

An Assessment of Sustainable Development Goal 16 in Northwest Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study assesses the progress made toward the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The objective is to examine the extent to which the region has advanced in promoting peace, strengthening justice systems, and building accountable institutions, while identifying the major challenges that continue to hinder implementation. The study is anchored on the principles of Sustainable Development Theory, which emphasize the interconnectedness of peace, security, good governance, and sustainable development. A qualitative research approach was adopted, relying on secondary data obtained from official government reports, publications of international organizations, policy documents, and relevant academic literature. Data were analysed through descriptive and thematic techniques to evaluate trends and patterns relating to security, justice, governance, and institutional performance within the region. The findings reveal that although several policy interventions and security initiatives have been introduced, Northwest Nigeria continues to face serious challenges, including widespread banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, population displacement, weak justice delivery mechanisms, corruption, and limited institutional effectiveness. The study further finds that persistent insecurity has negatively affected socio-economic development and weakened public confidence in state institutions. The study recommends strengthening security governance, enhancing collaboration among federal, state, and local institutions, improving access to justice, intensifying anti-corruption measures, investing in community-based peacebuilding initiatives, and promoting greater institutional accountability and transparency. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for achieving SDG 16 but also for fostering sustainable development, stability, and inclusive growth in Northwest Nigeria.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goal, Northwest, Insecurity, Poverty, Nigeria

1.0 Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which focuses on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, was adopted in 2015 as part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The goal underscores the importance of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at every level of governance. Through its various targets, SDG 16 seeks to reduce all forms of violence, strengthen the rule of law, combat corruption, and enhance institutional effectiveness and accountability (Anenene & Oyewole, 2020; World Bank, 2022). As such, it occupies a central place within the broader sustainable development framework, recognizing that peace, security, justice, and good governance are indispensable foundations for social and economic progress.

In Nigeria, however, the realization of SDG 16 has remained a significant challenge. Despite various policy initiatives and institutional reforms, the country continues to grapple with persistent insecurity, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and governance deficits. These challenges are particularly pronounced in Northwest Nigeria, which comprises the seven states of Kano, Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Jigawa, with a combined population of approximately 35.8 million people. Over the past decade, the region has experienced a dramatic deterioration in security conditions, becoming what some scholars describe as a “safe haven” for multiple armed groups operating across rural and urban communities (Ojewale, 2021). The resulting insecurity has generated one of the most severe human security crises in contemporary Nigeria.

The scale of the crisis is reflected in both human and developmental costs. Conservative estimates indicate that approximately 8,300 people lost their lives to banditry-related violence in Northwest Nigeria between 2013 and 2022, while thousands of others were subjected to kidnappings, displacement, and other forms of insecurity (Ojo et al., 2023). The region has also become the epicentre of kidnapping-for-ransom activities in the country, accounting for nearly 62 percent of all reported kidnapping incidents nationwide since 2019. Furthermore, between 2019 and 2024, an estimated 200,000 individuals were internally displaced as a result of banditry and related violent activities (Ewang, 2024). Beyond the immediate human suffering, this insecurity has undermined livelihoods, disrupted education and economic activities, weakened social cohesion, and posed serious threats to democratic governance and sustainable development in the region (Brenner, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the attainment of SDG 16 targets in Northwest Nigeria remains a daunting task. Key objectives such as reducing violence and related deaths (Target 16.1), promoting the rule of law and equal access to justice (Target 16.3), and developing effective, accountable, and transparent institutions (Target 16.6) continue to face substantial obstacles. The persistence of insecurity, governance challenges, and institutional weaknesses raises important questions regarding the extent of progress made toward achieving these targets and the factors hindering their realization.

It is within this context that this study assesses the implementation of SDG 16 in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on official reports, policy documents, empirical studies, and other relevant secondary sources, the paper critically examines developments relating to peace, security, justice, and institutional governance across the region. By synthesizing available evidence and recent scholarly literature, the study evaluates key indicators of progress while identifying the structural and operational challenges that continue to impede the achievement of SDG 16.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 signaled a global commitment to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. Central to this agenda is SDG16, which emphasizes the promotion of peace, access to justice, accountable institutions, and effective governance as essential foundations for sustainable development. More than a decade after its adoption, however, progress toward achieving SDG16 remains uneven across many developing

countries, particularly in contexts affected by persistent conflict, institutional fragility, and socioeconomic deprivation (United Nations, 2015).

Nigeria presents a significant case in this regard. Despite various policy interventions and security initiatives, the country continues to face widespread governance challenges, including corruption, weak institutional accountability, limited access to justice, and declining public trust in state institutions. These challenges are particularly pronounced in Northwest Nigeria, where recurring banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, and the growing influence of extremist networks have generated a prolonged security crisis (Adamaagashi et al., 2024). Beyond the immediate loss of lives and property, these conditions have disrupted economic activities, weakened social cohesion, displaced communities, and strained already fragile governance structures.

The persistence of insecurity in the region raises important questions about the extent to which the objectives of SDG16 are being realized. While existing studies have extensively examined the causes and consequences of banditry, terrorism, poverty, and governance failures in Northwest Nigeria, much of the literature treats these issues as separate phenomena (Essoh, 2024). Consequently, there remains limited empirical understanding of how insecurity, justice deficits, and institutional weaknesses collectively affect progress toward SDG16. This fragmentation in the literature makes it difficult to assess whether current governance and security responses are addressing the broader developmental dimensions embedded within the goal.

