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Full Length Research

Impact of Ethno-Religious Conflicts on Economic Development in Middle Belt Nigeria: A Study of Christian Youths

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of ethno-religious conflicts on the economic development of youths in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of this study comprised an estimated 5000 Christian youths from Kaduna and Kogi States. The study's sample consisted of 500 Christian youths, using 10% of the population as the representative sample. Multistage sampling techniques were adopted in selecting these sampled youths. The instrument used for data collection is a researcher-structured questionnaire titled "Impact of Ethno-religious Conflict on Economic Development Questionnaire (IERCEDQ)". The validity and reliability were ascertained using Cronbach's alpha statistics, and a reliability index of 0.73 was obtained, and that made the instrument reliable. The research questions were answered using simple descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested at 0.05 levels of significance with appropriate degrees of freedom using ANOVA analysis. The findings showed that these conflicts have detrimental effects on economic developments, disrupting livelihoods and economic environments across affected communities. Respondents also identified viable strategies for abating the conflicts, including interfaith dialogue, justice sector reforms, and civic education. The study concludes that addressing ethno-religious conflicts in the region requires a multifaceted and inclusive approach involving government, religious leaders, civil society, and local communities. Based on these, some recommendations made include, among others, community platforms should be established for regular engagement among different groups to build mutual understanding, government at all levels must promote justice, fairness, and inclusive representation in the government, and the government in Nigeria should strengthen the institution of the Public Complaint Bureau, which already exists in each state of the Federation, through appropriate legislation. This will help the parties in dispute to be able to lay bare their grievances for onwards transmission to appropriate government agencies for necessary action.

Keywords: Ethnoreligious conflict, Economic development, national security, political integration

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnoreligious conflicts can have negative effects on the country's national security, stability, and integration. This manipulation of religion and ethnicity by religious and ethnic leaders significantly obstructs the country's efforts to achieve greater heights. Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have become major boundaries that create

divisions among people. Ethnicity and religion have also become tools for mobilisation and manipulation in Nigeria. There has been frequent ethnic conflicts and religious clashes which have posed significant security challenges in the middle belt Nigeria. The long protracted ethno-religious conflict leads to the destruction of lives and

properties. Consequently, the conflicts left several people wounded and several thousand people displaced from their homelands. In other words, the ethno-religious conflict has led to the loss of human lives and capital. It is a serious and ongoing problem in Nigeria. Nigeria has been pushed hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional and state illegitimacy, hence hindering efforts towards economic transformation, democratisation, national cohesion and stability. are the main challenges to the achievement of national integration. It is a commonplace fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation state with socio-cultural differences, and these have resulted in cultural dissimilarity. This cultural dissimilarity has been manifested by, for instance, the differences in language, diet, dress and types of social system (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). Today, rather than integrating into a cohesive community with a common sense of identity and destiny, citizens of Nigeria are returning more and more to primordial affiliations for identity, loyalty and security. Instead of forging a united front and presenting a concerted effort to face the challenges of development in an increasingly competitive and globalised world, Nigerians are busy waging ethnic and religious wars, struggling for control over mineral resources, resisting marginalisation by dominant ethnic groups, and contending with diverse problems of basic survival (Udom & Okolie, 2022).

Nigeria, Africa's most populated country, has existed for over 100 years as a country since its creation by the British colonial administration in 1914 and has witnessed various conflicts. It is expected that Nigeria will coexist in harmony following the amalgamation of the geopolitical regions, which are made up of the northern protectorate, predominantly Muslim, and the southern protectorate, largely Christian, for economic and administrative convenience (Ezeogidi, 2020). Although the initial reason for the unification of both the northern and southern protectorates for economic opportunities did not serve its purpose rightly, instead both protectorates have spurred religious tensions for years in Nigeria.

Ethnicity and religion have become the basic problem of the north-south dichotomy employed as a fundamental political factor. Nigerian politics, even when pitched on other lines (North-South divide), always ends up being largely about Christianity and Islam (Kukah, 2020). 'Religion factors become dangerous when they are linked to politics but even more so when they are linked to ethnicity and the North-South Division' (Strategic Conflict Assessment Report, 2003). Sustaining a pluralistic and heterogeneous society can be upheld through unity in diversity. In the light of recent happenings, Nigeria operates on the verge of diversity in unity. Several ethnoreligious conflicts have occurred due to the inability to tolerate others' ethnic identity and religion or religious perspective, lifestyle, political views and ideas.

