



# **“LIVING WITH TWO WORRISOME PANDEMICS”**

**How the COVID-19  
Pandemic is Shaping  
Conflict in Nigeria**

# Key Findings and Implications

Drawing on workshops and interviews with 242 individuals in four states (Adamawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Plateau) plus Abuja, we find that the COVID-19 pandemic has **exacerbated pre-existing conflict dynamics** through three pathways:

- › **Increasing insecurity and armed group activities:** COVID-19 lockdowns, border closures, and movement restrictions contributed to pervasive insecurity by intensifying widespread economic hardship and intensifying gaps in security provision.
  - Both of these dynamics have strengthened and emboldened armed groups, fueling kidnappings and other attacks.
- › **Intensifying youth grievances and sparking social unrest:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the growth of youth-led online activism and stoked pre-existing grievances about unjust governance, which supported the emergence of the EndSARS protests.
  - These protests showcased the potential for youth-led activism to be a positive form of civic engagement, but also highlighted how mass mobilization has the potential to give rise to violent social unrest.
- › **Shifting patterns of social cohesion and conflict between and within identity groups:** COVID-19 lockdowns and movement restrictions shaped dynamics around resource scarcity, social cohesion, and identity-based conflict in multiple ways.
  - Lockdowns and movement restrictions generally reduced inter-group conflict by strengthening social cohesion and reducing many types of disputes about the use of scarce resources.
  - The end of lockdowns led to an increase in inter-group conflict and violence by reducing the perception that COVID-19 was a shared external threat and by reintroducing intense resource competition.
  - Within smaller, homogenous groups such as communities and families, lockdowns led to an increase in conflict by straining bonds of social support, reducing trust, and increasing intra-group disputes.

These findings have implications for how policymakers, donors, and practitioners should design and implement future responses to COVID-19 and other shocks in Nigeria:

- › Future COVID-19 restrictions should be coupled with **investments in economic support, security provision, and programs that build social cohesion**. Decisions to relax lockdowns should be combined with efforts to **bolster COVID-19 prevention behaviors and vaccine acceptance** as well as programs that **support livelihoods and strengthen dispute resolution mechanisms**.
- › Responses to COVID-19 and other shocks should **integrate good governance principles** to help improve effectiveness of service delivery and build trust between communities and government actors.
  - Such efforts should support and protect Nigeria's burgeoning **online civic spaces** by promoting digital civic engagement and by **countering attempts to either curtail or weaponize social media**.
- › Responses to COVID-19 and other shocks in Nigeria should draw on **local knowledge and creativity** by incorporating inclusive community engagement into program design and implementation.

# Nigeria



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## Background

Throughout the past year, Nigeria has been in the midst of a crisis that is defined by insecurity and violence, grievances about governance, economic hardship, hunger, and strain on natural resources. These challenges pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic, but have intensified over the past year, coinciding with Nigeria's attempts to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

## Conflict Patterns Prior to COVID-19

There are many types of conflict and violence within Nigeria that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these types of conflict are characterized by different actors, patterns of conflict, and types of violence (The Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution 2018, ACAPS 2020, Idowu 2020, Search for Common Ground 2020).<sup>1</sup> These include:

- › The eleven year-long insurgency by ISWAP and JAS, and counter-insurgency by military and vigilante groups in Northeast (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2015, Suleiman and Aminul Karim 2015, International Crisis Group 2019, Allen 2019, Amao 2020)



<sup>1</sup> In addition to these large regional conflicts that span multiple LGAs and states, there are numerous other localized violent conflicts that emerge out of disputes and tensions both between and within communities, and between communities and the government (The Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution 2018).

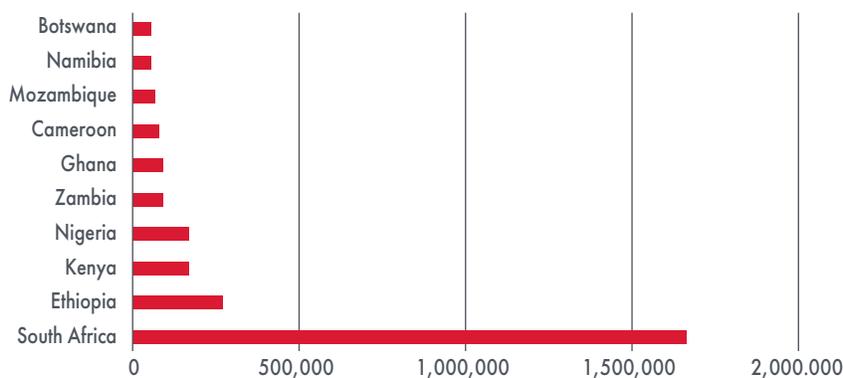
Dr. Ryan Sheely and Kamran Hakimian served as lead authors of this chapter.

The report title is based on a quote from a civil society leader: "In the true sense, community members are least concerned about the COVID pandemic, because they are living with two worrisome pandemics that have led to mass displacements of the local populations" (Civil Society Leader-Katsina).

- › Inter-communal conflict across multiple dimensions including ethnicity, religion (Muslim/Christian), livelihood (herder/farmer), and indigene/settler status in North Central, Northeast, and Northwest (Krause 2016, International Crisis Group 2017, Dion and Kemakolam 2018, Chukwuma 2020, Vinson 2020, Lichtenheld 2021).<sup>2</sup>
- › Large-scale organized crime, gang violence, and banditry, including kidnapping for ransom. Criminal violence and banditry are widespread throughout the country, but are especially prominent in Northwest, North Central, Southeast, and South-South. Gang violence is prevalent in many urban areas, with noteworthy pockets in cities and towns in Adamawa, Plateau, and Bauchi States among others (Lar 2019, Barnett 2020, Campbell and McCaslin 2020, International Crisis Group 2020, Haruna 2020).<sup>3</sup>
- › Militancy and insurgency surrounding oil production in South-South (Niger Delta) (Alozie 2020, Campbell 2020, Wodu 2020)
- › A separatist movement by Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Southeast (Abada et al 2020, Akwagyiram 2021, Campbell 2021, Craig 2021)

## COVID-19 Spread and Response in Nigeria

Nigeria officially recorded its index case of COVID-19 on February 28, 2020. The first death from COVID-19 in the country was reported less than one month later, on March 23. Since that time, there have been 166,518 officially reported COVID-19 cases and 2,099 deaths country-wide as of June 1, 2021, accounting for the 4th highest number of cases and the 5th highest number of deaths in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1). Nationwide, there have been two distinct waves of infection: a first wave starting in March/April 2020 and peaking in late June/early July and a second wave starting in early December and peaking in late January 2021 (JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data 2021). COVID-19 vaccination started in March 2021; as of June 1, 2021, 0.95% of the population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine (JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data 2021).



**Figure 1. Top 10 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with the Highest Number of COVID-19 Cases, as of June 1, 2021. Data source: JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data**

A majority of the cases that have been reported to date are from four states/territories, which are each home to one of Nigeria's ten largest cities: Lagos, FCT (Abuja), Plateau, and Kaduna (NCDC 2021). Epidemiological research indicates that officially reported statistics on positive cases and deaths may severely undercount the actual extent of the spread and lethality of the disease, making it very difficult to compile an accurate picture of COVID-19 spread in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In the North Central region, there are also protests and social unrest related to the ban of a Shia group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) (Tangaza 2015, Mawani 2020).  
<sup>3</sup> Some urban gangs, such as Sara Suka in Bauchi and Plateau states and Yan Shilla in Adamawa State have also been connected to patterns of patronage, political violence, and election interference supported by politicians (Haruna and Jumba 2011, Owonikoko and Momodu 2020).  
<sup>4</sup> A February 2021 study by Nigeria's Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) collected blood samples from a representative sample of households in four states (Lagos, Enugu, Nasarawa, and Gombe) and used antibody testing to construct an alternative estimate of COVID-19 prevalence. For Lagos, the study found a 23% prevalence of antibodies, suggesting that the official estimate of cases could be substantially lower than the actual prevalence (Akinwotu 2021, Center for International Health, Education, and



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Nigeria's public health response to the threat of COVID-19 has largely followed the pattern of the spread of the disease across states and over time. The initial response from both federal and state governments was swift in March and April 2020. The federal government and most state governments created inter-agency COVID-19 Task Forces to monitor the situation and implement restrictions. While the specific set of restrictions varied from state to state, every state-level response included a mix of lockdowns, curfews, and closures of international and state borders, as well as restrictions on market activity, religious worship, and other large gatherings (Dan-Nwafor et al 2020).

Lockdowns and restrictions have been introduced in three waves, broadly tracking with the key moments in the spread of the disease: 1) a first round of restrictions from late March to early May 2020, corresponding to the global declaration of the pandemic and the first cases and deaths in Nigeria, 2) a second round of restrictions in June 2020, corresponding to first wave of increasing cases, 3) targeted restrictions during and after the Christmas holidays, corresponding to the second wave of increasing cases in November 2020, and 4) new restrictions in May 2021, which were driven by concerns about the spread of new variants of the coronavirus.

## Methodology

The purpose of the research that we present in this chapter is to uncover the nature and extent of linkages between the COVID-19 pandemic and violent conflict in Nigeria. In particular, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- › How have COVID-19 and associated response measures changed the drivers of conflict in Nigeria?
- › In what ways have individuals' lived experiences of conflict been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- › To what extent is there variation in the impact of COVID-19 across different types of conflict within Nigeria?

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Biosecurity 2021).

To answer these questions, we focused on four states (Adamawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Plateau), plus the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja.<sup>5</sup> These case study locations were selected to ensure variation across a sample of three of the major types of violent conflict that predated the COVID-19 pandemic (the ISWAP and JAS insurgencies, intercommunal conflict, and banditry and kidnapping), as well as the widespread social unrest that emerged in late 2020 in conjunction with the EndSARS protests and looting of warehouses storing government food relief (known as “palliatives”).

The primary sources of data for this study are a set of 40 participatory systems mapping workshops (with an average of 5 participants per workshop) and 18 semi-structured interviews with a total of 238 individuals in 29 communities in the four states and one territory included in the research. We complement these in-depth qualitative data sources with additional data, including relevant conflict datasets, secondary sources, expert interviews, and workshops with team members from Mercy Corps’ Nigeria office.

Within each community, we sought to identify a diverse set of research participants. In general, we actively sought a balanced participation of male and female participants, and substantial representation of both youth and adults (Table 1). Depending on the demographic makeup of each community, we also sought a sample of participants which included the range of identity and population groups present (religious groups, ethnicities; livelihoods; socio-economic status).

	Youth	Adult	Age not specified	Totals
Female	40 (16.8%)	52 (21.8%)	40 (16.8%)	<b>40 (16.8%)</b>
Male	58 (24.4%)	63 (26.5%)	1 (0.4%)	<b>122 (51.3%)</b>
Gender not specified	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	20 (8.4%)	<b>22 (9.2%)</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>99 (41.6%)</b>	<b>116 (41.6%)</b>	<b>23 (9.7%)</b>	<b>238 (100.0%)</b>

**Table 1. Breakdown of Research Participants, by Age and Gender**

The purpose of these two types of data collection were to gather in-depth information about how communities experienced and perceived local political, economic, and security conditions during the pandemic. In the workshops, facilitators guided the participants through a process of identifying the most important drivers of conflict in their community during the pandemic period and collaboratively drawing a map of the causes and consequences of these dynamics. The semi-structured interviews also focused on identifying the causes and consequences of conflict in the participants’ community during the pandemic period, but placed a greater emphasis on probing for broader contextual details and illustrative narratives.

