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Secessionist Agitation And Human Insecurity In South East Nigeria, 2015-2025

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ABSTRACT
Secessionist agitation had remained a major political and security challenge in South-East Nigeria, driven by historical grievances, perceived political marginalisation, socioeconomic inequalities and dissatisfaction with the Nigerian federal structure. This study examined the relationship between secessionist agitation and human insecurity in South-East Nigeria from 2015 to 2025. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design and generated primary data through structured questionnaires and key informant interviews, while secondary data were obtained from scholarly and documentary sources. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages and mean scores, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The study was anchored on Relative Deprivation Theory. Findings revealed that perceived structural imbalance, political exclusion, infrastructural neglect and unresolved post-Civil War grievances had significantly contributed to secessionist agitation. It further found that socioeconomic deprivation and contentious security responses had intensified grievances, while associated violence and sit-at-home disruptions had adversely affected personal safety, livelihoods, mobility, political participation and community stability. The study recommended inclusive political dialogue, equitable representation and resource distribution, accelerated infrastructural development, and rights-based security responses. It concluded that addressing underlying grievances alongside human-security concerns had remained essential for sustainable peace and national integration.
Keywords: Human insecurity, relative deprivation, IPOB, secessionist agitations, south-east

INTRODUCTION
Nigeria's experience of secessionist agitation is deeply rooted in the country's historical process of state formation, ethnic diversity, political competition and uneven distribution of political and economic opportunities. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates created a single colonial entity comprising peoples with diverse political systems, histories and identities. These differences continued after independence in 1960, interacting with struggles over political power, resource distribution, regional inequalities and perceptions of marginalisation. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), precipitated by the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, represented the most violent manifestation of these contradictions. Although the war ended with Biafra's reintegration into Nigeria, questions concerning political inclusion, federal balance, distributive justice and national identity have persisted, particularly in South-East Nigeria.

Contemporary Biafran agitation is principally associated with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which emerged in 2012 and became increasingly prominent from 2015. While historical memories of the Civil War remain important, contemporary separatist mobilisation cannot be explained solely by the Biafran experience. Perceptions of political exclusion, ethnic marginalisation, socioeconomic inequalities and dissatisfaction with Nigerian democracy have contributed to support for secession. Tuki (2024), for instance, found that perceived ethnic marginalisation and negative perceptions of Nigerian democracy significantly correlate with support for secession. Thus, contemporary Biafran agitation reflects both historical grievances and continuing concerns regarding citizenship, political representation, distributive justice and the legitimacy of the Nigerian state.

The year 2015 constitutes a significant turning point in the contemporary trajectory of the agitation. The arrest of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu in October 2015 intensified mobilisation and transformed the Biafran question into a major political and security issue. Thereafter, IPOB increasingly employed protests, demonstrations, media campaigns and demands for a referendum, while the Nigerian government responded through arrests, restrictions, military deployments and other security measures. Osimen et al. (2024) identify Kanu's arrest as an important catalyst in the escalation of the agitation and its consequences for human security.

The state's response further shaped the character of the conflict. In September 2017, the Federal Government proscribed IPOB and designated it a terrorist organisation, thereby reinforcing a predominantly security-oriented approach to the agitation. Nwangwu (2023) argues that persistent state repression, including proscription, arrests, military operations and other coercive measures, contributed to the transformation of neo-Biafran separatism from predominantly non-violent mobilisation towards more militant resistance. The establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) by IPOB in December 2020 further complicated the security environment. This period coincided with increasing attacks on security personnel and public institutions, the emergence of actors popularly described as "unknown gunmen," criminal violence and intensified counter-security operations.

Importantly, insecurity in the South-East should not be attributed exclusively to IPOB or ESN. It has developed through a complex interaction of separatist mobilisation, state responses, criminality, communal tensions, political grievances and institutional weaknesses. This complexity makes human security particularly relevant to the analysis. The human-security approach shifts attention from the traditional protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity to the protection of individuals and communities from threats to their survival, livelihoods and dignity. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) identifies seven dimensions of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.

