

## The Intersection of Sustainable Development and Ethno-Religious Conflict in Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** Nigeria is now facing the complex issue of ethno-religious conflicts, which have significantly affected its socio-economic structure. This study investigates these conflicts' multifaceted and intricate impacts on Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable development. This research examines the historical context, economic disruptions, educational barriers, and political ramifications of ethno-religious contests. The examination explores prominent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, including the Jos Crisis, the Boko Haram Insurgency, the Kaduna Religious Crisis, and the tensions in the Middle Belt region. The study highlights many reasons that contribute to the intensification of these conflicts, including religious extremism, economic inequality, and political marginalisation. In addition, the article examines the core principles of sustainable development and the consequences of ethno-religious conflicts on environmental sustainability, social advancement, governance, humanitarian crises, economic activities, population displacement, and infrastructure devastation. Utilising conflict resolution strategies, such as interfaith dialogue, inclusive policies, community engagement, security sector reform, good governance, economic diversification, and investment in education, is recommended to mitigate the negative impacts of ethno-religious conflicts on attaining sustainable development. The report emphasises the need to address the root issues and implement proactive methods to create a sustainable and harmonious future in Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Conflicts; Ethnicity; Ethno-Religion; Sustainable Development; Nigeria.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, often known as the "Giant of Africa," has diverse cultures and religious practices. Nevertheless, this variety has also sparked friction, resulting in ethno-religious clashes that have sometimes tarnished the country's social cohesion (Mamman, 2019). These conflicts are complex, with historical, cultural, and economic elements playing crucial roles in their genesis and continuation. These conflicts occur at several levels, ranging from community disagreements to widespread violence that significantly affects the nation's development (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020).

The persistent occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has posed substantial risks to the stability of the country and hindered its advancement towards sustainable development. This paper examines the complex consequences of ethno-religious conflicts on Nigeria's efforts to achieve sustainable development. An in-depth analysis is required to fully understand the complex relationship between ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic growth throughout Nigeria's modern history. Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have significantly impacted the social structure, resulting in the relocation of communities, the loss of life, and the degradation of trust among various groups (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). The consequences of such disputes result in lasting damage to the impacted areas, impeding endeavours towards achieving long-term and environmentally responsible progress. Limited resources that may be assigned to development initiatives are transferred to address the immediate consequences and provide humanitarian aid (Ojeleye, 2016).

The ethno-religious conflicts have a significant and far-reaching effect on the economy. The wars cause disruptions in agricultural activity, displacement results in the loss of livelihoods, and destroyed infrastructure hinders economic activities. The persistent spectre of violence deters investments inside and outside the country, impeding economic expansion. Regions plagued by ethno-religious conflicts often encounter elevated levels of poverty as the pursuit of economic progress becomes more unattainable due to the underlying instability (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020).

Moreover, ethno-religious conflicts have immediate consequences for schooling. Instances of social upheaval often result in the deliberate targeting of schools and educational establishments, causing significant disruption to the academic progress of several pupils (Adebayo, 2010). Displacement, the demolition of schools, and the fear of violence all lead to a decrease in academic achievement. Consequently, this maintains the recurring patterns of poverty and hinders the advancement of human skills and knowledge, a crucial element of sustainable development (Mamman, 2019).

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The political environment in Nigeria is closely intertwined with ethno-religious dynamics. The nation's political history has always seen competition for political dominance based on ethnic and religious affiliations (Adebayo, 2010). Exploiting these fault points for political advantages intensifies tensions and creates a favourable atmosphere for confrontations. The allocation of political resources to address ethno-religious conflicts hinders the progress of governance initiatives to achieve sustainable development (Ojeleye, 2016). To comprehend the influence of ethno-religious conflicts on sustainable development, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of institutions and governance systems. The continuation of wars is attributed to factors such as inadequate governance, corruption, and the failure of institutions to address the underlying causes effectively. For sustainable development to occur, it is necessary to have an efficient government and institutions that can handle diversity, resolve past conflicts, and promote inclusiveness (Mamman, 2019).

