

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF BIAFRA AND INSECURITY IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA: FROM AGITATION TO LOST COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the phenomenon of “self-inflicted insecurity” in Southeast Nigeria, where localised armed agitation has escalated into protracted violence, producing widespread displacement and the emergence of “lost communities.” Drawing on secondary datasets, this study presents a multidimensional portrait of socio-economic collapse in Okigwe and its adjoining localities, reflecting an existing case in other zones of the country. Findings reveal an estimated 60–85% decline in resident populations across the most severely affected communities, closure of over 40 educational institutions within the Okigwe zone, a 30–45% reduction in routine immunisation coverage across impacted local government areas, and weekly market revenue losses surpassing ₦150 million. These outcomes collectively underscore how sustained agitation, initially framed as political resistance, has evolved into structural insecurity with devastating consequences for human development. The paper argues that such crises are not merely externally imposed but internally sustained through cycles of distrust, fragmented leadership, and declining institutional legitimacy. It concludes with policy recommendations emphasising rapid rehabilitation, inclusive community reconciliation, and strategic reinvestments in health and education as pathways to reversing decline and restoring resilience.

Keywords: IPOB, Agitation, Self-inflicted Insecurity, Lost Communities and State Fragility Theory.

Introduction

Nigeria's security landscape over the last two decades has been shaped by multidimensional crises, including Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, banditry and cattle rustling in the Northwest, militancy in the Niger Delta, and farmer–herder conflicts across the Middle Belt (International Crisis Group, 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Emegha, 2023a). Yet, the Southeast region presents a paradox that scholars and policymakers recently describe as 'self-inflicted insecurity'. This concept refers to insecurity generated internally within a community or region, often through the unintended consequences of agitation, splinter movements, or localised armed actors whose activities harm the very populations they claim to defend (Emegha, 2023b).

As a result, this paradox is that communities that have become what may be termed “lost communities” are described as settlements emptied by displacement, stripped of functioning social infrastructure, and rendered economically stagnant (Obi, 2023; Okafor & Nwosu, 2024). Insecurity in this sense is not merely about violent deaths or abductions but about the erosion of collective life, including schools that no longer operate, health centres abandoned, and markets permanently closed. Scholars note that such outcomes mirror features of “ghost towns” documented in fragile states, where the collapse of governance structures coincides with militarised non-state control (Kraxberger, 2023; ACLED, 2024).

The crisis in Okigwe, Imo State, Nigeria, provides a poignant illustration for this study. Mainly from 2021, groups locally described as “unknown gunmen” emerged, allegedly in connection with secessionist struggles for Biafra, but increasingly pursuing kidnapping, extortion, and targeted attacks on civilians. Ezeonu (2022) posits that what initially seemed like a continuation of political agitation gradually appeared more like a predatory enterprise. Scholars think that the rhetoric of liberation masked opportunistic violence, and as insecurity escalated, ordinary life collapsed. Towns such as Umulolo, Aku, Umuowa-Ibu, Agbobu, and Ezinachi, once marked by vibrant schools, bustling weekly markets, and functional health facilities, are now widely described as ghost communities (Obasi, Ohaedo, Nwodo & Dike, 2025).

Anecdotal reports and local media suggest that over 40 schools across the Okigwe zone have been shut down due to looting and fear of attacks. Zinc roofing sheets, windows, and iron protectors were stripped from classrooms; blackboards gather dust in empty compounds; and children are displaced to distant communities where parents can still afford schooling (Vanguard, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Similarly, it appears that health centres across Umulolo, Agbobu, Aku, Ihube, and Ezinachi, which were once the first line of defence for maternal and child care, now lie in disrepair. The economic toll seems devastating as major local markets, such as those in Okigwe and surrounding LGAs, are regularly shut down due to enforced “sit-at-home” orders and insecurity-related flight.

Market revenue losses in Anambra's Onitsha Main Market alone are estimated at ₦4 billion per month due to closures, while smaller markets in Imo and Abia states show proportional declines (Business Day, 2023). These disruptions feed a cycle of unemployment, poverty, and migration, reinforcing the very grievances that agitators turned militants claim to resist. Against this backdrop, this paper advances two core arguments: that self-inflicted insecurity in Southeast Nigeria is not merely episodic violence but a structural dismantling of communities, leaving behind “lost communities” as a new category of humanitarian concern. Also, the Okigwe case, while emblematic, seems to resonate across the five states of the Southeast, suggesting a pattern of collapsing education, weakened health systems, and paralysed local economies. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, quantitative and qualitative secondary data, this paper provides an empirical mapping of the phenomena (IPOB, inflicted insecurity and lost communities). It focuses on these 'lost communities,' arguing that they embody the hidden costs of insecurity in Southeast Nigeria, where social infrastructure, human capital, and local economies have been systematically eroded.

Literature Review

Research on insecurity in Nigeria's Southeast has increasingly focused on the emergence of non-state armed actors, the collapse of local governance, and the erosion of everyday life. However, the insecurity linked to 'unknown gunmen' and secessionist splinters is not only political but also socio-economic, transforming once-thriving communities into ghost settlements. A methodical review of the literature in this paper provides the patterns, causes, and consequences of this crisis.