These methods have the advantage of recording detailed accounts of local understandings of the connections between the COVID-19 and pandemic, which may be overlooked by other types of research approaches that focus on short-term trends in violent incidents or surveys of citizen perceptions. At the same time, a limitation of these methods is that they represent

<sup>5</sup> As part of SPARC (Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises), Mercy Corps and consortium partners are investigating the connections between COVID-19, conflict, economic and environmental shocks, and rural livelihoods in Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan. This research, which is being implemented through repeated qualitative interviews with pastoralists and farmers in each country, will lead to various publications in the coming year which will further build on select themes discussed in this report. Throughout this report, we note relevant overlaps with preliminary findings and planned publications from SPARC. See Mayhew et al 2021 for a summary of initial findings about the connections between COVID-19 and conflict dynamics in Kaduna, Plateau, Adamawa, Kogi, and Benue States, which most closely corresponds to this chapter’s discussion of Pathway 3.



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the experiences and perspectives of a relatively small number of individuals from a fraction of the communities and states in Nigeria. We addressed this limitation by intentionally sampling a diverse set of locations and individuals within those communities. While this approach makes it possible to start identifying overarching similarities and differences that cut across localities, the findings presented here should be thought of as a working set of hypotheses that should be further tested and refined using a wide range of data sources in a broader set of contexts across Nigeria.

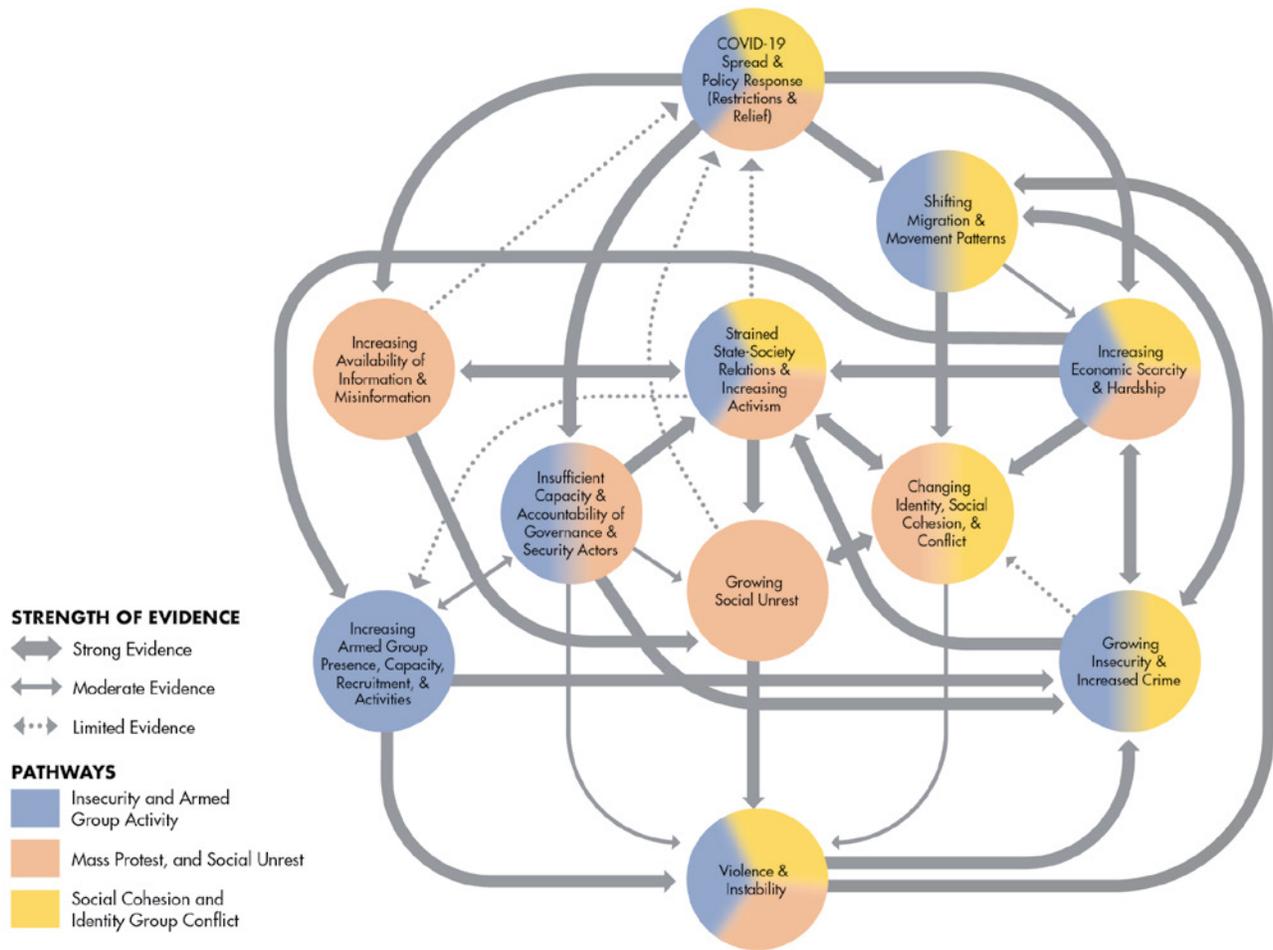
We analyzed the workshop and interview data using a set of methods based on systems analysis and process tracing, with the aim of assessing whether there are systematic pathways connecting the COVID-19 pandemic to conflict and violence, both directly and through influencing other conflict drivers and dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

Analysis of the data from community workshops and interviews reveals a wide diversity of local understandings and experiences of conflict and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Our dataset includes hundreds of locally-specific factors that drive conflict and promote peace, which we organized into 11 broad categories (Figure 2). These categories include perceptions about COVID-19 spread and response, manifestations of violence and instability, and a number of social, economic, and political drivers of conflict.



<sup>6</sup> For more detail on this analytic approach and how it was deployed in this case study, see [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix D](#).

# Findings: Pathways Linking COVID-19 and Conflict in Nigeria



**Figure 2. Summary of Connections between COVID-19 and Conflict in Nigeria**

Our analysis reveals a complex conflict system that is characterized by an overwhelming number of direct and indirect connections, which shape conflict through three broad pathways:<sup>7</sup>

1. Increasing insecurity and armed group activities
2. Intensifying youth grievances and social unrest
3. Shifting patterns of social cohesion and conflict between and within identity groups.

None of these three pathways were created or caused solely by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, specific elements of the COVID-19 response (lockdowns, border closures, and the distribution of palliative food aid) aggravated multiple drivers of conflict and reinforced pre-existing patterns of behavior by the government, armed groups, and community members.

<sup>7</sup> Each of these pathways can be thought of as a set of hypothesized causal mechanisms that explain how chains of cause and effect relationships between the individual elements within the broader conflict system shape patterns of behavior over time (Homer and Oliva 2001, Beach and Pedersen 2019). We assess the strength of evidence for each causal link within the broader system map by evaluating the level of reliability and corroboration of the accounts in the data and the extent to which the patterns in the data are corroborated by other sources of theory and evidence from Nigeria and other relevant contexts. This set of findings builds on previous Mercy Corps research that explores how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped governance and conflict dynamics in Borno State (Sheely and Sloan 2020). For a more detailed description of the analytic approach and a summary of the evidence underpinning each pathway, see [Appendix D](#).

Federal and State governments acted rapidly and imposed restrictions that were consistent with global public health guidance. These rapid and stringent COVID-19 response measures likely saved thousands of lives. It is not within the scope or aim of this case study to assess the epidemiological appropriateness or effectiveness of the measures taken. However, our research indicates clearly that the COVID-19 containment strategy had significant secondary impacts on the country’s conflict dynamics.

### Pathway 1: Insecurity and Armed Group Activity

Within the communities included in this study, dynamics related to the COVID-19 response, insecurity, and armed group activity are most prominent in rural areas of Adamawa and Katsina States, due to the presence of highly organized armed groups (Table 2). In rural Adamawa State, respondents described the presence and activities of Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) associated with the JAS and ISWAP insurgencies. In rural Katsina state, community members described highly-organized and well-armed banditry gangs as criminal organizations involved in seizing property, preying on farmers, and establishing control over rural areas to carry out a variety of illicit activities. While there are important differences between AOGs and banditry gangs, both types of groups have clear leadership and organizational structures that allow them to operate across a large geographic area. Interviewees in urban areas across our entire sample also described a number of other less formal armed groups that participate in organized criminal violence and kidnapping, including banditry gangs, cults, and other small criminal gangs. In the following discussion, we use the general term “armed groups” when discussing patterns that are consistent across all of these types of groups. In cases where the COVID-19 response led to variation in armed group behaviors, we specify the relevant groups or geographic locations.<sup>8</sup>

	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Banditry Gangs					
Ethnic Militia					
AOGs (JAS, ISWAP, and Other Splinter Groups)					
Other Semi-Organized Criminal Groups				 	
Community Collaboration with Armed Groups (Informants, Providing Supplies, etc)				 	
 Urban areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts					
 Urban areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references					
					
					

**Table 2. Types of Armed Groups Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations**

<sup>8</sup> Community interviewees in Adamawa State did not typically distinguish between JAS, ISWAP, and other splinter groups, instead using more general terms such as “Boko Haram”, “insurgents”, and “militants”. Similarly, community interviewees in Katsina State did not provide enough details to identify the full set of banditry gangs active in the state or to identify the full patterns of alliance and conflict between organizations. As we describe in more detail below, we categorize vigilante groups as “security actors” rather than “armed groups”, given that their stated purpose is to provide security as a public good within a given locality. Sometimes vigilantes were accused of extorting the community and/or committing acts of violence, but if this seemed to be a deviation from their core mandate, we do not change their designation. See [Appendix B](#) for a more detailed overview of definitions for the main types of armed groups and security actors identified in our dataset.

## Pre-Existing Dynamics: Economic Hardship and Governance Gaps

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardship and grievances about governance were both important underlying causes of armed group recruitment. Economic hardship allows armed groups to recruit new members, either by directly offering compensation or simply by offering a livelihood opportunity and sense of purpose to unemployed and under-employed youth. Grievances about governance shape armed group recruitment by creating a mix of anger and frustration with injustice and a lack of political voice that armed groups can use to attract new recruits (Mercy Corps 2015, Mercy Corps 2016). Grievances about governance are also intensified by economic hardship, which can fuel political grievances and mistrust.<sup>9</sup>

Both of these channels for recruitment increase the capacity of armed groups, leading to increased attacks against civilians and state security forces (Torbjörnsson and Jonsson 2017, Allen 2019). A consistent tempo of attacks by armed groups and counter-attacks by state security forces in turn intensifies community-level perceptions of insecurity (Suleiman and Karim 2015, Verjee and Kwaja 2020). In addition to fueling further cycles of grievances and armed group recruitment, perceptions around insecurity also drive a number of individual and collective attempts by communities to provide security themselves, both through purchasing/making small arms and light weapons (SALW) and by creating vigilante groups that aim to fill gaps in protection and law enforcement at the local level (Ibrahim and Bala 2018, Felbab-Brown 2020).



