



# FROM YOUTH RESEARCHERS TO COMMUNITY BUILDERS

## Harnessing Youth-Led Research to Prevent Violence in Northwest Nigeria

MARCH 2023

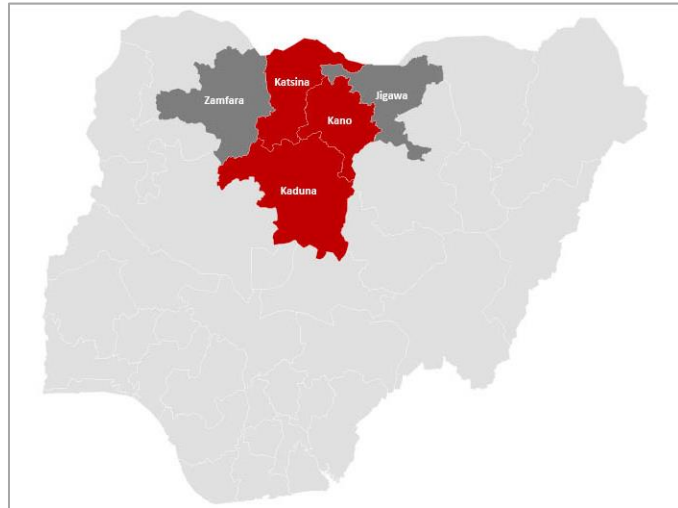
Violence throughout Northwest Nigeria has become a toxic mix of criminality, farmer-herder conflict, political violence, ethno-religious conflict, and jihadist insurgency that has only further escalated in recent years. Most research traces the violence to land disputes between primarily Fulani pastoralists and Hausa farmers over access to lands and water resources in rural areas of Zamfara State, which eventually pushed pastoralists to mobilize armed militias to assert their interests through violence. Meanwhile, sedentary farmers established their own neighborhood watch groups, locally known as ‘vigilantes,’ as a form of self-protection, but increasingly launched retaliatory attacks on Fulani enclaves throughout local forests, targeting those suspected of being affiliated with the pastoral militias, but frequently killing innocent civilians.<sup>1</sup> Concurrently, the proliferation of weapons across the

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan, Idayat. [“Nigeria’s rampant banditry, and some ideas on how to rein it in.”](#) The New Humanitarian. November 8, 2021.

porous border with Niger, rising price of cattle, and burgeoning gold mining sector stoked growing criminality throughout the region.<sup>2</sup>

As pastoralist militias and criminal gangs increasingly shared weapons, intelligence, and other resources, the groups have become nearly indistinguishable from one another and locally referred to locally as “bandits”. Although Zamfara represented the initial epicenter of this violence, it has since spilled over to the neighboring states of Kaduna and Katsina. Since January 2021, the violence has claimed the lives of 2,210 in Zamfara, 1,644 in Kaduna, and 669 in Katsina, with indications that these tallies are significantly undercounted.<sup>3</sup> As of September 2021, over 370,000 people had been displaced across the three states.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1. Study Sites for Youth-Led Action Research and Response (Red), with Neighboring States (Dark Gray)**

Young men represent not only the majority of perpetrators of violence, but also the primary victims, as gangs undertake retaliatory attacks or target young men as presumed members. Meanwhile, young women face gender-based violence and torture and are often widowed, left as the sole breadwinners for their families. The violence has compelled the closure of schools and markets, disrupting educational and livelihoods opportunities and undermining prospects for the next generation.

Despite the significant effects of the violence on young men and women, young people are rarely consulted on possible solutions to the violence. Against this backdrop, the Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP) program, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has undertaken the youth-led action research and response (YLARR) initiative aimed at: (i) engaging youth to examine root causes, drivers and enablers of violence, including youth perceptions of marginalization; (ii) engaging youth to identify factors that prevent involvement in violence; and (iii) engaging youth to proffer community-driven solutions and strategies to counter violence. Mercy Corps undertook the YLARR activity in collaboration with 74 youth researchers from 39 community-based organizations across Kaduna, Katsina, and Kano states. The research was initially intended to focus narrowly on ideologically-motivated violent extremism, but expanded to focus on the types of violence prioritized by the youth researchers—banditry in Kaduna and Katsina, and political thuggery and religious violence in Kano.