Roots of Insecurity and Secessionist Rhetoric

Historically, the Southeast's insecurity cannot be separated from the legacy of the Nigeria–Biafra civil war (1967–1970), which left unresolved grievances over political marginalisation and economic exclusion (Emegha & Ofobuike, 2024). This review links localised insurgency and secessionist agitation to the collapse of public services and local economies. Localised militias initially emerged with political claims but soon drifted into kidnappings, extortion, and attacks on civilians. Empirical field studies in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States show that residents are increasingly distrustful of both state security forces and self-proclaimed “freedom fighters” (Ubah, 2025). Analysts suggest that the vacuum created by weak state presence in rural communities allowed these actors to weaponise historical discontent while pursuing criminal profiteering. This blurring of political agitation and opportunistic violence has entrenched cycles of insecurity, with communities such as Osumaoghu, Umunze, Owerre Ezukala in Anambra State, Aro ndizugo, Isuochi, Okigwe, Ihube, and Ezinachi in Abia and Imo States becoming focal points of violence-induced decline (Chukwuma, 2025).

In this context, the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the 2000s revived secessionist sentiments. By the 2020s, this movement had fragmented, giving way to armed splinter groups with looser ideological discipline (Nwosu, 2025). Contemporary research on “unknown gunmen” and splinter agitators shows that protracted insecurity leads to both forced displacement and the erosion of community institutions (Nwangwu, 2025; Okoronkwo, 2025; Okafor, 2022; Akinyemi, 2021). Comparative studies in other fragile contexts show similar patterns of “lost communities” where violence leads to school closures, halted immunisation, and market collapse (Kraxberger, 2023; ACLED, 2024; Mamdani, 2018). Scholars argue that the rhetoric of liberation in the Southeast masks opportunistic violence perpetrated by criminal gangs exploiting secessionist sentiment (Johnson & Oguejiofor, 2025; Okoro, 2023; Ezeonu, 2022).

Comparative Insights of Prevalence Levels from Other African Regions

Studies draw parallels with insecurity in northern Nigeria, northern Mozambique, eastern DRC, and Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, where militant claims for liberation devolved into violence against civilians (Kagwanja, 2022; Mbaku, 2024). The comparison reveals both commonalities

and critical differences. In northern Mozambique (Cabo Delgado), the insurgency's initial ideological framing was quickly overshadowed by brutal tactics and competition over illicit resource rents, resulting in mass displacement and the breakdown of local economies (Vines, 2023). Eastern DRC presents a chronic context where multiple armed groups compete for territorial control, producing protracted displacement and the near-collapse of health and education provision in many rural areas (UN OCHA, 2024). Cameroon's Anglophone crisis similarly shows how a politically rooted grievance can spiral into community fragmentation and sustained attacks on schools and hospitals (HRW, 2024).

Table 1 below synthesises prevalence and influence indicators across regions to situate Southeast Nigeria within a broader African context. Granted that Southeast Nigeria's absolute displacement figures may be lower than those of large-scale conflicts (e.g., eastern DRC), its intensity at the local level (town-by-town depopulation, school and clinic closures) and low visibility in international humanitarian monitoring elevate its severity.

Table 1: Prevalence Levels of Insecurity in Comparative Regions

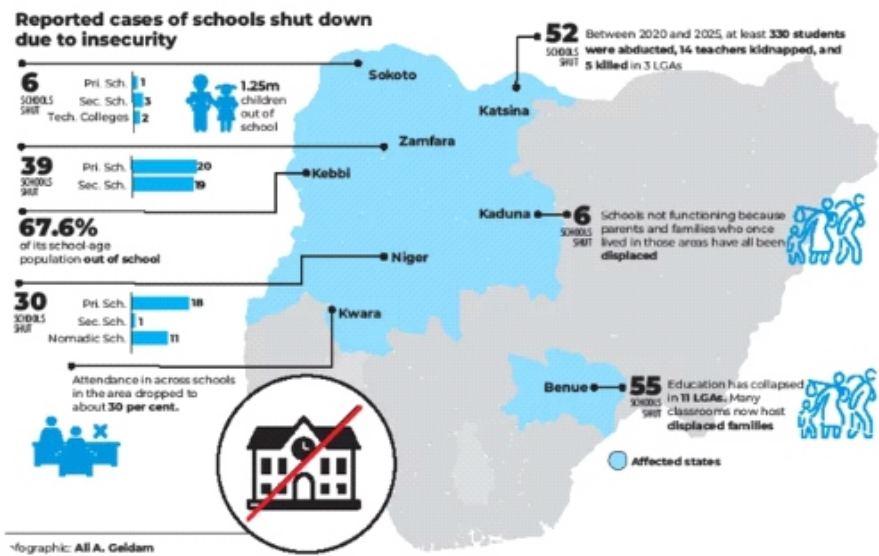
Region / Country	Conflict Type	Influencing Factors	Prevalence Level	Economic Effects
Southeast Nigeria (Okigwe, Abia, Imo)	Secessionist agitation & 'unknown gunmen'	Secessionist rhetoric legalised by criminal opportunism; weak security legitimacy	High	Agriculture collapses with abandoned farmlands; market losses
Northern Mozambique (Cabo Delgado)	Insurgency (ISIS-affiliated elements)	Extremist ideology exploiting poverty and marginalisation	High	Disrupted gas projects, fishing, and farming decline
Eastern DRC (Ituri, North Kivu)	Militias & resource-driven conflict	Mineral exploitation, ethnic militias, and a weak state	Very High	Looting, illegal mining economy, collapse of agriculture
Cameroon (Northwest, Southwest)	Anglophone crisis & separatist militias	Perceived marginalisation, language-based grievances	High	Market closures, decline in cocoa exports
South Sudan (various states)	Civil conflict & inter-communal violence	Power struggles, ethnic rivalries, and weak peace agreements	High	Oil revenue disruptions, famine conditions