### **II. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT**

Conflict is a dispute, disagreement, confrontation, war, struggle, controversy, or quarrel. Conflict may manifest either via physical aggression or through peaceful means. Conflict often materialises in a belligerent manner. Violence refers to using unlawful means of physical force to achieve personal or collective objectives.

#### **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity refers to the collective identity of a group of people who share common characteristics such as nationality, tribal membership, religious beliefs, language, and cultural heritage (Owutu, 2013). Nnoli (2007) defines ethnicity as constructing a social identity based on culturally distinctive practices, symbols, and cosmology. He contended that several ethnic groups within a particular area might lead to the mobilisation of ethnic differences for political and economic gain compared to other groups.

#### **Ethno-religious conflict**

Ethno-religious conflict refers to the collision, disagreement, confrontation, fight, rivalry, controversy, or quarrel between groups based on their ethnic and religious affiliations. Ethno-religious strife arises from a fundamental debate over the symbolic values held by the involved groups, which cannot be resolved. The non-negotiable qualities that have symbolic significance include religion and language.

#### **Religion**

According to Aleyomi (2012), religion is a human endeavour to understand and make sense of phenomena associated with the supernatural. It is a set of beliefs and rituals through which a community interprets and responds to what they see as magical and holy.

**Sustainable Development:** The commonly accepted definition of sustainable development, as proposed by the Brundtland Commission, is "development that fulfils the requirements of the current generation without jeopardising the ability of future generations to fulfil their requirements" (United Nations, 1987). The principle of preserving resources for future generations is a key characteristic that sets sustainable development policy apart from conventional environmental policy. Traditional environmental policy also aims to include the costs of environmental deterioration.

### **III. THEORETICAL DISCOURSE**

The convergence of sustainable development and ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria is an intricate and diverse dilemma that requires meticulous examination from many sociological perspectives. The setting may be better comprehended using conflict theory, social identity theory, and the triple bottom line as essential frameworks.

As expounded by thinkers like Karl Marx, conflict theory underscores the significance of power, inequality, and rivalry in moulding society's institutions. In Nigeria, ethno-religious conflicts often arise due to differences in the distribution of resources, political representation, and socio-economic possibilities among various ethnic and religious groups. According to scholars such as Galtung (1969), it is crucial to tackle these structural disparities to attain sustained peace and prosperity.

The social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), offers valuable insights into how people classify themselves and others, contributing to group conflicts. In Nigeria, ethno-religious identities are firmly rooted and can serve as the foundation for societal unity and fragmentation. Policymakers may devise policies that promote inclusiveness and respect multiple cultural and religious manifestations by comprehending the impact of these identities on attitudes and behaviours.

The triple bottom line method, introduced by Elkington (1997), promotes a comprehensive sustainability assessment, including economic, environmental, and social aspects. In the Nigerian context, sustainable development projects must tackle both economic inequality and ecological degradation and address social injustices worsened by ethno-religious conflicts. It is essential to combine these three aspects to promote enduring stability and resilience. The ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have immediate consequences for sustainable development, impacting crucial aspects such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. As shown by Ngwoke and Ituma (2020), the loss of infrastructure during wars obstructs economic progress and hampers the provision of vital services. The resultant migration of people intensifies the burden on resources,

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Hence aggravating social and economic disparities. To tackle this intricate overlap, a thorough approach is required. This entails enacting policies that specifically target the underlying factors contributing to ethno-religious conflicts, such as the equitable allocation of resources, fair political representation, and effective social integration. The primary focus of sustainable development projects should be on promoting economic growth that includes all members of society while prioritising preserving the environment and fostering social harmony. These efforts should keep with the triple bottom line ideas, as Adebayo (2010) outlined.

### **IV. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Ethno-religious conflicts have been a persistent and ongoing issue in Nigeria, affecting several aspects of the country's socio-economic and political environment (Ojeleye, 2016). Understanding the complex interrelationships between these conflicts and sustainable development is crucial to designing efficient methods to tackle this urgent problem. Academics emphasise the intricate nature of these disputes, often originating from past grievances, economic inequalities, and political exclusion.