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## COVID-19 Response, Economic Hardship, and Armed Group Recruitment

The federal and state government response to COVID-19 in Nigeria intensified pre-existing dynamics connecting economic hardship, grievances about governance, and armed group activity (Figure 3).

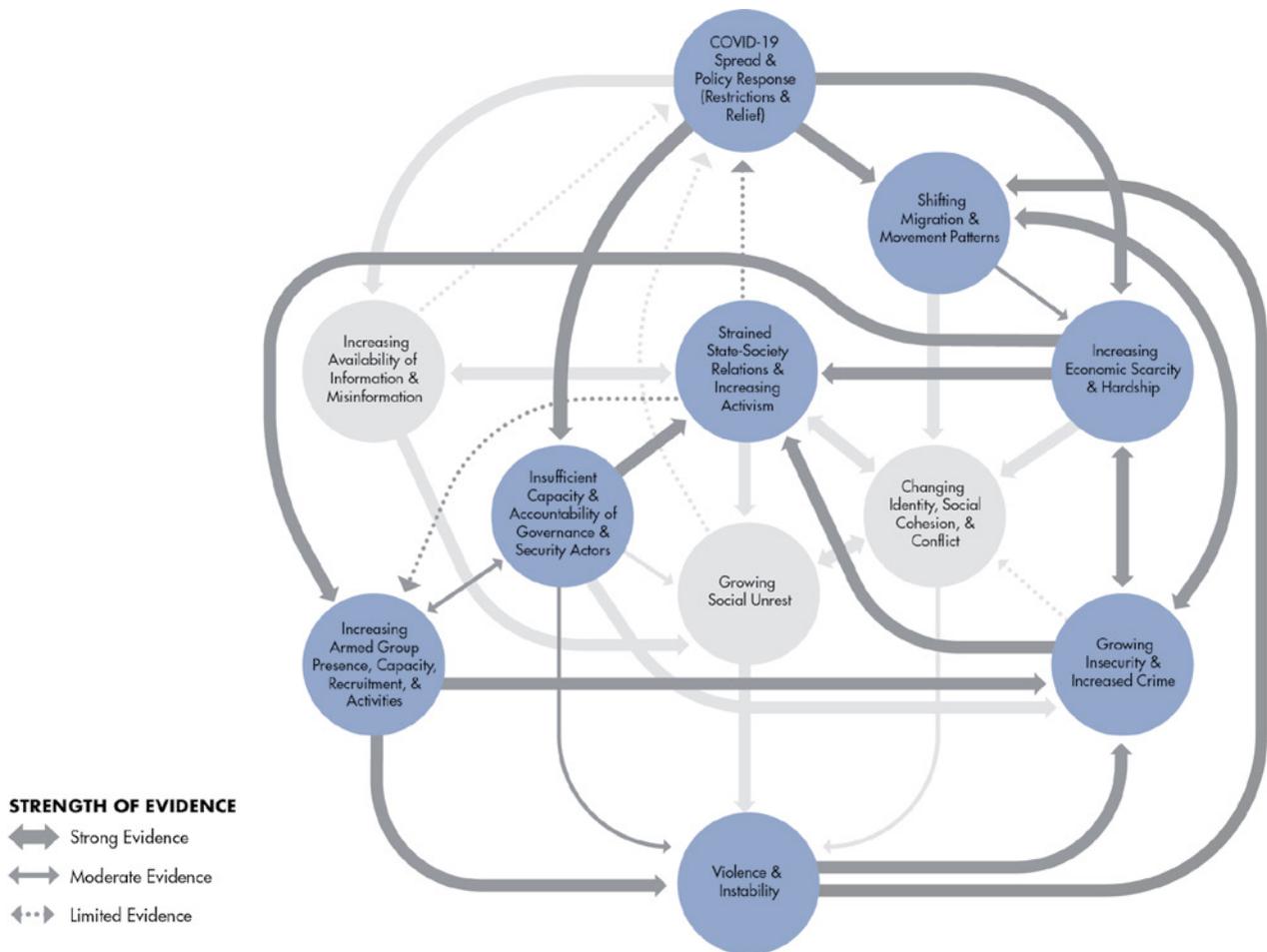
COVID-19 lockdowns, movement restrictions, and border closures led to a sharp increase in economic hardship across Nigeria. The International Food Policy Research Institute estimated a 38% drop in GDP and an 18% decline in agri-food GDP in Nigeria during the five-week lockdown period from late March to early April 2020 (Thurlow 2020). The impact of lockdowns and movement restrictions on economic activity was also visible in the overall performance of the economy. By the third quarter of 2020, the GDP had contracted for the second consecutive quarter, and with the oil sector hit hard, the country slipped into a recession (Al Jazeera 2020). Further, Mercy Corps' COVID-19 Rapid Assessment conducted by the Rural Resilience Activity in 2020 found that many households experienced large decreases in their income. For instance, on average, in Adamawa state, weekly household income reduced by more than half (N9,400 or USD 23.80), and average household debt increased by roughly a quarter (N5,800 or USD 14.70).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in The World Bank's National Longitudinal Phone Survey, 67 percent of households reported a decrease in their income and 69 percent of households have been affected by food insecurity (World Bank 2020). The combination of income loss and decreased access to food and consumer goods — driven by decreased trade due to insecurity and border restrictions, and the lockdown's effect on production — has led to substantial price inflation and increased household food insecurity (Oluocha 2021, Osa-Brown & Olurounbi 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, an impact evaluation of a Mercy Corps vocational education and cash transfer program in Afghanistan argues that perceptions of government commitment and capacity were the most important part of how economic interventions shaped youths' support for armed groups (Lyall et al 2020). This fits with broader research findings by Mercy Corps that youth grievances and perceptions of injustice play a larger role than unemployment in shaping support for violence (Mercy Corps 2015).

<sup>10</sup> These figures are based on the COVID-19 rapid market assessment conducted by Mercy Corps' Rural Resilience Activity team in August 2020.

Across all of our research sites, interviewees described COVID-19 as a catastrophic economic event for a substantial number of households, and none more so than the working poor, who had very few assets. Petty traders and small businesses often also could not weather the economic shock of the COVID-19 lockdown and other restrictions. In these cases, small-business entrepreneurs found themselves unable to earn a living. Rural areas suffered significant economic setbacks as well, due to the closure of markets, bans on movement (and trade) across national and state borders, and an inability to travel to farms.<sup>11</sup> A constant refrain from the data was having ‘no viable options or alternatives’ for livelihood, and widespread desperation to provide for one’s self and one’s family.

Community members frequently highlighted the disastrous economic consequences of various aspects of the COVID-19 response and the ways in which these drove recruitment into armed groups and ongoing cycles of attacks.<sup>12</sup> For example, economic insecurity allowed banditry gangs to recruit in Katsina State, positioning themselves an economic outlet of last resort for desperate households recently pummeled by the disruption of trade routes across international and state borders, increases in the price of goods, closures of local markets and businesses, and job losses for large portions of the population.<sup>13</sup> Increasing insecurity due to kidnapping, theft, and bandit attacks further depressed economic activity by reducing the ability of people to engage in farming or trade.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3. Pathway 1- Insecurity and Armed Groups**

11 Forthcoming research from SPARC will investigate longer-term impacts of COVID restrictions (and other shocks) on livelihoods and market system resilience.  
 12 Female Workshop 9- Adamawa, Female Workshop 6-Adamawa  
 13 Male Workshop #1- Katsina; Female Workshop 2- Katsina; Civil Society Leader- Katsina; Female Youth Workshop 11- Katsina; Female Youth Workshop 4  
 14 Male Workshop #1- Katsina; Male Youth Workshop 4- Katsina; Female Youth Workshop 10- Katsina



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COVID-related losses of income and insecurity increased the willingness of previously unaffiliated individuals to support armed groups. Interviewees described a rise in indirect modes of support for AOGs in Adamawa State and for banditry gangs in Katsina State. Indirect support for armed groups included serving as informants to help armed groups plan attacks, providing supplies and food, and smuggling supplies and illicit goods across state/international borders and through checkpoints.<sup>15</sup>

Male workshop participants in Katsina described a cycle of economic hardship, insecurity, and armed group recruitment during the pandemic, saying:

**›** *“On the side of informants for the bandits we are seeing more informants living within our communities. Some are caught and even killed. Also, those herders that have been disposed of their livestock by the bandits, realizing they have nothing more to survive on, sometimes decide for their children to join the bandits, so they can at least get something back for their families”.*<sup>16</sup>

These additional sources of personnel, information, and supplies led to shifts in strategies and tactics for armed groups. In Katsina, increased personnel and informants allowed banditry gangs to expand targeted attacks on villages and kidnapping for ransom, while maintaining and consolidating control over territories outside of the reach of state security forces.<sup>17</sup> A group of male workshop participants in Katsina described this dynamic, saying:

”There were changes in bandit tactics as the pandemic period allowed them sufficient time to strategize and plan worse attacks. They recruited informants from the community who supplied them the information they need in these localities and they also used women to supply them with weapons through the borders as they cross over with food items such as rice.”<sup>18</sup>

This increase in the severity of banditry attacks during the pandemic period was also associated with the use of kidnapping as a tool for forced recruitment. A group of female workshop participants described this pattern, saying:

”The bandits kidnap boys and refuse to return (them) to use them as bandits. They train them and convert them to bandits. They sometimes recruit forcefully by kidnapping those who are able to pay ransom for the release of their relative who has been a hostage. They’ll collect the money from them, and exchange them with the first hostage. They also kidnap women to use as their cook for them and pay the husbands some huge amounts of money as payment for keeping the women with them.”<sup>19</sup>



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In Adamawa, respondents described a reduction in AOG attacks on villages and a shift towards kidnappings and targeted attacks on security forces.<sup>20</sup> Workshop participants in Adamawa described how intelligence from informants facilitated attacks on security forces, saying:

”During the pandemic, Boko Haram intelligence on our community facilitated the attacks on security personnel while they were out socializing. Their ammunition was collected in the process. This follows their pattern of disarming our security personnel.”<sup>21</sup>

18 Male Workshop 1- Katsina

19 Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina

20 Community members describe this as a shift from a pattern of increasing attacks on villages immediately prior to the pandemic. As we describe below, this shift in the patterns of AOG attacks is driven in part by the strong security response within the state. These patterns are described in numerous interviews and workshops, including Male Youth Workshop 3-Adamawa, Male Workshop 5- Adamawa, Female Workshop 6-Adamawa, Female Workshop 4-Adamawa, Religious Leader 1- Adamawa, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa, Male Workshop 3- Adamawa

21 Male Youth Workshop 3-Adamawa

## Enforcement of COVID-19 Restrictions and Insecurity

These patterns of rising armed group attacks and kidnappings have contributed to a growing sense of insecurity and fear, which community members generally described as worsening since the beginning of the pandemic (Figure 4).<sup>22</sup> There was a 69% increase in the number of violent events nationwide (including attacks, abductions and forced disappearance, sexual violence, explosions and remote violence, and mob violence) in 2020 compared to 2019 (ACLED 2021). Cases of kidnapping more than doubled in 2020, with more than half of recorded cases taking place in northern and central Nigeria (Ayandele and Goos 2021).



