

AN EXPLORATION OF THE UNDP'S ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF KONTAGORA IN NIGER STATE (2020-2025)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57233/zjpd.v6i2.23>

Abstract

This study examines the role of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the management of humanitarian crises in Nigeria, with specific focus on Kontagora in Niger State. Nigeria has faced persistent humanitarian challenges arising from insecurity, natural disasters, poverty, and forced displacement, which have strained local governance structures and community resilience. As an international development agency, UNDP has played a significant role in complementing government and non-governmental efforts through interventions in crisis response, capacity building, and sustainable recovery initiatives. Using a qualitative approach, the research critically appraises UNDP's strategies, programmes, and partnerships in addressing the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations in Kontagora. It explores the extent to which UNDP interventions have enhanced livelihood restoration, peacebuilding, and socio-economic recovery in affected communities. The study also highlights the limitations encountered, including funding gaps, security constraints, and weak institutional collaboration. The research finds among other things that some UNDP-supported interventions helped affected households restore livelihoods, develop income-generating activities, acquire vocational skills, or improve their capacity to cope with the effects of insecurity. The study may establish that interventions involving traditional leaders, community organizations, local government institutions, youth, women, and other community stakeholders were more likely to be accepted and sustained. The study may identify inadequate coordination between UNDP, government agencies, NGOs, community organizations, and other development partners as a factor limiting the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian interventions. The research also recommends that UNDP should strengthen and expand interventions in highly affected communities within Kontagora, particularly programmes addressing livelihood recovery, food security, skills development, community stabilization, and resilience building. UNDP and its partners should adopt an integrated approach that connects immediate humanitarian assistance with long-term development and peacebuilding. This would reduce dependence on emergency assistance and help affected communities become more self-reliant.

Keywords: UNDP, Humanitarian crisis, sustainable development, Insurgency

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has experienced numerous humanitarian situations over the past few decades, including internal conflicts, natural disasters, relocation, and insecurity

stemming from terrorism. Kontagora in Niger State is one of the hardest-hit areas. It has been under a lot of humanitarian stress because of disputes between farmers and herders, banditry, and climate-related calamities like flooding and drought. These issues have led to a lot of people losing their homes, jobs, and safety

(Adewuyi, 2022). Humanitarian crises have turned into a worldwide problem, with poor countries suffering the most from their social, economic, and political effects.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is a leading international development organization that plays a key role in dealing with humanitarian situations by promoting recovery, resilience-building, and sustainable development. The UNDP has been working on more and more post-crisis recovery projects in Nigeria, such as helping internally displaced people (IDPs) find jobs, fixing up infrastructure, resolving conflicts, and helping communities reintegrate (UNDP Nigeria, 2023). These actions aim to make people safer, encourage peacebuilding, and make places like Niger North, notably Kontagora, less vulnerable. The ongoing humanitarian problems in the region, however, raise doubts about the effectiveness, scope, and long-term viability of UNDP's initiatives. A comprehensive assessment of the UNDP's role in managing humanitarian crises in Nigeria is essential to understand its contributions, pinpoint challenges, and propose strategic improvements. The objective of this study is to evaluate the extent to which the UNDP's efforts in Kontagora have facilitated local development and mitigated humanitarian challenges. To evaluate the effectiveness of multilateral humanitarian governance, it will also examine the coordination mechanisms among UNDP, affected communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local government entities.

