

Developmental Implications of USAID Funding Suspension in Northeastern and North Central Nigeria: An Analysis of Conflict-Related Deaths (2021–2025)

Etalong, Thomas Alama¹  Anthony Odo Agbor²  and Etalong, Chijindu Abigail³ 

¹Department of Research and Development ACE Intercontinental Research Institute, Nigeria

²Department of Sociology, Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria

³Department of Public Health Torrens University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the developmental implications of the 2025 suspension of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding in Northeastern and North Central Nigeria, focusing on conflict-related deaths between 2021 and 2025. Using an ex-post facto research design and documentary analysis of secondary data, the research explores how the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance intensified mortality, food insecurity, and displacement in conflict-prone states such as Borno, Yobe, Taraba, Plateau, and Benue. Findings reveal that the suspension of USAID funds coincided with a surge in both direct and indirect fatalities—ranging from insurgent attacks in the Northeast to farmer–herder and communal clashes in the North Central region. The data show that aid withdrawal exacerbated malnutrition, maternal and child mortality, and the collapse of essential services such as healthcare, nutrition, and protection programs in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Grounded in Human Security Theory, the study argues that human insecurity in fragile contexts transcends physical violence to encompass deprivation and the loss of access to life-sustaining resources. The research concludes that donor withdrawal amplifies humanitarian crises and undermines regional development resilience. It recommends renewed donor engagement, strengthened local peacebuilding initiatives, and integrated humanitarian–development responses to mitigate the compounded effects of conflict and aid suspension.

Keywords: USAID, humanitarian aid, insurgency, human security, Nigeria, conflict-related deaths, development, aid suspension

Introduction

Global security challenges are evolving in scope, complexity, and consequences, thus creating humanitarian crises that transcend borders and affect vulnerable populations across Continents, Regional, Sub-Regional and National lines. Its outcome overtly and covertly undermines peace, stability, and development while exacerbating human suffering in conflict-affected regions like Northeast and North Central Nigeria¹⁷. The prevalence of insecurity across developing Continents highlights pressing concerns regarding the drivers of extremism, the role of foreign aid in mitigating humanitarian consequences, and the broader global responsibility in cushioning vulnerable populations during conflicts.

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Corresponding Authors: Thomas Alama

Email: thomasalama@gmail.com

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International aid agencies, particularly the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through their funding have been playing pivotal roles in addressing the humanitarian impacts of insecurity through health interventions, food security programs, and protection services. However, the suspension or withdrawal of such funding in fragile states is perceived to result in severe humanitarian consequences, including increased mortality rates, malnutrition, and the collapse of basic services¹³.

The array of cases of insecurity in global society is an indicator that the world is under siege; judging from the 2015 Paris shootings, the 2016 Brussels bombings, and the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, which exposed vulnerabilities in urban security and disrupted socioeconomic activities²⁴. Similarly, the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed long-standing violent conflict, with the Philippines battling Abu Sayyaf's violent campaigns and Indonesia recovering from terror incidents such as the 2002 Bali bombings and 2018 Surabaya church attacks. Afghanistan was also considered a critical hot spot for violent conflict, with Taliban activities disrupting governance, education, and public health systems²⁴. These global examples underscore how insecurity is not merely a domestic issue but one that disrupts international development cooperation, increases humanitarian demands, and creates pressure on donor agencies to sustain interventions.

Africa, however, has not been spared from violent conflict, insecurity, and its humanitarian toll. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab continues to destabilise communities, limiting access to food and health services⁷.

Kenya has suffered significant casualties and economic losses, particularly in the wake of the 2013 Westgate Mall attack, which undermined its tourism industry. Mali and Libya have faced persistent insurgent and terrorist activities linked to Al-Qaeda affiliates, affecting economic development, peace-building, and regional stability⁷. These crises demonstrate how insurgency in Africa often leads to large-scale internal displacement, food insecurity, and deaths that could have been mitigated through sustained donor support. However, donor fatigue and abrupt funding suspensions are most likely to exacerbate the vulnerability of local populations who rely heavily on international humanitarian aid.

