

# Insurgency in Nigeria: Why the Northeast is a fertile ground.

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

*The Northeastern part of Nigeria has been embroiled in widespread insurgent activities since the extra judicial killing of the leader and founder of the Boko Haram organization Mohammed Yusuf in 2009. Ever since the Boko Haram and several of its splinter groups have pursued relentlessly violent campaigns against government institutions, towns and villages across Nigeria and beyond. Though insurgency has spiraled to other areas within and across the border of Nigeria from its epicenters in Yobe and Borno states in the Northeast of Nigeria, the region continue to serve as the hotbed of violent campaigns. With the aids of secondary sources of data emanating from relevant literature, magazines and newspapers, the study historicizes the entrenchment and the forces responsible for the sustenance of insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria. The study reveals that socio-political and economic marginalization of the masses of the Northeast are at the root of the lingering activities of violent non state actors in the region. To checkmate the prevalence of insurgency in the Northeastern part of Nigeria, the study suggests a very robust counter insurgency strategy aimed at targeting the root causes of insurgency such as unemployment, illiteracy, hunger, religious extremism and political alienation.*

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## Introduction

Many people believed that the birth of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria will usher in peace and deescalate tension across the country following the prolong years of military interregnum. However, from the Northeast of Nigeria, a religious organization emerged which rode on the back of the masses disenchantment with the political elites which they accused of betrayal and corruption (Onah, 2014). At the birth of the radical Islamist movement Boko Haram, originally known as Al Sunna Wal Jamma (followers of Prophet Mohammed's teaching) before it metamorphosed to Jama'atu ahlis Sunnah lidda'wati wal-jihad (people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teaching) at the beginning of the 21st Century the desire of the adherents was the creation of an egalitarian community of Islamic faithful, hence after the initial mobilization and recruitment of members from the areas around Damaturu in Yobe state they moved in droves to establish a colony and safe-haven for themselves in Zagi-Biriri village, seventy Kilometers north of the Yobe state capital in 2002 (Ishaku, 2012 ).

The politicians who were desirous of benefiting from the numerical strength of the Boko Haram movement in the periodic electoral contest and their quest for political relevance continue to relate with their leaders and became blind to the "monster" that was incubating

in-spite of their propensity for violence and bellicose disposition which manifested in series of running battles between the sect and the law enforcement agencies between 2003 and 2006. By 2009 after three rounds of general elections and ten years of unbroken civilian rules the relationship between the government of Borno State and members of Boko Haram degenerated to the point of open violent confrontation. The security apparatus in their characteristic mold as state agent of coercion failed to conduct themselves professionally by killing the charismatic leader of Boko Haram in the custody of the Nigerian police (Ishaku, 2012). The resultant consequence of this action is the horrendous spate of violent uprising that has swept through the Northeastern region of Nigeria, other parts of the country and the neighbouring countries of Chad, Niger and Cameroon in the past fourteen years.

Various scholars have written copiously on the causative factors of insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria by focusing on the activities of organizations such as Boko Haram and ISWAP (Onah, 2014; Stanicek and Betant-Rasmussen, 2021). Some have argued that the entire geographical space around the Lake Chad has a long culture and tradition of violent resistance that predates the contemporary time. Thus, it is the nature of the people of this region not to stomach repression or act of oppression, the reason they fiercely and

ruthlessly crushed the attempt of the Fulani jihadist to lord it over them in the first decade of the 19th Century. It has also been argued that the massive swath of ungoverned space and the presence of markets for the sales of illicit arms and ammunition around the Lake Chad corridors and the Sahara Deserts created a conducive atmosphere for insurgency to flourish in the region. Most fundamentally, the material conditions of the masses who are poor and alienated socially and politically by the thieving political class in the Northeast has created a climate of bitterness and resentment towards the ruling elites, which explains the ruthlessness with which high profile government officers and politicians were executed at the peak of the uprising.

