

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a global push to reframe responses to conflict and protracted crises by uniting humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding strategies into a single, coherent framework. Known as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus, this integrated approach has been advanced through UN resolutions, OECD frameworks, and shifts in donor policy to foster sustainable peace and resilience in fragile contexts. In places like Syria, Yemen, and South Sudan, the HDP Nexus seeks to go beyond reactive aid by addressing structural drivers of crisis while enabling local actors to shape recovery processes (Mena et al., 2022; UN OCHA, 2022).

In Africa, the HDP model has been promoted through regional strategies such as the African Union's Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy, as well as donor-funded programs targeting the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes regions (Delina & Gaviola, 2024). These initiatives underscore the growing recognition that siloed interventions—separated across humanitarian relief, development planning, and peacebuilding—have limited success in reversing instability. A more integrated, locally embedded model is needed to address overlapping risks, particularly in settings marked by cyclical violence, forced displacement, and economic marginalization.

In Nigeria, the implementation of the HDP Nexus is particularly urgent in the northern region, which has endured over a decade of violence from Boko Haram insurgency, communal clashes, and farmer-herder tensions (Tafida et al., 2023). These overlapping crises have not only displaced millions but also undermined access to livelihoods, education, and health services. While international and national actors have mobilized considerable resources, the prevailing response

architecture remains fragmented. Humanitarian actors focus on short-term relief; development efforts often proceed without considering peace dynamics; and peacebuilding interventions are typically under-resourced or politically marginalized (Dowd, 2023).

This fragmentation leads to missed opportunities for synergy and undermines long-term recovery. Local civil society groups, traditional institutions, and state agencies are often sidelined, receiving minimal capacity support or funding, despite their central role in community-based resilience (Lehne, 2020). This reality raises critical questions about how HDP strategies are operationalized, the extent to which coordination occurs, and the barriers that prevent deeper integration. The challenge lies not in the absence of interventions but in their lack of convergence. Fragmented implementation of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programs in Northern Nigeria continues to undermine sustainable outcomes. Local actors remain under-engaged, coordination mechanisms are weak, and donor funding often remains short-term or thematically narrow. These shortcomings jeopardize the HDP Nexus's promise of addressing root causes and building resilience. The objectives of the study are: i. To identify major structural and operational barriers confronting HDP Nexus implementation in Northern Nigeria; ii. To examine specific interventions or projects that illustrate the potential of integrated approaches in enhancing social cohesion and stability; iii. To propose actionable strategies to strengthen Nexus coordination, financing mechanisms, and institutional frameworks at local and regional levels.

This paper argues that while structural fragmentation and limited capacity undermine the implementation of the HDP Nexus in Northern Nigeria, initiatives such as the "Contributing to the mitigation of conflict over natural resources between farmer and herder communities in Adamawa state, Nigeria (COMITAS)" project offer critical lessons. Conflict-sensitive, locally embedded,

and cross-sectoral approaches can be scaled to support sustainable peace and recovery when supported by inclusive coordination and flexible funding mechanisms.

Conceptual Framework

The Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) Nexus refers to a policy and operational framework that seeks to enhance coherence and collaboration among humanitarian assistance, long-term development, and peacebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Emerging from critiques of siloed programming, the Nexus is intended to integrate these three areas to provide more sustainable, context-sensitive, and people-centered responses to crises. Rather than treating humanitarian emergencies, development processes, and peace initiatives as separate or sequential, the HDP Nexus emphasizes simultaneous engagement where possible, especially in protracted crises (DuBois, 2020; Vesco et al., 2023).

At the core of the HDP Nexus are four key principles: integration, conflict sensitivity, local ownership, and sustainability. Integration requires that humanitarian, development, and peace actors coordinate efforts around common goals, pooling knowledge and resources. Conflict sensitivity involves designing interventions that recognize and avoid exacerbating existing tensions. Local ownership prioritizes the role of communities, local institutions, and indigenous knowledge in shaping responses. Sustainability, in this context, entails building resilience—not only through infrastructure and services but also by reinforcing social cohesion and governance capacity (Howe, 2021; Oxfam, 2021).