National cohesion is rooted in the ability to tolerate others. Conflict itself is evidence of the relation between human and social forces, but the management of this violence remains paramount before it degenerates into

warfare. Ethno-religious conflict poses a threat to sustainable democracy and development. The nature of governance and the conduct of elections in Nigeria have become worrisome. These democratic processes are exhibited within ethno-religious ideas, which have appropriately led to underdevelopment, democratic retrogression, and lack of democratic consolidation.

Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria can be described as a cycle of bloodletting. The plural nature of Nigeria reflects the weak state of the country to guarantee fundamental liberties and rights, security, a dignified existence for its populace, distributive justice and the essence of the social contract. Ethno-religious pluralism becomes a problem in Nigeria when opportunities in life and access to important socio-economic opportunities are dependent on membership of a particular ethnic and religious group.

Ethno-religious conflict is a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic or religious group and another such group in a multiethnic and multi-religious society is characterised by a lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, and a tendency towards violent confrontations (Achumba, Ighom ereho and Akpan-Robaro, 2013; Salawu, 2010). The upsurge of violence resulting from ethnic cleavages and some elements of religious colouration can be said to be ethno-religious conflict. Within the framework of this work, crisis is cogitated in line with the submission of Oladosu (2013) as a state in which people, ethnic or religious groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement which may or may not result in bloody confrontation. A conflict triggered under the aegis of ethnic identities is referred to as ethnic or racial conflict, and similarly, those triggered under the influence of religion are defined as religious conflict. Conflicts are signals of social relations and are not inherently negative if necessary; preventive and early warning mechanisms are put in place to prevent them from degenerating into incessant bloody or violent confrontations.

Several works on the violent conflicts, especially ethno-religious conflicts, have their historical forebear in Nigeria. In many ways, it can be assumed that the creation of Nigeria was an outcome of many conflicts and compromises. Nigeria is said to be a pluralistic society such that culture, politics, ethnicity, religion, etc., are part of its existence. Despite this pluralism, it seems that ethnicity and religion are the most dominant and problematic issues in Nigeria. Ethnicity and religion have provided the pattern for the violent ethno-religious conflicts which Nigeria has experienced in the past 30 years.

Predictably, the mixtures of ethnicity and religious faith have taken the strife to unimaginable, deadly heights. Many villages in Nigeria have been levelled, neighbours who had lived in harmony for decades have turned on one another with murderous fervour, thousands of lives have been lost, numerous buildings and other valuables have been razed, the cities and indeed states that used to hold a lot of attraction for tourists find it hard

to sustain even the love of the indigenes, and fear has become a common denominator in Nigeria. These and more therefore present the problem of this study. Therefore, this study aims to determine ethno-religious conflicts and their impact on the economic and educational impact on Christian youths in Middle Belt Nigeria.

Ethno-religious conflict impacts negatively many forms of economic development, such as the inability for people to interact with one another, which also creates unhealthy child growth by seeing people outside their ethnic and religious groups as evil. Furthermore, during crises a lot of people abandon their ethnic, cultural, religious and traditional values to pledge allegiance to new, artificial and unproven states (Amnesty International, 2018). This unfortunate state has plugged people into deeper crises, with poor interactions resulting in the fierce elimination of people.

In Nigeria, since the return of civil rule in 1999, domestic instability arising from ethno-religious and inter- and intra-communal conflicts in varying degrees and dimensions has been recorded. This crisis has implications for national security, infrastructure, education and economic development in Nigeria (Nigeria is in danger; the country is torn apart by the twin forces of religion and ethnicity). Worryingly, there seems to be no solution in sight. The current book haram crisis which has so far claimed innumerable lives and damaged properties is fast becoming an issue for which every Nigerian should be concerned (Canci & Odukoya, 2018; Onah et al., 2017). The amalgamation policy by the British colonialists, such that a large number of heterogeneous people with their different cultural and political systems, languages and religions, was bound to be inherently conflict- and crisis-prone (Osunyikanmi & Sapele, 2019).

