



Between Commitment and Ineffectiveness: A Critical Analysis of Government Response to Internal Displacement in Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria, driven by the protracted insurgency of Boko Haram, remains a significant humanitarian challenge, displacing over two million people since 2009. In response, the Nigerian government has implemented a range of interventions, including the establishment of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, emergency relief distribution, and resettlement programmes. However, the effectiveness of these interventions remains contested. This study critically examines the nature, effectiveness, and limitations of the government's response to internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively selected participants and supplemented with secondary sources. The analysis was guided by the Cluster Approach framework and the theory of Sovereignty as Responsibility, while thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. The findings reveal that although the government demonstrated commitment across key humanitarian sectors: food and nutrition, healthcare, WASH, shelter, protection, and resettlement, its response was largely reactive, fragmented, and characterised by weak coordination, inadequate institutional capacity, and short-term planning. These limitations have resulted in significant gaps in service delivery, contributing to prolonged displacement and inadequate living conditions among internally displaced persons. The study concludes that the government's response reflects a combination of commitment and ineffectiveness, with a persistent gap between policy intentions and humanitarian outcomes. It recommends strengthening institutional coordination, enhancing accountability, and adopting sustainable, rights-based approaches to displacement management. The study contributes to debates on humanitarian response of state in conflict-affected settings.

Keywords: Internal Displacement, Government Response, Northeast Nigeria, Humanitarian Intervention, Boko Haram, IDPs



1. Introduction

Internal displacement remains a major humanitarian and governance challenge in conflict-affected regions, particularly in fragile states with limited institutional capacity. In Northeast Nigeria, the insurgency of Boko Haram has displaced over two million people since 2009, creating a protracted crisis across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States (IDMC, 2023; UNOCHA, 2022). In response, the Nigerian government has implemented interventions such as IDP camps, emergency relief distribution, and resettlement programmes. However, evidence points to persistent gaps in coordination, service delivery, and long-term recovery (World Bank, 2020; UNHCR, 2023).

Existing literature has largely examined displacement from human security, conflict, or humanitarian perspectives, often overlooking a critical evaluation of state-led responses. This study addresses this gap by critically analysing the nature and effectiveness of the Nigerian government’s response to internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria, drawing on the Cluster Approach and the theory of Sovereignty as Responsibility.

Specifically, this study explored how the Government responded to internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria. The findings of this study contribute to scholarly and policy debates by scientifically exploring the response of the government to the humanitarian situation in Northeast Nigeria and other regions of the world that have similar features with Northeast Nigeria. The outcomes of the research are relevant to policymakers in Nigeria by identifying gaps and highlighting issues related to coordination, accountability, and sustainable strategies for managing humanitarian situation of this magnitude.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria constitutes a protracted humanitarian crisis rooted in the violent insurgency of Boko Haram, which has displaced over two million people since 2009 (IDMC, 2023; OCHA, 2022). In response, the Nigerian government has deployed a range of interventions, including the establishment of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, emergency relief distribution, military-led stabilization efforts, and policy frameworks aimed at resettlement and reintegration. While these measures suggest a formal commitment to addressing displacement, their practical outcomes reveal significant contradictions between policy intent and humanitarian realities.

Empirical evidence indicates that government responses have been largely reactive,



securitized, and fragmented, prioritizing short-term emergency measures over comprehensive, rights-based, and durable solutions. Structural constraints such as chronic underfunding, weak institutional capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited inter-agency coordination have undermined the coherence and effectiveness of state interventions (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Moreover, allegations of corruption, diversion of relief materials, and politicization of humanitarian assistance point to deeper governance deficits that not only erode public trust but also exacerbate the vulnerabilities of displaced populations.

Critically, the dominance of a security-centric approach has often subordinated humanitarian priorities to counterinsurgency objectives, thereby restricting access to affected populations and shaping patterns of assistance in ways that may reproduce dependency and exclusion. Consequently, despite sustained government involvement, many IDPs continue to experience protracted displacement, precarious living conditions, and limited access to essential services. This raises fundamental questions about the adequacy, inclusivity, and sustainability of state-led responses.

Furthermore, existing scholarship tends to adopt descriptive or policy-oriented approaches, with limited critical interrogation of the political, institutional, and operational dynamics shaping government interventions. There is a notable lack of systematic analysis that evaluates not only what the government has done, but how and with what implications for humanitarian outcomes and long-term recovery. This analytical gap constrains a deeper understanding of the interplay between state capacity, governance practices, and displacement management in conflict-affected settings.

Against this backdrop, this study critically examines the nature, effectiveness, and limitations of the Nigerian government’s response to internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria. By interrogating the underlying structural and political factors shaping these interventions, the study aims to contribute to scholarly debates on state-led humanitarian governance and to generate evidence-based insights for more accountable, coordinated, and sustainable policy responses.

1.3 Literature Review

A considerable body of scholarly literature exists on Boko Haram conflict and its consequences on Nigeria. As earlier mentioned, one of those consequences is the internal displacement of population. It is determined that available literature related to the topic under study could be



categorised into: literature emphasizing state ineffectiveness, literature acknowledging efforts but highlighting structural constraints, and literature on national and international actors

State Ineffectiveness in Humanitarian Intervention

Recent studies continue to portray the Nigerian state as largely ineffective in addressing the humanitarian consequences of internal displacement. Studies highlight persistent weaknesses in institutional capacity, poor coordination, and inadequate protection mechanisms for displaced populations (Kolawole, 2024; Egbuta, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024). Human rights reports further document serious deficiencies in state-led humanitarian responses, including neglect of IDP welfare, inadequate camp conditions, and limited access to essential services (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022).