This report summarizes the key findings from the youth-led research, focusing on the causes and effects of each type of violence identified by the youth researchers, as well as proposed youth initiatives and other solutions identified during the research. The report concludes by highlighting a recommended set of youth-led initiatives that can be implemented by the youth researchers and their broader communities, along with recommendations to state and local governments and donors about how to support an enabling environment for positive youth-led initiatives and future participatory research interventions.

<sup>2</sup> Nagarajan, Chitra. [“Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara.”](#) February 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. [Nigeria Security Tracker.](#) October 2022.

<sup>4</sup> International Organization of Migration Nigeria. [Displacement Report Round 7: North Central and North West Zones.](#) September 2021.

# Methodology

Mercy Corps adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach as the overarching framework for the implementation of the YLARR initiative. PAR is an analytic approach that is conducted collaboratively with communities for the purpose of exploring and informing social change. In contrast with many traditional research approaches, which are performed on local communities with knowledge products flowing up towards academic or policy audiences, PAR is a process of community-driven collective inquiry that seeks to democratize knowledge.

Youth-led PAR is a subset of PAR that seeks to empower young people as researchers to participate in structured and collaborative reflection and learning and to translate their insights into actionable recommendations on behalf of their communities. This engagement is often transformative for youth to bolster their self-image as potential leaders within their communities, and to reframe their reputation and relationship with the wider community as positive change agents. Consequently, the YLARR initiative engaged community-based organizations (CBOs) and local youth as direct members of the research team, involving them in all activities throughout the research cycle.

In selecting locations for the YLARR process, Mercy Corps identified two local government areas (LGAs) in each northwestern state of Kaduna, Katsina, and Kano, based on probability and expected intensity of violence. Four communities where CIPP conducts programming within each selected LGA were assessed, for a total of 24 communities, as outlined in the table below.

States	Local Government Areas	Communities
Kaduna	Kaduna North	Kawo
		Gabasawa
		Ungwan Yero
		Ungwan Rimi
	Kajuru	Kasuwan Magani
		Idon Gida
		Iburu
		Kajuru
Katsina	Katsina	Kofar Guga
		Kofar Marusa
		Abbatuwa
		Tudun Yan Lihidda
	Jibia	Farfaru
		Shinfida
		Gangara
		Kusa
Kano	Fagge	Sabon Gari
		Yammata
		Rijiyar Lemo <sup>5</sup>
		Tudun Bojuwa
	Nassarawa	Badawa
		Tudun Wada
		Gama
		Gwagwarwa

**Table 1. Full set of states, LGAs, and communities included in the YLARR Process**

Mercy Corps partnered with 39 youth CBOs across these communities, including student associations, sports groups, religious organizations, social committees, and volunteer networks. Although Mercy Corps had initially engaged two CBOs in each community, nine were later excluded from the process due to risk of bias, lack of engagement, or poor data quality. Each CBO recruited two youth

<sup>5</sup> Rijiyar Lemo was subsequently removed, due to lack of engagement from the CBOs that agreed to participate in the research in this community.



researchers – one male and one female – of which a total of 74 researchers between the ages of 18 and 30 years-old participated in the research design, data collection, and analysis. The YLARR consultant was also a native of Kaduna State with considerable experience in youth programming.

In adapting the general youth-led PAR methodology to the context of the CIPP program, we designed a process consisting of six distinct phases:

- 1) **Research Design** – Following foundational trainings on research design, the youth researchers mapped and prioritized types of violence in their respective states in order to refine and contextualize the research scope. The youth researchers then identified target respondents and generated prospective questions for each target group, which were consolidated to produce a standardized questionnaire for all respondent groups across the three states.
- 2) **Data Collection** – The research employed key informant interviews (KIIs) as the primary method and targeted a range of respondents, including youth and women leaders, farmers, traders, students, traditional and religious leaders, security officials, and victims and perpetrators of armed violence, with proportions varying depending on the context in each state. The researchers conducted a total of 679 KIIs (215 in Kaduna, 284 in Katsina, and 180 in Kano), including 25 respondents identifying as demobilized former members of armed groups.
- 3) **Participatory Analysis** – The youth researchers participated in a series of analysis workshops disaggregated by state to contextualize, interpret, and analyze their data by identifying key themes. The analysis sessions also enabled the youth researchers to begin consolidating their responses to the initial research questions, which served as the basis for this research brief.
- 4) **Communication** – The youth researchers, with support from Mercy Corps, will draft research reports for their respective areas and plan to distribute and discuss the findings with key local stakeholders, including CBOs, government officials, and traditional leaders. Youth researchers will partner with CIPP-supported radio programs to broadcast relevant findings. Mercy Corps will also facilitate the dissemination of research findings at the national level to advocate for investment and policy changes that are likely to mitigate youth involvement in violence.
- 5) **Design and Implementation of Action** – Based on the research findings, the youth researchers will develop action plans for prospective programmatic activities, including youth-led trust-building events, radio programming, and Quick Impact Projects, among others. For selected activities that align with the objectives of the CIPP project, Mercy Corps may provide technical, financial, and logistical support for the implementation of these activities.
- 6) **Reflection and Adaptation** – Optimally, Mercy Corps will continue engaging the youth CBOs in ongoing cycles of reflection to synthesize learning gleaned from the implementation of activities and prospective directions for future research.