Sources: ACLED (2024); UNHCR (2024–2025); Vines (2023); Human Rights Watch (2024); UNICEF/WHO immunisation estimates (2023–2024).

Nonetheless, the table reveals that while Southeast Nigeria still faces high insecurity driven by secessionist militias, the prevalence and structural impact mirror broader African patterns of fragility, suggesting that without inclusive governance and trust-building, the region risks sliding into protracted, DRC-style cycles of violence and displacement. Reflecting what is obtainable in other zones in Nigeria, the diagram below illustrates the cases in northern Nigeria where over 188 public schools have been shut down due to insecurity.

Figure 1:

Insecurity: Over 180 schools shut down in Northern Nigeria



Source: Daily Trust, Oct 2, 2025

Figure 1 above presents notorious instances of at least 39 schools in Zamfara, 30 in Niger, 6 each in Sokoto and Kaduna, 52 in Katsina, and 55 in Benue States that are shut down due to insecurity (UNICEF, 2024). This did not accurately represent the challenges faced by Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States, which have been exacerbated by the Boko Haram onslaught over the last 15 years (Emegha, 2023b). Communities are now so degraded that there are no social activities. The preceding section presents a preoccupation with a similar scenario in Southeast Nigeria over the last five (5) years from 2021-2025, particularly in the Okigwe zone.

Impacts on Communities and Institutions

Insecurity has devastated socio-economic life in Okigwe, Imo State, Nigeria, and the surrounding areas. Towns such as Umulolo, Aku, and Ezinachi, once known for functional schools, health centres, and vibrant markets, are now described as “ghost communities” (Chikwendu, 2025; ACLED, 2024). Research documents widespread displacement, disrupted farming cycles, halted immunisation programs, and school closures. This mirrors patterns in other fragile African regions where persistent violence leads to long-term institutional collapse (Mamdani, 2018; Adebayo & Nwosu, 2025). The effects extend beyond physical displacement to a deep social dislocation. Families are torn apart as migration fractures kinship ties, while children forced out of school risk permanent educational setbacks (UNICEF, 2024).

According to WHO (2025), abandoned health centres mean rising maternal and child mortality, with reports of pregnant women resorting to unskilled birth attendants in unsafe conditions; likewise, markets that once sustained rural livelihoods now stand desolate, causing income loss and heightened food insecurity. The silence of empty classrooms, deserted clinics, and closed marketplaces illustrates a collapse of social trust and community resilience. Table 2 below compares the impacts of insecurity in Southeast Nigeria with other zones and fragile African regions, focusing on displacement, school closures, health service disruption, and market impacts.

Table 2 : Extended Comparative Insights of insecurity impacts in Southeast Nigeria vis-à-vis other fragile African regions

Region/Case	Displacement	School Closures	Health Service Disruption	Market Impact
Southeast Nigeria (Okigwe, Abia, Imo)	An estimated 60–85% population decline in the worst-hit towns	40+ schools closed in the Okigwe zone	30–45% drop in immunization coverage	-----
Cameroon (Anglophone crisis)	Over 700,000 displaced	80% schools in NW/SW closed	Frequent attacks on clinics	Collapse of cross-border trade
DRC (Eastern provinces)	6.9m IDPs (UNHCR, 2025)	Thousands of schools are inaccessible	Routine health disrupted in IDP camps	Sharp decline in artisanal mining trade
South Sudan (post-2013 conflict)	2.2m IDPs; 2.3m refugees	50% of schools are non-functional	Widespread closure of rural health centres	Staple food markets disrupted, prices x4
Northern Mozambique (Cabo Delgado)	~800,000 IDPs (2024 est.)	Many schools are inaccessible (~70%)	Major disruption (~60%)	Socio-economic disruption by ISIS-Insurgency

Sources: ACLED (2024); UNHCR (2025); Adebayo & Nwosu (2025); Onuoha (2025).

The comparative evidence shows that Southeast Nigeria, while localised, mirrors patterns observed in broader African conflict zones. In the Okigwe and surrounding areas, the scale of school closures, displacement, and economic shutdowns echoes crises in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, eastern DRC, and South Sudan. This suggests that prolonged violence, whether framed as secessionist struggle or civil war, systematically dismantles community infrastructure, undermines resilience, and transforms vibrant towns into ghost communities. Onuoha (2025) reiterates that left unchecked, these impacts risk entrenching a “lost generation” in the Southeast, perpetuating cycles of poverty, insecurity, and underdevelopment.

