

**RURAL SOCIOLOGY OF DISPLACEMENT: SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND AGRARIAN
CHANGE IN INSURGENCY-AFFECTED BORNO STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the sociological dimensions of agrarian transformation in Borno State, Nigeria, under the pressure of the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgencies. Drawing on a rural sociological framework that integrates agrarian political economy, social capital theory, and gender analysis, the study analyses how protracted conflict has restructured rural social relations, undermined traditional authority systems, and produced new forms of social stratification and livelihood adaptation. The analysis identifies four principal mechanisms of social transformation: the erosion of the Bulama-centred customary governance hierarchy; the reconfiguration of gender relations as women assume previously male-dominated livelihood roles; the emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force as a new social institution mediating between communities and the state; and the adaptation of indigenous social capital networks to conflict conditions through reciprocity, informal learning centres, and interethnic alliances. The paper argues that while community resilience has been extraordinary, it is deeply constrained by the structural violence of the conflict economy and the gendered dimensions of survival. The study concludes that durable rural recovery in Borno State requires policy interventions that recognise and strengthen indigenous social institutions, address the gendered restructuring of rural livelihoods, and integrate community-based resilience mechanisms into formal counterinsurgency and development frameworks.

Keywords: Rural sociology, Borno State, insurgency, agrarian change, social transformation, gender relations, social capital.

INTRODUCTION

The Boko Haram insurgency, which erupted in 2009 and has since evolved into a protracted conflict involving splinter factions such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has fundamentally altered the social and economic landscape of Borno State, Nigeria. The conflict has killed thousands, displaced over two million people, and devastated the agricultural economy of northeastern Nigeria. Yet the sociological dimensions of this crisis; how it has restructured rural social relations, transformed customary governance institutions, reconfigured gender roles, and produced new forms of social organisation, remain comparatively under-theorised relative to the extensive humanitarian and security literature.

Rural sociology, as the systematic study of rural life and social organisation, offers a distinctive analytical lens for understanding these transformations. Unlike purely economic or humanitarian analyses, a rural sociological perspective attends to the ways in which conflict reshapes the social fabric of rural communities: kinship structures, authority systems, gender divisions of labour, reciprocity networks, and the relationship between rural populations and the state. Borno State, whose Kanuri cultural heartland has been the epicentre of the insurgency, presents a particularly

important case for such analysis because the conflict has been waged not merely over territory but over the very social order of rural life.

This paper addresses the following research questions: How has the insurgency transformed the social structure of rural communities in Borno State? Through what mechanisms has conflict reshaped agrarian social relations and livelihood strategies? And what forms of social resilience and adaptation have emerged in response? The analysis draws on recent empirical studies, humanitarian assessments, and sociological theory to develop a comprehensive account of rural social transformation in insurgency-affected Borno.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on rural sociology and conflict in Borno State, identifying gaps that the present study addresses. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, drawing on agrarian political economy, social capital theory, and gender analysis. Section 4 outlines the methodology. Section 5 presents the findings organised around four thematic dimensions of social transformation. Section 6 discusses the implications for rural recovery and policy. Section 7 concludes.

Literature Review

The sociological literature on Borno State has historically been rich but fragmented, with anthropological and ethnographic studies of Kanuri society dating to the colonial and early post-colonial periods. These studies documented the region's distinctive social structure, characterised by a hierarchical chieftaincy system centred on the Shehu of Borno, below whom were district heads (Ajid), ward heads (Lawan), and village or hamlet heads (Bulama). The Kanuri social order was stratified into royal lineages, aristocratic families, commoners, and servile groups, with patron-client relationships pervading the entire social fabric. Agriculture formed the economic foundation of this order, with the majority of the population engaged in cereal crop cultivation and livestock rearing.

The Boko Haram insurgency has profoundly disrupted this social order, yet the sociological literature on the conflict has tended to focus on its political, security, and humanitarian dimensions. Recent studies have documented the conflict's impact on agricultural production, with findings showing statistically significant negative relationships between insurgency-related killings and both cropland cultivation and crop production. Studies of smallholder rice farmers in Borno State have found that yields declined from 41.14 bags to 22.87 bags, incomes fell from ₦1,292,188 to ₦818,855, and levels of living dropped from ₦2,118,777 to ₦981,502 during the insurgency. These findings align with broader assessments indicating that the production of key crops including cowpeas, maize, groundnut, rice, millet, and sorghum has declined by over 75 per cent.