Within this framework, secessionist agitation and the associated security responses have consequences beyond armed confrontation. Personal security may be undermined by killings, kidnapping, attacks and fear of victimisation; economic security may deteriorate through disruptions to markets, transportation, investment and employment; while political security may be weakened by intimidation, violence and restrictions on civic participation. Community security may similarly decline where prolonged violence produces fear, displacement, distrust and social fragmentation. Egobueze, Ogele, and Wilcox (2022), in examining pipeline vandalism and human security in Rivers State, demonstrate the broader relevance of understanding insecurity beyond threats to the state by considering its implications for livelihoods, economic wellbeing and community stability. Similarly, Didia, Akujuru, and Egobueze (2026) emphasise that insecurity can undermine human life, economic activities and socioeconomic development where governance and institutional responses remain weak.

One of the clearest manifestations of human insecurity associated with the agitation is the sit-at-home phenomenon. Repeated restrictions on movement have periodically disrupted markets, businesses, schools, transportation and other socioeconomic activities across parts of the South-East. Such disruptions particularly affect informal-sector workers and small-scale businesses dependent on daily commercial activities. Beyond economic consequences, prolonged insecurity can weaken confidence in public institutions. Where citizens perceive state security agencies as instruments of coercion rather than

protection, trust in government may decline; similarly, where non-state actors enforce compliance through intimidation or violence, the authority and legitimacy of formal institutions may be undermined.

Existing empirical studies increasingly recognise these multidimensional consequences. Osimen *et al*. (2024) establish a relationship between IPOB-related agitation and human security, while Nwangwu (2023) links state repression and changing separatist strategies to worsening insecurity. More broadly, Egobueze (2021) demonstrates that sustainable conflict management requires institutional engagement beyond conventional coercive responses, highlighting the importance of governance institutions in addressing conflict. Egobueze, Amadi, and Chukwumah (2024) similarly demonstrate the relevance of community-based security and conflict-management structures in addressing local insecurity. These studies reinforce the argument that insecurity is not simply a military problem but also a governance, institutional and human-security challenge.

Nevertheless, an important gap remains. Much of the existing literature concentrates separately on the causes of Biafran agitation, government responses to IPOB, state repression, sit-at-home orders or violent attacks. Although Osimen et al. (2024) explicitly examine secessionist agitation and human security, there remains scope for a systematic longitudinal analysis of **s**ecessionist agitation as the independent variable and human insecurity as a multidimensional dependent variable across the decade 2015–2025. Such an approach moves beyond fatalities and armed confrontations to investigate effects on personal safety, livelihoods, economic activities, political participation and community stability.

The period **2015–2025** is therefore analytically significant. It begins with Kanu's arrest and the intensification of IPOB mobilisation in 2015, encompasses IPOB's proscription in 2017, the establishment of ESN in 2020, subsequent armed violence, sit-at-home disruptions and state counter-security operations, and extends through 2025. It consequently provides a ten-year period for assessing changes in separatist mobilisation and their relationship with human insecurity.

Against this background, the study examined the relationship between secessionist agitation and human insecurity in South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2025, with particular attention to the structural, political and socioeconomic conditions that sustained separatist mobilisation and their implications for the security and wellbeing of the population. Accordingly, the study was guided by this research question:

What structural, political and socioeconomic factors accounted for the persistence of secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2025?

In addressing this question, the study focused on how perceived political marginalisation, structural inequalities, socioeconomic deprivation, unresolved historical grievances and state responses contributed to the persistence of secessionist agitation. It further examined the implications of these dynamics for personal security, economic livelihoods, political participation and community stability. In doing so, the study sought to deepen understanding of the human-security consequences of contemporary separatist politics and provide an empirical basis for assessing the extent to which predominantly state-centred security responses addressed the multidimensional insecurity experienced by communities in South-East Nigeria.

Theoretical framework: Relative Deprivation Theory

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Relative Deprivation Theory, complemented by Human Security Theory. The concept of relative deprivation is generally traced to Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues' 1949 study of American soldiers, which demonstrated that perceptions of deprivation are shaped not necessarily by objective material conditions but by comparisons with relevant reference groups. Stouffer observed that members of the U.S. Army Air Corps expressed greater dissatisfaction with promotion opportunities than military police personnel, despite experiencing comparatively higher promotion rates. This apparent paradox demonstrated that satisfaction or deprivation depends substantially on expectations and social comparison rather than absolute conditions (Pettigrew, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). The theory has subsequently become important in explaining grievances, collective mobilisation, political protest and political violence.