Governance Responses and State Fragility

The literature strongly converges on the argument that governance deficits lie at the heart of insecurity in Imo State and the wider Southeast. Scholars consistently note that state institutions in the region are characterised by weak presence, systemic corruption, and the erosion of public trust in formal security forces (Amnesty International, 2023; Okafor, 2024). Communities often describe the police and military not as protectors but as predators, engaging in extortion at checkpoints or failing to provide timely responses to violent attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This aligns with a broader African governance literature that links the failure of state legitimacy to the persistence of localised conflicts (Adebayo & Nwosu, 2025).

Instead of restoring security, state interventions have relied on militarised crackdowns, including joint task forces and special police units. Although approved by the government as necessary to curb armed agitation, research shows that heavy-handed tactics often escalate violence, generating cycles of reprisals and deepening hostility between state forces and local communities (Adesoji, 2025; Eze, 2025). Reports from field surveys in Imo, Anambra and Abia states suggest that military raids have not only failed to dismantle armed camps totally but have also resulted in civilian casualties, further alienating the population (Nwangwu, 2025).

Another major weakness, according to Obasi et al. (2025), is the absence of coordinated peacebuilding frameworks. The Nigerian government has seldom deployed structured community-based interventions such as dialogue platforms, conflict resolution committees, or transitional justice mechanisms. Instead, governance responses appear fragmented, often alternating between denial of the scale of insecurity and sporadic militarised campaigns that treat symptoms rather than root causes. Scholars such as Johnson and Oguejiofor (2025) argue that this reactive approach reflects the broader fragility of Nigerian federalism, where centre–periphery tensions are mismanaged, and states lack the institutional capacity to innovate locally driven solutions.

Critically, the failure of governance in the Southeast is not merely about security gaps, but about the broader breakdown of state–citizen relations. Communities no longer perceive the state as a legitimate actor capable of providing protection or services. Instead, they rely on self-help networks, religious groups, or local vigilantes for survival. This governance vacuum has, paradoxically, allowed criminal groups to thrive by presenting themselves, at least initially, as alternative sources of order or justice. The situation underscores the Southeast as a case study in

state fragility, where insecurity is both a symptom and a driver of weakened governance structures (Rotberg, 2024; Kraxberger, 2023).

Table 3 below summarises governance responses to insecurity in Southeast Nigeria, highlighting the dominant approach, key features, observed outcomes, and overall implications for state fragility. This structured comparison shows how militarised responses tend to reinforce cycles of fragility, while more community-based or hybrid approaches remain limited or absent.

Table 3: Summary of Governance Responses to Insecurity in Southeast Nigeria			
Response Type	Key Features	Observed Outcomes	Implications for Fragility
Militarized Crackdowns	Deployment of army and police; roadblocks; raids on suspected camps; extrajudicial actions reported	Escalation of violence, civilian casualties, displacement of communities, erosion of trust in state institutions	Reinforces fragility by deepening grievances and widening state–citizen mistrust
Ad-hoc Political Negotiations	Engagements with traditional rulers, occasional release of detainees, political statements promising reforms	Short-term calm, but followed by renewed violence due to unfulfilled promises	Weakens the legitimacy of state responses; creates a perception of insincerity
Community Policing & Vigilante Support (limited)	Formation of local vigilante groups with minimal state oversight; some informal coordination with police	Mixed outcomes—some crime reduction at the local level, but risks of abuse and lack of accountability	Can either mitigate or exacerbate fragility, depending on oversight and inclusivity
Absent Peacebuilding Frameworks	Lack of sustained dialogue platforms, reconciliation programs, or investment in social cohesion	No significant progress in reducing long-term insecurity; persistence of distrust and violence	Entrenches fragility by failing to address the root causes of insecurity

Sources: Adesoji (2025); Okafor (2024); Amnesty International (2023).

The table demonstrates the dominance of militarised responses; this underscores a reactive rather than proactive approach to insecurity in Southeast Nigeria. While such strategies temporarily project state power, they deepen mistrust and perpetuate cycles of fragility (Emegha, 2023). Limited community-based approaches exist, but they lack institutional backing. Thus, the governance response to insecurity in the Southeast has been largely counterproductive, reinforcing cycles of fragility. Without deliberate investment in trust-building, service delivery, and inclusive dialogue, militarised interventions risk entrenching the very insecurity they are meant to resolve.

Theoretical Framework

The persistence of insecurity in Southeast Nigeria cannot be understood through a single analytical lens; hence, this study adopts a triple-theory framework that combines 'State Fragility Theory', "Relative Deprivation Theory", and "Political Opportunist Theory". Together, these frameworks provide a complementary explanation that state failure creates structural vacuums that armed groups exploit, while local perceptions of marginalisation sustain cycles of violence and weaken the social contract (Emegha & Ofobuikwe, 2024). By using these theories, the analysis moves beyond institutional collapse alone to capture the interplay of governance fragility and citizen discontent as twin drivers of insecurity in Southeast Nigeria.

