

Violent Radicalisation Prevention in Northern Nigeria: The Socio-Economic Roles of Religious Leaders

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Abstract

Violent extremism remains one of the biggest security challenges in northern Nigeria. This study takes a grassroots approach, particularly investigating how religious leaders address the socio-economic factors that render people vulnerable to violent radicalisation in that region. Data for the study were generated from ten qualitative interviews with Christian and Muslim leaders across five locations in the region. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify and interpret key themes within the perspectives and experiences shared by the participants. It pioneers the application of the faith-based humanitarianism (FBH) concept to the study of violent radicalisation prevention and argues that religious leaders are more than just theological authorities; they are also practical socio-economic agents of prevent. It finds that they use their influence and network to facilitate individual and communal resilience, critical thinking, and social and economic empowerment in vulnerable communities. It concludes by suggesting that their contributions may play an important role in the prevention of violent radicalisation, especially in Nigeria's northern region, where issues of poverty, unemployment, and lack of education increase radicalisation risks.

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Introduction

Different scholars attach different meanings to radicalisation, but as Alex Schmid rightly points out, it is a *process* (Schmid, 2016: 27; see also Borum, 2011). Peter Neumann calls it “what goes on before the bomb goes off” (Neumann, 2008: 4). For the purpose of this study, radicalisation is defined as a mobilisation and recruitment process that feeds on vulnerability and manipulation (see Schmid, 2016: 27), whether at the individual, group, or mass level (Marsden et al., 2024: 3).

In northern Nigeria, radicalisation is not abstract; it is a reality. There are many factors that make people vulnerable in the region, but one of the strongest is socio-economic conditions: poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and so on. This is not to say that such

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conditions directly cause violent radicalisation. However, there is a strong correlation between the two phenomena, and this is evident in northern Nigeria.

The region, northern Nigeria, faces extreme poverty, systemic neglect, and broken/weak educational structures. According to the 2022 Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index prepared by the National Bureau of Statistics, 65% of Nigeria's poor people (about 86 million) live in the North (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2022). In fact, 8 out of the 10 poorest states in Nigeria are northern states (NBS, 2022). For example, 91% of the population of Sokoto State was classified as multidimensionally poor. That means people here live on less than ₦137,430 (about \$85) per year (NBS, 2022). Violent groups like Boko Haram take advantage of this situation, preying on poverty, joblessness, mass illiteracy, and injustice to recruit and radicalise.

When Boko Haram began, the founder, Mohammed Yusuf, gained followers by filling the gaps left by the state. He gave aid to northern Nigeria's poor, orphans, widows, and unemployed youth (Malefakis, 2022: 34-35; Thurston, 2016: 22). Recruits were promised or given \$2,631.58 for farming and cattle rearing; \$263.15 as interest-free loans; and \$30–\$313 per mission for women who acted as carriers (see Omenma et al., 2020: 12).

Empirical studies and expert analysis support the link between socio-economic conditions and violent radicalisation in northern Nigeria. For example, the results of a study conducted by the CLEEN Foundation in 2013 show that 93.2% of respondents in Borno State, 90% in Kano State, and 82% in Sokoto State identified ignorance as a key factor for Boko Haram recruitment. In Kaduna and Kano, 83% and 92% of respondents, respectively, pointed to unemployment and poverty. Other factors that the CLEEN Foundation identified include poor upbringing, illiteracy, injustice, and corruption (see Onuoha, 2014). Another study, which was published by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in 2017, found that 766 out of 1,607 participants ranked poverty among the top three reasons why people joined Boko Haram (Ewi & Salifu, 2017: 3-4). Many of the participants said that people join simply because: "they want to make money" (Ewi & Salifu, 2017: 4). Other factors found were social pressure, lack of education, and joblessness (Ewi & Salifu, 2017: 4). Some youth reportedly saw Boko Haram as a form of employment (Ewi & Salifu, 2017: 3-4). Omenma et al. argue that violent actors lure young people with offers of free Islamic schooling, interest-free loans,

jobs, wheelbarrows, sewing machines, motorbikes (achaba), free wives, and a monthly salary (Omenma et al., 2020: 12).

Again, in the North, there are an estimated 30 million *almajiri* (this basically means hungry, uneducated, and hopeless young people),² and violent groups consider them as possible “‘cheap’ foot soldiers” (Aghedo & Eke, 2013: 99). They promise a better life (Aghedo & Eke, 2013: 106) or offer small payments to these vulnerable young people to help them to scout on soldiers or burn down churches and schools (Zenn, 2014: 6). Two former Boko Haram recruits confessed to this. One said: “We were given a keg of petrol by our bosses to set schools ablaze, which we did within Maiduguri and we were paid ₦5,000 (about \$3.15 at current exchange rates)” (see Aghedo & Eke, 2013: 106-07). Another said: “We watched out for the soldiers at their units and reported back to them [BH]. We were reporting when soldiers were at ease or enjoying themselves and when they were off guard, and we were paid for doing that” (Aghedo & Eke, 2013: 106-07).

As part of its response to the issue, the Nigerian government has adopted a militarised approach, which involves airstrikes, deployment of troops, and raids in insurgent strongholds (see Tella, 2022). However, this hard security strategy has had serious consequences. In a 2015 report, the *Centre for Civilians in Conflict* documented human rights abuses by Nigerian forces deployed to combat Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Those abuses include extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, arbitrary detentions, and destruction of civilian property (Dietrich, 2015: 13). A resident of Yobe State captured the issue clearly: “People used to see government as a security provider, but now they see it as the aggressor” (Dietrich, 2015: 5). That shift in perception, the report explains, created sympathy for Boko Haram, at least in the early years before the group began attacking civilians. Heavy-handed government responses gave Boko Haram room to recruit (Dietrich, 2015: 5).

Other problems associated with government intervention include corruption, mistrust, and systemic failure. Onuoha et al. (2023:80-82) documented how embezzlement, poor equipment, extortion by lawmakers, and bureaucratic bottlenecks have crippled the state’s response in northern Nigeria.

² This statistic was provided by the CEO of the National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School-Children’s Education (NCAOOSCE), Dr. Muhammed Sani Idris, in a short video posted on the commission’s official X (formerly Twitter) handle on 30 July 2024, <https://x.com/ncaosce/status/1818271553983029276>

Considering all these problems, this study deems it necessary to consider grassroots responses, especially efforts that may potentially address what it calls the *enticement hypothesis* of radicalisation. When people are poor, idle, excluded, and angry, they become easy targets, or simply vulnerable. This study, therefore, shifts its focus to religious leaders. This is not just because of their spiritual roles, but because they have deep roots in local communities, enjoy public trust, and are positioned to intervene.

