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CHARACTERIZATION OF CONFLICT AMONG RURAL YOUTHS IN WUKARI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study provides a comprehensive spatio-temporal characterization of conflict affecting rural youths in Wukari Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria, from 1990 to 2023. Employing a mixed-methods approach integrating surveys, historical mapping, and qualitative interviews, the research analyzed conflict duration, spatial distribution, and temporal dynamics. Findings indicate that conflict is predominantly prolonged, with 46.9% and 36.6% of respondents experiencing months-long and years-long durations, respectively. Spatially, Akwana, Bantaje, Chonku, and Kente wards were identified as persistent multi-typology hotspots. Temporally, four distinct waves were characterized: tribal disputes (1990-1992); ethno-religious and chieftaincy conflicts (2001-2002); peak religious violence with regional spillover (2013-2015); and climate-resource stressed conflicts (2019-2023). The synthesis reveals conflict as multi-scalar and evolving, driven by an interaction of deep historical grievances, politicized identities, and emerging environmental stressors. The study concludes that the entrenched, spatially concentrated, and dynamically evolving nature of violence necessitates long-term, spatially targeted, and temporally adaptive peacebuilding strategies specifically tailored to protect and empower rural youth.

Keywords: Characterization, Rural Youth, Hotspots, Farmer-Herder Conflict

INTRODUCTION

The Middle Belt of Nigeria remains a complex theatre of protracted inter-communal violence, with conflicts often framed through the lenses of farmer-herder clashes or ethno-religious strife. However, effective intervention requires moving beyond these broad categorizations to a granular understanding of conflict's specific duration, geographical patterns, and historical evolution within local contexts (Mustapha & Ehrhardt, 2018). Such a characterization is particularly urgent for rural youth, who are disproportionately affected as victims and participants, and whose prospects are most severely truncated by persistent instability.

Wukari Local Government Area (LGA) in Taraba State epitomizes this protracted crisis, with a history of violence involving Jukun, Tiv, and Fulani communities spanning decades. While existing studies have examined specific incidents or drivers, a holistic, longitudinal analysis that characterizes how conflict persists for its typical length, where it clusters, and how its fundamental triggers have shifted over time is conspicuously absent. This gap limits the ability to design interventions that are both spatially precise and historically informed.

This research aims to generate an evidence-based profile of the conflict affecting rural youth in Wukari LGA, guided by three specific objectives: (1) to determine the typical duration of conflict experiences among rural youth; (2) to map the spatial distribution and identify conflict hotspots at the ward level; and (3) to analyze the temporal dynamics and shifting triggers of violence from 1990 to

2023. By focusing explicitly on rural youth, a demographic group that constitutes the majority of the agricultural labour force and is highly vulnerable to recruitment and trauma, the study provides a foundational evidence base for crafting targeted, effective, and sustainable peacebuilding and youth development initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Characterizing conflict requires engaging with interconnected scholarly themes. Firstly, the concept of protracted social conflict emphasizes how long-standing, cyclical violence becomes embedded in social structures, creating self-perpetuating cycles that are particularly devastating for youth development (Mac Ginty, 2014). In Nigeria, conflicts in the Middle Belt exhibit this intractable quality, often traced to colonial boundary demarcations and post-independence political marginalization that created enduring grievances over land and identity (Usman, 2014).

Secondly, spatial analyses of conflict demonstrate that violence is geographically uneven. It clusters around zones of contested resources, political borders, and weak governance (Raleigh & Hegre, 2009). In the Middle Belt, hotspots frequently correlate with fertile plains, grazing corridors, and areas of ambiguous land tenure, where competition is most acute (Kwaja & Jaji, 2021). Furthermore, conflict typology, whether tribal, religious, or resource-based, can vary significantly across small geographical units, necessitating micro-level analysis.