Conflict theory is rooted in the work of Karl Marx. The theory assumes that the society is in competition, which is a constant and, at times, an overwhelming factor in nearly every human relationship and interaction (Alegbeleye, 2014). Competition exists as a result of the scarcity of resources, including material resources, money, property, commodities, and more. Beyond material resources, individuals and groups within a society also compete for intangible resources as well. These can include leisure time, dominance, social status, sexual partners, etc. Given conflict theorists' assumption that conflict occurs between social classes, one outcome of this conflict is a revolutionary event. The conflict/Marxist theoretical perspective shares the same assumptions concerning the nature of the society and ethno-religious conflict. Conflict theory, on the other hand, emphasises conflict as the hallmark of the society (Yebo, 2015).

The theory also highlights that competition drives conflict as the society struggles for scarce resources. Hence, in this study, ethnoreligious groups compete for economic, political and educational resources. In the middle belt, land disputes, political control and access to government benefits can fuel conflict between Christian

and Muslim communities. Also, some religious and ethnic majorities control the institutions such as schools, government and businesses, which can equally fuel hatred. Therefore, this theory is significant in this study.

The study also examined some empirical studies, which include Alexander and Victor (2022), who examined the effect of ethno-religious conflicts and socio-economic development in Taraba State. A well-structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument to generate the required information and collect data for the study. A mixed-method approach was applied during this research using an exploratory research design. Findings show that ethno-religious conflict has caused a major setback to socio-economic development in Taraba State. Another study by Jegede (2019) examined the perennial incidents of religious crises in Nigeria which is ever on the increase, claiming hundreds of lives, destroying properties worth millions of naira. The colossal loss to violent religious conflicts in Nigeria did not end with loss of lives and properties. In fact, its attendant effects on peaceful co-existence, political stability and socio-economic development are beyond comprehension. Hardly can one speak of progress in Nigeria when our social, political, economic and religious systems fail to maintain at least a minimum level of social decorum. Adabembe and Adedayo (2022) x-rayed the historical background to religious crises, the causes of religious crises, religion and development, and the implications of religious crises on national development. The survey research method was used to assess this situation, and empirical results were found. Key informants and focus group discussions were used. 20 Christians, 20 Muslims, 20 African traditionalists, 20 leaders of religious organisations, and 20 leaders of ethnic groups. Formed the sample of the study. Data were collected through primary and secondary data collection. The work revealed that religious crises run counter to the tenets, teachings and ethical values of the three major religions which are in practice in the country. Meanwhile, religious fanatics and fundamentalists who originated and still promote religious crises in Nigeria violate religious tenets, ethical codes and teachings from the holy books. In the Alemika et al. (2022) study, it is posited that the socio-economic factors are a significant cause of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria's middle belt area. Alemika et al. (2022), believes that these differences common among ethnic religious groups are the root causes of conflicts in which religion becomes the beacon of grievance expressions. A good proportion of the Nigerian civilians prefers to resort to religious leaders, influential persons, and traditional rulers for peacekeeping in times of unrest (Alemika et al., 2002).

Other research on religious conflicts in Nigeria highlighted various possible causes of these conflicts, as the high level of diversity and pluralistic nature of the Nigerian society have spurred these conflicts. One of many causes is the introduction of the Sharia law in two of the Muslim-predominant states in Northern Nigeria, Kaduna and Kebbi. Okpanachi (2010) examined the

relationship between Sharia law, identity and conflict in Kaduna and Kebbi states. The study investigates historical and empirical implications of the Sharia policy for the formation and transformation of the identities of the different ethno-religious groups within the two states. The Sharia law has more impact on ethno-religious conflict in Kaduna State than in Kebbi State due to the variety of different ethnic groups in Kaduna State. The Sharia policy shaped the formation of both the Kaduna State and the Kebbi State, given its Muslim majority in both states (Okpanachi, 2010).