In addition, emerging research underscores that security-driven approaches to the insurgency have often failed to integrate humanitarian considerations effectively, thereby exacerbating vulnerabilities among displaced populations (Bøås et al., 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024; **Gwadabe et al., 2018**). These findings reinforce the argument that state responses remain operationally weak and structurally constrained, despite ongoing interventions.

Humanitarian Efforts and Structural Limitations

A second strand of literature adopts a more balanced perspective, acknowledging that the Nigerian state has made efforts to respond to the humanitarian crisis, but argues that such efforts are significantly constrained by systemic challenges. Empirical studies show that agencies such as NEMA and SEMAs have expanded their operational scope; however, their effectiveness is limited by funding gaps, weak institutional frameworks, and policy inconsistencies (Agunyai & Phago, 2024; Adeleye & Osadola, 2022). Recent governance-focused studies further emphasize the effect of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the action of elites in undermining humanitarian interventions (Transparency International, 2023; Bøås et al., 2025).

Additionally, other studies highlight the uneven implementation of international and regional frameworks such as the Kampala Convention, pointing to gaps between policy adoption and practical enforcement (African Union, 2022; IOM, 2023).



Policy debates have also intensified around controversial government strategies, including camp closures and forced returns, which raise concerns about sustainability and protection risks (International Crisis Group, 2024; Bøås et al., 2025). Overall, this strand concludes that while state efforts are evident, their impact is undermined by deep-rooted structural and governance challenges.

Supportive Role of International Humanitarian Community to the Government

Recent literature increasingly recognizes that humanitarian response in Nigeria is shaped by a multi-actor system involving both state and international actors. Contemporary reports highlight the central role of international organizations in delivering humanitarian assistance, particularly in areas such as camp coordination, food security, health services, and protection (IOM, 2023; UNHCR, 2024; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024; World Food Programme, 2024). Empirical studies further emphasize that humanitarian governance in Nigeria is increasingly networked and collaborative, involving international NGOs, UN agencies, and local actors (Kunnuji et al., 2024; Adekola et al., 2024). Thus, while recent studies acknowledge the importance of international actors, their roles remain under-theorized within broader analytical frameworks.

1.5 Theoretical Approaches and Emerging Gap

Recent scholarship continues to apply frameworks such as human security, state fragility, human rights, and forced migration to analyze internal displacement in Nigeria (Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2023; Adekola et al., 2024; Kolawole, 2024; Kunnuji et al., 2024; Patrick et al., 2025). However, these approaches are insufficient in isolation. Therefore, there is need to come up with integrate analytical frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of contemporary humanitarian crises in Northeast Nigeria. In response to this gap, the present study adopts an integrated framework combining Sovereignty as Responsibility and the Cluster Approach to humanitarian response, as operationalized by the United Nations system. This combined approach provides a more comprehensive and contemporary lens for analyzing the interaction between national and international actors in addressing internal displacement in Nigeria.

1.6 Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The Cluster Approach Framework and the theory of Sovereignty as Responsibility will be the



underpinnings upon which this study is based. The Cluster Approach is useful for analysing the extent to which the Nigerian government has coordinated its interventions and collaborated with other stakeholders in addressing the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Complementing Cluster Approach framework, is the theory of Sovereignty as Responsibility, which is relevant in assessing the Nigerian government’s response to internal displacement, as it underscores the extent to which the state must fulfill its primary responsibility of ensuring the safety, welfare, and dignity of displaced populations in Northeast Nigeria. Together, these frameworks provide a basis for evaluating both the effectiveness and accountability of government interventions in managing internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria (Deng et al., 1996; Deng, 2010; OCHA, 2024; UNHCR, 2024; Bellamy, 2021; Glanville, 2010).

1.7 Methodology

This study subscribed to a qualitative research approach, using a case study as a research design. (Black, 2014; Carter & Lubinsky, 2016). The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with a total number of 12 information-rich participants through purposive sampling technique. Additionally, supporting data were obtained from secondary sources to supplement participant limitations; and also, “to verify particular details that participants have supplied” (Shenton, 2004). The collected interview data were analysed using the six Phases of Thematic Analysis (TA) advanced by Braun & Clarke (2006). The Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software - Atlas.ti7, version 7.5.7 for Microsoft Windows was used in facilitating the process of creating the thematic maps of the analysis.

1.8 Analysis and Discussion of the Findings

The interview questions were phrased base on the research question which is in line with the six sectors of the Cluster Approach Framework to humanitarian response of the United Nations.

The Government Respond to Internal Displacement in Northeast Nigeria

The response to internal displacement by the government constitute the humanitarian response of the national authorities to the provision of food and nutrition; the healthcare; the provision of Water, sanitation and hygiene; the provision of habitable shelter and non-food items; the protection of the female IDPs from gender-based violence; and the issue of returning the IDPs to their communities of origin as a step to early recovery and attainment of durable solutions



for the victims. Thus, the six sectors of humanitarian response will be treated one after the other in the subsequent sections.

The Provision of Food and Nutrition by the Government

The dominant view of the participants about the food and nutrition indicated that there is a commitment of the government in providing food and nutrition which is lifesaving support to the affected people through the use of the already established governmental humanitarian institutions. However, the participants also pointed out that the government resorted to some unplanned approaches in responding to the situation that are not sustainable, which resulted in having worrisome gaps in the sector. See Figure 1.

