VOL. 13 NO. 2,
AUGUST, 2026
E-ISSN 3027-1533
P-ISSN 3026-8648

African Scholar Publications & Research International
www.africanscholarpub.com

Journal of African Innovation & Advanced Studies (JAIAS)

Harnessing African Creativity for Peacebuilding and Sustainable Development: The Role of Youth Innovation in Addressing Insecurity in Nigeria

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/ajaias.v13i2.0117

Abstract

Nigeria's persistent insecurity has evolved beyond a conventional security challenge to become a significant obstacle to peace, social cohesion and sustainable development. The paper challenges the tendency to portray young Nigerians principally as victims, potential recruits into violent groups or beneficiaries of government interventions, and instead conceptualizes them as active agents capable of generating knowledge, technology, entrepreneurial opportunities and locally grounded solutions to insecurity. The paper adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents, institutional reports and relevant secondary evidence on youth, innovation, peacebuilding and insecurity. It is anchored in Positive Peace Theory and complemented by the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) framework, which emphasizes meaningful youth participation, prevention, partnerships, protection and sustainable peace. The analysis demonstrates that youth-led innovation can strengthen peacebuilding through digital communication, early-warning and early-response mechanisms, counter-disinformation initiatives, community dialogue, civic participation, creative industries, entrepreneurship, livelihood creation and technology-enabled approaches to community security. However, youth creativity remains constrained by unemployment, inadequate access to finance, weak infrastructure, digital inequality, limited political inclusion, institutional weaknesses and insecurity itself. The paper therefore argues for integrating youth innovation with peacebuilding, community security and sustainable development. It recommends stronger youth innovation financing, peace-tech and creative-industry incubators, university–industry partnerships, community innovation hubs and digital-skills programmes.

Keywords: African creativity; Youth innovation; Peacebuilding; Human security; Youth, Peace and Security; Sustainable development.

Introduction

Across the African continent, a profound reservoir of human ingenuity thrives, manifested through diverse mediums such as cinema, musical composition, literary arts, fashion, technological startups, grassroots community problem-solving, digital communication, and indigenous knowledge systems. Despite this vibrant output, continental creativity is persistently marginalized through restrictive interpretations that confine it exclusively to entertainment and cultural consumption. Such narrow conceptualizations obscure its broader sociopolitical and developmental implications. In practice, creative expression supplies communities with pragmatic mechanisms to navigate social friction, enhance resilience, and foster peaceful coexistence. Youth populations, in particular, leverage digital networks, artistic media, entrepreneurial ventures, and localized knowledge systems to detect emerging security threats, dismantle violent extremist narratives, bridge polarized populations, generate sustainable livelihoods, and pioneer responses to localized violence. Consequently, creative capacity transcends mere cultural or economic valuation, operating instead as a critical pillar for peacebuilding and sustainable development.

This imperative is acutely pronounced within the Nigerian state, where persistent insecurity has emerged as a primary impediment to national progress. Over the past two decades, Nigeria's security architecture has experienced a profound structural evolution, shifting toward highly complex, geographically dispersed, and multidimensional conflict configurations. The national landscape has been severely impacted by violent extremism and insurgency in the North-East, widespread banditry and kidnapping syndicates across the North-West and North-Central zones, persistent farmer-herder and communal clashes, separatist-driven agitations in the South-East, resource-related militancy within the Niger Delta, and entrenched urban criminality. The ramifications of this prolonged volatility extend far beyond immediate fatalities and physical infrastructure damage. Chronic instability fractures educational continuity, paralyzes agricultural supply chains, instigates mass displacement, stifles domestic and foreign investment, curtails mobility, corrodes social capital, and erodes civic trust in governance institutions.

Historically, Nigeria's strategic response has relied heavily on conventional, state-centered coercive measures, including military deployments, enhanced policing, intelligence operations, and border enforcement. While these mechanisms remain indispensable for safeguarding territorial integrity and protecting citizenry, the longevity and evolving dynamics of contemporary threats demonstrate that kinetic responses alone cannot eliminate the structural drivers of violence. Insecurity is deeply entangled with systemic socio-economic deficits, including widespread unemployment, pervasive poverty, structural exclusion, institutional fragility, governance deficits, political marginalization, and constricted avenues for meaningful civic engagement. The intractability of these challenges necessitates a critical re-evaluation of traditional security paradigms. Consequently, security must be conceptualized beyond the narrow absence of physical combat, extending into the structural and environmental conditions that afford individuals and communities the agency to live dignified, resilient lives.