The study is motivated by the scarcity of academic research examining the localized impacts of UNDP's humanitarian operations in northern Nigeria. Numerous studies underscore the UNDP's development obligations at both national and international levels; nevertheless, there

is limited knowledge regarding its crisis management strategies at the local level in conflict-affected regions, such as Niger North (Ibrahim & Musa, 2020). This study aims to address the existing gap by providing empirical insights that can enhance policy recommendations and establish effective frameworks for improved humanitarian responses. The Niger North Zone, encompassing several local government districts, particularly Kontagora in Niger State, has historically suffered from insufficient social infrastructure, poor governance, and restricted access to essential services. These conditions have made the effects of humanitarian crises worse, making local communities more likely to experience poverty, starvation, disease epidemics, and social disintegration. In this case, the UNDP's role is very important, not just for providing immediate help but also for creating peace and long-term development. So, looking at how it affects this sector is important for national and regional humanitarian planning. One of the UNDP's key strategies for dealing with humanitarian crises is to include development-oriented responses in emergency interventions. This includes vocational training for young people, programs to empower women, help for local government institutions, and rebuilding community infrastructure. The purpose of this plan is to make communities stronger and less dependent on help. To ascertain the alignment of these strategies with the unique sociopolitical dynamics of the region, a critical assessment of their implementation in Kontagora is essential.

Moreover, the extent of community ownership and engagement is essential for the efficacy of any humanitarian response. Top-down interventions often fail to achieve their desired outcomes due to the lack of consultation with local stakeholders. Consequently, a more

comprehensive examination of the UNDP's engagements with local Kontagora stakeholders—including traditional leaders, community-based organizations, and local authorities—is essential. Understanding the nature and effectiveness of these relationships would make it simpler to find chances and gaps for better humanitarian governance.

This study came at a time when the international development community is pressing for more and more local actors to take the lead in responding to crises. The findings of this study may enhance broader conversations regarding the adaptation of global institutions, such as the United Nations Development Program, to more effectively support local entities. Ultimately, by focusing on Kontagora, the paper aims to boost academic comprehension and effective policy making that can improve humanitarian outcomes in Nigeria and similar contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories elucidate the mechanisms and effectiveness of humanitarian efforts. This inquiry is grounded in systems theory as propounded by scholars such as David Easton, Telcott Persons, Jay Forrester and Kenneth Boulding. Systems theory helps us understand that managing humanitarian crises is a complex and collaborative process. The theory posits that the efficacy of crisis response is contingent upon the interactions and communication among various components of a system, encompassing local communities, civil society, international organizations such as the UNDP, and governmental institutions.

It asserts that coordinated, inclusive and feedback-responsive humanitarian responses are the most effective. In places like Niger North Zone C, where systemic problems like poor governance, bad infrastructure, and social fragmentation

make it hard for the UNDP to manage humanitarian crises, this helps explain why the UNDP has trouble doing so. This paradigm enables the study to assess the systemic factors that affect the success or failure of UNDP's interventions, alongside the agency's participation. For humanitarian action to be effective in times of disaster, different groups of people; government agencies, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and community members must work together in a wider system (Bertalanffy, 1968).

The participatory development theory is another important part of this research. It asserts that when local communities are actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of development programs, they become more effective and enduring. This approach advocates for the participation of grassroots organizations, local leaders, and displaced individuals in decision-making processes concerning humanitarian operations (Chambers, 1997).

Literature Review

The role of international organizations in managing humanitarian crises in Nigeria and similar contexts has been extensively examined via many empirical studies. Ibrahim and Musa (2020) conducted a study on UNDP's operations in northeastern Nigeria, revealing that while the organization significantly contributed to infrastructure rehabilitation and peacebuilding, its efforts were often hindered by insufficient local coordination and financial constraints. Additionally, Okafor and Chukwuemeka (2021) found that insecurity, bureaucratic obstacles, and community distrust diminished the effectiveness of relief initiatives in the Middle Belt. In another study, Adewuyi (2022) criticized short-term aid as insufficient for long-term recovery and emphasized the importance of resilience-based interventions. However, few of these

studies have specifically focused on Niger North Zone, even though they have been helpful in understanding broader national trends. This understudied area presents unique opportunities and problems that require independent investigation. Moreover, a more context-specific analysis is required to comprehensively comprehend the dynamic linkages among UNDP programs, local government engagement, and community participation.

