



EFFECTIVENESS OF CIVIL - MILITARY RELATIONS STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY NIGERIAN ARMY IN MANAGING THE OKUAMA – OKOLOBA COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the effectiveness of Civil-Military Relations strategies adopted by the Nigerian Army in managing the Okuama - Okoloba communal conflict in Delta State, Nigeria. Guided by the Conflict Transformation Theory, the study employed a mixed-method approach that combined quantitative survey and qualitative in-depth interviews. The study population included residents of Okuama and Okoloba communities, personnel of the Directorate of Army Public Relations, and members of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, with a sample size of 431 obtained through multistage sampling and proportionate stratified random sampling. Findings revealed that community engagement programmes, joint patrols, and humanitarian outreach formed the core strategies employed by the Nigerian Army, which positively contributed to reducing tensions and fostering peace. However, challenges such as limited resources, community mistrust, and political interference hindered the effectiveness of these strategies. Community perceptions were mixed, with variable levels of approval and skepticism regarding the Army's role. The study concluded that while the Nigerian Army's multidimensional approach had a positive impact, its effectiveness was uneven and needed strengthening, particularly in human rights training and sustained community engagement. Recommendations included institutionalizing continuous dialogue platforms, enhancing transparency through proactive media engagement, and integrating traditional leaders and civil society in Civil-Military Relations approaches to promote sustainable peace.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations, Communal Conflict, Community Relations, Media Relations, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Civil-Military Relations (CMR) is a strategic framework for addressing contemporary security governance and conflict resolution challenges in domestic and international contexts. The effective application of Civil - Military Relations strategies entails engagements of whole-of-society approach towards conflict management and resolution.

Thus, modern CMR is a military public relations tool that is rooted in partnership, shared responsibility, and respect for human rights, grounded in mutual trust and influence between the military and society (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2022; Aina, 2025). As Cawthra and Luckham (2018) note that contemporary CMR extends beyond military diplomacy to encompass public relations, community outreach, and strategic media engagement which are essential tools for shaping public perceptions, reducing misunderstandings, and fostering local support, especially in fragile contexts.

In Nigeria, CMR gained prominence after the return to democracy in 1999, requiring the military to align operations with democratic norms and human rights standards (Chukwuemeka, 2019; Omitola & Fadakinte, 2020; Bamidele, 2021; Nwankwo, 2023). This transformation occurred alongside persistent security threats, including terrorism in the Northeast and communal and resource-based conflicts in the Niger Delta and Middle Belt (Owens, 2017; Gyamfi, 2020; Eze & Okoli, 2022). However, military engagements, particularly in domestic conflicts have sometimes been marred by controversy.

Historical military interventions such as the Odi operation in 1999 and the Zaki-Biam massacre in 2001 exemplify the long-standing consequences of inadequate stakeholder engagement and crisis communication (Eze, 2018). More recent events such as Nigerian Army clashes with the Islamic Movement in Nigeria from 2015 - 2018 and the Lekki Toll Gate incident during the #EndSARS protest in 2020 underscore the reputational damage that can result from perceived excessive force and inconsistent messaging (Amnesty International, 2018). Reflection on these events are testament that how, even years later, the absence of transparent communication channels and meaningful engagement continue to undermine public trust in security institutions (*Business Day*, 2021)

The Okuama - Okoloba communal conflict in Delta State, rooted in boundary disputes, resource control, and mistrust, escalated into violent clashes necessitating military intervention. Akinwale (2023), Akinola (2019), Smith and Ojo (2021) observe that the military increasingly assumes roles traditionally performed by civil authorities in addressing internal security challenges. In the Niger Delta Region, such interventions intersect with ethno-political realities, making the Okuama - Okoloba case a critical lens for examining the army's CMR effectiveness in conflict resolution, civilian trust, and peacebuilding.

Despite the relevance of CMR in communal conflicts, scholarly focus has largely been on national security and counterinsurgency, often neglecting micro-level evaluations. Issues such as proportionality in military response, adoption of people-centered strategies, and post-conflict peace sustainability remain underexplored. Examining the Okuama - Okoloba case offers valuable insights into balancing force with dialogue, enhancing media and community partnerships, and promoting professionalism and accountability in military operations in conflict-prone Nigerian communities.