This report marks the conclusion of the first three phases of the YLARR process, with subsequent phases intended to be implemented in the coming months. The findings presented in this report largely represent a summary of the insights gleaned by the youth researchers and YLARR consultant. While data coding did not allow for an examination of correlations, extraction of quotes, or citation of specific KIIs at this stage, the report attempts to distinguish between analysis sourced from the youth researchers and from secondary literature.

## Understanding “Violent Extremism”

USAID defines violent extremism (VE) as “ideologically motivated violence”; however, the types of violence explored by the YLARR initiative – including banditry, political thuggery, electoral violence, and even religious violence – are understood as driven primarily by economic, political, or other

structural motivations, despite sometimes being labeled as violent extremism.<sup>6</sup> This can be attributed in part to a ruling by the Nigerian Federal High Court in November 2021 to grant the government legal authority to label banditry groups operating in the Northwest as “terrorists.” This classification gives the military more latitude in their use of force and enables the federal government to decentralize to the state level other strategies to manage the violence, such as dialogue, gun buy-back, and amnesty programs.<sup>7</sup> While many local community respondents view the violence as purely criminal in nature, those who had been directly victimized were assessed as more likely to label such activities as ‘violent extremism,’ perhaps because their experiences are similar to those of victims of VE.

Research suggests that ideologically-motivated violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are exploiting the widespread insecurity in the Northwest to extend their operations beyond their bases in the Northeast in order to benefit from illegal gold mining and ransom payments, to divert the attention of military operations, and to expand the Islamic state. There are reports that Jama’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram, had made overtures to banditry groups in Katsina and even supported the 2020 kidnapping of school boys in Katsina.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Jama’atu Ansarul Muslimin Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru), a JAS splinter group aligned with al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has made considerable inroads in Kaduna, has increasingly acted as a shadow state by providing food and gifts to Muslim communities during religious holiday and agricultural products to farmers, as well as protection to rural residents against attacks by bandits.<sup>9</sup>

While there have been some alleged instances of Ansaru providing weapons and other support to bandits, there have also been increasing violent clashes over territorial control.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, there are indications that former JAS members may have fled the Northeast, due to ongoing military operations and particularly since the death of former leader Abubaker Shekau in May 2021, and joined gangs involved in banditry or political thuggery in the Northwest, bringing with them skills and weapons.<sup>11</sup> Despite these linkages, JAS, Ansaru, or other VEOs should not be conflated with the more dominant and numerous non-ideological groups operating in the Northwest. Although youth researchers and respondents consistently used the term “violent extremism” to describe a range of violent activities, this report attempts to specify the types of violence according to their strategic objectives and form.

## Findings

During the initial research design workshops, the youth researchers selected three types of violence to explore across the three states, with a focus on banditry in Kaduna and Katsina, and political thuggery and intra/inter-religious violence in Kano. Banditry refers to violence perpetuated by organized criminal gangs. Political thuggery refers to the weaponization of youth gangs by political actors to influence election results.

State	Types of Violence
Kaduna	Banditry
Katsina	Banditry
Kano	Political Thuggery, Religious Violence

**Table 2. Types of Violence Prioritized by Youth Researchers, By State**

<sup>6</sup> Lichtenheld, Adam, and Emmanuel Ogbudu. [‘Fear of the Unknown’: Religion, Identity, and Conflict in Northern Nigeria](#). Mercy Corps. 2021; Mercy Corps. [Overcoming Misperceptions about Violent Extremism: Lessons for Implementing the Global Fragility Act](#). December 2022.

