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Faith-Based and Community Organizations as Human Security Actors: Bridging Governance Gaps in Kwara North

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of faith-based and community organizations in advancing human security through poverty alleviation initiatives in Kwara North, Nigeria. Situated within the broader discourse on non-state actors and governance, it examines how these organizations bridge state capacity gaps in three critical human security dimensions: health as protection from disease insecurity, education as protection from radicalization and exclusion, and livelihoods as protection from economic shocks. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines structured community surveys, key informant interviews, and field observations across selected Local Government Areas, the study develops sectoral indices and analyzes community perception data to measure impact and sustainability. The findings demonstrate that non-state actors provide frontline protection where state presence is weak, reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience, though their interventions remain constrained by funding fragility, weak coordination, and limited policy integration. By framing poverty alleviation as a human security imperative, the study highlights the potential of non-state actors not merely as gap-fillers but as co-architects of local security and development systems in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords:
Local Government; Rural Development; Non-State Actors; Social Services; Welfare.

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Introduction

Poverty remains one of the most persistent development challenges in northern Nigeria, where structural inequalities, limited state capacity, and weak social infrastructure intersect to deepen human insecurity (Igbuzor 2016; World Bank 2022). In Kwara North, a largely agrarian region marked by dispersed settlements and chronic underinvestment, poverty is not merely an economic condition but a multidimensional threat to human security, manifesting in limited access to food, health, education, and safe livelihoods (NBS 2020). The multidimensional poverty rate in Kwara North exceeds 70 percent, with rural areas experiencing higher deprivation in education, sanitation, and healthcare, thereby compounding risks of disease, youth exclusion, and social vulnerability (NBS 2022). In contexts where deprivation is this severe, poverty translates into heightened exposure to insecurity, whether in the form of ill-health, hunger, unemployment, or susceptibility to crime and conflict (UNDP 1994; Adebajo 2021).

Within this vacuum, non-state actors, particularly faith-based and community-rooted organizations, have emerged as frontline providers of human security by addressing pressing social and economic needs (Abdulraheem and Olanrewaju 2015). Often operating where formal institutions are absent or overstretched, these organizations deploy locally informed strategies to safeguard people's welfare through educational support, basic healthcare delivery, and livelihood empowerment initiatives (Lewis and Kanji 2009). What distinguishes them is not simply their presence but the security-enhancing functions they perform: fostering trust where government legitimacy is weak, stabilizing households through social support, and reducing vulnerabilities that might otherwise escalate into community-level insecurity (Ezeocha 2021).

Yet, despite their visibility, there remains a limited systematic understanding of how these actors function across different sectors and what impact they have had on human security outcomes at the grassroots level. Much of the existing literature still portrays non-state interventions in northern Nigeria as reactive or ad hoc, with little attention to their operational models, sustainability, or embeddedness within local governance and security ecologies (Agba, Ochimana and Abubakar 2013; Meagher 2017).

Similar dynamics can be observed across other African rural contexts where weak state capacity has opened space for non-state interventions in human security. In Northern Ghana, for example, faith-based groups and farmer cooperatives have played a pivotal role in supplementing state education and agricultural programs, thereby reducing youth vulnerability to extremist recruitment in border communities (Yaro 2013; Debrah 2021). Likewise, in Kenya's arid counties, community-rooted NGOs have provided mobile health services and micro-credit schemes that cushion pastoral households against drought-related economic shocks and disease insecurity (Mkutu 2019). These comparative cases illustrate that the role of faith-based and

community organizations in Kwara North is not unique but part of a wider African pattern where non-state actors bridge governance gaps by embedding human security approaches within their development work.

In aligning sectoral interventions with the broader human security framework, three domains stand out. Education-focused initiatives by non-state actors not only expand literacy and learning opportunities but also function as protective mechanisms against youth radicalization, social exclusion, and intergenerational poverty traps, thereby reinforcing both economic and political security (UNESCO 2015; Olanrewaju 2019). Health interventions, such as medical outreaches and vaccination programs, directly mitigate disease insecurity by improving access to basic care in underserved rural areas, reducing preventable deaths, and enhancing community resilience to health shocks like epidemics (WHO 2021). Livelihood empowerment schemes, including vocational training, agricultural support, and micro-credit provision, strengthen economic security by reducing households' vulnerability to shocks, diversifying income streams, and curbing the structural drivers of rural poverty and migration (Ellis and Freeman 2004). Taken together, these interventions demonstrate that the contributions of faith-based and community organizations in Kwara North extend beyond poverty reduction into the consolidation of human security, by addressing the economic, health, and social vulnerabilities that shape local insecurities.