While it is true that it is not possible to know the exact number of ethno-religious conflicts due to lack of adequate statistical data on this issue, it is interesting to note that about forty percent (40%) of ethno-religion-based conflicts are credited to the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. The fact that there is a recent increase in the number of ethno-religious conflicts in the country makes it a relevant issue of discussion in contemporary Nigeria and a lesson for other nations in the world that are multi-ethnic and multi-religious in their composition (NziokiMunyao, MuemaMwania & Mwinzi, 2017). Also because of the violent nature of ethno-religious conflicts, which often take the form of riots, sabotage, assassination, armed struggles, guerrilla warfare and secession in Nigeria, they no doubt have implications for the political and economic development of the country, thus making it an important issue for discussion. The discussion of ethno-religious conflicts in whatever context even becomes more necessary given the fact that there is a phenomenal recurrence of ethno-religious conflict across the nation, thereby increasing the level of general insecurity, particularly in the areas where such conflicts had ever occurred. It is against this backdrop that this study will examine the manifestations of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria and their economic impact on Christian youths in the Middle Belt, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study include:

1. Examine the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.
2. Determine the impact of the ethno-religious crisis on economic development among Christian youths in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.
3. Establish the strategies to be adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria?

2. Determine the impact of the ethno-religious crisis on economic development among Christian youths in Middle Belt Nigeria.

3. Establish the strategies to be adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria.

1.5 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

HO1: There are no significant differences in the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria based on the socio-economic characteristics of Christian youths in the Middle Belt.

HO2: Ethno-religious crisis has no significant impact on economic development among Christian youths in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

HO3: There is no significant difference in the strategies adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria based on the socio-economic characteristics of Christian youths.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Descriptive survey research design is one in which a group of people or items are studied by collecting and analysing data from a sample of people or items considered to be representative of the entire population. Nworgu (2015) explained that a descriptive survey involves a systematic and comprehensive collection of information about the opinions, attitudes, feelings, beliefs and behaviour of people. This method of research design was used because it will help to elicit relevant information/opinion in ethno-religious crises and impact the economic and educational development of Christian youths in Middle Belt Nigeria. The area of study for this research is the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, which serves as a cultural and geographical transition zone between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South. The region is characterised by its ethno-religious diversity and recurrent conflicts. The study will focus on specific states within the Middle Belt that are most affected by ethno-religious conflicts. Nigeria's middle belt states include Adamawa, Kaduna, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Taraba, and the Federal Capital Territory.

The population of this study comprised an estimated 5000 Christian youths from Kaduna and Kogi States. This population will comprise Christian youths aged 15 to 30 years residing in these areas affected by ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria.

The study's sample consisted of 500 Christian youths, using 10% of the population as the representative sample. Multistage sampling techniques were adopted in selecting these sampled youths. At first the researcher will purposefully select 5 churches from each state under study, which will give a total of 10 churches. At the second stage the researcher will use stratified and proportionate sampling techniques to select the Christian youths from these churches. The convenience sampling technique will also be used at the third stage to make sure that the youths selected are willing and ready to participate in the study. This approach allows for proportional representation and mitigated potential biases, ensuring the sample accurately reflects the characteristics of the population. The instrument used for data collection is a researcher-structured questionnaire titled "Impact of Ethno-religious Conflict on Economic Development Questionnaire (IERCEDQ)". Questions are drawn based strictly on the stated objectives and literature reviewed. The questionnaires were structured in two sections. In section A, the respondents were required to provide their demographic information. Section B elicited information on ethno-religious conflict and its impact on the economic and educational development of Christian youths in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. This section was divided into 3 clusters. Cluster 1, on the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria; cluster 2, on the impact of ethno-religious crises on economic development among Christian youths in Middle Belt Nigeria; and cluster 4, on strategies to be adopted to abate the continuous

occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria. The response format on clusters 1, 3 and 4 is a 4-rating scale of Very high, high, low, and very low, while the other cluster is on a response format that is a 4-point rating scale of strongly agree (SD) (4 points), agree (A) (3 points), disagree (2 points), and strongly disagree (1 point). To test the reliability of the questionnaire instrument, the Cronbach's alpha method of reliability was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. 20 copies of the samples of the questionnaire were administered to 20 Christian youths that were not part of the sample. A reliability index of 0.73 was obtained, and this gave a 100% return rate. The research questions were answered using simple descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation. The four-point scale was used to compute the mean. Values are attached to the categories of responses, namely, Strongly Agree (4 points), Agree (3 points), Disagree (2 points) and Strongly Disagree (1 point). This means that the cut-off mark is 2.50. Hence, items with points above the cut-off mark of 2.50 were retained, while those below 2.50 were accepted. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 levels of significance with an appropriate degree of freedom using ANOVA analysis. The hypothesis of no significant difference was retained if the p-value was greater than the 0.05 level of significance; otherwise, the null hypothesis was rejected.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	220	44.0
Female	280	56.0
Total	500	100
Educational qualification		
O'level	54	10.8
Diploma	54	10.8
Degree	262	52.4
Postgraduate	35	7.0
Others	95	19.0
Total	500	100
Socio-income level		
Low-income family	274	54.8
Middle income family	206	41.2
High-income family	20	4.0
Total	500	100.0

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of participants in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The percentage of male and female youths that participated in this study is 44.0% and 56.0%, respectively. The percentage of educational qualifications includes O'level = 10.8%, Diploma = 10.8%, Degree = 52.4%, Postgraduate = 7.0% and others 19.0%. The result also revealed the percentage of socioeconomic status represented by

income level: low-income families, middle-income families, and high-income families have different percentages of 54.8%, 41.2%, and 4.0%, respectively. This implies that a reasonable number of participants with different characteristics.

Research Question One: What are the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria?

Table 2: Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria

S/N	Item statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Religious intolerance	500	3.19	.708	High
2	Competition for resources is a major cause of ethno-religious conflicts in the region.	500	3.15	.868	"
3	Politicians' manipulation of ethnic and religious differences fuels conflicts.	500	3.39	.657	"
4	Cultural and religious differences are the primary drivers of conflicts.	500	3.19	.952	"
5	Economic inequality and poverty contribute to ethno-religious tensions.	500	3.24	.612	"
Grand Mean			3.23	0.759	"

Table 2 shows the causes of ethnoreligious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria. The data reveal that the youths' average score is 3.23 out of 4, with a standard deviation of 0.893. This indicates that all the causes presented here are involved in causing ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. The relatively low standard deviation score of

0.893 indicates that respondents' opinions were not far apart, adding validity to the mean scores.

Research Question Two: What is the impact of the ethno-religious crisis on economic development among Christian youths in Middle Belt Nigeria?

Table 3: Impact of Ethno-Religious Crisis on Economic Development among Christian youths in Middle Belt Nigeria

S/N	Item Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Loss of livelihoods, displacement, and decreased investment.	500	3.29	1.126	High
2	The crisis has affected my business or investment decisions.	500	3.36	1.157	"
3	I have experienced loss of income or revenue due to ethno-religious conflicts.	500	3.42	1.059	"
4	The crisis has limited my access to markets or customers.	500	3.11	1.282	"
5	Ethno-religious conflicts have discouraged investments in my community.	498	3.12	1.340	"
Grand Mean		498	3.26	1.152	"

Table 3 shows the impact of ethnoreligious conflicts on economic development in Middle Belt Nigeria. The data reveal that the youths' average score is 3.26 out of 4, with a standard deviation of 1.152. This indicates that ethno-religious conflicts have a high economic impact on youths of the Middle Belt, Nigeria. The relatively low standard deviation score of 1.152 indicates that

respondents' opinions were not far apart, adding validity to the mean scores.

Research Question Three: What are the strategies to be adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria?