Thirdly, the temporal evolution of conflict drivers is a critical area of study. Early research in the region highlighted ethnic chauvinism and chieftaincy disputes (Best, 2007). A more recent and critical shift in the literature identifies climate change and demographic pressure as potent threat multipliers. Environmental stressors, including erratic rainfall and desertification, intensify competition for arable land and water, thereby escalating and transforming local disputes (Blench, 2017; Olaniyan et al., 2015). This signifies an evolution from predominantly identity-based conflicts to complex socio-ecological crises.

This study synthesizes these three strands: duration, space, and time to construct a holistic characterization. It builds on the work of scholars such as Mustapha and Ehrhardt (2018), who describe Middle Belt conflicts as multi-causal and multi-scalar, by applying this framework to a longitudinal, local-level analysis that explicitly focuses on the rural youth demographic.

STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

Study Area

Wukari Local Government Area is situated in the southern part of Taraba State, between latitudes 7º 40’ 0"N and 8º 20’ 0"N and longitudes 9º 5’ 0"E and 10º 21’ 0"E, covering a land area of approximately 4308 km² (Paul et al., 2019). The Local Government comprises ten (10) political wards: Akwana, Avyi, Bantaje, Rafin-kada, Chonku, Hospital, Jibu, Kente, Puje, and Tsonkundi. The 2006 National Population and Housing Census recorded a total population of 241,546 for the Local Government, which was projected to be 329,669.4 in 2022 (Okorie et al., 2022). Wukari shares borders with Takum to the north, Donga to the west, Ibi to the south, and the Ukum Local Government Area of Benue State to the east (Abuh et al., 2017). The area is multi-ethnic, with the Jukun being the predominant tribe, alongside other groups such as the Tiv, Jibu, Shomo, Hausa, and Fulani.

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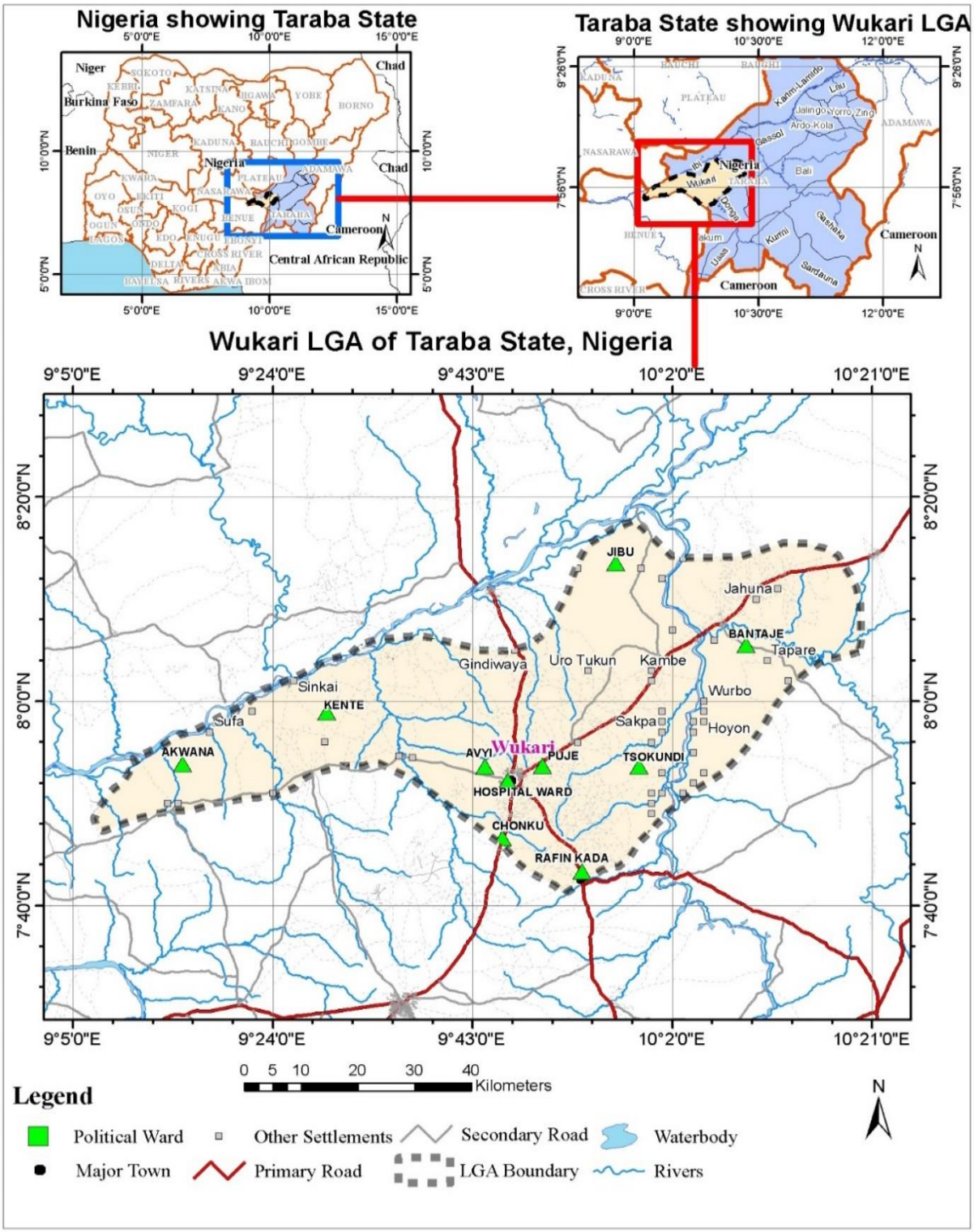