Statement of the Problem

The persistent communal conflict between the Okuama and Okoloba communities in Delta State, Nigeria, has led to considerable human suffering, destruction of properties, and disruption of economic activities, thereby undermining regional stability (Akinola, 2019; Smith & Ojo, 2021). In spite of numerous peace efforts, the conflict persists, reflecting the complex nature of communal disputes in Nigeria and the challenges in achieving sustainable conflict resolution (Umeji, 2020). The inability to effectively manage such conflicts threatens broader national security and impedes development in affected areas (Eze, 2018).

The Nigerian Army, as a pivotal security institution, has implemented various CMR strategies to address communal conflicts, including the Okuama–Okoloba crisis (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2022). CMR are critical for fostering cooperation, trust, and collaboration between the military and civilian populations, which are essential for effective conflict management (Owens, 2017; Gyamfi, 2020). However, scholars argue that the success of these strategies depends on the military's ability to engage local communities inclusively and transparently, which may vary in different contexts (Bamidele, 2021).

Regardless of these efforts, there is a gap in empirical evidence concerning the actual effectiveness of the Nigerian Army's CMR strategies in managing the Okuama–Okoloba conflict. Previous studies have often focused on broader security challenges in Nigeria without detailed examination of localised communal conflicts and the military's role therein (Chukwuemeka, 2019; Nwankwo, 2023). This study aims to fill this gap by assessing how the Nigerian Army's CMR strategies have influenced the

peacebuilding process and stability in the Okuama - Okoloba conflict, thereby providing recommendations to enhance conflict resolution mechanisms in Delta State and similar settings.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the Civil-Military Relations strategies adopted by the Nigerian Army in managing the Okuama - Okoloba communal conflict in Delta State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. Identify the Civil-Military Relations strategies employed by the Nigerian Army in the conflict management of the Okuama - Okoloba crisis.
- ii. Assess the impact of these strategies on peacebuilding and community cooperation in the affected areas.
- iii. Analyse the challenges faced by the Nigerian Army in implementing civil-military relations strategies during the conflict.
- iv. Examine the perceptions of the Okuama and Okoloba communities regarding the Nigerian Army's role in managing the conflict.
- v. Provide recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Civil-Military Relations strategies in sustaining peace in communal conflicts in Delta State and beyond.

Conceptual Definitions

Civil-Military Relations

Civil-Military Relations (CMR) is a relationship between civilian authorities, the military, and society. Thus, according to Finer (2021), the armed forces operate under civilian control and align with democratic values. In Nigeria, CMR is vital for balancing security with human rights during internal interventions such as communal conflict management.

The Nigerian Army's role in such operations underscores the need for civilian oversight, mutual respect, and strategic communication (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2022). Modern CMR includes community engagement, and humanitarian intervention. In the Niger Delta region, trust-building, dialogue, respect for local authorities, and non-kinetic operations are crucial, Okoli and Orinya (2023). However, perceived impunity, weak accountability, and community distrust remain challenges, requiring ongoing reassessment to ensure interventions foster sustainable peace.

Community Relations

Community relations, a strategic function of public relations, focuses on building mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their host communities through engagement, dialogue, and socially responsible actions (Asemah, 2022).

Beyond corporate social responsibility, it involves proactive communication, participatory involvement, and conflict-sensitive engagement to align organizational goals with public interest (Black, 2019). In conflict-prone areas, especially where influential institutions like the military operate, effective community relations can reduce tensions, foster reconciliation, and build trust (Onwubuoya, Asemah, & Edegoh, 2023).

Media Relations

Media relations is a strategic communication process between organisations and the media to foster positive public perception and ensure accurate information dissemination. As a core aspect of public relations, it involves building relationships with journalists, editors, and media outlets through activities such as press releases, press conferences, interviews, and timely responses (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2015). Practitioners act as intermediaries, framing messages to meet both organisational goals and media needs (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). Credibility, timeliness, and accessibility underpin effective media relations, which can enhance reputation, build trust, and manage crises.

