

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Benue State: The Need for Durable Solutions

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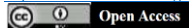
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ABSTRACT

Internal displacement remains an existential humanitarian, security, and socio-economic challenge in Benue State, Nigeria. Driven primarily by protracted herder-farmer conflicts, communal clashes, and environmental stressors, over 500,000 individuals have been forced into makeshift camps and host communities across the state. This paper examines the multi-dimensional living conditions of these Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), evaluates past and present emergency relief interventions by state, federal, and international actors, and analyses the institutional shift toward long-term recovery. Leveraging the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus as an analytical framework, the study evaluates the structural viability of Benue State's five-year, N853 billion Action. Plan on Durable Solutions. The findings reveal that while emergency relief provides critical short-term survival, it fails to address structural vulnerabilities such as permanent land loss, economic dependency, psychological trauma, and the erosion of social capital. The paper concludes that achieving true durable solutions requires sustained peacebuilding, secure land restoration, localized economic cooperative models, and collaborative pooled funding frameworks to transition IDPs from protracted displacement to long-term self-reliance.

Introduction

Benue State, widely celebrated as the 'Food Basket of the Nation,' occupies a vital geopolitical and agricultural position within Nigeria's Middle Belt region. Its fertile guinea savannah soil, abundant water resources from the Benue and Katsina-Ala rivers and dedicated agrarian population have historically made it the backbone of national food security, supplying staple crops like yams, cassava, rice, and maize across the country. However, over the past two decades, this critical agricultural haven has devolved into one of the primary epicentres of internal displacement in Sub-Saharan Africa. The root of this crisis lies in violent, protracted contestations over land, water resources, and migratory stock routes between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agrarian communities. There is no doubt that the clashes between herdsman and farmers in the predominantly farming areas of the North Central region resulted in the destruction of lives and farmlands have become a major treat to the efforts to boost food production, Eyekpimi (2016), and Ijisha, V.U, Ker G and Terlumun, Y.C (2015).

The trajectory of the conflict has been exacerbated by climate change, desertification in northern Nigeria, and demographic pressures, forcing pastoral communities southward into the fertile Middle Belt. This ecological shift has triggered intense competition over fixed land resources. Entire agrarian villages have been razed, ancestral farmlands violently occupied or abandoned, and local infrastructure systematically destroyed. According to the International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM-DTM), over 500,000 citizens have been displaced from their ancestral homes, forced into a state of permanent vulnerability within overcrowded official and unofficial camps, as well as strained host communities,

The consequences of this protracted displacement stretch far beyond immediate physical dislocation because Benue's macroeconomy relies almost entirely on subsistence and commercial agriculture, the mass displacement of farmers has triggered widespread food insecurity, a dramatic

decline in regional agricultural productivity, and hyperinflation of food prices across Nigeria, Ijisha, V.U, Ker G and Terlumun, Y.C (2015).

While local and international actors have historically responded with short-term humanitarian assistance, the protracted nature of the crisis means that camp-based relief is no longer sustainable or dignified. There is an urgent structural need to pivot away from temporary emergency fixes and toward institutionalised, durable solutions that guarantee physical safety, legal dignity, and economic autonomy for Benue's IDP populations. Furthermore, this underscores that displacement is not merely a technical humanitarian issue but a core failure of structural security and developmental alignment. The continuous disruption of farming cycles means that the longer the displacement persists, the more deeply dependency patterns are woven into the community's fabric. This paper unpacks the systemic failures of reactive paradigms, establishing a comprehensive case for why Benue's current socio-economic stability is inherently tied to the resolution of the IDP challenge through structured institutional channels. **Key concepts:** Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Protracted Displacement, and Durable Solutions.

3. Conceptual Clarifications

To establish a rigorous analytical foundation, three core concepts must be defined and contextualized within the specific realities of the Benue crisis: Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Protracted Displacement, and Durable Solutions.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), Internally Displaced Persons are defined as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border. This definition distinguishes IDPs from refugees, highlighting that despite losing domestic protection, they remain within the sovereign jurisdiction of their home state, which retains primary responsibility for their protection and welfare.