This holistic viewpoint is captured by the human security paradigm, which shifts institutional priorities away from the mere defense of state borders toward the protection and empowerment of human populations. Within this analytical framework, systemic poverty, structural joblessness, population displacement, food scarcity, social exclusion, and institutional decay are not merely secondary socio-economic concerns; under adverse conditions, they actively

function as accelerators of insecurity. In Nigeria, the intersection of insecurity and underdevelopment is acutely visible. Protracted violence systematically devastates critical infrastructure, including schools, agricultural fields, local markets, and commercial enterprises. It disrupts regional trade routes, forces mass displacement, discourages domestic and foreign investment, and erodes the social contract between citizens and governing institutions. Thus, insecurity accelerates developmental regression, while developmental deficits reinforce the drivers of instability.

This holistic approach gains heightened urgency against the backdrop of Africa's demographic transformation. Home to the world's youngest population, the continent faces profound policy challenges alongside historic opportunities. Nigeria sits at the epicenter of this demographic shift. Its substantial youth cohort possesses enormous potential for human capital accumulation, technological innovation, and societal transformation provided young people secure unhindered access to quality education, technical training, venture financing, digital infrastructure, and civic participation. Conversely, systemic exclusion from these opportunities renders youth uniquely vulnerable to criminal exploitation, recruitment by non-state armed groups, and political manipulation. Consequently, the lived reality of young Nigerians within this volatile environment is profoundly complex. Youth are frequently the primary victims and survivors of physical violence, mass displacement, and criminal exploitation. Yet, simultaneously, they operate as economic entrepreneurs, digital developers, community organizers, peace advocates, and local knowledge producers.

Reframing this paradigm, contemporary scholarship and policy discourse advocate for a conceptual shift regarding the intersection of youth and security. Rather than casting young Nigerians primarily as security threats, passive welfare recipients, or hapless victims of violence, analytical frameworks increasingly position them as vital social agents and strategic partners in peacebuilding. Armed with experiential community knowledge, digital literacy, and modern entrepreneurial networks, young people are uniquely positioned to spearhead technological and social innovations. Their capacities can be mobilized to fortify early-warning and early-response architectures, facilitate localized dialogue, counter hate speech and disinformation, establish alternative livelihoods, and reinforce social cohesion. African societies possess deep-rooted traditions of adaptive problem-solving in the face of economic hardship and social adversity. Contemporary African youth have successfully translated these traditions into modern domains, including financial technology, renewable energy, digital entrepreneurship, agricultural innovation, and social enterprise.

This philosophy aligns seamlessly with major international frameworks. Agenda 2063 of the African Union explicitly links sustainable security with inclusive development, technological innovation, and people-centered transformation. Similarly, the United Nations Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda spearheaded by Security Council Resolution 2250 mandates the formal recognition of youth as indispensable actors in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict recovery, emphasizing the core pillars of participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and reintegration. Practical precedents across Nigeria further validate this orientation. Contemporary initiatives, such as the United Nations Development Programme’s Young Africa Innovates programme, illustrate how structured incubation, targeted training, and digital skills development can empower youth in vulnerable regions to engineer home-grown technological responses to complex local challenges. When adequately supported and integrated into public governance, youth-led innovation can significantly bolster local early-warning systems, counter online disinformation, foster social cohesion, and generate alternative livelihoods. Nevertheless, youth participation remains heavily restricted by structural hurdles, including chronic joblessness, capital deficits, digital divides, underdeveloped technological infrastructure, political marginalization, and the pervasive shadow of physical insecurity. Overcoming these barriers requires

deliberate institutional engineering to finance, evaluate, scale, and embed youth-generated solutions directly into national security governance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Successive Nigerian administrations have dedicated substantial financial, administrative, and logistical resources toward neutralizing insecurity through military campaigns, counter-terrorism operations, and state-sponsored policing initiatives. Nevertheless, the persistence, geographical diffusion, and adaptive nature of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence indicate that conventional, state-centered security responses have not independently established the conditions necessary for durable peace. Insecurity is fundamentally sustained by interlocking structural, economic, political, and institutional deficiencies including acute youth unemployment, pervasive poverty, systemic inequality, political marginalization, and eroded social trust. Consequently, the core policy challenge facing the nation is not merely the suppression of active combatants, but the construction of a comprehensive security architecture capable of preventing violence while simultaneously fortifying the socioeconomic foundations of stability.