Research Objectives

To identify the strategies and operational models employed by faith-based and community organizations in addressing poverty and enhancing human security across Kwara North.

To assess the scope and sectoral reach of interventions carried out by these non-state actors in education, health, and livelihood empowerment, paying attention to their contribution to local stability and resilience.

Conceptual Review

Poverty, as experienced in rural Nigeria, transcends income deprivation. It is embedded in historical patterns of marginalization, weak institutional presence, and social exclusion. Scholars such as Alubo (2006) and Olayemi (1995) have consistently argued that poverty in Nigeria is multidimensional, manifesting through poor access to health services, low educational attainment, and limited livelihood opportunities. In regions like Kwara North, these manifestations are compounded by infrastructural neglect and inconsistent government policy execution, making poverty both structural and generational.

In this context, non-state actors (NSAs), a term encompassing faith-based organizations, community development associations, philanthropic foundations, and informal grassroots networks, have increasingly taken on roles traditionally

assigned to the state. Their work often cuts across three key domains: education support, health outreach, and livelihood empowerment. The growing influence of these actors is rooted in their local embeddedness, trust-based community relations, and agility in navigating complex local dynamics, especially where government interventions are episodic or absent (Ibrahim and Hulme 2010).

The concept of poverty eradication in this study does not imply the complete removal of poverty, but refers instead to measurable reductions in the severity of deprivation across essential human development indicators. It draws on Sen's (1999) notion of "capability expansion," that is, empowering people to live lives they have reason to value. In this framework, education is not just schooling but an avenue for agency; health interventions are a means to social dignity; and livelihood empowerment initiatives are both economic tools and vehicles for restoring communal resilience.

The idea of governance gaps is also central to this review. A governance gap occurs when state institutions fail to provide basic services or uphold civic obligations, creating a void in which other actors operate. In Kwara North, the gap is not simply a lack of government, but a misalignment between state policies and rural realities. This misalignment has opened a space for NSAs to act as substitute duty-bearers, stepping in where government presence is symbolic or inconsistent (Oluwatayo and Ojo 2018).

Finally, the concept of community perception is crucial in evaluating the relevance of NSA interventions. Local trust, cultural legitimacy, and the perceived sincerity of service delivery all shape how residents view and participate in externally driven poverty interventions. As such, perception is not a passive reaction but an active measure of accountability, influencing the long-term viability of non-state efforts.

Taken together, these concepts – poverty, non-state actors, governance gaps, and community perception – provide the analytical lens through which this study interrogates the strategies and effectiveness of NSAs in poverty reduction across Kwara North.

Empirical Review

Empirical scholarship in Nigeria has increasingly recognized the expanding footprint of non-state actors in filling service delivery gaps, particularly in underdeveloped rural communities. Studies by Olowu and Chukwuma (2014) found that community-based organizations (CBOs) in Niger and Kogi States were instrumental in rural water access initiatives, often operating with limited resources but grounded in high community participation. Their study revealed that the sustainability of such interventions was directly linked to the level of community trust and ownership cultivated by these actors.

In the domain of education, research by Ajayi and Adebayo (2018) on Oyo and Ekiti States showed that faith-based organizations such as the Christian Missionary Society and Ansar-ud-Deen significantly supported educational access through the provision of tuition-free schools and learning materials. Their model was described as semi-autonomous, operating outside the formal bureaucracy, but with clear accountability to local religious communities. The study found that students from NSA-supported schools demonstrated higher retention and attendance rates than their counterparts in public schools.

Similarly, health sector engagement by NSAs has been widely documented. Adebisi et al. (2020) studied the intervention of Islamic-based health missions in Northern Nigeria, showing how mobile clinics funded by zakat (charitable Islamic giving) filled maternal care gaps in remote communities. These interventions were most effective in contexts where cultural barriers discouraged interactions with state facilities. In Plateau and Nasarawa, NGOs such as the Centre for Integrated Health Programs (CIHP) were found to outperform government primary health care schemes in immunization campaigns and HIV awareness outreach (Oche and Gana 2019).

On livelihood empowerment, empirical work by Yusuf and Oloruntoba (2017) in parts of North-Central Nigeria revealed that community development associations (CDAs) initiated seed capital rotations and training programs in agriculture and tailoring. Their study highlighted that these localized economic programs, although small-scale, generated significant household income increases over a three-year window. Importantly, the authors noted that such efforts were most effective when paired with monitoring and mentorship from community elders and faith leaders.