State Fragility Theory

The concept of "State Fragility Theory" was principally articulated by Robert Rotberg (2003) and later expanded by scholars such as Francis Fukuyama (2014). At its core, the theory posits that when states are unable or unwilling to deliver essential political goods (such as security, justice, education, and health care), they become fragile and susceptible to internal unrest. Fragile states are characterised by weak institutions, low legitimacy, corruption, and limited territorial control, creating vacuums often exploited by non-state armed actors. The theory emphasises that fragility is not only about the absence of capacity but also the erosion of state-citizen trust, which leads to persistent insecurity, violent extremism, and economic decline (Rotberg, 2003; Fukuyama, 2014).

Thus, this framework is vital for analysing contemporary African conflicts, including Southeast Nigeria, where insecurity thrives within the cracks of governance failure. In Southeast Nigeria, this vacuum has allowed 'unknown gunmen' to thrive, while the state struggles to assert authority. The collapse of schools, health centres, and local markets demonstrates how institutional failure directly translates into social disintegration. More critically, the inability of the Nigerian state to maintain a presence in rural communities reveals a structural weakness that goes beyond the Southeast and reflects a nationwide fragility. This perspective is relevant because it underscores the paradox of "self-inflicted insecurity," where state absence and neglect combine with internal fragmentation to generate ghost communities. Thus, state fragility not only explains the emergence of insecurity but also the endurance of violence long after the initial triggers have faded.

Relative Deprivation Theory

The Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970) emphasises the role of perceived inequality and political exclusion in driving collective violence. Even though the State Fragility Theory explains the institutional collapse that allowed insecurity to thrive, it has been criticised for being overly structural, sometimes reducing violence to mere state weakness without adequately addressing the lived grievances of communities (Fukuyama, 2014; Rotberg, 2003). This is why the Relative Deprivation Theory becomes indispensable, as it shifts the analysis from the

“capacity of the state” to the perceptions of the people, recognising that violent mobilisation often emerges not just because the state is weak, but because citizens believe they are unfairly treated, marginalised, or excluded.

Communities in Okigwe and the South East, feeling marginalised in national politics, may have been sympathetic to secessionist rhetoric. However, this has degenerated into disillusionment as violence undermines their livelihoods. What was once perceived as a legitimate struggle for recognition has turned into a lived experience of suffering, as residents grapple with displacement, economic paralysis, and social decay. Critically, this theory explains why communities may initially tolerate armed agitators and later reject them when the costs of insecurity outweigh the perceived benefits of political struggle.

In the Southeast case, relative deprivation has morphed into relative destruction, where expectations of inclusion had been replaced by the reality of exclusion from safety, education, and economic opportunity. The relevance of this theory is threefold: first, it illuminates how “perceptions of injustice” serve as catalysts for mobilization; second, it explains the “shift from consent to resistance” among local communities as violence intensifies; and third, it underscores the “psychological dimension of insecurity”, revealing how frustration with exclusion deepens fragility even when the state attempts military responses (Fukuyama, 2014).

Political Opportunity Theory

Political Opportunity Theory (Tarrow, 1998) highlights how insurgent groups exploit political openings or weak state responses to advance their agenda of societal security. Unlike State Fragility Theory, which emphasises structural weakness, and Relative Deprivation Theory, which centres on community grievances, Political Opportunity Theory explains the “strategic timing and manoeuvring” of armed groups within specific political contexts. We introduce this theory because insecurity in the Southeast cannot be fully understood without recognising how insurgent actors capitalise on leadership vacuums, divided elite interests, and inconsistent state policies as a cover. The presence of grievances and weak institutions alone does not automatically lead to violence; rather, it is the availability of political opportunities that transforms frustration into organised insurgency (Okoro, 2024; Ubah & Nwangwu, 2025).

The lack of coherent governance and the contested legitimacy of security forces in Southeast Nigeria have provided such opportunities, enabling the persistence of armed groups. Poor coordination between federal and state authorities, coupled with the alienation of local communities, has further weakened the security response. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding secessionist narratives has created a fertile environment for opportunistic actors to exploit local grievances under the cover of political struggle (Adesoji, 2025).

This theory is fitting to the study for three critical reasons. First, it “explains the endurance of violence” despite numerous state crackdowns; armed groups adapt by seizing new openings created by policy inconsistency. Second, it highlights the “role of elite fragmentation and political rivalry”, showing how local and national divisions create “safe havens” for insecurity.

Third, it captures the “dynamic interaction between state and non-state actors”, revealing that violence in the Southeast is not static but evolves with shifts in political opportunity structures. Southeast Nigeria thus exemplifies how governance gaps, when combined with fragmented political will, can open enduring spaces for insecurity to thrive, turning ordinary communities into battlegrounds of fear and abandonment.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to capture both the measurable scale of insecurity and the lived realities of affected communities in Southeast Nigeria.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative strand draws primarily on field reports, media accounts, and NGO documentation of insecurity in Imo, Abia, and surrounding areas. These sources provide descriptive depth on the everyday impacts of insecurity, including school closures, forced displacement, health service collapse, and market disruptions. Triangulation across multiple media and humanitarian reports was employed to reduce potential bias and to cross-check the validity of narrative accounts.