Religion plays a central role in public and political life in Nigeria. For instance, government functions begin and end with prayer. Mosques and chapels are found in government houses. States within the federation sponsor pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem (Umeanolue, 2020: 144-46). Some northern states even implement Sharia law (Ostien & Dekker, 2010). Religious leaders, across faiths, are seen as more credible and trustworthy than politicians (Mbaegbu, 2024). Surveys even show that over 70% of Nigerians are highly religious, and six in ten people trust their religious leaders (Mbaegbu, 2024). This level of influence cannot be ignored in any serious effort to prevent violent radicalisation.

So the key question becomes: how are religious leaders using this influence to address the socio-economic factors that make people vulnerable to radicalisation? It is not enough to preach peace or reinterpret scripture. The focus here is on their practical roles: education, empowerment, job creation, skills training, charity, community mobilisation, and so on.

This question is important because it goes beyond theory to explore what is happening on the ground. The answers could help develop more community-based strategies to prevent radicalisation. The researcher hopes that lessons from this study may also be relevant to other regions facing similar threats. More importantly, it will help highlight the importance of influence and trust in building grassroots resilience to homegrown terrorism.

Literature Review

The field and practice of P/CVE (preventing and countering violent extremism) is indeed broad and multifaceted, and there is no “silver bullet” solution (Bjørge, 2013), as the phenomena of violent extremism and terrorism remain noticeably dynamic (Schmid, 2005). While several actors, including state and governmental organisations, think tanks, teachers and academic institutions, have been active in the field for some time, the tragic events of

9/11 brought about several significant changes (Schmid, 2005), one of which was the shift toward religion as a possible component in P/CVE strategies (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017).

The inclusion of religion as a pathway in P/CVE may not sit well with critics, especially from a divine service perspective, where the primary role of religious leaders is understood to be the worship of God, with their divine calling perceived as requiring a high degree of spiritual devotion. However, as post-secular theorists argue, religion has transcended such limitations (Casanova, 1994; Coffey, 2001; Wilson, 2012). The turn to religion in P/CVE can be attributed to several factors: the open-mindedness of many religious actors; the credibility they hold among extremists and individuals who are vulnerable to violent radicalisation; the emphasis within religious traditions on reconciliation and forgiveness; the capacity to address spiritual needs of those drawn to extremist ideologies; the historical role of religious actors in peacebuilding and conflict resolution; and their demonstrated ability to operate across multiple social and political domains (Gutiérrez, 1999; Harpviken & Roislien, 2005; Lunn, 2009; James, 2011; Leurs, 2012; Olarinmoye, 2012; Antoni, 2014; Olarinmoye, 2014; Svoboda et al., 2015; Mandaville & Nozell, 2017; Frazer & Jambers, 2018; Glazier, 2018; Diaz, 2022; Kloster, 2022; Van Metre & Scherer, 2023).

In seeking to understand the role of religion in P/CVE, a case study approach has been adopted and remains one of the most widely used methods. Scholars have examined its influence in Australia, Kenya, Pakistan, Spain, Denmark, Indonesia, and Tunisia (Halafoff & Wright-Neville, 2009; Hassan, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2021; Hariyanto, 2021; Saleh, 2022; García García, 2023; Cuccu, 2025). In the Nigerian context, efforts have also been made to understand the roles of religious actors, considering that the country has contended with one of the deadliest terrorist groups (Boko Haram) in the world (The Global Terrorism Index, 2015) and continues to struggle with extremism and violent radicalisation (Daniya, 2021; Ikpe et al., 2023).

One way that scholars have paid attention to the role of religion in P/CVE in the Nigerian context is through role-specific approaches. In this regard, a particular focus has been on promoting inter-faith dialogue and mediation (Iweze, 2022) and the counter-narrative functions of religious leaders (Sani Umar, 2015; Jangebe, 2015; Olojo, 2017; Ishaku et al., 2021). This very focus is understandable, as there is a broad consensus that radicalisation primarily affects the mind and requires a psychological approach (Olojo, 2017), which is

conveyed by religious actors through multiple media, including audio and video lectures, sermons, and newspapers (Sani Umar, 2015). While this study is situated within the same role-specific framework, it extends beyond previous efforts by applying the concept of faith-based humanitarianism (FBH) to explore how religious leaders mobilise and utilise social and economic capital to address underlying factors that fuel violent radicalisation in northern Nigeria. The application of FBH offers a fresh insight into the role of religious leaders in P/CVE, as it allows for an examination of the “practical actions” of prevention rather than merely the “words” emphasised in narrative-based interventions. This focus is increasingly important as the frontiers of prevention expand, with several policies such as the UN Plan of Action calling for concrete interventions by religious leaders and faith-based organisations (United Nations, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

The concept of faith-based humanitarianism (FBH) is borrowed here to examine how religious leaders in northern Nigeria respond to the socio-economic factors that make people vulnerable to radicalisation. The concept will help us understand the motivations as well as the methods used by religious actors in humanitarian/quasi-humanitarian settings.

Historically, humanitarian responses to violent conflicts have been dominated mainly by secular, international actors. This is not accidental, as Wilkinson et al. (2022: 9-11) explain that mainstream humanitarian agencies tend to view religious actors and organisations as “church-based” and therefore less legitimate, especially when they are unregistered. This perception, however, has changed in the last two decades. Religious actors have become more recognised in humanitarian work and, in some cases, now receive significant funding from national and international sources (Tomalin, 2020: 323).

The term “faith-based humanitarianism” as used in this study is taken directly from Nkwachukwu Orji’s 2011 work. Other scholars have used related terms: “evangelical humanitarianism” (King, 2019), “Islamic humanitarianism” (Svoboda et al., 2015), and “faith-based development” (Freeman, 2019). The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFLC) has also supported work in this area (see Yusuf, 2023).

According to Orji (2011: 489), FBH emerged in response to state failure, specifically the state's inability to meet the socio-economic needs of vulnerable groups and victims of violence. He outlines four key factors that make faith-based organisations (FBOs) effective in humanitarian work. First, FBOs have a good structure that is necessary for relief operations. Second, they operate at a relatively minimal cost compared to secular humanitarian agencies. This is particularly because they enjoy free labour and genuinely supportive volunteers. Third, they have a strong financial support system. Even in emergencies, they can mobilise financial support quickly and internally, as they do not need to wait for external funds to intervene in a crisis. Lastly, they are one of the most trusted by victims. Unlike secular actors, many victims do not feel uneasy or fear being exploited by them during moments of vulnerability (pp. 483-84).

Tomalin (2020) argues that FBH should be analysed using an actor-oriented approach. It pays attention to the actual experiences and practices of religious groups in the field. Another set of scholars of the concept, Wilkinson et al. (2022), go on to suggest a localisation approach. For them, religious actors function as community gatekeepers. They understand local dynamics far more than many international NGOs, because INGOs are often staffed by people on short contracts and with limited local knowledge. According to them also, even when secular groups partner with religious ones just to transfer risk, the religious groups still provide sustainability and deeper community ties.