<sup>7</sup> [‘Court Grants Nigerian Government’s Request to Declare Bandits as Terrorists.’](#) Sahara Reporters. November 26, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel, Malik. [‘Boko Haram teams up with bandits in Nigeria.’](#) ISS Today. March 3, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> [‘Ansaru’s comeback in Nigeria deepens the terror threat.’](#) ISS Today. June 1, 2022. Institute for Security Studies.

<sup>10</sup> [‘Bandits Win Fight with Ansaru Terrorists to Take Over Kaduna Communities, Abduct 50.’](#) Sahara Reporters. August 1, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Dahiru, Aliyu. [‘Kaduna Train Attack Reveals Nexus between Terrorists in Northeast and Northwest Nigeria.’](#) Humanitarian Angle. April 19, 2022.

This prioritization itself is a key finding. Notably, the youth did not identify violent extremism as a critical priority in any of the three states, despite the initial YLARR study objectives specifying VE as the primary area of interest. This finding aligns with Mercy Corps research indicating that VEOs are responsible for only 8% of attacks on civilians and 13% of fatalities in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia, arguing that investments in peacebuilding and conflict prevention should maintain “a broad focus and seek to reduce participation in a range of violent activities, including violent extremism...[particularly] when different types of violence share similar drivers.”<sup>12</sup> This finding also demonstrates the effectiveness of the PAR approach as a means of elevating local priorities, and in this case, clarifying where assumptions about the relevance of VE may not accurately reflect lived experiences within communities.

Overall, the youth researchers identified overlapping drivers that fuel all three forms of violence. In particular, community respondents widely cited a lack of education, which undermines basic skills for youth to obtain productive livelihoods, leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation, and excludes them from critical structures of society and governance. Youth also face bureaucratic, social, and physical barriers to engagement in productive and meaningful livelihoods, freedom of speech, and recreational activities, which may cause feelings of depression, resentment, and hopelessness.

Pervasive injustice in the form of perceived disparities in governance and development, and inefficient or ineffective systems of dispute resolution are also major drivers of violence. As insecurity has escalated and spread, access to affected areas has been impeded, further undermining development and overwhelming the justice system. The youth researchers further noted widespread perceptions that the government deliberately allows violence to consume certain communities depending on the political allegiances of those communities. This deep mistrust of the government and justice system serves as a critical driver for youth involvement in violence. As such, all of these factors are both root causes of the different types of violence and further compounded by the resulting insecurity.

The following sections seek to further map the dynamics related to the three types of violence. As relevant, these discussions elucidate where the findings may be relevant to other geographic locations, even if not specified by the youth researchers as a priority theme in their state.

## **Banditry**

Banditry is prevalent in both Kaduna and Katsina, where high rates of poverty and unemployment have compounded other drivers of violence. Although some incidents – primarily in Kaduna – are still linked to pastoralist-farmer conflict, banditry has largely transformed into criminal opportunism affecting pastoralists and farmers alike, characterized by mass displacement, widespread cattle rustling, and destruction of farmland.<sup>13</sup> Bandits frequently use kidnapping as a source of revenue from ransom, means of protection from state security forces, or intimidation of local communities. Kidnapping of children from boarding schools has become a particularly ruthless trend, with over 300 boys abducted from a boarding school in Katsina in December 2020.<sup>14</sup> The violence associated with banditry also includes theft, murder, rape, and maiming, which victimizes individuals and whole villages throughout rural areas.

As bandits have progressively coopted political and military allies to ensure their impunity and obtain access to weapons, they have increasingly attacked urban centers, public infrastructure, and high profile political and military targets. Notably, bandits in Kaduna assaulted an Air Force jet in July

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<sup>12</sup> Mercy Corps 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Ayandele, Olajumoke. “[Confronting Nigeria’s Kaduna Crisis.](#)” Africa Center for Strategic Studies. February 2, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> “[Parents pray for hundreds of students kidnapped in Nigeria’s Katsina.](#)” Reuters. December 13, 2020.

