

**FOREGROUNDING IDENTITY POLITICS
MANAGEMENT AND INTERCULTURAL
DIALOGUE FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN
TARABA STATE, NIGERIA**

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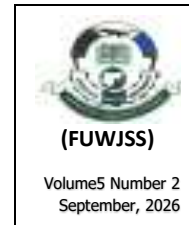
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Abstract

This paper examines how the deliberate integration of identity politics management and intercultural dialogue can generate conditions for sustainable peace in Taraba State, Nigeria, a region marked by recurrent identity-based conflicts rooted in land disputes, farmer–herder tensions, indigene–settler distinctions, and the politicization of ethnic and religious identities. Drawing on qualitative data from 100 participants across the three senatorial districts of Taraba State, collected through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and document analysis, the study investigates the mechanisms, limitations, and enabling conditions of government peacebuilding interventions and community-level intercultural dialogue. The study’s findings reveal that government peace committees operate predominantly in a reactive mode, intervening only after violence has escalated, while security deployments remain insufficient in the absence of community trust. Intercultural dialogue initiatives produce durable outcomes only when accompanied by concrete structural interventions that address land disputes, political exclusion and historical grievances. The study introduces the concept of a ‘*credibility deficit*’ to explain the cumulative erosion of community trust in peacebuilding processes caused by repeated cycles of unfulfilled institutional commitments. The study’s findings also established that the meaningful inclusion of women and youth functions as a structural condition for, rather than a supplement to, sustainable peace outcomes. The study concludes that durable peace in deeply plural conflict contexts cannot be achieved through governance reform or intercultural dialogue in isolation. Instead, it requires their simultaneous, coordinated deployment across institutional and community levels, supported by inclusive participation, credibility restoration, and continuous monitoring. The study recommends the institutionalization of proactive, integrated peacebuilding mechanisms that combine governance reform with sustained intercultural dialogue to ensure long-term peace and stability in Taraba State and comparable multicultural settings across post-colonial Africa.

Keywords: Governance, identity politics, intercultural dialogue, peace building, sustainable peace

Introduction

Sustaining peace in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies remains one of the most pressing governance challenges in post-independence Africa. In Nigeria, this challenge has intensified in recent years, as identity-based conflicts increasingly shape patterns of insecurity and social-political fragmentation (Igwe, 2025). Globally, emerging research demonstrates that identity conflict does not only fuel violence but also constrains long-term planning horizons and undermines cooperative decision-making within societies (Yu & Zhang, 2023). Compounding this, the politicization of identity and the rising polarization continue to deepen divisions across diverse socio-political contexts, making resolution progressively harder to achieve (Octavianne et al., 2024). Within Nigeria, the combination of over 250 ethnic groups, a near-equal Christian–Muslim divide, and a federal structure that incentivizes competition for state resources creates enduring structural conditions for conflict to subsist (Suberu, 2001; Mustapha, 2004). Despite extensive scholarly and policy attention to large-scale crises such as insurgency and militancy in Nigeria, the recurrent, low-intensity but highly destructive intercommunal conflicts of the Middle Belt remain comparatively under-examined, even though they represent a critical dimension of the country’s conflict landscape.

Taraba State particularly epitomizes the complexity of identity-based conflict within the Middle Belt, as it is home to more than 60 ethnic nationalities. The state has experienced recurring cycles of violence that have disrupted livelihoods and fractured social relations across its three senatorial districts. These conflicts are driven by overlapping and mutually reinforcing factors, including land disputes, farmer–herder tensions, indigene–settler distinctions, and the politicization of ethnic and religious identities. Such dynamics reflect broader historical and structural patterns of identity conflict in Nigeria, where colonial legacies, governance failures, and resource competition continue to shape intergroup relations (Berebon, 2024; Sowale, 2025). Notwithstanding the proliferation of government-led interventions such as peace committees, mediation forums, security deployments, and public dialogue initiatives, these conflicts have proven remarkably resilient. This persistence suggests that prevailing approaches are insufficient, pointing to a deeper structural and relational problem that requires more integrated and context-sensitive strategies.