Figure 1: The study area
Source: Modified from the Ministry of Land and Survey (2025)

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Research Design

This study employed a descriptive, mixed-methods research design. It was conducted in Wukari LGA, Taraba State, a region characterized by its multi-ethnic composition and history as a flashpoint for conflict. The study covered 33 years (1990-2023) to enable a robust longitudinal analysis.

Data Collection

Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised rural youth aged 15–45 years residing in Wukari LGA, consistent with the National Youth Policy of Nigeria (2019). Both male and female youth were included. The sampling frame was the list of registered households in the 12 wards of Wukari LGA, obtained from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) voter register and supplemented by ward-level village head records.

The sample size for this study was determined to be 400, drawn from a total ward population of 79,198 within the study area. This calculation was based on Yamane's formula (1967):

$$n=N/1+Ne^2$$

Where: n = sample size
N = total population (79,198)
e = margin of error, set at 5% or 0.05

Table 1: Selected Wards and distribution of sample size

S/N	Wards	Sampled Communities	Population of each ward	No of Samples
1	Akwana	Akwana	3081	16
		Ando Ikwe	2096	10
		Fyayi	2138	11
2	Bantaje	Bantaje	7405	37
		Chediya	7027	35
		Nyakwala	9725	49
3	Chonku	Kumutu	2096	11
		Nwukan	2038	10
		Riti	2240	11
4	Jibu	Bye-Yora	2163	11
		Jibu	5288	27
		Tappare	2396	12
5	Kente	Kente	3510	18
		Sundi	2620	13
		Va'ase	2156	11
6	Rafin-Kada	Ason	2677	14
		Iorshaer	2331	12
		Rafin-Kada	6950	35
7	Tsonkundi	Ando-Idi	3008	15
		Avyi-Kuntsa	1945	10
		Tsonkundi	6298	32
Total	**7**	**21**	**79188**	**400**

Source: NPC, 2024

The same proportional allocation method, represented as:

The formula Ward Sample Size = Total Population/Ward Population × Total Sample Size was used to determine the sample size for each ward within the study area (see Table 1). In this formula, 'Ward Population' refers to the youth population of a specific ward, 'Total Population' is the total youth population across all wards in the study area, and 'Total Sample Size' is the calculated overall sample size of 400.