The demographic weight of Nigeria's youth population intensifies this challenge. While young people represent a vital source of technological ingenuity, entrepreneurship, and digital innovation, they are frequently marginalized or stereotyped as security liabilities. Conversely, programs designed to promote youth entrepreneurship often treat economic empowerment in isolation, ignoring the conflict-affected environments in which these innovations must survive. This fragmentation creates a severe policy disconnect between youth economic development initiatives and national peacebuilding structures.

While emerging community-level programs such as United Nations-supported early-warning systems in northwestern states demonstrate the efficacy of localized, youth-engaged problem-solving, these initiatives remain largely uncoordinated and detached from formal national security frameworks. Scholarship has extensively analyzed Nigerian insecurity, youth unemployment, and digital innovation as isolated phenomena, but critical gaps remain regarding their systematic integration. The central problem addressed by this paper is the persistent underutilization, underfinancing, and institutional exclusion of Nigerian youth creativity within national peacebuilding and security governance. Without intentional structural reforms to integrate youth-led innovation into formal policy frameworks, Nigeria's human security architecture will continue to neglect a primary catalyst for sustainable peace and development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this research paper is to critically examine how African creativity and youth-driven innovation can be systematically mobilized and institutionalized to mitigate insecurity, bolster peacebuilding frameworks, and advance sustainable development across Nigeria.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship between African creativity, youth-led innovation, and peacebuilding, and evaluate how digital, technological, and community-centric innovations contribute to conflict prevention, threat mitigation, and enhanced social cohesion within the Nigerian context.
2. To analyze the contributions of youth entrepreneurship, creative industries, and digital technologies toward achieving sustainable development, while identifying the institutional,

socioeconomic, technological, and security-related barriers that constrain youth creativity and meaningful participation in peacebuilding architecture.

3. To formulate actionable policy strategies aimed at institutionalizing youth-driven innovation within Nigeria's national security, human security, and peacebuilding frameworks.

African Creativity, Youth Innovation and Sustainable Development

African creativity represents a broad reservoir of human ingenuity expressed through cultural production, technological innovation, entrepreneurship, digital communication, indigenous knowledge and community-based problem-solving. Contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges approaches that treat African creativity principally as cultural expression or entertainment and instead recognizes creativity and innovation as potential instruments of social and economic transformation. Recent research on African innovation and entrepreneurship argues that context-specific innovation, social entrepreneurship and affordable innovation can contribute to addressing inequality, limited access to finance and education, youth unemployment, and sustainability challenges in areas such as agriculture, energy and healthcare. Müller et al. (2026) consequently emphasize the importance of developing innovation and entrepreneurship theories that are sensitive to African historical, cultural, institutional and socioeconomic realities rather than simply transferring Western-developed models to African contexts.

The relationship between creativity and sustainable development is also reflected in the work of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Its initiative involving young African writers demonstrates how creative expression can make the Sustainable Development Goals more accessible by connecting development issues with the lived experiences of African communities. The initiative involved young people aged 15–35 and addressed issues including poverty, climate change, gender, food security, natural resources, health, urbanization and employment. This demonstrates that creativity can function not only as cultural expression but also as a mechanism for communicating development challenges, stimulating public awareness and encouraging young people to participate in development processes.

Within Nigeria, youth innovation is particularly significant because of the country's large youth population and the socioeconomic challenges confronting young people. Youth can employ digital technologies, entrepreneurship, creative industries and community-based initiatives to develop solutions to social problems. Recent Nigerian scholarship conceptualizes young people as proactive actors who can use creativity, technological literacy and social awareness to address economic, social and environmental challenges. Gupa and Mundi (2026), for example, argue that Nigerian youth possess considerable potential to contribute to sustainable innovation, leadership transformation and social accountability, although this potential remains underutilized.