Conceptually, two dominant approaches underpin efforts to address these identity-based conflicts: identity politics management and intercultural

dialogue. Identity politics management refers to governance strategies designed to address group-based grievances, ensure equitable access to resources, and regulate diversity within political systems. Intercultural dialogue, in contrast, involves structured engagement aimed at fostering mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation between groups (Taylor, 1992; Bohm, 1996). While both approaches are widely recognized as essential, they are frequently implemented in isolation. Government interventions often prioritize institutional reforms without sufficient community engagement, whereas dialogue initiatives are commonly undertaken without the structural support required to translate agreements into sustained outcomes.

Recent scholarship further conceptualizes identity conflict as a dynamic and processual phenomenon shaped by perception, appraisal, and interaction rather than static group divisions (Vough et al., 2025). Comparative studies show that institutional arrangements can either mitigate or exacerbate identity-based tensions depending on their design and implementation (Bayu, 2022). In addition, structural drivers such as inequality, exclusion, and ideological mobilization continue to reinforce conflict dynamics if left unaddressed (Wahid et al., 2025). These insights suggest that both structural and relational dimensions must be addressed simultaneously, highlighting the importance of examining how governance mechanisms and dialogue processes interact within specific conflict contexts such as Taraba State.

Existing scholarship on peacebuilding in Nigeria provides valuable insights into conflict dynamics and intervention strategies at macro and meso levels of analysis (Aliyu, 2011; Paden, 2008; Isumonah, 2003). However, several critical gaps remain. First, there is limited systematic empirical research on the effectiveness of government-led mechanisms for managing identity politics in Taraba State. Second, although intercultural dialogue is widely advocated as a tool for managing ethnic and religious tensions, the conditions under which it produces durable outcomes remain underexplored in this context. Third, the relationship between governance mechanisms and dialogue processes is typically framed as sequential rather than integrative, with reforms assumed to precede or substitute for dialogue. Recent studies further highlight the growing role of youth in shaping identity politics and conflict dynamics in Nigeria (Akinyetun, 2025), as well as the limitations of conventional conflict management strategies that fail to address underlying relational and structural drivers (Phiri, 2022). Collectively, these limitations reveal a significant gap in understanding how governance and dialogue can be deliberately integrated to produce sustainable peace. Therefore, this study examines how identity politics management and intercultural dialogue can be strategically combined to generate sustainable peace outcomes in Taraba

State, investigating the mechanisms, limitations, and enabling conditions of their integration in conflict-affected settings.

Identity Politics Management and Government-Led Mechanisms for Sustainable Peace

Existing literature on managing identity politics in ethnically plural societies has evolved considerably since the foundational contributions of Horowitz (1985) and Lijphart (1977). While consociational and power-sharing approaches dominated early debates (Lijphart, 1977), subsequent scholarship has emphasized the importance of institutional design, elite incentives, and the quality of implementation over the choice of formal arrangement (Norris, 2008; Reilly, 2011). In the African context, Cheeseman and Lavers (2023) demonstrate that formal power-sharing agreements are most effective when accompanied by genuine commitment of elites, transparent resource allocation, and credible mechanisms of accountability, conditions that are systematically absent in many Middle Belt governance contexts.

The role of traditional and religious leaders as intermediaries between formal government apparatuses and community-level realities has received growing attention in African peacebuilding literature. Isbell (2010) and Adekanbi (2016) document the ways in which traditional rulers in northern Nigeria serve as cultural brokers by translating formal policy into community-accessible language and generating the trust and legitimacy that external government actors lack. However, extant literature highlights the limitations of over-reliance on traditional authority, stressing that the effectiveness of informal mediation depends heavily on individual credibility and perceived impartiality, raising concerns about institutional sustainability.

The empirical literature on intercultural dialogue as a peacebuilding tool is extensive but uneven (Bohm, 1996; Saunders, 1999; Wanis-St. John & Kew, 2008). A consistent finding across different geographical and conflict contexts is that dialogue-related initiatives produce the most long-lasting results when they are genuinely inclusive of all conflict-affected communities, connected to concrete action rather than confined to discursive exchange, sustained over time rather than episodic, and grounded in acknowledgement of historical injustices rather than premised on artificial neutrality (Lederach, 1997; Galtung, 1996; Ramsbotham et al., 2011).