**Figure 4. Violent Events in Nigeria 2019-2020.**  
Data Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

This rising sense of insecurity was reported even in communities outside of areas where AOGs and banditry gangs are active. In urban areas, rising insecurity was driven largely by increases in theft and robbery, both by individuals, and also increasingly by a variety of other organizations, including cults, criminal gangs, and loosely organized “group robberies.”<sup>23</sup>

The COVID-19 response had an impact on insecurity by altering the presence, activity, and capacity of government security actors and vigilante groups (Table 3). Across communities, respondents noted the involvement of government security

<sup>22</sup> Male Workshop 1- Katsina, Female Workshop 10-Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 3-Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1-Adamawa  
<sup>23</sup> Male Workshop 4- Abuja, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau, Female Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Youth Urban Male Workshop 3- Plateau

	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Government Security Forces-Military and Police (Increase/Decrease)	 (Increase)	 (Increase)	 (Increase)	 (Decrease)	 (Increase)
Vigilante Groups		 	 	 	 
Vigilante Groups- Formalization and Collaboration with Government Security Forces					

 **Urban areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts**  
 **Urban areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references**

 **Rural areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts**  
 **Rural areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references**

**Table 3. Types of Security Actors Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations<sup>24</sup>**

actors in enforcing lockdowns and other COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>25</sup> Because this new role for government security actors was not typically accompanied by increases in personnel or resources, existing security actors were shifted into COVID-19 enforcement from other types of tasks. As a result, the process of enforcing COVID-19 restrictions intensified an uneven pattern of state presence and capacity that was present before the pandemic, which in turn shaped the strategic decisions of armed groups and community grievances about the government.

In localities where community members reported an increase in the presence and visibility of state security forces (Adamawa State, Abuja and urban areas in Plateau and Kaduna States), this surge in government presence was typically linked to a reduction in attacks by armed groups and an increase in perceptions of security.<sup>26</sup> However, community members also reported that increases in the presence of government security forces were also often accompanied by corresponding increases in heavy-handedness by security actors, which fueled grievances about governance. These grievances in turn created a fertile ground for recruitment by armed groups, as well as participation in online and in-person activism and protests.<sup>27</sup>

In communities where government presence remained limited or decreased (primarily in Katsina State), community members reported that government preoccupation with enforcing COVID-19 restrictions was accompanied by reduced effort and attention to protecting communities against rising crime and violence. The absence of government security forces in many rural areas led to increased attacks by armed groups on villages, which further intensified community grievances about government performance, fueling further cycles of armed group recruitment. As a group of male community members in Katsina state put it:

24 This table summarizes the patterns in types of government and non-government security actors described within our qualitative dataset and is not meant to be an exhaustive or representative ranking of the presence of each of these actors within each state.

25 Female Workshop 3- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

26 Male Youth Civil Society Leader- Kaduna

27 For a more detailed description of the linkage between enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions, grievances against the government, and participation in protests, see the discussion of Pathway 2 below.

*“The Government’s lack of willpower to curb the incessant attacks and kidnapping by bandits in the community has in many ways exposed her weaknesses. These attacks heightened during the pandemic period as the government diverted her attention and resources to curb the spread of the virus.”<sup>28</sup>*

Increasing insecurity and uneven capacity of state security forces during the pandemic period also led to the creation and expansion of vigilante groups and other forms of organized community self-protection. Vigilante group presence and activity is widespread across the study area, both in rural communities in Adamawa and Katsina directly impacted by AOGs, as well as in urban communities in these states and in Jos and Kaduna.<sup>29</sup> In communities where vigilante groups had not been active before the pandemic, community members described the creation of new vigilante groups.<sup>30</sup> In other communities with a longer history of vigilante groups and community security provision, community members described improvements in vigilante group training, professionalization, equipment, and morale.<sup>31</sup> In both cases, these pandemic-era expansions in vigilante group presence and capacity were described as being supported by a mix of community contributions and support from/coordination with state security forces.<sup>32</sup>



Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters

While increases in vigilante group presence and capacity during the pandemic period were widespread across our study area, the role that vigilantes played in shaping conflict, violence, and insecurity varied substantially across communities. In many communities, increased vigilante presence and capacity was associated with reported reductions in violent attacks by armed groups and increases in perception of the level of security by community members.<sup>33</sup> However, other communities reported systematic patterns of heavy-handedness and indiscriminate violence by vigilante groups, including violent extrajudicial punishments (“jungle justice”), extortion of community members, and prejudicial profiling and harassment of youth or members of particular ethnic groups as bandits or insurgents.<sup>34</sup> Youth workshop participants in Plateau State described this duality of vigilante forces, saying:

*“There was an increase in criminal activities across ethnic and religious divides, which created more support from the police force to the vigilante group to intensify patrol and restrict people from movement outside their communities. Some vigilantes use that to oppress and extort community people while most helped prevent crime and were attacked by criminals and injured.”<sup>35</sup>*

28 Male Workshop 1-Katsina

29 Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Male Herder Workshop- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 6- Katsina, Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau

30 Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Female Civil Society Leader- Katsina

31 Male Workshop 1- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina

32 Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Male Workshop 7- Katsina, Community Youth Leader-Kaduna

33 Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Female Civil Society Leader- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 11- Katsina

34 Fulani Chief- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau

35 Youth Urban Workshop 3- Plateau

Variation in the presence of norms and institutions that promote accountability and inclusion accounts for differences in the ability of communities and state actors to constrain the behaviors of vigilante groups and state security actors.<sup>36</sup> For example, in one community in Adamawa State, the military responded to patterns of heavy-handed law enforcement by state security forces by creating a new accountability mechanism that allowed community members to voice complaints. Community members described that this new institution helped them to feel more secure and increased their trust in security actors.<sup>37</sup>

Respondents noted a diverse array of motivations for recruitment into vigilante groups, ranging from a sense of public-spirited altruism, to frustration with the government, to vengeance against armed groups, to a desire for income and status.<sup>38</sup> Localized institutions for recruiting, training, and compensating members of vigilante groups can strongly influence which types of motivations predominate within a given group. Transparent and accountable recruitment can increase the extent to which newfound vigilante group capacity is used in the interest of public security.<sup>39</sup>

## Pathway 2: Youth Activism, Mass Protest, and Social Unrest

Within the communities included in this study, dynamics related to the COVID-19 response, online activism, and youth grievances are most prominent in urban communities in and around Abuja (FCT), Jos (Plateau State), Kaduna (Kaduna State), and Yola (Adamawa State). Most discussions of these dynamics within our study area focused on the EndSARS protests that took place around the country in October 2020 and the concurrent raids on warehouses where government palliatives were being stored (Agbedo et al 2020, Effoduh 2020, Ogunmodede 2020). These discussions highlighted two closely related types of phenomenon (which sometimes took place at the same time): 1) peaceful mass protests and 2) social unrest characterized by violent demonstrations, violent intervention against protests (either by security forces or counter-protestors), and/or other instances of rioting and looting. In addition to the EndSARS protests and palliative warehouse raids, interviewees also reported a number of smaller-scale instances of activism, protest, and social unrest that took place during the pandemic period (Table 4).



Teo Inspiro/Shutterstock

36 Collaboration between government security forces and vigilante groups does not on its own appear to have led to increased restraint by either type of actor. In fact, in some cases, government security actors would co-opt community vigilantes, leading them to re-inforce predatory and discriminatory behavior towards communities.

37 Community Workshop 5- Adamawa

38 Male Youth Workshop 3- Katsina, Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 11- Kasina, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna

39 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Male Workshop 7- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 5- Katsina

	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Online Activism					
Palliative Looting					
EndSARS Protests					
Protests Against Insecurity					
Gender / GBV Protests					
Protests About Governance					
Local Protests (Other)					
Urban areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts		Rural areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts			
Urban areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references		Rural areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references			

**Table 4. Types of Activism, Protest, and Social Unrest Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations<sup>40</sup>**

## Pre-Existing Dynamics: Technology, Youth Grievances, and Activism

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and youth-led activism were both important underlying causes of public protests and social unrest.<sup>41</sup> Over the past ten years, the level of access to ICTs such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets has increased substantially in Nigeria, which has led to corresponding increases in the use of internet, text messaging, and social media apps (Ogbuabor et al 2017).<sup>42</sup> This spike in internet access is particularly pronounced among young people. As of 2019, 70% of Nigerians aged 18 – 35 years old had access to the internet, compared with 56% of those aged 36 to 60 (NOI Polls 2019).<sup>43</sup> This in turn has led to the emergence of a cadre of youth activists and youth-led civil society organizations (so-called “clicktivists” and “hashtag activists”) that use social media as a tool to voice political grievances and organize protest actions (Mateos and Erro 2020, Uwalka 2020a, Uwalka 2020b).

40 This table summarizes the patterns in types of activism, protest, and social unrest described within our qualitative dataset and is not meant to be an exhaustive or representative ranking of the importance or frequency of each of these activities within each state.

41 The discussion of the role of online activism in organizing protest movements primarily focuses on the period from 2010 to present. Nigeria has a much longer history of mass protest and activism that stretches back to resistance against colonial authorities and pro-independence movements of the colonial era. Post-independence Nigeria has also undergone forms of collective action like strikes, boycotts, large-scale protests and movements, and mass demonstrations (often led by youth movements, social activists, and labor unions) to air grievances against state repression and consequences of governance shortcomings (Odion-Akhaine 2009; Hari 2014). By the 2000s, organized labor and unions have been integral to protest movements against the government (Hari 2014). Unions like the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) organized significant movements against government actions and policies. Between 1999 and 2018, ASUU organized a strike every year except 2000, 2004, and 2012 (Akeredolu 2020). Apart from such nationwide, large-scale movements, there have also been smaller, perhaps more regional protests in the Niger Delta region and in the North (like the 2006 protests by Muslims in Borno) that did not always have claims with broad appeals (Hill and Asthana, 2006).

42 Text messaging includes both Short Message Services (SMSs) on mobile providers and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Skype. Social media includes platforms that allow users to connect with or follow one another, and to share content either publicly or to their individual connections, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

43 The same survey indicates that in 2019 67% of men had access to the internet, compared to 55% of women (NOI Polls 2019). This survey does not provide analysis about the extent to which this gender disparity in internet access differs across age groups.

Increased access to information and online activism facilitated by ICTs shape state-society relations in Nigeria through three mechanisms.<sup>44</sup> First, the use of ICTs increases the information about politics and government performance that are available to both ordinary citizens and activists (Ogbuabor et al 2017). This works both by increasing access to a wider array of news sources (such as blogs and online magazines) and allowing individuals to access direct firsthand accounts of news events from elsewhere in the country (and in the world) through social media posts or WhatsApp Groups. Increased information about government performance can be used as a tool to hold politicians and government agencies accountable, but when accountability mechanisms are not functioning, this information can also increase anger and frustration (Dambo et al 2020).