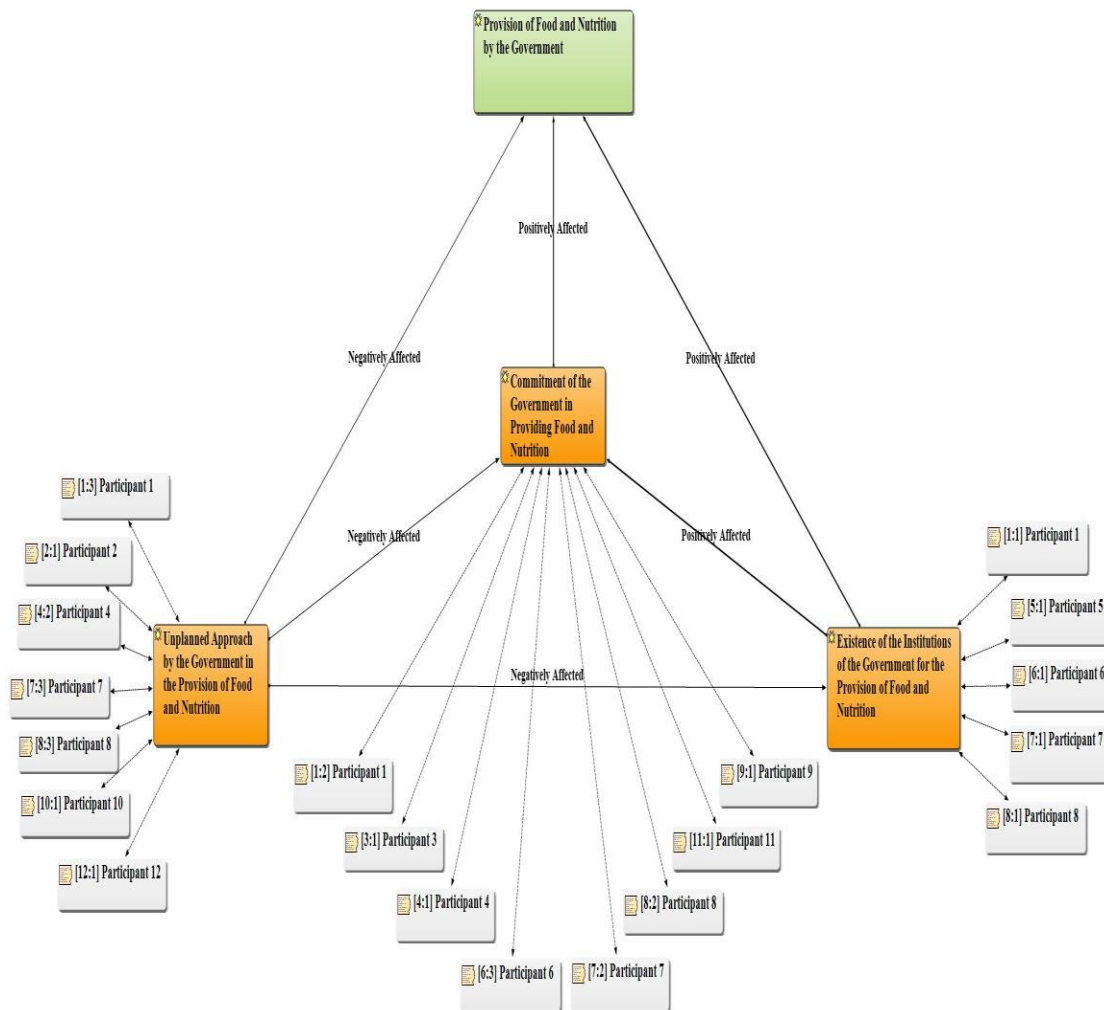


Figure 1: Thematic Map for the Provision of Food and Nutrition by the Government



The Provision of Healthcare by the Government

The dominant views expressed by the participants indicated that the government is trying and doing the best it could to provide healthcare services to the IDPs. However, some participants clarified and placed the blame on the approach used by the government for the gaps in sectors. Such approaches include providing intervention on an ad-hoc basis, overreliance on foreign actors, which is not enough to cover the people in need. They also faulted the government for its ineffectiveness in coordinating the humanitarian partners in the sector. See Figure 2.