Relative deprivation refers to the perceived discrepancy between what individuals or groups believe they are entitled to and what they actually possess or can realistically attain. Osimen, Daudu, and Awogu-Maduagwu (2023) describe relative deprivation in terms of inadequate access to resources considered necessary for maintaining the standard of living expected within a particular socioeconomic group. Consequently, deprivation is not necessarily synonymous with absolute poverty. Individuals or groups may possess considerable resources but still experience deprivation when they compare their circumstances with those of other groups perceived to enjoy greater opportunities, recognition, status or political influence.

The theory was developed more explicitly within the study of political violence by Ted Robert Gurr (1970) in *Why Men Rebel*. Gurr conceptualises relative deprivation as the perceived discrepancy between people's value expectations—the goods, conditions and opportunities to which they believe they are entitled—and their value capabilities, or what they believe they can realistically obtain and maintain. Where the gap between expectations and capabilities becomes substantial, frustration and resentment may develop. Under particular political and social conditions, accumulated grievances may contribute to collective protest, rebellion or political violence.

Relative deprivation may assume economic, social or political dimensions. Economic deprivation may arise from perceived inequalities in employment, infrastructure, income or access to economic opportunities. Political deprivation may involve perceived exclusion from political representation, decision-making institutions or access to state power, while social deprivation may emerge from perceived discrimination, unequal recognition or threats to group identity. Accordingly, what matters theoretically is not simply whether inequality objectively exists, but whether individuals and groups perceive existing arrangements as unfair in comparison with relevant reference groups.

This distinction makes Relative Deprivation Theory particularly useful in political science and conflict studies. It has been employed to analyse collective protest, ethnic conflict, political violence, terrorism, insurgency and separatist movements. Gurr (1970) argues that sustained discrepancies between expectations and capabilities can produce frustration, which may generate aggression against institutions or actors perceived as responsible for deprivation. Structural inequalities may reinforce these perceptions where political institutions, historical experiences and resource-allocation systems are viewed as systematically disadvantaging particular communities.

The theory is particularly relevant to the analysis of contemporary secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria. The emergence and persistence of organisations such as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have frequently been associated with perceptions of political marginalisation, economic inequality, inadequate federal representation and unresolved grievances arising from Nigeria's Civil War and post-war political arrangements. Contemporary studies have similarly employed relative deprivation perspectives in examining politics and armed struggle in South-East Nigeria (Ishak et al., 2025).

Applied to the present study, the theory suggests that secessionist agitation may develop when individuals or groups perceive a substantial discrepancy between their expectations of political inclusion, economic opportunities, infrastructure, representation and social recognition and what they believe they actually receive within the Nigerian federation. IPOB supporters, for example, have articulated grievances concerning political representation, federal appointments, infrastructure, economic opportunities and the treatment of the South-East within Nigeria's political structure. Whether every aspect of these claims can be objectively established is analytically different from the question of whether such perceptions influence political behaviour. Relative Deprivation Theory places particular emphasis on the latter.

The theory therefore helps explain how perceptions of marginalisation may become transformed into collective political mobilisation. Where members of a community repeatedly compare their political representation, infrastructural development or access to state institutions with those of other regions, perceived inequalities may generate resentment and reinforce demands for political change. Ugwueze et al. (2020) associate contemporary Biafran separatism with questions of political inclusion and economic integration, while other studies connect pro-Biafran mobilisation with unresolved post-Civil War

grievances and perceptions of exclusion. From this perspective, demands for Biafran self-determination may be understood partly as attempts to address perceived discrepancies between expected and experienced political, economic and social conditions.

Relative Deprivation Theory also provides insight into why historical grievances may persist across generations. The Nigerian Civil War ended in 1970, yet memories and interpretations of the conflict continue to influence contemporary political narratives. Where subsequent generations perceive current inequalities through historical experiences of war, exclusion or discrimination, past grievances may become incorporated into contemporary claims. Political entrepreneurs and social movements may similarly frame present conditions through historical narratives, strengthening group solidarity and collective mobilisation.