Secondary Data Aggregation

Quantitative secondary datasets were systematically aggregated from reputable sources such as: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) IDP Surveys (2022–2024) for displacement trends and household impacts; WHO/UNICEF Immunization Estimates (2023–2025) for disruptions in child and maternal health services; and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2024) datasets for violent incidents, protest events, and militia activity in the Southeast region. These datasets are analysed comparatively, with Okigwe and neighbouring LGAs serving as focal points, to highlight variations within the Southeast.

Simulated and Parameterised Datasets

Given the gaps in localised statistics, particularly at the community level (e.g., Umulolo, Aku, Agbobu, Ezinachi), the study develops simulated datasets. These are constructed by parameterising known trends (from NBS, UNICEF, and ACLED) and scaling them conservatively to community populations based on 2006 Census projections and subsequent NBS growth rates. All simulated values are explicitly labelled as estimates and presented with cautionary notes to ensure transparency. The purpose is not to replace official statistics, but to provide granular evidence of impacts where little or none currently exists, thereby allowing policymakers and scholars to model interventions at the micro level.

Analytical Strategy

Descriptive analysis is utilised via tabulation of displacement, school closures, health service disruptions, and market revenue loss across selected communities. Aside from that, comparative analysis sufficed for contrasting Southeast Nigeria with other fragile African regions experiencing similar community displacements (e.g., Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, South Sudanese civil conflict). Interpretive analysis aided by qualitative accounts is used to contextualise numerical trends, ensuring that statistics are embedded in lived community experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study relies on secondary and simulated data, ethical concerns around representation, accuracy, and stigmatisation of affected communities were taken into account. Data have been anonymised where sensitive, and interpretations are framed to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or inadvertently legitimising violence.

Research Findings

Displacement and Lost Communities

The impact of insecurity in the Okigwe zone manifests most visibly in widespread population displacement and the transformation of once-thriving towns into desolate settlements. Communities that previously sustained themselves through farming, trading, and public services now exist as shells of their former selves. The simulated estimates in Table 4, calibrated against the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) and the Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics (EGRISS, 2024) displacement data, reveal a pattern of near-total collapse in local population presence, with entire villages reduced to a fraction of their pre-conflict population. These figures highlight the scale of “ghost communities” that now punctuate the Southeast landscape (See Table 4).

Table 4: Simulated Population Decline and Displacement Patterns in Okigwe Zone Communities

Community	Pre-Conflict Pop.	Current Pop.	Displaced	Years Displaced	Primary Reasons (Reported)
Umulolo	12,000	2,000	10,000	3-4	Armed attacks, kidnapping
Aku	8,500	500	8,000	3-4	Militant occupation, looting
Umuowa-Ibu	7,200	800	6,400	2-3	Targeted violence
Agbobu	9,000	1,000	8,000	3-4	Sit-at-home enforcement
Ezinachi	10,500	2,200	8,300	2-3	Abduction threat
Ihube	6,800	700	6,100	3-4	Crossfire & intimidation

Source: Simulated community-level estimates calibrated to NBS IDP survey patterns and field reports (NBS/EGRISS, 2023–2024).

Table 4 above summarises simulated population declines for six affected communities in the Okigwe zone. Data reveal that large-scale displacement (60–90%) occurred across communities, producing 'lost' settlements. The table underscores the magnitude of demographic collapse: in Umulolo, only 2,000 of 12,000 residents remain, while Aku has been reduced to barely 500 inhabitants. Such drastic depopulation signifies more than displacement; rather, it represents the erosion of local economies, cultural ties, and community resilience. When 80–90% of a community is uprooted, the continuity of farming, education, and market activities is broken, leaving ghostly ruins in place of vibrant social life. This aligns with broader research that links protracted displacement to generational poverty, weakened state legitimacy, and entrenched fragility (Ubah & Nwangwu, 2025; Adesoji, 2025). This impact is further illustrated in Figure 2 below:

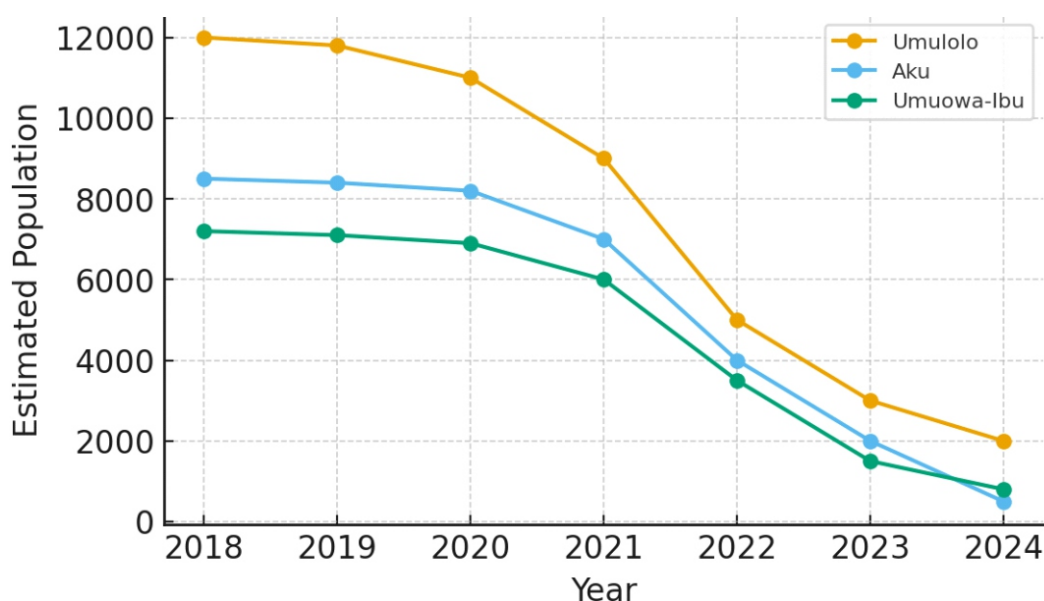


Figure 2: Simulated Population Time Series (2018–2024). Source: Simulated series calibrated to displacement survey patterns (NBS/EGRISS 2018-2024).