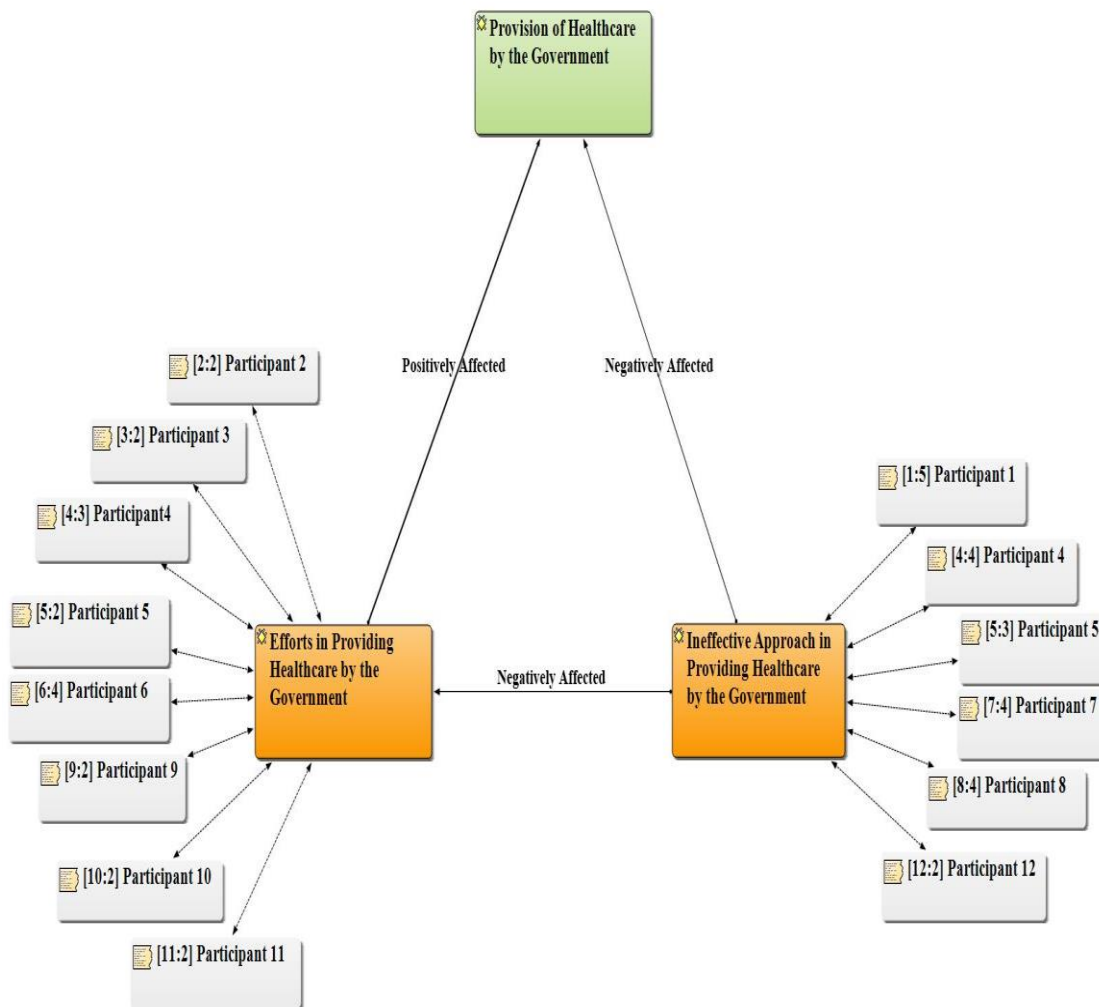


Figure 2: Thematic Map for the Provision of Healthcare by the Government



The Provision of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) by the Government

It is determined that the government handled the WASH sector negligently. As a result, it affected the adequate provision of the WASH negatively. It has also dwarfed the overall efforts being made in the cluster by the humanitarian actors. However, the government made some efforts in the sector but without significant positive impact. See Figure 3.