However, Relative Deprivation Theory has important limitations. Most significantly, perceived deprivation does not automatically produce rebellion or political violence. Many individuals and communities experiencing substantial economic or political inequalities do not participate in violent movements. Conversely, some individuals who participate in collective movements may not personally experience severe deprivation. The theory therefore does not fully explain the intervening roles of political leadership, ideology, organisational capacity, opportunity structures, state responses and individual choices in transforming grievances into mobilisation. It may also overemphasise grievance while giving insufficient attention to institutional and strategic factors that determine whether dissatisfaction results in peaceful protest, political participation or violence.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Relative Deprivation Theory is particularly appropriate for the present study because it provides a framework for explaining the grievance and mobilisation dimension of secessionist agitation. The theory enables the study to examine how perceived political exclusion, economic inequality, inadequate representation and historical grievances may influence the emergence and persistence of separatist mobilisation in South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. It consequently provides the theoretical connection between perceived deprivation and the study's independent variable—secessionist agitation.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between secessionist agitation and human insecurity in South-East Nigeria from 2015 to 2025. The study covered the five states of the South-East geopolitical zone—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Primary data were generated through a structured questionnaire administered to selected respondents and key informant interviews conducted with participants considered knowledgeable about secessionist agitation and security conditions in the region. The questionnaire elicited respondents' perceptions of the structural, political and socioeconomic drivers of secessionist agitation and its implications for human security, while the interviews provided deeper explanations of issues relating to political marginalisation, infrastructural development, resource distribution, historical grievances, state security responses and socioeconomic conditions. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly journal articles, books, official documents, reports of relevant institutions and credible human-rights and security reports relating to IPOB, separatist agitation and insecurity in South-East Nigeria.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies, percentages and mean scores, to establish patterns in respondents' perceptions of the variables investigated. The qualitative data obtained from the key informant interviews were analysed thematically and used to explain, corroborate and contextualise the quantitative findings, while documentary evidence was subjected to content analysis. The integration of questionnaire responses, interviews and documentary sources provided methodological triangulation and strengthened the interpretation of the findings. The analysis was guided by Relative Deprivation Theory : the former provided the framework for explaining how perceived political exclusion, socioeconomic inequalities and unmet expectations could generate secessionist grievances, while the latter facilitated assessment of the consequences of agitation and

associated state responses for personal safety, economic livelihoods, political participation and community security. This methodological approach enabled the study to establish the nature and dimensions of the relationship between secessionist agitation and human insecurity in South-East Nigeria during the 2015–2025 period.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The initial part of the document involved demographic analysis of the questionnaires distributed and collected and the second part involves analysis of the responses to the basic issues brought out by the study using mean value analysis and hypothesis testing.

Presentation of Data

Table 1: Socio-demographic Analysis of Response Rate

Administration of Questionnaires	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Number of questionnaires administered	400	100
Number of questionnaires not returned	50	13
Number of questionnaires retrieved	350	87
Number of questionnaires valid for the study	350	87

Source: Field Work, 2026

The table above revealed that out of the 400 questionnaires that were administered to respondents, 13 respondents making 3% of the questionnaires were not returned, 350 respondents representing 87% were successfully completed, retrieved and valid for proper analysis. The response rate is 87% and this is a mark of excellence for the study.

Table 2: Socio-demographic Analysis of Returned/Valid Questionnaires

Administration of Questionnaires	Questionnaire Distributed	Returned Questionnaire
Youth Groups	100	80
CDC	100	95
NGOs	100	90
Security Agent	100	85
Total	400	350

Source: Field Work, 2026

Data in table 2 above revealed that out of the 350 questionnaires, 80 questionnaires were returned out of 100 that were administered to youths. Also, 95 questionnaires were returned out of 100 that were administered to CDC. Meanwhile, 90 returned out of 100 questionnaires that were administered to NGOs while 85 returned out of 100 questionnaires that were administered to security agents. The response rate of total questionnaires returned is 87% which is a mark of excellence for the study.