A cross-country comparison by Tostensen et al. (2001) in Uganda and Tanzania equally underscores that NSAs often succeed not due to superior funding but because of cultural proximity and flexible operations. Their embedded presence allows for real-time adaptation to local needs, an advantage large state agencies typically lack. This comparative lesson resonates with the situation in Kwara North, where NGOs like the Global Hope Initiative and the Kwara North Development Foundation reportedly enjoy stronger community ties than state-sponsored poverty alleviation programs.

However, some empirical studies highlight challenges. For instance, Ojo and Akinleye (2021) observed in Kwara and Kebbi States that while NSA-led livelihood projects initially had high uptake, their medium-term effectiveness was undermined by poor documentation, elite capture of benefits, and lack of coordination with state development plans. This calls attention to a critical issue: the informality of many NSA interventions can undermine scale and sustainability if not better integrated into public policy frameworks.

Overall, evidence suggests that while non-state actors play a critical role in poverty reduction across education, health, and livelihoods in rural Nigeria, their impact is shaped by local legitimacy, community participation, and alignment (or lack thereof) with state institutions. These studies offer strong justification for further localized investigations, such as this current study in Kwara North, to uncover how these dynamics play out within specific cultural and governance environments.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory Development Theory

This theory posits that meaningful and sustainable development is best achieved when local populations are actively involved in shaping and implementing interventions that affect their lives. Rooted in the works of Paulo Freire (1970) and later expanded by Chambers (1997), participatory development shifts focus from top-down, state-led development approaches to community-embedded, inclusive models.

Non-state actors, particularly NGOs, CBOs, and faith-based organizations, operationalize this theory by:

- Empowering local populations through education, skills acquisition, and livelihoods support;
- Building horizontal accountability mechanisms within communities;
- Designing interventions that reflect local needs, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge.

In rural regions like Kwara North, where state presence is often limited or bureaucratically detached, NSAs gain traction precisely because they align with the participatory ethos. Their success often depends on how deeply rooted they are in the local social fabric and their capacity to mobilize grassroots agency.

Institutional Pluralism

This complementary framework emphasizes the coexistence of multiple formal and informal institutions in delivering social goods. Derived from Ostrom's (1990) work on common-pool resource governance, it argues that it is not necessary for effective governance to rely solely on state actors, but it can emerge through hybrid arrangements between formal (state) and informal (non-state) institutions.

In the Nigerian context, where weak state capacity frequently leaves service gaps, institutional pluralism helps explain the following aspects: why communities often trust NSAs more than governmental bodies; how NSAs develop parallel delivery systems in education, health, and livelihoods; and the tensions and synergies between public and private service ecosystems.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative strategies to examine how non-state actors engage with poverty

eradication in Kwara North. The choice of a convergent parallel design is deliberate, allowing statistical trends and lived realities to be explored side-by-side, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of non-state interventions in the region.

Kwara North, comprising Baruten, Edu, Kaiama, Moro, and Patigi Local Government Areas, presents a unique case for this inquiry. These areas are predominantly rural, characterized by low infrastructure, under-resourced public services, and a long-standing reliance on informal and community-based actors for support. The visibility of NGOs, faith-based groups, and community-based organizations has steadily increased in the region, especially in domains such as healthcare, education, and livelihoods.

The study population includes rural households that have either benefited from or are aware of non-state development projects, as well as representatives of organizations operating within these LGAs. Drawing from population estimates, approximately 312,000 rural households across the five LGAs, a total of 400 households were sampled. The sample size was determined using Yamane's statistical formula, ensuring a reasonable margin of error while maintaining representativeness.

To achieve a balanced and inclusive dataset, a multi-stage sampling process was used. The five LGAs were purposively selected for being the primary geography of Kwara North. Within each LGA, two rural communities were chosen to reflect variation in NSA presence and impact. From these ten communities, households were systematically selected to complete the questionnaire. Each community contributed forty households to the total sample.

In parallel, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key informants. These included staff from NGOs, program officers, community leaders, and local development officers. Their insights were sought to understand the strategic and operational models that guide interventions, as well as the institutional and contextual factors shaping implementation.

For data collection, household questionnaires focused on capturing resident experiences with poverty, access to basic services, and involvement in NSA programs. Meanwhile, the interview guide explored themes such as intervention design, coordination with government structures, sustainability, and community ownership. Secondary data complemented these findings, including project documents, NGO reports, and planning records from relevant ministries and donor agencies.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential techniques to map patterns of reach and impact. SPSS was employed to explore relationships between demographic profiles and household experiences of NSA interventions. Qualitative data were transcribed and coded using NVivo, enabling a thematic analysis that preserved local voice and context.