In the Nigerian context, Aliyu (2011) and Nmadu (2015) document the proliferation of government-sponsored dialogue initiatives in conflict-affected states but note a persistent gap between the frequency of dialogue events and the durability of their outcomes. Omeje and Hepner (2013) attribute this gap to three structural failures: the absence of follow-through

mechanisms that translate dialogue commitments into enforceable agreements; the exclusion of youth and women from most formal dialogue processes; and the failure to address the structural drivers of conflict, including land, political representation, and historical grievances, alongside the discursive dimensions of intergroup relations.

This paper builds on and extends the literature by providing empirically grounded analysis of dialogue dynamics in Taraba State and by theorizing the conditions under which dialogue and governance reform must be integrated rather than sequenced or substituted in order to generate viable peace.

Theoretical Framework: Protracted Social Conflict, Lederach's Peacebuilding Architecture, and the Theory of Communicative Action

This paper is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks, each of which explains a different dimension of the relationship between identity politics management, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable peace. The Integration Framework applied in this study illustrates how identity politics management and intercultural dialogue must be simultaneously coordinated across structural, institutional, and relational levels to generate sustainable peace outcomes in Taraba State.

Edward Azar's (1990) Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) framework provides the primary structural lens for this article. Azar argued that the most intractable conflicts in the developing world are not primarily about ideology or inter-state rivalry but about the failure of states to satisfy the communal identity needs of their populations, specifically the needs for security, recognition, acceptance, and equitable distribution of resources. According to Azar, protracted social conflict is sustained by the interaction of four preconditions: communal content (the salience of ethnic, religious, or cultural group identities); governance failure (the inability or unwillingness of states to address communal grievances); the deprivation of basic human needs; and international linkages. The PSC framework is particularly valuable for this study because it explains why conflicts in Taraba State have resisted resolution despite successive government intervention: as long as the structural conditions generating conflict, including land tenure insecurity, political exclusion, indigene-settler hierarchies, and weak institutional capacity, remain in place, surface-level interventions cannot interrupt conflict cycles. This paper extends Azar's framework by theorizing the integration of governance reform and dialogue as a necessary condition for breaking PSC dynamics, and introduces the concept of the credibility deficit as a specific mechanism through which repeated governance failure erodes the legitimacy of subsequent peacebuilding efforts.

John Paul Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding architecture is a complementary analytical framework that emphasises the multi-level, long-term nature of sustainable peace. Lederach argued that building peace cannot be reduced to elite-level negotiations or community-level reconciliation initiatives alone. Rather, it requires coherent, coordinated engagement across three levels simultaneously: top-level leadership (government, military, religious and political elites), middle-range actors (respected leaders, academics, civil society organizations), and grassroots communities (local leaders, community members, women, youth). Lederach's framework is significant for this paper in two respects. First, it provides a conceptual basis for understanding why government-led peace committees that operate primarily at the elite level produce fragile outcomes, as without parallel engagement at community and middle-range levels, elite agreements lack the social infrastructure needed to hold. Second, it informs the Integration Framework proposed in this paper, which specifies the conditions under which formal governance mechanisms and community-level dialogue must be coordinated across Lederach's three levels to generate sustainable peace.

Jürgen Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action provides the third philosophical foundation for understanding why intercultural dialogue succeeds or fails as a peacebuilding tool. Habermas distinguished between strategic action, communication aimed at securing predetermined outcomes, and communicative action, communication oriented toward genuine mutual understanding and rational consensus. For Habermas, authentic communication requires comprehensibility (participants must be able to understand one another), sincerity (participants must be genuinely committed to honest engagement), and legitimacy (the communicative process must be perceived as fair and free from domination). Applied to intercultural dialogue in conflict-affected communities, Habermas' framework clarifies a critical distinction between performative dialogue, meetings held for appearances without genuine commitment to understanding, and transformative dialogue, conversations that produce empathy, new understandings, and changed relationships. The empirical findings of this article reveal systematic barriers to communicative action in Taraba State: unaddressed historical grievances undermine sincerity, power asymmetries between different ethnic and gender groups compromise legitimacy, and the legacy of unfulfilled promises from previous initiatives erodes comprehensibility by making participants question whether dialogue outcomes will have real-world consequences. This analysis leads directly to the paper's concept of the credibility deficit.

