

Human Development Deficits as Drivers Behind Internal Displacement in Nigeria: An Integrative Review

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Article history: Published: August 2026 Keywords: Internal Displacement Human Development Multidimensional Poverty Forced Migration Socioeconomic Vulnerability	In Nigeria, internal displacement is widely described as a security crisis, fueled by insurgency, clashes between farmers and herders, plus banditry. Yet that framing often misses the deeper socio economic fragilities that actually push people out. In this integrative review we try a different angle, looking at how deficits in human development, meaning extreme poverty, educational exclusion, the breakdown of health systems, and livelihood insecurity, act as basic drivers of forced migration, not only as aftermath effects. Pulling together peer reviewed studies from 2015 to 2026, the article builds a conceptual framework based on the human development and capability approach. What emerges is a reinforcing “displacement development trap”. Widespread multidimensional poverty, very high out of school numbers, and dependence on fragile farming that erodes how well communities can cope. Those same shortcomings then heighten how much people face environmental disturbances and violence, and that tends to trigger mass relocation, as a straight up survival route. After that, displacement makes the same deprivations worse, producing a generational loop of durable fragility. The review also argues that military actions and short term humanitarian relief, while necessary in the immediate sense, are not enough. For Nigeria to achieve a lasting and sustainable solution, policymakers have to blend security interventions with a forward looking development plan, and not treat them as two separate things. they should prioritize targeted social protection, accessible schooling, and reliable health services, so that community resilience can grow, and vulnerabilities get addressed before they turn into displacement.

1. Introduction

Internal displacement remains one of Nigeria's most persistent and rather complex humanitarian crises. Over the last decade, the scale, and even the character of internal displacement have expanded quite a lot, pushing millions of Nigerians out of their homes and community life. Most discussions have been focused on security and conflict first. In that framing, the displacement-producing drivers are often linked to the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East (Oghuvbu, 2024), the continuous farmer herder confrontations in the North Central (Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024), broad banditry patterns in the North West, and climate induced disasters, like seasonal flooding, happening across many states (Dauda & Kolo, 2022).

Still, if displacement is explained only through security and conflict lenses it has some big drawbacks. It tends to frame displacement as just the outcome of violence, while at the same time leaving out the deeper socio economic weaknesses that can trigger and then keep the crisis alive (Ghafoori et al., 2025; Weerasinghe, 2026). In this review, the authors bring a human development angle to internal displacement in Nigeria. Attention was given to how poverty, deprivation in education, breakdowns in health services, uneven employment opportunities, and everyday exposure to vulnerability connect and shape the risk of displacement.

This paper focuses on how human development deficits are often not recognized enough as the core underlying causes, for internal displacement, not just as a result of it. In other words, it tries to shift the lens, away from treating displacement as the only starting point and toward seeing these shortfalls as fundamental, in some cases quietly driving the whole situation (Cantor et al., 2026). The reason for doing this integrative review is to pull together scattered studies so we can get a fuller idea of how underdevelopment actually feeds displacement. The primary objective here is to scrutinize the routes by which human development deficits raise exposure to displacement, and also to suggest an integrated structure that reflects the two-way dynamic between underdevelopment and forced migration.

2. Conceptualizing Human Development and Internal Displacement

2.1 Human Development

Human development can be understood as the process where people's freedoms and chances get enlarged and their well-being improves; broadly speaking, this includes more than simple prosperity (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). It goes beyond economic growth and touches multi-dimensional factors, especially income and living conditions, education, along with health. If human development is at a high level, it usually signals strong employment and livelihood opportunities, so that people become more empowered, with the capabilities and freedoms to design a life they really value. In contrast, where human development is weak there are clear gaps, these deficits are essentially deprivations across those key areas, which can severely limit what individuals are able to do and to be (UNDP, 2022).

2.2 Internal Displacement

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are said to be individuals or groups who get forced to leave their own homes to escape the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses, or natural disasters, but who did not cross an internationally recognized State border. This makes internal displacement feel different from refugee movements and also from voluntary economic migration. In Nigeria, the patterns of internal displacement are very regionalized, pushed mainly by insurgency in the northeast (Mamman, 2020), resource conflict in the Middle Belt (Idisi et al., 2026), and environmental decline across different geopolitical zones.