Besides these approaches, there is yet another by Walker et al. (2012), which is the spirituality approach. They maintain that faith provides a coping mechanism in crisis. This is because FBOs admonish victims of trauma that God understands their suffering, restoring hope. In their words, "adjustment to major trauma and loss may require more 'meaning making' than active 'problem solving'" (p. 121). To them, FBOs stand out because they don't just distribute food and water; they help victims find strength and meaning. They also keep their volunteers going by drawing on spiritual motivation. The idea that selfless service is an act of devotion sustains their humanitarian commitment (p. 129).

By the perspectives above, this study does not aim to discredit secular actors or suggest that religion is the only way forward in humanitarian response or the prevention of radicalisation. To be clear, the researcher's own experience in Nigeria, as well as some literature (e.g., Tomalin, 2018), suggests that religion can also be part of the problem, as it

sometimes supports systems that entrench poverty, inequality, and exclusion. These are the same conditions that the researcher mentioned earlier that contribute to people's vulnerability to radicalisation in northern Nigeria.

That notwithstanding, FBH can help us to appreciate how important religion and religious actors are in addressing the humanitarian needs of societies. It helps us to understand that religious actors can be both servants of God and of the people, or preachers of God's Word and also those who use their legitimacy and influence to mobilise resources to solve real-world problems (including poverty and exclusion).

As a conceptual framework, FBH is used in this study as an analytical tool for examining the socio-economic roles of religious actors in the North. The perspectives of FBH scholars are adapted to explain how influence and religious social capital are mobilised in vulnerable communities to prevent violent radicalisation through access to opportunities, scholarships, value-based education, and the promotion of critical thinking.

Religious leaders are influential, and it is difficult, as earlier noted, to ignore them when the topic of radicalisation or prevention in northern Nigeria is raised. Importantly, the study does not aim to glorify religion, but rather to understand its place in humanitarian work and security-related interventions.

Lastly, while religious actors have always been involved in deradicalisation and prevention, as seen in the literature review section, FBH offers a unique analytical tool with which to see (or interpret) how religious leaders use humanitarian methods as part of their strategy to prevent violent radicalisation. In northern Nigeria, for instance, we can better understand the link between faith and security by looking at how religious leaders are combining *humanitarian efforts* with radicalisation prevention work.

Research Methodology

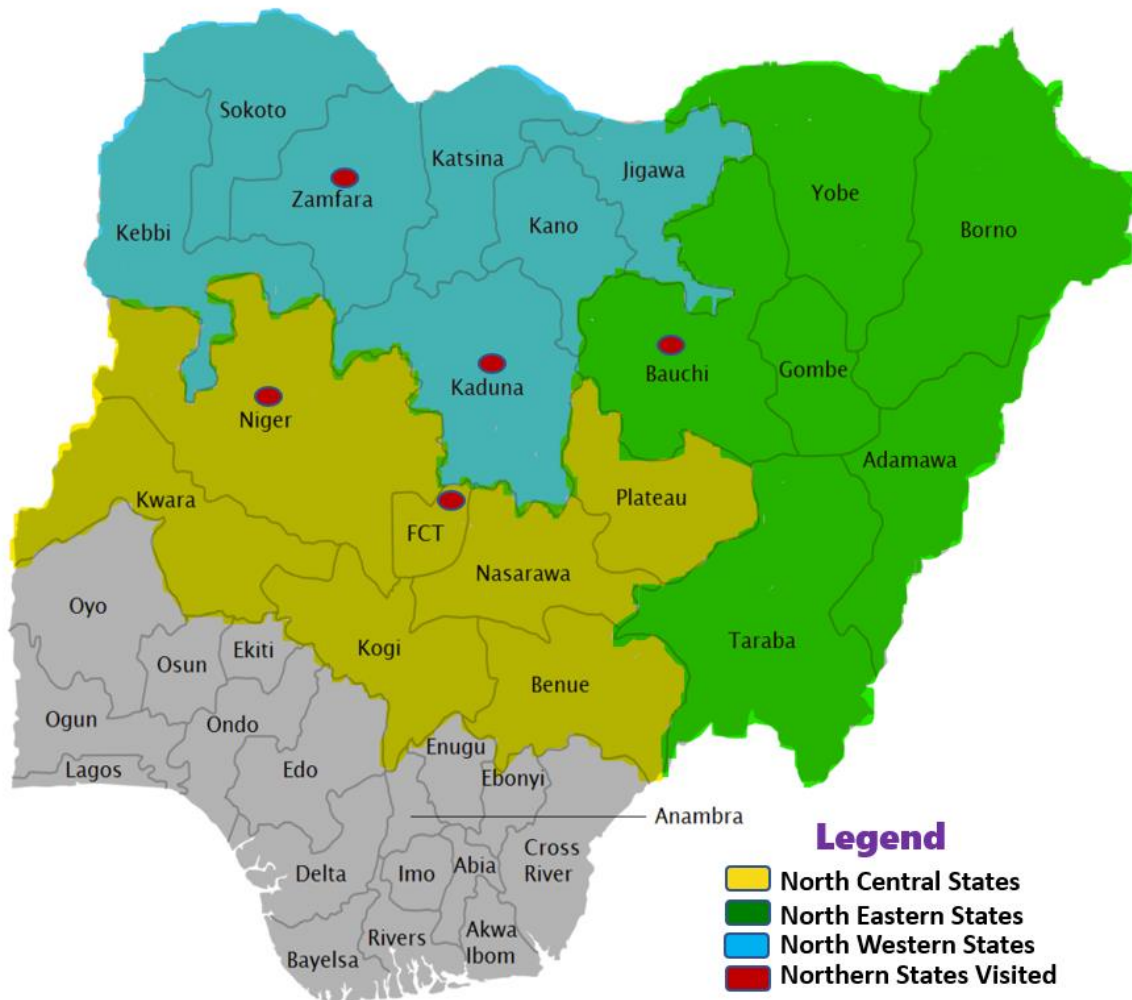
This study is based on empirical data that were collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten participants (both Christian and Muslim clerics) in three geopolitical zones of northern Nigeria (North Central, Northeast, and Northwest). Participants were purposively recruited through referrals from the researcher's professional and community contacts in the northern region. Fieldwork began in the North Central zone, with two

participants (a Methodist priest and a Muslim imam) interviewed in Minna, Niger State. The next stop was the North-western state of Kaduna, where an Anglican priest and a Muslim imam were interviewed in Kaduna City. From Kaduna, the journey continued upward to another North-western state, Zamfara, where interviews were conducted with a Protestant Church pastor and a Muslim imam in the city of Gusau. Zamfara was very important due to its high incidence of violent radicalisation and insurgency.

