

Community-Based Approaches to Tackling Insecurity in Nigeria: Lessons and the Way Forward

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: insecurity; community-based security; routine activity theory; crime prevention; Nigeria DOI: 10.63280/jpsd.v1i2.50996	Nigeria has continued to experience diverse and persistent security challenges, including insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, farmer-herder clashes, and separatist agitations. These threats have undermined national development, weakened social cohesion, and exposed the limitations of conventional state-centered security approaches. Against this backdrop, community-based security initiatives have increasingly emerged as complementary mechanisms for addressing insecurity at the grassroots level. This study examines community-based approaches to tackling insecurity in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on their contributions, challenges, and implications for sustainable peace and security governance. The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design and relies on secondary sources of data, including scholarly journal articles, books, government publications, policy documents, security reports, and publications from national and international organizations. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes relating to insecurity and community-based security initiatives in Nigeria. The findings reveal that insecurity in Nigeria is driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and governance-related factors, including poverty, unemployment, corruption, weak institutions, and inadequate state security capacity. The study further shows that community-based security mechanisms such as vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, community policing structures, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), and regional security networks have contributed significantly to intelligence gathering, crime prevention, and local security management. However, their effectiveness is constrained by inadequate regulation, poor coordination with formal security agencies, human rights concerns, politicization, and limited accountability mechanisms. The study concludes that sustainable security in Nigeria requires a hybrid security governance framework that integrates formal security institutions with well-regulated and accountable community-based initiatives. It recommended, among others, security sector reforms, strengthened community policing, legal frameworks for community security groups, and socio-economic policies aimed at addressing the root causes of insecurity. Copyright © 2026 JPSD. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Nigeria has witnessed a persistent and increasingly complex security crisis over the past two decades. While the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East remains one of the most devastating manifestations of insecurity, the country has simultaneously experienced the expansion of banditry across the North-West, farmer-herder conflicts in the North-Central region, secessionist agitations and violent confrontations in the South-East, kidnapping-for-ransom across major highways, communal clashes, and urban criminality in several metropolitan areas. These threats have resulted in significant human casualties, widespread displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and severe economic losses. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2025), Nigeria continues to rank among the countries most affected by terrorism and organized violence, while reports from the World Bank (2024) and the Nigeria Security Tracker indicate that insecurity has adversely affected agricultural productivity, investment flows, and overall socio-economic development.

The growing complexity of security threats has exposed the limitations of conventional state-centric approaches that rely predominantly on formal institutions such as the military, police, and intelligence agencies. Although these institutions remain indispensable for maintaining law and order, their effectiveness has often been constrained by inadequate personnel, logistical challenges, intelligence gaps, corruption, and declining public confidence (Alemika, 2013; Eke, 2020). In many rural and semi-urban communities, state security presence remains insufficient, creating governance and security vacuums that are frequently exploited by criminal networks and violent non-state actors. Consequently, there is increasing recognition that sustainable security cannot be achieved solely through coercive state mechanisms but requires broader societal participation and locally grounded interventions.

Scholarly literature attributes Nigeria's insecurity to a combination of socio-economic, political, and governance-related factors. Poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and inequality have been identified as conditions that facilitate criminality, recruitment into extremist movements, and violent conflicts (Adebayo, 2014; Okolie et al., 2019; Orhero, 2019). Similarly, weak governance, corruption, and inadequate service delivery have undermined state legitimacy and weakened citizens' trust in public institutions (Transparency International, 2024; Orhero, 2007). These structural conditions create environments in which insecurity thrives and reinforces cycles of violence, deprivation, and underdevelopment. As Galtung (1969) argues, the absence of direct violence alone does not constitute peace; rather, sustainable peace requires the elimination of structural conditions that generate conflict and insecurity.

From a peace and security studies perspective, contemporary security thinking has increasingly shifted from traditional state security to the broader concept of human security. The human security paradigm emphasizes the protection of individuals and communities from threats to their lives, livelihoods, and dignity rather than

focusing exclusively on territorial defense (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). Within this framework, insecurity is understood not merely as a military or law enforcement challenge but as a multidimensional problem encompassing economic, social, political, and environmental vulnerabilities. This perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where many security threats emerge from unresolved socio-economic grievances and governance deficits.

The limitations of exclusive state-centered security provision have stimulated interest in community-based approaches to security management. Community-based security emphasizes collaboration between citizens, traditional institutions, civil society organizations, and formal security agencies in identifying, preventing, and responding to threats. Such approaches draw upon local knowledge, social networks, and community participation to enhance security outcomes. Their relevance can also be understood through the lens of Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), which posits that crime occurs when a motivated offender encounters a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian. Community security initiatives, including vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, community policing structures, and regional security outfits, can function as “capable guardians” by increasing surveillance, strengthening social control, and improving the flow of local intelligence needed to deter criminal activities.

In Nigeria, several community-based security mechanisms have emerged in response to the perceived inadequacies of formal security institutions. Examples include vigilante groups in various communities, neighborhood watch arrangements, the Civilian Joint Task Force in the North-East, and regional initiatives such as Amotekun in the South-West and Ebube Agu in the South-East. While these initiatives have demonstrated varying degrees of success in crime prevention and intelligence gathering, concerns remain regarding accountability, legality, professionalism, and human rights compliance (Higazi, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2023). These concerns underscore the need for systematic evaluation of community-based security approaches to determine their effectiveness, limitations, and implications for sustainable peacebuilding.