2.3 Linking Human Development Deficits to Displacement

The conceptual linkage starts from human development deficits, which naturally produce vulnerability (Weerasinghe, 2026). When populations don't have enough education, health services, and economic resources, their vulnerability to outside pressures is magnified. This vulnerability then boosts their exposure to insecurity, economic shocks, and climate extremes, and the chain keeps going. In many cases, that exposure leads to the erosion of livelihoods and protective assets. Without a safety net, or the ability to keep earning locally, communities eventually get pushed into displacement as a coping strategy.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Human Development Approach

Built on Amartya Sen's capability outlook, the Human Development Approach claims that poverty and underdevelopment are really about missing capabilities and constrained life choices (UNDP, 2022). When people are unable to access education, health, and reliable economic security, their ability to act becomes narrower. With fewer real options, and less room to maneuver, vulnerability rises fast because the affected groups often do not have the human capital plus the practical resources required to negotiate, or even to endure, major shocks.

3.2 Vulnerability, Resilience Perspective

This view tracks vulnerability at household and community level at the same time. Vulnerability depends on how much people are exposed to hazards, and also on the coping capacity that is already in place (Ghosh & Orchiston, 2022). The presence of social structures and institutions, or their absence, shapes whether the area can take a hit and still remain standing. If development gaps are pronounced, coping capacity tends to be low as well, unfortunately.

3.3 Conflict Development Nexus

The conflict development nexus suggests a back-and-forth relationship:

underdevelopment tends to feed insecurity, then that insecurity pushes deeper development shortfalls. Poverty and a lack of opportunity generate resentments and also reduce the perceived opportunity cost of joining armed or unlawful groups, which ends up triggering conflict (Dan-Azumi, 2025). Once conflict starts it can break down infrastructure and social services, keep the loop going as a bad spiral.

3.4 Proposed Integrative Framework

This review puts forward one central analytical feedback loop:

Human development deficits → diminished capabilities and resilience → greater exposure to insecurity and shocks → livelihood loss → displacement → further human development deficits.

The idea is that displacement is both a consequence of pre existing deprivations, and at the same time it becomes a driver for more underdevelopment.

4. Methodology

4.1 Review Design

An integrative literature review design was used, to pull together multiple strands of evidence, from qualitative findings, quantitative results, and theoretical writing, so that it can more fully explore complex phenomena and, also help in creating fresh conceptual models, from what was found.

4.2 Search Strategy, Terms, Criteria, and Extraction

The literature search was carried out in major academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and AJOL). Boolean operator strings were used, aiming at human development, poverty, education, and displacement in Nigeria. The studies retained were peer reviewed, tied to Nigeria, 2015 to 2026, and able to be synthesized in a way that still respects the local context.

4.3 Quality Appraisal

For the methodological quality check, the authors examined how strong the research design was, whether the findings were valid, and if the claims still matched the Nigerian context. The authors relied on updated quality reporting guidelines for systematic and integrative reviews (Page et al., 2021). With that approach, the authors could identify, quite precisely, the existing evidence gaps that still remain uncovered.

5. Thematic Findings: Human Development Deficits as mechanisms that Trigger Displacement

5.1 Theme 1: Poverty and Material Deprivation

Nigeria is dealing with a major multidimensional poverty crisis, and it is even more intense in rural areas (NBS, 2022). When households are economically weak, they struggle to craft meaningful safety cushions. Poverty is basically the foundation of displacement risk, it reduces household resilience in a direct way, so a family cannot properly withstand shocks like a failed harvest or a nearby militant attack (IDMC, 2021). Because of that, poverty drives people into overreliance on livelihoods that are already very fragile. When fighting or disasters arrive, the plain absence of savings and financial buffers means flight becomes, in practice, the primary survival option.

5.2 Theme 2: Educational Deficits and Youth Vulnerability

Access to quality education still does not feel evenly shared, Nigeria continues to host millions of children who are out of school. This educational imbalance is already embedded in places that later end up facing the heaviest conflict. When young people are without learning opportunities, they miss the practical know-hows needed for formal work, and then the odds rise that they are pulled into armed groups or banditry, which in turn helps push communities into instability and displacement. In addition, when insurgents in northern Nigeria close schools on purpose, it becomes a direct spark for households to move away, because families run in search of safer conditions for their children (Mamman, 2020; Oghuvbu, 2024).

5.3 Theme 3: Health Deprivation and Psychosocial Impacts

In many rural, and also conflict-prone, places the healthcare infrastructure is mostly absent, or it just does not function. With inadequate healthcare and high disease susceptibility, people basically cannot muster the strength to respond to health emergencies. When epidemics or violent shocks hit an already fragile health system, the fact that life-saving care is not reachable pushes households into mass movement toward safer and more urbanized areas (Emmanuel et al., 2026). Also, the intense mental health burden reported among terror survivors breaks community ties and ties that keep social life together, and then displacement becomes more like a permanent mechanism than a temporary coping move (Olufadewa et al., 2022).