The literature therefore suggests that youth innovation should not be reduced to commercial entrepreneurship. It encompasses technological, social, cultural and community innovations capable of responding to problems that conventional institutions may not adequately address. For this study, African creativity is consequently understood as a potential resource through which Nigerian youth can generate locally appropriate responses to insecurity, social exclusion and developmental challenges.

Youth, Insecurity and Peacebuilding in Nigeria

The relationship between youth and insecurity in Nigeria is complex. Young people are frequently represented within security discourse as victims of violence, unemployed populations vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, or potential sources of political and communal violence. Such

representations, however, provide only a partial understanding of the role of young Nigerians in conflict-affected communities. Young people can simultaneously be victims of insecurity and active contributors to peacebuilding, conflict prevention and community resilience.

The United Nations Development Programme's Youth in Africa: A Demographic Imperative for Peace and Security provides important evidence for this argument. The study, based on a desk review, regional case studies and consultations with young peacebuilders, found that young Africans are already actively involved in peacebuilding through innovative approaches. These include preventing electoral violence, participating in early-warning and early-response mechanisms, reconciliation initiatives and community dialogue. The report argues that the demographic importance of African youth should therefore be matched by deliberate efforts to harness and scale youth-led peacebuilding solutions.

This perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where youth-led initiatives can contribute to community-level responses to insecurity. Recent research on youth-led peacebuilding in Nigeria identifies youth participation in early warning, grassroots conflict management, dialogue facilitation, community mediation, civic education and digital peace advocacy. The study also identifies political exclusion, limited funding, weak institutional support, unemployment and the instrumentalization of youth for violent purposes as major constraints.

The literature therefore supports a movement away from treating youth merely as objects of security interventions toward understanding them as security stakeholders. This is consistent with the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, which recognizes meaningful youth participation as an important component of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. The 2025 Peacebuilding Fund thematic review, which examined 41 projects across 33 countries, found that youth-inclusive peacebuilding programmes can expand youth participation in decision-making, support youth networks and strengthen linkages among young people and other peacebuilding stakeholders.

Youth Innovation, Digital Technology and Peacebuilding

One of the most significant areas in which African youth creativity intersects with peacebuilding is digital technology. Young people are major users and producers of digital content, making social media and other digital platforms important spaces for political participation, communication, advocacy and peacebuilding. Digital technologies can facilitate rapid information sharing, community mobilization, counter-narratives, early-warning communication and dialogue across social and geographic boundaries.

In the Nigerian context, Ogidi (2025) examines the relationship between social media platforms, youth and sustainable peacebuilding. The study argues that social media provides adaptive opportunities for youth participation and voice in peace processes. Since young people constitute a major demographic within social media spaces and are simultaneously vulnerable to conflict, digital platforms become important points of intersection between youth agency, communication and peacebuilding.

The potential of digital platforms, however, is not inherently peaceful. Social media can also facilitate misinformation, hate speech, radicalization and other forms of harmful communication. Recent Nigerian research on youth participation in protests and digital peacebuilding similarly identifies misinformation, radicalism, online opposition, government surveillance and digital exhaustion as challenges that can undermine the peacebuilding benefits of social media. This suggests that digital innovation must be accompanied by digital literacy, responsible communication and institutional frameworks that protect civic participation.

Consequently, youth digital innovation can contribute to peacebuilding through multiple pathways: early-warning systems, digital reporting mechanisms, counter-disinformation campaigns, peace

education, civic engagement, community dialogue and online advocacy. However, its effectiveness depends on the availability of digital infrastructure, skills, institutional support and an enabling environment for meaningful participation.

Youth Entrepreneurship, Creative Industries and Sustainable Development

Youth entrepreneurship represents another important dimension of the relationship between innovation and sustainable development. Entrepreneurship provides opportunities for young people to convert creativity and knowledge into employment, income generation and social value. In conflict-affected environments, productive economic opportunities can also contribute to community resilience by reducing socioeconomic vulnerabilities and providing alternatives to criminal or violent activities.