Table 4: Strategies to be Adopted to abate the Continuous Occurrence of Ethno-Religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria

S/N	Item Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Interfaith dialogue and understanding can help reduce conflicts.	500	3.27	.621	Agree
2	Community-based peacebuilding initiatives are effective in preventing conflicts.	500	3.19	.713	"
3	Government policies and interventions can play a crucial role in conflict resolution.	500	2.96	.877	"
4	Education and awareness programs can promote tolerance and understanding.	500	3.40	.655	"
5	Collaboration between community leaders, government, and civil society can help prevent conflicts.	500	3.04	1.029	"
Grand Mean		500	3.17	0.779	"

Table 4 shows the strategies to curb ethnoreligious conflicts among youths in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The data reveal that the youths' average score is 3.17 out of 4, with a standard deviation of 0.779. This mean is higher than the benchmark mean of 2.5. This indicates that the youths agreed to all the strategies to curb ethno-religious conflicts in Youths of the Middle Belt, Nigeria. These strategies, if adopted, will actually abate continuous ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The

relatively low standard deviation scores of 0.779 imply that respondents' opinions were not far apart, adding validity to the mean scores.

Hypothesis One: There are no significant differences in the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria based on socio-economic characteristics of Christian youths in Middle Belt.

Table 5: Significant Differences in the Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria Based on Socio-Economic Characteristics Of Christian Youths in Middle Belt.

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.056	3	1.352	4.776	.003
Within Groups	140.415	496	.283		
Total	144.471	499			

Table 5 reveals a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of youth with different socio-economic statuses on the causes of ethnoreligious conflict in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Specifically, the calculated f-value of 4.776 and a p-value of .003 indicate that the difference in opinions is significant at the 0.05 level. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, suggesting that there is a

significant difference in the opinion of youth of different socio-economic statuses on the causes of ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two: Ethno-religious crisis has no significant impact on economic development among Christian youths in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

Table 6: ANOVA statistics on Significant Impact of Ethnoreligious conflict on Economic Development Among Christian Youths In Middle Belt Nigeria

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	45.229	3	15.076	23.036	.000
Within Groups	324.616	496	.654		
Total	369.845	499			

Table 6 reveals reveal a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of youth on the impact of ethnoreligious conflict on economic development in Middle Belt Nigeria. Specifically, the calculated f-value of 23.036 and a p-value of .000 indicate that the difference on the impact is significant at the 0.05 level. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, suggesting that there is a

significant impact of ethnoreligious conflicts on economic development in Nigeria.

Hypothesis Five: There is no significant difference on the Strategies adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of Ethno-Religious conflicts in middle Belt Nigeria based on the Socio-economics characteristic of Christian youths

Table 7: Significant difference on the Strategies adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of Ethno-Religious conflicts in middle Belt Nigeria based on the Socio-economics characteristic of Christian youths

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	68.863	3	22.954	36.335	.000
Within Groups	313.349	496	.632		
Total	382.213	499			

Table 7 reveals a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of youth on the strategies to abate ethnoreligious conflict in Middle Belt Nigeria. Specifically, the calculated f-value of 36.335 and a p-value of .000 indicate that the difference in the strategies is significant at the 0.05 level. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, suggesting that there is a significant difference in the strategies to abate ethnoreligious conflicts based

on the socioeconomic status of youth in the Middle Belt, Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings revealed the causes of ethnoreligious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria. It showed that participants

widely agreed on multiple interrelated causes, including religious intolerance, political manipulation of identity, competition over land and resources, youth unemployment and government neglect or bias, among others. Further findings showed no significant difference in the opinion of youths based on their socio-economic status. This means that youths of different backgrounds and income earnings have different views over the causes of ethnoreligious conflict in Nigeria. These findings support various studies, such as Agbiboa (2018), who found out that the multi-dimensional nature of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is often rooted in colonial legacies, weak institutions, and poor governance. Okoli and Iortyer (2021) also reported the role of overlapping religious and customary laws in fuelling tensions, and Onuoha (2016) showed that ethno-religious conflict can occur, particularly where policies appear to favour one group over another. The agreement among respondents of this present study showed that ethno-religious conflicts are deeply embedded in Nigeria's socio-political structure, necessitating systemic reforms. Other studies in corroboration with these findings are Adabembe and Adedayo (2022), who x-rayed the historical background to religious crises, the causes of religious crises, religion and development, and the implications of religious crises on national development and discovered that religion was the genesis of the ethno-political crisis that infiltrates present-day Nigeria. Also, religion has been politicised in the country despite the fact that the country is a secular state. Finally, the work revealed that religious crises run counter to the tenets, teachings and ethical values of the three major religions which are in practice in the country. Another study by Alexander and Victor (2022) examined the effect of ethno-religious conflicts and socio-economic development in Taraba State and also discovered that superiority complexes, that is, claims of superiority by both Islam and Christianity over the African traditional religion and culture, and disregard and contempt for African traditional religion and institutions are causes of religious crises. This finding implies that some of these causes should be put into consideration when drafting strategies or policy to combat ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria generally.