#### **Historical Background of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria**

Nigeria has had inter-ethnic and inter-religious issues since independence in 1960. Characterized in the cultural and religious milieu, Nigeria has seen multiple ethno-religious conflicts that have impacted its developmental path. The origins of ethno-religious conflicts may be traced back to the period before colonisation and were further intensified by colonial policies that exacerbated existing divisions based on ethnicity and religion (Ojeleye, 2016). The British colonial administration increased tensions by displaying favouritism towards specific groups, thereby creating fertile ground for power conflicts based on ethnic and religious divisions. Following the attainment of independence, the quest for political dominance became closely connected with ethno-religious affiliations, resulting in recurring episodes of violence (Mamman, 2019)

#### **Fundamental Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: The Jos Crisis**

Recurring conflicts have occurred in the city of Jos, located in Plateau State, between the Hausa-Fulani Muslim population and the Berom, Anaguta, and Afizere Christian groups (Uhunmwangho, 2011). The pursuit of wealth and political power has incited violence, leading to substantial casualties and property damage. The crisis is caused by intricate and diverse variables, often originating from historical, economic, political, and social influences. Jos has a history of several ethnic groups peacefully coexisting, although tensions have arisen due to historical grudges, property conflicts, and population shifts.

The city's advantageous geographical position and lucrative economic prospects have attracted individuals from many ethnic and religious backgrounds. The ethno-religious issue in Jos mainly involves a dispute between Christians and Muslims. The city is predominantly Christian, with a substantial Muslim community, frequently referred to as settlers. Exploiting religious differences for political and commercial benefits has resulted in intermittent violent conflicts (Uhunmwangho, 2011).

#### **Boko Haram Insurgency**

The Boko Haram insurgency, which is mainly located in the northeastern region of Nigeria, is a multifaceted ethno-religious conflict (Abdul, 2018). The group, deeply entrenched in extreme views, has systematically targeted individuals from both the Christian and Muslim communities, resulting in extensive forced migration and the loss of human lives. Boko Haram originated with an extreme interpretation of Islam, promoting the enforcement of stringent Islamic law (Sharia) across Nigeria. The organisation views Western education as inconsistent with its understanding of Islam, and its name, "Boko Haram," may be rendered as "Western education is prohibited" in the Hausa language. The group consists mainly of individuals from the Kanuri ethnic group, predominantly in northeastern Nigeria (Abdul, 2018)

This ethno-religious component adds complexity to the conflict as it connects with religious and regional identities. Boko Haram has specifically targeted those who identify as Christians, Muslims who express opposition to its ideology, and those whom it perceives as being connected with the Nigerian state. Assaults on churches, mosques, and religious assemblies exacerbate the ethno-religious character of the war. Boko Haram garnered global recognition for its aggressive assaults on educational institutions, including

Schools and universities. According to Alanamu (2004), the group perceives Western education as a representation of secularism and corruption, highlighting its ethno-religious motives.

#### **Kaduna Religious Conflict:**

Kaduna State has had recurring episodes of ethno-religious turmoil, characterised by confrontations between adherents of the Islamic and Christian faiths. The recurrence of hostilities in this area may be attributed to political manipulation, economic inequality, and historical grudges (Uroko, 2018). The ethno-religious conflict in Kaduna has historical roots, originating from the colonial era and continuing into the post-independence period. Establishing states based on ethno-religious criteria by the British colonial authority laid the foundation for disputes rooted in identity. Historical events such as land disputes, political power battles, and religious conversions have gradually intensified these tensions. Political players in Kaduna have sometimes used these ethno-religious divisions for their political advantage (Uroko, 2018).

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The use of polarising language and behaviours that support certain religious or ethnic factions has played a role in the intensification of conflicts. Politicians using identity politics to strengthen their authority have exacerbated distrust and hostility among different populations. Socio-economic inequalities, often delineated by religious affiliations, have exacerbated the situation. Resource allocation, access to education, and economic prospects have been linked with religious identities, resulting in sentiments of marginalisation and dissatisfaction.

