



Crises and Empowerment: Integrating Forced Migrants into Social Safety Nets in Gusau Metropolis, Zamfara State, Nigeria

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Abstract

There is a disturbing trajectory unfolding in Nigeria in the manner the state responds and cares for victims of crises such as floods, conflict and other forms of violence. Most often, the state condemns the crises, provides unsustainable temporary palliatives and abandons the victims to their faith. Such is the condition of rural dwellers and residents in the suburbs of Zamfara State who have come under persistent attacks from bandits, kidnappers, farmers and herders' conflict and other forms of violence in the past one decade. This has not only dislocated the rural economy but has also forced people to migrate into the inner city to take refuge with family members, friends and relative and some, in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps. The forced migration of people has not only worsened the rise in number of the urban poor which hitherto stood at 42% but also led to a significant surge in urban population growth. Using in-depth interview, purposive sampling technique and a sample size of 30 respondents, the study found that forced migrants in Gusau Metropolis experience limited awareness and access to social safety nets, socio-economic vulnerability, disrupted livelihoods, and weak institutional integration. It was recommended that Government, NGOs, humanitarian agencies, and community-based organizations should improve sensitization, registration, and outreach, provide sustainable livelihood opportunities, and establish coordinated, regularly updated social protection systems to ensure the effective inclusion of forced migrants in available safety-net programmes.

Keywords: Crises, Empowerment, Migration, Rural, Urban

Introduction

One of the most serious humanitarian and developmental crises many nations of the world are currently facing is forced displacement of people. According to projections from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), 108.4 million people would have been forced to leave their homes worldwide by the end of 2022. In addition to 35.3 million refugees, 5.4 million asylum seekers, and 4.4 million persons who are stateless, around 62.5 million of them are internally displaced (UNHCR, 2023, ILO, 2023).

A further investigation into global disaggregated data on forced migration crisis also reveals a troubling concern as 76% of refugees are in low- and middle-income countries (ILO, 2023). Also emphasizing the above view, Hollifield (2023) affirms that until the war in Ukraine, 86% of forced migrants almost 70 million people were hosted in developing countries. In Nigeria,



the situation is not different. The causes of internal displacement in Nigeria vary significantly across states and regions. In the North-Central region, communal clashes are the predominant driver of displacement, particularly in Benue (86%), Nasarawa (76%), and Plateau (61%) (International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix [IOM DTM], 2022). In contrast, armed banditry and kidnapping are the major causes in the North-West, especially in Zamfara (97%), Katsina (75%), and Sokoto (72%). (IOM DTM, 2022).

According to Saminu et al. (2022), banditry and the increasing struggle for survival among armed groups between 2009 and 2022 contributed significantly to mass displacement in Zamfara State. The activities of bandits, including attacks on communities and the disruption of livelihoods, resulted in a substantial increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the state. Consequently, many displaced persons were forced to seek refuge both in official displacement camps and in communities outside designated camps (Saminu et al., 2022). As of 2022, approximately 720,115 people had been displaced as a result of banditry (Saminu et al. 2022). It has been estimated that 10,326 households were recorded in official camps, while 90,107 households lived outside the camps (Saminu et al. 2022). Similarly, approximately 14,076 female adults were residing in official camps compared with 123,739 outside the camps. Male children accounted for about 23,520 individuals in camps and 193,455 outside camps, while female children numbered approximately 29,183 in camps and 235,709 outside official camps (Saminu et al. 2022).

The scale of displacement demonstrates the severe humanitarian consequences of banditry in Zamfara State, particularly in terms of population displacement, loss of livelihoods, and increased dependence on humanitarian assistance. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often compelled to live in overcrowded camps, informal settlements, host communities, and other precarious conditions, where access to adequate shelter, food, healthcare, education, water and sanitation, and livelihood opportunities remains limited (Ekezie, 2022). Beyond the immediate loss of homes and livelihoods, prolonged displacement disrupts social networks, weakens household resilience, exposes displaced populations to protection risks, and can deepen poverty and dependency United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020). Women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of protracted displacement (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2015).

The Nigerian displacement crisis is therefore not merely a humanitarian concern but also a major development challenge. The continued displacement of large numbers of people places considerable pressure on host communities and public institutions while undermining local economic productivity and human capital development. In many displacement-affected communities, limited employment opportunities, rising living costs, inadequate infrastructure, and competition over scarce resources further compound the vulnerability of displaced populations. Consequently, addressing forced displacement in Nigeria requires approaches that extend beyond emergency relief to include durable solutions, livelihood recovery, social protection, peacebuilding, reconstruction, and the restoration of access to essential services.