From the humanitarian perspective, the Nexus affirms that addressing immediate needs—such as food, shelter, and protection—is essential but insufficient if disconnected from broader systemic challenges. Protracted displacement, such as that experienced in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa

states due to Boko Haram insurgency, has highlighted the limits of short-term relief in the absence of governance reform, livelihood recovery, and psychosocial support (Zenn, 2020; Vesco et al., 2023).

In terms of development, the Nexus reframes progress not merely in economic terms, but as a pathway out of fragility. Investments in education, health, infrastructure, and institutional capacity must proceed alongside—and in coordination with—humanitarian and peace interventions. In Northern Nigeria, for example, development gains have often been reversed due to recurrent violence, underscoring the need for joint planning that considers security dynamics (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The peacebuilding component introduces both preventive and restorative dimensions. It aims to resolve underlying drivers of conflict—such as competition over land and water, marginalization, and weak justice systems—while supporting social reintegration, dialogue, and community-based reconciliation (Search for Common Ground, 2020; Emah, 2024). The integration of peace work into humanitarian and development responses is critical in Northern Nigeria, where the farmer-herder crisis and insurgency have deeply fragmented communities (Nagombe & Umar, 2025).

The practical relevance of the Nexus has been evident in Nigeria through initiatives like the COMITAS project, which shows that linking development (livelihoods, infrastructure), peacebuilding (dialogue, mediation), and humanitarian support (relief, psychosocial aid) yields stronger outcomes than fragmented interventions (Search for Common Ground, 2020; Mercy Corps, 2024). It's important to familiarise yourself with the project,

It is about “Contributing to the mitigation of conflict over natural resources between farmer and herder communities in Adamawa state, Nigeria (COMITAS)”. The

project is funded by the European Union (EU) Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) that responds quickly and flexibly to conflicts and crises. The COMITAS project is empowering communities to prevent and respond to violence by strengthening collaboration on Natural Resource Management, fostering trust through community dialogue, and promoting positive perceptions through reliable information and peace messaging. The 18-month project is currently implemented in five Local Government Areas in Adamawa state: Demsa, Numan, Lamurde, Girei, and Mayo Belwa, across 10 wards (IOM, n.p).

However, criticisms persist. DuBois (2020) notes that some humanitarian actors fear the erosion of neutrality and independence when forced to align with political peace agendas. Similarly, Mackatiani et al. (2014) caution that regional coordination often falters due to weak institutions and inadequate grassroots integration.

Yet, studies such as Chinwokwu (2015) and Ndubueze-Ogaraku & Onoja (2021) argue that localized engagement and conflict-sensitive frameworks—central to the Nexus—are necessary for peace and resilience. Community-based early warning systems, inclusive governance, and climate-responsive livelihoods are not auxiliary elements; they are essential to the success of integrated approaches. In essence, the HDP Nexus is more than a coordination tool; it is a shift in development thinking that recognizes the interdependence of relief, reconstruction, and reconciliation. In fragile settings like Northern Nigeria, where humanitarian needs persist amid development deficits and conflict legacies, the Nexus offers a pragmatic, if complex, pathway to durable solutions.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws on Functionalism and Systems Theory to analyze the implementation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in conflict-affected Northern Nigeria. These frameworks offer complementary perspectives: one focuses on the stabilizing role of institutions and shared norms, the other emphasises interdependence, coordination, and feedback among system actors.