Furthermore, available national assessments of SDG implementation often provide aggregated findings that obscure the distinctive realities of conflict-affected regions (Ejiogu, 2024). As a result, there is insufficient evidence on the specific challenges and opportunities associated with implementing SDG16 in Northwest Nigeria, where the interaction between insecurity and institutional fragility is particularly acute. This gap is significant because effective policy responses require a contextual understanding of how local security dynamics influence peacebuilding, justice delivery, and institutional performance.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the progress, challenges, and prospects of SDG16 in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. By examining the relationship between conflict, governance, justice, and institutional effectiveness, the study seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of SDG16 implementation within one of Nigeria's most vulnerable regions. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on sustainable development, peacebuilding, and governance while offering insights that may inform policy interventions aimed at strengthening peace, justice, and institutional resilience.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 SDG16, Governance, and Institutional Development

The aspiration of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) is founded on the understanding that peace, justice, and strong institutions are not only desirable outcomes of development but also essential conditions for achieving sustainable progress (Anenene & Oyewole, 2020; Ugwuda, 2023). The relationship between governance and development is mutually reinforcing: societies characterized by stability, accountability, and justice are more likely to experience economic

growth, social cohesion, and poverty reduction. Conversely, environments marked by violence, corruption, and weak institutions often struggle to achieve meaningful development outcomes (Ugwuda, 2023; Afrobarometer, 2024).

Within the SDG16 framework, the rule of law and public confidence in institutions occupy a central position. However, available evidence suggests that these foundations remain fragile in Nigeria. According to Afrobarometer (2024), public trust in major state institutions is both low and declining, averaging approximately 30 percent nationally. Religious leaders remain the only institutional actors trusted by a majority of citizens, with about 60 percent expressing confidence in them. By contrast, trust in security institutions is considerably weaker, with only 15 percent of Nigerians reporting confidence in the police. This pattern reflects a broader crisis of institutional legitimacy and public confidence.

The scholarly literature reinforces these concerns. Studies consistently identify persistent weaknesses within Nigeria's governance and justice systems that undermine efforts to realize SDG16 objectives (Adaba & Boio, 2024). Ugwuda (2023), for example, observes that corruption, administrative inefficiency, unfair judicial practices, case backlogs, and limited access to justice continue to constrain the effective administration of criminal justice in Nigeria. These challenges weaken the rule of law and erode citizens' confidence in state institutions. Similarly, research by Ugoani (2017) and Akande (2022) links leadership failures, financial mismanagement, and inadequate accountability mechanisms to growing public dissatisfaction, which in turn contributes to social unrest and criminal activities. Collectively, these studies suggest that meaningful progress toward SDG16 in Nigeria depends on comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening governance structures, enhancing accountability, and improving access to justice (Anenene & Oyewole, 2020; Ugwuda, 2023).

2.2 Conflict Dynamics and Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria

The Northwest geopolitical zone has emerged as one of the most significant sites of insecurity in contemporary Nigeria, attracting increasing scholarly attention. Existing studies characterize the region's instability as a complex interaction between organized banditry and violent extremism, often described as a "banditry–terrorism nexus" (Ojewale, 2021). While rural banditry has long been a feature of the region's security landscape, recent developments indicate growing connections between criminal groups and jihadist networks operating across the broader Sahel and Lake Chad Basin regions.

Researchers have noted that extremist organizations, including factions associated with Boko Haram and the Islamic State, increasingly view Northwest Nigeria as a strategic corridor linking conflict zones in the Lake Chad region with those in the wider Sahel (Barnett, 2022). This evolving security environment has intensified the scale and complexity of violence across the region. High-profile incidents, such as the mass abduction of schoolchildren in Kankara, Katsina State, in 2020, demonstrated operational patterns that observers linked to Boko Haram-style tactics (BBC, 2020). Beyond such headline-grabbing events, communities continue to experience widespread displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and severe humanitarian consequences. According to a report by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR, 2024), more than 25,000 children have been orphaned in Zamfara State alone as a result of persistent bandit attacks.

The literature further emphasizes that insecurity in Northwest Nigeria cannot be understood solely through a military or security lens. Rather, it is deeply embedded within broader socioeconomic and governance challenges. Scholars argue that poverty, inequality, weak state presence, and limited access to public services have created conditions that facilitate the expansion of armed groups and criminal networks (Ojewale, 2021; Brenner, 2021). In many rural communities, the absence of effective state institutions has diminished public confidence in government and weakened local resilience against violence.

2.3 Poverty, Marginalization, and the Governance–Security Nexus

A recurring theme within the literature is the close relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and insecurity in Northwest Nigeria. Several states within the region, including Kaduna, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Jigawa, rank among the poorest in the country (Ukpe & Aniogolu, 2022). High levels of poverty, combined with unemployment, low educational attainment, and limited economic opportunities, have contributed to widespread social vulnerability.

Particularly significant is the region's large youth population, many of whom face limited prospects for meaningful employment and social mobility. Scholars argue that these structural conditions create fertile ground for recruitment into armed groups, bandit networks, and other forms of organized criminality. As a result, poverty and insecurity often reinforce one another in a cyclical manner: insecurity disrupts economic activities and development efforts, while persistent deprivation increases the appeal of illicit livelihoods and violent mobilization (Okijie et al., 2023).

From an SDG16 perspective, these realities highlight the interconnected nature of peace, justice, and development. Weak institutions not only struggle to address insecurity effectively but also fail to provide the social and economic foundations necessary for long-term stability. Consequently, governance deficits and socioeconomic exclusion remain central drivers of conflict across the region.

2.4 Research Gap and Contribution of the Study

The existing body of literature presents Northwest Nigeria as a region characterized by chronic insecurity, governance weaknesses, and significant developmental challenges. While numerous studies have examined the dynamics of banditry, terrorism, poverty, and institutional failure, relatively few have systematically assessed these issues through the lens of SDG16. Existing research often addresses security challenges and governance concerns separately, leaving limited understanding of how these factors collectively shape progress toward the goal of promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions.