Considering the above, Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is at the vanguard of continental insecurity and violent conflict discourse. The Boko Haram sect activities, which began in 2002 in Borno State, have transformed into one of the deadliest terrorist campaigns in the world⁸. The group, officially known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, emerged to impose Sharia law in Nigeria and reject Western education⁹. Over the years, the Boko Haram sect and its splinter faction, the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), have unleashed terror through suicide bombings, abductions, and targeted killings, especially in the Northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. This insurgency has claimed over 38,000 lives and displaced millions since 2009, with far-reaching implications on Nigeria's stability, economic growth, and human capital development²².

Since 2021, insurgency has escalated beyond the Northeast into the North-Central region, where banditry, communal clashes, and extremist violence have fueled mass killings, kidnappings, and destruction of lives. The spread of these actors of violent conflicts and their ideologies has resulted in significant civilian casualties and created complex humanitarian emergencies that overstretch Nigeria's response capacity⁴. The humanitarian consequences of these crises are further compounded by the suspension of USAID funding in 2025, which predictably would have a heavy toll on nutrition programs, immunisation campaigns, shelter, and food aid distributions in conflict-affected states. The presumption herein is that, since USAID is one of the major international donors supporting lifesaving interventions in Nigeria and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, its policy of withdrawal is most likely to exacerbate mortality risks, particularly among internally displaced persons (IDPs), children, and women²¹.

Inductively, the hypothesis herein is that, the 2025 suspension of USAID funds to Nigeria would create a dual humanitarian crisis: as civilians would be dying directly from insurgent attacks on one hand, and on the other, indirect deaths surged due to malnutrition, preventable diseases, and lack of access to basic services previously supported by donor funding²⁰. The immediate closure of health and nutrition centres, reduced food distributions, and weakened protection services would expose vulnerable populations to avoidable mortality. Significantly In the Northeast Geopolitical zone, citizens displaced by Boko Haram violence would lack access to food and medical treatment, while in the North-Central states, victims of communal violence and banditry would be cut off from humanitarian support. These gaps highlighted are indicators that aid withdrawal during periods of heightened insurgency can amplify death tolls and worsen human insecurity²⁷.

Buttressing these assumptions, reports showed that, in Borno State, IDP camps witnessed closures of health facilities and interruptions in the treatment of severely malnourished children, increasing the preventable infant/child mortality

rate²⁷. In Benue and Plateau, victims of communal clashes and armed banditry were left without food and emergency health assistance, thereby predisposing victims to the possibility of the spread of infections, outbreak of epidemics and heightened mortality rates. The compounded effect of persistent insecurity and violent conflict amidst the USAID funding freeze creates a humanitarian emergency that would not only increase the mortality rates but also destabilise community resilience and development prospects. It is therefore on this premise that this study seeks to critically examine the Developmental implication of USAID Funding suspension in Northeastern and North-central Nigeria: An analysis of conflict-related deaths from 2021 to 2025.

Literature Review

The global development landscape underscores the indispensable role of international aid in mitigating the effects of conflict and displacement. International aid from institutions like USAID forms a lifeline for conflict-affected populations by supporting food security, healthcare, and shelter provision⁵. The suspension of such aid would result in heightened vulnerability, increased mortality, and deepened humanitarian cum developmental crises. Sub-Saharan Africa, more than any other region, depends heavily on external humanitarian funding due to persistent governance challenges and weak state capacity³. This dependence makes countries in the region highly vulnerable to aid fluctuations, particularly in conflict-prone zones. Slim categorically stated that the politicisation of aid and the withdrawal of donor support in conflict settings directly undermine civilian protection, exacerbating death tolls linked to violent insurgencies²⁵. These global perspectives highlight the interconnections of donor commitments and humanitarian outcomes, offering a useful basis for examining Africa's reliance on foreign assistance. Barnett equally averted that insurgencies and fragile political structures intensify the humanitarian consequences of aid withdrawal⁵. Reductions in donor funding across the Horn of Africa during periods of political instability led to significant increases in civilian deaths, famine-related mortality, and displacement¹⁸. These regional studies reinforce the global evidence, but they also highlight the structural fragility that makes African states especially exposed to shifts in donor behaviour.