Communal Conflict

Communal conflict involves violent or non-violent disputes between groups sharing a geographic or cultural space, often over land, resources, identity, or political power. In Nigeria, such conflicts commonly stem from boundary disputes, ethno-cultural divisions, and weak governance, sometimes worsened by political manipulation and economic deprivation (Akinyele, 2023). In the Niger Delta, these tensions also reflect struggles over environmental degradation and exclusion. Failures in early warning systems, weak institutions, arms proliferation, youth unemployment, and erosion of traditional authority further escalate clashes (Adamu & Salihu, 2022). Effective resolution demands a multi-stakeholder approach which include engaging community leaders, security agencies, civil society, and government which are centred on dialogue, justice, and trust-building.

Nigerian Army's Role in Conflict Management

The Nigerian Army has played a central role in managing internal security challenges, including communal conflicts, insurgencies, and civil unrest (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2022). Its involvement in peace operations is underscored by constitutional provisions that authorize military assistance to civil authorities in maintaining law and order (Kon, 2025).

In the context of the Okuama –Okoloba conflict, the Army's interventions aim at restoring peace, protecting lives, and facilitating conditions for dialogue. Military-led peace operations emphasise rapid deployment and control of violence; however, scholars highlight that achieving sustainable peace requires the Army to adopt complementary non-kinetic approaches such as community engagement, humanitarian assistance, and conflict mediation (Egbujiobi, 2025). Such strategies contribute to winning hearts and minds, thereby reducing hostility and enhancing cooperation.

Recent reforms within the Nigerian Army, including the Transformation Agenda (2010–2014) and the establishment of dedicated civil-military affairs departments, reflect a shift toward professionalization and improved community relations (Igbashangev, 2023).

These initiatives seek to mitigate past negative perceptions and incorporate lessons learned into operational guidelines and training programs. Nevertheless, challenges persist in aligning military actions with human rights standards and civilian expectations. Reports of abuses undermine trust and complicate collaboration with local populations (Gbasha, 2024). The Army's ability to balance kinetic force with empathetic engagement remains critical, particularly in volatile communal conflict zones where cultural sensitivity is paramount.

Civil-Military Relations Strategies in Conflict Management in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Civil-Military Relations (CMR) strategies for conflict management combine kinetic (military force) and non-kinetic (civil engagement) approaches to address communal clashes, insurgency, banditry,

and separatist agitations. Kinetic operations, such as Operation Safe Haven, Operation Delta Safe, and Operation Python Dance to restore order but often lack lasting impact without supporting non-kinetic measures (Okoli & Orinya, 2023).

Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) efforts, including medical outreaches, school reconstruction, and community dialogues, aim to win hearts and minds (Nwankpa, 2021). Yet, poor human rights records, inadequate civil engagement training, and weak accountability erode trust. Eze and Ogbodo (2022) highlight that politicization, weak inter-agency coordination, and exclusion of local actors undermine sustainability. Experts such as Igbashangev (2023), Gbasha (2024) and Kon (2025) recommend preventive and community-centred strategies within multi-stakeholder frameworks.

Effectiveness and Criticisms of Military-Led Peace Operations

Military-led peace operations play a crucial role in the restoration of normalcy during violent conflicts, where civilian security institutions are weak or absent. In Nigeria situation, while these interventions demonstrate strengths in rapid response and immediate stabilisation, they often face challenges in achieving long-term sustainability and lasting peace. Adefehinti and Ojo (2022) note their effectiveness in halting immediate violence, creating safe zones, and deterring armed groups through visible force projection. However, without comprehensive post-conflict peacebuilding and inclusive dialogue, gains are often short-lived.

Many military personnel are trained for combat rather than mediation, civilian engagement, or trauma-sensitive approaches, creating tensions with local populations (Ibeanu, 2021). Reports of human rights abuses, unlawful detentions, and excessive force have further eroded public trust. Aghedo and Osumah (2023) warn that militarising internal conflicts without socio-political solutions can deepen grievances and fuel future unrest. Ultimately, military-led operations are most effective when integrated with civilian governance, development programmes, and transparent accountability systems that prioritise human security over tactical victories.

Community Perceptions and Civil-Military Relations

Community perceptions significantly influence the effectiveness of Civil-Military Relations, especially in conflict-prone areas where trust and legitimacy are vital. In Nigeria, public views on military interventions vary, shaped by experiences that range from protection and humanitarian aid to allegations of abuse and excessive force.

Onapajo (2021) notes that while some communities regard the military as a stabilising force, others see them as external actors whose presence can heighten tensions, particularly when operations lack cultural sensitivity or are marred by impunity. Historical grievances, ethnic ties, past abuses, and exclusion from security decision-making processes further shape these perceptions.