In the Northeast, Bauchi State was visited to represent the region. There, three participants were interviewed in Bauchi City: two Christian leaders (from ECWA and Church of Christ in Nations) and a Muslim assistant imam.

Lastly, an interview was conducted in Abuja (North Central zone) with a Living Faith Church (LFC) pastor. This last interview was especially important, as Abuja serves as Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FCT).

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria Showing the Geopolitical Distribution of Interviewed States in Northern Nigeria



(Source: Author's illustration, 2025)

Table 1: Interviewee Table

ID No.	Religion	Location	Date of interview
Participant 1	Christianity (Church of Christ in Nations)	Bauchi	May 22, 2025
Participant 2	Islam	Bauchi	May 22, 2025
Participant 3	Islam	Minna (Niger State)	May 16, 2025
Participant 4	Christianity	Kaduna	May 18, 2025

	(Anglican)		
Participant 5	Islam	Kaduna	May 18, 2025
Participant 6	Christianity (LFC: Living Faith Church)	Abuja	June 09, 2025
Participant 7	Christianity (ECWA: Evangelical Church Winning All)	Bauchi	May 22, 2025
Participant 8	Christianity (Protestant)	Zamfara	May 20, 2025
Participant 9	Christianity (Methodist)	Minna (Niger State)	May 16, 2025
Participant 10	Islam	Zamfara	May 19, 2025

The interview guide included opening questions (e.g., "Can you tell me your religious affiliation and your role?"), main questions (e.g., "How are you/your religious community addressing vulnerability issues in the region?"), exploratory questions (e.g., "What challenges have you encountered in your socio-economic roles?"), forward-looking questions (e.g., "What could be done to complement your efforts in addressing youth vulnerability to radicalisation?"), and closing questions (e.g., "Is there anything you would like to add or clarify?"). Where necessary, the participants were encouraged to elaborate or clarify their responses.

Responses were triangulated to assess consistency and enhance the credibility of the data. Where feasible, additional sources were used to verify specific claims. This was done using secondary sources. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded and later transcribed manually using a quasi-verbatim method. Non-lexical utterances, false starts and minor grammatical slips were omitted during the transcription to ensure readability while preserving the original meanings and perspectives of the participants.

For the analysis of the data, a thematic approach was used to identify recurring themes and patterns across the transcripts. Although the study was informed by the concept of FBH, the coding process was inductive. Patterns and themes emerged directly from the data. The

researcher first engaged in repeated readings of the transcript for familiarisation. After that, open coding followed, during which keywords, phrases and ideas expressed by participants were identified. These initial codes were examined, refined and grouped together to form broader categories, which ultimately developed into themes such as education and awareness, and economic empowerment. The coding was manually done, and analytic memos were kept throughout to document emerging insights, coding decisions and reflections. Although coding was primarily undertaken by the researcher, credibility was strengthened through expert debriefing. The researcher discussed emerging codes and themes with a senior lecturer at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, who specialises in grassroots P/CVE. Rich, illustrative participant quotations are presented in the findings to support key interpretations.

Reflexivity was an integral component of the entire research design. The researcher is a Nigerian scholar familiar with the cultural and religious dynamics of northern Nigeria and maintains strong professional networks in the region. This positionality facilitated access to participants and helped the interpretation of context-specific meanings. At the same time, it required conscious monitoring to avoid over-familiarity or assumptions during analysis. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout fieldwork and coding to record positionality-related reflections, field interactions and emerging tensions. These reflexive notes were revisited often during the development of themes.

As radicalisation and religion are politically sensitive topics in northern Nigeria (Akintayo, 2025; Njoku et al., 2025), data collection demanded careful negotiation. Terms such as “terrorism” were occasionally softened or replaced (e.g. with “(terrorist) crime”) to avoid eliciting discomfort, consistent with ethical engagement in high-risk settings. Local gender norms also influenced recruitment: religious leadership in this context is overwhelmingly male, and no female clerics were approached or available for participation. Nonetheless, efforts were made to understand the supportive roles that the wives of these clerics play.

The perspectives of community members or programme beneficiaries, although generally important, were not included for two reasons. First, the study was designed to examine the motivations, perceptions and strategies of religious leaders themselves, rather than to evaluate programme outcomes. Recruiting beneficiaries would have shifted the scope

towards an impact-assignment study, which was beyond the scope of this paper. Second, the researcher was advised during fieldwork not to engage beneficiaries because of heightened scrutiny by government and NGOs in the region, as well as potential stigma, psychological stress and absence of long-term institutional support. Engaging these groups would have required safeguards that were not covered in the study's approved ethics application.

Ethical approval was sought and obtained on 14 May 2025 from the School of International Relations Ethics Committee at the University of St Andrews. Key ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, and data protection. The participants were given clear information about the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any point. Their personal details were anonymised, and consent was obtained for both participation and audio recording. At the end of each interview, participants were given a debrief form.

Analysis of the Socio-Economic Roles of Religious Leaders in Preventing Violent Radicalisation in Northern Nigeria

This section investigates how religious leaders engage in practical, socio-economic activities to prevent violent radicalisation in northern Nigeria. Within the framework of faith-based humanitarianism, the study demonstrates that religious leaders are relevant and active actors in promoting peace and security in northern Nigeria, especially by going beyond their traditional theological roles. It argues that they function as socio-economic actors and not just as theological authorities to their members. They harness their influence to bridge security and systemic gaps at the grassroots level. They shape belief systems, values, attitudes and perceptions, and also build individual as well as communal resilience. Although these contributions may seem modest or minor on the surface, they are, in fact, pivotal because the Nigerian state cannot manage the situation alone, nor can it afford to stoop to the grassroots level to tackle it directly.

A thematic approach was used to analyse the roles of both Christian and Muslim leaders in northern Nigeria, as captured in the interviews, and the researcher develops his argument. Their roles are categorised into two broad themes, namely: education and awareness, and economic empowerment. These themes directly address the research question,

which seeks to investigate the *methods* adopted by religious leaders in preventing violent radicalisation in the north.

To deepen the theoretical contribution of this article, the researcher engages adjacent literatures on desistance, livelihood-based reintegration, faith-based development, and the political economy of religious actors (Uggen, 2000; Mourier, 2013; Chloupis & Kontompasi, 2025; Mancino, 2025; Rubin, 2025). Insights from these bodies of work are helpful for analysing how religious actors draw on their moral authority, local legitimacy, and material resources (including donations, land, networks, education systems, and welfare services), alongside institutional incentives (such as attracting followers and meeting community expectations), to influence governance, security, and development across diverse settings. They indicate that the pathways through which religious leaders in northern Nigeria support prevention efforts align with patterns observed elsewhere. Engaging these strands of literature therefore situates the findings within wider debates and clarifies the processes through which religious actors may contribute to resilience against violent extremism.