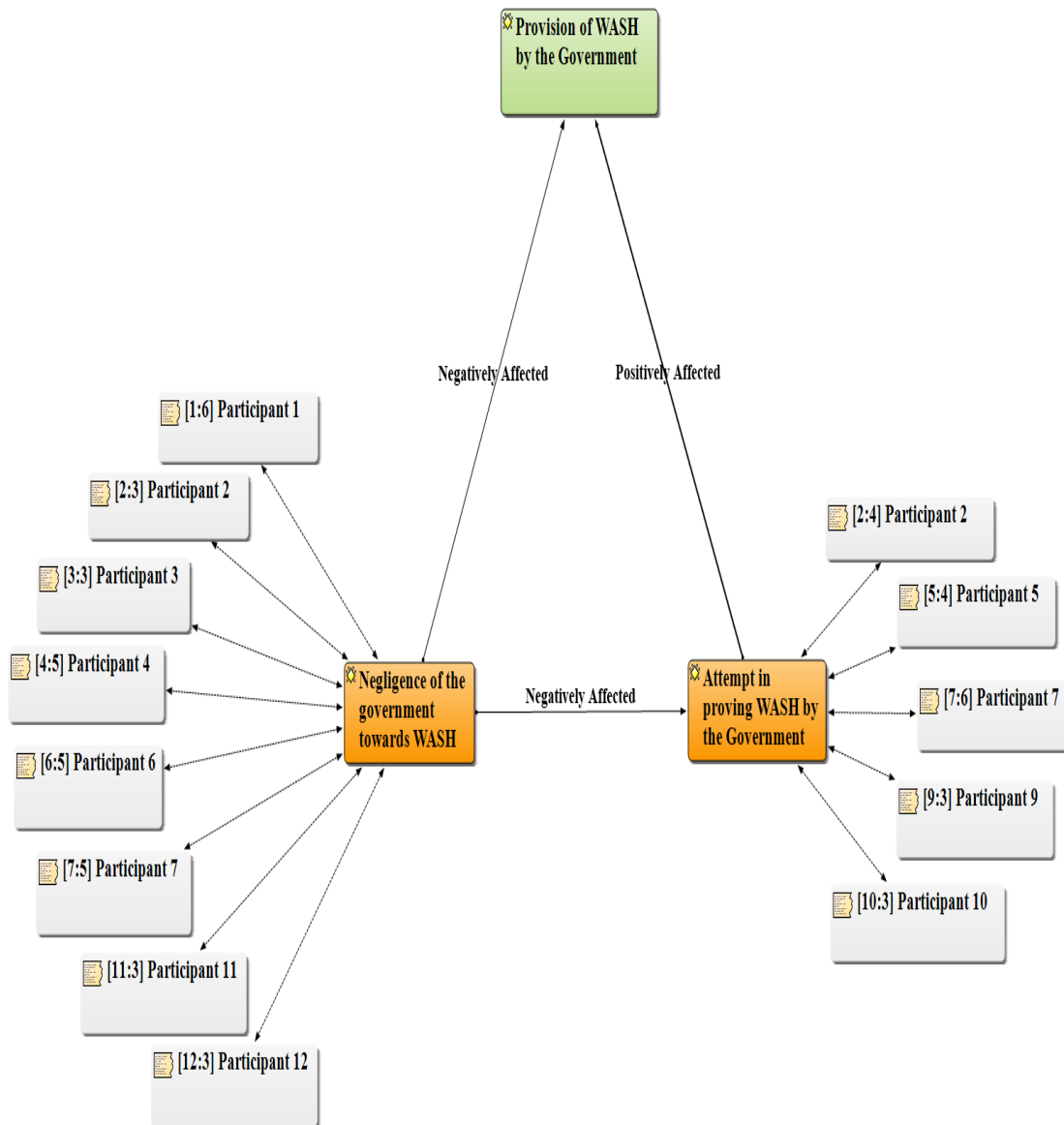


Figure 3: Thematic Map for the Provision of WASH by the Government



The Provision of Shelter and Non-Food Items (NFIs) by the Government

Here, it is found that the insignificant efforts made by the government created some alarming gaps in the shelter and non-food items sector, which failed the government. This has negatively affected the overall response in the sector. Although, the majority of the participants indicated that the International Humanitarian Organisations were into the sector to bridge the gaps, but lack of proper coordination from the national authority affected the efforts being made in the sector negatively. See Figure 4.

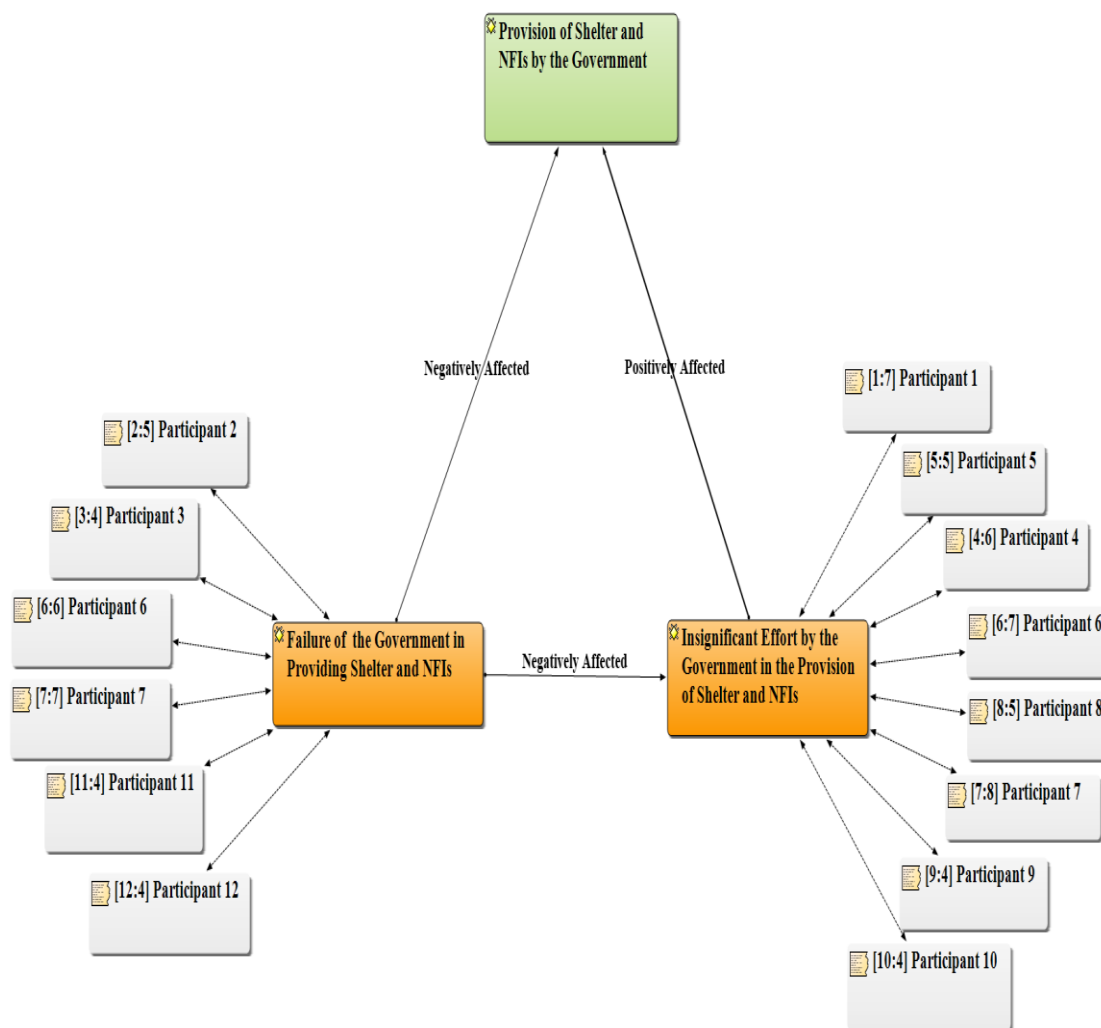


Figure 4: Thematic Map for the Provision of Shelter and Non-Food Items (NFIs) by the Government



Protection of the IDPs from Gender-based Violence (GBV) by the Government

The dominant view of the participants showed that the government is negligent in addressing the protection issue of the IDPs more especially in relation to the GBV against the female IDPs. This negligence according to them has manifested in the form of using weak and unsustainable security system approach that eventually jeopardised the safety of the female IDPs. However, some among the participants testified that the government is making some efforts in the protection sector, but inadequate handling of the sector has already created a security vacuum which negatively affected the IDPs. See Figure 5.