Table 3: Demographic Analysis of Gender

Gender of Respondents	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	220	63
Female	130	37
Total	350	100

Source: Field Work, 2026

Table 3 above showed that 220 respondents representing 63% are male while 130 respondents representing 37% are female. This indicates that the majority of the respondents are male. Irrespective of their genders, their responses do not in any way interfere with the outcomes of the study as they were not biased in their views.

Table 4: Socio-demographic Analysis of Academic Background

Educational Qualifications	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
PSLC/SSCE	100	29
HND/BSc/PGD	200	57
MSc/MPA/MBA/PhD	50	14
Total	350	100

Source: Field Work, 2026

From the table above, it was evident that the educational attainment of the respondents is as follows; 100 respondents making 29% are holders of FSLC/SSCE, 200 respondents making 57% are holders of Higher National Diploma (HND)/Bachelor of Science (BSc) and Postgraduate Diploma (PGD) while 50 respondents making 14% are holders of Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Master of Science (M.Sc)/Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D). This indicates that the respondents have adequate information about successionist agitations and human insecurity in south east, Nigeria.

DATA ANALYSES

Research Question 1: **What structural, political, and socio-economic factors account for the persistence of secessionist agitations in South-East Nigeria (2015–2025)?**

Table 5: Computational analysis of the structural, political, and socio-economic factors which account for the persistence of secessionist agitations in South-East Nigeria

S/N	Variables	Respondent Responses						
		No	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	$\bar{X}$	Remark
1	The absence of the practice of true federalism that recognizes all groups and their agitations.	350	148 (42%)	180 (51%)	11 (3%)	11 (3%)	3.3	Agreed
2	The exclusion of certain groups in political representation contributes to successionist agitations in Nigeria.	350	161 (46%)	98 (28%)	51 (15%)	40 (11%)	3.1	Agreed
3	Sectionalism and marginalization have fuelled successionist agitations in different regions of Nigeria.	350	20 (6%)	16 (5%)	228 (65%)	86 (25%)	1.9	Disagree
4	Ethnicity and tribal interest are major triggers of successionist agitations.	350	196 (56%)	110 (31%)	24 (7%)	20 (6%)	3.4	Agreed
5	Suppression of peoples' rights by security forces has led to successionist agitation in the south east.	350	5 (1%)	55 (16%)	230 (66%)	60 (17%)	2.01	Disagree

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2026

Table 5 shows the mean ratings of respondents on the structural, political and socio-economic factors that contribute to the continuance of secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria. The results show the views of respondents on the structural, political and socio-economic factors that contribute to the continuance of secessionist agitation in Nigeria.

The lack of true federalism that takes into account all groups and their demands. A large number of respondents (42% strongly agreed, 51% agreed) stated that lack of true federalism that takes into account all groups and their demands, with a mean rating of 3.3, implying that there was high agreement among the respondents on lack of true federalism that takes into account all groups and their demands resulting in successionist agitations. The above result reveals that lack of true federalism that takes into account all groups and their demands is an important factor that resulted in successionist agitations in south east, Nigeria.

Political exclusion of some groups has been cited as a cause of successionist agitations in Nigeria, with a mean rating of 3.1. While 46% of the respondents strongly agreed, 28% agreed to the notion that political exclusion of some groups has been a cause of successionist agitations in Nigeria.

Unlike political exclusion of some groups, which has fuelled successionist agitations in Nigeria, sectionalism and marginalization have not fuelled any form of successionist agitations in different regions of Nigeria. A high proportion of the respondents (65% disagreed, 25% strongly disagreed) rated this statement unfavourably; hence, a low mean rating of 1.9. This means that sectionalism and marginalization have not fuelled successionist agitations in different regions of Nigeria.

It is apparent that Ethnicity and tribal interest are triggers of successionist agitations with a mean of 3.4. Fifty-six percent of the respondents agreed, while 31% strongly agreed that Ethnicity and tribal interest are triggers of successionist agitations.