Protracted Displacement: In Benue State, this definition manifests in a highly complex manner, as displacement is not a singular event but a repetitive, cyclical trauma. Many IDPs have been displaced multiple times over the past decade, fleeing to safe zones only to face secondary attacks or be forced to move due to camp closures and resource depletion. This brings the concept of Protracted Displacement into sharp focus. Protracted displacement refers to situations where IDPs are trapped in a state of limbo for extended periods often years or decades where the processes for finding durable solutions have stalled, and where displaced populations cannot enjoy their basic constitutional rights, access stable livelihoods, or achieve sustainable self-reliance. In Benue, thousands of families have lived in temporary tarpaulin structures since 2018, transforming temporary emergency camps into permanent slums characterized by extreme poverty.

Durable Solutions: To resolve this state of limbo, international frameworks point to the concept of Durable Solutions. As conceptualised by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons (2010), a durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance, and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination. A durable solution is IDPs in Benue State: The Need for Durable Solutions structurally achieved through three distinct pathways: sustainable return to ancestral homes, sustainable local integration into host communities, or sustainable resettlement in another part of the country. Crucially, a solution is only 'durable' if it is voluntary, safe, dignified, and accompanied by the restoration of economic livelihoods, civic documentation, and effective access to justice.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDP Nexus), commonly referred to as the 'Triple Nexus,' as its foundational theoretical framework. Historically, global responses to displacement operated within rigid operational silos. The HDP was officially launched in 2019 under the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General/ Resident Coordinator/ Humanitarian Coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC) with the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (2000). Humanitarian actors focused exclusively on immediate short-term survival (the provision of food aid, temporary shelters, and emergency medical care). Development actors stepped in years later to build

long-term infrastructure, while peacebuilders worked separately on high-level political mediation and conflict resolution. The Triple Nexus framework, heavily championed by the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), argues that these three pillars are deeply interconnected and must be designed, funded, and implemented simultaneously and collaboratively rather than sequentially in protracted crises.

In the context of the Benue IDP crisis, applying the HDP Nexus provides a comprehensive analytical lens to understand why past interventions have faltered and how current policies must be restructured. The humanitarian pillar remains critical for immediate life-saving interventions in active conflict zones. However, if relief is not integrated with the development pillar, IDPs remain trapped in state-sponsored dependency, unable to farm, earn incomes, or secure permanent housing. Simultaneously, the peace pillar is indispensable; without resolving the underlying structural causes of the conflict such as cattle rustling, land tenure reforms, and community reconciliation any development infrastructure built, or resettlement attempted will remain highly vulnerable to renewed outbreaks of violence.

Therefore, the HDP Nexus establishes that a durable solution in Benue State cannot be achieved through a linear progression from aid to development. Instead, institutional actors must engage in simultaneous operations: ensuring current camp safety (Humanitarian), deploying agricultural cooperative financing models and permanent infrastructure (Development) and establishing robust communal dialogue frameworks alongside professional security enforcement (Peace). This integrated approach shifts the focus from managing the displacement crisis indefinitely to actively ending it through synchronized policy implementation.

The Conditions of IDPs in Benue State.

The frequent attacks on Benue farmers led to establishment of the above IDP camps to accommodate the rising number of people being displaced. Over 500,000 are displaced and kept in overcrowded schools, empty government buildings used as camps across the state while others moved to other communities/towns to seek refuge on their own. According to Ukase and Jato these camps are characterized by inadequacy of basic amenities and are prone to further attacks by same people who pushed them into these camps. These IDPs according to Benue State Emergency Management Agency (BENSEMA) have undergone enormous psychological, emotional, health and other related stress and social dislocations. Some of these IDPs have continued to stay in various makeshift camps in the State for more than seven years now. This development has seriously disarticulated their sources of livelihood with some implications. Majority of the Internally Displaced Persons in these camps are women and children.