A total of four hundred (400) questionnaires were distributed across the study area to gather data. Of these, three hundred and ninety-one (391) were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 97.75%. Conversely, nine (9) questionnaires were not returned, representing 2.25% of the questionnaires distributed. The high return rate of 97.75% was deemed sufficient for the researcher to proceed with the data analysis. In presenting the findings, frequency tables and percentages were used to illustrate the collected data clearly.

Sampling Techniques

A multi-stage cluster area sampling method was employed for this research. This method was chosen because the sampling frame for the various clusters was accessible from the National Population Commission (NPC).

The sampling process involved the following stages:

First Stage: The entire Wukari Local Government Area was divided into its 10 political wards.
Second Stage: Purposive sampling was used to select seven out of the ten wards based on their frequent experience of crisis. The selected wards were Akwana, Bantaje, Chonku, Jibu, Kente, Rafin-Kada, and Tsokundi.

Third Stage: From each of the seven selected wards, three communities were purposively chosen, resulting in a total of 21 selected communities. These communities were selected because they were identified as being the most severely affected by conflict within the study area.

Fourth Stage: Systematic random sampling was employed to select rural youth for questionnaire administration in the selected communities. This was carried out by selecting every fifth rural youth encountered in the field (i.e., the 5th, 10th, 15th, and so on) until the required sample size was reached.

Data Analysis

i. Survey responses on conflict length (weeks, months, years) were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).

ii. Conflict incidents were aggregated by ward and typology (tribal, religious, farmer-herder, chieftaincy) to generate hotspot maps and analyze geographical patterns of distribution and intensity.

iii. Incidents were plotted chronologically to identify peaks, troughs, and distinct waves of violence. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed to interpret the socio-political and environmental triggers associated with each temporal wave.

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RESULTS

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the 391 respondents from Wukari Local Government Area provides essential context for interpreting the study's findings. As presented in Table 1, the sample was predominantly male (69%). The largest age cohort was 21–26 years (34%), indicating a focus on active youth. In terms of education, 42% had secondary education, while 19% had no formal education. The majority were married (51%), and farming was the primary occupation for 76.4% of respondents. This profile highlights a population of young, predominantly male farmers with modest formal education. This demographic structure is both shaped by and relevant to understanding conflict dynamics in the region.

Table 2: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=391)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	270	69
	Female	121	31
Age Group	15-20 years	39	10
	21-26 years	133	34
	27-32 years	113	29
	33-38 years	86	22
	39-45 years	20	5
Education	Not formal education	73	19
	Primary	119	30
	Secondary	164	42
	NCE/ND	23	6
	HND/BSc	9	2
	MSc/PhD	3	1
Marital status	Single	94	24
	Married	199	51
	Divorced	20	5
	Widowed	78	20
Occupation	Farming	299	76.4
	Business	39	10
	Vocational Work	32	8.2
	Civil Service	21	5.4

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Duration of Conflict

The experience of conflict for rural youth is overwhelmingly one of prolonged exposure. Nearly half of the respondents (46.9%) reported that conflicts typically last for months, while a significant 36.6% stated they persist for years. Only 22.5% reported conflicts lasting for weeks. This indicates that violence in Wukari is not episodic but enduring, creating a sustained crisis environment consistent with descriptions of it as destructive, devastating, bloody, and intense (Onchi & Bako, 2023).