Against this background, this study examines community-based approaches to tackling insecurity in Nigeria. By situating the analysis within the Routine Activity Theory, the study explores how local participation, collective responsibility, and community-driven security initiatives contribute to addressing contemporary security challenges. The study also identifies lessons, best practices, and policy options for strengthening community-based security mechanisms as complementary components of Nigeria’s broader security architecture and peacebuilding efforts.

Research Problem

Nigeria continues to face persistent and complex security challenges, including insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, communal violence, and separatist agitations. Despite substantial investments in conventional security institutions such as the military, police, and intelligence agencies, insecurity remains widespread across many parts of the country. The inability of formal security institutions alone to effectively address these threats has led to the emergence and expansion of various community-based security initiatives, including vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, community policing structures, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Amotekun Corps, Ebube Agu, and other local security arrangements.

Although these community-based approaches have contributed to intelligence gathering, crime prevention, and local security management, they remain controversial. While some studies highlight their effectiveness in complementing formal security institutions, others point to challenges such as inadequate regulation, weak accountability mechanisms, human rights violations, ethnic bias, political manipulation, and conflicts with state security agencies. Furthermore, existing literature has largely focused on describing the existence of these groups rather than critically examining their effectiveness, limitations, and implications for sustainable peace and security governance in Nigeria.

Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of how community-based security approaches contribute to tackling insecurity, the challenges that constrain their effectiveness, and the conditions under which they can be integrated into Nigeria's broader security architecture. This gap necessitates a systematic examination of community-based approaches to security to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and policy implications for sustainable peace and security in Nigeria.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How effective are community-based approaches in tackling insecurity in Nigeria?

Specific Research Questions

- i. What are the major factors responsible for the persistence of insecurity in Nigeria?
- ii. What forms of community-based security initiatives have emerged in response to insecurity in Nigeria?
- iii. To what extent have community-based security approaches contributed to crime prevention, intelligence gathering, and security management in Nigeria?

- iv. What challenges constrain the effectiveness of community-based security initiatives in Nigeria?
- v. How can community-based security approaches be strengthened and integrated into Nigeria's security architecture to promote sustainable peace and security?

Review of Related Literature

Conceptualizing Insecurity in Nigeria

The concept of insecurity has evolved considerably within contemporary peace and security studies. Traditionally, security was viewed from a state-centric perspective that emphasized the protection of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political institutions against external aggression (Buzan, 1991). However, the changing nature of global and domestic conflicts has expanded the meaning of security beyond military concerns to include threats to human welfare, livelihoods, and social stability. This broader understanding is reflected in the human security paradigm introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), which defines security in terms of freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity.

In Nigeria, insecurity manifests in multiple forms, including terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, communal conflicts, farmer-herder clashes, secessionist violence, cybercrime, and political violence. These threats have become increasingly interconnected, creating a complex security environment that challenges conventional security responses. According to Onuoha (2014), insecurity in Nigeria is multidimensional, involving both direct violence and structural conditions that undermine social stability and national development. Similarly, Eke (2020) argues that contemporary security challenges in Nigeria cannot be adequately understood solely through military or law enforcement lenses because many threats emerge from socio-economic grievances, governance failures, and social exclusion.

The Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have significantly transformed Nigeria's security landscape since 2009. Beyond causing thousands of deaths and displacing millions of people, these groups have undermined governance structures, disrupted economic activities, and generated humanitarian crises across the Lake Chad Basin region (Onuoha, 2020). Likewise, the escalation of banditry in the North-West and North-Central regions since 2018 has introduced new dimensions of insecurity characterized by mass abductions, cattle rustling, village attacks, and attacks on transportation infrastructure (International Crisis Group, 2023). These developments illustrate that insecurity in Nigeria extends beyond criminality and encompasses broader challenges of governance, development, and social cohesion.

From a peace studies perspective, insecurity is also linked to the concept of structural violence. Galtung (1969) argues that violence is not limited to physical harm but includes social, political, and economic structures that prevent individuals from achieving their full potential. Persistent poverty, inequality, unemployment, and political exclusion in Nigeria can therefore be understood as forms of structural violence that create conditions conducive to conflict and insecurity. Consequently, understanding insecurity requires an examination of both immediate manifestations of violence and the structural conditions that sustain them.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Insecurity

A substantial body of literature identifies socio-economic deprivation as one of the most significant drivers of insecurity in Nigeria. The relationship between poverty, unemployment, inequality, and violence has been extensively documented within both development and security studies. According to Stewart (2008), economic marginalization often generates grievances that can fuel social unrest, criminality, and violent conflict. In the Nigerian context, widespread poverty and youth unemployment have created conditions under which many individuals become vulnerable to recruitment by insurgent groups, criminal gangs, and other violent actors.