5.4 Theme 4: Employment, Livelihood Insecurity, and Climate Vulnerability

With soaring youth unemployment and a heavy reliance on informal, rain-fed farming, livelihoods in Nigeria are incredibly fragile. Agricultural vulnerability is a key cause behind displacement in the Middle Belt and the North-West (Dan-Azumi, 2025). When rural households suddenly lose access to fields due to desertification, along with livestock losses tied to banditry, then their economic anchor is, basically, cut off and people end up moving right away (Idisi et al., 2026; Ndashiru et al., 2026). Environmental degradation often wipes out housing and crops too, so it generates big groups of environmental IDPs who do not have the funds to rebuild their lives (Dauda & Kolo, 2022).

5.5 Theme 5: Infrastructure, Governance Gaps, and Unequal Space in Nigeria

Deficits in critical infrastructure including clean water, road networks, and electricity do hamper day-to-day human well-being (UN-Habitat, 2024). This is made worse by public institutions that are weak, also by limited social protection tools. When regional security keeps going downhill, the reduced institutional footprint leaves room for ungoverned spaces where armed groups can thrive, and not just temporarily. Displacement is really tied to local spatial inequalities (World Bank, 2026). Households with more wealth can secure safer, planned migration, but poorer households in conflict-affected and under-governed areas get pushed into chaotic, forced displacement instead.

5.6 Theme 6: Fragility and Poverty Trends (2015–2025)

To give this picture proper context, it matters to look at how state fragility metrics converge with poverty indicators. Table 1 shows the structural weaknesses that sit underneath Nigeria's displacement problems.

Table 1: Fragile State Ranking and Poverty Indicators in Nigeria (2015–2025)

Year	FSI Score (Max 120)	FSI Rank	Poverty Indicator / Data Milestone
2015	102.4	14th	Sustained post-recession economic vulnerability.
2016	103.5	13th	Highest recorded state fragility score of the decade.
2017	101.6	13th	Multidimensional Poverty Intensity peak at 41.9%.
2018	99.9	13th	National monetary poverty rate estimated at 40.1%.
2019	98.5	14th	34.7% living in extreme poverty (\$3.00/day line).
2020	97.3	14th	Severe macro-economic shocks exacerbating livelihoods.
2021	98.0	12th	Multidimensional Poverty Intensity marginally drops to 40.9%.
2022	97.2	16th	63.0% (133 million) multidimensionally poor (MPI).
2023	98.0	15th	Extreme poverty (\$3.00/day) rises to 41.8%.
2024	96.6	16th	Ongoing inflation pressures projecting poverty above 50%.
2025	N/A	N/A	Projected over 52.5% of the population living in poverty.

Source: Fund for Peace 2024, and NBS 2022

(Note: FSI = Fragile States Index, higher scores mean stronger fragility. Rank means global placement among roughly 179 countries.)

6. The Nigerian Displacement, Development Trap

6.1 From development gaps to displacement

As laid out, low human development feeds vulnerability. In practice, this lowers the margin at which a community can take in any shock. Small economic tremors, climatic disturbances, or security pressure can quickly turn into big crises, making onward movement inevitable (Cantor et al., 2026).

6.2 From Displacement to Development Gaps

Once people are displaced, they slip into another phase of intense deprivation. Hunger risk and joblessness rise sharply in IDP settings, alongside the complete loss of shelter, this then erodes physical wellbeing and mental health too (Olufadewa et al., 2022; Oghuvbu, 2024).

6.3 The repeating Cycle

Displacement is not a linear result really; it is a reinforcing cycle that keeps thickening the same deficits that were already there, like a self-closed loop (Ghafoori et al., 2025). When childhood schooling is disrupted in camps, that next generation ends up missing key

capacities and human capital (Mamman, 2020) and then dependency deepens, which in turn keeps the displacement cycle active for the future.

7. Integrative Synthesis of the Evidence

7.1 Evidence Pathways and Displacement Matrix

By organizing the evidence conceptually, you can see separate routes that link particular human development shortfalls to displacement. Table 2 pulls these dimensions together, showing that poverty, educational marginalization, and governance failures tend to forecast vulnerability to external shocks, and in the end they determine which displacement pathway happens.