Second, increases in access to and use of ICTs shape state-society relations by providing an avenue for voice and political expression for youth when other modes of political participation are curtailed through exclusionary rules and norms (Uwalaka 2020a, Dambo et al 2020). The use of hashtags as a focal point of activism allows individuals to align themselves with social movements, raise visibility for an issue or grievance, and build transnational alliances (Pasierb 2020, Olutokunbo et al 2015). Online-based hashtag activism has been a central part of a number of social movements in Nigeria, including #OccupyNigeria (2012), #OpenNASS (2013), #BringBackOurGirls (2014), and #NotTooYoungtoRun (2016) (Olutokunbo et al 2015, Uwalaka and Watkins 2019, Uwalaka 2020a).<sup>45</sup>

The 2020 #EndSARS protests themselves have their origins in a pre-pandemic online activism campaign that originally started in December 2017 (Dambo et al 2020).

Third, growth of ICTs shapes state-society relations by making it easier for activists, civil society organizations, and other political actors to coordinate offline protests (Uwalaka 2020a). The use of social media and text messaging makes it possible for activists from different parts of the country (and the world) to coordinate strategies, plan protest events, and quickly mobilize protest participants (Olutokunbo et al 2015).

A number of prominent examples of digital activism in Nigeria (such as #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls, and the first wave of #EndSARS campaigns in 2017) have paired online messaging with public protest activities.<sup>46</sup> In these cases, activists used a mix of private text messages and public social media posts to coordinate and mobilize protest actions (Pasierb 2020, Uwalaka 2018, Uwalaka and Watkins 2019, Uwalaka 2020a). While these cases demonstrate the latent capacity of activists to use ICTs as a tool for demanding accountability and organizing protests, most prior examples of hybrid online/offline activism in Nigeria have not been accompanied by broader social unrest characterized by violent demonstrations or counter-protest activities or large-scale looting or rioting.<sup>47</sup>



Abugrafia/Shutterstock

44 Recent research by Mercy Corps in Nigeria has documented how the growth of access to smartphones and the internet has also led to increased opportunities to “weaponize” ICTs (especially social media) through the spread of misinformation (any content that is false or incorrect, regardless of intent), disinformation (the spread of deliberately misleading or biased information), and online hate speech (Mercy Corps 2019, Proctor Forthcoming). See Appendix D for a brief discussion of the alternative hypothesis that misinformation, disinformation, and online hate speech are the key mechanisms underpinning social unrest during the pandemic period in Nigeria. In addition, mechanisms related to the weaponization of ICTs and social media are also relevant to Pathway 1 (the use of disinformation by armed groups as a recruitment tool) and Pathway 3 (misinformation and online hate speech fueling identity-based conflict) and are discussed in more detail in those sections and in [Appendix D](#).

45 #OccupyNigeria was a series of protests in 2012 in response to the fuel subsidy removal. #BringBackOurGirls was a global advocacy campaign shaped by Nigerian activists that called for government action to secure the release of schoolgirls kidnapped by JAS from Chibok (Borno State) in 2014. #OpenNASS was a digital campaign calling on the National Assembly to be more transparent with its budget. #NotTooYoungtoRun was an online protest in support of amending the Nigerian constitution to allow younger people to run for political office.

46 #OccupyNigeria was the earliest large-scale example of using online activism to mobilize in-person protests, and has been described as the “first successful large-scale action in Nigeria since the Aba Women’s Riot of 1929” (Uwalaka et al., 2018). During #OccupyNigeria protests, a broad cross-section of the population took part in the occupation of public spaces in Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port-Harcourt, and other urban centers (Kew and Kwaja 2018). A survey about the protests found that 90% of those surveyed used Facebook to communicate about the Occupy Nigeria protests (Uwalaka et al 2018).

47 Mercy Corps research on digital conflict risks finds that while online activists have not typically used social media to organize violent social unrest, other influencers have spread misinformation and disinformation aimed at mobilizing supporters and catalyzing acts of violence (Proctor Forthcoming).

## COVID-19 Lockdown, Palliative Distribution, and Online Activism

Several key elements of the pandemic period in Nigeria shaped and intensified these dynamics around ICTs, youth political grievances, and protests/social unrest (Figure 5). During the COVID-19 lockdown and movement restrictions, use of smartphones, text messaging, and social media all increased. Market analysis finds mobile phone users increased by 10.0% during 2020, internet users by 22.1%, and social media users by 22.2%, comparing January 2021 and January 2020. This rate was substantially higher than the previous year-on-year increase between 2019 and 2020, especially for internet users, which grew only 2.6% during 2019 compared to 22.1% during 2020 (Hootsuite & We Are Social 2020; Hootsuite & We Are Social 2021).<sup>48</sup>



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This increase in internet usage was particularly pronounced among young people in urban areas. While some workshop participants explicitly described a desire to continue civic and political engagement during the lockdown as a rationale for increased internet and social media use, others described a variety of idiosyncratic individual motivations for increasing internet and social media use, including alleviating boredom, maintaining social connections, and shifting studies and businesses online during the pandemic.<sup>49</sup>

However, regardless of the intention behind increased social media use during the lockdown, there was widespread acknowledgement that this had the unintended effect of increasing awareness of civil and political rights and human rights, in part by providing news of political movements and protests around Nigeria and elsewhere in the world.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, community members also noted that increases in the use of social media and text messaging platforms made it easier to share information and learn about government service delivery shortcomings. A group of female youth workshop participants in Kaduna described this dynamic, saying:

**›** *“Several social media handles were used to disseminate critical information, complaints on a range of issues, and activism. Most prominently was Twitter. People used social media to express their concerns and grievances more. People that were previously not on social media quickly joined the bandwagon.”<sup>51</sup>*

At the same time, the government’s pandemic response generated a number of grievances, which were then documented, shared, and amplified through increasingly active digital communities and networks. Research participants reported that the increased role of government security actors in enforcing COVID-19 restrictions led to instances in which checkpoints or enforcement of mask mandates were used as opportunities to demand a bribe from community members.<sup>52</sup>

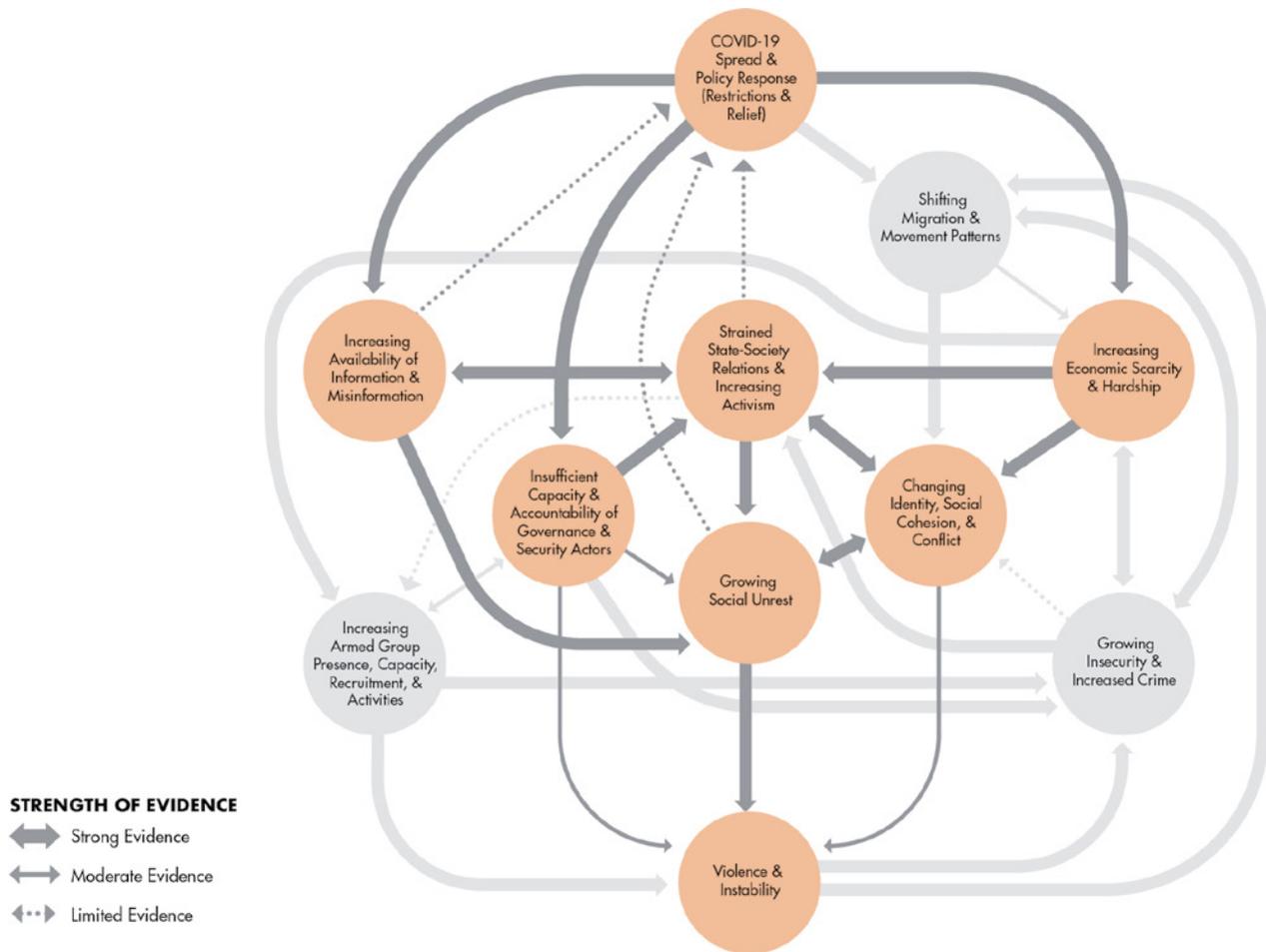
48 This trend is corroborated in many sources in our interviews and workshops, including Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Urban Workshop 1-Plateau, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Male Workshop 4- Abuja.

49 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Urban Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 3- Abuja, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna

50 Male Workshop 4- Abuja, Female Workshop 2- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa

51 Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna

52 Male Youth Leader 2- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 3- Katsina, Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1- Abuja



**Figure 5. Pathway 2- Youth Grievances, Mass Protest, and Social Unrest**

In addition, community members reported substantial shortages and delays in the government’s planned distribution of palliative food aid to individuals adversely impacted by COVID-19.<sup>53</sup> Community members attributed gaps in palliative distribution as evidence of partisan politics, ethno-religious favoritism, or self-interest by state and local government officials.<sup>54</sup> A group of female youth workshop participants summarized this type of narrative around palliative distribution, saying:

”The greed of government officials led to the hoarding of palliatives which were distributed to every state by the federal government to reduce the sufferings of the masses during the lockdown. However, the state government officials saw it as an opportunity to reserve food items to use during their political campaigns and rallies and to sell a part of it and distribute it to only their close friends and families.”