Okolie et al. (2019) argue that poverty contributes to insecurity by creating frustration, hopelessness, and vulnerability among marginalized populations. This argument aligns with Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that perceived disparities between expectations and actual living conditions can generate grievances that motivate violent behavior (Gurr, 1970). Similarly, Onuoha (2014) observes that many recruits into Boko Haram and other violent groups originate from communities characterized by chronic poverty, limited educational opportunities, and weak state presence.

Youth unemployment remains particularly significant in explaining Nigeria's security challenges. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), youth unemployment and underemployment continue to affect millions of Nigerians despite various government intervention programmes. The inability of the economy to absorb a rapidly growing youth population has created a pool of disaffected individuals who may be susceptible to criminal activities, political violence, or extremist recruitment. Momoh (2010) argues that the failure of successive governments to address youth empowerment and social welfare has contributed significantly to social instability and insecurity.

The farmer-herder conflict further illustrates the socio-economic dimensions of insecurity. While often portrayed as ethnic or religious conflicts, scholars such as Benjaminsen and Ba (2019) argue that competition over scarce resources, environmental degradation, climate change, and demographic pressures are central factors driving these conflicts. Thus, insecurity in Nigeria is closely linked to broader development challenges that require comprehensive socio-economic interventions rather than purely military responses.

Governance, Corruption, and Institutional Weaknesses

Governance failures constitute another major explanation for persistent insecurity in Nigeria. Effective governance is essential for maintaining law and order, delivering public services, promoting social justice, and ensuring citizen confidence in public institutions. However, weak institutions, corruption, poor service delivery, and limited state capacity have significantly undermined Nigeria's ability to address security challenges effectively.

Corruption has been identified as a major obstacle to effective security governance. Transparency International (2024) notes that corruption weakens public institutions, reduces accountability, and diverts resources away from critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and security. In the security sector, corruption can undermine operational effectiveness through procurement fraud, inadequate personnel welfare, and misallocation of resources. Such challenges reduce the capacity of security agencies to respond effectively to emerging threats.

Social Contract Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between governance and insecurity. According to Hobbes (1651/1996), citizens surrender certain freedoms to the state in exchange for protection and security. When the state fails to provide security or basic public services, its legitimacy becomes weakened, and citizens may seek alternative sources of protection. In Nigeria, the emergence of vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and community-based security organizations can be interpreted as responses to perceived failures of the state to fulfill its social contract obligations.

Furthermore, weak governance often contributes to declining public trust in formal security institutions. Hills (2008) argues that effective policing depends heavily on public cooperation and legitimacy. Where citizens perceive security agencies as corrupt, abusive, or ineffective, they become less willing to share information or cooperate with law enforcement efforts. This trust deficit has been particularly evident in Nigeria following incidents of police brutality that culminated in the #EndSARS protests of 2020. The protests highlighted longstanding concerns regarding accountability, professionalism, and human rights within the Nigerian policing system.

Community-Based Approaches to Security

Growing dissatisfaction with state-centered security provision has generated increasing interest in community-based approaches to security management. Community-based security emphasizes local participation, collective responsibility, and collaboration between formal and informal actors in preventing and responding to security threats. Such approaches recognize that local communities often possess valuable knowledge, social networks, and cultural mechanisms that can contribute significantly to security governance.

Bruce Baker (2008) argues that community policing and local security initiatives are particularly valuable in contexts where formal security institutions suffer from resource constraints and limited local legitimacy. In many African countries, including Nigeria, informal security actors frequently provide security services in areas where state presence is weak or absent. These actors often possess superior local intelligence and greater familiarity with community dynamics than formal security agencies.

Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding community-based security. The theory suggests that crime occurs when a motivated offender encounters a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian. Community policing, neighborhood watch groups, vigilante organizations, and local surveillance networks can therefore function as capable guardians by increasing monitoring, deterring criminal activities, and facilitating rapid responses to emerging threats.

In Nigeria, community-based security initiatives take various forms, including vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Amotekun Corps, Ebube Agu, Hisbah Corps, and local hunter associations. The Civilian Joint Task Force, for example, has played a significant role in intelligence gathering and counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2017). Similarly, Amotekun was established in the South-West to address rising incidents of kidnapping, armed robbery, and violent crime.

The literature suggests that community-based security initiatives have made important contributions to crime prevention and security management in Nigeria. One of their major strengths lies in intelligence gathering. Because community members possess intimate knowledge of local environments, social networks, and movement patterns, they are often able to identify suspicious activities more quickly than formal security agencies (Baker, 2008).

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) provides a notable example of successful community participation in security management. The group played a significant role in supporting counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram by identifying insurgent hideouts, gathering intelligence, and assisting security forces in distinguishing insurgents from civilians (International Crisis Group, 2017). Similarly, neighborhood watch associations and local vigilante groups have contributed to reductions in theft, armed robbery, and kidnapping in several communities through regular surveillance and community patrols.

The establishment of Amotekun in South-West Nigeria has also been associated with improved responses to kidnapping and rural banditry. By maintaining a visible security presence and working closely with local communities, the outfit has enhanced public confidence and strengthened local security governance in many areas (Akinwale, 2021).

Furthermore, community-based security initiatives contribute to strengthening social cohesion and informal social control. Their activities often encourage collective responsibility for security and promote trust between citizens and security providers. These contributions align with Routine Activity Theory, which suggests that increased guardianship reduces opportunities for crime by increasing the likelihood of detection and intervention (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies significantly across regions and depends on factors such as community support, training, legal recognition, funding, and cooperation with formal security institutions.