Research Methodology

This article is grounded in the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, which holds that social reality is not a fixed or objective phenomenon but is constructed through the meanings, experiences, and interpretive frameworks that social actors bring to their lives and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This philosophical positioning is particularly appropriate for a study focused on peacebuilding, governance, and intercultural dialogue, domains in which the meanings participants attach to institutions, processes, and relationships are as consequential as the institutions and processes themselves. A qualitative multi-method design was employed to generate the depth, contextual richness, and interpretive breadth required to address the research questions of the study.

The study was conducted across all three senatorial districts of Taraba State: Taraba North, Taraba Central, and Taraba South. Within these districts, data were collected from eleven local government areas (LGAs): Karim Lamido and Jalingo in Taraba North; Lau, Sardauna, and Bali in Taraba Central; and Kurmi, Ussa, Takum, Donga, Wukari, and Ibi in Taraba South. This multi-district, multi-LGA design ensures geographic representativeness and enables comparative analysis across contexts with distinct ethnic compositions, conflict histories, and governance experiences. Taraba State was selected because of its exceptional ethnic and religious diversity, its documented history of recurrent identity-based conflicts, and the strategic importance of its peacebuilding experiences for comparable contexts across Nigeria's Middle Belt and the broader West African sub-region.

A total of 100 participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling ensured representation across categories of key stakeholders relevant to the study's focus on governance mechanisms, intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding, including traditional rulers, religious leaders, civil society representatives, political actors, farmers, herders, traders, youth leaders, and women leaders. Snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants within categories characterized by restricted access, particularly women and youth at the grassroots level. Participants were drawn from all three senatorial districts and the eleven selected LGAs to ensure breadth of perspective.

Semi-structured KIIs were conducted with institutional and leadership actors, including traditional rulers, religious leaders, senior civil society representatives, political actors, and local government officials. The KII protocol was designed to elicit detailed accounts of governance mechanisms, their perceived effectiveness, the conditions enabling or constraining dialogue, and participants' conceptualizations of sustainable peace. Interviews averaged 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted in English and other

major local languages of Taraba State, namely Hausa, Kuteb, Tiv, Jukun, Fulfulde, and Mambilla, with trained research assistants, and were audio-recorded with participants' written consent.

FGDs were conducted with community-level stakeholders including farmers, traders, youth groups, and women's organizations. Each FGD comprised six to ten participants and was guided by a structured protocol addressing participants' experiences of government peacebuilding initiatives, processes of intercultural dialogue, and their perceptions of the conditions required for sustainable peace. The group dynamic of FGDs was particularly productive for eliciting normative community perspectives and surfacing disagreements that might not emerge in individual interview settings.

Systematic participant observation was conducted at community peace meetings, government-sponsored dialogue forums, and interethnic public gatherings across all three senatorial districts and the eleven selected LGAs. Field notes documented patterns of interaction, power dynamics within dialogue settings, and observable indicators of trust and mistrust between group representatives.

Policy documents, government reports, peace committee minutes, and civil society publications were systematically reviewed to contextualize participants' accounts and identify recurring gaps between policy intent and implementation outcomes.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarization with data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the analysis. NVivo software facilitated systematic coding and cross-referencing across data sources and participant categories. Analytical rigour was maintained through triangulation across methods and sources, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling to surface researcher positionality and manage interpretive biases.

The research team comprises scholars affiliated with Nigerian universities with established programmes in conflict and peacebuilding in the Middle Belt region. This institutional location deepened interpretive sensitivity to local political dynamics and facilitated participant access, while also carrying the risk that proximity to the context could foreclose analytical openness. The team occupied a partially insider position, sharing broad national and regional identity with most participants, while remaining outsiders to the specific ethnic and community identities central to the conflicts examined. To manage the interpretive biases this dual positioning generates, reflexive journals were maintained throughout data collection and analysis, member checking was conducted with a subset of participants, and

peer debriefing sessions were used to interrogate readings that may have been shaped by prior expectations or institutional proximity to governance actors.

The study received full ethical clearance from Babcock University Health Research Ethics Committee (BUHREC) with the approval reference BUHREC 665/25/1144. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, with full explanation of the study's purposes, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to protect their anonymity. Given the political sensitivity of the research topic, particular care was exercised in data storage, participant identification, and the reporting of findings. Participants are identified in quoted extracts only by role, gender, age, location, and data collection method.