According to official statistics obtained from the Benue State Emergency Management Agency, (SEMA) in July 2026, women and children are the most affected IDPs in Benue State. They are experiencing psychological trauma in both official and unofficial camps established by the government and INGOs/NGOs. Their fundamental human rights and freedom to freely express and live their normal social life violates the essence of their existence. Some children have been raped by their enemies and sometimes even by those who should protect them an experience which according to Ukase and Jato, (2022) creates constant feelings of humiliation and discrimination; and situation that also breeds hatred and the urge for revenge. It's also an excruciating experience that women and children IDPs had to watch the brutality and atrocities that were carried out during any of the crisis that displaced them. Some of them watched helplessly their loved ones slaughtered to death while others maimed and dehumanised. The picture of such horrors has continued to haunt them, while affecting also their mental health and renders them emotionally unstable and economically unproductive.

In the reality of destruction of farmers' crops and killing of their breadwinners as well as displacements, hunger and poverty have become a daily dilemma that characterises the IDPs across Benue land. At the LGEA, RCM primary school camps and the Shelter camp, all in Daudu in Guma LGA, the health personnel in charge of both camps and Assistant Chief Nursing Officers and Midwives of the Red Cross told the researcher separately that, the over 10,871 children in both camps had come down with malnutrition. Vanguard's reports in 2021 that the Abagena camp alone houses over 16,583 children and 75% of them were malnourished. These calamities are not good for growing children, for they can affect their entire being in the long run. According to Akera (2023) all the IDPs in Benue are

facing similar accommodation challenges, inadequate food, poor nutrition, poverty, unemployment, lack of clothing, lack of access to schools and proper health systems. The effects of these challenges are not only to the IDPs but the to the entire state. This is because resultant effects of these situations include but not limited to homelessness, hooliganism, pending social vices, diseases and deaths, starvations, declining literacy level, low productivity, high level of dependency and increasing spate of child labour, insecurity and criminality, Akeru argued. Other effects identified by Agera (2023) are changes in demographic compositions of the rural communities, economic and political backwardness, psychological trauma and cultural decadents amongst the people etc.

Ukase and Jato (2022) borrowed the words of Global Protection Cluster Group to argue that: Forced out of their homes, IDPs also experience specific forms of deprivation, such as loss of income, shelter, and often faced heightened or protection risks. These risks may include armed attacks and abuse while fleeing in search of safety: family separation, including an increase in the number of separate and unaccompanied children; heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly affecting women and children; arbitrary deprivation of land, homes and other property and displacements into inhospitable environments where they suffer stigmas, marginalization, discriminations

It is to say that the State is therefore sitting on a timed bomb. In this sense, this category of people no doubt needs urgent attention to avert the emerging danger in the society internationally and domestically. According to Akeru (2023), interactions with some IDPs at Abagena Camp revealed the real situation of IDPs which is characterised by misery and helplessness as the children showed visible symptoms of malnutrition as they feed on roasted cassavas and corn and any other thing they could lay their hands upon.

According to Abu O., Terwase, I. & Nfor, E. (2023), the daily reality for over half a million IDPs in Benue State is defined by deep, multi-dimensional hardships that span economic, physical, social, and psychological domains. The most profound challenge is the severe economic disruption and complete loss of livelihoods. Empirical assessments indicate that prior to displacement, roughly 99% of IDP households in Benue were actively engaged in agricultural production, relying on farming as their sole source of income and sustenance. Displacement has stripped these communities of their primary economic asset their ancestral land. Deprived of access to fields, farming tools, and seeds, proud self-sufficient agriculturalists are reduced to forced economic idleness, trapped within camp walls and entirely dependent on highly erratic humanitarian food distributions and cash transfers, Ukase and Jato (2022).