Despite their contributions, community-based security initiatives face numerous challenges that constrain their effectiveness. One of the most significant challenges is the absence of clear legal and regulatory frameworks. Many vigilante groups operate without comprehensive legal recognition, resulting in ambiguities regarding their powers, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms (Hills, 2014).

Human rights concerns also constitute a major challenge. Several studies have documented cases of arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings by some community security groups. Such actions undermine the rule of law and can create new sources of insecurity and community grievances (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Another challenge is inadequate training and professional capacity. Many community security actors lack formal training in intelligence gathering, conflict management, human rights standards, and legal procedures. This limitation affects operational effectiveness and increases the likelihood of misconduct. Funding constraints further limit their ability to acquire equipment, maintain operations, and sustain long-term security activities.

Political interference and elite manipulation represent additional obstacles. In some cases, local politicians have used vigilante groups for electoral purposes, ethnic mobilization, or political intimidation. Such practices compromise the neutrality of community security initiatives and may contribute to social tensions and conflict (Asuni, 1999).

Poor coordination between community groups and formal security institutions also reduces effectiveness. The absence of institutionalized communication channels often results in duplication of efforts, mistrust, and operational conflicts between community-based actors and state security agencies. Consequently, scholars advocate stronger regulatory frameworks, improved training, effective oversight mechanisms, and enhanced collaboration between formal and informal security providers.

However, while community-based approaches offer important benefits, they also present significant challenges. Asuni (1999) notes that vigilante groups often emerge in response to state failure but can themselves become sources of insecurity if not properly regulated. Numerous studies have documented cases involving extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, and abuse of authority by vigilante organizations. The activities of groups such as Yan Sakai in the North-West, some factions of the Hisbah Corps in northern Nigeria, and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in the South-East illustrate the potential dangers associated with poorly regulated community security initiatives (International Crisis Group, 2023).

A major limitation of much of the earlier literature is its tendency to portray community-based security primarily as a positive alternative to state failure while paying insufficient attention to issues of accountability, political manipulation, and human rights. Hills (2014) argues that informal security actors frequently operate within ambiguous legal frameworks, creating challenges for democratic governance and the rule of law. Political elites may also exploit such groups for electoral purposes, ethnic mobilization, or personal interests, thereby undermining their effectiveness and legitimacy.

Recent scholarship increasingly adopts the concept of Hybrid Security Governance to explain the interaction between state and non-state security actors. Hybrid governance recognizes that security provision in fragile and developing states often involves complex networks of formal institutions, traditional authorities, community organizations, and informal security actors (Boege et al., 2009). Rather than viewing community-based security and state security as mutually exclusive, this perspective emphasizes collaboration, coordination, and institutional integration.

Furthermore, Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding framework highlights the importance of engaging actors at multiple societal levels in addressing conflict and insecurity. According to Lederach, sustainable peace requires participation from top-level political leaders, middle-range actors, and grassroots communities. Community-based security initiatives, therefore, contribute not only to crime prevention but also to broader peacebuilding efforts through dialogue, trust-building, conflict resolution, and social cohesion.

Overall, the literature suggests that community-based security approaches can significantly enhance security outcomes when properly regulated, adequately trained, and effectively integrated into formal security structures. However, their success depends on strong accountability mechanisms, respect for human rights, clear legal frameworks, and sustained collaboration with state institutions.

Lessons for Nigeria

The literature demonstrates that insecurity in Nigeria is a multidimensional phenomenon driven by interconnected socio-economic, political, governance, and security factors. Poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, institutional weaknesses, and declining public trust collectively create conditions that facilitate violence and criminality. Consequently, sustainable solutions require integrated approaches that address both immediate security threats and their underlying structural causes.

A major lesson emerging from the literature is the importance of moving beyond traditional state-centric security frameworks toward human-centered approaches that prioritize social justice, economic inclusion, and community participation. The human security paradigm emphasizes that security is not merely the absence of violence but also the presence of conditions that promote human well-being and dignity.

The literature also underscores the necessity of strengthening state legitimacy through improved governance, transparency, and accountability. Social Contract Theory suggests that when governments effectively provide security and public services, citizens are more likely to cooperate with formal institutions and reject alternative sources of authority.

Finally, community-based security approaches emerge as valuable complements to formal security systems. Nevertheless, the literature reveals that their effectiveness depends on regulation, training, legal oversight, and integration within broader security governance frameworks. Future policy interventions should therefore focus on developing hybrid security arrangements that combine the strengths of state institutions and community actors while ensuring adherence to democratic principles and human rights standards.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) developed by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979). The theory emerged as a response to traditional criminological explanations that focused primarily on the motivations and characteristics of offenders. Instead, Routine Activity Theory argues that crime is largely shaped by opportunities created by everyday social and environmental conditions. According to the theory, crime occurs when three essential elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence

of a capable guardian. The theory, therefore, shifts attention from why individuals commit crimes to the circumstances that make criminal acts possible.