Oke, Okla and Agidi (2023) have argued that acute poverty and economic displacement of livelihoods have severely limited the options of vast majority of young Nigerians in the northern region. Persistent poverty, especially in the midst of plenty and affluence of the upper class, have invariably led to feelings of frustration among the poor; and these generate hatred, distrust, envy and anger. These psychological situations lead to a loss and erosion of faith in the system, deprivation, alienation and hopelessness. At this point, hostility, antagonism, sabotage and indiscriminate aggression fester. To this end, individual and group grievances, arising from poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination, and economic marginalization, can be used as mobilizing tools by clandestine groups to find support and recruits for terrorism and violence

Suffice it to say that in 2019, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) a splinter group that break away from Boko Haram was ranked the second deadliest terrorist group in the world and the deadliest in sub-Saharan Africa by the 2020 Global Terrorism Index (Stanicek and Betant-Rasmussen, 2021). The study flowing from the ongoing introduction is segmented into six units. The second unit is devoted to conceptual clarification of insurgency, while the third unit focuses on the theoretical framework that propel the study; the fourth unit discusses insurgency in precolonial Northeastern Nigeria, the crux of the work the catalyst of contemporary insurgency in the Northeastern Nigeria is discussed in the fifth unit, while the last and concluding unit is the conclusion and recommendation.

## Conceptual Clarification

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### Insurgency:

Insurgency is an organized, long-drawn-out political cum military struggle carried out by an organized armed movement to fatally “weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control (The U.S. Department of the Army, 2007). According to O’Neill (1990), insurgency is a conflict between non-ruling groups and ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group deliberately uses political resources, e.g. organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics (O’Neil, 1990). In essence, insurgency is an organized violent rebellion or assault that is aimed at overthrowing a ruling government or regime. The cardinal aim of insurgent organization is to take control of the local population which undoubtedly is one of

the most important determinant factors for victory between an established state authority and a non-state actor that employs an irregular modus operandi. The primary objective in this type of nonconventional warfare is essentially the acquisition of political control and legitimacy.

It is important to note that through the instrument of ideological and social manipulation of the people via the mass media the insurgent organization ultimately seeks to transfer political power from the government to itself (Neumann and Smith, 2008). Insurgent activities, therefore, may include violence, but are likely to involve a wider platform of ideological and social activism as well. It is in this guise that certain insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP carried out welfare programmes in their operational bases and also set up mechanism to enforce an Islamic code of justice in the settlement of interpersonal conflicts, International Crisis Group (2019). They pursued these courses ostensibly to blackmail the government in order to win the hearts of the masses. It is obvious, that without popular backing of the masses, insurgency cannot achieve the broad scope that revolution or civil war can achieve, but it can continue to operate for long periods of time, especially if it receives assistance from foreign powers to complement a relative shortage of internal resources.

While it is a fact that no insurgency can achieve momentous progress without popular internal support, the significant role of external aid and funding is also very crucial. Without foreign support, insurgencies cannot endure for too long. It is on this note that O’Neill (1990), observed that “unless governments are utterly incompetent, devoid of political will, and lacking resources, insurgent organisations normally must obtain outside assistance if they are to succeed.” The scenario painted by O’Neil (1990) tacitly explains the intractable armed conflict in North Eastern Nigeria since 2009. The relentless onslaught of Boko Haram and ISWAP against the Nigerian state in their campaign to establish Islamic Caliphate in their various spheres of influence has been sustained through the support of other international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS who supplied those funds, armaments, logistic support and training on how to prosecute asymmetric warfare, European Parliament (2021).

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### Insurgency in Precolonial Northeastern Nigeria:

The Northeastern part of Nigeria at the peak of her glory in the pre-colonial time was a land of warriors that sustained one of the longest dynasties in world history, the Sefawa dynasty in the Kanem Borno Empire (Buah, 1974). It took resilience on the part of the political leadership of the time and gallantry of the military force to ward off invaders and internal rebellion. The states in the area around Lake Chad for the greater part of the pre-colonial era were known for political intrigues, most often violent in nature. Intrigues and rebellion against leadership was thus one of the hallmarks of the history of state formation in the area. Therefore, the area around Lake Chad and Borno are not new to insurgency. The Sefawa dynasty which started at Njimi in 930 AD. had to endure internal wrangling among members of the royal house and repeated cycles of raids from the north before relocating downward to the area west of Lake Chad in about 1391 (Ishaku, 2012). It is important to state that the relief sought by the political leadership of Sefawa was