These perceptions about the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions and palliative distribution reinforced existing narratives and grievances held by youth about quality of governance. Rather than remaining localized, these examples of perceived lapses during the COVID-19 response affected almost everyone in the country to some degree, and were shared nationwide through social media and text messaging platforms by activists, civil society organizations, and average citizens.<sup>55</sup> These grievances were shared alongside other examples of perceived governance shortcomings happening at the same time and fueled mounting feelings of frustration and anger among many youth.<sup>56</sup>

### Protests During a Pandemic: From Online Organizing to Mass Demonstrations

The government’s implementation of the COVID-19 lockdown and palliative rollout intensified existing mechanisms linking online activism, youth political grievances, and protest activity.

As a result, when a decentralized network of activists used the #EndSARS hashtag to speak out against police killings of young men in Rivers and Delta states in early October 2020, both the online messaging around the hashtag and the in-person demonstrations in major cities became a focal point for broader grievances, anger, and activism that had taken place online during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>57</sup> As one interviewee put it:

”COVID is not a cause, it is a trigger event that set the spark for protest and large-scale contentious action, and government’s insensitivity to what people were going through on a daily basis that is what made it so bad.”<sup>58</sup>

While previous online advocacy campaigns in Nigeria have also translated into public protests, the mass protests associated with EndSARS surpassed these in terms of size, duration, and spread across regional, ethnic, and religious divisions. Nationwide, there were a total of at least 179 peaceful protest events during October 2020. Within the locations included in this study, there were a total of 20 recorded peaceful protests during this time frame (Table 2). Peaceful protests made up a majority (66%) of all recorded protest activity during the height of EndSARS activity, indicating that overall, the EndSARS movement was a form of positive civic engagement.

	States Included in Sample (Abuja, Adamawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Plateau)	Nationwide
<b>Total Recorded Protest and Social Unrest Events, October 2020</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>270</b>
Peaceful Protests	20	179
Protests with Intervention and Excessive Force	12	39
Violent Demonstrations	5	33
Looting/Rioting	4	19

**Table 5. Summary Statistics on Protests and Social Unrest in Nigeria, October 2020.**  
Data Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

55 Male Youth Workshop 3- Abuja, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna, Male Youth Civil Society Leader-Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa  
 56 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Youth Urban Workshop-Plateau  
 57 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna  
 58 Mercy Corps Nigeria Internal Workshop 2



Teo Inspiro/Shutterstock

Beyond the size and scope of protests, the EndSARS movement also demonstrated the potential to activate new identities around youth and gender, strengthening the profile and resources of a decentralized set of organizations and networks led by young men and women (Ogunmodede 2021). Coalitions of women from various cross-sections of society played an important role in organizing protests, drawing on their online networks and resources to articulate and voice how they were being impacted by police brutality, insecurity, and broader gender inequalities, including increasing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) during the pandemic (Dark 2020).<sup>59</sup>

A group of young women participating in a workshop in Kaduna summarized the dynamics around increasing women's participation in activism in their community, saying:

”Women heard more about SARS brutality, harassment, and killing on social media and the increase in this news resulted in the increased role of a female activist in mobilization for a social cause. Women are more aware of their rights and this increased women's motivation to engage in protests regardless of being hurt, beaten, or stomped. This also led to an increase in women's participation in the EndSARS protest and palliative looting and this is the first protest that female youths participated in our community. Women were involved in more community decisions beyond what they normally do. For women that didn't have a support system, the pandemic made them realize that they need to get out and do something to support themselves. The situation made them strong. The norm of the society made women to be seen as weak, but women used the pandemic to dispel that norm. As the saying goes, 'what a man can do, a woman can do best.'”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> The Feminist Coalition played an especially important role in fundraising and raising the profile of the EndSARS protests globally (Nwankwor and Nkereuwem 2020, Maclean 2021). Local-level instances of this kind of women's leadership are described in numerous interviews and workshops including Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1-Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1-Abuja, Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 2- Adamawa

<sup>60</sup> Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna

The increased salience of youth and gender as identities for mobilizing collective action allowed organizers and protesters in many communities to build coalitions and social cohesion across ethnic and religious lines.<sup>61</sup> A youth community leader in Kaduna State described this increase in youth cohesion across group divides, saying:

› *“Since these EndSARS campaigns were largely youth-led, at first with minimal political influences, this allowed youths from all religions to speak in one voice to share stories of sufferings. The events of the pandemic were the trigger to these shared experiences.”<sup>62</sup>*

The decentralized nature of the EndSARS movement led the online activism and in-person protests to extend beyond the initial set of grievances related to police brutality to a broader demand for change in the quality, accountability, and inclusivity of governance institutions and processes.<sup>63</sup> For example, male youth workshop participants in Adamawa State described this dynamic, saying:

› *“Furthermore, the creation of pages on Facebook to report gender-based violence online increased access to media led to mass movement and following of new trends on activism in the country and community and gave rise to house-to-house gender-based violence campaigns conducted by community members.”<sup>64</sup>*



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## Social Unrest Alongside Peaceful Protests: Looting and Violent Demonstrations

The EndSARS protests in October 2020 also differed from past instances of activism in the extent to which peaceful protests were accompanied by pockets of social unrest and violence. Nationwide, the largely peaceful wave of mass protests were also accompanied by intervention and excessive force against protestors (14% of all events), violence by protestors or counter-protestors (12% of all events), and looting, rioting, and property damage (7% of all events), including looting of food from palliative warehouses and attacks on houses and businesses owned by state and local politicians and government officials (ACLED 2021).

The EndSARS protest movement grew rapidly through social media and was led by a decentralized and loosely networked structure of the key activists and coalitions organizing the protests. While protest organizers used their online platforms to share tactics for nonviolent resistance with protesters, the rapid growth of the mass protests attracted individuals and groups with a diverse array of motivations and commitments to nonviolent action. This decentralized structure helps to explain how the largely peaceful EndSARS protests fed into broader incidents of social unrest such as looting palliative warehouses and other attacks on people and property. Community accounts of the raids on palliative warehouses reflect this diversity of motivations. Many workshop participants viewed the raids as another way to express the grievances raised during the EndSARS protests and to exercise their rights by claiming a public good that had been denied to them through corruption.<sup>65</sup>

61 Male Youth Workshop 2- Adamawa, Community Youth Leader- Kaduna, Male Workshop 4-Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Community Leader-Urban-Plateau

62 Community Youth Leader-Kadun

63 Urban Community Leader- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

64 Male Youth Workshop 2- Adamawa

65 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Youth Urban Workshop-Plateau, Male CSO Leaders-Kaduna, Male Youth Civil Society Leader- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop

A female civil society leader in Jos described this interpretation of the palliative warehouse raids:

”The government’s insensitivity to the plights of the community-made her pay little to no attention that the palliative items are well distributed to the right people. For this community, the government does not bother about our wellbeing. They have never brought any form of relief or support to the development of the community. The people only heard that palliatives were shared in certain areas and to some close allies of government officials, the distribution was based on who you know in government. The people were denied palliatives that were meant to relieve them of the hunger and hardship caused by the lockdown.”<sup>66</sup>

Community members also noted that like the protests, the raids on palliative warehouses involve cohesion and collective action by youths across ethnic and religious divides.<sup>67</sup>



Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters

However, other community members presented a contrasting view that the palliative warehouse raids were evidence that the protests had been “hijacked by hoodlums.”<sup>68</sup> A participant in a workshop in Jos described this view linking social unrest and criminality, saying:

”After the burgling of government warehouses, criminal elements extended the burgling to private stores and warehouses. This necessitated the imposition of a three-day curfew by the government to curtail criminal activities. Many youths went into destroying warehouses and government offices as a way of expressing their anger towards bad governance. They have legalized criminality as a right and they find pleasure in doing so. As a result, there has been an increase in the rate of kidnapping since the protest.”<sup>69</sup>

4- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Community Youth Leader-Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Male Workshop 4- Abuja, Community Tribal Leader-Abuja, Male Workshop 5- Adamawa, Male Workshop 7- Adamawa, Male Youth Workshop 3-Abuja

66 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau

67 Urban Community Leader- Plateau, Male Youth Urban Workshop 3- Plateau, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau

68 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Leader 2- Plateau, Female Workshop 3- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

69 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau

The violence and social unrest that accompanied the EndSARS protests can be also explained in part by the use of excessive force to respond to largely peaceful protests. While the killing of 12 protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos was the highest profile example of violence by government (or government-aligned) actors in response to the protests, community members reported that police and vigilantes in many other communities utilized excessive force to respond to peaceful protests (Amnesty International 2020).<sup>70</sup>

### Pathway 3: Social Cohesion and Conflict Between and Within Identity Groups

Divisions between **identity groups** are important drivers of violent conflicts in the four states in our sample, including ethnicity, religion, livelihoods practices (farmer/herder), and indigene/settler status (recognition of a group as “original” inhabitants of an area or newcomers from another part of the country). The salience of each type of division varies across our study locations (Table 6).<sup>71</sup> Scarcity and movement patterns are also relevant to understanding how the COVID-19 response shaped conflict within groups such as communities and families and related tensions, disputes, and violence across age and gender divides.

	Rural	Urban	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Herder-Farmer	x			x	x	x	x
Indigene-Settler	x	x		x	x		x
Ethnic	x	x	x		x	x	x
Religious		x	x		x		x

**Table 6. Salient Dimensions of Identity Group Conflict Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations<sup>72</sup>**

### Pre-Existing Dynamics: Scarcity, Movement, and Social Cohesion

The social cohesion and identity group conflict pathway is driven by a set of pre-COVID mechanisms that link economic scarcity and hardship, movement patterns, and multiple dimensions of identity, cohesion, and conflict (Figure 6). Many inter-group conflicts in Nigeria are shaped by competition over scarce resources, such as conflict over access to grazing land and routes (herder/farmer conflicts), access to property titles, schools, and public jobs (indigene/settler conflicts), and access to government-provided public goods and services (religious and ethnic conflicts) (Akov 2017, Lichtenheld 2021). Scarcity and competition can lead to an increased number of tensions and disputes between members of a group, which can be exacerbated when movement and migration patterns increase the number of individuals and groups competing for access to the same resources (International Crisis Group 2017, International Crisis Group 2020).

<sup>72</sup> This table summarizes the patterns in dimensions of intergroup conflict described within our qualitative dataset and is not meant to be an exhaustive or representative ranking of the importance of each of these social cleavages within each state.

The extent to which disputes over access to scarce resources escalate into conflicts is shaped by the level of social cohesion in a given locality, which is characterized by a number of underlying factors including trust, a shared sense of identity and purpose, and a willingness to participate and cooperate across salient social divisions (Kim et al 2020).<sup>73</sup> The absence of trust and norms of collective action and participation can reduce the willingness and ability of group members to work together to develop solutions to disputes over the use of scarce resources (Taylor and Singleton 1993). In addition, a lack of trust and shared purpose can increase fear and uncertainty between groups, which can in turn increase the likelihood of security dilemmas that escalate disputes into armed confrontations (Lake and Rothchild 1996, Lichtenheld 2021).