Routine Activity Theory has become one of the most influential frameworks in crime prevention and community security studies because it emphasizes situational factors that can either facilitate or inhibit criminal activities. The theory is particularly relevant in societies experiencing weak state capacity, inadequate policing, and growing insecurity, where the effectiveness of guardianship becomes a critical determinant of security outcomes.

Core Tenets of Routine Activity Theory

The first component of the theory is the motivated offender. Cohen and Felson (1979) assume that individuals with criminal intentions are constantly present within society. The theory does not primarily explain the origins of criminal motivation but acknowledges that social and economic conditions may increase the likelihood of criminal behavior. In the Nigerian context, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, inequality, and limited economic opportunities have been widely identified as factors that contribute to criminality, insurgency, kidnapping, banditry, and other forms of insecurity (Okolie et al., 2019; Onuoha, 2014; Orhero, 2019). These conditions create a pool of potential offenders who may resort to violence or crime as a means of survival, economic gain, or expression of grievance.

The second element is the suitable target. Crime is more likely to occur when attractive and vulnerable targets are available. Such targets may include individuals, communities, infrastructure, businesses, or valuable resources that lack adequate protection. In Nigeria, poorly secured rural communities, isolated highways, schools, markets, and agricultural settlements have frequently become targets of kidnappers, bandits, insurgents, and other criminal groups. The vulnerability of these targets often increases where security infrastructure is weak and rapid response mechanisms are absent.

The third and most important component for this study is the capable guardian. A capable guardian refers to any person, institution, or mechanism capable of deterring criminal activity through surveillance, supervision, intervention, or protection. Guardians may be formal actors such as the police, military, and intelligence agencies, or informal actors such as traditional rulers, vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, community policing committees, youth groups, and residents. The theory argues that when effective guardianship is absent, opportunities for crime increase significantly because offenders perceive a lower risk of detection and punishment.

The theory further emphasizes that crime results from the convergence of these three elements within a specific social and physical environment. Consequently, changes in social organization, population movement, urbanization, technological development, and community structures can influence crime rates by altering the relationship between offenders, targets, and guardians. Security interventions,

therefore, should focus not only on apprehending offenders but also on reducing target vulnerability and strengthening guardianship structures.

Application of Routine Activity Theory to Community-Based Security in Nigeria

Routine Activity Theory is particularly useful for understanding the emergence and growing significance of community-based security approaches in Nigeria. The persistent insecurity experienced across many parts of the country has often been attributed to limitations in formal security institutions, including inadequate personnel, poor logistics, insufficient intelligence gathering, corruption, and limited geographical coverage. These challenges have created significant guardianship gaps that criminal groups exploit.

The theory's concept of the capable guardian provides a direct theoretical justification for community-based security initiatives. Community policing structures, neighborhood watch associations, vigilante groups, traditional conflict management systems, local hunter groups, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Amotekun Corps, and other community security arrangements function as informal guardians by increasing surveillance, monitoring suspicious activities, gathering intelligence, and responding rapidly to threats. Their presence raises the risks associated with criminal behavior and reduces opportunities for offenders.

This relationship is particularly important because community members often possess local knowledge that formal security agencies may lack. They understand local terrain, social networks, movement patterns, and emerging threats within their communities. Consequently, they are better positioned to detect early warning signs of criminal activity and provide actionable intelligence. In Routine Activity Theory terms, community-based security initiatives strengthen guardianship and disrupt the convergence of the three conditions necessary for crime to occur.

Furthermore, community participation promotes informal social control, collective responsibility, and social cohesion. These factors increase community vigilance and make it more difficult for offenders to operate undetected. The establishment of neighborhood watch groups, community policing forums, and local security committees can therefore be viewed as practical mechanisms for enhancing guardianship at the grassroots level.

From a peacebuilding perspective, the theory also complements broader human security approaches by recognizing that security is not exclusively the responsibility of the state. Rather, effective security governance requires collaboration between formal institutions and local communities. This aligns with contemporary notions of hybrid security governance, which emphasize partnerships among state actors, traditional institutions, civil society organizations, and community groups in addressing security challenges.

Critique of Routine Activity Theory

Despite its relevance, Routine Activity Theory has certain limitations. One major criticism is that it focuses primarily on situational opportunities for crime while paying less attention to the structural causes of criminal behavior, such as poverty, inequality, political exclusion, corruption, and governance failures. In the Nigerian context, these underlying conditions play a significant role in generating insecurity and cannot be adequately explained through opportunity structures alone.

The theory also assumes the existence of motivated offenders without sufficiently explaining the social, political, and economic processes that produce criminal motivations. For this reason, scholars often complement Routine Activity Theory with broader perspectives such as Human Security Theory, Social Contract Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Hybrid Governance frameworks when analyzing complex security challenges in developing societies.

Nevertheless, Routine Activity Theory remains highly relevant to this study because it provides a clear explanation of how community-based security mechanisms contribute to crime prevention. By emphasizing the role of capable guardianship, the theory offers a strong analytical foundation for examining how local participation, community vigilance, and grassroots security initiatives can complement formal security institutions in addressing insecurity in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine community-based approaches to tackling insecurity in Nigeria. Documentary research involves the systematic collection, review, and interpretation of existing documents and published materials to generate knowledge about a social phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). The design is particularly appropriate for this study because it enables an in-depth examination of the evolution of insecurity in Nigeria and the various community-based responses that have emerged across different regions of the country.