In Nigeria, the reliance on external aid, particularly from USAID, is critical for sustaining humanitarian operations in conflict-affected areas. USAID funds have historically supported internally displaced people (IDPs) with food, water, and healthcare, particularly in the North². He contends that suspension of aid threatens not only the well-being of displaced populations but also undermines Nigeria's broader counterinsurgency efforts by worsening the poverty index as well as the developmental indices of the country. This argument connects with Omondi and Kimani's observation regional findings on USAID Funding but underscores how Nigeria's vast population amplifies the consequences of donor withdrawal¹⁸. In line with this, the suspension of USAID funding in 2021–2023 contributed to reduced access to food supplies in IDP camps, leading to spikes in malnutrition-related deaths, particularly among children and pregnant women²⁸.

Drawing inference from Northeastern Nigeria, where the Boko Haram insurgency had a significant toll, that the reduction in USAID food security programs aggravated mortality trends. His study showed that development partners scaled down food distributions in Borno and Yobe States, leading to starvation and preventable deaths¹⁵.

This finding aligns with evidence at the national level but emphasises how localised aid suspension translates directly into heightened death tolls in insurgency-ravaged areas²⁸. The stoppage of health interventions funds by USAID contributed to increased maternal and child mortality in IDP camps across Northeastern Nigeria⁶. This resonates with national level perspective but narrows the focus to specific health outcomes linked to the withdrawal of aid².

In the North Central region, where banditry and farmer-herder conflicts have escalated, similar patterns emerge. The suspension of humanitarian funds constrained livelihood support programs, leaving displaced farming households in Benue and Plateau States without assistance. This deprivation not only worsened food insecurity but also contributed to rising death tolls from malnutrition and violent clashes¹⁶. Okoh's findings, aligned with those of Nwankwo¹⁵, suggest that whether insurgency or communal violence, the withdrawal of USAID funds intensifies humanitarian suffering across Northeastern and North-Central Nigeria.

At the intersection of humanitarian aid and conflict mortality, depicted that the absence of USAID-supported peacebuilding and resilience programs exacerbated community vulnerability, indirectly fueling higher death rates. They note that without these interventions, local mediation structures collapsed, leading to intensified clashes¹⁰. This complements Bello's focus on health by highlighting how aid withdrawal also undermines social stability and increases indirect mortality from renewed violence⁶.

Moreover, Johnson contends that the suspension of USAID assistance between 2021–2024 eroded trust in humanitarian actors and weakened the overall humanitarian response architecture in Nigeria¹². His study demonstrates that local Non-Governmental Organizations that were heavily dependent on donor sub-grants were forced to halt operations, leaving critical service gaps in IDP camps. This connects back to Barnett's global insight about the systemic consequences of donor withdrawal, reinforcing the fragility of humanitarian ecosystems, especially in conflict zones⁵.

Specifically, Adamu's projections, predicted that the cumulative death toll from insurgency and displacement-related causes in Northeastern and North Central Nigeria could escalate significantly without renewed donor support¹. His position was that the compounding effects of hunger, disease, and violence will surpass the mortality levels recorded in the immediate years following the aid suspension. His work provides a forward-looking perspective, linking past consequences (as documented by Nwankwo, Bello, and Okoh) to future risks, underscoring the urgency of sustainable donor engagement.

Prospectively, while insurgency itself drives high civilian casualties, the suspension of humanitarian assistance acts, has a multiplier effect on death tolls. His stance was that aid withdrawal not only deepens immediate mortality but also undermines long-term recovery, trapping affected populations in a vicious cycle of violence, poverty, and developmental dependency¹¹.

The suspension of USAID funds undermines development and escalates humanitarian crises, particularly in Northeastern and North-Central Nigeria, as it; intensifies both direct and indirect causes of mortality. Globally, the scholarly positions of⁶ and²⁵ showed that aid withdrawal in conflict zones undermines food security, healthcare, and civilian protection, while regionally,^{3 and 18} revealed that Sub-Saharan Africa's fragile governance structures expose it to donor fluctuations.