The Kaduna religious conflict has been characterised by instances of violence, including assaults on communities, houses of worship, and retaliatory murders (Mamman, 2019). These occurrences have led to fatalities, the uprooting of communities, and a widespread feeling of uncertainty. Significant conflicts have occurred in locations such as Kaduna City, Zaria, Kafanchan, and other areas within the state (Uroko, 2018).

### **General Tensions in the Middle Belt:**

The Middle Belt area, known as Nigeria's "Middle Belt," has seen many outbreaks of ethno-religious strife. Diverse ethnic groups characterise the Middle Belt region, each possessing unique cultural practices, languages, and historical origins (Abdul, 2018). The presence of several nationalities may result in rivalry for resources, political participation, land disputes, grazing rights, resource distribution, and social influence, which can generate tensions and conflicts. The area exhibits religious heterogeneity, characterised by a substantial coexistence of Christians and Muslims. While this variety enhances the cultural tapestry, it has also caused friction. The presence of conflicting religious ideologies and historical religious disparities plays a significant role in the ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt. The area has a long history of enduring injustices and ongoing conflicts around property ownership. Unresolved concerns stemming from past events, such as colonial legacies and community battles, persistently influence inter-ethnic and inter-religious interactions, contributing to current tensions.

### **Factors that Contribute to the Escalation of Ethno-Religious Conflicts**

Political marginalisation is a significant factor contributing to the intensification of conflicts, especially those based on ethnic or religious identities (Tolu, Lawal, Abe, & Oluwatoyin, 2011). Perceiving political marginalisation due to one's race or religious affiliation sometimes triggers increased tensions and frustrations among varied groups. This mood is worsened by the uneven allocation of resources and opportunities, intensifying the prevalent feeling of unfairness and exclusion among the afflicted groups. Economic inequalities in areas abundant in resources have a crucial role in developing tensions. The battle for dominance over rich resources, such as land and oil, sometimes takes on ethno-religious aspects, intensifying conflicts (Mamman, 2019). The correlation between economic disparities and ethno-religious divisions exacerbates perceived unfairness and exclusion, hence fostering an environment conducive to social upheaval and strife. Moreover, the rivalry for resources, especially those that are limited, such as land, water, or economic prospects, exacerbates ethno-religious conflicts. The competition for authority over these necessary resources coincides with pre-existing ethnic or religious divisions, increasing the complexity of the conflict dynamics (Tolu, Lawal, Abe, & Oluwatoyin, 2011). Addressing the issue of resource rivalry is crucial to discovering sustainable solutions to the underlying problems.

The rise of religious extremism, exemplified by organisations such as Boko Haram, adds complexity to the intricacies of conflict dynamics. The proliferation of extremist ideas exacerbates religious tensions since the process of radicalisation and the relentless pursuit of exclusive religious objectives culminates in acts of violence against perceived enemies (Ojeleye, 2016). The presence of extremists greatly exacerbates the difficulties in attaining peace and stability. Regardless of their authenticity or perception, historical grievances are crucial in fueling the intensification of ethno-religious confrontations. Previous occurrences, unfairness, or conflicts may reemerge, intensifying present strains and nurturing a feeling of shared victimisation or bitterness (Ekhatior, Miller, & Igbiosa, 2021). Recognising and appropriately dealing with past grievances is crucial for achieving long-lasting conflict resolution. Political manipulation exacerbates the situation by using ethno-religious divisions to consolidate power or deflect attention from governance concerns. Employing manipulative political tactics, such as divisive language, increases tensions and exacerbates the division between communities (Mamman, 2019). Examining the impact of political influence is crucial for creating a favourable atmosphere for resolving conflicts. Identity politics refers to the process of politicising ethnic and religious identities, which leads to increased conflicts when political entities ally themselves with specific groups. This alignment often fosters a culture of opposition between groups, increasing rivalry and worsening conflicts (Tolu, Lawal, Abe, & Oluwatoyin, 2011). Addressing identity politics is crucial for fostering inclusion and alleviating tensions.