This study addresses that gap by integrating conflict and security analyses with the SDG16 framework. Building on earlier scholarship (Anenene & Oyewole, 2020; Ugwuda, 2023), the paper focuses specifically on Northwest Nigeria and evaluates the extent to which conflict, justice-related challenges, and institutional weaknesses have influenced progress toward SDG16 between 2015, the baseline year for the Sustainable Development Goals, and 2025. Through this approach,

the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and constraints facing the implementation of SDG16 in one of Nigeria's most conflict-affected regions.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Sustainable Development Theory

2.5.1 Origins and Proponents of Sustainable Development Theory

Sustainable Development Theory emerged as a response to growing concerns about the environmental, social, and economic consequences of conventional development models that prioritized economic growth without adequate consideration of ecological sustainability and social equity. The theory gained international prominence through the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, whose landmark report, *Our Common Future* (1987), defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

The intellectual foundations of Sustainable Development Theory can be traced to the contributions of several scholars and international institutions. Barbara Ward and René Dubos were among the early advocates of linking environmental protection with development concerns, particularly in their influential work *Only One Earth* (1972). Herman Daly further advanced the theory through his concept of ecological economics, emphasizing that economic activities must operate within environmental limits. Similarly, Robert Costanza contributed significantly to understanding the relationship between ecological systems and economic sustainability. At the international level, organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank have played central roles in promoting sustainable development as a global policy framework.

The theory is built on three interconnected pillars: economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability. Economic sustainability focuses on generating long-term prosperity and livelihood opportunities. Social sustainability emphasizes social justice, inclusion, equality, peace, and human well-being (Hóðiné Hernáði, 2023). Environmental sustainability seeks to ensure the responsible use and preservation of natural resources for present and future generations. Contemporary interpretations of the theory increasingly recognize governance and institutional effectiveness as a fourth pillar, reflecting the importance of accountable institutions in achieving sustainable development goals.

2.5.2 Relevance of Sustainable Development Theory to the Study

Sustainable Development Theory provides a suitable framework for examining the challenges and prospects of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The theory recognizes that development cannot be achieved solely through economic growth; rather, it requires the existence of peaceful societies, access to justice, effective institutions, and inclusive governance structures. These principles align directly with the objectives of SDG16, which seeks to promote peace, justice, and strong institutions as essential foundations for sustainable development.

The relevance of the theory to this study lies in its emphasis on the interconnected nature of peace, governance, and development. In Northwest Nigeria, persistent insecurity arising from banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, and violent extremism has undermined social stability and weakened public institutions. Sustainable Development Theory suggests that such conditions create significant obstacles to development because violence disrupts economic activities, limits educational opportunities, discourages investment, and weakens citizens' trust in government institutions. Consequently, the failure to achieve peace and institutional effectiveness directly affects broader development outcomes.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of inclusive governance and participatory decision-making. SDG16 emphasizes accountable institutions and citizen participation in governance processes. This is particularly relevant to Northwest Nigeria, where issues of political exclusion, weak state presence, and governance deficits have contributed to recurring conflicts and public dissatisfaction. Sustainable Development Theory therefore helps explain why strengthening institutions, promoting transparency, and enhancing community participation are critical components of achieving long-term peace and development in the region.

The theory also underscores the relationship between poverty, inequality, and insecurity. High levels of unemployment, economic deprivation, and social exclusion in Northwest Nigeria have created conditions that facilitate recruitment into criminal networks and armed groups. From the perspective of Sustainable Development Theory, addressing these structural challenges is essential for creating sustainable peace and reducing conflict. This supports the argument that SDG16 cannot be pursued in isolation but must be integrated with other development goals relating to poverty reduction, education, economic empowerment, and social inclusion.

Sustainable Development Theory provides a holistic framework for understanding why progress toward SDG16 remains limited in Northwest Nigeria. It demonstrates that peace, justice, and strong institutions are not merely desirable outcomes but fundamental prerequisites for sustainable development. Therefore, the theory offers a useful lens through which to analyze the impact of insecurity, governance challenges, and institutional weaknesses on the implementation of SDG16 in the region.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the progress, challenges, and prospects of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The case study design is particularly appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex relationship between insecurity, governance, justice, and institutional performance within a specific geographical and political context. Data for the study were obtained exclusively from secondary sources. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, policy documents, reports from international organizations, newspaper reports, and publications from research institutes focusing on security, governance, and development in Nigeria. Particular attention was given to literature addressing conflict dynamics, institutional effectiveness, access to justice, and public governance in Northwest Nigeria. To enrich the analysis, the study also examined publicly available statements, assessments, and commentaries from government officials, security analysts, development practitioners, and civil society

organizations. Reports and analyses produced by international organizations and policy institutions provided additional insights into the evolving security and governance landscape of the region. Quantitative evidence was drawn from established conflict-monitoring and humanitarian databases, including reports produced by organizations such as UNHCR, ACAPS, and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). These sources were used to identify patterns and trends relating to violence, displacement, insecurity, and humanitarian conditions across the study period. The collected materials were analyzed using thematic analysis. Information from the various sources was organized into three broad themes: security and violence, justice and law enforcement, and governance and institutional effectiveness. These themes were then examined in relation to relevant SDG16 targets, including the reduction of violence (Target 16.1), the promotion of equal access to justice (Target 16.3), and the development of effective, accountable, and transparent institutions (Target 16.6). This approach enabled a systematic assessment of the extent to which conditions in Northwest Nigeria have advanced or hindered progress toward the realization of SDG16. By drawing on diverse sources of evidence and integrating security, governance, and development perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges confronting SDG16 implementation in Northwest Nigeria. The use of multiple data sources also enhances the credibility of the findings through triangulation, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of developments within the region.

