protect all citizens in the country while the federation lasts.
- 3). The government at all levels must take security matters seriously. For instance, there is need to establish early warning mechanisms to detect the planning of the organized attacks by the armed groups and also brace up to confront them effectively whenever they strike.
- 4). Communities and residents must understand that security is everybody's business and not the business of the government alone. In circumstances where community members are sympathetic to criminal elements for whatever reason, it will be difficult for the government to intervene successfully. Hence, there is need for the government and communities to engage in meaningful collaboration to fight insecurity.
- 5). Again, it is discernible that some of the issues dressed up in the garb of marginalization are simply effects of bad governance at both the centre and state levels. To this extent, some of the challenges driving the agitations are actually issues relating to bad governance but since the people have developed the victim psychology, everything appears like deliberate victimization and marginalization. This explains the reason most of the agitators fail to hold the state and local governments accountable but only dwell on the federal government even when the issues of concern are under the purview of the state or local government. There is

the need, therefore, for the trajectory of governance to be headed in the right direction. Political office holders must handle their positions responsibly while the masses must hold their leaders at all levels accountable.

- 6). Furthermore, the escalation of insecurity and the poor response of the government have forced some communities into forming local vigilante groups. The hiring and firing of the members of these vigilante groups are most times not properly organized such that those exposed to handling of guns through the vigilante structure can be laid off without caring about what they become or go into afterwards. Without properly organizing the vigilante groups, it might serve as training grounds for those that would turn into criminal elements in the society. There is therefore need to organize and structure the vigilante properly to avoid experiencing negative outcomes and unintended consequences. The government should consider the community police option so that the security architecture would rest on a formalized arrangement that can guarantee the proper training and tenure of operatives instead of depending on a makeshift arrangement.

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