The finding also revealed the high impact of ethnoreligious conflict on economic development in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. This finding on the economic impact of these conflicts is severe. Respondents agreed that there are disruptions of agricultural activities, destruction of markets, business closures, and loss of livelihoods as major effects of ethnoreligious conflict on the economy. According to Adabembe and Adedayo's (2022) study, it was revealed that regions plagued by violence experience a decline in productivity, investment, and infrastructure. Paul et al. (2019) further discovered that insecurity in the Middle Belt has driven away both local and foreign investors, worsening poverty and unemployment. Paul et al.'s (2019) study added that ethno-religious conflicts have significantly slowed economic development in the Middle Belt region. Jegede

(2019), who examined the perennial incidents of religious crises in Nigeria, which are ever on the increase, have claimed hundreds of lives, destroying properties worth millions of naira. Alexander and Victor (2022) examined the effect of ethno-religious conflicts and socio-economic development in Taraba State and found out that ethno-religious conflict has caused a major setback to socio-economic development in Taraba State. The findings of this present study present the real situation on the impact of ethnoreligious conflicts on the economic development of the country and need to be addressed.

Further findings revealed the strategies to abate continuous ethno-religious conflicts in Middle Belt Nigeria. Further findings revealed a significant difference exists in the opinion of youths of different socioeconomic statuses. The study revealed that respondents suggested several strategies to mitigate conflict, including interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding, equal resource distribution, economic empowerment of youth, strengthening of legal and justice systems, and promotion of civic education and tolerance in schools. These align with the recommendations of Ibrahim and Tukur (2017), who advocated for community-based peace processes combined with institutional reforms. Onuoha (2011) also discovered that durable peace requires inclusive governance, equity, and rule of law. The general agreement of the respondents in this present study shows that citizens recognise the solutions but lack implementation from government and stakeholders. Other studies, like Alexander and Victor (2022), who examined the effect of ethno-religious conflicts and socio-economic development in Taraba State, revealed some strategies to put in place, which included the need to create room for inter-ethnic and interfaith dialogue to protect the rights of all citizens and that the government should create awareness of the implication of conflict in the society as well as bring those that are perpetrating religious crises to book. Another study from Paul et al. (2019), which determined the effects of ethnoreligious crises on educational development and established the strategies to be adopted to abate the continuous occurrence of ethnic and religious crises in the Wukari local government area, reported that respondents agreed that political leaders, traditional rulers, community/religious leaders, youth organisations and non-governmental organisations should be united with the aspiration of promoting peace and development among the various ethnoreligious groups in the state. These findings are very important to draft strategies to abate continuous ethnoreligious conflict in Middle Belt Nigeria and other regions of Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study concludes that ethno-religious conflict remains a serious threat to peace and economic growth in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The causes are multifaceted – religious, political, economic, and structural – and the impacts are devastating and far-reaching. However, the

consensus among respondents about potential solutions offers hope. For real progress to be made, stakeholders must move from rhetoric to action, implementing inclusive, grassroots-based strategies that address the root causes of the conflict.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Community platforms should be established for regular engagement among different groups to build mutual understanding.
2. Government at all levels must promote justice, fairness, and inclusive representation in resource allocation and leadership.
3. Employment and skills acquisition programmes should target young people to reduce their vulnerability to manipulation and violence.
4. The government in Nigeria should strengthen the institution of the Public Complaint Bureau, which already exists in each state of the Federation, through appropriate legislation.
5. The government should help the parties in dispute lay bare their grievances for onwards transmission to appropriate government agencies for necessary action.

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