Evidence from the Nigerian scene as captured by,² Adebayo and Usman and Ibrahim²⁸ reinforces the position that USAID's suspension between 2021 and 2023 escalated malnutrition-related deaths in IDP camps, a finding echoed by Nwankwo¹⁵ and Bello⁶ who link aid cuts to starvation and maternal-child mortality in the Northeast, and there were incidences of displaced farming households in the North Central¹⁶. Beyond immediate deprivation, and the absence of USAID-supported peace-building programs and the recess in NGO operations further eroded community resilience, indirectly fueling violence and weakening humanitarian systems. The cumulative death tolls will continue to rise if donor engagement remains suspended, framing aid withdrawal as a multiplier of insurgency-driven casualties¹. Critically, these studies converge on the view that while insurgency is the root cause of civilian deaths, the suspension of humanitarian assistance magnifies mortality by collapsing survival networks, exposing the structural fragility of Nigeria's humanitarian architecture, and underscoring the indispensable role of sustained donor support towards ensuring a sustainable development trend as victims of violent conflicts seek opportunities to rebuild and revamp their essence in society.

Theoretical Framework

The Human Security Theory:

Human Security Theory was first articulated in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report and advanced by scholars like Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq, who redefined security by shifting the focus from state sovereignty to individual well-being. It assumes that security threats extend beyond military aggression to include poverty, hunger, displacement, and poor governance^{23,26}. By recognising food, health, economic, and community security as essential dimensions of survival, the theory underscores that peace cannot be sustained without addressing root vulnerabilities. Applied to Northeastern and North Central Nigeria, the theory helps explain how the suspension of USAID humanitarian funding between 2021 and 2025 weakened access to food aid, healthcare, and displacement support, thereby aggravating insurgency-related death tolls. This perspective highlights that insecurity in conflict-prone regions is not only the result of direct violence but also of systemic developmental breakdown.

The strengths of Human Security Theory lie in its holistic, people-centred lens, which reveals the multidimensional consequences of aid withdrawal and draws attention to the dignity and survival of vulnerable populations (Paris, 2001). However, the theory has notable weaknesses: its wide scope makes it conceptually ambiguous, and it often overlooks the geopolitical interests and structural power dynamics that drive donor decisions¹⁴. In Nigeria, while the framework effectively illustrates how USAID's funding suspension magnifies human suffering, it does not fully account for the political strategies that shape aid distribution. Nevertheless, by reframing the insurgency's humanitarian consequences through the lens of human vulnerability, the theory provides a critical foundation for analysing the intersection of conflict, aid, and mortality in fragile contexts.

Research Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is the ex-post facto research design. This design is appropriate because the variables under investigation, the suspension of USAID funds and its humanitarian consequences on Northeastern and North Central Nigeria between 2021 and 2025, have already occurred

and cannot be manipulated by the researcher. The study employed the documentary method of data collection, which relied on secondary sources such as textbooks, journal articles, official reports, conference and seminar papers, internet materials, magazines, and newspapers. These sources provided relevant information on the humanitarian situation, insurgency trends, and the effects of aid withdrawal. To interpret the data, the study utilised content analysis, enabling the researcher to critically examine, categorise, and draw patterns from existing literature and reports. This approach allowed for a systematic and comprehensive understanding of how the suspension of USAID funds influenced the humanitarian landscape, with particular focus on the death toll emanating from insurgency within the study period.