3.1 Security and Violence (SDG 16.1–16.2)

Northwest Nigeria has experienced a dramatic escalation in insecurity and violent conflict since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. What began as localized criminal activities has evolved into a complex security crisis characterized by widespread banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, cattle rustling, sexual violence, and targeted killings. Rural communities across the region have been particularly affected, living under persistent threats from heavily armed groups that operate with increasing sophistication and impunity (Brenner, 2021; UNIDIR, 2024). The scale of the violence is reflected in available data. Between 2013 and 2022, an estimated 8,300 people lost their lives as a result of bandit attacks in Northwest Nigeria (Kleffmann et al., 2024). Similarly, between 2019 and early 2024, the region accounted for 9,527 kidnapping cases, representing approximately 62 percent of all recorded abductions nationwide, with the majority attributed to bandit groups (Ojo et al., 2023). Given the limited reporting mechanisms in many rural areas, the actual figures are likely considerably higher. Furthermore, violence in the region is often intertwined with ethnic and communal tensions, particularly between farming and pastoral communities. Retaliatory attacks involving Hausa farming groups, Fulani herders, and local vigilante formations have contributed to enduring cycles of violence and revenge (Babatunde, 2018).

The persistence and expansion of insecurity in Northwest Nigeria can be traced to several interconnected factors. A significant concern is the growing relationship between bandit groups and extremist organizations. Ojewale (2021) identifies what he describes as a “banditry-terrorism nexus,” highlighting the increasing collaboration between criminal networks and jihadist movements operating across the Sahel region. Extremist organizations, including Islamic State affiliates such as ISGS and JNIM, as well as Boko Haram splinter groups like ISWAP, have reportedly used parts of Northwest Nigeria as strategic transit routes and operational sanctuaries. The widely publicized abduction of schoolchildren in Kankara in 2020 demonstrated this

convergence, as evidence suggested operational links between local bandits and Boko Haram elements (The Street Journal, 2020). These developments indicate that insecurity in the Northwest extends beyond conventional criminality and increasingly overlaps with broader regional security threats.

Geographical and institutional factors have further compounded the problem. The region's extensive and largely porous borders, particularly the approximately 1,497-kilometre frontier with Niger Republic, facilitate the movement of armed actors, illicit goods, and small arms across national boundaries (Enor et al., 2019). Vast forest reserves provide safe havens for criminal groups, enabling them to establish camps beyond the reach of security agencies. At the same time, Nigeria's security architecture has been stretched by multiple conflicts occurring simultaneously across the country. The prolonged insurgency in the Northeast, communal conflicts in the Middle Belt, and separatist agitations in the Southeast have placed considerable demands on military and police resources. Consequently, security personnel have often been deployed across numerous theatres of conflict, limiting the state's capacity to effectively police and secure Northwest Nigeria. As Ojewale (2021) observes, Nigerian security forces were deployed in "no fewer than 30 states" by 2021, creating conditions in which armed groups could operate with relatively little resistance. The resulting security vacuum has allowed bandit networks to consolidate their influence and expand their activities across the region.

The humanitarian consequences of this insecurity have been profound and far-reaching. Violent attacks have forced large numbers of people to abandon their homes and livelihoods. As of 2024, nearly 200,000 individuals remained internally displaced across the Northwest, while many others had sought refuge in neighbouring countries (Amnesty International, 2025). Displacement has disrupted social structures, weakened local economies, and increased vulnerability among affected populations. Educational outcomes have also suffered significantly. Repeated attacks on schools and the fear of abduction have discouraged both teachers and students from attending educational institutions, particularly in rural communities. According to available estimates, more than one-third of school-age children in Zamfara State were out of school in 2019 due largely to insecurity and the inability of teachers to safely access affected areas (Suleiman, 2024). Such trends pose serious challenges to long-term human development and social stability.

The economic impact of the crisis has been equally severe. Widespread insecurity has undermined agricultural production, which remains the primary source of livelihood for most households in the region (Ogundare, 2024). Farmers have been forced to abandon their lands, while many communities face restrictions on movement due to fear of attacks. In Zamfara State alone, more than three billion Naira has reportedly been paid as ransom to kidnappers, diverting scarce resources from productive economic activities. Agricultural output has also declined sharply; between 2014 and 2020, the production of staple crops in Zamfara fell by more than 60 percent, contributing to rising food insecurity, poverty, and malnutrition across affected communities (Bush & Noura, 2023). These economic disruptions have created a vicious cycle in which poverty fuels insecurity, while insecurity further deepens poverty.

Women and girls have borne a disproportionate share of the burden associated with the conflict. Evidence suggests that gender-based violence has increased considerably in areas affected by banditry, with rape, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage frequently employed as tools of

intimidation and social control (Usman et al., 2022). Beyond the immediate physical and psychological consequences, such violations contribute to the erosion of community cohesion and further marginalize already vulnerable groups.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that the security situation in Northwest Nigeria has deteriorated substantially during the SDG implementation period. Rather than witnessing progress toward the targets of SDG 16.1 and 16.2, which seek to significantly reduce all forms of violence and protect vulnerable populations, the region has experienced an expansion of armed violence, criminality, displacement, and human suffering. The persistence of these challenges underscores the gap between the aspirations of SDG 16 and the realities confronting communities across Northwest Nigeria, highlighting the urgent need for more comprehensive, coordinated, and locally responsive security interventions.

3.2 Policing, Justice, and Rule of Law (SDG 16.3, 16.10)

A central objective of SDG 16 is the promotion of equal access to justice and the development of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. In Northwest Nigeria, however, the realities of policing and justice administration reveal significant gaps between these aspirations and lived experiences. The region continues to grapple with weak law enforcement capacity, limited access to justice, and declining public confidence in state institutions. These challenges have undermined efforts to establish the rule of law and have contributed to the persistence of insecurity across the region.

One of the most pressing concerns is the limited operational capacity of the police. Law enforcement agencies in Northwest Nigeria remain severely under-resourced despite the growing complexity of security threats. Abraham and Sakariyau (2023) observe that “the inability of the police to control banditry in NW Nigeria is a result of inadequate operational facilities, inadequate personnel, lack of police–public partnership, and issues with interagency partners”. This assessment highlights the multidimensional nature of policing challenges in the region. Many states lack essential security infrastructure, including armored vehicles, surveillance equipment, helicopters, and reliable communication systems. In addition, the recruitment, training, and deployment of personnel have not kept pace with the rapidly evolving security environment. As a result, communities frequently report delayed responses to distress calls, while in some instances security agencies fail to respond altogether. Such shortcomings have weakened the state’s ability to protect lives and property and have created opportunities for criminal groups to operate with relative impunity (Asangausung et al., 2024).