Functionalism

Functionalism is a macro-sociological perspective that views society as a system of interrelated parts, each functioning to maintain social stability and cohesion. The theory assumes that institutions exist to fulfill necessary functions for the survival of society (Giddens, 1984). While functionalist thinking traces back to Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, it was Émile Durkheim who formally articulated it in the late 19th century. Later, Talcott Parsons (1951) developed a more structured version of the theory in his work *The Social System*, offering a systemic view of how institutional roles preserve societal order. Parsons' functionalist model outlines four basic prerequisites for social systems—adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (AGIL framework). Institutions, including political, economic, and cultural bodies, perform these functions to stabilize society. Within this logic, disruptions such as conflict or displacement are seen as threats to integration, which institutions must respond to to restore balance (Turner, 2003). Functionalism has been criticized for its conservative bias, particularly its tendency to justify the status quo and underplay conflict, power imbalances, and systemic inequalities (Collins, 1994). The theory also lacks a strong explanation for social change, often treating society as static or self-correcting without accounting for dissent or structural violence. Functionalism is relevant in explaining how institutions involved in humanitarian aid, development programming, and peacebuilding are expected to coordinate to preserve social order in Northern Nigeria. In theory,

organizations such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), local governments, and community-based organizations should act in complementary ways to maintain security, provide services, and rebuild livelihoods. However, the failure of these institutions to operate in a harmonized manner—due to fragmented mandates, political competition, or inadequate resourcing—undermines their integrative function. The HDP Nexus model, then, can be viewed as a corrective mechanism aimed at restoring systemic integration by aligning roles and responsibilities toward a unified goal of resilience and stability.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory emerged in the mid-20th century through the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), who introduced the concept of open systems—entities that interact with their environments and adapt through feedback. In organizational studies, the theory was advanced by scholars such as Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn (1978), who applied it to examine how institutions survive and evolve through interaction, information exchange, and self-regulation. At its core, Systems Theory posits that organizations and societies function as interconnected systems. Each unit or actor contributes to the overall operation of the system and depends on others through flows of resources, information, and influence. Feedback mechanisms—whether positive (amplifying) or negative (corrective)—are central to maintaining equilibrium and promoting learning. Effective systems are those that exhibit coordination, communication, adaptability, and synergy (Skyttner, 2005). Systems Theory has been critiqued for its abstractness and lack of normative guidance. While it emphasizes interconnection and feedback, it often overlooks issues of power, ideology, and inequality, treating all actors as equally capable of communication and adaptation (Jackson, 2000). Furthermore, its technocratic tone sometimes minimizes political context. Systems Theory is particularly instructive in diagnosing why HDP Nexus efforts often stall in Northern Nigeria.

The HDP Nexus depends on cooperation between humanitarian actors, development agencies, peacebuilders, and local institutions. However, when coordination mechanisms are weak, communication channels are fragmented, and learning loops are absent, the system malfunctions. For example, development programs may ignore security risks flagged by humanitarian actors, or peace initiatives may be undercut by parallel relief efforts that bypass local governance structures. Systems Theory underscores the need for feedback structures—such as joint needs assessments and cross-sectoral reviews—to ensure that actors are not operating in isolation. The success of pilot programs like the COMITAS initiative, which brought together multiple actors around shared goals and regular feedback, demonstrates how systemic alignment can enhance coherence and effectiveness.

While Functionalism sheds light on the institutional roles required to maintain integration in conflict-affected societies, Systems Theory explains the operational interdependence and coordination mechanisms necessary for Nexus implementation. Combined, these frameworks reveal both the normative expectations placed on institutions and the practical realities of fragmentation in Northern Nigeria. Their insights lay the conceptual foundation for analyzing the HDP Nexus's performance and prospects in this region.

Empirical Review

Chinwokwu (2015) assesses the role of community-based early warning systems in managing conflict and building peace in Nigeria. The paper identifies poor governmental response to early warning signals as a central issue exacerbating Nigeria's internal security challenges. Drawing on secondary data, the study highlights that most conflicts—communal, ethno-religious, and insurgent—are often predictable but escalate due to institutional negligence. It recommends

improved grassroots communication, stakeholder collaboration, prompt intervention, and public enlightenment. In the context of the HDP Nexus, the study reinforces the importance of localized, preventive mechanisms that integrate community voices into broader humanitarian and peacebuilding strategies.