Against this background, understanding the magnitude, drivers, and socioeconomic implications of forced displacement in Nigeria is critical to developing effective policies and interventions. Although humanitarian responses have provided vital assistance to millions of displaced persons, the persistence of conflict and insecurity continues to reproduce displacement and constrain the prospects for durable solutions. This situation underscores the need for coordinated interventions that address both the immediate humanitarian needs of displaced populations and the underlying structural factors responsible for their displacement.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives guided the study

- i. Assess the existing social safety nets for forced migrants in Gusau metropolis.
- ii. Identify the socio-economic challenges faced by forced migrants in Gusau metropolis,
- iii. Examine the extent to which forced migrants have been integrated into social safety nets in Gusau metropolis

Literature Review

The Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that refers to the process through which individuals and groups acquire greater control over resources, decisions and circumstances that affect their lives. UNICEF (2017) defines empowerment as increasing the personal, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. This definition suggests that empowerment goes beyond the provision of material assistance; it involves strengthening people's capacity to make choices, exercise agency, participate in decision-making and influence the conditions that shape their wellbeing. In the context of forced migration, empowerment is particularly important because displacement can significantly reduce individuals' control over their livelihoods, resources and social circumstances. Samari et al. (2023) conceptualise refugee empowerment in terms of education, employment, economic support and emotional support. Their study of Afghan refugees in Iran demonstrates that these four dimensions can contribute to overcoming homelessness and improving refugees' capacity to cope with displacement. They therefore suggest that empowerment interventions should not be restricted to humanitarian relief but should also enhance refugees' capabilities and opportunities.

Similarly, Khatib et al. (2020) argue that refugee women's empowerment is closely associated with their ability to participate economically and socially in host communities. Their study highlights the importance of education and entrepreneurial opportunities in improving the integration and empowerment of refugee women. This is significant because refugee women may face multiple and overlapping barriers to employment, economic participation and social integration.

Empowerment also involves participation in decisions affecting displaced populations. Klassen (2022) observes that refugee policy has increasingly shifted from portraying refugees primarily as vulnerable recipients of assistance towards recognising them as actors whose



participation should be incorporated into humanitarian and policy processes. However, she notes that translating this policy shift from vulnerability to empowerment into meaningful participation remains problematic.

Social Safety Programmes

Social safety programmes are an important component of social protection and are designed to protect vulnerable households and individuals against poverty, economic shocks and livelihood insecurity. They commonly include cash transfers, food assistance, subsidies, public works and other non-contributory forms of assistance. For forced migrants, these programmes can provide essential support because displacement frequently results in the loss of livelihoods, assets, income and access to conventional social protection systems.

Collyer et al. (2022) explain that forcibly displaced populations, particularly refugees who cross international borders, have historically experienced considerable exclusion from state-provided social assistance. They further demonstrate that displaced people often depend on informal sources of assistance, including family networks, neighbours, community organisations and faith-based groups. The authors argue that social assistance should therefore be understood more broadly as a potential bridge between humanitarian assistance and longer-term development.

The relationship between migration status and access to social protection is also demonstrated by (Espinoza et al, 2021). Their comparative study of seven Latin American countries found substantial differences in the inclusion of migrants and refugees in social transfer programmes. They observed that access was often influenced by migrants' legal status and that many interventions introduced during the COVID-19 crisis were temporary and selective. Consequently, migrants and refugees could remain excluded from social and economic rights despite experiencing significant socio-economic vulnerability.

Social safety programmes can nevertheless contribute to empowerment when they are connected with productive and livelihood opportunities. Samari et al. (2023), for example, demonstrate that economic assistance, employment and education can form part of an empowerment strategy for refugees. Their findings suggest that assistance becomes more transformative when it is accompanied by opportunities that enable refugees to develop capabilities and become economically self-reliant.

Socio-Economic Challenges of Forced Migrants

Forced migrants experience numerous socio-economic challenges as a consequence of displacement. These challenges include loss of livelihoods, unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, food insecurity, limited access to healthcare and education, social exclusion and insecurity. Displacement can also result in the loss of productive assets, social networks and community support systems, thereby increasing dependence on humanitarian assistance.

Evidence from Nigeria demonstrates the seriousness of these challenges. Amoo et al. (2018) examined the socio-economic and health consequences of displacement resulting from the 2012 floods in Nigeria. Their study of 432 households across 17 IDP camps found that 69.2% of



respondents had lost their means of livelihood. The loss of livelihoods was accompanied by substantial reductions in income and food consumption. The authors also identified overcrowding, poor nutrition, inadequate health infrastructure and exposure to disease as major challenges facing displaced populations.

These challenges are not restricted to disaster-induced displacement. Akpoghome (2016) identifies internal displacement in Nigeria as a significant protection and governance challenge. The author highlights weaknesses in the legal and institutional framework for protecting internally displaced persons and examines the implications of Nigeria's implementation of the Kampala Convention. Such institutional weaknesses can contribute to the vulnerability of displaced populations by limiting their access to effective protection and assistance.