pyrrhic as the Bulalas and Wadais emerged as new enemies and thorns in their flesh. However, in 1447, Mai Ali Ghaji ruthlessly crushed the Bulalas and went on to establish the second Borno Empire at Ngazargamu. Ali Ghaji was able to restore power and stability at the new capital. He succeeded in solving the problem of insurgency in the area by introducing a political reform which reduced the excessive powers of the nobles whose struggle for power had caused the problem leading to the weakness of the first Kanem Borno Empire. During his time, he was able to put an end to the repeated cycle of civil wars. Ali Ghaji successors continued in his footsteps by adopting his militarist policy, thereby leading to the massive expansion of the frontiers of the empire southward by 17th Century. For instance, Mai Idris Alooma who ruled between 1571 and 1603 carried out the most elaborate military campaign because of his access to firearms and Turkish musketeers from Tripoli. He was the first ruler to use firearm in the Sudan and due to the effective deployment of his musketeers and calvary subdued the So, Bulalas and Mandara on the borders of his kingdom and conquered Kano, Air and Agades (Onkwubiko, 1985).

By early 18th Century, Usman Danfodio the leader of the Sokoto Jihad cashed in on the declining fortunes of the Borno Empire and launched a sustained military assault on the western flank of the empire through his protegees, leading to the fall of the capital Ngazargamu. It took the intervention and the military dexterity of Mohammed El-kanemi a non Sefawa who mobilized the Shuwa Arabs and the Kanuri to frustrate the ambition of the Fulani from extending their caliphate up to Borno. Mohammed El-kanemi in 1814 moved the capital of Borno to Kukawa and presided over a rejuvenated empire (Cohen and Brenner, 1978). As at 1846 when El-kanemi's son Umar took over from his father his ascension officially marked the beginning of a new dynasty and the end of the Sefawa dynasty. Umar who adopted the title of Shehu instead of Mai unlike his father was a weak ruler and under his watch Borno began to experience rapid decline. The arrival of the trio of Britain, France and Germany in the Lake Chad Basin in the second half of the 19th Century created serious friction in the empire, leading to imperialist balkanization of the area. Borno Empire was already engulfed in a deep state of confusion when Rabeh az-Zubayr, from Sudan invade and sacked the reigning El-kanemi Shehu Abba Kyari at Kukawa and established his reign of terror from Dikwa as his capital in 1893(Ishaku, 2012). It took the combined efforts of Britain and France to dislodge Rabeh from Dikwa and assassinate him in 1900, following which the seat of Shehu of Borno was moved from Kukawa to Maiduguri the same year (Falola et al, 2014).

Having discussed the historical progression and trajectory of insurgent activities in pre-colonial Northeastern Nigeria, it is imperative to interrogate the causative factors of insurgency in pre-colonial Northeastern Nigeria, especially the Lake Chad Basin. The fundamental cause of insurgent activities among the heterogeneous groups that inhabited the Lake Chad Basin was the quest for power and independence. It was the desire of the big centralised political unit to incorporate other groups as vassal states to extract tributes and obtain slaves. While some of the ethnic groups submitted and became acculturated, some like the Jukun took their flight by migrating southward to North Central Nigeria from where they occasionally launched their attack on Borno. Some of the ethnic

groups however remain within the region to fight and negotiate their independence. The Mandara for instance moved from the bank of the Lake Chad to the mountains and highlands to establish their own chiefdom as a mark of resistance to Sefawa leadership and Islamic culture (Ishaku, 2012). It is on record that Mai Idris Alooma made frantic efforts to impose vassal status on the Mandara and also launched several slave raiding expeditions into the southern part of his empire. Thus, the Sefawa who were late comers to the Lake Chad area in the process of state formation precipitated an avalanche of insurgent activities (Cohen and Brenner, 1978). The Kanuris who inherited the remnant of the empire from the Sefawa after the role they played in thwarting the efforts of the Fulani from establishing a foothold in their region ultimately have the British colonial authority to thank for crushing the Rabeh dictatorial regime and bringing them to political reckoning. However, it is worth noting that the role of the British colonial authority in bringing smaller political units under the centralized political structure of the Shehu was a great source of tension during and after the introduction of colonial rule in Nigeria.