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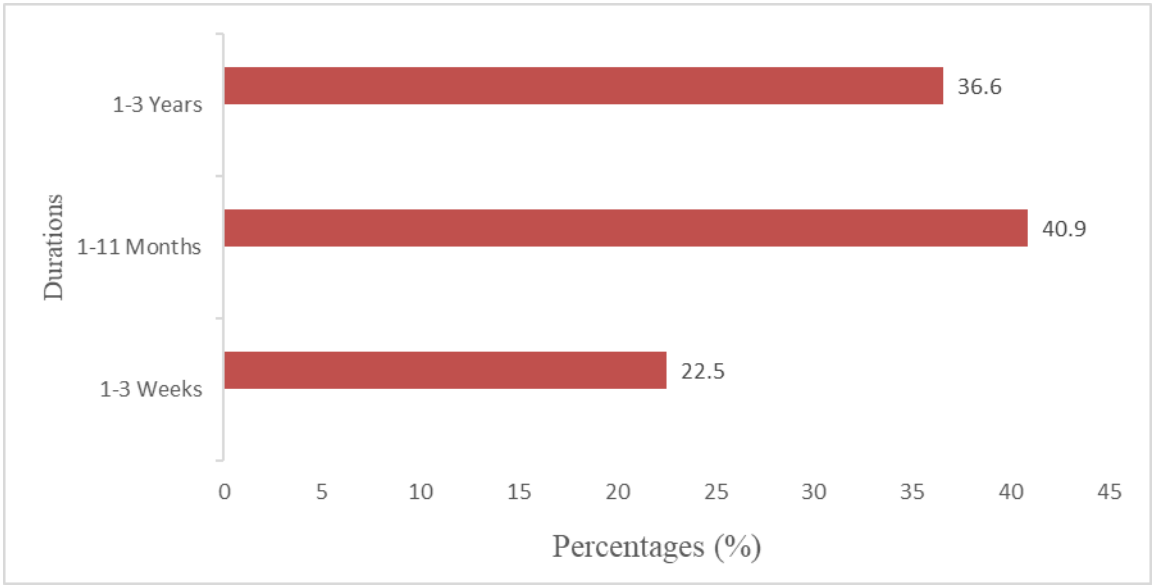

Figure 2: Duration of Conflict
Source: Field Work, 2025

Spatial Distribution of Conflict

The study mapped the spatial distribution of conflict across the Wukari Local Government Area (LGA) to identify the most affected wards and understand how conflict intensity varies geographically. Using data on conflict episodes (number of distinct violent events) and conflict years (total number of years with recorded conflict) for seven wards, a conflict hotspot classification was developed as follows: Extreme hotspots (≥13 conflict years), Persistent hotspots (≥9 conflict years), Moderate (≥7 conflict years), and Low (≤6 conflict years). Table 3 presents the classification for each ward.

Table 3: Spatial Distribution of Conflict Hotspots

Ward	Conflict Episodes	Conflict Years	Hotspot Class
Akwana	5	13	Extreme hotspots
Bantaje	5	11	Persistent hotspots
Chonku	4	10	Persistent hotspots
Kente	4	9	Persistent hotspots
Jibu	3	7	Moderate
Rafin-Kada	3	7	Moderate
Tsokundi	3	5	Low