Findings and Discussions

Government Peace Committees: Reactive Mechanisms and Their Limitations

Findings from this study confirm that state-level peace committees represent the primary formal mechanism through which government in Taraba State attempts to manage identity-based tensions and promote intercultural dialogue. Participants across all classifications recognized the importance of these structures as platforms for convening representatives from conflicting communities. A local government official from Jalingo, Taraba Central, described their intended function:

The peace committees try to bring people together mostly before disputes turn violent. We invite leaders from all sides, including youths and women, and we try to find solutions that everyone can live with. But sometimes, people just don't trust each other enough to listen at first. (Local government official, male, 52 years, Jalingo, Taraba Central, KII)

However, the dominant finding across the data is that these committees operate predominantly in reactive rather than preventive mode. By the time committees convene, violence has typically already erupted, tempers are elevated, and the conditions for productive dialogue are compromised. A civil society actor from Karim Lamido, Taraba North, articulated this structural limitation with precision:

Most of the time, we only hear about a committee meeting after people have already clashed, with properties destroyed and some people killed. By then, tempers are high, and agreements are fragile. It feels like we are always catching up instead of preventing the fight. (Civil society actor, female, 44 years, Karim Lamido, Taraba North, KII)

Document analysis corroborated this reactive pattern, revealing that the overwhelming majority of documented committee interventions were post-

conflict rather than preventive, and that follow-up monitoring of agreed outcomes was systematically absent from committee mandates and resourcing. This finding is consistent with the broader peacebuilding literature, which identifies the absence of early warning and preventive mechanisms as a structural weakness in state-led conflict management frameworks (Lederach, 1997; Ramsbotham et al., 2011). Within Azar's (1990) Protracted Social Conflict framework, the reactive posture of peace committees reflects a governance failure that allows the structural preconditions of conflict to accumulate unchecked until they produce violence, at which point the credibility and effectiveness of state intervention are already severely compromised.

Security Deployment: Temporary Containment and the Trust Deficit

The deployment of security forces was identified as a commonly employed but deeply limited response from the government. While participants acknowledged that police and military presence could temporarily contain violence, concerns about delayed response times and perceived institutional bias were widespread and consistent across data sources. A community elder from Wukari, Taraba South, explained:

The soldiers and police show up during conflicts, but usually after blood has been shed. People start to wonder whose side they are on. When that happens, the violence just shifts to another place, and trust in the government goes down. (Community elder, male, 63 years, Wukari, Taraba South, KII)

This finding reveals a critical feedback loop consistent with what this paper conceptualizes as the credibility deficit (discussed in detail below). Perceived institutional bias in security responses erodes community confidence in the state, which reduces cooperation with security forces in future incidents, which in turn further degrades early warning capacity and response effectiveness. Security deployment alone, absent the trust-building required to make it perceived as legitimate, is insufficient as a conflict management strategy. This resonates with Cheeseman and Lavers' (2023) argument that formal governance mechanisms require credible accountability to function effectively in plural societies.

Traditional and Religious Leaders as Indispensable Intermediaries

A consistent and strongly evidenced finding across the data is that traditional rulers and religious leaders function as indispensable bridges between formal government mechanisms and community-level realities. Where government officials lack cultural authority and community trust, traditional leaders provide both. A traditional ruler from Bali, Taraba Central, explained this complementary role:

Sometimes the government officers cannot reach or convince the people. That's when we step in as mediators. We know the history, the culture, and the people involved. Our presence makes the discussion feel real, and people actually listen. (Traditional ruler, male, 61 years, Bali, Taraba Central, KII)

Observation data reinforced this finding, showing that community meetings co-facilitated by government representatives and traditional leaders produced more sustained engagement and more durable commitments than those led solely by external government actors. This finding aligns with Adekanbi's (2016) and Isbell's (2010) documentation of traditional rulers as cultural brokers in northern Nigeria. Within Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding architecture, these actors occupy the middle-range level, connecting top-down institutional authority with grassroots community realities in ways that neither level can achieve independently. However, participants also regularly noted that the effectiveness of informal mediation is heavily dependent on the personal credibility and perceived impartiality of individual actors, raising important questions about institutional sustainability.