Table 2: Dimensions of Human Development Deficits and Their Pathways to Internal Displacement in Nigeria

Human Development Deficit	Indicators & Manifestations	Immediate Vulnerability	Displacement Pathway	Core References
Poverty & Material Deprivation	63% Multidimensional poverty; lack of financial buffers	Low coping capacity; inability to absorb economic shocks	Forced movement following minor climatic or security disruptions	IDMC, 2021; NBS, 2022
Educational Deficits	High out-of-school rates; targeted destruction of schools	Youth vulnerability; limited formal sector employability	Household flight to secure children; youth recruitment into armed groups	Oghuvbu, 2024; Mendenhall, 2026
Health System Failure	Poor rural primary care; endemic parasitic infections	Low physical and psychosocial resilience	Relocation to urban centers for care during epidemics or violent shocks	Olufadewa et al., 2022; Emmanuel et al., 2026
Livelihood Insecurity	Reliance on rain-fed agriculture; loss of farmland	Economic fragility; vulnerability to climate shocks	Complete livelihood collapse necessitating urgent mass relocation	Dauda & Kolo, 2022; Ndashiru et al., 2026
Governance & Institutional Deficits	Weak conflict resolution; collapse of local safety nets	Absence of physical protection in ungoverned spaces	Escalation of resource conflicts triggering mass communal flight	Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024; World Bank, 2026

8. Discussion

8.1 Principal Findings

The overall integrated evidence, it seems, points to human development deficits as the basic scaffolding of internal displacement in Nigeria (Cantor et al., 2026). Security threats work like a spark, but poverty, low education, and livelihood insecurity function as the flammable fuel that makes things escalate.

8.2 Human Development as a Root Cause

This review pushes back on the usual frameworks that treat displacement as if it were only a security, or humanitarian, issue. When displacement is viewed through a developmental lens then it becomes evident that underdevelopment, in practice, creates the main conditions that lead to forced migration (Ghafoori et al., 2025).

8.3 Interaction Between Development and Security

Since insecurity is reinforced a lot by underdevelopment, military action without matching development intervention, tends to quiet violence briefly, while the deeper drivers remain in place (Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024).

8.4 Implications for Nigeria

Nigeria has to urgently bring together its policy reactions by getting human development aligned with conflict prevention and also institutional strengthening (Oghuvbu, 2024). Education plus healthcare ought to be seen, at the core of it, as strategies meant to stop displacement before it spreads.

8.5 Implications for displaced people

For those already living as IDPs, there needs to be a more deliberate change away from only immediate humanitarian relief and toward long-run recovery, durable housing, and the strengthening of resilience, so camps do not become a forever option (UN-Habitat, 2024).

9. Policy and practice implications

- Poverty reduction: policy must move toward targeted social protection schemes, and rural economic development, in order to give fragile families some real financial cushioning (NBS, 2022).
- Education: safeguarding schools in conflict areas is absolutely crucial, so funding should be directed heavily toward alternative learning routes, as well as vocational programs (Mendenhall, 2026).
- Health Care: This is a critical intervention involving constructing resilience in primary health care at the rural level and integrating mental health support into the day-to-day health care of communities at risk.
- Sustainable Livelihoods: Support needs to integrate climate- smart farming with other supports and includes rural employment generation because if people get jobs in these lands, they are attached to their areas and feel like they are not dislodged by their lands (Pjpwa & Ndashiru, 2026).

- Governance and Institutional Development: This inter alia demand for better public service delivery, stronger local governance so that mediation can happen especially in disputes over resources (Fund For Peace, 2024).
- Enduring Solutions: Policies should go beyond just temporary camps, and it will have to move towards local integration through resettlement that can be supported, plus a fair recovery process that becomes real, and lasting over time (World Bank, 2026).

10. Research gaps, and future research

Even with a growing body of work, a few gaps remain, and they are persistent. For instance, longitudinal evidence that actually tracks how human development shortfalls interact over time, to increase the odds of displacement, is still limited (Cantor et al., 2026; World Bank, 2019). Another challenge is that household-level evidence on socioeconomic tipping points tied to flight is not enough yet (World Bank, 2019). Also, education and health are often treated as downstream results, rather than as protective inputs, or as investments that can be reinforced before displacement pressure ramps up (Ghafoori et al., 2025; Mendenhall, 2026; Cantor et al., 2021). There is also a need for more integrated probing of how climate vulnerability maps onto, broader development trajectories (Garip & Reed, 2025; Ghosh & Orchiston, 2022; Weerasinghe, 2026). In addition we still need gender and age disaggregated evidence, to sort out how different groups face different displacement threats (Benelli et al., 2012; World Bank, 2026). Lastly, there is an urgent requirement for more rigorous evaluation to see whether development interventions really reduce displacement risk in practice (UN-Habitat, 2024; World Bank, 2019).

11. Conclusion

Internal displacement in Nigeria is often, maybe a bit too much, understood only as something that happens when armed conflict and general insecurity are present. However this review shows displacement is connected to a broader human development emergency, not only to immediate violence. Real gaps in poverty reduction, education services, health systems, livelihood options, and governance do more than leave people vulnerable to shocks. They also contribute to the insecurity that later, sparks mass movement. Because of that the response should not stay in the same lane. If the goal is to stop forced migration, then development-led steps need to stand beside traditional security measures and humanitarian responses, with equal urgency.

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