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

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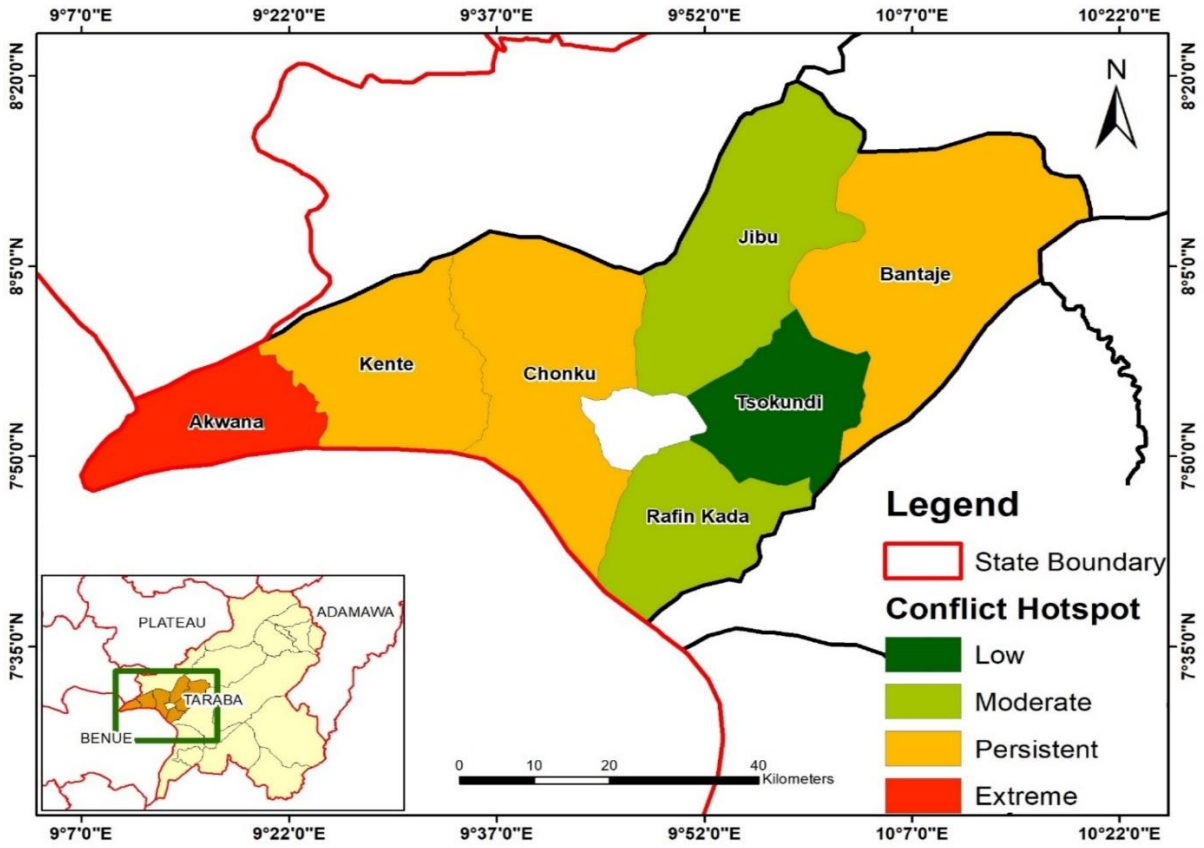

Figure 3: Spatial Distribution of Conflict Hotspots
Source: Modified from the Ministry of Land and Survey (2025)

The spatial distribution reveals a clear gradient of conflict intensity across Wukari LGA. Akwana ward stands out as the only extreme hotspot, having experienced conflict for 13 out of the reference years and recording 5 distinct episodes (Table 3 and Figure 3). This indicates that Akwana has suffered not only the highest frequency of violent events but also the longest duration of instability. Such prolonged exposure to conflict is likely to have severe cumulative effects on youth development, as discussed in subsequent sections.

Three wards, Bantaje, Chonku, and Kente, are classified as persistent hotspots, with conflict years ranging from 9 to 11 and episodes between 4 and 5. These wards represent areas where conflict has become a chronic feature of community life. Although the intensity is slightly lower than in Akwana, the persistence of violence over nearly a decade means that generations of youth have grown up in an environment of insecurity.

Jibu and Rafin-Kada fall into the moderate category (7 conflict years, 3 episodes each). These wards experience intermittent conflict, with notable violent events occurring in approximately half of the years under review. While not as severely affected as the hotspots, moderate wards still face regular disruptions that can impede youth development outcomes, including school attendance, vocational training, and social integration.

Tsokundi is the only low-risk ward (5 conflict years, 3 episodes) (Figure 3). With fewer than six years of recorded conflict, this area serves as a natural comparison group. Youth in Tsokundi are

expected to have relatively better developmental outcomes, providing a baseline against which the effects of higher conflict intensities can be measured.