A humanitarian crisis is an emergency occurrence or series of events that puts the health, safety, security, or well-being of a large group of people or a community in serious danger. Natural catastrophes, armed conflicts, disease outbreaks, or a mix of these can lead to humanitarian emergencies (UNHCR, 2022). Humanitarian intervention includes activities that aim to reduce human suffering and restore normalcy during and after a crisis. Crises in many parts of Nigeria, mostly caused by internal conflicts, terrorism, and environmental issues, have led to widespread displacement, poverty, and insecurity. Emergency aid, food and housing provision, infrastructure reconstruction, psychosocial support, and recovery capacity building are all part of these (Odeh & Anwar, 2021). So, to save lives, restore jobs, and build resilience, humanitarian management means planning, coordinating, and carrying out strategic responses to these kinds of crises.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is one of the most important groups that help with international development and humanitarian response. In countries like Nigeria that are in crisis, the UNDP does things like fight poverty, improve governance, construct infrastructure, promote peace, and strengthen institutions (UNDP Nigeria, 2023). The conceptual framework for this study underscores long-term recovery and sustainable peace in post-crisis communities,

positioning UNDP's role as developmental rather than solely relief-focused.

This approach is based on three main ideas: crisis management, development aid, and community resilience. Crisis management includes both the long-term rebuilding process and the fast response to emergencies. Development aid is when international organizations help poor countries improve their institutions and living situations. Community resilience is the ability of affected populations to absorb shocks and recover from hardship (Adewuyi, 2022).

The Idea of Development

In the Nigerian context, development has been a significant focus in academic study, policy debates, and international development efforts. This literature study examines scholarly perspectives on Nigeria's development process, focusing on its conceptualization, challenges, and the responsibilities of various stakeholders. Taking into account Nigerian development in its broadest sense, development is improving living standards, lowering poverty, and encouraging social welfare and economic prosperity (Todaro & Smith, 2015). People have often looked at Nigeria's rise through the glasses of economic expansion, industrialization, and modernization (Ake, 2000). Scholars assert that an exclusive focus on GDP growth neglects critical issues such as governance, inequality, and human development (Obadan, 2001). The Human Development Index (HDI), introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has increasingly influenced Nigerian development policies, emphasizing income, education, and health as vital indicators of development (UNDP, 2019). This multidimensional technique has revealed Nigeria's persistent developmental shortcomings despite its wealth of natural resources, particularly oil.

After gaining independence, Nigeria tried a variety of different ways to grow, including structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s, import substitution industrialization (ISI) in the 1960s and 1970s, and more recent initiatives to cut down on poverty (Sala-I-Martin et al., 2007). The oil boom of the 1970s caused economic growth at first, but it later led to economic instability and dependence (Watts, 2004). The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) put the SAPs into place to open up the economy, but they were criticized for making poverty and inequality worse (Lewis, 1996). Nigeria's more recent development frameworks stress sustainable development goals (SDGs) that are in line with worldwide agendas (Adewuyi, 2016).

Challenges of Development

According to several scholars, Nigeria's growth is slowed down by issues with governance, corruption, ethnic divide, and not enough infrastructures (Joseph, 1991; Olowu, 2003). Corruption has especially hurt public trust and drawn money away from important areas like health and education (Transparency International, 2020). Regional and ethnic disparities intensify disputes and inequitable resource allocation, hence hindering equitable development (Suberu, 2001). Moreover, social services and employment opportunities are strained due to rapid urbanization and population growth (Adeniran & Akinola, 2017). Development initiatives have been impeded by environmental challenges, notably the devastation caused by oil extraction in the Niger Delta, leading to ecological and socioeconomic crises (Watts, 2008).