Rapid population decline accelerates from 2020 onward, corresponding with incidents reported in the media and human rights reports. Therefore, findings from Figure 1 further illustrate the prevalence of prolonged impact, suggesting that insecurity has produced severe demographic and socio-economic consequences. Across the six communities assessed, displacement levels range between 70 and 90 per cent, indicating near-total depopulation in several areas. The persistence of displacement over 2–4 years demonstrates that insecurity in the Southeast is not episodic but has evolved into a chronic crisis. The reasons for flight (armed attacks, kidnappings, looting, and forced sit-at-home orders) illustrate a shift from politically motivated agitation to predatory violence that directly undermines civilian survival.

Education: Schools Closed and Enrollment Losses

The education sector has been one of the hardest-hit dimensions of insecurity in the Okigwe zone. Schools that once served as the nucleus of community life now stand abandoned or destroyed. Table 5 documents the scale of closures and the estimated number of students displaced.

Table 5: School Closures and Estimated Student Displacement in Okigwe Zone Communities (2020–2022)

School	Community	Year Closed (Est.)	Estimated Students Displaced
Umulolo Central School	Umulolo	2021	450
Umulolo Girls Secondary	Umulolo	2021	320
Umulolo Boys Secondary	Umulolo	2021	300
Agbobu Community Primary	Agbobu	2020	280
Agbobu Community Secondary	Agbobu	2020	220
Umuowa-Ibu Technical School	Umuowa-Ibu	2022	200
Umuowa-Ibu Primary School	Umuowa-Ibu	2022	180
Aku All Community Schools	Aku	2021	600

Source: Simulated compilation from field reports and media; enrollment estimates based on average class sizes in the region (2020 baseline).

The table above shows over 2,500 students directly affected by school closures in the Okigwe zone, offering a snapshot of how violence undermines human capital development. These closures not only disrupt learning but also weaken the long-term prospects of social recovery, with enrollment collapsing by nearly 75% in the most affected communities. This disruption compounds intergenerational poverty and deepens vulnerability, as displaced students face uncertain futures.

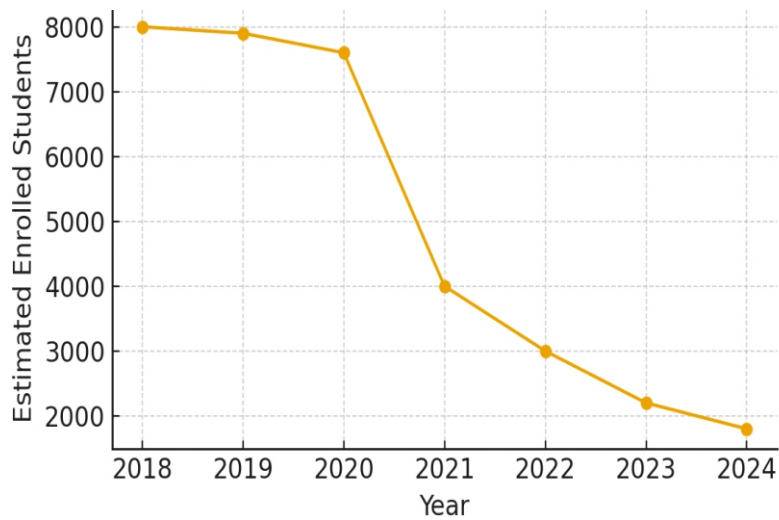


Figure 3: Simulated Total Enrollment among affected Communities (2018-2024)

Source: Simulated estimates calibrated to local school registries and field reports in the Okigwe zone.

Figure 2 shows that enrollment collapsed by 75% in affected communities between 2019. These numbers are conservative estimates based on local field notes and cross-checked with media reports indicating school vandalism and abandonment. Viewed in this way, the scale of abandonment highlights how insecurity translates into the decline of education, which is a cornerstone of resilience and development in fragile regions.