Developmental Implications of USAID Funding Suspension in Northeastern and North Central Nigeria: An Analysis of Conflict Related Deaths between 2021–2025

Table 1: Selected major incidents and conservative fatality counts (Plateau, Benue, Borno, Yobe, Taraba; 2021–2025)

State	Year	Major documented incidents (selected)	Conservative documented fatalities (selected incidents)	Humanitarian consequences (high-level)
Borno	2021–2025	Repeated village raids, base assaults, roadside bombs; multiple mass raids in 2024–25	Numerous high-fatality attacks (dozens per major raid; aggregated thousands across the conflict), exact conservative counts vary by event.	Large displacement, severe child malnutrition, interrupted health/nutrition outreach, and protection need.
Yobe	2021–2025	Major raid in Nov 2023 (Gaidam/Gurokayeya); other episodic attacks	At least ~40 killed in Nov 2023 attack (example); other incidents add dozens.	Displacement, trauma, pressure on IDP sites, gaps in mobile clinic/vaccine outreach.
Taraba	2021–2025	Surge of May–June 2025 attacks in Karim Lamido and other LGAs; multiple village raids	Dozens killed in late-May 2025 outbreaks; local claims higher (40+ reported by multiple outlets).	Sudden displacements, shelter/WASH needs, urgent food, and protection assistance; verification gaps.
Plateau	2021	Rukuba Road ambush (22), Yelwa Zangam raid (36)	58 (two documented incidents).	Early resurgence of ambush/farmer–herder violence; curfews; fears of reprisals.
Plateau	2022	Kanam–Wase corridor raids	50–70 (conservative documented range; community estimates higher).	Mass abductions, arson, displacement, and depopulation risk for rural communities.
Plateau	2023	Mangu (May ≥80), Christmas Eve coordinated attacks (140–200)	220–280 (conservative sum for two major episodes).	Widespread displacement; crop destruction; critical strain on local health services.
Plateau	2024	Mangu (Jan ≥30), Zurak/Wase mine-area (May ≥40)	70–90 (combined conservative count).	Continued violence despite curfew; expands to resource-rich areas.
Plateau	2025	April Bokkos (52), April Bassa (51)	103 (April combined conservative count).	Large displacement (IOM DTM: 1,203 newly affected, incl. children); urgent multisector needs.
Benue	2021	Odugbeho massacre (Agatu)	<40 (reported).	Deep local trauma, displacement, and insecurity in rural markets.
Benue	2022	Guma LGA coordinated raids	25+ reported.	Disruptions to livelihoods; community self-defence responses.
Benue	2024	Ayati village attack (Aug)	<30 reported.	Village raised; increased displacement and protection need.
Benue	2025	April–June surge (Ukum/Logo/Gbagir/Yelewata etc.)	Multiple incidents; conservative incident counts: 56 → upward revisions (to 72); one attack reported by Amnesty as 100+; aggregate surge: 159 deaths (Feb–May) reported in s	

Source: Researcher, 2025

In Borno State, the data from 2021 to 2025 underscores the continued centrality of the Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency, which remains the epicentre of armed violence in North-Eastern Nigeria^{7,9}. The documented incidents, repeated village raids, military base assaults, and widespread use of roadside bombs reveal a persistent pattern of high-fatality events, particularly the mass raids of 2024–2025 that claimed dozens of lives in single episodes, aggregating into thousands over the conflict period²⁷. The humanitarian fallout is immense, as these attacks fuel large-scale displacement, severe child malnutrition, and disruption of health and nutrition programs. Protection needs, particularly for women and children, have intensified as conflict dynamics spread across rural and peri-urban areas, eroding resilience and straining international humanitarian responses^{6,28}.

In Yobe State, though less intense than Borno, the insurgency produced episodic but significant violence, most notably the November 2023 raid on Gaidam and Gurokayeya, which left about 40 dead²¹. Other sporadic attacks added to the fatality toll, showing how Yobe continues to be vulnerable to spillover effects from Borno⁸.

The humanitarian implications are visible in displacement spikes, trauma among survivors, and heightened pressures on internally displaced persons¹⁵. Moreover, the disruptions strained outreach efforts such as mobile health clinics and vaccination campaigns, deepening vulnerabilities in a state already struggling with weak social infrastructure²⁷.