African innovation research increasingly recognizes the importance of entrepreneurship ecosystems, social entrepreneurship and affordable innovation in addressing structural development challenges. Müller et al. (2026) identify limited access to finance and education and youth unemployment among the major challenges that innovation and entrepreneurship can potentially address. Their analysis further emphasizes that African innovation research must account for the continent's particular institutional, cultural and socioeconomic circumstances.

Creative industries provide an additional pathway. Music, film, literature, fashion, gaming, visual arts and digital media can generate employment while simultaneously influencing attitudes, identities and social relationships. The UNECA youth creativity initiatives demonstrate how African young writers and creatives can use storytelling to communicate sustainable-development concerns and give young people a voice in discussions surrounding the SDGs.

The significance of this literature for Nigeria is that youth entrepreneurship should be understood beyond conventional business creation. Youth-led enterprises can contribute to livelihood creation, social inclusion, community resilience and sustainable development. When connected to peacebuilding objectives, entrepreneurship and creative industries can therefore serve both economic and social functions.

Structural Constraints on Youth Innovation and Peacebuilding

Although the literature demonstrates considerable potential for youth innovation, it also cautions against portraying young people as an unlimited resource whose creativity alone can resolve structural insecurity. Youth innovation is strongly conditioned by the institutional and socioeconomic environment in which young people operate.

The major constraints identified across the literature include unemployment, inadequate access to finance, limited education and technical skills, weak institutional support, digital inequality, inadequate infrastructure, political exclusion and insecurity itself. African innovation research emphasizes the importance of institutional and ecosystem conditions for transforming innovative ideas into sustainable outcomes.

Political exclusion is particularly significant because youth participation in peacebuilding requires more than inviting young people to participate in programmes. Meaningful participation requires opportunities to influence decisions, access institutions and contribute to policy development. The UNDP's guidance on youth-inclusive political processes emphasizes that barriers to meaningful political and civic participation continue to limit the ability of young people to influence decisions affecting their communities.

Security conditions can also undermine youth innovation. Young people living in conflict-affected communities may lack access to education, technology, finance and safe spaces necessary for

innovation. Thus, insecurity can simultaneously create the need for youth innovation while weakening the conditions required for young people to innovate effectively. This creates a significant paradox: the communities that most require innovative peacebuilding solutions may also be the communities in which young innovators face the greatest structural constraints.

Youth Innovation and the Youth, Peace and Security Framework

The Youth, Peace and Security framework provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding youth as agents rather than passive recipients of peacebuilding. The framework emphasizes meaningful youth participation and recognizes the contribution young people can make to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and sustainable peace.

The relevance of the framework to this study is particularly evident in the emphasis on participation, prevention and partnerships. Youth participation enables young people to contribute their knowledge and experiences to security decision-making; prevention recognizes their capacity to identify and address emerging sources of conflict; while partnerships create institutional relationships between youth organizations, governments, civil society and development actors.

The African context provides substantial empirical support for this approach. UNDP's 2023 study found youth-led contributions to early warning, electoral violence prevention, reconciliation and community dialogue across African regions. More recently, UNDP's 2026 Africa Youth Success Stories in Governance and Peacebuilding documented 44 youth-led initiatives across Africa that contribute to governance, institutional reform and peace processes.

The emerging evidence therefore suggests that the YPS framework can be strengthened by connecting youth participation to innovation. Rather than limiting youth participation to representation in peacebuilding institutions, youth innovation expands participation to include technology development, creative expression, entrepreneurship, community problem-solving and digital communication.

Empirical Gap:

Although existing studies have established that African youth possess significant creative and innovative capacities and participate in peacebuilding, digital advocacy, entrepreneurship, early warning and community resilience, empirical research remains fragmented across these domains. There is limited integrated evidence on how African creativity and youth innovation can simultaneously contribute to peacebuilding, sustainable development and the reduction of insecurity in Nigeria. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the specific pathways through which youth-led technological, social, cultural and entrepreneurial innovations can be incorporated into Nigeria's peace and security architecture. Furthermore, while existing studies identify structural constraints such as unemployment, inadequate financing, digital inequality, weak institutional support and political exclusion, there remains limited evidence on how these constraints affect the scalability and sustainability of youth-led peacebuilding innovations. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by bringing together African creativity, youth innovation, peacebuilding, human security and sustainable development within an integrated framework for understanding youth contributions to addressing insecurity in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is theoretically underpinned by two complementary analytical lenses: Positive Peace Theory, primarily associated with the scholarship of Johan Galtung, and the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Framework, codified internationally through United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 of 2015.