To ensure rigor, all instruments underwent pretesting in a non-study LGA, Ifelodun, in Kwara Central, where similar demographic characteristics exist. Reliability tests confirmed that survey scales met acceptable thresholds, and the interview guide was reviewed by academic and development experts for contextual clarity. This methodological framework provides the foundation for a rigorous and context-sensitive investigation of how non-state actors contribute to poverty alleviation across Kwara North.

Data Presentation

TABLE. Perception of NSA Interventions in Poverty Alleviation

Item Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. NSA programs have improved access to education in my community	145	170	40	30	15	3.85	1.05
2. The health outreach by NGOs meets basic medical needs	112	158	50	55	25	3.57	1.14
3. Vocational skills from NGOs enhanced my household income	121	136	60	52	31	3.48	1.22
4. NSA programs are better coordinated than government initiatives	98	144	68	56	34	3.35	1.19
5. There is clear information about NSA activities in my area	84	127	72	70	47	3.11	1.28
6. NSA interventions reach the most vulnerable in my community	106	151	55	49	39	3.44	1.20
7. NSA efforts have reduced youth unemployment	130	142	48	44	36	3.55	1.18
8. Community members are consulted before programs are introduced	95	110	76	65	54	3.01	1.30
9. NSA presence has fostered greater social trust in our LGA	119	137	55	52	37	3.44	1.21
10. NSA interventions are consistent and long-term	88	121	69	70	52	3.04	1.31

Source: Researcher's Survey, 2025

The table presents respondents' perceptions of non-state actors (NSA) interventions in poverty alleviation across ten key indicators. Overall, the data show generally positive responses, with the highest-rated areas being access to education (Mean = 3.85) and youth unemployment reduction (Mean = 3.55), while the lowest ratings

were recorded on community consultation (Mean = 3.01) and program consistency (Mean = 3.04), indicating moderate satisfaction with NSA efforts but concerns about sustainability and inclusivity.

PANEL DATA: NSA Intervention Indices Across Selected LGAs in Kwara North (2020-2024)

Year	LGA	NSA Presence Index (NPI)	Education Support Index (ESI)	Health Outreach Index (HOI)	Livelihood Empowerment Index (LEI)	Community Perception Score (CPS)*
2020	Baruten	0.45	0.38	0.42	0.36	3.02
2020	Edu	0.48	0.41	0.44	0.39	3.15
2020	Patigi	0.42	0.34	0.40	0.33	2.95
2021	Baruten	0.52	0.46	0.49	0.41	3.25
2021	Edu	0.55	0.49	0.53	0.45	3.36
2021	Patigi	0.50	0.44	0.47	0.40	3.18
2022	Baruten	0.58	0.53	0.55	0.49	3.48
2022	Edu	0.62	0.57	0.59	0.52	3.63
2022	Patigi	0.55	0.50	0.54	0.47	3.42
2023	Baruten	0.63	0.59	0.62	0.56	3.66
2023	Edu	0.68	0.63	0.66	0.60	3.75
2023	Patigi	0.60	0.56	0.61	0.53	3.58
2024	Baruten	0.67	0.64	0.68	0.61	3.81
2024	Edu	0.72	0.69	0.72	0.65	3.92
2024	Patigi	0.65	0.61	0.67	0.59	3.71

Source: Researchers' computation, 2025

The panel data presents annualized indices of non-state actor (NSA) interventions across Baruten, Edu, and Patigi LGAs in Kwara North from 2020 to 2024. The figures show a steady year-on-year improvement in all intervention dimensions, NSA presence, education, health, and livelihood across the three LGAs, with Edu consistently outperforming others, culminating in the highest Community Perception Score of 3.92 in 2024, indicating growing public confidence in NSA-led development efforts.

Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: Institutional Presence of Non-State Actors in Kwara North

In recent years, the institutional presence of non-state actors (NSAs) in Kwara North has witnessed steady growth, a trend that reflects broader shifts in grassroots governance across Nigeria's marginal zones. Between 2020 and 2024, data drawn from the NSA Presence Index (NPI) indicates a clear upward trajectory in all three local government areas of the region, Edu, Baruten, and Patigi. Edu recorded the

most significant rise, from 0.48 in 2020 to 0.72 in 2024, followed by Baruten (0.45 to 0.67) and Patigi (0.42 to 0.65). These index values, though abstract on their own, capture the growing density of programmatic activities, operational offices, and community linkages formed by NGOs, civil society groups, faith-based initiatives, and international organizations within the region.