However, these agricultural and economic analyses, while valuable, do not fully capture the sociological dimensions of the crisis. A growing body of research has begun to address this gap. Studies on women's livelihoods in Borno State have documented that more than 70% of female respondents faced loss of primary income sources, 62.2% experienced loss of farmland, and 49.8% lost livestock, with many women turning to precarious survival strategies under exploitative circumstances. Research on non-displaced communities has examined survival strategies, social cohesion, and the dynamics of community resilience against Boko Haram, theorising through Rational Choice Theory and Social Capital Theory. A study of conflict-induced displacement among rural communities in Kaga LGA has documented the challenges faced by displaced populations. Assessments of rural livelihood diversification among farming households in southern Borno have examined how households adapt to conflict conditions.

Despite this growing body of research, significant gaps remain. Few studies have systematically integrated the multiple mechanisms through which insurgency transforms rural social structures. The gendered dimensions of agrarian change, the transformation of customary authority systems, and the emergence of new social institutions such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) remain under-theorised. This paper seeks to address these gaps by developing a comprehensive rural sociological analysis of social transformation in insurgency-affected Borno State.

Theoretical Framework

Agrarian Political Economy

The agrarian political economy tradition, associated with scholars such as Henry Bernstein and Philip McMichael, analyses rural social relations through the lens of production, property, and power. This framework directs attention to how control over land, labour, and agricultural surplus shapes social stratification and class relations. In the context of Borno State, the insurgency has disrupted all three dimensions of agrarian political economy: land access has been restricted or rendered dangerous; labour has been displaced, conscripted, or killed; and surplus has been appropriated by insurgent groups through extortion and taxation. Understanding these disruptions requires attention to the ways in which conflict reshapes the fundamental social relations of agricultural production.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam, examines the role of social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust in facilitating collective action and individual well-being. In rural Borno, social capital has historically been embedded in kinship networks, patron-client relationships, and community-based institutions. The insurgency has both eroded and transformed these social capital resources. On the one hand, displacement, death, and suspicion have weakened traditional bonding and bridging social capital. On the other hand, communities have developed new forms of social capital through informal learning centres, interethnic alliances, and community-based security arrangements. Mercy Corps research has demonstrated the centrality of social capital, freedom of movement, and access to markets as critical capacities for managing through the crisis.

Gender Analysis

A gender analysis framework, informed by feminist political economy and intersectionality theory, examines how conflict reconfigures gendered divisions of labour, access to resources, and social power. In Kanuri culture, hegemonic masculinity has historically positioned men as dominant, protectors, and strong relative to women, who have been depicted as domestic workers and housewives subservient to men. The insurgency has disrupted these gender norms in complex ways. The targeted killing and conscription of men and boys has forced women into new livelihood roles, while the loss of male household heads has created female-headed households with distinctive vulnerabilities. At the same time, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and the breakdown of marital rights have compounded women's precarity.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative synthesis approach, drawing on empirical studies, humanitarian assessment reports, and sociological analyses published between 2024 and 2026. The sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from humanitarian organisations, and ethnographic accounts of rural life in insurgency-affected Borno. The analysis is organised around four thematic dimensions of social transformation: (1) erosion of customary governance and authority; (2) gendered restructuring of rural livelihoods; (3) emergence of new social institutions; and (4) adaptation of social capital networks. These dimensions are treated as interconnected mechanisms

through which the insurgency has reshaped rural social structures. The synthesis prioritises sources that provide empirical evidence while also drawing on sociological theory to interpret the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Erosion of Customary Governance and Authority

The Borno insurgency has fundamentally disrupted the customary governance hierarchy that has structured rural social life for centuries. The Bulama system, in which village and hamlet heads served as the primary interface between rural communities and higher political authorities, has been severely weakened by displacement, death, and the flight of traditional leaders to urban centres. The customary hierarchy beginning with Bulamas and ending with Shehus or Emirs, which historically performed functions relevant to land disputes, resource allocation, and social regulation, has been undermined by the collapse of the rural communities it served.

The erosion of customary authority has had profound sociological consequences. In the absence of functioning traditional institutions, rural communities have had to improvise new forms of social regulation and dispute resolution. In some areas, religious leaders; imams and Quranic scholars, have stepped into the vacuum, assuming roles in education, conflict resolution, and community mobilisation that traditionally belonged to secular authorities. A religious scholar from Borno recounted how he supported Quranic recitation and writing competitions for his students, maintaining educational continuity when formal schools had been destroyed.