The institutional weaknesses of the police are further compounded by broader governance challenges. Analysts at Brookings attribute the escalation of violence in the region partly to “weak institutional capacity within the police,” noting that ineffective policing is often reinforced by deep socio-economic inequalities and widespread citizen alienation. In contexts where citizens perceive state institutions as absent, ineffective, or indifferent, trust in government authority tends to erode. Consequently, communities become more likely to seek alternative forms of protection and justice outside formal legal frameworks (Abraham and Sakariyau, 2025).

Public trust in the police has reached particularly low levels in Nigeria. According to Afrobarometer data, only 15 percent of Nigerians express trust in the police force (Oresanya et al., 2025), making it one of the least trusted public institutions in the country. This distrust is rooted largely in perceptions of corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability. For many citizens, interactions with law enforcement are often associated with extortion, abuse of power, or ineffective service delivery. Such perceptions have weakened the legitimacy of policing institutions and reduced citizens' willingness to cooperate with security agencies in addressing criminal activities.

The consequences of this trust deficit are evident in the increasing prevalence of informal and extra-legal forms of justice. Investigations by DW Africa highlight the growing incidence of "jungle justice," whereby suspected criminals are punished or executed by mobs without recourse to formal legal procedures (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2019). Reports indicate that more than 555 individuals have been killed through mob violence in Nigeria over the past decade. The persistence of such practices reflects public frustration with the perceived inability of the criminal justice system to deliver timely and effective justice. As one analyst explains, when "law enforcement agents are seen to be restricted...to the capital cities...people tend to have a sense that the government is far away and they can do whatever they like" (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2019). This observation is particularly relevant to many rural communities in Northwest Nigeria, where state presence is often weak and access to formal justice institutions remains limited.

In response to these deficiencies, local communities have increasingly relied on vigilante organizations such as Yan Sakai and Yan Bindiga to provide security. While these groups have, in some cases, assisted in protecting communities against bandit attacks, their operations frequently occur outside established legal frameworks (Okoli, 2024). The absence of effective oversight has raised concerns regarding human rights violations, arbitrary punishments, and extrajudicial killings. Consequently, while vigilante groups may temporarily fill security gaps, they can also contribute to the erosion of legal norms and due process protections.

Scholars and policy practitioners have proposed several reforms aimed at strengthening justice delivery and restoring public confidence in state institutions. Ugwuda (2023) argues that achieving the objectives of SDG 16 requires "increased funding, improved capacity building, and a multi-stakeholder approach" to criminal justice reform in Nigeria. Such reforms would involve not only improving police capacity but also enhancing collaboration among law enforcement agencies, judicial institutions, civil society organizations, and local communities. Similarly, Africa advocates for comprehensive police reform and greater decentralization of policing structures, arguing that state and local authorities should be empowered with the resources necessary to organize and manage security operations more effectively (Zondi, 2026). The underlying assumption is that locally responsive and accountable policing structures would improve service delivery and reduce the sense of impunity that often fuels vigilante justice.

Human rights organizations have also emphasized the importance of strengthening accountability mechanisms within the justice system. Amnesty International and other advocacy groups have called for thorough investigations and prosecutions of mob killings and other forms of extrajudicial violence as a means of restoring confidence in the rule of law (Amnesty International, 2023).

Without visible accountability, public perceptions of injustice are likely to persist, further undermining institutional legitimacy.

Despite these recommendations, progress has remained limited. Structural challenges continue to affect the administration of justice across the region. Correctional facilities remain overcrowded, while a significant proportion of inmates are held in prolonged pre-trial detention. Court proceedings are often delayed by procedural bottlenecks, inadequate funding, and shortages of judicial personnel (Haque, 2025). Consequently, many cases remain unresolved for years, contradicting SDG 16's vision of accessible, timely, and effective justice for all.

Overall, the evidence suggests that policing and justice institutions in Northwest Nigeria remain far from achieving the aspirations outlined in SDG 16.3 and SDG 16.10. Communities continue to face significant barriers in accessing justice, while weak institutional capacity, low public trust, and the persistence of extrajudicial practices undermine the rule of law. In many instances, citizens experience a dual burden: the violence and abuses perpetrated by criminal groups on the one hand, and the inadequacies of state institutions on the other (Ezechi & Ifedi, 2022). Addressing these challenges will require sustained institutional reforms, greater investment in justice-sector capacity, and renewed efforts to rebuild trust between citizens and the state.

3.3 Governance and Institutional Challenges of Sustainable Development Goal 16

The achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 depends heavily on the existence of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. In Northwest Nigeria, however, institutional weaknesses continue to undermine efforts toward peace, justice, and sustainable development. Persistent governance deficits, widespread corruption, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited citizen participation have constrained the capacity of public institutions to respond effectively to the needs and expectations of local communities (Anenene & Oyewole, 2020). As a result, many of the region's governance structures remain unable to deliver the level of transparency, responsiveness, and public trust envisioned under SDG 16.

Corruption remains one of the most significant obstacles to institutional effectiveness in the region. Numerous studies have linked poor governance and financial mismanagement to the persistence of insecurity and social instability, arguing that corruption not only weakens state institutions but also contributes directly to conflict dynamics (Oliva et al., 2025). When public resources intended for development, security, and service delivery are diverted through corrupt practices, citizens are left without the basic support systems necessary for social and economic well-being. This institutional failure erodes public confidence in government and creates conditions in which criminal actors can thrive.