Lastly, the suppression of people's rights by the security forces is one factor responsible for successionist agitation in the south east and was perceived negatively. With an average score of 2.01, most people (66% disagree, 17% strongly disagree) feel that the suppression of people's rights by the security forces has not contributed to successionist agitation in the south east.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Structural, Political and Socioeconomic Factors Accounting for Secessionist Agitations in South-East Nigeria

The findings reveal that secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria is associated with interconnected structural, political and socioeconomic grievances, particularly perceptions of defective federalism, political marginalisation, infrastructural neglect, unequal distribution of resources, unresolved post-Civil War grievances and the conduct of security agencies. The quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that these factors have reinforced perceptions of relative deprivation and alienation, thereby providing an enabling environment for separatist mobilisation.

The survey findings show that 42% of respondents strongly agreed and 51% agreed, with a mean score of 3.3, that the absence of what respondents considered "true federalism" capable of recognising the interests and grievances of Nigeria's constituent groups contributes to secessionist agitation. This suggests that respondents perceive the structure and operation of Nigerian federalism as an important factor underlying separatist mobilisation. This finding corresponds with recent studies that identify political exclusion, perceived marginalisation and governance deficiencies among the factors sustaining Biafran separatism (Nwangwu et al., 2020; Okojie & Onuoha, 2024).

Infrastructural neglect also emerged prominently from the qualitative evidence. Participants associated deteriorating federal roads and inadequate major infrastructure with perceptions of regional marginalisation. One respondent stated:

> "Another important structural issue is that of infrastructural neglect. Our government has been politicizing our welfare. Our highways are dilapidated; we are marginalized. There is no functional infrastructure development by the federal government in the south east.

> They have promised us seaports and international airports, but unfortunately, these promises are unfulfilled. These are some of the structural issues that have resulted in successionist movements in our area" (P. Onwubia, personal communication, May 25, 2026).

The significance of this response lies less in establishing objectively that the South-East is uniquely deprived of infrastructure than in demonstrating how perceived infrastructural inequality shapes political attitudes. Relative Deprivation Theory emphasises that political grievances are influenced by comparison between what groups believe they should receive and what they perceive themselves as actually receiving. Recent research similarly identifies material deprivation, relative marginalisation and perceived governance failure as recurring explanations for contemporary Biafran mobilisation (Adekunle et al., 2024; Nwangwu, 2023).

Historical grievances arising from the Nigerian Civil War and its aftermath also remain significant. Respondents' perceptions suggest that the Federal Government's post-war programme of Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (the Three Rs) has not been regarded as fully addressing the socioeconomic and infrastructural consequences of the conflict. The declaration of "No Victor, No Vanquished" was intended to facilitate national reconciliation, but its implementation has remained contested. Achebe (2012) argues that aspects of Nigeria's post-war treatment of the former Biafran region contributed to enduring perceptions of exclusion. More recent research similarly identifies unresolved historical grievances, failed nationalism, marginalisation and coercive state responses as factors sustaining contemporary separatist agitation (Adeforiti & Abang, 2024).

Political marginalisation was another major theme emerging from the findings. Respondents frequently connected contemporary agitation with perceptions of unequal representation within the federation. Particular attention was drawn to the South-East having five states, compared with six in most other geopolitical zones. An interviewee explained:

> "One cause of successionist disturbance is their marginalization politically. South eastern part of Nigeria has been marginalized and thus have only five states, while the other parts of the nation have six states. This is the criterion according to which the Nigerian government is marginalizing us. This is also resulting in an imbalance of powers in the country" (E. Okonkwo, personal communication, May 25, 2026).

This perception has implications beyond the numerical distribution of states because Nigeria's federal arrangements connect states and local government structures to political representation and aspects of resource distribution. The finding is consistent with Nwangwu *et al.* (2020), who locate post-war Igbo nationalism and Biafran separatism within Nigeria's political economy and the struggle over inclusion, power and resources. Recent research on public perceptions of Biafran movements also identifies political marginalisation, selective appointments, exclusion and perceived inequities in national political structures among important grievances associated with separatist mobilisation.

The findings therefore lend support to Relative Deprivation Theory, which explains collective political grievances through perceived discrepancies between expectations and actual opportunities. Where citizens believe that comparable regions enjoy greater political representation, infrastructure, resources or access to federal institutions, perceptions of relative deprivation may intensify. Such perceptions do not automatically produce secessionism, but they may create grievances that political movements mobilise and transform into collective demands.