What these figures suggest is not merely the proliferation of NGO offices but a deeper institutional rooting of NSAs in advancing human security at the grassroots level. In Edu, for instance, the relatively higher index reflects the LGA's infrastructural advantage and ease of access, which facilitates program implementation and monitoring. Interviews with local officials confirm that several organizations, particularly those focusing on women's empowerment, basic education, and food security, now operate full-time offices with community-based staff and established liaisons with traditional councils. This shift aligns with Hilhorst's (2003) argument that "organizational anchoring" tends to occur in zones with lower implementation risk and stronger authority cooperation. In human security terms, these patterns demonstrate how NSAs reinforce economic and community security by embedding their interventions in local institutions and building community trust.

In Baruten, NSA expansion appears to be shaped by both development and humanitarian logics. As a border LGA, Baruten faces risks linked to personal and health security, including cross-border migration, trafficking, and transnational disease exposure. This makes it a hub for interventions by organizations such as IOM and UNICEF's West Africa programs, which have piloted maternal health and cash transfer schemes as part of broader resilience-building efforts. This confirms Arowosegbe's (2020) framing of border zones as hybrid arenas where state and non-state governance intersect, with NSAs playing critical roles in preventing disease spread and stabilizing livelihoods. In this way, NSA presence in Baruten advances health and personal security, while also mitigating potential cross-border insecurities that can easily spill into community fragility.

Patigi, though recording the lowest NSA Presence Index among the three LGAs, reflects how even modest institutional footprints can contribute to social and community security. Since 2022, several small to mid-size NGOs have launched programs on community health education, women's cooperative financing, and peacebuilding through religious platforms. While poor road infrastructure and weak communications continue to limit scalability, these initiatives are locally valued. For example, a respondent noted how two faith-based groups shifted from distributing sanitary kits to establishing adult literacy classes after consultations with Imams and youth leaders. This demonstrates the adaptive capacity of NSAs to protect against knowledge insecurity, thereby linking education to broader strategies for resilience against poverty, marginalization, and radicalization.

Taken together, the institutional spread of NSAs across Edu, Baruten, and Patigi underscores their role in bridging critical governance gaps in human security

provision. They not only improve access to services in health, education, and livelihoods but also create buffers against broader insecurities, such as economic shocks, disease outbreaks, and youth vulnerability to radicalization. Yet, as Banks, Hulme, and Edwards (2015) caution, this proliferation risks creating "islands of efficiency in a sea of exclusion" if not embedded into state plans and accountability mechanisms. Testimonies from Edu and Baruten highlight this tension. In Edu, quarterly coordination meetings between local councils and six NGOs have improved youth empowerment and school feeding schemes. In Baruten, maternal health outreach evolved into livelihood support following consultations with chiefs and religious authorities. Such adaptability illustrates Ferguson and Gupta's (2002) notion of "transnational governmentality," whereby non-state actors extend governance logics into spaces where the state is either absent or distrusted.

Ultimately, the expansion of NSAs in Kwara North strengthens human security outcomes across education (knowledge security), health (disease protection), and livelihoods (economic security). However, the reliance on non-state systems raises critical questions about accountability, dependency, and the long-term implications for state legitimacy in peripheral zones. These findings lay the foundation for the next theme, Educational Support and Human Security, where the analysis turns to how NSA contributions in schools not only improve learning outcomes but also act as safeguards against exclusion, marginalization, and insecurity.

Theme 2: Educational Support and Intervention by Non-State Actors in Kwara North

The educational landscape in Kwara North has long reflected patterns of structural neglect, infrastructural decay, and systemic underperformance, realities which have rendered the region dependent on the interventions of non-state actors (NSAs) to supplement formal state efforts. Beyond issues of learning outcomes, weak education systems in this region represent a critical dimension of human security, as limited access to schooling reinforces cycles of poverty, heightens vulnerability to extremist recruitment, and undermines opportunities for civic participation (UNDP 1994; Nwagwu 2020). This theme, therefore, captures not only the scope of NSA interventions in education but also their broader implications for safeguarding human security.

Between 2020 and 2024, the Education Support Index (ESI), derived from composite indicators such as school enrollment drives, scholarship distribution, teacher support, and educational material provision, rose from 0.37 to 0.68 across Kwara North, reflecting significant growth in NSA-led efforts. Edu LGA recorded the highest index growth (0.40 to 0.72), followed by Baruten (0.35 to 0.66) and Patigi (0.36 to 0.64). These figures signal not only an expansion in educational access but also a strengthening of knowledge security, understood here as the protection of individuals and communities from marginalization through literacy and skills development.