2021,<sup>15</sup> the Nigerian Defense Academy in August 2021<sup>16</sup> and All Progressives Congress (APC) party chieftains in September 2022<sup>17</sup>. Kidnapping in Kaduna has also targeted priests,<sup>18</sup> although the violence is not considered to be religiously motivated. There have been notable cases of bandits blocking highways and even rail lines.<sup>19</sup> In Katsina, gangs have become increasingly emboldened, even attacking the President's advance security team in July 2022.<sup>20</sup>

The brazen and frequent attacks have caused grave disruptions to civic, economic, and social life. Following the spate of kidnappings, the government has recurrently shuttered schools across both states, with claims that over 5000 schools in Kaduna have been either closed, abandoned, or destroyed, resulting in a large number of out-of-school children, especially of primary school age.<sup>21</sup> The insecurity has also pushed district heads from eight LGAs in Katsina into the state capital, further limiting access of communities to local government officials.<sup>22</sup>

Livelihood activities including businesses, farming, and herding have been decimated by displacement, destruction of farmland, rustling or killing of livestock, bandit-imposed taxes, and fear of attack, which have resulted in reduced family incomes and growing food insecurity. The youth researchers noted that local businesspeople have either relocated from insecure areas or are no longer willing to invest in the community, out of fear that they could be targeted by bandits or kidnappers due to their relative wealth, which further undermines the local employment market and development. They also found that due to the ethnic overtones of the crisis, economic exchange between Fulani people and other tribes has declined considerably.

Pervasive fear of banditry has made communities more reclusive and insular, limiting social interactions, particularly across tribes. Community respondents reported that Fulani and Hausa people no longer attend each other's market days, Friday prayers, or cultural and religious festivities. For example, as local sponsors have fled and fears of attack have elevated, the community of Idon Gida in Kaduna no longer celebrates 'Idon Day,' a festival that had previously convened diverse tribes for the local rice and Bambara nut harvest. Inter-marriage has also reportedly reduced among tribes in the region. Curfews, checkpoints, and other movement restrictions have further inhibited intercommunal interactions. Despite this overall decline in social cohesion, the youth researchers noted that relations between the Adara majority and Hausa minority in Kaduna have improved, due to perceptions that they now have a common enemy in the Fulani.

Security strategies are widely considered as one of the critical means of addressing banditry. In particular, neighborhood watch groups are viewed by community respondents as playing a largely positive role by conducting regular patrols, supplying intelligence to state security forces, and spearheading rescue

#### **GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO BANDITRY**

*The federal government has undertaken an estimated ten military operations against banditry groups in Northwest Nigeria, although the gangs are able to readily regroup, due to cover from local forests and a high degree of mobility. Some state governments have attempted negotiations, resulting in various disarmament and amnesty schemes, such as cash-for-guns or cows-for-guns alongside pledges of development. Missed opportunities for coordination across states has also meant that progress by one state is quickly undermined by violence in neighboring areas.*

<sup>15</sup> Ewoker, Chris. "[Nigeria fighter plane shot down by bandits – military.](#)" BBC News. July 19, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> "[Bandits Attack Nigerian Defense Academy, Kill Military Officer, Abduct Two Personnel.](#)" Sahara Reporters. August 24, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Arowolo, Solomon. "[Bandits attack convoy, 'kidnap' APC chieftains in Kaduna.](#)" Blueprint Newspaper. September 22, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Enyiocha, Chimezie. "[Abducted Kaduna Priests: One Killed, One Freed.](#)" July 19, 2022. Channels TV.

<sup>19</sup> "Suspected bandits attack passenger train in northern Nigeria." Al Jazeera. March 29, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> "[Bandits Attack Buhari's Convoy in Katsina.](#)" Daily Trust. July 5, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> "[Over 5,000 Schools in Kaduna Remain Shut Over Fear of Bandits' Abductions.](#)" Sahara Reporters. August 7, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> "[Insecurity: Katsina Bans Volunteer Group, 'Yan Sa Kai.'](#)" Daily Trust. February 15, 2022.



operations of abducted schoolchildren.<sup>23</sup> While these civilian protection groups, predominantly comprising local young men, have historically been informal, community-based entities, some neighborhood watch groups are now actively supported by and coordinate with state security forces. In Kaduna, the regional Community Joint Task Force (CJTF) has reportedly been given weapons, uniforms, and salaries by the government to serve as a community police force, guarding local schools throughout rural areas. Despite allegations of predatory behavior in some localities, youth researchers indicated that neighborhood watch groups have been widely effective at building trust with the communities that they are meant to protect, and that abuse has reduced in the face of the external threat of banditry.