Socioeconomic conditions constitute another important dimension. Participants associated unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, declining economic opportunities and perceived inequalities in resource distribution with increasing dissatisfaction. Contemporary studies similarly connect Biafran mobilisation with material deprivation and perceptions of economic exclusion. Osimen et al. (2024) argue that IPOB agitation cannot be separated from underlying grievances concerning marginalisation and socioeconomic conditions, while recent research on social injustice and Biafran movements identifies deprivation, unequal political representation and exclusion as important elements shaping public perceptions of separatist agitation.

However, the relationship between socioeconomic grievance and secessionism should not be interpreted deterministically. Poverty or unemployment alone does not necessarily generate separatist movements. Rather, the evidence suggests that economic difficulties become politically significant when they are interpreted within broader narratives of regional discrimination, political exclusion and historical injustice. In this respect, socioeconomic grievances interact with political and identity-based factors.

The study further found that the conduct of security agencies is perceived as an important factor in the escalation of separatist agitation. Survey evidence showed that 338 respondents, with a mean score of 3.47, associated violations of fundamental rights by security forces with armed conflict in the South-East. An interview participant explained:

> "Many of the people living within the region have suffered violations at the hands of the same security agencies that are supposed to safeguard lives and property. First, the extra-judicial detention of Nnamdi Kanu is unconstitutional. Secondly, our innocent people are being detained without charge and are denied an opportunity to receive a fair trial in open court. Thirdly, the majority of those young people who have been killed are innocent. It is true that the government of Nigeria moves slowly in ensuring equal representation in government and structural balance but fast when it comes to using military measures in dealing with issues in the south eastern part of the country. Such an unwarranted and illegal arrest along with the attitude of the government towards our airlines is clear indication of armed struggle and secessionism resulting in human insecurity within the region."

The interview represents the participant's perception and should therefore not be interpreted as independent verification of each allegation. Nevertheless, it illustrates how security operations may influence perceptions of state legitimacy. Nwangwu (2023) argues that coercive state responses to neo-Biafran mobilisation contributed to the transition from predominantly non-violent agitation towards more confrontational forms of resistance. More recent scholarship similarly identifies state violence alongside relative marginalisation and material deprivation as major explanations advanced for the resurgence of Biafran separatism.

The interaction between separatist mobilisation and state security responses consequently appears cyclical. State coercion may be justified by authorities as necessary for maintaining territorial integrity and public order, while affected communities may interpret excessive or indiscriminate enforcement as further evidence of political exclusion. Such perceptions can reinforce grievances and provide separatist organisations with additional narratives for mobilisation. At the same time, violent activities attributed to separatist actors and other armed groups can generate further security operations, creating a cycle of mobilisation, repression and insecurity.

This interpretation is consistent with Osimen et al. (2024), who found that IPOB-related agitation has significant implications for human security. Similarly, recent scholarship on ethnonationalist violence argues that separatist actors themselves exercise political agency and can contribute to securitisation and violence rather than functioning merely as passive victims of state repression. This is an important qualification because insecurity in the South-East cannot appropriately be attributed exclusively either to government security forces or to separatist movements. Criminal organisations, "unknown gunmen," communal conflicts and other armed actors further complicate the security environment.

The cumulative nature of these grievances was captured by another participant:

> "Successionist agitations is a product of years of grievances. An accumulation of violation of documented promises and agreements led to the high level of human insecurity. Take a look at political and economic marginalization, lack of accountability and transparency and unequal distribution of positions and power have collectively resulted to the deadly activities of successionist agitations" (K. Amara, personal communication, May 25, 2026).

This position reflects the study's broader empirical finding that secessionist agitation is perceived as arising not from a single factor but from the accumulation and interaction of historical, structural, political

and socioeconomic grievances. Indeed, 80% of respondents associated government silence on historical grievances, perceived inequalities in political representation and resource distribution, deficits in accountability and transparency, and alleged human-rights violations with the resort to armed agitation in the region.