Intercultural Dialogue: Transformative Potential and the Reframing of Shared Vulnerability

Across all data sources, intercultural dialogue was acknowledged as a critical mechanism through which communities can move from mutual fear and suspicion toward empathy and mutual recognition. The transformative potential of dialogue was most vividly described in accounts of farmer-herder exchanges in communities such as Ibi and Donga that created opportunities for each group to understand the other's vulnerabilities and concerns. A civil society actor from Karim Lamido, Taraba North, described this dynamic:

When farmers and herders sit together, you see it in their eyes as they begin to understand each other's suffering. They realize that everyone worries about their families, their land, and their children. For a moment, they stop thinking in terms of tribe and start seeing people. (Civil society actor, female, 46 years, Karim Lamido, Taraba North, KII)

Observation during community meetings confirmed that participants frequently referenced shared struggles, including access to grazing land, water, and markets, as starting points for dialogue, enabling tensions to be reframed as collective resource management challenges rather than ethnic disputes. This reframing is consistent with Habermas' (1984) concept of communicative action: when participants engage in genuine mutual understanding rather than strategic argumentation, new possibilities for

collaborative problem-solving emerge. Wanis-St. John and Kew (2008) similarly identify the reframing of conflict narratives as a foundational condition for dialogue's transformative effects.

Dialogue as a Platform for Concrete, Enforceable Agreements

Beyond its psychological and relational dimensions, intercultural dialogue was identified as a platform for generating practical and enforceable agreements on concrete issues. Several participants described how focused discussions on tangible, everyday concerns, such as grazing routes, crop protection arrangements, and market access, produced specific outcomes that reduced immediate conflict and built confidence for further dialogue. A youth leader from Bali, Taraba Central, noted:

When we meet, farmers and herders start talking: 'Let us mark grazing routes properly, let us respect farm boundaries.' Sometimes they even agree to take turns. You see them shake hands at the end, and that changes the day-to-day reality, not just the words. (Youth leader, male, 29 years, Bali, Taraba Central, FGD)

This finding highlights the instrumental value of issue-focused dialogue. By addressing concrete grievances rather than abstract intergroup animosities, dialogue produces tangible outcomes that rebuild trust incrementally. Each small agreement functions as a confidence-building measure that creates social capital for addressing more complex and historically charged disputes (Saunders, 1999; Galtung, 1996).

Dialogue and Sociocultural Cohesion: Symbolic Acts of Mutual Respect

Participants also described dialogue initiatives as reinforcing sociocultural cohesion by creating spaces for small but symbolically meaningful acts of mutual respect, including attending one another's festivals, participating in shared community projects, and eating together. A female community representative from Ibi, Taraba South, noted:

Before now, we would never go to a neighbour's wedding if they were from another nearby tribe that we have had issues with. But now, we attend, we share food, we talk. Little by little, people trust each other more, and fights become fewer. (Community representative, female, 38 years, Ibi, Taraba South, FGD)

Observation data supported this finding, showing that dialogue initiatives that incorporated shared cultural activities, including communal prayers, joint clean-up projects, and co-hosted festivals, produced more sustained intergroup engagement than purely discursive exchanges. This is consistent with Lederach's (1997) emphasis on relationship-centred peacebuilding,

which recognizes that trust is built through shared experience as much as through formal agreement.

The Credibility Deficit: When Dialogue Becomes Performative

Despite its well-documented contributions, the findings reveal a critical and recurring limitation: dialogue initiatives fail to produce stable peace when structural issues such as land disputes, political favouritism, and historical grievances remain unaddressed. Several participants reported attending dialogue sessions as performances, without genuine commitment to the process. A traditional ruler from Bali, Taraba Central, articulated this phenomenon directly:

Some elders come to the meetings and nod to everything people say there, but outside, old grudges still rule. If land disputes or political favoritism are not solved, the smile in the hall will not last long on the ground. (Traditional ruler, male, 61 years, Bali, Taraba Central, KII)

This finding points to what this paper conceptualizes as the ‘credibility deficit’: the systematic erosion of community trust in dialogue processes produced by repeated cycles of meetings without consequential follow-through. The deficit is compounded over time: each dialogue initiative that fails to produce structural change reinforces community cynicism, reduces voluntary participation in subsequent initiatives, and makes genuine communicative action progressively harder to achieve. This concept extends Habermas’ (1984) theory of communicative action by specifying a concrete mechanism through which the conditions for authentic dialogue are degraded by the history of its own failures. As expectations of implementation decline, dialogue risks becoming performative rather than transformative, and communities may continue to participate formally without genuine belief that the process will produce tangible outcomes.