These frameworks are intentionally paired because they address mutually reinforcing dimensions of the study. Positive Peace Theory supplies the structural and normative definition of the ultimate goal sustainable, equitable peace while the YPS Framework provides the operational and strategic blueprint for recognizing young people as active agents of change in achieving that goal. Together, they establish a robust conceptual foundation for analyzing how youth-driven creativity and innovation can be systematically integrated into Nigeria's national security and sustainable development architecture.

Positive Peace Theory

Positive Peace Theory provides a critical departure from conventional definitions of security by distinguishing sharply between negative peace and positive peace. According to Johan Galtung, negative peace denotes merely the absence or temporary cessation of direct physical violence. In contrast, positive peace requires the active presence of social, political, and economic structures that foster equity, justice, cooperation, and human dignity, thereby dismantling the drivers of structural and cultural violence.

This distinction is profoundly relevant to the Nigerian security landscape. A temporary decline in armed clashes or successful military operations against insurgent factions does not equate to genuine peace if local populations remain trapped in structural poverty, extreme inequality, institutional decay, political marginalization, and protracted unemployment. Under such conditions, communities remain fundamentally vulnerable to renewed conflict.

The analytical utility of Positive Peace Theory for this paper lies in its core assertion that durable security cannot be achieved exclusively through the suppression of violent actors; it requires deliberate investments in the structural foundations of society. These foundations include institutional accountability, social inclusion, participatory governance, economic opportunity, and inter-communal trust. Youth-driven innovation directly engages these pillars of positive peace. For instance, youth-led technological platforms enhance transparency and early warning; digital entrepreneurship creates alternative livelihoods that insulate young people from criminal recruitment; and grassroots creative initiatives bridge polarized ethnic or religious divides. By addressing these structural vulnerabilities, youth innovation moves society beyond the superficial boundaries of negative peace toward long-term, positive peace.

The Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Framework

Complementing Galtung's macro-level structural theory, the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Framework anchored by UNSCR 2250 and reinforced by African Union continental policies supplies the normative and operational mechanism for youth agency. Historically, international security paradigms relegated young people to two narrow categories: either as passive victims of conflict or as dangerous security threats. The YPS framework fundamentally overturns this deficit model by mandating that young populations be recognized as essential, capable partners in preventing and resolving conflict.

The operational structure of the YPS framework rests upon five core pillars, all of which directly inform the analytical structure of this paper:

1. **Participation:** Mandating the systematic inclusion of young people and youth-led organizations in peace processes, policy formulation, and security governance at local, national, and international levels.

2. **Protection:** Ensuring the legal and physical safeguarding of youth human rights, physical safety, and civic/digital spaces from violence, arbitrary repression, exploitation, and gender-based abuse.
3. **Prevention:** Harnessing youth-led early-warning systems, community dialogue networks, and localized problem-solving initiatives to address the root causes of violence before armed conflict erupts.
4. **Partnerships:** Fostering collaborative networks and institutional linkages between governments, security agencies, civil society organizations, international bodies, and young innovators.
5. **Disengagement and Reintegration:** Establishing supportive socioeconomic and structural pathways that facilitate the exit of vulnerable youth from criminal syndicates, gangs, and extremist networks through sustainable livelihoods and psychosocial support.

Application of the Theory

Synthesizing Positive Peace Theory and the YPS establishes a comprehensive analytical framework for this study. While Positive Peace Theory defines the structural destination a just, inclusive, and resilient society free from structural violence—the YPS Framework illuminates the operational vehicle: the active mobilization of youth creativity, technological ingenuity, and entrepreneurial agency.