According to Nnoli and Eze (2023), failure to respect traditional authority, communicate effectively, or provide channels for civilian feedback fosters mistrust and resistance. Conversely, positive engagements such as medical outreach, infrastructure development, and inclusive peace dialogues build goodwill and cooperation. Okonkwo (2022) stresses that improving these relations requires professionalism, discipline, and reforms that promote accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to civilian needs. Addressing community perceptions is therefore essential for the legitimacy and sustainability of Civil-Military Relations in Nigeria.

Media Perceptions and Civil-Military Relations

Media representations significantly shape public perceptions of Civil-Military Relations, especially in conflict-prone areas where trust and legitimacy influence operational effectiveness. In Nigeria, the media often acts as a bridge between the armed forces and local communities, by amplifying positive and negative aspects of their engagements.

News coverage, social media discourse, and investigative reports influence whether communities view the military as protectors providing security and aid or as agents of intimidation and rights violation. According to Onapajo (2021), media framing can reinforce or challenge community attitudes. Positive reports highlighting peacekeeping and humanitarian outreach portray the military as a stabilising force, whereas stories exposing abuses, impunity, or cultural insensitivity fuel suspicion and resentment. Historical grievances and past misconduct mean negative narratives spread quickly without proactive image management. Eze (2023) notes that poor media relations, such as restricting journalists, issuing vague statements, or ignoring traditional communication channels, erode trust and hinder cooperation.

Conversely, transparent information sharing, regular briefings, and culturally sensitive messaging help counter misinformation and foster understanding. Positive coverage of medical outreaches, infrastructure projects, and inclusive dialogue can generate goodwill. Okonkwo (2022) argues that strong Civil-Military Relations require operational discipline and robust media strategies. The media serves as both watchdog and partner, amplifying community voices while legitimising military presence in conflict-affected areas.

Okuama–Okoloba Communal Conflict in Delta State, Nigeria

The Okuama–Okoloba communal conflict in Delta State arises from a longstanding rivalry between the neighboring communities of Okuama in Ughelli South LGA and Okoloba in Bomadi LGA. This violent confrontation, which escalated significantly in early 2024, is rooted in historical disputes over land ownership and resource control (Vanguard, 2024). The conflict has, over time, caused serious disruption and loss of lives, sparking widespread concern within the region.

Moreover, the primary cause of the conflict centres on contested boundary lines where both communities claim ownership of fertile farmland and waterways vital for fishing activities. Okoloba residents accuse Okuama indigenes of illegally invading and exploiting their fishing grounds through destructive practices such as dynamite fishing, which not only damages the ecosystem but also threatens the economic survival of local fishermen (Punch, 2024). In response, the Okuama community alleges harassment and encroachment by Okoloba youths, resulting in reciprocal violence.

Additionally, economic competition is a critical factor intensifying the crisis. Both communities depend heavily on fishing and agriculture, but increased competition over dwindling natural resources has heightened tensions. This struggle is compounded by environmental degradation caused by unsustainable fishing techniques, which further limits access to livelihoods and exacerbates communal animosities (National Point Daily, 2024).

Significantly, political dynamics also play a role in perpetuating the conflict. Influential political actors in both communities are believed to manipulate the dispute for personal gain, fostering factional militias and encouraging violent confrontations. Such political interference undermines peace initiatives and deepens mistrust between the communities (ThisDayLive, 2024).

Furthermore, the intervention of security forces, particularly the Nigerian Army, has had a mixed impact. While the military was deployed to restore order and enforce peace, its presence has sometimes been met with suspicion and accusations of partiality or excessive force. The tragic death of 17 military

personnel in the conflict zone in 2024 intensified security operations but also led to further civilian displacement and hardship (Daidac, 2024). The human toll of the conflict has been devastating. Hundreds of lives have been lost, and thousands displaced, leading to widespread humanitarian crises. Homes, farms, and fishing equipment have been destroyed, further impoverishing the affected populations and disrupting social stability in both communities (Smith & Ojo, 2021).

Socially, the conflict has eroded communal relations, making reconciliation efforts difficult. Daily interactions between the Okuama and Okoloba people, especially those related to trade and social gatherings, have been strained or halted altogether. The disintegration of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which once helped to mediate disputes, has left a vacuum that violence often fills (Nwankwo, 2023). Environmental consequences are also significant.