Neighborhood watch groups have also contributed to improvements in intergenerational relations, as youth researchers found that youth and elders are increasingly cooperating on issues of community security. Neighborhood watch groups are involved in providing protection for cultural and religious events, such as marriages and festivals, encouraging elders to listen to youth on crucial issues of community decision making and building mutual respect. Youth researchers also envisioned a role for traditional leaders and neighborhood watch groups to collaborate on surveilling and vetting visitors to their areas to prevent potential bandits from entering, and establishing Early Warning Early Response (EWER) mechanisms to more effectively respond to incidents of violence. Youth researchers suggested that these positive intergenerational interactions are also reducing youth involvement in anti-social behaviors, such as drug abuse and petty crime.

While some respondents in Kaduna and Katsina acknowledged that the government has deployed military assets to establish checkpoints, conduct nighttime patrols, collect intelligence, and arrest suspects, these efforts have been only limitedly successful. Security personnel reportedly point to insufficient weaponry and training to conduct their jobs effectively and a lack of benefits and allowances to their families in case they are killed or wounded on duty, resulting in their hesitation to undertake risky offensives against bandits. Youth researchers highlighted a need to improve the resourcing of the military response and to nurture better collaboration between security forces and communities to share intelligence.

#### **PROPOSED YOUTH INITIATIVE:**

*Establish joint EWER structures and other violence prevention mechanisms to engage both traditional leaders and neighborhood watch groups in providing community security, including protective presence around community events and surveillance and vetting of visitors.*

## **Political Thuggery**

Political thuggery is violence perpetrated predominantly in urban centers by youth gangs, which are hired by political actors to influence the outcome of elections. Political sponsors may provide gangs with money, weapons, and vehicles to intimidate voters, raid voting centers and ballot boxes, and disrupt campaign events. Political thugs may attempt to threaten or attack political opponents and often act with impunity. Community respondents suggested that most young men involved in political thuggery suffer from poverty and unemployment, leaving them vulnerable to economic incentives offered by politicians, and struggle with substance abuse, making them easier to manipulate for violent ends. Violence often escalates when different gangs come into confrontation, and fights may resume in subsequent election cycles.

Youth researchers identified political thuggery as a critical priority in Kano, where gangs were used extensively by both major political parties during the 2019 elections, resulting in a high number of casualties.<sup>24</sup> There have already been grave examples during the APC gubernatorial primary in May

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad, Idris. ["48 Hours After Kankara Boys' Release, Armed Group Abducts Children in Katsina."](#) Humanitarian Angle. December 20, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> ["Widespread Violence Ushers in President's New Term."](#) Human Rights Watch. June 10, 2019.



2022, especially against youth candidate Sha'aban Sharada.<sup>25</sup> As tensions have risen between the Kwankwasiyya Movement, comprising loyalists of former governor Rabi'u Kwankwaso, and Gandujiyya Movement, comprising followers of current Governor Ganduje, there are further risks that political thuggery could be used to influence the election results. The governor reportedly prohibited thugs from attending political gatherings, although there are concerns that this directive will be applied equally.

While not prioritized by the youth researchers in Katsina, observers fear a heightened risk of political thuggery as well. Katsina has historically been a People's Democratic Party (PDP) stronghold, as the home of former President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. It is also home of current President Buhari of the APC. However, media reports suggest that the APC has lost considerable support within the state due to rising insecurity.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the major parties are likely to rely on political thuggery in an attempt to safeguard the image of their respective figureheads during the 2023 elections.

Community respondents indicated that political thuggery not only results in casualties and destruction of property, but also significantly undermines voter turnout, with women, elderly, and people living with disabilities remaining at home out of fear of the violence. The violence also creates widespread perceptions that election outcomes do not represent the will of communities, but rather the extent to which political thugs have been able to intimidate voters or stuff the ballot boxes, which can subsequently fuel spontaneous clashes among political supporters if the results are perceived as unfair. The youth researchers reported that in the aftermath of elections, political thugs continue to harass and threaten voters, and especially students, who may have supported political opponents.