Applying these combined lenses enables this paper to move beyond conventional state-centric security models. It demonstrates that transforming Nigeria's security challenges requires dismantling structural deficits while simultaneously institutionalizing the innovative capacities of its vast youth population as core drivers of peacebuilding and sustainable development.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This paper adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis. The choice of a qualitative approach is informed by the purpose of the study, which is to examine how African creativity and youth-led innovation can contribute to peacebuilding and sustainable development while addressing insecurity in Nigeria. Rather than seeking to establish a statistical causal relationship between variables, the study seeks to interpret existing evidence, identify patterns and develop an integrated understanding of the relationship between youth innovation, peacebuilding, human security and sustainable development. Documentary research is particularly appropriate for the study because the subject cuts across several areas of scholarship and public policy, including security studies, peacebuilding, youth development, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, sustainable development and governance. These areas generate substantial documentary evidence that can be critically examined and synthesized to address the research questions.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from a range of credible documentary sources. Greater weight is given to recent literature and institutional evidence, particularly materials recently published, while foundational theoretical works are retained where necessary to establish the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the study. The study employs purposive selection of documentary materials. Sources are selected according to their relevance, credibility, recency and contribution to the research questions. This approach makes it possible to distinguish between general discussions of youth development and evidence that directly relates to the central argument of the paper. The documentary evidence is analyzed through thematic analysis. The analysis involves identifying recurring concepts, arguments, evidence and relationships across the selected literature and institutional documents.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study finds out that African creativity and youth innovation constitute an underutilized resource for peacebuilding, sustainable development and addressing insecurity in Nigeria. Youth-led technological, social, cultural and entrepreneurial innovations have the potential to strengthen early warning, community dialogue, peace education, digital advocacy, employment and community resilience. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of these innovations are constrained by inadequate financing, weak institutional support, digital inequality, limited skills, political exclusion and insecurity. The study is therefore likely to demonstrate that moving youth from being viewed primarily as beneficiaries or victims of security challenges to active security stakeholders requires deliberate institutional partnerships, meaningful participation and an enabling environment for youth innovation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports a fundamental reconsideration of Nigeria's approach to youth and security.

From Youth as Security Risk to Youth as Security Resource

One of the central arguments of this paper is that Nigeria needs to reconsider the way it conceptualizes youth. A young unemployed person living in a conflict-affected community may indeed be vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups. But that same young person may also possess technological, entrepreneurial, artistic or organizational skills that could benefit the community. The difference lies partly in the institutional environment.

Where the state provides opportunities for participation, innovation and employment, youth energy can become a developmental asset. Where such opportunities are absent, the same energy can become vulnerable to exploitation.

Consequently, youth policy should be integrated into national security policy.

Youth Innovation and Early Warning

Early warning represents one of the most promising areas for youth innovation. Young people are often deeply embedded in community communication networks. They may notice changes in local tensions before formal institutions do.

Digital platforms can allow communities to report: unusual movements; threats; hate messages; communal tensions; emerging disputes; rumors; attacks; displacement; and other warning indicators.

The broader lesson is that security intelligence should not be monopolized by formal security institutions. Community knowledge can complement conventional intelligence.

Creative Communication and Countering Harmful Narratives

Insecurity is also a battle over narratives. Violent groups can use social media and other communication platforms to recruit supporters, spread fear and legitimize violence. Young creatives can respond through: films; podcasts; music; drama; cartoons; social media campaigns;

documentaries; online discussions; and culturally appropriate peace messages.

Such interventions are particularly relevant in societies where formal government communication may not always reach young people effectively.

Creative communication can make peace messages more understandable and emotionally meaningful.

Youth Innovation and Community Dialogue

Peacebuilding cannot be achieved solely through formal negotiations. Many Nigerian conflicts occur at community level, where relationships between farmers and herders, ethnic groups, religious communities, political groups and neighboring settlements can deteriorate.

Youth can facilitate community dialogue because they often move across traditional social boundaries. Youth-led sports, cultural events, digital campaigns, town-hall meetings, artistic performances and community projects can create opportunities for interaction between groups that might otherwise remain separated. The objective is not simply entertainment. It is the reconstruction of social relationships.

Youth Innovation and Alternative Livelihoods

Economic insecurity and physical insecurity frequently reinforce each other. Where young people have few legitimate economic opportunities, criminal networks may offer alternative sources of income.