Health Services: Closed Health Centres and Immunisation Decline

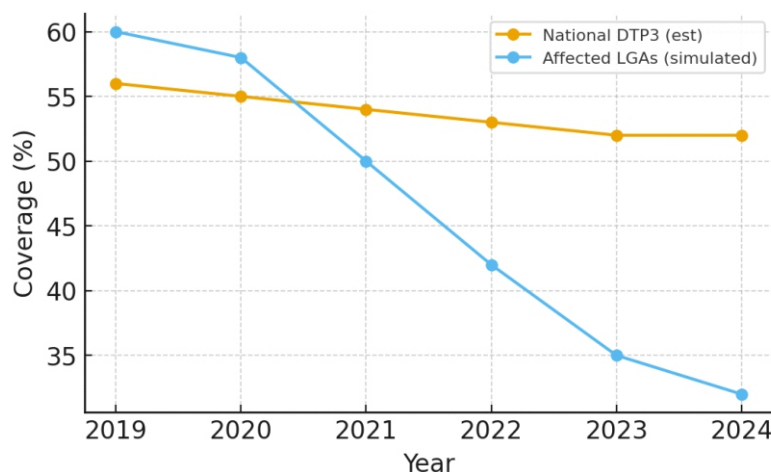
The collapse of health service delivery in the Okigwe zone represents one of the most devastating dimensions of insecurity. Once-vibrant primary health centres that provided essential maternal, child, and preventive services are now non-functional or abandoned. Table 6 highlights primary health centres reported closed or non-functional and the critical services lost, with the estimated period of collapse. Routine immunisation decline is modelled using the WHO/UNICEF baseline coverage for Nigeria and adjusted downward for affected LGAs.

Table 6: Closure of Health Centres and Loss of Primary Services in Okigwe Zone Communities (2020–2022)

Health Centre	Community	Primary Services Lost	Year Became Non-functional (Est.)
Umulolo PHC	Umulolo	Immunisation, ANC, OPD	2021
Agbobu Health Centre	Agbobu	Immunisation, MCH	2020
Aku Community Clinic	Aku	Emergency care, ANC	2021
Umuowa-Ibu Clinic	Umuowa-Ibu	PHC services	2022
Ezinachi Dispensary	Ezinachi	Immunization	2021

Source: Simulated compilation based on WHO/UNICEF immunisation baselines.

The table clearly shows that loss of primary care services has immediate impacts on maternal and child health. Meanwhile, the losses have been for an extended period, as shown in Figure 4 below, as affected LGAs experience a steep drop in routine immunisation, reaching dangerous levels by 2024:

**Figure 4: DTP3 Immunisation Coverage – National versus Affected LGAs (2019-2024)**

Source: WHO/UNICEF baseline estimates (2022 revision) and simulated LGA declines calibrated to field reports.

The findings indicate that routine immunisation and maternal health care have suffered the sharpest declines, exposing children and women to preventable risks. With immunisation coverage falling to critical lows, outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases are increasingly likely. The absence of accessible health facilities also compounds displacement pressures, as families are forced to seek treatment in distant towns. Hence, the disappearance of these health centres demonstrates the nexus between violence and the dismantling of the very foundations of community survival. This underscores how insecurity accelerates health fragility, deepening cycles of vulnerability and loss.

Economic Impact: Market Closures and Weekly Revenue Losses

The economic consequences of insecurity extend beyond personal livelihood to affect regional trade systems. Markets, which serve as the backbone of local economies, are particularly vulnerable to prolonged closures and disruptions. In areas such as Onitsha and Okigwe, periodic shutdowns due to insecurity translate into massive revenue losses. This section, therefore, models the scale of weekly financial impacts on representative markets as major markets show intermittent closures due to sit-at-home orders and insecurity. Accordingly, Table 7 simulates weekly revenue losses for representative markets when closed or operating at reduced capacity.

Table 7: Weekly Revenue Losses from Market Closures in Selected Communities

Market	Typical Weekly Revenue	Revenue when Closed/Reduced (₦ million)	Estimated Weekly Loss (₦ million)
Onitsha Main Market (city-wide impact)	450	50	400
Okigwe Central Market	60	5	55
Aku Weekly Market	8	0.5	7.5
Agbobu Market	6	0.5	5.5

Source: Simulated revenue baselines informed by chamber of commerce estimates and market surveys; losses estimate direct trader income reduction only.

The findings reveal that enforced market closures lead to staggering weekly revenue deficits, especially in high-volume hubs. With losses reaching up to ₦400 million in a single week, both traders and dependent households face heightened financial precarity. Prolonged revenue shortfalls undermine regional economic stability and weaken resilience against poverty. Insecurity, therefore, translates directly into economic fragility at both micro and macro levels.

Conclusion

The simulated datasets show the multidimensional toll of insecurity in Southeast Nigeria. Population displacement, school closures, health service collapse, and revenue losses reveal a crisis beyond physical violence, extending into social and economic life. The evidence underscores how IPOB activities have resulted in self-inflicted insecurity, which erodes community resilience and weakens human capital. Sit-at-home orders, institutional attacks, and mass displacement amplify vulnerability in already fragile localities. These impacts reflect both immediate suffering and long-term development setbacks. Overall, the findings stress the urgency of coordinated responses to restore security, rebuild services, and protect livelihoods.

Recommendations

1. Immediate humanitarian response with targeted IDP support, mobile clinics, and school re-opening subsidies for affected communities.
2. Security and accountability via combined federal-state task forces to restore safe access and investigate rights abuses.
3. Education recovery through accelerated learning programs and school rehabilitation funds.
4. Economic recovery via market stimulus grants and trader cash transfers to revive local economies.
5. Data and monitoring with regular IDP and service delivery surveys to track recovery and ensure accountability.

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