Finally, a number of mechanisms related to governance also shape the extent to which inter-group disputes and conflicts escalate into violence. Group-based favoritism and clientelism in the distribution of public goods and services can create and exacerbate horizontal inequalities and can fuel inter-group grievances around bias and prejudice (Stewart 2008, Cederman et al 2011).<sup>74</sup> These grievances can also increase mistrust in government security and justice actors, particularly among marginalized groups, which can reduce their willingness to rely on the government to help resolve disputes and enforce agreements.<sup>75</sup> Finally, pervasive insecurity also contributes to the likelihood that inter-group disputes escalate to violence by increasing individual ownership of small arms and the prevalence of local vigilantes and armed groups (Lichtenheld 2021).



Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

## COVID-19 Lockdown and Shifting Patterns of Cohesion and Conflict Between Identity Groups

For inter-group conflicts, the fear of the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 during the lockdown period helped to temporarily increase social cohesion by creating a sense of “mutual vulnerability” to a common threat (Figure 6). This helped to ease the escalation of inter-group conflicts by reducing the extent to which the motivations and intentions of the other group were the most prominent threat (Lichtenheld 2021).<sup>76</sup> A participant in a community workshop in Plateau State described how this dynamic led to reduced violence in previously existing conflict between Irigwe farmers and Fulani herders, saying:

”There was heightened fear in the minds of people during the lockdown as a result of the fear of COVID. People naturally stopped attacking and killing themselves during the lockdown. They are saying why will I kill someone while there is something invisible that can kill and no one is safe, they then started showing some love towards each other.”<sup>77</sup>

73 These dimensions correspond to a definition of social cohesion as “A sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a given group or locality and the willingness of those group members to engage and cooperate with each other to survive and prosper” (Kim et al 2020).

74 Male Workshop 7- Katsina

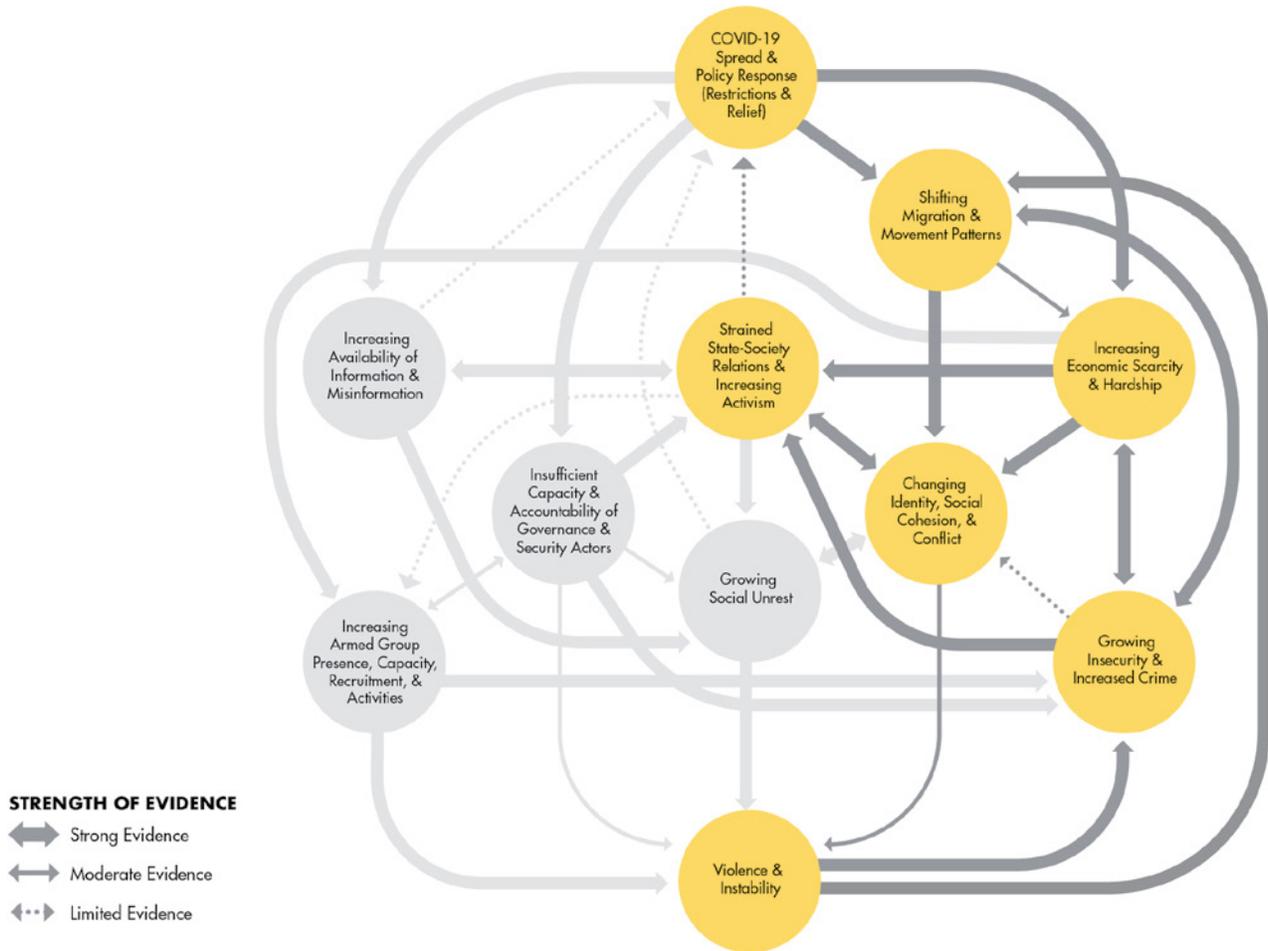
75 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Community Youth Leader-Kaduna

76 Data collected by SPARC in 2020 supports this finding that lockdown periods led to increased social cohesion and reduced time and resources for intergroup conflict (due to a need to re-allocate time and resources to livelihood coping and adaptation). Forthcoming research from SPARC will explore these dynamics further.

77 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau

An interviewee in Kaduna state similarly described how the impacts of the pandemic on food insecurity shaped patterns of conflict between Muslims and Christians, saying:

“Before the pandemic, religion has been at the crux of the conflicts in Kaduna State, but COVID-19 heralded the emergence of a common enemy called ‘hunger’. This common denominator allowed us to come together beyond religious differences. Presently, ‘the religion of hunger’ governs us here, as everyone worships food.”<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 6. Pathway 3- Social Cohesion and Identity Group Conflict**

This sense of mutual vulnerability during the lockdown period also helped to build social cohesion by creating a sense of shared purpose across group divisions.<sup>79</sup> In some communities, a shared identity marker (such as religion or language) helped to foster unity and cooperation across other divisions that had been salient in pre-pandemic conflict.<sup>80</sup> In others, the disruption of previously segregated market and trade activity forced trade and economic cooperation across group lines, which helped to foster positive interactions and build trust.<sup>81</sup>

78 Community Youth Leader-Kaduna

79 As described in the discussion of Pathway 2 above, participation in EndSARS protests and palliative warehouse rates united people across ethno-religious lines, but this was primarily focused on youth living in urban areas, and was less prominent in rural areas where protests were less common.

80 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, CSO Leader-Adamawa

81 Female Workshop 2- Plateau, Male Workshop 5-Adamawa, Male Herder Workshop 2- Plateau



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The impact of COVID-19 movement restrictions on resource competition and inter-group conflict is dependent on a number of local contextual factors, including the existing economic situation, the structure of identity cleavages, and the specific design and implementation of local restrictions. In some communities, the COVID-19 lockdown and related movement restrictions contributed to reducing intergroup conflict by limiting many of the types of negative interactions that exacerbate disputes driven by resource scarcity. This dynamic was especially pronounced for disputes and grievances that stem from attempts of two or more groups to access a shared resource simultaneously, such as property disputes over a given set of land (common in indigene-settler conflicts) or disagreements over the use of shared rangeland, forests, and water points (common in herder-farmer conflicts).<sup>82</sup> In Plateau State, pastoralists had access to a large amount of grazing land during lockdown, which allowed them to avoid the area being used for farming. In these cases, relations between Fulani herders and Atyap farmers improved.<sup>83</sup> A religious leader in Kaduna described this dynamic, saying:

**›** *“During the pandemic, incidence of the lingering land dispute between the Kataf and Hausa groups that consistently led to violent conflict with fighting, killings, destruction of properties and displacement of community members drastically reduced due to the movement ban as farmlands are always the central point of most disagreements but during the lockdown, people could not visit their farms thereby reducing the conflict.”<sup>84</sup>*

82 Village Head- Kaduna, Female Workshop 2- Plateau, Female Workshop 2- Plateau, Male Religious Leader- Kaduna, Male Workshop 5-Adamawa, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa

83 Male Civil Society Leader- Plateau; Female Workshop 2- Plateau

84 Male Religious Leader-Kaduna

Despite strong evidence that the shared public health threat and movement restrictions played a role in reducing intergroup conflict during the COVID-19 lockdowns, tensions and violence continued in some communities. The determining factor for this was whether the COVID-19 lockdown decreased or increased scarcity of a common resource. In Kaduna State, communities reported that competition for farmland and forests for logging increased, as the local restrictions allowed groups to access these areas for economic activity, while largely shutting down other economic avenues.<sup>85</sup> In this case, increased demand for land for farming and/or logging exacerbated existing conflict patterns between groups. Similarly, there was increased anger at pastoralists for cattle encroachment in cases where COVID-19 restrictions forced their movement patterns to go closer to farmland.<sup>86</sup>

Lockdowns also did little to reduce disputes and tensions when one or more of the identity groups involved in a conflict refused to comply with the government’s movement restrictions.<sup>87</sup> Low compliance with lockdowns was driven by a number of factors, including inconsistent enforcement of restrictions, a lack of trust in the government, and the necessity of movement as an economic survival strategy, and the existence of cultural norms challenging the legitimacy of restricting movement.<sup>88</sup> This set of factors encouraging movement even in the midst of lockdown were particularly salient for pastoralists, and many reported cases of conflict during that period involved cases in which herders encroached onto farmland.<sup>89</sup> Lockdowns also did little to reduce violence when conflicts were in the midst of recurring cycles of attacks and revenge killings at the time when movement restrictions went into effect.<sup>90</sup> In these cases, the public health threat of COVID-19 was insufficient to create a sense of shared purpose that could overcome existing anger and fear.