As mentioned, the use of illegal fishing methods like dynamite fishing has caused severe damage to the aquatic ecosystem, destroying fish populations and damaging riverbanks. This environmental degradation perpetuates the cycle of poverty and conflict by further restricting the economic base of both communities (Vanguard, 2024).

Government and civil society interventions have included peace committees, military patrols, and dialogue initiatives. However, these efforts lack sustained coordination and sufficient community buy-in, limiting their effectiveness. The absence of comprehensive strategies addressing both security and socio-economic needs hampers efforts to resolve the conflict decisively (Deltastate.gov.ng, 2024).

In conclusion, the Okuama–Okoloba communal conflict is a complex crisis driven by overlapping factors including boundary disputes, resource competition, political manipulation, and environmental degradation. The severe human, economic, social, and environmental impacts demand multi-dimensional responses involving security, development, and peacebuilding to ensure sustainable peace in Delta State (Chukwuemeka, 2019).

Conflict Management in Delta State

Delta State, located in Nigeria’s oil-rich Niger Delta region, has faced recurrent communal conflicts fueled by competition over resources, ethnic divisions, and governance deficits (Smith & Ojo, 2021). Managing these conflicts requires context-sensitive interventions that address both immediate security threats and underlying socio-economic grievances (Nwankwo, 2023).

The Nigerian Army’s deployment to Delta State involves a blend of kinetic operations to control violence and Civil-Military Relations efforts designed to engage communities and support peacebuilding (Wahab, 2025). Success in this environment depends on the ability to navigate complex local dynamics and foster cooperation among diverse ethnic groups. Recent conflict management approaches emphasise multi-agency collaboration, including involvement of traditional leaders, government officials, and civil society organisations to complement military efforts (Egbujiobi, 2025).

This holistic approach acknowledges the limits of purely military solutions and the necessity of inclusive peacebuilding processes. Again, the Army’s role extends beyond conflict suppression to facilitating development projects and humanitarian assistance that can address root causes of unrest. Such interventions contribute to long-term stability by improving livelihoods and reducing incentives for violence.

Review of Empirical Works

Daniel and Ebiegberi (2024) conducted a mixed-method study titled “The Okuama Tragedy: An Assessment of Civil-Military Relations in Nigeria (1999 - 2024)”. Using content analysis of military documents, media reports, and academic literature, and guided by elite theory, the authors argued that military overreach in internal conflicts stems from weak civilian oversight and a militarized security structure. They linked the Okuama - Okoloba crisis to longstanding constitutional ambiguities, concluding that the Army’s actions reflect systemic issues in Nigeria’s Civil–Military Relations.

Another study by Gbemre (2024), in “Okuama Killings and the Role of the Nigerian Military”, used interviews and policy documents to examine the legal framework of the army's intervention. The study identified procedural failings, including lack of collaboration with police and DSS, no court warrants, and unverified allegations. Gbemre argues that the military's unilateral action violated principles of due process and accountability, leading to distrust between civilians and the military, and calls for clearer operational guidelines.

Bala (2025) examined the Armed Forces of Nigeria’s Evolving Civil-Military Relations practices with Transnational Oil Companies in the Niger Delta. The study adopted Principal-Agent Theory. Findings showed informal PR-like strategies, but absence of a formal CMR doctrine hindered efficiency. The study recommended for the establishment of a tailored doctrine to enhance communication, partnership sustainability, and conflict resolution effectiveness in security operations.

Oshodi (2024), in “Let Law Enforcement Breathe: Prioritizing Police Authority over Military Interference”, critiqued the Okuama intervention through constitutional analysis. The study argues that internal security is constitutionally the role of the police and that the military’s involvement lacked presidential authorisation. Oshodi recommended the need for reforms to reinforce police dominance and restrict military deployment in civilian affairs to constitutionally appropriate scenarios.

To add to the above discussion, Nwankwo (2023), in the scholarly article *Localized Communal Conflicts and Security Responses in Nigeria: An Empirical Study*, employed case study methodology to analyze communal conflicts’ characteristics and state security responses across Nigeria, including Delta State. Using conflict transformation theory, Nwankwo emphasised long-term engagement and socio-economic reforms alongside military presence. This theoretical framework supports the present study’s examination of Civil-Military Relations strategies in conflict management.