Reports from investigative journalists and policy analysts further suggest that insecurity in Northwest Nigeria has, in some cases, been facilitated by collusion between criminal groups and public officials. Allegations of bribery, illicit protection arrangements, and the granting of informal access to transportation routes have reinforced perceptions that certain state actors benefit from the continuation of insecurity rather than its resolution. Such allegations, whether fully substantiated or not, contribute to public perceptions of state complicity and deepen distrust in government institutions (Mahmud & Maigari, 2025). Scholars observe that the federal

government's "weakening engagement" in the region, partly resulting from the demands of managing multiple security crises across the country, has created opportunities for criminal groups to expand their operations with relatively limited resistance (Irabor & Awofeso, 2025; Samuel, 2026).

The challenges of governance are also evident in the policy responses adopted by some state governments. Faced with escalating violence, several governors in states such as Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara pursued negotiated settlements and ceasefire agreements with bandit groups (Irabor & Awofeso, 2025; Samuel, 2026). These initiatives often involved offers of amnesty, financial incentives, or other concessions intended to encourage armed actors to abandon violence. While such measures were presented as pragmatic attempts to restore peace, many observers questioned their long-term effectiveness. In several instances, agreements collapsed shortly after implementation, and attacks resumed. Critics argue that these arrangements inadvertently rewarded violent behaviour and weakened the principle of accountability by allowing perpetrators of serious crimes to avoid legal consequences (Oluwaniyi, 2011; Ekumaoko, 2013). From the perspective of SDG 16.6, which emphasizes effective and accountable institutions, such outcomes raise important concerns regarding the state's commitment to impartial law enforcement and the consistent application of justice.

Beyond high-level governance issues, corruption and institutional inefficiency affect everyday life across the region. Northwest Nigeria contains five of the ten poorest states in the country, despite decades of substantial public expenditure and national revenue generation (Adamaagashi, et al., 2024). In many communities, public investments have failed to translate into meaningful improvements in infrastructure, education, healthcare, or economic opportunities. The diversion and mismanagement of public funds have contributed to the deterioration of roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and other essential services. These developmental shortcomings reinforce existing socio-economic grievances and increase feelings of marginalization among local populations.

Equally significant is the limited inclusion of citizens in governance processes. SDG 16.7 emphasizes responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. Yet evidence from Northwest Nigeria suggests that many policy decisions, particularly those related to security and conflict management, have been implemented with minimal consultation of affected communities (Nyarangaa et al., 2021). In states such as Zamfara and Sokoto, security negotiations and amnesty arrangements were reportedly conducted without meaningful engagement with victims, traditional leaders, community organizations, or other key stakeholders. Consequently, many residents felt excluded from decisions that directly affected their lives and security. Communities also reported limited involvement in post-conflict reconstruction initiatives, compensation programmes, and broader peacebuilding efforts. Such exclusion weakens the legitimacy of government interventions and reduces the likelihood of sustainable outcomes (The New Humanitarian. 2025).

The judiciary, another critical pillar of SDG 16, faces similar institutional constraints. Access to formal justice remains difficult for many residents of Northwest Nigeria, particularly those living in rural and remote areas. Geographic barriers, financial constraints, and limited judicial infrastructure often make it challenging for citizens to seek legal redress through formal courts

(Abdulkadir, et. al, 2025, Ezechi & Ifedi, 2023). As a result, many individuals rely on customary and Islamic legal systems, which operate alongside the federal judicial framework. While these systems provide accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms for many communities, their coexistence with formal legal institutions can create inconsistencies in the administration of justice and limit access to standardized legal protections.

Furthermore, concerns regarding due process, judicial efficiency, and human rights protections continue to affect public perceptions of the justice system. Human rights organizations have documented cases in which suspects, including political critics and individuals accused of criminal activities, have allegedly been subjected to torture, prolonged detention, and other forms of abuse without adequate legal safeguards (Bassey & Asangausung, 2023). Delays in judicial proceedings remain common, with many individuals spending extended periods in detention before their cases are heard (Nyarangaa et al., 2021). Such practices undermine confidence in the justice system and contradict the principles of fairness and accountability that underpin SDG 16.

The persistence of mob justice further illustrates the challenges facing formal institutions. The widely reported vigilante mob killing in Kaduna in 2025, which prompted President Tinubu to pledge that those responsible would be “brought to justice,” underscores both the prevalence of extrajudicial violence and the difficulties associated with prosecuting such cases (Addeh, 2025). Although official condemnations are important, the recurrence of similar incidents suggests that institutional responses remain insufficient to deter unlawful actions or restore public confidence in legal processes.

Overall, the evidence indicates that governance and institutional performance in Northwest Nigeria remain significantly below the standards envisioned under SDG 16. Persistent corruption, weak accountability structures, limited citizen participation, and deficiencies within the justice system have contributed to an environment characterized by exclusion, impunity, and institutional fragility. Rather than fostering transparent, responsive, and representative governance, many institutions struggle to meet the expectations of the populations they serve. Consequently, progress toward SDG targets relating to accountability, anti-corruption, inclusive decision-making, and effective governance has remained limited, highlighting the need for far-reaching institutional reforms and stronger mechanisms of public accountability.

3.4 SDG16 Indicators: Assessment of Progress

Assessing progress toward SDG 16 in Northwest Nigeria requires an examination of measurable indicators relating to violence, access to justice, institutional effectiveness, corruption, and citizen participation. Although reliable subnational data remain limited, the available evidence provides a compelling picture of persistent underperformance across nearly all dimensions of SDG 16. The existing indicators suggest that rather than advancing toward the goal of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, Northwest Nigeria continues to face significant setbacks (Ezechi & Ifedi, 2022).