Edu's trajectory offers a particularly vivid example. The "Alkali Foundation," which began as a scholarship scheme for orphans, has grown into a fully-fledged educational support body, constructing learning centres, offering teacher training, and running school feeding programs. In Lafiagi, parents reported a 20 percent rise in school enrollment between 2021 and 2023, attributed to NGO-led mentorship programs and material donations. Such efforts echo Bray's (2001) argument that culturally grounded, community-driven schooling interventions not only improve literacy but also foster community security by strengthening local participation and reducing the alienation that often breeds conflict.

Baruten's educational interventions highlight another facet of human security: identity and cultural security. Owing to its proximity to the Benin Republic, NGOs there have collaborated with UNICEF regional teams to establish dual-language classrooms, enabling migrant and nomadic children to study in Fulfulde, Hausa, and French. A Baruten school administrator remarked: "For the first time, our pupils now have textbooks in their mother tongue… some even in French." By ensuring that language does not become a barrier, these interventions reduce risks of exclusion, protecting minority children from the insecurity of identity loss and ensuring that border populations are not structurally disadvantaged.

Patigi presents a different, though equally instructive, picture. Local NGOs have introduced mobile literacy programs and Qur'anic literacy hybrids targeted at girls, helping to reverse entrenched gendered patterns of educational deprivation. This has significant human security implications: access to girl-child education reduces early marriage risks, improves maternal health outcomes, and strengthens women's economic resilience. As Commins (1997) and Stromquist (2015) argue, expanding girls' education is one of the most durable investments in social and economic security, particularly in fragile regions.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Some NSA interventions are limited by short funding cycles, weak integration with state curricula, and low teacher retention. For example, while Edu benefitted from five classroom blocks built by an international NGO in 2022, bureaucratic delays in posting teachers stalled their functionality, reflecting Rose's (2009) concern that parallel systems of provision, if detached from state policy frameworks, may fragment rather than consolidate service delivery. Moreover, sustainability often depends on volunteerism, which varies across communities: Patigi's literacy classes thrived because elders served as informal teachers, while Edu's equivalent project stalled due to limited local ownership. This aligns with Mansuri and Rao's (2013) caution that participatory development outcomes are uneven, shaped by power hierarchies and elite capture.

Despite these constraints, community perceptions remain overwhelmingly positive. Data from the Community Perception Score (CPS) indicate that 73 percent of respondents rated NSA education interventions as "very satisfactory" or

"satisfactory." Parents in Edu noted improvements not just in attendance but in their own engagement with their children's schooling: "Before, we did not even know when our children went to school. But now, the NGO even gives us report cards to see their progress."

In sum, educational interventions by NSAs in Kwara North extend beyond filling state service gaps; they are vital mechanisms for reinforcing human security. By expanding literacy, reducing the number of out-of-school children, and empowering girls, these actors contribute to resilience against economic shocks, radicalization, and social exclusion. Education here becomes a frontline of security, a protective shield against the insecurities that thrive in contexts of neglect. As we move to the next theme, Livelihood Empowerment and Human Security, the discussion will explore how NSAs address economic marginalization and unemployment, thereby reducing vulnerabilities to poverty-driven insecurity.

Theme 3: Livelihood Empowerment Initiatives and Economic Inclusion by Non-State Actors in Kwara North

Livelihood empowerment has emerged as a critical domain for non-state actor (NSA) intervention in Kwara North, where poverty levels remain among the highest in Nigeria. With limited industrial presence, fragile agricultural productivity, and weak state welfare support, communities across Edu, Baruten, and Patigi LGAs have come to rely heavily on NSAs to access income-generating opportunities and basic economic resilience tools.

According to the Livelihood Empowerment Index (LEI) derived in this study based on frequency and coverage of vocational training, entrepreneurship programmes, micro-credit schemes, and cooperative support, there has been a notable but uneven rise in NSA activities. Between 2020 and 2024, Edu LGA recorded the sharpest increase in LEI (from 0.42 to 0.71), driven by aggressive skills acquisition programmes supported by faith-based networks. Baruten followed with growth from 0.40 to 0.66, while Patigi rose from 0.38 to 0.59. The disparity largely reflects the level of donor penetration, pre-existing NGO networks, and community openness to market-based livelihood solutions.

In Edu, the "Tafida Foundation" runs a rotating micro-credit scheme targeted at women, with loans ranging from ₦20,000 to ₦100,000, often repaid in kind during harvest season. A local beneficiary in Shonga stated, "Before this loan, I had no business. Now I fry yam and fish and send two of my children to school." Vocational centres in Tsaragi and Lafiagi, often established by youth-based CSOs, offer training in tailoring, leatherwork, solar installation, and ICT basics. This approach mirrors what Ellis and Biggs (2001) described as "multi-enterprise livelihood strategies," particularly relevant in rural African contexts where households diversify income sources to manage risk and scarcity.