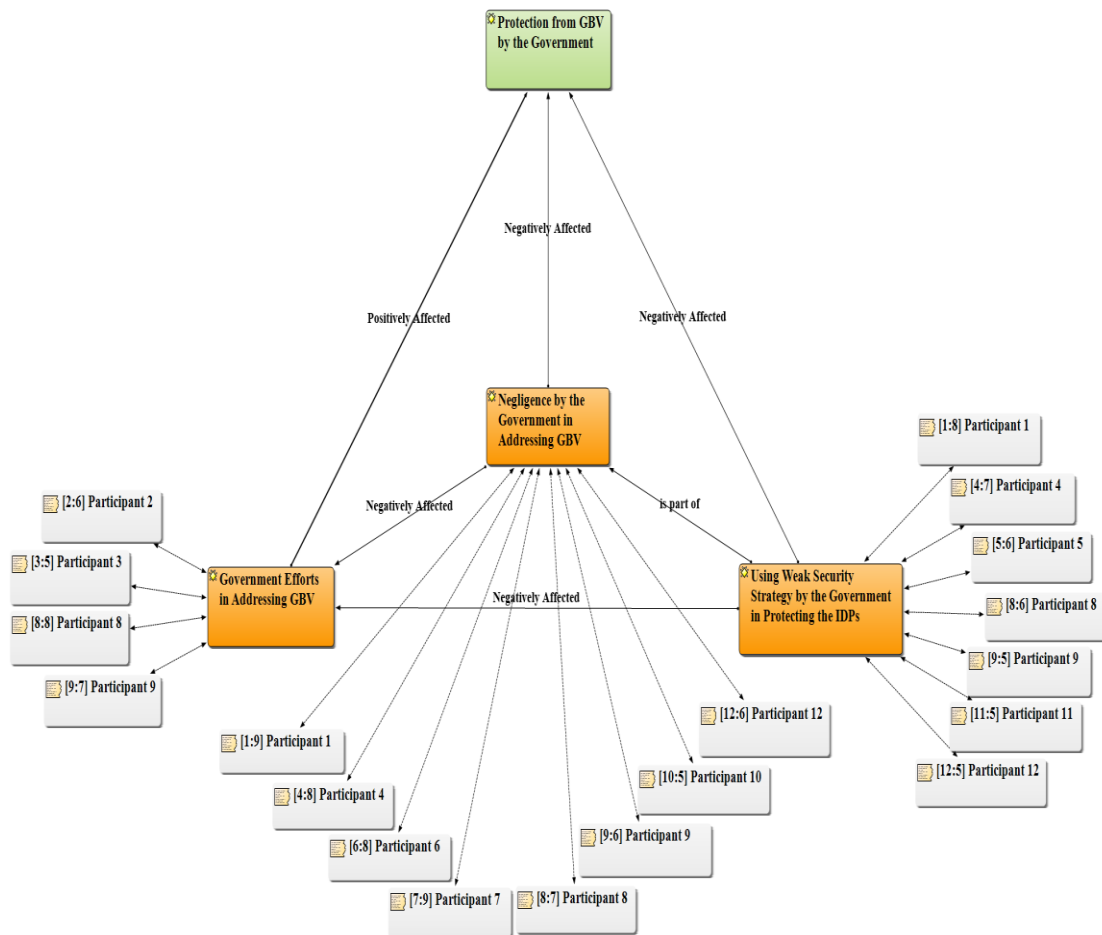


Figure 5: Thematic Map for the Protection of the IDPs from Gender-Based Violence (GBV) by the Government



Facilitating the Return of the IDPs to their Communities by the Government

The government is commendably committed in facilitating and ensuring the return of the displaced persons to their communities of origin. However, the approach and policy used by the authorities in handling the issue is not sustainable. Most of the policies and approaches targeted the immediate needs of the returnees while their long term needs are not given adequate attention. As a result, the approaches became a stumbling block to the attainment of durable solutions. See Figure 6.