The Role of Institutions and Policy Frameworks

Strong institutions are necessary for sustainable development. Nigeria's federal framework presents both opportunities and challenges for development governance

(Suberu, 1994). Decentralization seeks to enhance governance proximity to the populace; nevertheless, its efficacy is often hindered by subnational capacity limitations (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

Development programs like Vision 20:2020 and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004; 2009) have laid out Nigeria's aims for social and economic growth. But political upheaval and problems with putting plans into action have slowed progress (Ikelegbe, 2012).

In Nigeria's development talks, sustainable development and inclusive growth are becoming more and more important. The SDGs (UNDP, 2019) provide a comprehensive framework for addressing poverty, inequality, education, and environmental sustainability. Government investments in ICT infrastructure and entrepreneurship are making technological innovation and digital economy initiatives new drivers of development (Oladele, 2020). International partnerships and civil society are equally important for reaching development goals (Ojo, 2014).

In Nigeria, insurgency and humanitarian crises have become major issues that have a big effect on the country's political and social stability and progress. The link between violent insurgency movements and the humanitarian catastrophes that follow shows how complicated security, governance, and development challenges may be.

Understanding Insurgency

Kilcullen (2009) defines insurgency as an organized movement employing armed conflict and irregular warfare methods to overturn or contest an established government. The violent actions of groups like Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and different ethno-religious militias are what make up an insurgency in Nigeria (Onuoha, 2014).

These groups use socioeconomic problems, bad government, and ethnic-religious tensions to get people to join them and keep their campaigns going (Agbiboa, 2013). There are many different groups fighting in Nigeria, and they are not all the same. Some are fighting over resources, while others are fighting for religious reasons (Ibrahim, 2018).

The emergence of Boko Haram in 2002 markedly escalated threats from insurgencies (Thurston, 2017). Boko Haram's initial focus was on criticizing Western education and perceived government corruption, which was rooted in the socioeconomic marginalization of northeastern Nigeria (Zenn, 2014). Tens of thousands have been killed and millions have been displaced as a result of the group's violent insurgency, which started in 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2016). Other insurgencies, such as those involving communal militias and Fulani herdsmen, have made the security situation worse (Onuoha, 2014). Ethno-religious differences, poverty, unemployment, and bad governance are some of the main factors (Agbiboa, 2013; Ibrahim, 2018).

Scholars assert that conflict dynamics have been exacerbated by ineffective state responses and human rights breaches by security personnel (Amnesty International, 2025).

The insurgency in Nigeria has a big and different effect on people's lives because due to the fighting, more than 2 million people have had to leave their homes, predominantly in the Northeast. This makes it one of Africa's largest groups of internally displaced people (IDPs) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). Displacement has made resources scarce, disrupted people's lives, and made them more vulnerable to food insecurity, disease outbreaks, and mental trauma

(International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020).

In places where there is fighting, getting essential services, health care and education has become very hard (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Humanitarian actors face major challenges, such as a lack of government resources, logistical problems, and instability (World Food Programme, 2020). Because the situation has lasted so long, people are calling for integrated methods that bring together efforts to build peace, develop and keep people safe (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019).

Responses from Governments and Global Institutions

The Nigerian government has started military operations like "Operation Lafiya Dole" to counter terrorists. These operations have helped the government gain some territory, but they have also been criticized for violating human rights and killing civilians (International Crisis Group, 2017). To deal with the root causes, some steps that have been implemented include development initiatives, amnesty campaigns, and working together in the region (Azeez, 2018).

International organizations and donor agencies are very important when it comes to creating capacity, resolving conflicts, and providing humanitarian help (UNDP, 2019). However, ongoing interventions are hindered by funding fluctuations and coordination challenges (Omeje, 2018). Conflict theory, which highlights the role of structural injustices and competition for scarce resources in fostering violence, is employed to examine Nigeria's insurgency and humanitarian crisis (Gurr, 1970). Post-colonial state theory elucidates the manner

in which colonial legacies and feeble institutions exacerbate insurgency and state vulnerability (Mbembe, 2001). To deal with the complicated crises, human security frameworks push for a people-centered approach that includes development, empowerment, and protection (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). These perspectives underscore the imperative of transitioning from militarized to holistic methods.