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### **Theoretical framework:**

This study is rooted within a theoretical framework of relative deprivation theory (RDT). Relative deprivation theory suggests that people who feel they are being deprived of something considered essential in their lives (e.g., social amenities, money, security, rights, political voice, status, etc.) may organize or join social movements or armed conflicts dedicated to obtaining the things of which they feel deprived. It is the conscious feeling of negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and present actualities. According to Nagel (1974), relative deprivation theorists believe that political discontent and its consequences—protest, instability, violence, revolution—depend not only on the absolute level of economic well-being, but also on the distribution of wealth.

In some cases, relative deprivation has been cited as a factor driving incidents of social disorder like rioting, looting, terrorism, and civil wars. In this nature, social movements and their associated disorderly acts can often be attributed to the grievances of people who feel they are being denied resources to which they are entitled. Consequently, relative deprivation model also provides an intellectual space and methodological underpinnings to understand the armed conflict and it is very much close to grievance perspective. Although, Aristotle argued that inferior's revolt in order that they may be equal, and equals that they may be superior. Such is the state of mind which creates revolution. Gurr (1970) was reputed as the most prominent proponent of relative deprivation theory of modern times. To Gur, it is almost a universal assumption that an inequitable distribution of resources and wealth will provoke violent rebellion; as he maintains that there are several factors of 'political violence' and 'political movement', but dominant causal factor seems to be the subjective sense of 'Relative Deprivation' of the collectivities or the mass of people.

Galtung (1964) alleged that those groups and societies who find themselves in a state of uncertainty along various economic and socio-political status are more likely to be provoked and exhibit aggressive behaviours. It should also be noted that there are a number of other factors and variables that can instigate the use of

violence as well. For example, the culture, the nature of economic relationships in the society, and the political environment. Burton (1979) established a relationship between frustration which pushes humans into acts of hostility and the need on the part of such individuals to gratify their basic essential needs. To him, people cannot be understood to condone practices and regimes that thwart their identity and other aspirations that are associated to their desires and because of this, they are constrained to react against the factors, groups and institutions that they see as being responsible for hampering such needs. On the other hand, individuals and sects will embrace any group or institution no matter how sinister, which tends to improve their lot and satisfy their basic needs of shelter, food, protection, social justice, etc.

There is no hiding the fact that frustration produces aggressive behaviour on the part of an individual, so does relative deprivation predict collective violence by social groups. Terlumun et al (2020), contend that a nation with legacies of economic quagmire, high unemployment rate and uneven economic development is a good ground on which terrorist seed can grow and flourish. Acute poverty and economic displacement of livelihoods have severely limited the options of vast majority of young Nigerians in the northern region. Persistent poverty, especially in the midst of plenty and affluence of the upper class, will invariably lead to feelings of frustration among the poor. It will generate hatred, distrust, envy and anger. These psychological situations lead to a loss and erosion of faith in the system, deprivation, alienation and hopelessness. At this point, hostility, antagonism, sabotage and indiscriminate aggression fester. To this end, fraternalistic relative deprivation, arising from poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination, and economic marginalization, can be used as mobilizing tools by insurgent groups to find support and recruits for terrorism and violence.

Olojo (2013) argues that high level of poverty makes it simpler for extremist groups like Boko Haram to assemble disgruntled mobs in pursuit of their own political gains. In Northern Nigeria, over 70 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, it is not difficult for any demagogue or religious bigot to rally the poor and impoverished as paraphernalia for their own personal aggrandizement. There is the added dimension of massive unemployment, especially within the burgeoning stratum of college graduates. When citizens are pressed to the lowest levels of anxiety, desperation and hopelessness, they can fall easy prey to insurgent groups like Boko Haram who offer them a sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, this theory has come under some scathing remarks. The relative deprivation theory (RDT) has some limitations when applied to the study of insurgency. It oversimplifies the causes and ignores structural factors like political representation. More importantly, it downplays the role of ideology which is often central to insurgency. Again, Rao (2000), argues that the theory has some of its own limits that prove it is insufficient in understanding the armed conflict across the world. To him, a position of relative deprivation does not generate a conflict. The structural conditions of relative deprivation provide only the necessary conditions. Relative deprivation theory neglects other underlying factors which can precipitate a conflict, such as, resource constraint, mobilisation, displacement, people's belief, etc. It completely overlooks the geographical terrain and the greed aspect of conflict. Being deprived