In Taraba State, the pattern of violence reflects the spread of communal and armed group conflict from Nigeria's Northeast into the Middle Belt¹. The May–June 2025 attacks in Karim Lamido and neighbouring LGAs marked a sharp escalation, with at least 40 deaths conservatively documented, though local sources report higher figures. These sudden outbreaks triggered emergency displacements, with affected populations requiring urgent shelter, water, sanitation, and food assistance¹⁰. Verification gaps in reported fatalities highlight the challenge of data reliability in remote areas, yet the humanitarian footprint is evident in protection crises and the erosion of rural stability¹⁶. The Taraba case demonstrates the southward expansion of insecurity beyond traditional Boko Haram frontlines¹¹.

In Plateau State, the data reveals a steady intensification of farmer–herder and communal clashes over five years, with

fatality counts escalating from dozens in 2021 to over 200 in 2023, before stabilising at slightly lower but still severe levels in 2024–2025. The 2021 Rukuba Road ambush and Yelwa Zangam raid (58 deaths combined) signalled the early resurgence of violence, escalating in 2022 with the Kanam–Wase corridor raids that left up to 70 dead. The conflict climaxed in 2023, when the Mangu crisis (≥ 80) and the Christmas Eve coordinated attacks (140–200 deaths) resulted in one of the deadliest single-year episodes, leading to mass displacement and destruction of crops^{22,4}. Despite curfews, violence continued in 2024 (70–90 deaths) and in 2025, with April attacks in Bokkos and Bassa killing 103 people and displacing over 1,200. The cumulative effects include widespread displacement, rural depopulation risks, and increased vulnerability of communities in resource-rich and agrarian zones¹².

In Benue State, the violence pattern reflects persistent farmer–herder conflict and community reprisal dynamics¹⁷. The 2021 Odugbeho massacre in Agatu left under 40 dead, setting the tone for recurrent communal violence²⁴. In 2022, coordinated raids in Guma LGA added another 25+ fatalities, disrupting livelihoods and prompting community self-defence responses³. The conflict persisted in 2024, with the Ayati village attack resulting in about 30 deaths and leading to displacement and destruction of local settlements¹¹. The humanitarian situation worsened in 2025, when a surge of violence across Ukum, Logo, Gbagir, and Yelewata produced an estimated 159 documented deaths between February and May, with some single incidents exceeding 100 deaths⁴. This escalation significantly eroded rural stability, displaced farming populations, and compounded food security and protection crises^{16,6}.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the suspension of USAID funds and the persistence of violent conflicts and insecurity in Borno, Yobe, Taraba, Plateau, and Benue between 2021 and 2025 have had severe developmental implications, including high fatality counts, mass displacement, food insecurity, and the collapse of basic health, education, and protection services. The recurring attacks, ranging from insurgent raids in Borno and Yobe to farmer–herder clashes in Plateau, Benue, and Taraba, have eroded livelihoods, deepened inter-generational trauma, and exposed the limitations of state and humanitarian responses. Overall, the findings underscore the urgent need for coordinated peacebuilding, security reforms, and sustained humanitarian assistance to prevent further deterioration of stability and human security in Nigeria's North-East and North-Central regions.

Recommendations

i. Strengthen Multi-Sector Humanitarian Response and Early Warning Systems: Humanitarian actors, in collaboration with federal and state governments, should scale up integrated responses that address displacement, food insecurity, health, and protection needs simultaneously. This requires improved early warning and rapid response systems to anticipate and mitigate attacks before they escalate into mass fatalities, particularly in volatile rural and border communities.

ii. Enhance Community-Based Peacebuilding and Security Collaboration: Sustainable peace in Plateau, Benue, and Taraba requires structured dialogue mechanisms that engage farmers, herders, traditional leaders, women, and youth in conflict resolution.

Local peace committees and community policing initiatives should be strengthened, while federal security forces improve intelligence-sharing and accountability to reduce reprisal attacks and resource-driven clashes.

iii. Invest in Livelihoods and Social Services to Reduce Vulnerability: Governments and development partners should prioritize rebuilding livelihoods, particularly agriculture and small-scale trade disrupted by violence, while expanding access to education, healthcare, and psycho-social support. This approach will not only reduce dependence on humanitarian aid but also weaken the conditions that fuel radicalization, communal violence, and cycles of displacement across the affected states.

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