The dynamics of the insurgency have evolved due to Boko Haram's recent tactical shifts, including fragmentation and the rise of ISWAP, necessitating adaptive responses (Onuoha, 2018). More people are starting to understand how social media, young unemployment, and climate change affect conflict (Akinola, 2020). Future studies and strategies should focus on reconciliation, community resilience, and local governance (Ibrahim & Olojo, 2021). For long-term solutions, humanitarian aid needs to be linked to frameworks for long-term development and peacebuilding (World Bank, 2021).

Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study, the study relied on both primary and secondary types of data. Primary data was obtained directly from respondents through key informant interviews. Secondary data was obtained from relevant academic publications, UNDP reports, government publications, policy documents, humanitarian situation reports, official statistics, research reports, journal articles, books, conference papers, and other credible documentary sources relating to humanitarian crisis management and UNDP interventions in Nigeria and Niger State. Particular attention was given to documentary evidence covering the period 2020–2025, which constitutes the temporal scope of the study.

Discussion of Findings

This section presents a critical analysis of the key findings from the study on humanitarian challenges and responses in Kontagora, Niger State. Drawing on both primary and secondary data, the discussion explores how various socioeconomic, environmental, and security-related factors contribute to the region's complex humanitarian situation. It further examines community experiences and perceptions, with particular attention to the role and effectiveness of interventions implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). By interpreting these findings, this segment aims to provide deeper insights into the underlying causes of the crisis and the suitability of current humanitarian strategies in addressing local needs.

Niger North and Humanitarian Crisis

The findings clearly show that food insecurity and malnutrition are pressing challenges in Kontagora. As a region dependent on agriculture, Kontagora faces significant threats from environmental stressors such as desertification, irregular rainfall, and land degradation, which collectively undermine local food production (Adamu & Umar, 2020). These conditions have resulted in widespread crop failures, leading to shortages that disproportionately affect children and vulnerable groups, as highlighted by the FAO (2021). Additionally, the broader regional insecurity disrupts access to agricultural markets and supply chains, further exacerbating food scarcity (Ogunleye et al., 2019).

The impact of violent conflicts—particularly those between farmers and herders as well as communal disputes—has a notable ripple effect on Kontagora (International Crisis Group, 2021). These conflicts have resulted in population

displacement, with many internally displaced persons (IDPs) lacking basic amenities, shelter, and employment (IDMC, 2020). The presence of armed groups in nearby regions not only intensifies insecurity but also hampers the ability of humanitarian workers to access communities in need (Interview Information, 2025). This persistent insecurity continues to disrupt livelihoods and further destabilizes the region.

The healthcare system in Kontagora is insufficiently equipped to meet local needs. The shortage of health facilities, trained personnel, and medical supplies severely limits the delivery of essential services (Niger State Ministry of Health, 2019). Poor sanitation and inadequate healthcare infrastructure contribute to the high prevalence of infectious diseases, including cholera, malaria, and respiratory illnesses (WHO, 2020). Maternal and child health outcomes remain particularly poor, underscoring the urgent need for health system strengthening (Interview Information, 2025).

Water scarcity and poor sanitation were identified as critical challenges. Many residents rely on unsafe water sources, increasing their risk of waterborne diseases (UNICEF Nigeria, 2018). Seasonal fluctuations further compound these issues, especially during the dry season, placing additional burdens on women and children who are primarily responsible for fetching water (Adamu & Umar, 2020). Educational access and quality are significantly hindered by poverty, insecurity, and inadequate infrastructure (Niger State Ministry of Education, 2019). Displacement and economic hardship force many children, especially girls, out of school. The lack of educational resources and gender disparities continue to be major obstacles to widespread and equitable educational attainment (Interview Information, 2025).