Education and Awareness

Education is a highly influential tool across multiple spheres of society. In the context of crime and desistance, for example, it is regarded widely as a “preventative” and “control” mechanism, although outcomes are not always linear (Abeling-Judge, 2019; Chloupis & Kontompasi, 2025). Prison-based education programs and vocational training have been shown to facilitate cognitive transformation, reduce the likelihood of recidivism, and provide ex-offenders with new identities and post-prison opportunities (Warr, 2016; Hughes, 2021; Mancino, 2025).

Similarly, education is recognised as one of the most effective tools for preventing violent radicalisation (Saleh, 2022; HM Government, 2011; HM Government, 2015; Elwick & Jerome, 2019). It is also a tool for creating awareness in local communities, as Elwick and Jerome (2019: 350-51) argue. What is, however, missing in the literature is the possible roles of religious leaders within that sector. The attention of scholars is particularly focused on the roles of teachers. Notwithstanding, the data generated for this study shows that religious leaders also function within the education sector, or put differently, they employ education as

a tool for building resilience and creating awareness, which they believe may help prevent violent radicalisation. Their activities follow the localisation method offered by Wilkinson and colleagues of FBH (Wilkinson et al., 2022), because they use contextual knowledge of northern Nigeria's educational issues when serving as prevent actors. Their prevent roles within the education space thus take two approaches: system-level interventions and individual-level engagements.

System-level interventions

These are actions or measures taken to shape the structural and institutional systems that influence radicalisation risks in local communities. In northern Nigeria, religious leaders engage actively in providing secular education and establishing secular schools. To clarify, religious education and schools are widespread in northern Nigeria and, no doubt, they have their merits. However, they do not provide balanced learning; they limit the focus of learners and their understanding of the world (Hoechner, 2018). Moreover, one of the ways through which Boko Haram promotes its ideology and radicalises northern populations is by launching a full-fledged attack on secular or Western education, with the leaders, Mohammed Yusuf and Abubabkar Shekau, promoting the idea that secular/Western education teaches topics (e.g. Darwinism, the Big Bang, etc.) that are contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an and challenge the supremacy of Allah (see Cook, 2018^A; Cook, 2018^B; Ojo-Adewuyi, 2024). Indeed, the English translation of the group's nomenclature reads 'Western education is forbidden.'

The understanding of this erroneous teaching geared at radicalisation and the need to put an end to it serves as one of the reasons for the religious leaders in the north embarking on secular education projects. In different parts of the region, Christian and Muslim leaders and their religious organisations have established schools where secular education is provided and learners are prepared for several national and sub-continental examinations, such as the WAEC and NECO examinations. In Bauchi State, for example, a religious leader talked about Hope Academy, which his church, the Church of Christ in Nations, established. There is also the Faith Academy, owned by the Living Faith Church. These schools, according to participants, offer students a balanced view of the world, promote tolerance, equip them with critical thinking skills, and prepare them for better career opportunities in the future.

A priest of the Church of Christ in Nations in Bauchi shares the ideas above as some cardinal reasons behind their establishment of Hope Academy. He said:

I can say that education is key to everything. So, since they lack secular education, it is easier for them to be vulnerable to radicalisation. The lack of secular education in northern Nigeria also makes it difficult for them to get involved in government activities or get employed because they don't have certificates...

I can say the church is seriously contributing a lot in northern Nigeria because if you go to some of the churches, you will find out that there are private schools [owned by religious organisations]... We have Hope Academy, where we train these youths in such a way that they will withstand any pressure. In our school, we have more than 600 students. They write WAEC and NECO. If you go to some of the universities [within the country], you will discover that our students are studying professional courses like Medicine, law, and so many others, and they will contribute to the economy of this country. They will be useful citizens (Participant 1, May 22, 2025).

It is important to acknowledge that establishing a school is financially demanding, and not all religious organisations have the financial resources to do so. However, when funding is a challenge in establishing secular, formal schools, some religious leaders adopt alternative approaches. One such method involves religious leaders setting up local forums to prepare the minds of young people for secular education and encouraging them, after some weeks or months of training, to enrol in public schools that offer formal certificates. An assistant imam from the same Bauchi State confirmed this:

Imams are usually limited in that respect [referring to funds], but they used to organise schools and the schools are usually within the mosque environment... They are not certificate schools that will guarantee any government work. We have 50-100 students daily. We encourage parents to take them to formal schools to acquire formal education so that they can get formal employment (Participant 2, May 22, 2025).

Another action within the framework of system-level interventions is opposition to doctrinal falsehood and misleading interpretations. For so long, scholars (e.g. Samuel Huntington) have held the pessimistic view that portrays religion as ultimately dangerous and

also prone to violence (see Antoni, 2014: 5-6). This study, however, distances itself from such views; it offers a different perspective. Based on the information provided by the participants, it reveals that the problem lies in the *interpreters of religion* and not in *religion* itself. In northern Nigeria, religious leaders identify the operation of illegal schools (or what they call “under-the-tree schools”)³ in various local communities, where untrained teachers encourage young people to act violently, as a foremost cause of violent radicalisation, not the religion of Christianity or Islam itself. A priest in Bauchi had this to say:

It is not that Islamic education or Islamic culture encourages violence. If you go to most of the rural areas, you will discover that even the teachers are not trained. Some of the teachers in those areas and the way that they teach and mentor young people contributed to all this radicalisation (Participant 1, May 22, 2025).

To solve the problem, religious leaders stand up against the violent interpretation of religious texts and go as far as alerting the authorities to either arrest manipulative teachers, shut down the under-the-tree schools, or provide professional teachers to existing public schools⁴ (Participant 3, May 16, 2025). One potential outcome of this is that it signals to young people that radical and violent ideologies are unacceptable. In turn, this may help these young people to resist being drawn into extremism.

Lastly, religious leaders commit to conducting research and providing information to researchers as a way to contribute to correcting the social and economic issues upon which violent radicalisation thrives. Across the five locations chosen for this study, religious leaders openly expressed that they granted the interviews, despite their busy schedule, because they consider research pivotal for addressing security concerns in northern Nigeria. Some of them claim to be actively engaged in researching security topics. Ultimately, they consider research as their modest contribution towards arresting the issue of violent radicalisation in the region. A Kaduna-based priest of the Anglican Church of Nigeria explained:

³ It is important to note that there are some reasons why individuals join such schools. One is ignorance of the dangers they pose. Two, they are usually free (i.e. no fees) to attend, and three, there are limited alternatives.

⁴ This underscores their potential role as watchdogs of education within local communities, where they monitor both the credibility of instructors and the content of their lessons, while, of course, keeping government authorities informed of such developments.

Research of this nature [referring to this very study] is a gain to society. I provided the information in this interview because it is for academic research, which has the tendency to broaden the horizon of knowledge and create a better society and a peaceful Nigeria (Participant 4, May 18, 2025).