The World Bank's assessment of Nigeria's labour market highlights the importance of productive employment and human capital development in preventing poverty and fragility. Therefore, youth innovation programmes should not focus exclusively on short-term empowerment seminars.

They should provide: start-up financing; technical training; digital skills; mentorship; access to markets; incubation; intellectual-property protection; infrastructure; and long-term business support. Such measures can turn creativity into sustainable livelihoods.

Institutionalizing Youth Participation

A major weakness in many youth programmes is their temporary character. A government or NGO may organize a youth summit, workshop or training programme, take photographs and produce a report, but the young participants may have little influence afterwards. Meaningful participation requires institutional mechanisms.

Nigeria should consider establishing permanent youth advisory structures within: state peacebuilding institutions; local government security committees; community policing structures; conflict early-warning systems; development agencies; technology policy institutions; and peace and security programmes.

The AU's development priorities already identify youth empowerment, good governance, science and technology, peace and security, culture and the creative economy as interconnected priorities.

The policy challenge is therefore not necessarily the absence of frameworks but the gap between frameworks and implementation.

An Integrated Model for Youth Creativity and Peacebuilding

This paper proposes a Youth Creativity–Peacebuilding–Sustainable Development Model. The model consists of five interconnected stages:

Stage 1: Identify Youth Creative Capacity

Government and development partners should identify existing youth skills, organisations, technology platforms and creative networks.

Stage 2: Provide Institutional Support

Young innovators require financing, training, infrastructure, mentoring and access to institutions.

Stage 3: Connect Innovation to Security Problems

Innovation should be directed towards practical challenges such as early warning, misinformation, community dialogue, livelihoods and civic participation.

Stage 4: Institutionalize Successful Innovations
Successful youth-led initiatives should be integrated into local and national policy rather than remaining isolated projects.
Stage 5: Measure Peace and Development Outcomes
Programmes should be evaluated according to measurable outcomes such as: conflicts prevented; disputes resolved; jobs created; youth participation increased; misinformation reduced; community trust improved; and vulnerable groups included.
This transforms creativity from an abstract concept into a measurable public-policy instrument.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's insecurity cannot be adequately addressed through coercive security measures alone. Military and police responses remain necessary where citizens face armed threats, but sustainable peace requires attention to the economic, social, political and human conditions that shape insecurity.
This paper has argued that youth innovation provides an underutilized resource within Nigeria's peacebuilding and development architecture.
The young Nigerian should not be seen only as a potential victim, protester, unemployed citizen or recruit into a violent organization. Young people are also entrepreneurs, programmers, farmers, artists, researchers, community organizers, digital creators, peacebuilders and problem-solvers.
Recent initiatives such as Young Africa Innovates demonstrate that when young Nigerians are provided with training, mentorship, finance and institutional support, they can develop locally relevant solutions to complex problems.
The broader implication is that Nigeria should move from a predominantly youth-risk paradigm towards a youth-agency paradigm.
Such a shift does not romanticize young people or deny the fact that some young people participate in violence. Rather, it recognizes the diversity of youth experiences and creates conditions under which positive agency can become stronger than destructive alternatives.
Peacebuilding, sustainable development and national security should therefore be understood as interconnected policy objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a National Youth Peace-Tech Fund:** Create a competitive federal fund dedicated to supporting youth-led technologies and social innovations focused on peace and security.
2. **Build Innovation Hubs & Foster Partnerships:** Set up specialized peace-tech hubs in universities and conflict-affected states while strengthening collaboration between academia, industry, and government.
3. **Integrate Youth into Security Policy:** Create structured mechanisms—such as innovation challenges, labs, and pilot projects—for security agencies to collaborate with young innovators.
4. **Expand Financial Access & Sustainability:** Move beyond short-term grants to provide blended financing options, including low-interest loans, venture capital, and market-access support.
5. **Upscale Digital & Technical Skills Training:** Expand training beyond basic computer literacy to encompass advanced fields like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, data analysis, and coding.

6. **Strengthen Community Peacebuilding & Action Plans:** Support grassroots, youth-led mediation and reconciliation efforts while implementing state-level Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) frameworks.

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