DuBois (2020) critiques the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus from a humanitarian standpoint, arguing that while concerns about compromising neutrality and independence are valid, the principles themselves are adaptable. Using a conceptual approach, the paper suggests that Nexus-thinking can enhance humanitarian effectiveness by broadening the scope of response and embedding dignity through development and peace. Rather than dismissing the Nexus, DuBois advocates for its use in reinforcing the core principle of humanity. Though not empirically grounded, the work is relevant to Northern Nigeria, where siloed interventions remain a challenge. However, its normative stance may underestimate political realities and operational risks in deeply fragmented settings.

Ndubueze-Ogaraku and Onoja (2021) examine the interlinkages between insurgency, environmental degradation, and agricultural livelihoods in Nigeria. Anchored on Homer-Dixon's eco-violence theory, the study adopts a review-based methodology using both empirical and theoretical data. It traces the evolution of insurgent activity from the Niger Delta militancy to Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, highlighting how these dynamics interact with ecological stressors such as desert encroachment and the shrinking of Lake Chad. Findings reveal that this insurgency-environment-livelihood nexus contributes to declining agricultural productivity, displacement, food insecurity, and rising poverty levels. The authors recommend diplomatic engagement with insurgent groups, full implementation of the UNEP report on Ogoniland, and improved agribusiness support policies. About the HDP Nexus in Northern Nigeria, the study

underscores how unresolved environmental stressors and security crises perpetuate fragile livelihoods, thereby reinforcing the need for integrated, conflict-sensitive development strategies.

A conflict assessment study conducted by Search for Common Ground, in partnership with Mercy Corps and IOM, evaluates resource-based conflicts in five LGAs of Adamawa State, Nigeria, under the COMITAS project. Using a mixed-methods approach—160 surveys, 40 key informant interviews, and 22 focus group discussions—the study identifies farmer-herder disputes as the most prevalent conflict type. These are primarily driven by climate change, poverty, poor resource governance, and drug abuse. While prior interventions had limited effect, the COMITAS project reportedly reduced local tensions through community structures like Peace Architecture Dialogues and Community Response Networks, improving trust and intergroup relations. However, the sustainability of these gains remains fragile due to persistent socioeconomic challenges and environmental stressors. The study recommends climate-adaptive interventions, livelihood support, and community-based conflict resolution training. In the context of the HDP Nexus, this assessment highlights how integrated, locally-led interventions can reduce violence but must be matched with long-term structural and environmental reforms.

Similarly, a European Commission-commissioned study (2022) assessed the implementation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus across nine countries—including Nigeria, Chad, and Uganda—using qualitative inquiries centered on understanding, mobilisation, and implementation. It found a broad conceptual appreciation of the Nexus and its relevance in protracted crises. However, operational hurdles, such as inadequate funding, institutional capacity gaps, and weak coordination mechanisms, hampered progress. While joint planning and conflict analysis were recognized as vital, the "peace" dimension remained ambiguously integrated. The study recommends enhancing inter-agency coordination, improving the EU's policy guidance,

bolstering country-level support via a Help Desk, and refining monitoring frameworks. Though the findings affirm the HDP Nexus's potential, they reveal that without stronger leadership and institutional clarity, implementation in contexts like Northern Nigeria remains uneven and slow.

Vesco et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of literature on how armed conflict affects human development across nine key sectors, including health, education, income, political stability, and food security. Drawing on interdisciplinary studies and datasets such as UCDP and World Bank indicators, they demonstrate that the effects of conflict are often interlinked and cumulative—spanning direct impacts like mortality and displacement, as well as indirect ones such as institutional breakdowns and reduced investment. The review underscores a critical gap: while sector-specific effects are documented, little research empirically explores how conflict outcomes intersect across domains. This limitation hinders integrated responses in contexts like Northern Nigeria, where HDP Nexus implementation requires a holistic understanding of conflict's cross-sectoral consequences.