#### **PROPOSED YOUTH INITIATIVE:**

*Conduct awareness raising campaigns on avoiding incitement to violence, enabling youth to identify stereotypes, rumors, and political hate speech, as well as peaceful means of expressing their grievances through civic engagement, in order to mitigate their manipulation into violence.*

A majority of respondents in Kano acknowledged that the government has attempted to manage political thuggery through the deployment of security forces with standing orders to arrest perpetrators. The government has also reportedly given start-up capital to youth and built rehabilitation centers for drug abusers, to little effect. Although the youth researchers suggested that there have been some successes in negotiating 'peace accords' between political thuggery gangs to halt aggression, these agreements are not sustainable, since thugs remain

beholden to the politicians who sponsor them. Unless political actors are held to account, community respondents fear that political thuggery will continue. Despite these challenges, the youth researchers perceive that they can play a positive role in mitigating the involvement of their peers in political thuggery by supporting awareness raising campaigns on youth civic rights and responsibilities and on the dangers of hate speech to enable youth to avoid manipulation.

## **Religious Violence**

Intra-religious conflict in Kano stems from tensions between the mystical Sufi Tijaniyya and Kadiriyya sects, the Salafi Izala sect, and the Shia Imamiyya and Zakzakiyya sects. Although all of the sects are predominantly Hausa within Kano, which mitigates any ethnic dimension to the conflict, there have been historical clashes over positions of religious leadership within the state, including a recent power struggle within Kano's Council of Islamic Scholars.<sup>27</sup> Community respondents perceive that these tensions are often linked to desires for political influence that would elevate the profile and reach of sects. As a result, social interactions between followers of the different sects have reportedly reduced, no longer attending each other's weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, and other events. With the

<sup>25</sup> Dahiru, Aliyu. "[Thuggery Hurting Political Activities Ahead of Nigeria's General Elections.](#)" Humanitarian Angle. June 25, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Ibrahim, Ogalah. "[2023: APC chances in Katsina without ex-SGS, Inuwa.](#)" Vanguard. October 3, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> "[Crisis Rocks Kano Council of Islamic Scholars over Removal of Chairman Sheikh Khalil.](#)" Sahara Reporters. October 12, 2021.

rise of hate speech associated with the election season, the youth researchers voiced concern that intra-religious tensions could further escalate into violence.

Inter-religious relations between the Muslim majority and Christian minority in Kano have also witnessed recurring tensions in recent years. In 2020, in affiliation with the nationwide #EndSARS protests, which aimed to dismantle the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, youth in Kano organized a protest in the largely Christian neighborhood of Sabon Gari. Violence erupted when criminal gangs assaulted the protesters and destroyed local property, including a church.<sup>28</sup> The youth researchers interpreted this incident as an attempt to coopt the protests to stoke inter-religious animosity, despite evidence that both Christians and Muslims served as protest organizers and participants. Similarly, the youth researchers cited cases of intimidation and attacks on voters in Sabon Gari during the 2019 gubernatorial election, over perceptions that Christians were voting for the opposition, resulting in the election being initially declared as inconclusive. This incident aligns with a recent Mercy Corps study on the nature of intercommunal violence in Northwest Nigeria, which found that it is largely driven by “insecurity and a lack of trust between ethno-religious groups competing for political power.”<sup>29</sup>

These violent events have eroded inter-religious social cohesion and further limited intercommunal interactions, including participation in and exchange of gifts for each other’s festivals, such as Sallah and Christmas. Meanwhile, growing stereotypes of Christians as settlers who are not originally from Kano and of Muslims as rightful indigenes have deepened tensions. This decline in inter-religious social cohesion is likely to spark future violence, as the same Mercy Corps study found that “a decrease in social cohesion, including intergroup trust, is associated with a 43 to 60 percent increase in respondents’ willingness to endorse violence.”<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, state-sponsored intra- and inter-religious dialogue forums have reportedly been effective at mitigating tensions, including one established following the #EndSARS incident. This aligns with the views of the youth researchers that religious violence is easier to de-escalate than banditry and political thuggery. Community respondents suggested that dialogue approaches should be supplemented with the establishment of government regulatory agencies that provide oversight to religious and ethnic associations to ensure that they are promoting peace through their sermons and cultural activities. Moreover, community respondents view the educational curriculum as an opportunity to create space to appreciate diverse religious beliefs. The youth researchers perceive that they have a role to play in supporting their peers to express their religious values in ways that are peaceful and tolerant.