Unlike conventional historical research, which relies extensively on primary archival records, oral histories, and historical documents, this study primarily utilizes contemporary documentary evidence drawn from academic, policy, and institutional sources. The approach allows for the exploration of insecurity as a dynamic socio-political phenomenon while facilitating the assessment of community-based security initiatives within broader governance and peacebuilding frameworks.

The study focuses on major security developments in Nigeria from the return to democratic governance in 1999 to 2025. This period is particularly significant because it witnessed the emergence and expansion of major security threats, including Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, kidnapping,

communal violence, and separatist agitations. It also coincides with the increasing prominence of community-based security initiatives such as vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Amotekun Corps, Ebube Agu, and other local security arrangements.

Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data. Data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government publications, policy documents, reports of international organizations, security assessment reports, newspaper archives, and publications from research institutes and civil society organizations. Particular attention was given to materials published by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank, International Crisis Group, Transparency International, Institute for Economics and Peace, and relevant Nigerian government agencies.

To ensure credibility and relevance, sources were selected based on the following criteria:

- i. Relevance to insecurity, community-based security, peacebuilding, and governance in Nigeria;
- ii. Scholarly rigor and publication in reputable academic journals or recognized institutions;
- iii. Recency, particularly studies published between 2015 and 2025 to capture contemporary security developments;
- iv. Empirical or policy significance in explaining security challenges and community responses.

The use of diverse sources was intended to reduce overreliance on a limited body of literature and to facilitate triangulation of perspectives from academic, governmental, and policy-oriented publications.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, a qualitative analytical technique that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns and themes within textual materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded through several stages.

First, relevant documents were systematically reviewed and categorized according to their focus areas. Second, recurring concepts and issues relating to insecurity and community-based security were identified and coded. Third, the coded data were organized into major thematic categories. The principal themes that emerged from the analysis included:

- i. Conceptualization and dimensions of insecurity;
- ii. Socio-economic drivers of insecurity;
- iii. Governance, corruption, and institutional weaknesses;
- iv. Community-based security mechanisms;
- v. Human security and peacebuilding approaches;
- vi. Challenges and limitations of community-based security initiatives;
- vii. Policy implications for sustainable security governance.

The thematic approach enabled the study to identify areas of convergence and divergence within the literature while facilitating a critical assessment of the effectiveness and limitations of community-based approaches to insecurity in Nigeria.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To enhance the credibility of the study, data triangulation was employed through the use of multiple categories of sources, including academic publications, policy reports, and institutional documents. Cross-referencing information from diverse sources helped to minimize bias and improve the reliability of interpretations.

Furthermore, the study adopted a critical review approach rather than merely summarizing existing literature. Contrasting perspectives on community-based security, including debates regarding effectiveness, accountability, human rights concerns, and state legitimacy, were examined to ensure analytical balance.

Ethical Considerations

Because the study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, it did not involve direct interaction with human participants and therefore did not require formal ethical approval. Nevertheless, ethical research standards were maintained through accurate citation of sources, avoidance of plagiarism, and faithful representation of authors' arguments and findings.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which restricts access to firsthand experiences of community members, security personnel, and victims of insecurity. Consequently, the findings are dependent on the quality, availability, and perspectives contained in existing literature and documentary sources.

Additionally, because community-based security initiatives vary significantly across Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural and geographical contexts, some local experiences may not be fully captured in the available literature. Future studies may address this limitation through field-based research involving interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory methods that provide deeper insights into community experiences and perceptions of security.

Justification for the Methodology

Despite these limitations, the documentary research design remains appropriate for the study because it provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of insecurity and community-based security responses in Nigeria. The approach enables the integration of insights from peace studies, security studies, governance research, and development literature, thereby facilitating a multidimensional understanding of the subject matter.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined community-based approaches to tackling insecurity in Nigeria against the backdrop of the country's evolving security landscape, characterized by insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, communal violence, and separatist agitations. The findings reveal that insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a law enforcement challenge but a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in complex socio-economic, political, and governance-related factors. Persistent poverty, youth unemployment, social exclusion, weak governance structures, corruption, and inadequate public service delivery have collectively created conditions that facilitate criminality and violent conflict. These structural conditions have weakened state legitimacy, reduced public trust in government institutions, and increased the vulnerability of many communities to insecurity.

The study found that the nature of insecurity in Nigeria has evolved significantly over the past two decades. While the Boko Haram insurgency dominated national security discourse in the early 2010s, recent years have witnessed the emergence and expansion of banditry in the North-West, farmer-herder conflicts in the North-Central region, separatist violence in the South-East, and widespread kidnapping across the country. These developments demonstrate that insecurity in Nigeria has become increasingly decentralized, localized, and adaptive, making it difficult for conventional state security institutions to respond effectively through centralized strategies alone.

A major finding of the study is that state-centered security approaches, although indispensable, have proven insufficient in addressing the scale and complexity of contemporary security challenges. The Nigerian Police Force, military, and other security agencies continue to face challenges related to inadequate personnel, poor logistics, insufficient intelligence capabilities, limited technological capacity, and declining public confidence. In many rural and semi-urban communities, the limited presence of formal security institutions has created security vacuums that criminal groups exploit. Consequently, many communities have increasingly resorted to self-help security arrangements to fill these gaps.