does not necessarily cause an armed conflict. For instance, Dharavi region of Mumbai, the second largest slum of the world, can be a good example of relative deprivation, but Mumbai has no record of violent conflicts.

The catalysts of insurgency in the contemporary Northeast Nigeria:

The insurgency in the Northeast has triggered a panic mood not only in that region but also across the entire northern zone. The sense of safety once experienced by Nigerians has become a memory in the figment of their imagination as virtually every part of the country has witnessed one form of security threat or another and it ranges from such visible threats like political violence, killing, kidnapping, rape, violent ethnic and religious rivalry, armed robbery attack, Boko Haram insurgency, herdsman and farmers clash, armed banditry, police brutality, etc., and non-visible threats to national security like, hunger, unemployment, intimidation, oppression, poverty, injustice, corruption, capital flight, relocation of businesses by multinational companies, electoral malfeasance and a whole lot of others.

Oke (2020), maintains that insurgency in Nigeria has attained an infamous status and has generally affected all the facets of the national life. There is no sector that is spared by this hydra-headed monster and it appears to be gathering momentum and alarming dimensions on a daily basis. The Nigerian State has lately been confronted with constant insurgent activities with the Northeast part of the country being worst hit. These security challenges which have social, economic, political and environmental dimensions, have affected the nation's stability and wellbeing adversely. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgency has brought about vicious devastation of properties and countless loss of lives especially within Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe States. Even fringe and contiguous states like Benue, Nasarawa, Katsina, Kaduna, etc., are not immune from the orgy of violence.

One constant question in the minds of any discerning observer is: what are the drivers of insurgency in the Northeast? In trying to provide an answer to the above question, Omodunbi, Adeyeye, and Ige (2021), opine that the failure of good governance is a central catalyst for political violence and a vital explanation for the emergence of the Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. To them, it is more sufficient to explain the totality of Boko Haram in the face of economic deformity/backwardness, lack of educational facility and general awareness cum the existence of wide gap between expectation and acquisition.

There is no gainsaying the fact that unemployment rate in Nigeria averaged 13.55 percent from 2006 until 2020, reaching an all-time high of 33.30 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020 a record that is capable of spurring the youth into crisis of insurgency (statista.com, 2020). Using both the international methodology which (covers persons aged 15–64 who during the reference period (which is usually the week preceding the time the survey is administered) were available for work, actively seeking work, but were unable to find work). And New Nigeria methodology which establishes (unemployment as the proportion of those in the labour force who were actively looking for work but could not find work for at least 20 hours during the reference period to the total currently active

(labour force) population. Accordingly, you are unemployed if you did absolutely nothing at all or did something but for less than 20 hours during the reference week).

Going by the above analysis, Northeast states are home to most unemployed youths in Nigeria. Relying on the International methodology and New Nigeria methodology, Adamawa State poverty level was 24.67%, 54.89%, Bauchi State 30.01%, 34.22%, Bornu State 23.85%, 43.25%, Gombe State 34.94%, 31.26%, Taraba State 36.17%, 31.55% and Yobe State 21.55%, 52.57% respectively (statista.com, 2020). The above number of unemployed young army of youths, makes a fertile breeding ground for recruitment into Boko Haram and other anti-state behaviours. To lay credence to the above assertion, in a study conducted by Omodunbi, Adeyeye, and Ige (2021), 246 respondents, constituting 64.1% of their population of study, strongly agreed that unemployment is one of the major causes of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.