Emah (2024), in a Mercy Corps-led ethnographic study, maps natural resource conflicts between farmers and herders across twelve communities in Taraba and Adamawa States under the COMITAS II initiative. Using qualitative and descriptive methods, the study identifies land and water scarcity as major triggers of conflict, alongside broader drivers such as decentralization, transboundary pressures, ethnic tensions, and opportunistic violence. The findings underscore the significant impact of these disputes on local infrastructure, livelihoods, and social cohesion. The study recommends empowering local mediation structures and promoting community-designed resource action plans. This aligns closely with the HDP Nexus by demonstrating the value of localized, peace-integrated development in conflict-prone areas.

Nagombe and Umar (2025) investigate how communal conflict affects livelihoods in the NGADA Special Development Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. Using an explanatory design and secondary data, the study applies social capital and conflict theory to understand the disruptions caused by resource-related disputes. The findings reveal that competition over land, grazing areas, and water—aggravated by demographic stress and weak local resolution systems—has led to reduced agricultural output, trade restrictions, and deteriorating economic conditions. The study recommends enhancing local dispute resolution, ensuring fair resource distribution, and building community resilience. About the HDP Nexus, this research underscores the critical need to integrate peacebuilding with development interventions in conflict-prone communities.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive design, relying entirely on secondary data. Relevant information was gathered from academic journals, policy papers, reports published by NGOs and international organizations (such as the UN), as well as from verified news sources. The analysis followed a thematic approach, with data organized and interpreted according to the key research questions guiding the study. This method allows for a structured understanding of both the challenges and opportunities surrounding the implementation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in Northern Nigeria.

Discussion

What systemic barriers impede nexus coordination across sectors?

The reviewed studies suggest that fragmentation is a defining weakness in the HDP Nexus implementation in Northern Nigeria. Chinwokwu (2015) draws attention to the state's failure to act on early warning signs, a lapse that Functionalism would attribute to institutional breakdown.

Where state structures fail to perform their integrative functions, disorder persists, and localized peacebuilding becomes episodic rather than systemic. DuBois (2020), writing from a humanitarian vantage, reinforces this view, pointing out that siloed interventions rooted in sector-specific mandates hinder convergence. He contends that humanitarian principles are often treated as immovable, even though their operational flexibility could enable broader coordination. This echoes Systems Theory's premise: without interdependent feedback loops between humanitarian, development, and peace actors, coordinated responses remain elusive. Institutions work in isolation, ignoring the systemic interrelation among poverty, violence, and underdevelopment.

The European Commission's (2022) multi-country review reveals more formalized barriers. Despite widespread agreement on the value of the Nexus, the findings underscore bureaucratic limitations—notably, short-term programming cycles and unclear peace mandates. These gaps frustrate efforts to align mandates across donors and local implementing partners. In Northern Nigeria, where both immediate needs and structural vulnerabilities coexist, these delays are more than technical—they carry existential consequences for displaced persons and conflict-affected communities. Vesco et al. (2023) add a macro-perspective by tracing how war-induced disruptions spread across sectors—from health and education to governance and food systems. Their observation that scholarship continues to treat conflict effects as siloed mirrors the actual practices on the ground. In line with Systems Theory, the absence of interconnected analysis results in disjointed policy. Each agency treats a symptom—malnutrition, displacement, youth unemployment—without a holistic understanding of the underlying system dysfunction.

Where have integrated approaches shown promise at the state or community levels?

Evidence from subnational contexts offers a contrasting picture. The COMITAS initiative in Adamawa and Taraba (Search for Common Ground, 2020; Emah, 2024) stands out as a positive demonstration of what integration looks like in practice. Interventions were guided by localized knowledge, participatory structures, and an awareness of context-specific grievances—approaches aligned with both Functionalism’s stress on social cohesion and Systems Theory’s focus on interconnectivity. What distinguishes COMITAS is its grounding in community-based dialogue mechanisms (PADs and CRNs) and investment in early warning systems. These initiatives didn’t just facilitate coordination—they rebuilt the social glue eroded by recurring farmer-herder clashes. Functionalism finds utility here: institutions at the local level were reconstituted to perform their integrative roles. Meanwhile, Systems Theory validates the project’s success in using community feedback to adjust mediation strategies, proving that effective response requires circuits of information that are open, responsive, and decentralized.