The study further established that community-based security initiatives have emerged as important complementary mechanisms for addressing insecurity. Across different regions of Nigeria, various forms of community security arrangements have developed, including vigilante groups, neighborhood watch

associations, traditional conflict management institutions, local hunter groups, community policing committees, and regional security networks. These initiatives perform critical functions such as intelligence gathering, surveillance, conflict mediation, early warning reporting, and support for formal security operations.

Evidence from existing studies suggests that some community-based security initiatives have recorded notable successes. For example, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in northeastern Nigeria contributed significantly to intelligence gathering and counterinsurgency efforts against Boko Haram by leveraging local knowledge and community networks. Similarly, the establishment of the Amotekun Corps in South-West Nigeria was largely motivated by the need to address rising incidents of kidnapping, armed robbery, and violent crime. Reports indicate that Amotekun has enhanced local security surveillance and improved collaboration between communities and formal security agencies in several states. Likewise, community policing initiatives implemented in states such as Lagos and Ekiti have demonstrated the value of citizen participation in crime prevention, intelligence sharing, and conflict resolution.

The study also found that the relevance of community-based security can be explained through the lens of Routine Activity Theory. Community members, neighborhood watch groups, vigilante organizations, and local security networks function as "capable guardians" by increasing surveillance and reducing opportunities for criminal activity. Their proximity to local communities enables them to identify suspicious activities more quickly than formal security agencies and to provide context-specific intelligence that enhances crime prevention efforts. Consequently, community participation strengthens informal social control and contributes to improved security outcomes.

Despite these contributions, the findings reveal that community-based security approaches are not without significant challenges. One of the most critical concerns identified in the literature is the issue of accountability and human rights compliance. In several instances, vigilante groups and informal security actors have been accused of engaging in arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of abuse. Such practices undermine the rule of law and may generate new forms of insecurity rather than resolving existing ones. The study therefore finds that while community-based security arrangements can enhance security provision, they can also become sources of insecurity when they operate outside established legal and institutional frameworks.

The study further reveals that some community-based security groups have become vulnerable to politicization and elite manipulation. Political actors have occasionally utilized local security groups for electoral purposes, ethnic mobilization, and political intimidation. This challenge is particularly significant because it compromises the neutrality of such organizations and increases the risk of inter-group tensions and communal conflicts. In some regions, local security organizations have gradually evolved into ethnic militias or have been perceived as

representing specific sectional interests, thereby weakening their legitimacy and effectiveness.

Another important finding is the absence of a comprehensive regulatory and coordination framework governing many community-based security initiatives. Weak collaboration between formal security institutions and community-based actors often results in duplication of efforts, operational conflicts, and intelligence-sharing challenges. The lack of standardized training, professional oversight, and operational guidelines further limits the effectiveness of many local security groups. Consequently, while community-based initiatives possess significant potential, their impact is frequently constrained by institutional weaknesses.

The study also highlights important policy developments that have shaped contemporary community security governance in Nigeria. Notable among these is the Nigeria Police Force Community Policing Initiative launched in 2019, which sought to institutionalize collaboration between communities and law enforcement agencies. The initiative reflects growing recognition that effective security governance requires active citizen participation and local ownership. Similarly, the emergence of regional security networks such as Amotekun in the South-West and Ebube Agu in the South-East demonstrates the increasing importance of subnational responses to insecurity. However, debates continue regarding their constitutional status, operational mandates, accountability mechanisms, and relationship with federal security institutions.

Furthermore, the study finds that legal and regulatory issues remain central to the effectiveness of community-based security arrangements. Existing security laws, including the Police Act 2020 and other relevant legal frameworks, provide opportunities for community participation in security governance but also raise important questions concerning oversight, accountability, and the lawful use of force. The absence of clear and harmonized regulatory frameworks for many community security initiatives creates uncertainty regarding their powers, responsibilities, and relationship with state institutions.

Overall, the study concludes that community-based security approaches represent an important component of Nigeria's broader security architecture. However, their effectiveness depends largely on proper regulation, professional training, legal oversight, respect for human rights, and effective coordination with formal security institutions. The findings suggest that sustainable security in Nigeria cannot be achieved through state-centered approaches alone. Rather, an integrated security governance framework that combines formal security institutions with accountable, well-regulated, and community-driven security mechanisms offers a more realistic and sustainable pathway toward addressing the country's complex and evolving security challenges.

The study therefore establishes that the future of security governance in Nigeria lies not in the replacement of state security institutions by community actors, but in the development of collaborative and hybrid security arrangements that harness the strengths of both formal and informal mechanisms while maintaining democratic accountability, legality, and respect for human rights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined community-based approaches to tackling insecurity in Nigeria within the broader context of the country's socio-economic, political, and institutional realities. The study established that insecurity in Nigeria is a multidimensional phenomenon driven by the interaction of structural, governance, and security-related factors. Persistent poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, corruption, weak state institutions, and declining public trust have collectively contributed to the proliferation of insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, farmer-herder conflicts, and other forms of organized criminality across different regions of the country.