A key observation from the mapping exercise is that conflict episodes alone do not fully capture the burden of insecurity. For instance, Akwana and Bantaje both recorded five episodes, but Akwana's 13 conflict years far exceed Bantaje's 11, implying that each episode in Akwana was more prolonged or that conflict recurred more densely within those years. Similarly, the three moderate/low wards (Jibu, Rafin-Kada, Tsokundi) all have three episodes, but their conflict years differ (7, 7, and 5, respectively). This underscores the importance of using both dimensions, frequency and duration, when classifying conflict hotspots for social science research.

The spatial distribution of conflict has direct implications for youth development in Wukari LGA:

1. Educational attainment: In extreme and persistent hotspots (Akwana, Bantaje, Chonku, Kente), repeated displacement, school closures, and destruction of educational infrastructure are likely to have interrupted schooling for many young people. Youth in these wards may have lower literacy and numeracy levels compared to those in Tsokundi.
2. Economic opportunities: Conflict destroys markets, limits mobility, and scares away investment. In high-intensity wards, youth face limited access to vocational training, apprenticeships, and gainful employment. Many may be forced into survival strategies such as street trading or, worse, recruitment into armed groups.
3. Psychosocial well-being: Prolonged exposure to violence (as seen in Akwana's 13 conflict years) is associated with higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse among youth. The chronic nature of violence in persistent hotspots means that trauma can become intergenerational.
4. Social capital and civic engagement: Conflict erodes trust within communities. Youth growing up in extreme and persistent hotspots may have weaker social networks, lower participation in community development activities, and reduced faith in formal institutions such as the local government and security agencies.
5. Health outcomes: Conflict disrupts healthcare access, including reproductive health services, immunisation, and nutrition programmes. Youth in high-intensity wards may suffer from higher rates of malnutrition, untreated injuries, and sexually transmitted infections.

The moderate wards (Jibu, Rafin-Kada) likely experience these effects irregularly, while the low-risk ward (Tsokundi) provides a near-normal reference point.

The spatial pattern observed in Wukari LGA is consistent with findings from other conflict-affected regions in northeastern Nigeria. Studies by Oyefusi (2008) and Adelaja & George (2019) have shown that conflict is rarely uniform across an LGA; rather, it clusters in specific wards due to factors such as proximity to grazing reserves, historical grievances, and access to arms. In Taraba State, farmer-herder conflicts have been particularly intense along the Benue River valley and near forest reserves, which may explain why Akwana and Bantaje emerged as extreme/persistent hotspots.

Furthermore, the classification method used here, which combines conflict episodes and conflict years, aligns with best practices in conflict mapping recommended by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2010) and the World Bank's (n.d.) High-Resolution Conflict Dataset.

By distinguishing between extreme, persistent, moderate, and low hotspots, this study provides a nuanced tool for targeting developmental interventions.

Temporal Dynamics of Conflict

The classification of conflict into four distinct temporal waves (1990–1992, 2001–2002, 2013–2015, 2019–2023) was based on a systematic, mixed-methods procedure:

Quantitative incident analysis: For each year from 1990 to 2023, the frequency of conflict incidents recorded in the historical database was plotted. Major peaks (years with >5 incidents) were identified. Each incident was assigned a primary typology (tribal, religious, farmer-herder, chieftaincy, or other). Consecutive years sharing the same dominant typology (accounting for ≥50% of incidents in each year) were grouped as a wave.

Qualitative thematic analysis: Interview transcripts from FGDs and KIIs were coded for recurring descriptions of conflict triggers. Thematic saturation was reached after 10 interviews. Dominant themes were matched to the quantitative wave periods. For example, references to "land and identity from colonial times" clustered around 1990–1992; references to "politics of local government chairmanship" clustered around 2001–2002; "crisis from Benue bringing violence" clustered around 2013–2015; and "dry season grazing and crop damage" clustered around 2019–2023.