This economic collapse is compounded by deplorable living conditions characterized by substandard housing and severe overcrowding. In major camps across local government areas like Guma, Makurdi, Gwer-West and Logo, thousands of families reside in makeshift tarpaulin tents or severely congested, abandoned public school classrooms. These makeshift shelters provide almost no insulation against Benue's extreme seasonal weather, exposing inhabitants to torrential downpours during the rainy season and intense heat during the dry season. The lack of structural durability and personal space compromises human dignity and accelerates the spread of infectious diseases, resulting in disproportionately high rates of malaria, acute respiratory infections, and skin conditions among camp populations, Agera (2022).

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) deficits represent another critical failure within the IDP settlements. Most camps suffer from an acute shortage of clean drinking water and functional, gender-segregated sanitary facilities. The ratio of individuals to functional pit latrines frequently exceeds acceptable humanitarian standards, leading to widespread open defecation and the contamination of shallow groundwater sources. These systemic WASH deficits create persistent public health risks, leaving displaced populations highly vulnerable to devastating outbreaks of waterborne diseases, including cholera, dysentery, and typhoid fever, which further strain the state's already fragile rural healthcare infrastructure, Akeru (2023).

Furthermore, security threats and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are pervasive features of protracted displacement in Benue. Due to funding constraints, camp perimeters are frequently porous and lack adequate security personnel or lighting. Women and young girls face heightened exposure to sexual harassment, exploitation, and assault when venturing outside camp boundaries to collect firewood or search for casual labor. Within the camps, the breakdown of traditional communal social structures

and the psychological stress of displacement have led to spikes in domestic violence and transactional sex as survival mechanisms. Simultaneously, the camps themselves remain structurally insecure, facing occasional outlier attacks from armed actors operating along border corridors.

Finally, the crisis has engineered a profound loss of education and deep-seated generational trauma. A massive generation of displaced children is currently growing up without access to formal, structured schooling due to the physical destruction of rural educational infrastructure and the conversion of urban schools into IDP housing. This educational vacuum severely constricts the future socio-economic mobility of these children, creating long-term structural inequality. Layered over this is a total absence of professional psychosocial support services. Displaced individuals carry profound, unaddressed psychological trauma from witnessing the violent slaughter of family members, the destruction of their homes, and the loss of their cultural heritage, perpetuating a silent mental health crisis across generations.

Emergency Relief by Humanitarian Agencies, INGOs, NGOs, State and Federal Governments

The institutional response to the Benue IDP crisis consists of a multi-tiered, complex network of interventions involving international humanitarian agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local civil society organizations, and both the state and federal governments. At the international level, United Nations agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have played a foundational role. The IOM has been instrumental in deploying its specialized Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), which provides critical, biometrically verified data on IDP demographics, movement patterns, and urgent humanitarian needs, serving as the baseline for all major aid allocation.

In tandem with UN agencies, prominent INGOs have led frontline relief delivery. These organizations focus on distributing Emergency Shelter Kits, managing camp coordination, and executing targeted WASH interventions, such as drilling solar-powered boreholes and constructing communal latrine blocks. At the grassroots level, local faith-based organizations, indigenous NGOs, and charitable trusts serve as the indispensable first responders. These local entities possess deep contextual knowledge and high community trust, allowing them to rapidly fill critical operational gaps left by larger organizations. They consistently provide cooked meals, organize mobile medical outreaches in remote areas, and offer immediate legal aid and protective counselling to survivors of violence.

The Federal Government of Nigeria engages with the crisis primarily through specialized statutory bodies, most notably the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and IDPs (NCFRMI). The federal intervention typically takes the form of periodic bulk consignments containing staple food items, medical supplies, mattresses, blankets, and roofing sheets delivered to the state capital for onward distribution.

Additionally, federal military and paramilitary forces are deployed across strategic corridors to provide general territorial security and deter large-scale coordinated attacks on displaced settlements. At the sub-national level, the Benue State Government acts as the primary political custodian and daily manager of the displacement crisis. It executes this responsibility through the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (BSEMA). SEMA coordinates the logistics of relief distribution, maintains official camp registries, and manages administrative interfaces between international donors and local communities. The state government also dedicates constrained local security resources, including the civil defense and localized vigilante groups, to maintain basic law and order within recognized IDP camps.