Ndubueze-Ogaraku and Onoja (2021) further show that the crisis in Northern Nigeria cannot be separated from ecological degradation. Their findings add weight to the argument that integrated approaches must include environmental resilience. Their call for broader agribusiness support and diplomatic responses points toward long-term stabilizing mechanisms, though their emphasis remains largely macro. Together, these cases affirm that where projects respect local agency and treat communities as partners rather than passive recipients, the outcomes shift. It also becomes clear that the success of integrated efforts depends less on template designs and more on context-responsive engagement that aligns development goals with peace imperatives.

What institutional structures could better support Nexus implementation?

Institutional capacity, particularly at the grassroots, emerges as both a vulnerability and a potential driver. Nagombe and Umar (2025) report that traditional structures in NGADA are under-resourced and ill-equipped to mediate land and water conflicts, a deficit that leaves communities vulnerable to recurring violence. According to Functionalism, such gaps reflect institutional failure to adapt to shifting conflict patterns, thus weakening their stabilizing role. In the COMITAS II study (Emah, 2024), the creation of resource-sharing frameworks and inclusive dispute mechanisms counteracted this weakness. By recognizing the feedback function of local actors, the initiative sidestepped top-down prescriptions. This underscores Systems Theory's emphasis that systems do not operate in isolation. When local actors have decision-making power and clear channels for voicing needs, outcomes are more durable.

The European Commission's (2022) review offers a cautionary note: national-level alignment remains weak. While donor support exists, the lack of clear accountability frameworks and uncertain leadership slows implementation. The failure to formalize Nexus coordination structures—between ministries, donors, and local implementers—perpetuates bureaucratic inertia. Even as peacebuilding principles are integrated rhetorically, they remain marginal in actual delivery. However, the European Commission also notes that technical support mechanisms (such as help desks and policy guides) are beginning to fill coordination gaps. These are promising institutional innovations, especially if scaled and linked to real-time data systems across sectors. At the end, local ownership emerges as an enduring condition for success. The reviewed literature affirms that enabling elements—trust, inclusive governance, and predictable financing—are not abstract ideals but necessary scaffolds. Systems break down not because interventions are absent, but because those interventions are isolated from the people most affected.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study set out to examine the challenges and opportunities in implementing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in the conflict-affected regions of Northern Nigeria. Drawing on theoretical insights from Functionalism and Systems Theory, and grounded in empirical cases—especially those relating to the COMITAS project—it is clear that the Nexus framework holds real promise. When properly implemented, it can enable integrated, sustainable responses that address both the immediate and structural dimensions of conflict. However, the evidence also reveals systemic barriers that continue to undermine Nexus implementation. These include fragmented mandates, short-term program cycles, weak coordination, under-resourced local institutions, and bureaucratic constraints that fail to prioritize local ownership. Yet, as demonstrated by COMITAS and other community-based interventions, when programs are grounded in local agency and supported by coherent structures, they yield measurable gains in trust, cooperation, and resilience. Therefore, unlocking the full potential of the Nexus in Northern Nigeria requires deliberate institutional reform, consistent financial support, and the elevation of local actors from implementers to co-decision makers. A scaled, inclusive HDP model offers a credible path toward long-term peace and development.

Based on the findings, this paper recommends that;

The Federal Government ought to establish decentralized coordination structures across humanitarian, development, and peace sectors at the state and local government levels to reduce overlap and policy disconnection.

Government and non-governmental bodies should adopt multi-year, flexible funding frameworks that go beyond emergency cycles to support the long-term objectives of Nexus-aligned

programming, as well as formalize the role of local actors by ensuring their participation in planning, budgeting, and implementation, especially in early warning and conflict resolution systems.

Build local capacity through structured training programs, resource access, and mentorship to empower grassroots peacebuilders, civil society, and traditional institutions.