Relationship Between Empowerment, Social Safety Programmes and Forced Migrants

The three concepts are closely interconnected. Socio-economic displacement creates vulnerability; social safety programmes provide protection against that vulnerability; and empowerment provides a pathway through which forced migrants can move from dependence towards greater self-reliance and control over their lives.

The literature indicates that social safety programmes can reduce immediate deprivation, but their longer-term impact depends largely on whether they create opportunities for empowerment. Collyer et al. (2022) argue that social assistance can potentially bridge humanitarian and development responses, while Samari et al. (2023) demonstrate the importance of combining economic assistance with education, employment and emotional support.

At the same time, structural exclusion can limit the effectiveness of such interventions. Espinoza et al. (2021) demonstrate how legal status can determine migrants' access to social protection, while Crawford et al. (2023) show that social exclusion can restrict refugees' participation in economic and social life. This implies that the provision of social safety programmes alone may not be sufficient to empower forced migrants. Programmes need to be accessible, inclusive and designed around the specific socio-economic circumstances of displaced populations. They should ideally combine financial or material assistance with livelihood opportunities, education, skills development, employment, financial inclusion and participation in decision-making.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed empowerment theory to explain the integration of forced migrants into social safety nets in Gusau metropolis. Empowerment Theory is associated with Rappaport (1987) and further developed by Zimmerman (1995, 2000). The theory explains how individuals and communities can acquire greater control over resources, decisions, and conditions affecting their lives. Drawing on the earlier work of Freire (1970) on critical consciousness and liberation, the theory views disadvantaged populations as active agents rather than passive recipients of assistance. Its major assumptions are that empowerment involves access to resources, meaningful participation, critical awareness, decision-making, and increased control over personal and



collective circumstances. Applied to forced migrants in Zamfara State, the theory suggests that effective integration into social safety-net programmes should extend beyond immediate relief to improve access to information, social protection, livelihood opportunities, institutional participation, and productive resources, thereby strengthening migrants' agency, self-reliance, and capacity to improve their socio-economic conditions.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. The reason for the adoption of this approach was to enable the research gain in-depth insights into forced migrants' socio-economic conditions whether they have been integrated to social safety nets or not.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling technique was adopted for the selection of both the study areas and participants. The researcher used purposive sampling method to forced migrants, government agencies and non- governmental organization have knowledge and experience about displacement and social safety nets. The criteria used for selection of participants was based on the willingness to participate in the study and have been living in IDP camps for the past 3 years with direct experience of living in IDP camps.

S/N	Participants	Number selected
1	Forced Migrants	22
2	Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs	2
3	Non-Governmental Organization	6
Total		30

Data Collection Techniques and Analysis

In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 forced migrants while (6) key informant interviews were conducted with government officials and non-governmental organizations on displacement and social safety network. All responses were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis as prescribed Clarke and Braun (2005).

Findings

The interview data were analyzed thematically to share or identify the emerging themes or patterns from the participants' answers on integration of forced migrants into social safety nets. Among the themes that were identified include limited awareness and access to social safety nets, socio-economic vulnerability and livelihood challenges among forced migrants and non-integration of forced migrants into social safety nets in Gusau metropolis

Theme 1: Limited Awareness and Access to Social Safety Nets



The findings revealed that many forced migrants were not aware of the social safety-net programmes available to them, while others had limited information about where and how to access such support. Although government and humanitarian organizations may provide various forms of assistance, participants indicated that information about these interventions does not always reach forced migrant communities.

One participant explained: “We hear that government or organizations give assistance, but we do not know where to go or who to meet to get it.” (Male, 35, Damba, 15th October, 2022).

Another participant stated: “Nobody has explained to us what social safety-net programmes are available. We only hear about assistance when it has already been distributed.” (Female, 19, Sabon Gida, 20th October, 2022)

On the part of government agencies, there are many social safety programmes how to find displaced person to benefit is a huge challenge.

One of the difficulties we face is identifying and registering all the people who need assistance. Some of the displaced persons are scattered within communities, and this makes it difficult to reach them with information and support (Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, 5th November, 2022)

Non -governmental agencies share the same opinion:

We have observed that some migrants do not know which organization is responsible for providing particular assistance. They may know that support is available but do not know where to register or how to access it (NGO, 10th November, 2022).

The findings indicate an awareness and accessibility gap rather than an outright absence of social safety nets. Although government and NGOs have established various interventions, inadequate dissemination of information and difficulties in reaching dispersed forced migrant populations limit their ability to benefit from available support.

Theme 2: Socio-economic vulnerability and livelihood challenges among forced migrants

The findings revealed that forced migrants experienced significant socio-economic vulnerabilities and livelihood challenges as a result of displacement. Participants reported difficulties in securing stable sources of income, accessing employment opportunities, meeting basic household needs, and maintaining sustainable livelihoods. Displacement often resulted in the loss of homes, productive assets, businesses, farmland, and other sources of livelihood, thereby increasing migrants’ dependence on family members, government assistance, humanitarian organizations, and informal sources of support.