Summarily, these actions or the sub-theme of system-level interventions illustrate how religious actors perceive themselves as working indirectly to influence and shape the education system in the north, with the intention of fostering a social environment that may be more resilient to violent radicalisation. From the lens of FBH, these actors have “mastery of the development language” (see Tomalin, 2020: 325) and the changes or development they seek to bring to the education system in northern Nigeria reflect how they understand their prevent roles. The next sub-theme captures their more direct efforts to prevent violent radicalisation.

Individual-level Engagements

These are conscientious efforts, rooted in direct personal engagement and moral guidance and support, aimed at individuals whom religious leaders perceive to be at risk of radicalisation. Here, the principal goal is to cultivate a strong moral, spiritual and socio-economic resilience in young people.

Among all the prevent actors, religious leaders are a prime and best-suited group to provide moral, spiritual and value-based teaching to individuals at risk of radicalisation. This is not a strange statement to make, because their services flow from a place of deep sacrifice, sincere passion and reverence for God. They are not compensated like many other professionals. They may not even receive a public recognition or a simple “thank you.” Regardless, they continue to work faithfully in the prevent space. For emphasis, the services of religious leaders are not anchored on reward; they are strictly done in reverence for God. To be sure, Olivia Wilkinson and colleagues, of faith-based humanitarianism, argue that religious actors are guided by religious values and reverence for God (Wilkinson et al., 2022: 8). For Tomalin (2020), they are legitimate actors. They receive freely and freely they give, a biblical verse on humanitarian service by religious actors confirms further (Matthew 10:8).

One way that spiritual and, more importantly, value-based knowledge is impacted by religious leaders, and which they perceive as contributing to efforts to prevent violent

radicalisation in the north, is through the application of verses from sacred texts. The Christian Bible and the Qur'an are not mere religious texts, as may be wrongly perceived; they are powerful tools for engaging vulnerable minds—an idea that strongly aligns with the spirituality approach of FBH scholars (e.g. Walker et al., 2012). Just as violent extremists distort the contents of those sacred texts to radicalise, religious leaders also rely on the contents of the same texts to teach moral and societal values, and build individual capacity and resilience. They believe that the closer one is to the truth of the sacred texts (i.e. the more one is taught true and unadulterated knowledge of the texts), the more likely they are to resist extremist ideologies.

Across the five locations of the interviews, religious leaders cited several biblical and Qur'anic verses they borrow to teach value and virtue. They include: “What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul” (Participant 4, May 18, 2025), “Cast all your anxiety on Him [God] because He cares for you” (Participant 4, May 18, 2025), and “Vengeance is Mine, says the Lord” (Participant 4, May 18, 2025). These verses teach contentment, hope, and absolute trust in God. Religious leaders view the teaching of these virtues as a necessary step in resilience and capacity building, as Boko Haram, considering the points raised in an earlier section, radicalises and recruits through enticement (radicalisation by enticement) and assures their new members of vengeance, for those who seek that due to perceived injustice by the Nigerian government and security forces. This point directly reflects the idea that Peter Walker and colleagues raised within the framework of FBH, where they argue that religious actors build or restore hope by encouraging people confronted by extreme adversity to turn to and rely on God (Walker et al., 2012: 121). So, spirituality and messages from sacred texts are understood by leaders as tools for building hope and resilience, which they regard as potentially important in efforts to mitigate the risk of radicalisation.

Another way that value and virtue are impacted and resilience is built is through one-on-one counselling and by organising youth programmes and conventions. The youth programmes are conducted periodically, sometimes quarterly, sometimes yearly, depending on the religious organisation. An imam in Kaduna pointed out one importance of such forums. For him, such forums offer religious leaders the opportunity to directly teach the youth, especially when it is difficult to trust the content of the courses/subjects they learn in school

or the teachers who teach them (Participant 5, May 18, 2025). So, the forums are used by religious leaders to bridge the moral and value gaps that may not have been covered in schools. The same imam confirms this by saying that they use the youth forum to “feed the heart with the food of the soul” (i.e. to appeal to the conscience of the youth and prepare them to withstand wrong doctrines).

A Christian priest, also from Kaduna, noted that they tag their youth programme “Youth Week” and use such a forum to teach self-worth and integrity, and show the youths the *right* figure, the *right* personality to emulate. He said:

Jesus Christ is our standard... We let the youth know that they're important in society, in church, in nation-building.... In our Youth Week, we teach them that they need an experience with Jesus Christ. They need a life encounter that will enable them to make a difference in society and the world of today, not copying the standard of the world and not taking part in violence... God needs people to have His fear and integrity (Participant 4, May 18, 2025).

The emulation point above is crucial. In the world of terrorism and political violence generally, and with the prevalence of “the network society,”⁵ imitation is real, and a big problem too. For example, several terrorist attacks, including the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand by Brenton Tarrant in 2019, the Oslo and Utoya Island attacks by Anders Breivik in July 2011, the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting by Robert Bowers in October 2018, and the Buffalo Supermarket shooting by Payton Gendron in 2022, show cases where lone actors were radicalised on social media and/or harnessed social media to share their extreme views and live-stream their attacks to garner notoriety and promote their cause. In fact, according to Petter Nesser, terrorism today is highly contagious and often follows the copycat method (Nesser, 2012: 69). Hence, it is understandable why the void of a role model is filled, or why religious leaders in northern Nigeria point the youth within various forums to the *right* person to emulate as a step towards preventing violent radicalisation.

In addition, the youth forum provides a platform for teaching the principles of accountability and consequences, respect for the rights and freedoms of others, and the importance of dedicated learning. A deputy imam in a mosque in Bauchi with over 10 years in

⁵ Borrowing Manuel Castells’s term that discusses the age of the internet, where information and knowledge (good and bad) spread without obstacles.

religious service said that “if you teach the youth that God will judge them on whatever activity they do, they will be cautious of what they believe and what they get involved in” (Participant 2, May 22, 2025)—an idea that reflects the spirituality approach of FBH scholars. Another respected imam in a mosque in Minna, Niger State, echoed the principles of consequences and respect as deterrents, a tool for preparing the youth to resist extremist ideologies. He said:

First of all, we tell them the effects. We tell them that violence is not part of the religion, that when someone does something bad, Allah will punish him and he will have a bad repercussion. The repercussion will be very severe from the Almighty Allah. When the person dies, the Almighty will be angry with him, and he cannot see His mercy.

Also, we tell them that there is a right between them and other people. It is not good for anyone to inconvenience others and disrupt the peace of a society out of any selfish interest (Participant 3, May 16, 2025).

In Abuja, a Living Faith Church pastor mentioned that in such forums and private counselling sessions with vulnerable members of the society, he teaches the importance of self-study as a way to build critical thinking (Participant 6, June 9, 2025).