Also relevant is the Elechi and Ohazuruike (2024) conducted a study titled *Civil-Military Relationship and the Fight Against Security Challenges in Nigeria*. This research employed agency theory to broadly analyse Civil-Military Relations and focused on interactions between the Nigerian armed forces and local communities. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study examined military professionalism and community-centered engagements.

The findings highlighted the significance of a disciplined military protecting civilians while maintaining democratic norms through programs such as joint patrols and medical outreaches. The research also exposed challenges including political interference and resource constraints. This study supports the current research’s observations on the Nigerian Army’s strategic use of community engagement and joint patrols and echoes identified challenges weakening military effectiveness and community trust.

Aboluwoye (2019) explored civil-military relations in the Nigerian Fourth Republic in the work *A Study of the Civil-Military Relations in Nigerian Fourth Republic*. This qualitative study analyzed historical and contemporary data post-1999 to assess the state of Civil-Military Relations. The findings documented a significant erosion of mutual trust due to previous military abuses, emphasising the necessity to strengthen human rights training and transparency in military conduct. This aligns closely with the present study’s findings regarding human rights training deficiencies and ongoing mistrust issues within Nigerian civil-military relations.

Musa (2022) authored *The Effect of Military Unprofessionalism on Civil-Military Relations and Security in Nigeria*, which utilised qualitative interviews with civilians affected by military abuse in Plateau State. The study found that a lack of military professionalism weakens civil-military relations, erodes trust, and exacerbates insecurity, highlighting a critical need for military discipline and enhanced civilian oversight. This empirical evidence reinforces this study's emphasis on improving human rights training and rebuilding trust within affected communities.

Yaya (2021) examined Civil-Military Relations and legislative oversight in Nigeria in the work *Civil-Military Relations and Legislative Oversight in Nigeria*. The research employed secondary data analysis and descriptive methods to explore changes following Nigeria's 1999 democratic transition. Findings reveal a gradual transformation and professionalization of the military, contributing positively to counterinsurgency and militancy responses but also highlighting persistent challenges in legislative oversight and funding. Yaya's study informs understanding of the Nigerian Army's ongoing institutional evolution and operational challenges relevant to civil-military cooperation and legitimacy.

Lastly, Smith and Ojo (2021) in their article *Communal conflicts in Nigeria: Causes and prevention strategies* conducted a literature review and qualitative interviews across conflict zones, applying conflict prevention theory to propose integrated security and governance reforms. Their findings advocate for enhanced community engagement and trust-building practices, recommendations fundamental to the present study's aim of evaluating effective civil-military strategies in communal conflict management.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on Conflict Transformation Theory, developed in peace and conflict studies to emphasise transforming underlying relationships and social structures rather than just resolving conflicts (Bush & Folger, 1994, cited in Lamidi, 2020). Key theorists like Lederach and Varghese stress addressing root causes such as identity and power imbalances through dialogue and long-term, inclusive peacebuilding (Lederach, 1995; Rupesinghe, 1995).

The theory's strength lies in its holistic approach, integrating social and psychological dynamics and empowering local actors, making it suitable for complex communal conflicts like Okuama–Okoloba (Johannesen, 2021). However, it can be idealistic, resource-intensive, and dependent on political will, which may limit its application in fragile contexts (Lederach, 2005). Despite these challenges, it aptly guides this study by focusing on sustainable peace and community collaboration through the Nigerian Army's civil-military strategies in managing the Okuama–Okoloba conflict.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-method design to examine the effectiveness of civil-military relations strategies in managing the Okuama–Okoloba communal conflict. Conducted in the Okuama and Okoloba communities of Delta State, it combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to capture broad trends and detailed perspectives.

The target population of 4,590 included residents of both communities, Army Public Relations personnel, and journalists. A multistage proportionate stratified random sampling selected 431 participants based on the Krejcie and Morgan table. Data were collected through structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews with key informants. The research instrument was validated by communication experts, and data were analyzed using descriptive/inferential statistics and thematic analysis to ensure triangulation and validity.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, the researcher analyzed, interpreted and discussed the result of the data collected through the administered questionnaire. A total of 431 copies of questionnaires were administered to the respondents in which, 430 were returned and 1 not returned. This made the returned and unreturned rate to be at 99.7 % and 0.3%. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were also covered.