The CJTF has emerged as a particularly significant new institution in this governance vacuum. During endline surveys across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states, 79 per cent of respondents identified the CJTF as one of the main security providers in their community, surpassing the military and police in this role. The CJTF represents a grassroots response to state failure, but it also introduces new dynamics of power and stratification into rural communities. Its members, often young men with limited formal education, have acquired social status and material resources through their security roles, creating new axes of social differentiation.

Gendered Restructuring of Rural Livelihoods

The insurgency has produced a profound restructuring of gender relations in rural Borno. The targeted killing and conscription of men and boys, combined with the displacement of male household heads, has forced women into livelihood roles that were previously male-dominated. Women have become primary agricultural producers, traders, and income earners in many households, challenging the hegemonic masculinity that has characterised Kanuri society.

Yet this gendered transformation has been accompanied by intensified vulnerability. Research on women's livelihoods in Borno State has documented that more than 70% of female respondents faced loss of primary income sources, 62.2% experienced loss of farmland, and 49.8% lost livestock. Access to vocational training, credit, land, and institutional assistance remains notably restricted for women, and many have turned to precarious survival strategies, including survival sex and petty trading under exploitative circumstances. The erosion of marital rights in Yobe and Borno States has exacerbated gender inequality, domestic instability, and the breakdown of family structures in a region already ravaged by insurgency and poverty.

The gendered restructuring of rural livelihoods is not merely a temporary adaptation to crisis conditions. It is producing lasting changes in the social organisation of rural communities. Women who have assumed male roles during the conflict may find it difficult to relinquish them when and if peace returns, creating potential tensions within households and communities. At the same time,

the absence of male household heads has created new forms of female-headed households that face distinctive challenges in accessing land, credit, and social support.

Youth, Militarisation, and Social Stratification

The insurgency has profoundly reshaped the position of youth in rural Borno society. Young men who might have pursued agricultural livelihoods or formal education have been drawn into the conflict economy in multiple ways: as members of the CJTF and other vigilante groups, as conscripts or recruits for insurgent factions, or as labourers in the informal economy of displacement. The Boko Haram crisis has forced many young people in Borno State to take up arms and form vigilante groups, and the rise of violence-prone groups has had a negative impact on youth and the wider society.

The militarisation of rural youth has produced new forms of social stratification. CJTF members, even those with limited formal education, have acquired status and income through their security roles. Meanwhile, the disruption of education has left seven out of ten youths in Borno State lacking formal education, entrenching exclusion and reinforcing extremist recruitment narratives of systemic neglect and lost opportunities. The large Almajiri population—boys and young men who migrate from rural areas to pursue Quranic education, has been particularly vulnerable, with many struggling with unemployment despite their religious education.

The social consequences of youth militarisation extend beyond the conflict itself. Young men habituated to violence and accustomed to the status and income that armed roles provide may find it difficult to reintegrate into agricultural livelihoods. The Borno Model, which has facilitated the reintegration of ex-associates of Boko Haram, has shown how engaging with communities can improve chances of integration and enable a more adaptable model. However, reintegration programmes face the challenge of creating viable livelihood alternatives in a rural economy that has been devastated by conflict.

Adaptation and Resilience of Social Capital Networks

Despite the erosion of traditional authority and the disruption of gendered and generational relations, rural communities in Borno State have demonstrated remarkable resilience through the adaptation of social capital networks. Social cohesion and informal networks of family, friends, and neighbours have been critical resources for managing through the crisis, mentioned 241 times in Mercy Corps assessments as a capacity for coping with challenges.

Communities have developed new forms of social capital in response to the insurgency. Interethnic alliances aimed at protecting lives and property have been formed in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States, drawing on Social Capital and Conflict Transformation theories to explain their significance in fragile settings. These alliances represent an expansion of social capital beyond kinship and ethnic boundaries, creating new forms of solidarity in response to shared threat. In some host communities, migration has been viewed positively as a coping mechanism, with social capital providing both bonding and bridging functions across rural and urban areas.

Informal learning centres have emerged as a significant form of social capital adaptation. Community leaders; pastors, elders, and imams, made room in their houses, places of worship, and shops so that children and adults could learn basic numeracy and literacy skills. Communities have started to collaborate to support learning in the absence of functioning formal schools. These adaptations represent a reconfiguration of social capital networks rather than their simple preservation, as new spaces and relationships for social reproduction emerge in response to conflict conditions.

Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) groups have also emerged as important social capital institutions. In places where banks are far away or simply not an option, community members save small amounts together and can take loans from the group to meet everyday needs or start businesses. These groups provide financial services that formal institutions cannot deliver in conflict-affected areas, and they also serve as spaces for social support and collective problem-solving.