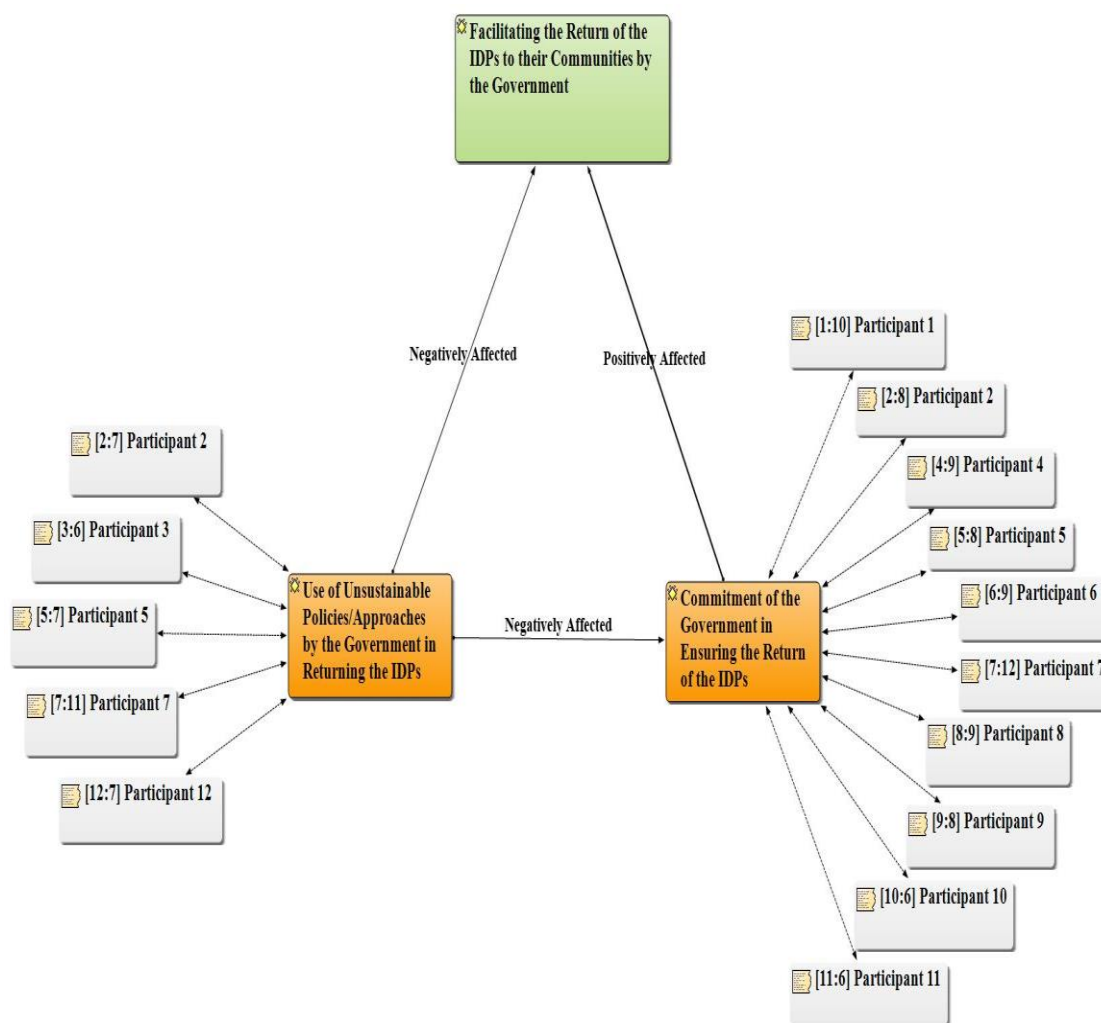


Figure 6: Thematic Map for the Return of the IDPs to their Communities by the Government



Bearing in mind the research question which sought to determine how the government responded to internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria, it is found that the government responded to the internal displacement by showing a sense of commitment in handling the phenomenon. However, the overarching opinion of the participants revealed that the approach used by the government in the humanitarian response is ineffective. This ineffectiveness has negatively affected the commitment of the government in responding to the situation leaving wide gaps in almost all the sectors of the humanitarian response. Figure 7 showed the relationship among all the 14 themes that emerged from the Research Question. It has also illustrated how the themes were redefined and named, which is the 5th phase of the thematic analysis used by this study. After which the 14 themes were deduced to 2 themes: *Ineffective Approach by the Government*; and *Commitment of the Government*. In conclusion, it is determined that the government responded to the internal displacement with a sense of commitment, but using ineffective Approach.

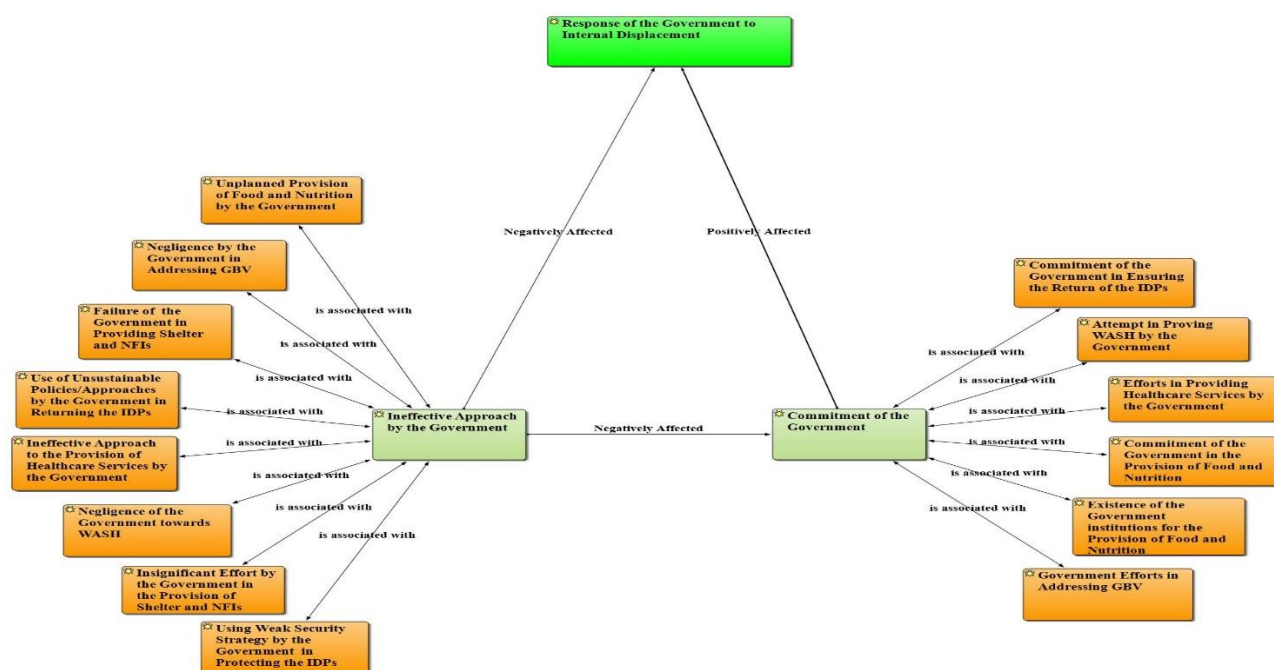


Figure 7: Thematic Map for the Response of the Government to the Internal Displacement

Recommendation to the Government

Based on the findings of this study, this section attempts to provide Policy, Institutional, and



legislative Recommendations to remedy the problems identified by this study. The recommendations include: first, the adoption of the Kampala Convention (2009) which is the African Union (AU) Convention for the Assistance and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. Second, the establishment of the National Humanitarian and Human Rights Commission (NHHRC). Third, the establishment of the National Peace and Reconciliation Council (NPRC).