Apart from unemployment, there are other socioeconomic factors that trigger insurgent activities in the Northeast of Nigeria. According to Kamta, Azadi and Scheffran (2000), northeast Nigeria is the poorest region of the country with underdeveloped and decaying infrastructures and has a high concentration of unemployed youths. This region also presents low school attendance rates among male and female household members. In the words of Owolabi (2021), Nigeria currently has 20 million out-of-school children, 13.2 million children out of this are victims of Boko Haram's activities in northeast Nigeria, making it the highest in the world. Braithwaite et al. (2014), finds a causal relationship between poverty and conflict. A close examination of the above will reveal that Sub-Saharan Africa is a typical example with many conflict frontlines. Take for instance, in 2002, about 35 poor countries identified in sub-Saharan Africa were all involved in conflicts. In the Horn of Africa in general, the spatial distribution of conflict indicates that poverty and youth unemployment are predominant in areas with conflict (Mengistu, 2015). There have been several armed attacks often between farmers and herders over resources such as water, livestock and grazing land in the Benue-Plateau axis leading to loss of lives and property. Although, poverty may not be the only cause of insurgency in the northeast, there is ample evidence to suggest that poverty may be an important factor for young people's desire to join the insurgency, given the subsequent financial reward.

It is also worthy to note that other factors that fuel insurgency in the northeast include quest for political power, dominance and supremacy by the political and influential class, religious fanaticism and intolerance, particularly divisive sermons and preaching of Islamic clerics that seek to interpret and impose the strictest form of Sharia, declining favourable environmental factors as majority of the rural populations are employed in the agriculture sector and as such, even minor climate deteriorations can precipitate devastating consequences. Other factors may include the long years of government neglect and abdication of functions such as the provision of basic social amenities especially in the hinterlands and

rural areas, extra-judicial killings and highhandedness of security agents in dealings with the civilian populace, etc.

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## Conclusion and Recommendations:

The purpose of this study was to establish whether the socioeconomic status in northeast Nigeria significantly contributed to the escalation of the current crisis in the region. The causal link between poverty, unemployment and illiteracy as factors of conflict in this region is not easily discernable, but the evidence suggests that the lack of economic opportunities and the lack of education may contribute to the festering of conflict hence heightening the crisis. It is often argued that the reasons for joining arm groups are usually external, rather than internal to the individuals and that the reason people join conflict may differ from county to country. In the case of northeast Nigeria, it is safe to argue based on findings in this paper that the low socioeconomic standard of the region and the existing poverty may have created a good breeding ground for an insurgent group. The findings in this paper also suggested the opportunistic nature of the Boko Haram group. They are opportunistic in the sense that even though the historical heritage of the region might not have been the principal cause for their radicalization, they make use of it in a propagandistic manner to indoctrinate young people. They are also opportunistic in their ability to enroll economically vulnerable people in their troops in exchange of small stipends. Finally, in an area where school attendance is the lowest in Nigeria, Boko Haram found uneducated youths that can easily be manipulated and indoctrinated, and given weapons to fight for a reason they often do not even understand.

Furthermore, the following policy recommendations can be essential in preventing future crisis of the same nature in the region:

Employment opportunities: there is urgent need for governments at all levels and development partners to rejig their strategies and establish productive industries and manufacturing companies that will offer the teeming jobless youths, opportunities to engage themselves in meaningful ventures that will earn them decent incomes. What is the need of spending long years in trainings and schools only to graduate and become a professional jobseeker? If this lack of job openings is taken care of, the menace of insurgency will naturally be tackled by fifty percent, as the sect will be denied of foot soldiers.

Again, there has to be concerted effort and initiative to promote functional educational system which among other things, lays emphasis on self-reliance and entrepreneurship. As stated above, there are estimated 13.2 million out-of-school-children in the northeast (Owolabi, 2021). The implication is that the future looks grim for these kids that are not in school at the moment. Boko Haram and other dissident groups like the Islamic State (ISIS), Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al shabaab, etc., will, sadly, recruit future fighters from that number. The governments at local, state and federal must put on their thinking caps and device ways and means of getting these children back to standard and well-equipped schools for national stability and sustenance.

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