The absence of interfaith conversation is a significant element that contributes to the development of conflicts, as it fosters a lack of understanding between various religious groups (Nwaomah, 2011). Challenging prejudices, correcting misunderstandings, and encouraging communication are essential for creating an atmosphere that supports peaceful coexistence. The lack of effective dispute resolution procedures and the absence of a strong family structure provide another critical difficulty. Insufficient or inefficient conflict resolution processes enable disagreements to persist and intensify, reducing the possibility of achieving a peaceful conclusion (Ojeleye, 2016). Establishing a basis for permanent peace necessitates the essential task of rebuilding confidence in organisations responsible for managing disputes.

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### **Sustainable Development in Context**

The United Nations defines sustainable development as a comprehensive framework that aims to tackle the interrelated challenges of economic growth, social fairness, and environmental preservation. (Mamman, 2019). These disputes, often based on historical grudges, economic inequities, and political manoeuvring, impede the nation's growth and provide substantial barriers to achieving sustainable development goals. An intricate interweaving of identities marks ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, combining ethnic associations with religious convictions and often resulting in acts of violence and societal turmoil. To comprehend the dynamics of these conflicts in the context of sustainable development, it is necessary to analyse their effects on crucial aspects such as poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, examining sustainable development initiatives might be essential in reducing ethno-religious conflicts and promoting societal unity.

The relationship between sustainable development and ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria prompts necessary inquiries about the distribution and use of resources. The rivalry for resources, worsened by these conflicts, is a substantial obstacle to sustainable development efforts. Limited resources, such as economic possibilities, fertile land, or necessary services, become areas of conflict, intensifying tensions and impeding advancement. To tackle this junction, it is crucial to have a sophisticated comprehension of how resource management may be used to mitigate ethno-religious conflicts and foster sustainable development. Moreover, the influence of ethno-religious conflicts on societal institutions, such as education and healthcare systems, necessitates thoughtful examination within the context of sustainable development discussions. Conflicts often result in the relocation of populations, which in turn hampers their ability to access education and healthcare facilities. Analysing approaches to reconstructing these vital systems within a sustainable development framework is crucial for ensuring long-term stability and advancement.

### **The Influence of Ethno-Religious Conflicts on Sustainable Development**

The economic volatility hinders efforts to attain sustainable development objectives, impeding progress in reducing poverty and diversifying the economy. Cities such as Jos, formerly thriving centres for tourism and commerce, have seen substantial economic deterioration due to recurrent ethno-religious conflicts (Ojeleye, 2016).

1. Conflicts often result in the large-scale displacement of individuals, which hinders sustainable economic development and gives rise to internally displaced persons (IDP) development (Ekhaton, Miller, & Igbinsosa, 2021). The presence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) puts a significant burden on the resources of the communities hosting them. Additionally, the IDPs themselves are at risk of experiencing hardship due to the loss of their homes and means of earning a living.
2. Ethno-religious conflicts often destroy crucial infrastructure vital to development. Violent events that destroy infrastructure impede economic growth and increase the expenses associated with rebuilding infrastructure, such as roads, schools, hospitals, and public utilities, hindering progress towards developmental objectives (Ihuah, 2022).
3. Social Development: The ramifications of ethno-religious conflicts on society are significant. Onebunne (2018) asserts that these disputes give rise to distrust and hostility among many ethnic and religious factions, promoting a fragmented social structure. Conflicts exert pressure on social trust and coherence across diverse ethno-religious groups, resulting in splits that hinder collective endeavours for development (Ojeleye, 2016).
4. The political consequences of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria also present a substantial risk to the country's sustained development. The allocation of resources towards managing and containing disputes diminishes the financial resources that may be allocated to developmental initiatives and public services (Ihuah, 2022). Moreover, the exploitation of ethno-religious emotions for political advantages sustains a pattern of aggression, hindering the democratic process and the necessary stability for long-lasting progress. Ethno-religious conflicts challenge government institutions, leading to an unstable climate that discourages investment and sustainable development efforts (Ekhaton, Miller, & Igbinsosa, 2021).
5. Humanitarian crises arise due to conflicts, resulting in substantial implications for health, education, and general welfare (Abdul, 2018). Allocating resources to dispute resolution diverts funding from crucial development programmes.
6. Environmental sustainability is a fundamental component of sustainable development. Displaced people often relocate to locations with limited resources. This may lead to deforestation, unhygienic conditions, and pressure on water resources. Numerous ethno-religious wars led to the devastation of agricultural areas, either as a deliberate tactic used by the warring factions or as an unintended consequence of the battle. Not only does this pose a danger to the security of our food supply, but it also negatively influences the sustainability of our land.
7. The relationship between ethno-religious conflicts and sustainable development in Nigeria is complex, with education playing a crucial role. Conflicts often interrupt educational institutions, depriving a generation of vital information and abilities (Abdul, 2018). Abdul (2018) further argued that the demolition of schools and relocation of students worsen educational inequalities, impeding the Country's efforts to achieve its educational sustainability objectives.
8. Religious institutions, which have considerable influence on the social structure of Nigeria, are not exempt from the consequences of ethno-religious conflicts. Nwaomah (2011) asserts that conflicts exert pressure on interfaith relations, thereby impeding the capacity of religious institutions to contribute to community development actively. The involvement of religious