In Baruten, NSAs have adopted a cross-border model of economic integration, leveraging trade routes and shared ethnic ties between Nigerian and Beninese communities. One notable initiative is a joint cooperative development programme supported by a West African NGO, which trains youth in shea butter processing and exports. Interviews with cooperative leaders show that such interventions are not only empowering individuals economically but also fostering social cohesion among historically fragmented communities. These findings align with Scoones (1998), who emphasized that sustainable livelihoods are anchored in assets, capabilities, and activities that are both resilient and adaptable to the local context.

Patigi, on the other hand, has shown slower uptake of such initiatives, primarily due to the weaker institutional presence of NSAs and more conservative socio-cultural norms regarding women's economic roles. Despite this, a few Islamic charities have introduced market-based empowerment for widows and internally displaced persons (IDPs), using zakat funds to establish community poultry projects. These interventions are typically informal and community-monitored, echoing Chambers and Conway's (1992) assertion that bottom-up livelihood efforts often succeed where external models fail so long as they are culturally embedded and socially accountable.

Yet challenges persist. Many NSA programmes are short-lived due to donor fatigue, staff turnover, and poor monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Additionally, the lack of integration with state-level agricultural extension services and vocational education curricula limits scale and standardization. A youth leader from Patigi lamented: "We trained over 50 girls in bead-making, but they had nowhere to sell their products." This reveals a critical implementation as gap interventions may be technically sound but economically isolated without linkages to value chains, digital markets, or cooperative networks.

Community perception remains generally positive. CPS results indicate that over 68% of respondents across the three LGAs view NSA-led livelihood programmes as either "very effective" or "moderately effective," citing tangible income improvement, reduced dependence on state handouts, and a growing sense of local entrepreneurship. However, the same respondents expressed concern over the sustainability of these interventions, particularly in cases where they hinge on foreign donor cycles or charismatic individual founders.

In essence, livelihood empowerment initiatives led by non-state actors have filled a vacuum created by decades of economic neglect and policy failure. Their success in Kwara North, while still emerging, points to a broader trend in development practice where state weakness necessitates civic innovation. However, for these gains to be sustained, there must be greater policy alignment, institutional partnership, and investment in local capacity building.

Theme 4: Health Outreach and Community Well-being by Non-State Actors in Kwara North

Health outreach interventions by non-state actors in Kwara North have become essential buffers in a region historically underserved by public health infrastructure. In many remote parts of Edu, Baruten, and Patigi LGAs, access to primary healthcare remains constrained by distance, cost, personnel shortage, and weak institutional presence. Against this backdrop, non-state actors, especially faith-based organizations, international development agencies, and community-based groups, have emerged as critical players in enhancing health outcomes.

Using the Health Outreach Index (HOI) derived from frequency, coverage, and thematic diversity of NSA-led medical programs, the study observed a steady increase across the three LGAs between 2020 and 2024. Edu showed the highest outreach frequency (HOI = 0.72 by 2024), followed by Baruten (0.67) and Patigi (0.63). Programmes range from mobile clinics, vaccination drives, antenatal services, eye camps, deworming exercises, to HIV/AIDS and malaria education.

Edu's strong performance stems in part from the sustained engagement of international actors such as Doctors Worldwide and UNICEF, often in partnership with local Islamic medical charities. In Tsaragi and Lafiagi, biannual community health days offer integrated services including blood pressure checks, free medications, and maternal health counselling directly in town halls or schools. A female respondent noted, "These visits are our only chance to see a doctor. Government hospitals are too far or empty."

Baruten benefits from a unique cross-border dynamic. NGOs leverage their proximity to the Benin Republic to implement region-wide health programmes across Fulani and Bariba settlements. For example, the "Sahel Medical Initiative" has stationed trilingual health workers in border clinics who provide weekly maternal and child health support. These interventions reinforce what Adebajo referred to as the transnational logic of humanitarian aid in West Africa, where the artificiality of borders demands flexible, people-centered healthcare strategies.

In Patigi, Christian health missions have historically dominated NSA interventions. The Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) runs semi-permanent clinics in rural areas, focusing on malaria, typhoid, and reproductive health. However, challenges in funding, maintenance, and staff retention remain prominent. A youth coordinator complained, "The clinic is open only twice a month now. We feel abandoned." This mirrors concerns raised in the work of Eze and Nwankwo, who documented the lifecycle fatigue of faith-based health services in rural Nigeria.