The Integration Framework: Towards Simultaneous, Coordinated Peacebuilding

The most consequential finding from the data is that neither governance mechanisms alone nor intercultural dialogue alone can produce sustainable peace in Taraba State. Instead, sustainable peace requires the deliberate integration of both strategies, what this paper terms the Integration Framework. This finding emerged consistently across all stakeholder categories and senatorial districts. A civil society actor from Karim Lamido, Taraba North, articulated the core logic:

Dialogue is not magic. You can bring people together all day, but if the land issues and past injustices are ignored, the conversation will go nowhere. You need to deal with people’s identity and history first, or

nothing changes. (Civil society actor, female, 46 years, Karim Lamido, Taraba North, KII)

This account demonstrates that structural interventions and dialogue are not substitutes for one another but prerequisites for one another's effectiveness. Governance reform without dialogue lacks the social legitimacy and relational trust needed for communities to accept and implement structural changes. Dialogue without governance reform lacks the structural anchor needed to translate discursive agreements into changed realities. This finding challenges the sequential assumption that pervades much peacebuilding practice, namely that structural reforms must first be implemented before meaningful dialogue can occur, or that dialogue can substitute for the more difficult work of institutional change (Omeje & Hepner, 2013; Aliyu, 2011).

Participants consistently emphasized that successful integration leverages both formal and informal institutional structures. Government commissions provide legitimacy, resources, and policy authority, while traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations provide cultural relevance, community trust, and local credibility. A traditional ruler from Sardauna, Taraba Central, described this complementary dynamic:

When the government brings policies or programs, we help translate them for our communities. We explain why it is important to listen to each other and not let old grudges decide our future. (Traditional ruler, male, 62 years, Sardauna, Taraba Central, KII)

Observation data reinforced this finding, demonstrating that bringing together government officials and traditional leaders generated more sustained and substantive engagement than either actor could produce independently. This finding operationalizes Lederach's (1997) multi-level architecture by identifying traditional and religious leaders as the critical middle-range intermediaries through whom vertical integration between institutional and community processes occurs, thereby addressing the gap that Lederach's framework leaves less explicit.

Inclusive Participation: A Structural Condition, Not a Procedural Preference

Inclusive participation, specifically the meaningful inclusion of women and youth, emerged as a non-negotiable structural condition for sustainable peace outcomes. Participants highlighted that initiatives dominated by male elders produce agreements that reflect a partial understanding of community needs and lack the buy-in of the demographic groups most directly affected by conflict. A female youth leader from Takum, Taraba South, stated:

If only men and elders decide, the younger generation and women are left out. Peace is for everyone, so everyone must speak and everyone must be heard. (Youth leader, female, 27 years, Takum, Taraba South, FGD)

This finding has direct operational implications. Agreements negotiated without the participation of women systematically fail to address the domestic, economic, and social dimensions of conflict that women experience most acutely. Settlements negotiated without youth participation fail to generate the social compliance needed for implementation in communities where young people constitute the majority of the population (Akinyetun, 2025; Wanis-St. John & Kew, 2008). The Integration Framework therefore treats inclusive participation not as a procedural preference but as a structural condition for effective peacebuilding, one that generates more comprehensive understandings of conflict dynamics, fosters broader community ownership of negotiated outcomes, and strengthens the social coalitions required to sustain peace initiatives over time.

Capacity Building and Intercultural Education as Long-Term Enablers

Participants widely identified capacity building and intercultural education as long-term enablers of integration, complementing the reactive mechanisms of peace committees and dialogue forums with a preventive investment in the next generation's conflict literacy. A community elder from Karim Lamido, Taraba North, articulated the intergenerational logic:

We have to teach our children and youths to know and respect each other, to settle their disagreements without fighting. This is how we can help the next generation to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. (Community elder, male, 65 years, Karim Lamido, Taraba North, FGD)

This finding resonates with Lederach's (1997) emphasis on long-term, relationship-centred peacebuilding and with Galtung's (1996) argument that sustainable peace requires structural and cultural transformation, not merely the cessation of violence. In contexts such as Taraba State, where historical grievances and conflict memories are transmitted across generations, peace requires not only institutional reforms but also the gradual transformation of social relationships and cultural understandings between communities.