The Enactment of a National Law on Internal Displacement and Reconstruction (Internal Displacement & Reconstruction Act)

Although, in Nigeria there are provisions and institutions for the protection of all citizens and their rights. The constitution of the country has stipulated fundamental rights of all Nigerians. Also, there are institutions that exist to uphold the protection of the citizens’ rights such as the National Human Rights Commission, in addition to many law enforcement agencies. In relations to the humanitarian and emergency issues, there are a number of institutions entrusted to handle them such as the NEMA and the NCFRMI. However, there are no specific provisions that safeguard the rights of the internally displaced people. Accordingly, the phenomenon of internal displacement unlike other humanitarian situations comes with some peculiar needs that require special treatment. For instance, unlike refugees that are protected by international law, the IDPs require the protection of a national law since they did not cross border into another country. Even though, the international law applies to all signatory states, but due to the principle and the respect of national sovereignty, enforcement is in most cases difficult. Consequently, considering the findings of this research, the Enactment of a national law on internal displacement and reconstruction which shall be known as the *Internal Displacement & Reconstruction Act* is recommended. The Act shall be modelled after the Kampala Convention (2009) which is the first legal instrument that the AU has specifically enacted to Assist and Protect the Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. However, as explained earlier the restrictions posed by the notion of states sovereignty does not allow for the proper application and enforcement of such transnational legal instruments. This limitation warrants the need for the enactment of a national legislative act to address internal displacement and its aftermath as recommended by this study.



The Establishment of the National Humanitarian and Human Rights Commission (NHHRC)

As earlier clarified, there are institutions in Nigeria that are saddled with the responsibility of handling emergencies. One of the major obstacles discovered by this study is poor coordination among the humanitarian actors. This study has identified disharmony even among the various humanitarian institutions of the government which led to the duplication of efforts in some sectors, while other sectors are ignored or underserved due the inexactness of which institution has the responsibility over what; which institution has supremacy over other institutions; the unclear demarcation of the jurisdictions of each institution; the unclarity about the institution the international partners are answerable to, and the terms of engagement.

As a result, this study proposes a policy and institutional reform. Accordingly, the establishment of the *National Humanitarian and Human Rights Commission (NHHRC)* is recommended. The NHHRC shall be created to execute the provisions of the proposed *Internal Displacement & Reconstruction Act*. The establishment of the NHHRC shall be a policy and institutional reform effort. Therefore, all national humanitarian and human rights bodies should be placed under the NHHRC. The current NCFRMI, NEMA, the National Human Rights Commission and other similar institutions should become units under the NHHRC. Also, there shall be a unit under the NHHRC that should deal with the local NGO's and international partners. This policy and institutional reform is expected to strengthen institutional capacity; reinforced effectiveness in coordination. It will also give room for prevention of humanitarian crisis, preparedness and mitigation. Lastly, when a humanitarian situation is at hand, there will be timely and effective response that could reduce the level of suffering and damages and facilitate recovery.

The Establishment of the Northeast Peace and Reconciliation Council (NPRC) (To be Modelled after the Rwanda's Gacaca System)

The Boko Haram Conflict and its humanitarian consequences have left some unhealed wounds and made some significant damages to some segments of the population in the Northeast. So many young men and women were indoctrinated and brained-washed to join Boko Haram. Most of these young people are part of the Northeastern communities and they are made to commit a number of atrocities and unspeakable horror to several members of those



communities. As such, a sense of animosity will tend to loom in that society which could lead to reprisal attacks and revenge. The national assembly should enact a law establishing the Northeast Peace and Reconciliation Council, a council that will serve as a body of transitional justice which will use judicial and non-judicial approaches to address cases of human right violations; properties and land disputes among the returnees. In the course of this study, the data gathered showed that the properties and farmlands of the displaced people were occupied by some other persons during the period of their displacement. The Council should also be saddled with the responsibility of dealing with amnesty, rehabilitation and reintegration of the brain-washed members of the armed group into the society. Also, the *almajiri* schools which are believed to be the avenue used to nurture extremism should be placed under the NPRC for restructuring, regulation and supervision. Among other things, the operation and the structure of the NPRC shall be specified and backed by a legislation.

1.9 Conclusion

This study finds that the Nigerian government’s response to internal displacement in Northeast Nigeria reflects a degree of commitment but remains largely ineffective due to structural and operational constraints. Government interventions across key humanitarian sectors have been predominantly reactive, fragmented, and short-term in orientation, limiting their ability to deliver sustainable outcomes (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Consequently, many internally displaced persons continue to face prolonged displacement, inadequate living conditions, and restricted access to essential services (UNHCR, 2023; World Bank, 2020).

The findings highlight a significant gap between policy intentions and humanitarian outcomes, underscoring the need for more coordinated, accountable, and long-term strategies. Strengthening institutional capacity and aligning responses with rights-based and durable solutions are essential for improving displacement management in Northeast Nigeria and similar conflict-affected contexts.



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