The end of the COVID-19 lockdown led to a “rebound effect” in which intergroup conflict and violence re-emerged in many areas where it had been suppressed due to movement restrictions and increases in inter-group social cohesion. The end of lockdown simultaneously reversed both factors that had been dampening violent conflict by allowing a wider range of movement and sending the message that the public health threat of COVID-19 had diminished.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the end of lockdown led to the intensification of some inter-group conflicts. In many communities, the economic hardship introduced by the lockdown was not immediately alleviated by the easing of restrictions, meaning that increasing interactions between groups were also accompanied by heightened scarcity and competition.<sup>92</sup> In some communities, the end of lockdown led to new intergroup grievances, such as disputes that had started during lockdown (pastoralists taking advantage of lockdown to graze their cattle on farmland) or narratives about identity-based favoritism in government responses (such as targeting palliatives on ethnic or religious lines or ethnic profiling by security forces).<sup>93</sup>

85 Female Workshop 2-Kaduna; Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna  
 86 Female Workshop 2- Kaduna, 24\_, Male Herder Workshop 1- Kaduna  
 87 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Female Workshop 2- Plateau  
 88 Male Workshop 7- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 3- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina, Female Workshop 4-Adamawa, Male Workshop 8- Adamawa  
 89 Male Herder Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Workshop 7- Katsina  
 90 Female Workshop 2- Kaduna, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Female Workshop 8- Katsina  
 91 Male Religious Leader-Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna  
 92 Male Workshop 8- Kaduna, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Male Workshop 8- Adamawa, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa, CSO Leader- Adamawa, Female Workshop 2- Plateau  
 93 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Male Religious Leader-Kaduna, Female Workshop 2-Plateau, Female Workshop 10- Katsina, Youth Urban Workshop 2- Plateau



Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps



Michael Madukwe/Mercy Corps

## Movement Restrictions, Economic Hardship, and Conflict Within Communities and Families

The lockdown eroded social cohesion and increased conflict within identity groups, as well as within other small, homogeneous groups such as villages and families. These smaller groups were most likely to be confined together in lockdown, increasing the frequency of interactions and tensions between a more limited set of social contacts.<sup>94</sup> In the case of families, this density of interactions within close quarters often increased substantially due to multiple members of the household being out of work, schools being closed, and other family members returning from work in other states.<sup>95</sup>

At the same time, the economic hardship caused by losses in jobs and incomes created intensified scarcity within groups and communities in a number of ways. Loss of sources of incomes during the pandemic period put additional pressure on obligations of economic support based on social connections within tight-knit groups, particularly in the absence of effective government social safety nets, which members may turn to for the purposes of extracting resources via social ties (family, tribe, ethnicity, religion). This led to increased within-group demands for sharing, increasing internal strain at the level of identity groups and families.<sup>96</sup> These requests were also more likely to be denied due to widespread scarcity (nearly everyone in a given social network was impacted in some way) alongside an unpredictable economic outlook (even relatively less-impacted individuals were uncertain about the duration of the lockdown and its impacts). In addition, the lockdown also interrupted many within-group bonding opportunities, such as religious services and general socializing, which further strained intra-group relationships.<sup>97</sup>

94 Youth Male Civil Society Leader-Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau

95 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Youth Urban Workshop 2- Plateau

96 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 1- Plateau. Forthcoming research by SPARC further investigates the role that informal support within social networks plays in facilitating livelihood adaptation during COVID-19 in Nigeria and South Sudan.

97 Male Religious Leader-Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna

These increases in demands for support and decreases in trust-building activities within groups were accompanied by increased tensions and conflicts over how to allocate scarce resources. At the level of communities, this dynamic led to rising disputes and conflicts about how to target and allocate local food support. A civil society leader in Plateau State described this pattern, saying:

”People stopped assisting each other as one does not know when they will get access to go out to get food. That created hatred, especially between community members and leaders and this resulted in frustration. This brought about a reduction in unity between people — people were scared to give out what they have, as one does not know when the lockdown will end.”<sup>98</sup>



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Within families, the convergence of movement restrictions, scarcity, and escalating tensions led to rising conflicts.<sup>99</sup> This set of dynamics challenged gender norms and roles within the household and was linked to rising rates of divorce and domestic violence against women and youth. Reported domestic violence spiked 56% nationwide in just the first two weeks of lockdown, reflecting an increase across all 24 states reporting (UN Women 2020).<sup>100</sup>

Female workshop participants in Katsina described this pattern, saying that “Because culturally, the man is the sole provider of the family, these men couldn’t meet up with their responsibilities in their homes and this caused a lot of marital problems. For some, it led to divorce.”<sup>101</sup> In a community in Kaduna states, male workshop participants corroborated this dynamic, saying:

”At the family level, due to the inability of the head of household to provide for his family which is a factor that has increased in strength, couples tend to disagree and argue more than before lockdown. This led to domestic violence which also has increased due to COVID 19 lockdown and some husbands beating their wives, which also led to divorce amongst families. This is important because our community is a peaceful settlement which houses different people. Before COVID we had a system that worked and a mechanism to organise and settle disputes.”<sup>102</sup>

98 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau

99 Male Farmer Workshop 1- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

100 This figure is likely an underestimate due to lockdown further limiting the ability of survivors of violence to report incidents and seek assistance. The Lagos state government domestic and sexual violence response team reported a three-fold increase in gender-based violence incidents in the first month of the pandemic (Kemakola and Robertson 2020). In the three states (Lagos, Ogun, FCT) that were placed on full lockdown by the Federal Government, reports of domestic violence increased by 297% from March to April 2020. By contrast, three states (Benue, Ebonyi, Cross River) that were on less stringent lockdown measures had a 53% increase in number of cases, with Ebonyi (which the governor refused to place on lockdown) actually seeing a decrease from March to April (Young and Adib, 2020).

Similar accounts connecting increased GBV to the COVID lockdown were reported by media outlets and Nigeria-based organizations serving women (Fawole et al. 2021). These patterns were corroborated in a number of our interviews and workshops, including Female Workshop 3- Plateau, Female Workshop 2-Katsina, Female Workshop 10-Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa.

101 Female Workshop 2- Katsina

102 Male Heder Workshop 1- Kaduna

A group of youth workshop participants in Plateau State further described dynamics related to decreasing social cohesion and increasing domestic violence in generational terms, saying:

”*The loss of jobs and livelihoods increased anger as a result of the inability of the youths to go about their normal business, due to the lockdown. Because of the inability of families to adequately cater for their needs, there is heightened anger within the family. This has caused a lot of divorces, triggered violence, and caused disharmony among family members. The situation has however improved when the lockdowns were relaxed because people have started picking their businesses back.*”<sup>103</sup>

Increasing crime and insecurity is a final pathway through which economic hardship and scarcity led to eroding social cohesion and increasing conflict within identity groups. Because increases in robbery, theft, and kidnapping were happening alongside movement restrictions, individuals began to suspect their neighbors and family members of being thieves and informants for banditry gangs or AOGs.<sup>104</sup> This dynamic increased fear and mistrust, as described by a group of young women in Katsina:

”*The fear is born out of the fact that many people have joined the kidnapping enterprise either as active or passive members. The spy agents providing intelligence to the kidnappers have increased. People have less trust in even members of their families because in some cases your family member could be the one to providing tips on how to kidnap you.*”<sup>105</sup>

This growth in mistrust and erosion of social cohesion was particularly pronounced with respect to youth. Adult community members highlighted narratives that attributed the rise in crime during the pandemic to a combination of “youth idleness”, “immorality”, and “social vices” such as drinking, drug use, gambling, and promiscuous sexual activity.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, in Adamawa, youth who were demobilized AOG members were viewed with mistrust as potential informants for insurgents and kidnappers.<sup>107</sup>



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103 Male Youth Workshop 1- Plateau

104 Community Youth Leader-Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 6- Katsina, Female Workshop 3- Plateau

105 Female Youth Workshop 6-Katsina

106 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Female Workshop 4-Adamawa

107 Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Male Workshop 5- Adamawa

# Conclusions and Policy Implications

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria was already in the midst of a crisis defined by persistent insecurity, violent conflict, grievances about governance, and economic hardship. The response to COVID-19 in Nigeria exacerbated these pre-existing drivers of conflict in three ways: by increasing insecurity and armed group activities, by intensifying youth grievances and sparking social unrest, and by shifting patterns of social cohesion and conflict between and within identity groups.

This case study has the following implications for policymakers and practitioners:

1. Restrictions designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, necessary and life-saving as they may have been, substantially intensified economic hardship and hunger, which placed tremendous strain on individuals, households, and communities. This, in turn, has exacerbated existing conflict drivers by:
  - › Driving collaboration with AOGs, banditry gangs, and other armed groups, thus further fueling insecurity,
  - › Fueling protest and social unrest by increasing demands for government aid and social protection, which were not met,
  - › Inflaming conflicts between and within communities by increasing resource scarcity and raising the stakes over disputes about competing claims to natural resources and government services, and
  - › Deepening long-term scarcity and hardship that will likely endure even after restrictions are lifted, intensifying grievances and disputes that emerged during lockdown.

In practice, future COVID-19 restrictions should be coupled with investments in economic support, security provision, and programs that build social cohesion. Similarly, decisions to relax lockdowns should be combined with efforts to bolster COVID-19 prevention behaviors and vaccine acceptance as well as programs that support livelihoods and strengthen dispute resolution mechanisms.

2. Gaps in the quality of governance increased the likelihood that economic hardship fed into the types of motivations, grievances, and tensions that have driven violent conflict in Nigeria before the pandemic. Some of the specific governance challenges that we identified include:
  - › Failure to incorporate community feedback into the design and implementation of COVID-19 restrictions and relief missed opportunities to identify potential unintended consequences of restrictions on conflict drivers.
  - › An absence of transparency and accountability within the implementation of restrictions and palliative food aid increased public mistrust in the intentions and motives of the government.
  - › In areas where the presence and capacity of government security actors decreased during the pandemic, communities were vulnerable to rising crime and attacks by armed groups and expressed an increased sense of abandonment and exclusion that intensified anti-government grievances.



Oluwafemi Dawodu/Shutterstock

Future responses to COVID-19 (and other unexpected shocks) in Nigeria should integrate participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability into the design and implementation of policies and programs. This will help to prevent these interventions from unintentionally activating conflict drivers, by improving effectiveness of service delivery and building trust between communities and government actors. Such efforts should support and protect Nigeria's burgeoning online civic spaces by using ICTs to promote digital civic engagement and by countering attempts to either curtail or weaponize social media.

3. Communities were able to counteract the pathways connecting COVID-19 to conflict through localized collective action and peacebuilding initiatives. For each pathway, local communities, civil society, government actors, and other stakeholders oftentimes come together to intervene in the dynamics linking the COVID-19 response to conflict, such as:
  - › Communities institutionalized vigilante groups in ways that effectively provide security within local areas, while also building in oversight mechanisms that help to ensure accountability and restraint.
  - › Young men and women used online platforms as an opportunity to take on a leadership role in civic engagement and community decision-making.
  - › Civil society organizations, activists, and community members used major shared events such as the lockdown and the EndSARS protests to galvanize a shared sense of purpose and identity across ethnic and religious divisions.
  - › Local leaders adapted grassroots dispute-resolution mechanisms to continue operating while reducing risk of disease transmission by using mobile phones, social distancing, and masks.

Local communities are uniquely positioned to identify exactly how the COVID-19 pandemic shapes conflict and to develop solutions that simultaneously reduce disease spread and mitigate its secondary impacts. Future COVID-19 responses in Nigeria should draw on local knowledge by incorporating community engagement into program design and implementation. Donors should promote local leadership of humanitarian and development aid projects by investing in creative community-led efforts to counter the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic hardship, insecurity, and conflict and providing direct funding to local organizations to help scale up strategies that are already working.

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Where possible, we sourced photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in the areas of Nigeria that are the focus of this study: Abuja, Adamawa State, Katsina State, Kaduna State, and Plateau State. Many of the photographs in this chapter are from other states and/or from the years preceding the pandemic, but were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.

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