It is important to note that nudging the youth towards a path of learning is important for helping them develop critical thinking and resilience. Sas et al. (2020) demonstrate that knowledge is a formidable tool with which young people can “question and challenge themselves and others” (p. 7). They also argue that knowledge facilitates the development of “superior ideas” which can, in turn, be used to independently fight radical views (p. 7). Similarly, the HM Government (2011) acknowledges that central to prevent is the need to “equip young people with the knowledge and skills to challenge extremist narratives,” no matter where they find themselves (p. 49).

Youth forums are important, no doubt, but more important than that is *how* religious leaders attract their targets to such forums. The *how* question is not common in literature on prevent, and any serious academic inquiry of this nature cannot leave that unanswered. It is relatively easier for teachers to reach their targets in prevent within schools because they are primarily their students whom they stay with every school day. The situation, however, is different and more difficult with religious leaders. A priest within the Evangelical Church

Winning All (ECWA) in Bauchi voices one of their major challenges. He said, "...you know, the radical ones and those on the verge of radicalisation don't attend church activities" (Participant 7, May 22, 2025). The lack of participation is real and was also confirmed in Kaduna, with the Anglican priest there saying, "Some of them feel lazy to come to church" (Participant 4, May 18, 2025).

In the atmosphere of laziness and lack of participation, religious leaders demonstrate innovation by using both incentives and door-to-door outreach as strategies for mobilising vulnerable individuals to their forums. In Zamfara, a soldier priest of the Nigerian Army Protestant Church spoke about flyer-based strategy as well as door-to-door outreaches and his intention to use them for their forthcoming forum. He said:

Now, my real plan and vision for this programme, my first intention is: when the handbill is printed, I will go with my team and visit their homes, giving them the flyers, because on that day they will learn how to avoid radical living (Participant 8, May 20, 2025).

He also went further to highlight his intention to use incentives as a strategy. He said:

I'm trying to put a bus on the road for those who cannot afford it to come freely on that day. I'll put the buses on the road... Anybody who thinks that they cannot trek to church will have the free bus option. Let everybody be in attendance, let them come and hear the raw teaching of how their lives should look (Participant 8, May 20, 2025).

Besides value-based mentoring, the supportive opportunities method emerges as an important educational approach used by religious leaders to target and engage the vulnerable youth directly. Northern religious leaders understand that a significant portion of the northern population lives in abject poverty and cannot afford formal education, hence the issue of 30 million *almajiri* that scholars admit that extremist groups like Boko Haram target for radicalisation and recruitment (Aghedo & Eke, 2013; Zenn, 2014). Religious leaders offer scholarships not just to fill the void that lack of education creates, but to facilitate inclusion and give vulnerable youths a sense of belonging. Practical engagement and empowerment of vulnerable individuals occur through the provision of education opportunities and support. In

Bauchi, a priest called scholarships an investment into “the human project”⁶ (Participant 1, May 22, 2025).

One unique feature of scholarships provided by religious leaders is that they cover different categories, that is, they include both merit-based and need-based awards. Another feature is that they come in high volumes,⁷ though depending on the capacity of the religious organisation. Yet another feature is that they are sometimes non-discriminatory. A Living Faith Church pastor in Abuja spoke of a popular scholarship scheme they run, highlighting some of the above features:

We have David Oyedepo Foundation. It gives scholarships and they get to the north... Once you have the cut off mark in JAMB [a university entrance examination] and you have 5 A's or 5 B's in WAEC examination, then they will call you for an interview. They will give you a scholarship.

You know, even yesterday they called for the children of the widows. You know, Papa (referring to Bishop David Oyedepo, the founder and president of Living Faith Church Worldwide) took it upon himself to be responsible for the school fees of those children.

Papa is not giving scholarships to just one person, not just ten, not just twenty. It is in thousands, and you can imagine the monetary worth of that (Participant 6, June 09, 2025).

In Bauchi, a priest talked about the non-discriminatory nature of these supportive opportunities. He said, the scholarships are “not only for the members of our church” and “they are not restricted to Christians” (Participant 1, May 22, 2025). Nkwachukwu Orji wrote about the non-discriminatory principle that socio-economic assistance from faith-based leaders/organisations sometimes follow, arguing that these leaders and organisations adopt the “universalistic strategy” of aid that “does not consider religious identity when providing support” to individuals and communities at risk and in need (Orji, 2011: 487).

Aside from these points, supportive opportunities from religious leaders, as the Living Faith Church pastor hinted, often originate from their headquarters and branches in developed cities. Religious organisations in rural communities where the risk of radicalisation is high rely on the financial support of their sister organisations in other states and regions to meet the

⁶ By this term, the priest means that scholarships, when given to individuals, can secure their future and enable them to give back to society in due time.

⁷ Participants were unable to provide [exact] figures.

educational needs of their local population. This underscores the strong network of funds that these actors control, and this makes them significantly different from the rest of the prevent actors. This argument directly aligns with the view of the scholars of faith-based humanitarianism. In fact, according to Nkwachukwu Orji, faith-based organisations are one group that do not necessarily need to rely on external funds to intervene in a crisis or emergency; they can effectively mobilise financial support quickly and internally (Orji, 2011: 483-84).

Economic Empowerment

The results of several empirical studies referenced in the introductory section unanimously assert that poverty and joblessness remain one of the biggest loopholes exploited by terrorist groups in the north to draw many to violent extremism. This serves as the basis of the use of economic empowerment by religious leaders as a prevent strategy in that region.

Economic empowerment is understood to potentially mitigate some of the desperation, hopelessness, low self-worth, anger and frustration associated with poverty, unemployment and enforced idleness. By addressing these challenges, such initiatives are viewed by religious leaders as contributing to a sense of purpose, responsibility and social stability. Although this study does not directly measure their effectiveness, FBH scholars highlight the power of faith in uplifting vulnerable groups and enhancing livelihoods (Walker et al., 2012; Orji, 2011).

It is important to emphasise that the social stability and a sense of purpose that economic empowerment facilitates do not automatically make violent radicalisation impossible. However, they may reduce the risk significantly. When the hands are actively engaged in productive work and the mind is positively creative, the work and worries of any daring, violent extremist, if at all, compound (Copeland & Marsden, 2020; Graff, 2010).

Economic empowerment initiatives led by religious leaders in northern Nigerian take multiple forms that mirror empowerment strategies used in correctional settings to support livelihood reintegration, improve post-prison economic stability, and facilitate desistance in the United States and other contexts (Uggen, 2000; Chloupis & Kontompasi, 2025; Mancino, 2025). One such approach is the organisation of skill acquisition programmes. These programmes provide structured vocational training designed to equip vulnerable populations

with relevant skills for wealth generation and financial independence, thereby potentially reducing their exposure to factors that heighten susceptibility to violent radicalisation. According to the information gathered in the field, the programmes take place in two settings. One is the school, where religious leaders introduce entrepreneurial classes in the schools they established. This is done with the aim of equipping children with practical skills for employment right from a young age. Another advantage is that it allows for a longer duration of training, as students spend six years in secondary school learning various skills in addition to their regular classes/subjects (Participant 5, May 18, 2025).