Despite the extensive resources and commendable intentions underpinning this multi-layered relief ecosystem, the intervention strategy remains fundamentally flawed. It operates as a reactive framework characterized by extreme funding volatility, massive logistical bottlenecks, and periodic vulnerabilities to aid diversion. More importantly, this short-term relief model does not build long-term capacity. It treats a permanent, structural crisis as an endless series of temporary emergencies, failing to transition populations away from aid dependency and underscoring the urgent need for a comprehensive shift toward durable solutions.

Durable Solutions

Recognizing the deep fiscal and humanitarian unsustainability of indefinite emergency aid, the policy trajectory in Benue State has undergone a significant institutional shift toward the operationalization of permanent, durable solutions. This strategic evolution is formally crystallized in the Benue State Government's comprehensive five-year, N853 billion Action Plan on Durable Solutions demonstrating rare political will, the state administration has committed 10% of its total annual statutory budget directly to funding this long-term recovery framework, signalling a transition from passive crisis management to active crisis resolution, Channels TV, (2025).

The Action Plan is meticulously aligned with the internationally recognized Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework, structuring its execution around three distinct, voluntary pathways tailored to IDP preferences and safety profiles. The first and highly prioritized pathway is Sustainable Return. Empirical data from comprehensive socio-economic assessments indicate that an overwhelming 96% of surveyed IDPs express a clear, unyielding preference to return to their ancestral communities rather than relocate permanently. To facilitate this, the plan focuses heavily on restoring security to abandoned Local Government Areas, clearing explosive remnants of war, and rebuilding basic public infrastructure such as local clinics and primary schools.

The second pathway is Sustainable Local Integration. For a segment of the displaced population, returning home is structurally impossible due to deep psychological trauma, the complete ecological degradation of their homelands, or lingering border insecurities. In these instances, the Action Plan designs institutional frameworks to seamlessly absorb IDPs into their current host communities. This pathway emphasizes expanding urban utilities, upgrading host community schools, and securing formal residential land titles for IDPs, thereby preventing social friction, resource competition, and xenophobic marginalization between displaced populations and host residents.

The third pathway is Sustainable Resettlement. This involves the voluntary relocation of IDPs to entirely new, planned communities within secure zones of the state. Under this pathway, the government takes on the role of master planner, acquiring large tracts of secure land, constructing modular dignified housing units, and laying down essential utility networks. This ensures that resettled populations are not merely dumped into new environments but are integrated into fully functional, economically viable ecosystems designed for long-term human development.

Crucially, to drive immediate self-reliance and economic autonomy across all three pathways, the Benue State Government has pioneered an innovative agricultural cooperative model. The administration has established 210 formalized farmers' cooperatives, directly benefiting over 4,200 displaced individuals. By clustering these cooperatives and granting them secure, legally protected access to thousands of hectares of fertile land, the initiative circumvents the traditional vulnerabilities of isolated smallholders. Displaced families are provided with modern agricultural inputs, mechanical tractors, and direct linkages to commercial agricultural off-takers, enabling them to safely resume food production, break the cycle of aid dependency, and directly contribute once again to the regional economy.

Recommendations

To effectively transit Benue State's ambitious Durable Solutions Action Plan (DSAP) from policy formulation to successful, verifiable field implementation, several targeted, multi-sectoral interventions must be urgently executed. First, the Federal and State Governments must prioritize the establishment of Secured Agricultural Corridors. Given that security remains the foundational prerequisite for sustainable return, specialized and highly mobile security outposts, such as the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps' (NSCDC) Agro-Rangers, must be permanently deployed throughout agrarian local government areas. These units should be tasked with conducting daily patrols along farm-to-camp transit routes, guarding agricultural clusters, and providing real-time intelligence to returning communities, thereby neutralizing threats from armed actors and rebuilding the confidence of farmers.