Table 1: Civil-Military Relations Strategies Employed by the Nigerian Army

Strategy	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Community Engagement Programs	293	68
Joint Patrols	237	55
Medical Outreach	232	54
Infrastructural Support	189	44
Human Rights Training	164	38
Total	430	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 1 show that 68% of respondents recognized community engagement programs as a key strategy employed by the Nigerian Army in managing the Okuama–Okoloba conflict. This high percentage reflects the military’s focus on building trust and open communication with local communities, which is essential in creating a collaborative security environment.

Joint patrols (55%) and medical outreach (54%) efforts further demonstrate the army’s dual approach of maintaining security presence while addressing humanitarian needs. Infrastructural support (44%) highlights the Army’s active role in community development to address socio-economic factors that contribute to conflict, while human rights training (38%) indicates ongoing but less emphasized efforts to ensure respect for civilian rights.

Table 2: Perceived Impact of Army Strategies on Peacebuilding

Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improved Peace and Cooperation	245	57
No Change	46	11
Neutral/Undecided	129	30
Worsened Situation	10	3
Total Respondents	430	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data indicate that 57% of respondents perceive the Nigerian Army’s civil-military relations strategies as having improved peace and cooperation in the Okuama–Okoloba conflict area. This majority view reflects a positive response to the Army’s intervention efforts and suggests that the strategies employed have helped reduce tension and enhanced collaborative efforts toward peacebuilding.

However, 30% of respondents remain neutral or undecided, which highlights ongoing uncertainties or mixed experiences within the communities. A smaller segment of 11% perceives no change, and 3% believe the situation has worsened, indicating that challenges remain in creating widespread, sustainable peace.

Table 3: Challenges Faced by the Nigerian Army

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Limited Resources	265	62
Community Mistrust	206	48
Political Interference	139	33
Logistical Constraints	117	27
Total	430	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data reveal that the Nigerian Army faces several significant challenges in managing the Okuama–Okoloba communal conflict. The most frequently reported challenge is limited resources, cited by 62% of respondents, indicating that shortages in manpower, equipment, and funding constrain the Army’s operational capacity.

Additionally, 48% of respondents highlighted community mistrust as a major obstacle, reflecting deep-seated skepticism and negative perceptions likely stemming from past abuses or partiality allegations. Political interference, identified by 33% of respondents, suggests that local power struggles complicate military efforts, as influential actors may manipulate the conflict or security responses for personal gain. Logistical constraints, affecting 27%, further hamper effective deployment and sustained engagement in the conflict zone.

Table 4: Community Perception of Nigerian Army’s Role

Community Group	Favorable (%)	Moderate (%)	Unfavorable (%)	Total (%)
Okuama Residents	35	45	20	100
Okoloba Residents	33	30	31	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data from the field survey reveal varied perceptions about the Nigerian Army’s role in the Okuama - Okoloba conflict among the two communities. Among Okuama residents, 35% viewed the Army’s role favorably, while a larger proportion, 45%, held moderate views, and 20% held unfavorable opinions.

Conversely, in the Okoloba community, favorable perceptions stood at 33%, with 30% moderate and a notably higher 31% expressing unfavorable views. This distribution highlights a general uncertainty with a significant minority expressing dissatisfaction, especially among Okoloba residents who seem comparatively less supportive of the military presence and actions.

Table 5: Recommendations for Improving Civil-Military Relations

Recommendation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Establish Joint Community-Military Committees	309	72
Increase Transparency and Communication	297	69
Integrate Traditional Leaders and Civil Society	285	66
Total	430	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data show that the majority of respondents (72%) recommend establishing joint community-military committees as a key way to improve civil-military relations. This suggests a strong desire for institutionalised, ongoing collaboration and dialogue between the Nigerian Army and local communities.

Increasing transparency and communication, recommended by 69% of respondents, emphasizes the need for openness in military operations and effective information flow to build trust and reduce misunderstandings. Additionally, 66% advocate for the integration of traditional leaders and civil society organisations, highlighting the importance of involving respected local actors to legitimize and support peace efforts.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that community engagement programmes are the most prominent civil-military relations strategy employed by the Nigerian Army, recognized by 68% of respondents. This finding underscores the Army’s commitment to building trust, enhancing dialogue, and fostering cooperation with local communities, which is essential for operational success and sustainable peacebuilding.