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leaders in conflict dynamics hampers their ability to promote peace and sustainable development effectively, consequently reducing their influence in effecting beneficial transformations (Nwaomah, 2011).

### Resolving Conflicts and Promoting Sustainable Development

The attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria relies on promoting peace in the face of ethno-religious conflicts. Proactive conflict prevention techniques, highlighted by interfaith discussion, are essential to fostering tolerance and reducing such disputes (Abdul, 2018). It is necessary to acknowledge religious leaders' vital importance in resolving conflicts and peaceful coexistence (Nwaomah, 2011). Facilitating comprehension between opposing factions, acknowledging their frustrations, and harmonising their objectives might facilitate the discovery of shared interests.

The fundamental foundation for resolving the underlying causes of ethno-religious conflicts is the inclusive policies espoused by Ihuah, (2022). These policies address the inequalities in economic conditions, the exclusion of some groups from political processes, and the fight for resources. Intergovernmental organisations and civil society groups significantly influence the resolution of disputes and guide efforts to achieve peace (Abdul, 2018). Ensuring equal distribution of resources and opportunities requires prioritising inclusive governance (Ekhatior, Miller, & Igbinsosa, 2021).

Community participation and social healing have a crucial role in minimising the development of conflicts and strengthening social connections at the local level (Tolu, Lawal, Abe, & Oluwatoyin, 2011). Enabling communities to engage in decision-making actively is a beneficial strategy for promoting long-lasting. Enhancing the security sector and maintaining the rule of law is crucial for impartially resolving disputes. This entails bolstering security forces' capabilities to manage conflicts, tackling security issues by upholding the principles of legal governance, and establishing responsibility for human rights violations (Tolu, Lawal, Abe, & Oluwatoyin, 2011). Promoting good governance requires addressing political and economic imbalances through an open and inclusive government. Ensuring fair distribution of resources and equal representation are crucial steps to reduce feelings of exclusion. Moreover, it is essential to implement tactics to expand the range of economic activities and generate employment opportunities in regions impacted by violence to combat poverty and foster economic development (Purity. & Rita, 2018). The presence of a varied economy and many employment opportunities enhances the overall stability of areas that are prone to violence. Emphasising education

becomes a fundamental aspect of the recovery process, concentrating on reconstructing educational facilities and guaranteeing universal access to high-quality education. Education promotes personal growth and is pivotal in developing a society's ability to adapt and undergo constructive change.

## V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have wide-ranging implications for sustainable development, including economic advancement, social unity, political steadiness, and educational continuity. Addressing the core causes entirely is crucial due to the cyclical nature of these disputes, which maintains a cycle of underdevelopment.

Academic literature emphasises the significance of taking proactive measures to avert conflicts, implementing inclusivity policies, communicating between different religious groups, and fostering collaborative activities involving many stakeholders. In Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable development objectives, it is crucial to tackle ethno-religious conflicts. This is a moral obligation and a necessary approach to creating an atmosphere that promotes growth and prosperity (Nwaomah, 2011). Using integrated measures, Nigeria may successfully negotiate the intricacies of ethno-religious conflicts and create a more sustainable and peaceful future.

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