Second, the Ministry of Lands, Survey, and Solid Minerals, in close coordination with SEMA and traditional land authorities, must implement Joint Land Titling and Restitution Initiatives. A major barrier to durable return and resettlement is the proliferation of land disputes, boundary overlapping, and predatory land grabbing that occurs during protracted absences. The state must launch a digitized, fast-tracked land verification and registration program specifically for displaced persons.

Traditional rulers must be integrated into these frameworks as institutional witnesses to validate ancestral claims, ensuring returning IDPs receive legally binding certificates of occupancy that protect their land assets from unlawful expropriation.

Third, institutional actors must move away from volatile, highly conditional monthly donor financing by adopting a Pooled Funding and Financing Model. The state's 10% budgetary commitment should be integrated into a consolidated, independently audited Durable Solutions Trust Fund. This fund should actively pool capital from federal counterpart funding, international development bank loans (such as from the World Bank and African Development Bank), corporate social responsibility bonds from the private sector, and diaspora remittance trusts. By blending these diverse funding streams, the state can guarantee fiscal predictability, protect long-term infrastructure projects from political transitions, and maintain operational momentum even during global humanitarian funding downturns.

Fourth, there is an urgent need to roll out Comprehensive, Institutionalized Psychosocial Programming across all transition pathways. Physical infrastructure and economic inputs alone cannot guarantee a durable solution if the target population remains crippled by unaddressed psychological trauma. SEMA must partner with psychiatric institutions and non-governmental health actors to integrate trauma-informed mental health counselling, peer support groups, and community-led healing circles directly into camp exit strategies. Specialized focus must be placed on treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among survivors of violence, helping to repair shattered social fabrics and prevent the cyclical transmission of community trauma.

Fifth, the state must prioritize Inclusive Civic Documentation and Information Systems. The chaotic nature of violent displacement frequently results in the complete loss of personal identification documents, including birth certificates, national identity cards, and voter cards. Without these critical documents, IDPs face severe institutional barriers, including exclusion from formal banking, the inability to enrol children in secondary schools, and political disenfranchisement. The National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) and the National Population Commission must launch synchronized, mobile registration drives across all camps and resettlement zones to re-verify identities and issue free legal documentation, ensuring full civic inclusion and access to state social protection programs.

Finally, traditional rulers should mobilize their subjects to organize Community Base Security (CBS) to complement conventional security network. This is very important because the youths who will be recruited into the CBS will server as watch dogs over their communities and will be able the checkmate strangers. This will go along way to ensure the safety of the people.

Conclusion

The protracted displacement of over half a million citizens in Benue State represents far more than a transient humanitarian emergency; it constitutes a profound structural crisis that threatens Nigeria's long-term agricultural stability, national security architecture, and socio-economic cohesion. For over a decade, treating this deep-seated dislocation through the narrow lens of short-term emergency relief has inadvertently institutionalized a state of limbo, trapping vulnerable populations in a damaging cycle of poverty, dependency, and systemic loss of human dignity. The Benue State Government's five-year, N853 billion Action Plan on Durable Solutions marks a seminal and highly necessary paradigm shift, structurally aligning sub-national policy with international best practices and the integrated principles of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus.

However, the ultimate success of this transformative framework will not be measured by the sophistication of its written policy or the size of its budgeted figures, but by the transparency, consistency, and inclusivity of its field execution. Moving forward, transforming this strategic blueprint into a tangible reality requires unwavering political will, strict fiscal accountability mechanisms to prevent aid corruption, robust and synchronized security support from the federal government, and an uncompromising focus on land restitution rights. Only when Benue's IDPs can voluntarily return to their ancestral farmlands with guaranteed safety or integrate into new communities with full legal dignity and economic autonomy, can the state truly begin to heal, rebuild its broken agrarian economy, and confidently reclaim its rightful status as a secure, self-sufficient food basket for the entire Nigerian nation.

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