At the national level, Nigeria’s overall performance on the Sustainable Development Goals remains relatively weak. According to the SDG Index (2025), Nigeria ranks 147th out of 167 countries, with an overall score of 54.7 out of 100 (Sustainable Development Solutions Network,

n.d). While state-level SDG 16 scores are unavailable, broader national indicators and regional trends offer valuable insights into conditions in the Northwest. For example, Nigeria's homicide rate, which serves as one indicator for SDG target 16.1, is estimated at approximately 5–6 deaths per 100,000 people, a figure broadly comparable to the global average (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021).). However, national averages obscure substantial regional disparities. Given the intensity of banditry, kidnappings, communal violence, and terrorist activities across Northwest Nigeria, it is highly probable that the region experiences significantly higher rates of violent crime than the national average. The scale of kidnapping alone points to a severe humanitarian and security crisis, indicating that violence is escalating in a region where SDG 16 seeks substantial reductions in all forms of violence.

Indicators relating to justice and institutional trust also reveal serious challenges. Public confidence in law enforcement remains exceptionally low. Afrobarometer data indicate that only 15 percent of Nigerians trust the police, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with policing effectiveness, accountability, and integrity (Kweitsu, 2023). Trust in other key democratic institutions is similarly limited, with confidence in the courts and legislature estimated at approximately 21–23 percent (afrobarometer, 2024). These figures suggest that many citizens perceive public institutions as ineffective, inaccessible, or vulnerable to corruption. Such perceptions are particularly significant in Northwest Nigeria, where insecurity and weak state presence have encouraged reliance on vigilante groups, traditional mechanisms, and informal systems of justice. The growing dependence on these alternatives highlights the limited reach of formal justice institutions and underscores the challenges facing the realization of SDG target 16.3, which emphasizes equal access to justice and the rule of law.

Corruption indicators further illustrate the governance deficits affecting progress toward SDG 16.5. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) placed Nigeria at approximately 25 out of 100 in 2024, ranking the country around 150th out of 180 nations globally (Transparency International, 2025). Such a score reflects deeply entrenched corruption within public institutions and governance structures. Although disaggregated state-level data remain scarce, many Northwest states, including Zamfara and Sokoto, are frequently associated with weak governance outcomes, limited transparency, and poor public service delivery. The persistence of corruption not only undermines development efforts but also weakens public confidence in government institutions and reduces the effectiveness of policies designed to address insecurity and poverty.

Measures of citizen participation and political inclusion, central components of SDG target 16.7, also demonstrate limited progress. Democratic participation in several Northwest states has been constrained by insecurity, logistical challenges, and declining public confidence in political processes. Local government elections have, at various times, been delayed, disrupted, or characterized by low voter turnout and public disengagement. Such conditions weaken opportunities for meaningful citizen involvement in governance and limit the responsiveness of institutions to local concerns (Oresanya et al., 2025). Consequently, many communities continue to feel marginalized from decision-making processes that directly affect their welfare and security.

Taken together, the available evidence indicates that progress toward SDG 16 in Northwest Nigeria has been extremely limited. Violence continues to intensify, undermining targets 16.1 and

16.2. Access to justice remains constrained, while trust in legal and security institutions remains low, reflecting shortcomings in target 16.3. Corruption and weak institutional capacity continue to hinder progress toward targets 16.5 and 16.6, while low levels of participation and public trust reveal persistent challenges associated with targets 16.7 and 16.10. The extensive evidence of killings, kidnappings, displacement, and institutional fragility stands in sharp contrast to the aspirations of SDG 16 and its vision of peaceful, safe, and inclusive societies (UNIDIR, 2024). Overall, the findings suggest that Northwest Nigeria has not only struggled to meet SDG 16 benchmarks but, in several critical areas, appears to be moving further away from them.

4.0 Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study reveal a range of interconnected and systemic obstacles that continue to undermine the implementation of SDG 16 in Northwest Nigeria. While the Sustainable Development Goals envision a future characterized by peace, justice, accountability, and inclusive governance, the realities observed across the region demonstrate the persistence of structural conditions that inhibit progress toward these objectives. The analysis points to three broad and mutually reinforcing challenges: insecurity, institutional weakness, and socio-economic exclusion.

First, the ongoing security crisis remains the most immediate and visible barrier to achieving SDG 16. Banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, and communal violence have created an environment of chronic instability that affects virtually every aspect of social and economic life. SDG 16 places significant emphasis on reducing violence and promoting peaceful societies, yet communities across Northwest Nigeria continue to experience persistent threats to their safety and livelihoods. As Ojewale (2021) argues, one of the key limitations of government responses has been the tendency to frame the crisis primarily as a problem of banditry rather than recognizing its increasingly complex links to organized terrorism and transnational extremist networks. This narrow characterization has contributed to policy responses that are often reactive rather than strategic, limiting their effectiveness in addressing the root causes of insecurity. The experience of Northwest Nigeria reflects a broader challenge observed in several conflict-affected regions across Africa, where overstretched security institutions struggle to create the stable conditions necessary for sustainable development (Ugwuda, 2023).

Second, institutional weakness continues to undermine the broader objectives of SDG 16. The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that institutions in Northwest Nigeria face challenges relating both to capacity and legitimacy. In many communities, the state is either unable or unwilling to provide adequate security, justice, and basic public services. Government neglect, weak accountability mechanisms, and persistent corruption have contributed to widespread perceptions of institutional failure (Anenene & Oyewole, 2020). The use of amnesty arrangements and negotiated settlements with armed groups illustrates this dilemma. While such measures are often justified as practical responses to insecurity, they frequently undermine public confidence in the rule of law by rewarding criminal behaviour and weakening accountability. This is agreed with the assertion of Mallinder (2018) on amnesties and inclusive political settlements. Consequently, citizens increasingly perceive formal institutions as ineffective, leading them to seek protection and justice through alternative means.

This situation reinforces what Afrobarometer describes as a vicious cycle of institutional decline. Weak institutions generate distrust among citizens, while distrust reduces cooperation with public authorities and further weakens institutional effectiveness (Adaba & Boio, 2024). The resulting cycle perpetuates insecurity and instability, making it increasingly difficult to achieve the objectives of SDG 16. Rather than functioning as pillars of peace and development, institutions often become symbols of exclusion and inefficiency.