The findings demonstrate that contemporary security challenges in Nigeria cannot be adequately addressed through conventional state-centered security mechanisms alone. Despite the central role of the military, police, and other security agencies, institutional constraints such as inadequate manpower, poor logistics, intelligence deficiencies, corruption, and limited community trust have weakened their capacity to provide effective security. Consequently, communities have increasingly resorted to self-help security arrangements to compensate for the shortcomings of formal security institutions.

The study further revealed that community-based security initiatives—including vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, traditional security institutions, community policing structures, and regional security networks—have become important actors in Nigeria's evolving security architecture. Their effectiveness derives largely from their proximity to local communities, superior knowledge of local environments, and ability to facilitate intelligence gathering and early warning mechanisms. In this regard, the findings support the central proposition of Routine Activity Theory that effective guardianship can reduce opportunities for criminal activities and enhance community safety.

However, the study also demonstrates that community-based security approaches are not inherently beneficial. In several instances, the absence of clear legal frameworks, professional oversight, and accountability mechanisms has resulted in human rights abuses, arbitrary enforcement practices, ethnic profiling, and political manipulation. Some vigilante organizations have themselves become sources of insecurity, contributing to cycles of violence, revenge attacks, and social fragmentation. These findings suggest that community-based security should not be romanticized as a universal solution to insecurity but should instead be understood as a complex and sometimes contradictory component of security governance.

The study therefore concludes that sustainable security in Nigeria requires a shift from exclusive state-centered security provision toward a framework of hybrid security governance in which formal institutions, local communities, traditional authorities, and civil society actors collaborate within clearly defined legal and institutional arrangements. Such a framework must be grounded in democratic accountability, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. More importantly, addressing insecurity requires not only improved security responses but also broader reforms aimed at tackling the structural drivers of violence, including poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and governance failures.

Nevertheless, achieving such reforms is unlikely to be straightforward. Political resistance, vested elite interests, institutional inertia, and competition over security resources may limit the implementation of meaningful reforms. Consequently, sustainable security transformation in Nigeria requires not only technical solutions but also strong political commitment, institutional reforms, and active citizen participation. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. The Federal Government should undertake comprehensive Security Sector Reform aimed at improving the professionalism, accountability, transparency, and operational effectiveness of security institutions. Such reforms should focus on personnel welfare, intelligence capabilities, technological modernization, human rights compliance, and public accountability mechanisms. Strengthening state security institutions remains essential because community-based initiatives cannot effectively substitute for functional national security structures.
- ii. A comprehensive national regulatory framework should be developed to govern community-based security initiatives across the country. The framework should clearly define the powers, responsibilities, operational boundaries, oversight mechanisms, and accountability standards of vigilante groups, neighborhood watch organizations, and regional security networks. This would reduce ambiguity, prevent abuse, and facilitate effective collaboration with formal security institutions.
- iii. The Nigeria Police Force should deepen and strengthen the Community Policing Initiative introduced in 2019 by creating sustainable mechanisms for citizen participation in security governance. Community safety committees, traditional rulers, youth organizations, women's groups, religious leaders, and civil society organizations should be formally integrated into local security planning and intelligence-sharing processes.
- iv. Independent oversight bodies should be established at federal and state levels to monitor the activities of community-based security groups. These bodies should investigate allegations of misconduct, enforce disciplinary measures, and ensure compliance with constitutional provisions and international human rights standards. Human rights education and conflict-sensitive training should be mandatory for all community security personnel.

- v. In areas where vigilante organizations have become heavily armed or militarized, government authorities should implement carefully designed Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programmes. Such initiatives should aim to prevent the transformation of community security groups into autonomous armed actors capable of threatening state authority or community stability.
- vi. In communities affected by violence involving vigilante groups, insurgents, bandits, or communal militias, government and civil society organizations should support transitional justice initiatives, community dialogue platforms, and reconciliation programmes. Addressing past grievances and human rights violations is essential for preventing cycles of revenge and fostering long-term peace.
- vii. Security interventions should be complemented by targeted socio-economic programmes designed to reduce poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. Investments in education, vocational training, youth employment, agricultural development, and rural infrastructure should be prioritized in conflict-prone areas. Sustainable security cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying socio-economic conditions that facilitate criminal recruitment and violence.
- viii. The study recommends a broader national dialogue on federalism and security governance. Given the localized nature of many security threats, greater decentralization of certain security functions may enhance responsiveness and effectiveness. However, such reforms must be accompanied by strong safeguards against political abuse, ethnic exclusion, and elite capture.
- ix. Government agencies should develop measurable indicators for assessing the performance of community-based security initiatives. Monitoring frameworks should include indicators relating to crime reduction, community trust, human rights compliance, intelligence effectiveness, and conflict prevention outcomes. Regular assessments would provide evidence-based guidance for policy adjustments and resource allocation.
- x. Finally, security reform requires strong political will at all levels of government. Without genuine commitment from political leaders, many of the proposed reforms may remain symbolic. Therefore, sustained advocacy by civil society organizations, academic institutions, traditional authorities, and development partners is necessary to ensure that security reforms move beyond rhetoric and translate into meaningful institutional change.

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