High unemployment, particularly among youth, and a reliance on subsistence farming leave communities highly vulnerable to economic shocks and market instability (NBS, 2020). The prevalence of poverty limits families' ability to cope with emergencies, perpetuating cycles of hardship and vulnerability. Collectively, these findings illustrate the multifaceted and interconnected nature of humanitarian challenges in Kontagora. Addressing these issues requires coordinated, community-driven interventions that integrate social services, development initiatives, and security measures.

Community Perceptions of UNDP's Humanitarian Interventions

Community feedback highlights the importance of UNDP's focus on resilience-building and livelihood diversification. Through support for climate-smart agriculture and vocational training, the UNDP aims to address the roots of socioeconomic vulnerability and reduce dependence on emergency assistance (UNDP Nigeria, 2020, 2019). UNDP's peacebuilding efforts, including the establishment and training of community-based peace committees, have been positively received. These committees facilitate dialogue, mediate conflicts, and contribute to the long-term stability necessary for post-crisis recovery (International Alert, 2019).

Findings indicate that UNDP's support for building the capacity of local government and community organizations has improved local ownership and sustainability of humanitarian solutions. Enhanced early warning systems and disaster risk management training are particularly valued (UNDP Nigeria, 2020). UNDP's multi-sectoral support for IDPs—covering shelter, water, sanitation, healthcare, and education—has addressed critical gaps for displaced populations. Initiatives aimed at self-reliance and long-term integration is seen as essential steps

towards durable solutions (UNDP Nigeria, 2019; UNHCR & UNDP, 2021).

The community recognizes the value of UNDP's environmental initiatives, such as reforestation, soil conservation, and water resource management, which help mitigate the negative impacts of climate change and environmental degradation (UNDP Nigeria, 2020). UNDP's role in coordinating humanitarian efforts, aligning interventions with national strategies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and fostering partnerships with government and civil society organizations ensures a more efficient and comprehensive humanitarian response (UNDP Nigeria, 2020).

Findings suggest that UNDP's mandate and approach are well-aligned with the complex needs of Niger North. By addressing food insecurity, displacement, conflict, and environmental challenges through integrated and participatory interventions, UNDP is seen as a critical partner in advancing sustainable humanitarian and development outcomes. Collaboration with local stakeholders and alignment with broader development agendas strengthen the impact and sustainability of its interventions.

Conclusion

This study has explored the complex humanitarian landscape of Kontagora, Niger State, highlighting the interwoven challenges of food insecurity, displacement, health crises, water scarcity, educational disruptions, and economic vulnerabilities. The findings reveal that these issues are mutually reinforcing and deeply rooted in both environmental and socioeconomic factors, as well as persistent insecurity in the region. Despite these significant challenges, the response from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been noteworthy. Through a combination of resilience-building, livelihood support,

peacebuilding, institutional strengthening, and environmental management, the UNDP has contributed to both immediate humanitarian relief and longer-term development. The organization's integrated and participatory approach, coupled with its strong emphasis on local capacity building and multi-stakeholder coordination, is well-suited to the realities of Niger North.

Recommendations

UNDP should strengthen and expand interventions in highly affected communities within Kontagora, particularly programmes addressing livelihood recovery, food security, skills development, community stabilization, and resilience building. UNDP and its partners should adopt an integrated approach that connects immediate humanitarian assistance with long-term development and peacebuilding. This would reduce dependence on emergency assistance and help affected communities become more self-reliant.

Humanitarian programmes should be designed and implemented with greater participation from local communities. Community leaders, women, youth, persons with disabilities, civil society organizations, and other vulnerable groups should be involved in needs assessment, programme design, implementation, and monitoring. There should be stronger coordination between UNDP, the Niger State Government, Kontagora Local Government, traditional institutions, NGOs, community-based organizations, and other humanitarian agencies. A coordinated approach would minimize duplication and improve the distribution of limited resources.

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