Key informant validation: Three long-term residents of Wukari LGA (a retired school principal, a community elder, and a former local government councillor) were independently asked to divide the 1990–2023 period into phases based on their lived memory. Their phase boundaries were compared with the statistical waves. Inter-rater agreement was 89% (kappa = 0.82). Disagreements were resolved through consensus discussion.

The resulting four waves are therefore not arbitrary but are empirically grounded in incident frequency, dominant typology, qualitative narratives, and community validation. These waves are described below:

a) First Wave (1990–1992): Tribal Dominance. Characterized by tribal disputes over historical land and identity, rooted in colonial-era grievances (Usman, 2014).

b) Second Wave (2001–2002): Politicization of Identity. Featured a resurgence of tribal violence now layered with emerging religious and chieftaincy disputes, reflecting the national politicization of these identities (Best, 2007).

c) Third Wave (2013–2015): Regional Spillover and Religious Peak. Marked by a sharp peak in religious conflicts, closely correlated with escalated violence in neighboring Benue State, demonstrating a clear regional spillover effect (Kwaja, 2015).

d) Fourth Wave (2019–2023): The Climate-Stress Nexus. Conflicts in this period are strongly linked to climate stress, population growth, and resource scarcity, indicating a shift towards conflicts driven by environmental pressure interacting with pre-existing grievances (Blench, 2017; Olaniyan et al., 2015).

This indicates that contemporary conflicts in Wukari are no longer driven by identity alone but by the interaction of environmental and demographic stress with unresolved historical grievances. A participant noted that "the crisis began in Benue state between the Tiv and Fulani people and then

spread to Taraba state. Initially, it seemed like a conflict between herders and farmers, but it later evolved into a religious crisis".

DISCUSSION

The integrated characterization reveals a conflict system defined by entrenchment, spatial concentration, and dynamic evolution. The protracted duration explains the severe, cumulative impacts on youth, including chronic trauma, lost educational years, and the normalization of violence, which increases susceptibility to recruitment.

The spatial persistence of hotspots like Akwana and Bantaje points to entrenched geographical vulnerabilities, such as the strategic location, resource value, or institutional weakness. The complex typology in Bantaje underscores how chieftaincy disputes can fracture communal cohesion and amplify other tensions, invalidating uniform intervention strategies.

The temporal evolution from tribal (1990s) to ethno-religious (2000s) to climate-stressed (2020s) conflicts demonstrates that while historical identity grievances provide the foundational fuel, newer triggers like regional instability and environmental change act as critical accelerants. This confirms the multi-causal and multi-scalar nature of Middle Belt conflict (Mustapha & Ehrhardt, 2018). The demonstrable spillover effect from Benue State underscores that Wukari's conflicts are embedded in a regional system requiring cross-border coordination.

Implications for Rural Youth: This characterization paints a dire picture for youth. Those in hotspots face compounded, multi-typology violence leading to disproportionate risks. The cyclical wave-like nature creates a conflict trap, disrupting recovery and fostering hopelessness. The shift towards climate-driven conflict directly threatens their agrarian livelihoods, deepening their vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that conflict affecting rural youth in Wukari LGA is characterized by protracted duration, spatial concentration in specific multi-typology hotspots, and a temporal evolution from historical identity clashes to contemporary socio-ecological crises. The conflict is not a series of isolated events but an enduring system that adapts and persists. This complex characterization underscores the systemic failure of short-term, palliative conflict management approaches and highlights the acute vulnerability of rural youth caught in this enduring cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the characterization, a three-pronged, adaptive strategy is recommended:

a) State government should prioritize Peacebuilding and youth development resources in identified hotspot wards (Akwana, Bantaje, Chonku, Kente). Interventions should be tailored to the specific conflict mix of each ward (e.g., addressing chieftaincy disputes in Bantaje alongside land dialogue).

b) The shifting triggers must inform early-warning and response systems. This includes reinforcing climate adaptation and resource-sharing mechanisms during periods of environmental stress and enhancing cross-border collaboration with Benue State to mitigate regional spillover.

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