The findings therefore demonstrate considerable correspondence between the quantitative evidence, interview responses and existing literature. Contemporary scholarship increasingly situates Biafran separatism within a combination of relative marginalisation, material deprivation, social injustice, historical memory, governance deficiencies, state repression and separatist political agency (Nwangwu *et al.,* 2020; Nwangwu, 2023; Osimen *et al.,* 2024). Recent studies further emphasise that deteriorating material conditions and perceptions of government actions and policies can reinforce feelings of marginalisation and sustain separatist demands (Okojie & Onuoha, 2024).

Overall, the findings support the proposition that secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 emerged from an interaction of structural imbalance, perceived political exclusion, socioeconomic grievances, unresolved historical experiences and contentious state-security responses. Relative Deprivation Theory is particularly useful in explaining how these objective and perceived inequalities generate grievances and collective mobilisation. However, the evidence also indicates that deprivation alone is insufficient to explain the evolution of the conflict. Political leadership, separatist mobilisation, state responses and the activities of other armed actors influence whether grievances are expressed through peaceful advocacy, civil disobedience or violence. The findings therefore underscore the multidimensional character of contemporary secessionist agitation and its connection with the wider problem of human insecurity in South-East Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 is a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in the interaction of historical grievances, perceived structural inequalities, political exclusion, socioeconomic deprivation and contentious state responses. The resurgence and persistence of Biafran agitation cannot therefore be adequately explained as merely a product of ethnic nationalism or the activities of IPOB. Rather, it reflects accumulated grievances concerning the character of Nigerian federalism, political representation, resource distribution, infrastructural development and unresolved post-Civil War experiences.

The findings further demonstrate that the relationship between secessionist agitation and human insecurity is mutually reinforcing. While perceived marginalisation and relative deprivation provide conditions for separatist mobilisation, the resulting protests, armed confrontations, sit-at-home disruptions and security operations have consequences for personal safety, economic livelihoods, political participation and community stability. Thus, both the activities associated with separatist mobilisation and the responses of the state have contributed to an increasingly complex security environment in the South-East.

The study therefore concludes that predominantly coercive approaches cannot, by themselves, provide a sustainable solution to secessionist agitation. Addressing the challenge requires attention to the underlying political, structural and socioeconomic grievances while simultaneously protecting citizens, strengthening legitimate institutions, promoting political inclusion and ensuring accountability in security operations. Sustainable peace and human security in the South-East ultimately depend on combining effective security governance with dialogue, equity, justice and inclusive national integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. Promote inclusive federal restructuring and equitable political representation.

The Federal Government and National Assembly should pursue constitutional and institutional reforms that address perceived structural inequalities affecting the South-East. Particular attention should be given to equitable political representation, resource allocation and greater inclusion of the region in federal

institutions and decision-making processes. Strengthening fiscal and administrative decentralisation could also enhance subnational autonomy and reduce perceptions of exclusion that sustain secessionist grievances.

2. Address historical grievances and accelerate socioeconomic development.

The Federal Government, in collaboration with South-East state governments, should establish an inclusive dialogue and reconciliation framework to address unresolved grievances associated with the Civil War and its aftermath. This should be complemented by targeted investment in federal roads, transportation, industrial development, employment creation and other strategic infrastructure. Addressing both historical grievances and contemporary socioeconomic deprivation would reduce perceptions of relative deprivation that provide fertile ground for separatist mobilisation.

3. Adopt rights-based and accountable security responses.

Security agencies should replace predominantly coercive approaches with intelligence-led, proportionate and community-sensitive security strategies that respect constitutional rights and the rule of law. Allegations of arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, extrajudicial killings and excessive use of force should be transparently investigated, with appropriate accountability where violations are established. Improved community engagement and professional security operations would help rebuild public trust and reduce the cycle of grievance, repression and further mobilisation.

4. Adopt a comprehensive human-security approach to secessionist agitation.

`Government responses should move beyond protecting territorial integrity to addressing the multidimensional effects of insecurity on citizens. Federal and state governments should prioritise personal safety, economic livelihoods, freedom of movement, political participation and community stability while strengthening dialogue with legitimate community stakeholders. Particular attention should be given to mitigating the socioeconomic consequences of violence and sit-at-home disruptions through peacebuilding, community-based conflict prevention and economic recovery programmes. Such an approach would address both the underlying drivers of secessionist agitation and its consequences for human security.

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