Third, deep social inequalities and patterns of exclusion exacerbate the challenges facing the region. Although SDG 16 emphasizes inclusivity and equal access to opportunities, Northwest Nigeria remains characterized by high levels of poverty, limited educational attainment, and widespread rural marginalization. Compared to many other parts of Nigeria, communities in the Northwest face more severe socio-economic disadvantages and fewer opportunities for upward mobility (Abubakar & Aina, 2019). These conditions contribute to grievances that can fuel conflict and weaken social cohesion.

The erosion of the social contract between citizens and the state is particularly evident in this context. Individuals who feel excluded from political processes and deprived of economic opportunities are less likely to trust government institutions. For many residents, particularly those affected by cattle rustling, displacement, unemployment, and insecurity, formal institutions offer little hope of protection or redress. As Nagarajan (2020) suggests, some individuals may even view armed groups as alternative sources of security, income, or social support. Such dynamics reflect a profound crisis of state legitimacy and demonstrate how social exclusion can reinforce insecurity and weaken governance structures.

From a comparative perspective, the challenges facing Northwest Nigeria appear especially severe. Although other regions of the country face significant security and governance concerns, the Northwest exhibits a particularly troubling convergence of violence, poverty, institutional weakness, and social exclusion. The Northeast, despite the devastation caused by Boko Haram, has benefited from substantial military operations, humanitarian interventions, and international assistance that have contributed to relative stabilization in some areas. Comparable efforts have yet to produce similar outcomes in the Northwest. The study of Tarasa et al. (2025) move in the same direction with this analysis. Southern states, while not free from governance challenges, generally record lower levels of violent conflict and higher levels of institutional trust. Consequently, Northwest Nigeria represents one of the clearest examples within the country of the difficulties associated with implementing SDG 16 under conditions of protracted insecurity and weak governance.

Overall, the discussion highlights the extent to which peace, justice, and strong institutions are interconnected. The inability to address insecurity undermines governance reforms, while weak institutions and social exclusion create conditions that perpetuate violence. Without comprehensive strategies that simultaneously strengthen security, improve institutional accountability, reduce corruption, and promote inclusive development, progress toward SDG 16 in Northwest Nigeria is likely to remain limited (Mahachi, 2025; United Nations, 2015). The region therefore serves as a critical case study of the challenges confronting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that the aspirations of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice, and building effective, accountable institutions remain largely unrealized in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. Evidence from the region reveals a persistent deterioration in security conditions, the weakening of justice institutions, and continuing governance challenges that collectively undermine progress toward peace and sustainable development. The escalation of banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, and institutional fragility has created an environment that is fundamentally inconsistent with the objectives of SDG16.

The findings further indicate that insecurity and weak governance are mutually reinforcing. Violence erodes public confidence in state institutions, while ineffective institutions struggle to provide the security, justice, and accountability necessary for long-term stability. As a result, development gains across other sectors are also threatened. Unless decisive and coordinated interventions are implemented, Northwest Nigeria risks becoming increasingly entrenched in cycles of instability, exclusion, and underdevelopment.

To reverse this trend and accelerate progress toward SDG16, several policy measures are necessary.

1. Strengthening Security and State Presence

Enhancing the Northwest's security architecture requires deploying adequately equipped military and police personnel, supported by sustainable funding, stronger inter-agency coordination, and fortified border management along the Nigeria–Niger frontier. Investments in modern surveillance technologies (e.g., drones) must be sustained to bolster intelligence gathering. Federal forces need sufficient resources to avoid overstretch from concurrent national crises. Crucially, the state must protect civilians by establishing secure transit corridors, protected communities, and rapid-response mechanisms to curb kidnapping.

2. Reforming Policing and the Justice System

Rebuilding public trust demands comprehensive police reforms. Recruitment should emphasize local participation to improve community relations, while decentralized policing structures can allow better state-level responsiveness. Human rights training and robust anti-corruption measures must be institutionalized. Judicially, the state must expedite the prosecution of violent crimes, guarantee victims' access to justice, and enforce accountability for vigilante excesses to dismantle impunity.

3. Enhancing Community and Civil Society Engagement

Achieving SDG 16 requires active citizen participation. Local communities, traditional leaders, women, and youth must be integrated into peacebuilding initiatives (SDG 16.7). Dialogue mechanisms should address deep-seated grievances regarding land, grazing routes, and marginalization. Supported by strict oversight to prevent vigilantism, community policing

can strengthen local safety, while civil society organizations monitor accountability and document human rights violations.

4. Addressing Structural Drivers of Conflict

Sustainable peace relies on resolving the socioeconomic conditions facilitating criminal recruitment. Governments must prioritize investments in education, rural infrastructure, agriculture, and entrepreneurship, aligning SDG 16 with poverty reduction (SDG 1) and decent work (SDG 8). Simultaneously, anti-corruption mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure transparent public resource management.

5. Improving Governance and Data Systems

Effective subnational interventions require reliable, disaggregated data tracking security incidents, institutional trust, and justice access across Northwest states, mirroring Nigeria's 2025 Voluntary National Review commitments. Ultimately, political leaders must demonstrate genuine will by respecting legal processes, honoring peace agreements, and enforcing the rule of law impartially.

The trajectory of SDG16 implementation in Northwest Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 has been largely negative, with significant implications for national development and stability. The persistence of violence, institutional weakness, and governance deficits continues to hinder the realization of peaceful and inclusive societies in the region. Achieving the ambitions of SDG16 by 2030 will require sustained political commitment, substantial institutional reforms, and continued support from national and international stakeholders. While the SDG framework provides a valuable roadmap, meaningful progress will depend on translating policy commitments into practical actions that strengthen security, improve justice delivery, and enhance governance. Without such reforms, Northwest Nigeria is likely to remain a major obstacle to Nigeria's broader development aspirations, perpetuating cycles of insecurity and underdevelopment in one of Africa's most strategically significant regions.

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