The study also revealed significant recognition of joint patrols (55%) and medical outreach (54%) as crucial strategies blending security enforcement with humanitarian assistance. This aligns with empirical findings by Elechi and Ohazuruike (2024), who emphasised the importance of a disciplined military that protects civilians while maintaining democratic norms through community-centered engagements.

Furthermore, the study showed that infrastructural support (44%) is a vital strategy reflecting the Army’s role in promoting socio-economic development to address root causes of conflict, confirming the conflict transformation principle of addressing structural drivers of violence (Lederach, 1995). However,

human rights training (38%) received the least emphasis, suggesting a need to strengthen education and communication on rights observance to rebuild community trust.

This finding corresponds with documented challenges in Nigerian civil-military relations where past abuses have eroded mutual trust and cooperation (Aboluwoye, 2019). Together, these findings confirm that while the Nigerian Army employs diverse strategies crucial for peace, consolidating these efforts, especially in human rights, is necessary to enhance legitimacy and lasting peace.

The study revealed that 57% of respondents perceived the Army's strategies as improving peace and cooperation. This majority perspective highlights the relative success of the Army's approach in reducing violence and fostering community collaboration, supporting the argument that combining kinetic and non-kinetic efforts is effective in conflict-prone areas (Nwankwo, 2023).

However, the presence of a large neutral group (30%) and minority perceptions of no change or worsening (14%) indicate ongoing uncertainties and fractured community experiences. Interview findings suggest that peacebuilding gains remain fragile when deeper relational and structural causes of the Okuama–Okoloba conflict are unaddressed, echoing Lederach's (1995) view on the importance of transforming relationships for sustainable peace. Moreover, the study found that limited resources (62%) and community mistrust (48%) are the major challenges hindering the Nigerian Army's effectiveness. Political interference (33%) and logistical constraints (27%) further complicate operations.

These challenges align with Elechi and Ohazuruike's (2024) findings that weak civilian leadership and political manipulation undermine coordinated security efforts, while Nwankwo (2023) highlights resource shortfalls as a common barrier to effective civil-military collaboration in Nigeria. Such impediments reduce the Army's operational reach and deteriorate community confidence, emphasising the need for strategic capacity building, depoliticization, and goodwill restoration. Additionally, the study showed divergent community perceptions: 35% of Okuama residents held favorable views of the Nigerian Army's role, with 45% moderate and 20% unfavorable, while Okoloba residents exhibited 33% favorable, 30% moderate, and 31% unfavorable perceptions.

This reveals persistent ambivalence, particularly among Okoloba, potentially due to historical grievances or perceived partiality, corroborating documented distrust issues in Nigerian civil-military relations (Aboluwoye, 2019). The moderate majorities suggest cautious optimism but also signal the necessity for increased transparency and community-responsive approaches to strengthen military legitimacy.

Finally, the study found that respondents highly recommend the establishment of joint community-military committees (72%), increased transparency and communication (69%), and the integration of traditional leaders and civil society actors (66%) to improve relations. This underscores the community's desire for institutionalised and inclusive frameworks, reflecting best practices in conflict transformation that emphasise participation, openness, and cultural sensitivity (Lederach, 1995; Nwankwo, 2023). These recommendations highlight pathways toward deepening trust and cooperation, essential for addressing the complex socio-political realities of the Okuama–Okoloba conflict and enhancing the sustainability of peace efforts.

Conclusion

The study found that the Nigerian Army managed the Okuama - Okoloba conflict through strong community engagement with officials, traditional rulers, and youth leaders, though dialogue intensity was limited. Media relations had moderate impact, while relief aid, medical support, and educational resources eased tensions, improved public perception, and built trust, yielding a generally positive, though uneven, resolution outcome.

Recommendations

1. The Army should adopt a proactive engagement of local media to promote transparency and prompt information dissemination during crises.
2. The Nigerian Army should institutionalize community relations and sustained dialogue as a core strategy for effective conflict management and trust-building in internal conflicts.
3. The Army should embed liaison officers by amplify local voices, shift from reactive messaging to proactive dialogue, collaborate with civilian authorities in managing communal conflict.

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