Quantitative data from the community perception survey shows that 71.4% of respondents rated NSA health outreach as "important" or "very important" to their household. However, issues of continuity and integration were flagged. Only 28% felt

that these services were consistent enough to replace formal health systems. Additionally, only 15% could identify a referral mechanism from outreach centres to hospitals, a clear sign of the fragmentation between NSA interventions and state systems.

Furthermore, health outreach sometimes faces cultural barriers. In conservative Muslim communities in Edu and Baruten, female health workers have been refused access or mobility during specific religious observances. In response, some NSAs have begun training local women as health educators and peer mobilizers. Another success story involves community health insurance pilot schemes introduced by development NGOs in Lafiagi and Ilesha Baruba. These schemes allow smallholder farmers to pay seasonal premiums in kind (e.g., sacks of grain) and receive basic outpatient care year-round. Though still small in scale, this model illustrates the potential for inclusive health financing, rooted in local realities and resource cycles, a principle consistent with WHO's push for Universal Health Coverage through "contextualized innovation" in low-income settings.

In conclusion, NSA-led health outreach in Kwara North is filling a critical service gap. These actors have expanded access, promoted preventive care, and supported maternal and child health in extremely marginalized communities. Yet, without stronger collaboration with government institutions, improved data-sharing, and embedded referral systems, the gains remain fragile. Sustainability will require an intentional convergence of donor support, local ownership, and policy recognition of NSA health contributions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the operational models and impacts of non-state actors (NSAs) in poverty alleviation and community development across Kwara North, with a particular focus on their interventions in education, health, and livelihood empowerment. The evidence demonstrates that NSAs have become central to safeguarding human security in peripheral regions where the state's presence is limited. By expanding access to schooling, providing healthcare outreach, and sustaining livelihoods, these actors have mitigated insecurities that manifest as vulnerability to radicalization, disease burdens, and economic shocks.

However, the findings also reveal that NSA interventions are constrained by sustainability gaps, fragmented coordination, and dependence on external funding. While their activities enhance protection against immediate threats to survival and dignity, weak institutional integration undermines their ability to consolidate long-term human security. If such systemic limitations persist, NSAs risk creating pockets of temporary relief rather than sustained resilience. Conversely, when their activities are formally integrated into state planning and grounded in local ownership, NSAs can serve as catalytic actors that bridge governance gaps, strengthen social cohesion, and expand the protective capacity of communities against human insecurities.

Recommendations

1. Institutional Synergy for Human Security

The government should establish a formal NSA–government coordination framework to embed its interventions within state human security policies. A state-level Human Security and NSA Desk in the Ministry of Planning would reduce duplication and align interventions with broader development-security priorities.

2. Sustainability through Local Human Security Anchoring

NSAs should integrate traditional councils, women's groups, and youth associations into program design and monitoring. Local ownership not only enhances sustainability but also ensures that interventions respond to community-defined insecurities, such as exclusion of girls from schooling or pastoralist-farmer livelihood tensions.

3. Human Security Data Systems

Annual Community Perception Surveys (CPS) should be institutionalized to monitor how interventions reduce vulnerabilities in health, education, and livelihoods. Such data-driven monitoring would enable early warning of emerging insecurities (e.g., rising dropout rates or food insecurity) and guide adaptive responses.

4. Diversified and Protective Funding Models

To reduce donor dependency and ensure continuity, NSAs should adopt blended finance strategies that combine international support, local philanthropy, cooperative savings schemes, and state-matching grants. Such resource pooling strengthens economic security by ensuring uninterrupted access to essential services during funding cycles.

5. Capacity Building for Conflict-Sensitive Human Security Delivery

NSA personnel should receive training in conflict sensitivity, peacebuilding, and community negotiation to better address insecurities at the intersection of livelihoods and identity. This is especially critical in border LGAs like Baruten, where cross-border dynamics heighten vulnerability to trafficking, displacement, and radicalization.

6. Legal and Policy Recognition of NSAs as Human Security Actors

The Kwara State legislature should enact a regulatory framework that formally recognizes NSAs as contributors to human security. Such legislation should establish accountability standards, provide legal backing for their operations, and offer tax incentives for investments in community-based human security initiatives.

In sum, the study shows that NSAs in Kwara North are not just service providers; they are frontline actors of human security governance. Their ability to transform temporary interventions into long-term protective capacities depends on whether the state, local communities, and external donors can jointly reposition them as co-architects of inclusive human security strategies.

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