One participant explained

Before we were displaced, I had my own farm and could provide food for my family. Since we came here, I have no land to farm and finding work is not easy.



Sometimes we depend on people to give us food.” (Male, 42, Lalan, 10th November, 2022).

Another participant stated:

Life has become very difficult because there is no regular work. I take any small job I can find, but the money is not enough to feed my children and pay for other needs.” (Male, 31, Marari, 26 th October, 2022).

A male participant explained: “We want to start something that can bring us income, but we do not have the money to begin. Sometimes we hear about loans or business support, but we do not know how to access them.” (Female, 27, Damba 7th October, 2022).

From the perspective of government agencies, the socio-economic challenges of forced migrants were also recognized as a major concern. One government official noted:

Many displaced persons lost their livelihoods when they were forced to leave their communities. Our challenge is not only providing immediate relief but also helping them to become economically independent. Limited resources and the large number of displaced persons make this difficult.” (Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, 8th November, 2022).

Non-governmental organizations similarly identified livelihood insecurity as a major challenge among forced migrant populations. An NGO representative explained:

Most of the displaced persons we work with have lost their major sources of income. Some were farmers, traders, or artisans before displacement. They need more than food and temporary assistance; they need livelihood opportunities, vocational training, access to capital, and other forms of economic support to rebuild their lives.” (NGO, 1st November, 2022).

The findings therefore indicate that the socio-economic vulnerability of forced migrants is closely associated with the disruption and loss of livelihood opportunities following displacement. While humanitarian assistance provides important short-term relief, such support may not adequately address the long-term economic insecurity experienced by displaced populations. The inability to access land, employment, credit, markets, productive assets, and sustainable income-generating opportunities increases dependence on external assistance and exposes forced migrants to poverty and other forms of socio-economic deprivation.

Theme 1: Non-Integration of Forced Migrants into Social Safety Nets in Gusau Metropolis



The findings revealed that many forced migrants in Gusau Metropolis were not adequately integrated into existing social safety-net programmes. Although government agencies and non-governmental organizations have established different forms of social protection and humanitarian assistance, many forced migrants reported that they were either excluded from these programmes or faced difficulties accessing them. The situation was attributed to factors such as lack of awareness, inadequate information, difficulties with registration, limited identification of eligible beneficiaries, and the dispersed nature of forced migrant populations within host communities.

One participant explained: “We hear that government or organizations give assistance, but we do not know where to go or who to meet to get it.” (Female, 18, Damba, 23rd October, 2022).

Another participant stated: “Nobody has explained to us what social safety-net programmes are available. We only hear about assistance when it has already been distributed.” (Male, Sabon Gida, 29h October, 2022).

“One of the difficulties we face is identifying and registering all the people who need assistance. Some of the displaced persons are scattered within communities, and this makes it difficult to reach them with information and support.” (Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, 5th November, 2022).

Non-governmental organizations shared similar concerns regarding the limited integration of forced migrants into available social protection programmes. An NGO representative stated:

We have observed that some migrants do not know which organization is responsible for providing particular assistance. They may know that support is available but do not know where to register or how to access it.” (NGO, 10th November, 2022).

The findings therefore indicate that the non-integration of forced migrants into social safety nets is characterized by both accessibility and institutional inclusion gaps. While social safety-net programmes and humanitarian interventions exist, many forced migrants are unable to benefit from them because of inadequate dissemination of information, difficulties in identification and registration, and challenges in reaching migrants who are dispersed within host communities. Consequently, the existence of social safety-net programmes does not necessarily translate into effective inclusion of forced migrants.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that forced migrants in Gusau Metropolis face interconnected challenges of limited awareness and access to social safety nets, socio-economic vulnerability, and inadequate integration into existing social protection programmes. Displacement has disrupted their livelihoods and increased dependence on external assistance, while inadequate information, registration difficulties, and limited institutional outreach prevent many from benefiting from available interventions. The situation therefore calls for a more inclusive and coordinated approach that combines social protection with sustainable livelihood support and improved identification and outreach mechanisms.



Recommendations

- i. Government and NGOs should conduct sensitization meetings, door-to-door mobilization, and mobile registration exercises to ensure that forced migrants receive information and are included in available social safety-net programmes.
- ii. Government and humanitarian organizations should move beyond short-term relief by providing vocational training, start-up grants, microcredit, agricultural support, and employment opportunities tailored to the skills and previous livelihoods of forced migrants.
- iii. Government agencies, NGOs, and community-based organizations should develop a coordinated mechanism for integrating forced migrants into existing social safety-net programmes. Beneficiary databases should be regularly updated and linked across relevant agencies to reduce exclusion and duplication.

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