Continuous Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Finally, participants emphasised that integration is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Without systematic monitoring, outcome assessment, and responsiveness to emerging grievances, even well-designed integration initiatives risk stagnating. A civil society actor from Bali, Taraba Central, captured the adaptive management imperative:

You cannot just hold one meeting and walk away thinking you have solved the problem. You have to follow up to see who is really talking, who is listening, and whether trust is actually growing. (Civil society actor, male, 50 years, Bali, Taraba Central, KII)

The emphasis on monitoring and follow-through speaks directly to the conditions required to address the credibility deficit. Restoring institutional credibility in contexts such as Taraba State requires not only the launch of new initiatives but also the visible and verifiable delivery of commitments made in previous processes. Transparent acknowledgement of past failures and early demonstration of concrete outcomes are prerequisites for re-engaging communities whose trust has been eroded by repeated cycles of unfulfilled promises (Habermas, 1984; Cheeseman & Lavers, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explains the interplay required to transcend episodic responses to identity-based conflicts in deeply plural societies such as Taraba State. Its central finding is that sustainable peace is structurally conditional upon the simultaneous and coordinated deployment of governance reform and intercultural dialogue. Neither can compensate for the absence of the other. Reform without dialogue lacks relational legitimacy, while dialogue without reform lacks the institutional anchor needed to translate agreements into durable realities.

Theoretically, the Integration Framework advances beyond sequentialist and substitution models by specifying how governance and dialogue must be coordinated across structural, multi-level, and communicative dimensions simultaneously. The credibility deficit concept extends Habermas' (1984) communicative action theory by identifying the cumulative mechanism through which repeated institutional failure erodes the very conditions that make genuine dialogue possible. The study provides the first systematic qualitative account of integrated peacebuilding dynamics across all three of Taraba State's senatorial districts and eleven LGAs, establishing that the inclusion of women and youth is an operational condition for durable peace, not a normative aspiration.

The study's limitations should inform future inquiry. The single-state, cross-sectional design constrains transferability and cannot trace how integration processes evolve longitudinally. Power dynamics within conflict-affected communities may have shaped participant disclosure, and researcher positionality inevitably influenced the analytical process despite deliberate reflexive practices. Future research should pursue longitudinal evaluations of integrated interventions, comparative studies across Middle Belt states, and targeted investigations into rebuilding institutional

credibility where cycles of unfulfilled commitments have deepened the credibility deficit.

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

First, peace committees in Taraba State should be transformed from reactive institutions into permanent, proactive bodies with formal mandates for early warning, preventive dialogue, and systematic monitoring of peace agreements across all eleven LGAs examined in this study. Second, peacebuilding initiatives should be co-designed with traditional authorities, religious leaders, and civil society organizations whose legitimacy and community trust complement the authority of formal government institutions, thereby operationalizing the multi-level integration that Lederach's (1997) architecture prescribes. Third, assessment of the credibility deficit should become an integral component of conflict analysis before new peace initiatives are introduced; restoring institutional credibility requires visible follow-through on previous commitments, transparent acknowledgement of past failures, and early delivery of concrete outcomes. Fourth, the meaningful participation of women and youth must be institutionalized as a non-negotiable design principle across all peacebuilding mechanisms, with structured representation at every level of dialogue and governance engagement. Fifth, long-term investment in intercultural education and civic capacity building should be integrated into state and local government planning frameworks to address the intergenerational transmission of historical grievances and build preventive conflict literacy among younger generations. Finally, all peacebuilding initiatives should be subject to systematic, independent monitoring and evaluation, with findings publicly reported and used to adapt strategies responsively.

With all things considered, durable peace in contexts of overlapping ethnic, religious, and resource tensions demands a shift from reactive crisis management toward sustained, multi-level architectures that embed structural reform within ongoing relational work, an imperative that extends beyond Taraba State to comparable multicultural settings across post-colonial Africa.

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