The Conflict Economy and Social Differentiation

The insurgency has produced a conflict economy in which insurgent groups extract resources from rural populations through taxation, extortion, and the control of agricultural production. ISWAP has operated a taxation system in parts of northern Borno, with farmers paying millions of naira in levies and so-called farming permits for access to land. In 2026, ISWAP and JAS ordered farmers to stop cultivating entirely, threatening death for those who defied them, and requiring those who wished to cultivate to relocate to terror-controlled territories. This conflict economy has created new forms of social differentiation, as some farmers are able to pay for access to land while others are excluded entirely.

The conflict economy also intersects with gender and generational relations in complex ways. Women have been particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency, including demands of sex in exchange for food or services. Young men recruited into insurgent groups or the CJTF have access to resources and status that are unavailable to their peers who remain in farming. These dynamics of differentiation are producing a rural social structure that is increasingly stratified not only by traditional criteria of kinship and patron-client relations but also by proximity to and participation in the conflict economy.

Discussion: Implications for Rural Recovery

The findings of this study have significant implications for rural recovery and development policy in Borno State. First, the erosion of customary governance institutions means that recovery efforts cannot simply rely on traditional authorities as implementing partners. New institutions, including the CJTF, religious leaders, and informal community organisations, have assumed governance functions and must be engaged in recovery planning. However, the integration of these new institutions into formal governance structures must be approached carefully, as their legitimacy is uneven and their involvement may exacerbate rather than mitigate social tensions.

Second, the gendered restructuring of rural livelihoods requires gender-sensitive recovery interventions. Women who have assumed new livelihood roles during the conflict need access to land, credit, training, and markets on equitable terms. The barriers that women face in accessing these resources, documented in research on women's livelihoods in Borno State, must be addressed through policy reforms that recognise women's changed economic roles and their distinctive vulnerabilities. Recovery programmes that assume male household heads will return to farming when security improves are likely to miss the reality of female-headed households and women's expanded agricultural responsibilities.

Third, the social capital networks that have sustained communities through the crisis should be recognised and strengthened as foundations for recovery. Informal learning centres, savings groups, and interethnic alliances represent indigenous responses to conflict that have proven effective in the absence of formal institutions. Rather than bypassing these networks in favour of externally designed programmes, recovery efforts should build on and support them. The Mercy Corps research demonstrating the centrality of social capital, freedom of movement, and market access to community resilience provides evidence for this approach.

Fourth, the conflict economy and its effects on social differentiation must be addressed in recovery planning. If access to land, inputs, and markets continues to be mediated by insurgent taxation and control, recovery will be uneven and socially divisive. Security restoration is therefore not merely a precondition for agricultural recovery but a requirement for equitable social reconstruction. The Borno Model's emphasis on community engagement and economic reintegration offers lessons for how to address the legacies of conflict participation while rebuilding rural social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the sociological dimensions of agrarian transformation in insurgency-affected Borno State through a rural sociological framework integrating agrarian political economy, social capital theory, and gender analysis. The analysis has identified four principal mechanisms of social transformation: the erosion of customary governance and authority systems; the gendered restructuring of rural livelihoods; the emergence of new social institutions including the CJTF and informal learning centres; and the adaptation of social capital networks through reciprocity, interethnic alliances, and savings groups.

The findings demonstrate that the insurgency has not merely disrupted agricultural production; it has fundamentally restructured the social organisation of rural life. Traditional authority hierarchies have been weakened, gender relations have been reconfigured, new forms of social stratification have emerged around conflict participation, and communities have developed innovative social capital adaptations to survive in the absence of state institutions. These transformations are likely to have lasting effects that will shape post-conflict rural society for decades to come.

The policy implications are clear. Rural recovery in Borno State must attend not only to agricultural inputs and infrastructure but also to the social reconstruction of rural communities. This requires recognising and strengthening indigenous social institutions, addressing the gendered dimensions of livelihood change, engaging with new governance actors, and addressing the social differentiation produced by the conflict economy. A rural sociological perspective is essential for understanding these dynamics and designing interventions that address the social foundations of rural life, not merely its economic surface.

Future research should examine the long-term trajectories of social transformation in Borno's rural communities, including the persistence or reversal of gendered livelihood changes, the evolution of CJTF's role in local governance, and the conditions under which traditional authority institutions can be rebuilt. Such research is essential for understanding how rural societies recover from protracted conflict and for designing policies that support equitable and sustainable rural futures.

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