#### **PROPOSED YOUTH INITIATIVE:**

*Conduct sensitization campaigns on avoiding incitement to violence, enabling youth to identify violent religious rhetoric, as well as peaceful outlets to express their religious beliefs.*

## **Recommendations**

The YLARR process explicitly seeks to translate research findings into actionable steps that the youth researchers and CBOs can implement or advocate for, independently or with support from CIPP. As such, while community respondents cited the federal government and military as critical actors in addressing the types of violence discussed in this research brief, particularly in tackling banditry, the below recommendations focus on actions that can be undertaken by state and local stakeholders.

### **Local Communities**

Both local leaders and youth have roles to play in mitigating violence within their communities, with the potential for youth to spearhead certain initiatives.

<sup>28</sup> Ibrahim, Nasir. [“#EndSARS: Protest turns violent as thugs, protesters clash in Kano.”](#) Premium Times. October 20, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Lichtenheld and Ogbudu 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

- › **Engage youth in community decision making**, especially on local security policies, to reinforce their roles as positive change agents – whether as activists, peacebuilders, or neighborhood watch groups – and inhibit their involvement in violence.
- › **Support youth to develop peer support networks** to help identify at-risk peers, encourage constructive community engagement through development and recreational activities, and dissuade youth involvement in violence.
- › **Strengthen traditional justice mechanisms** through capacity building and community engagement to be more proactive, efficient, and fair in dispute resolution, including referrals to local courts, in order to deescalate conflicts and prevent retaliatory attacks.
- › **Establish joint international Early Warning Early Response (EWER) mechanisms** to enable coordination between youth neighborhood watch groups, traditional and religious leaders, and state security and justice actors to efficiently disseminate verified information, plan preventive community-based protection strategies, and intervene in various types of violence.
- › **Facilitate frequent, positive interactions among diverse ethno-religious groups**, including youth, to foster intergroup trust, including community dialogue, cooperative implementation of local development initiatives, and joint recreational activities.
- › **Support youth to conduct sensitization campaigns on avoiding incitement to violence**, enabling youth to identify stereotypes, rumors, political hate speech, and violent religious rhetoric, as well as peaceful means of expressing their grievances through civic engagement, in order to mitigate their manipulation into violence.

## CIPP Program

The CIPP program should conduct the planned next phases of the YLARR process to communicate the initial findings, translate them into activities, and iterate the research.

- › **Continue engaging youth as researchers and activists**, building on the leadership experience that they gained and positive relationships that they formed with government officials, traditional leaders, and other community members through the YLARR process.
- › **Provide capacity building support to youth CBOs** to enable them to expand their networks of local youth and more effectively conduct quality research, design evidence-based interventions, and implement youth-led community initiatives moving forward.
- › **Deepen research on specific correlations** between the different types of violence, their drivers, and potential solutions across the three states to ensure that programmatic recommendations are contextualized and evidence-based.
- › **Develop action plans** in collaboration with youth researchers and other community stakeholders to identify specific programmatic support that CIPP can offer in line with the below recommendations for local community mitigation activities.

## State and Local Government

State government institutions and local government officials are central to addressing the deep structural grievances that often underpin youth involvement in violence, with the following examples representing priorities highlighted by the youth researchers and community respondents.

- › **Provide equitable access to quality education**, including vocational training options, for children and youth in urban, rural, and transhumant contexts in order to ensure that they have a foundation for productive livelihoods and feel connected to government services.

- › **Stimulate youth livelihoods** by funding youth scholarships, small business grants, and vocational training programs and by attracting investment to generate job creation that will help address certain economic motivations for involvement in banditry and political thuggery.
- › **Reform local justice systems** through introduction of oversight and disciplinary systems to ensure that courts are able to serve as independent institutions and to collaborate with traditional dispute resolution mechanisms.

## Donors

Youth-led PAR has the potential to be a highly beneficial exercise that directly contributes to youth empowerment and generates evidence for community-based programming. Donors should continue supporting such research in the context of violence prevention and peacebuilding programs, with particular awareness of the following.

- › **Maintain a broad focus on diverse types of violence including, but not limited to violent extremism**, in order to avoid assumptions about the prevalence and relevance of violent extremism within communities and to enable local stakeholders to define the priorities that most accurately reflect their lived realities.
- › **Fund robust teams of researchers and practitioners** to oversee PAR processes and mentor youth researchers in a way that enables deep engagement and mutual questioning of assumptions. Given the complexity of PAR, particularly with youth in complex conflict contexts, research teams should bring to bear a diversity of skill sets that foster creativity as well as local ownership.



## CONTACT

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### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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