Two is the church/mosque environment.⁸ Here, religious leaders directly oversee the training sessions, unlike in the first category, where teachers serve as a proxy or draft vocational training modules, timetable, and methods. In other words, in vocational training sessions that take place within the church/mosque, religious leaders/religious officials decide who teaches what skills, how, and in what manner. Also, training sessions that take place within the church/mosque environment are usually shorter in duration, lasting between one and six months. However, whether in school or church/mosque, experts are invited to lead the sessions. Income-generating skills, such as shoe-making, baking, soap-making, tailoring, welding, hairdressing, and IT, are taught in these programmes, as confirmed in multiple interview locations, including Kaduna, Minna, Bauchi, Abuja, and Zamfara. In Kaduna, particularly, a priest talked about small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), noting that they not only provide vulnerable populations (participants) with vocational training but also take the pain of providing them with microgrants or funds to start their own SMEs (Participant 4, May 18, 2025).

⁸ Churches/mosques are not only for worship but also serve as economic empowerment centres in the northern Nigerian context. The analysis here and Figure 3 illustrate that.

Figure 3: Vocational Training going on in a Living Faith Church in the North





(Source: Provided to the researcher by the Church Pastor, June 13, 2025)

Besides skill acquisition programmes, another way northern religious leaders empower the local population economically is through job placement assistance. What is central here is influence. Religious leaders are very influential actors, and they use their influence to bridge employment gaps in vulnerable communities. To begin with, they provide employment referrals by connecting job seekers to potential employers. Additionally, they use the pulpit to advertise general job openings, recognising the features of the communities they live and work in—where the local population hardly reads newspapers and magazines, wherein some of the opportunities are displayed. Lastly, they invite or allow employers to use their pulpits to advertise employment opportunities directly. In Zamfara, a priest spoke on some of these points. He shared the following experience:

There is a company I worked for in Lagos. That company normally comes to our church, giving us the opportunity to assist them with recruitment. They have come to my office before, giving us 10-15 slots, mostly for security guard roles. They pay them about 60,000 naira per month, and the employees work only about 14 days each month (Participant 8, May 20, 2025).

The same priest goes on to talk about how he uses his network and influence to link vulnerable individuals to public service roles. He said:

They are building our [state] airport. When they finish building it, there will be lots of job opportunities. I can meet my commander [referring to his superior in the Nigerian Air Force] to possibly call the state governor or whoever is in charge to give us slots, so we can be able to give to those who are in need (Participant 8, May 20, 2025).

In Kaduna and Minna, the experiences of the priests there reflect the perspectives above and go thus: “So many youths have joined the military through the help of the church” (Participant 4, May 18, 2025) and “If we see job adverts in the newspaper or any opportunity at all, we announce it in the church and guide them through the application process” (Participant 9, May 16, 2025), respectively.

Additionally, religious leaders empower vulnerable individuals through direct employment. Religious organisations do not only rely on unpaid services; they are also employers of labour. In Abuja, a pastor provides a glimpse into the magnitude of direct employment offered by his organisation, saying: “I can tell you that under the Living Faith Church, we pay salaries to more than 50,000 employees monthly. More than 50,000 staff, you know, and I mean salaries and house rents of those staff members” (Participant 6, June 9, 2025).

Lastly, economic empowerment facilitated by religious leaders takes the form of football opportunities. Northern religious leaders see an interplay between recreational activities and wealth generation. They support aspiring players in turning football from a leisure activity into a professional career. The Living Faith Church pastors in Abuja had this to say:

One of my friends has a football academy, and football is an activity that really brings money, and you know the youth are happy playing it. So, what we do is bring those who are skilful and put them into the academy. We currently have about six youths who will be travelling to European countries through the academy in two months (Participant 6, June 9, 2025).

Figure 4: The Pastor and the youths during football training sessions



(Source: Provided to the researcher by the Church Pastor, June 13, 2025)

Importantly, the nature of economic empowerment pursued by northern Nigerian religious leaders to address structural vulnerabilities linked to violent radicalisation can generate not only direct preventive effects but also broader security dividends. Individuals who are recruited into the military or paramilitary organisations through their assistance, for example, may become future counterterrorism operatives who help fight terrorism and violent

extremism. Similarly, beneficiaries of vocational trainings may go on to mentor or train other vulnerable members of their communities, thereby widening employment opportunities and reducing pool of individuals who are susceptible to extremist recruitment. Even the support provided for sports initiatives, such as football, can motivate young people to pursue meaningful aspirations with discipline and resilience.

Resource Mobilisation and Intervention Delivery

Delivering socio-economic interventions in P/CVE is notoriously difficult (Parker & Lindekilde, 2020; Charkawi et al., 2024), and similar challenges are documented across wider social-service provision sectors (Turbett, 2009; Hardill & Dwyer, 2011). Beyond identifying *what* religious leaders in northern Nigeria do, understanding *how* they mobilise resources, select beneficiaries, and deliver assistance offers important operational insight for practitioners seeking to partner with faith actors.

The identification and selection of beneficiaries occur through a multi-layered process that combines need-based assessments, public advertisements, referral mechanisms, proxy identification and targeted outreach. Needs shape the form and timing of assistance that these actors provide (e.g., counselling, food support, microgrants, educational sponsorship). In Bauchi, for example, a pastor explained that their scholarships often prioritise the “neglected” in vulnerable communities, particularly orphans “because they do not have anybody to pay their school fees” (Participant 1, May 22, 2025). Religious leaders also employ community adverts, which mirror marketing techniques. Such adverts sometimes highlight available benefits to draw vulnerable youths into faith-based P/CVE programmes (Participant 6, June 9, 2025; Participant 9, May 22, 2025).

Alongside self-referral, where individuals voluntarily seek help (Participant 7, May 22, 2025), religious leaders engage in targeted outreach, especially when they detect heightened risk indicators in communities. In Zamfara, a participant described how Muslim community emissaries are dispatched “deeply inside those areas that are having issues” to counter violent teachings using Qur’anic guidance (Participant 10, May 19, 2025). Proxy identification via relatives and friends is another strategy. As an imam in Kaduna noted, these close associates often detect early warning signs of radicalisation and are well-positioned to

be listened to. They are, therefore, engaged during interventions (Participant 5, May 18, 2025; also, Participant 7, May 22, 2025). These layered approaches demonstrate an ingenuity that parallels outreach logics in both P/CVE programming and social marketing.

Partnerships rely heavily on parents and government actors, whom religious leaders regard as central to shaping youth behaviour. Parents are seen as the primary site of socialisation, and many leaders emphasise values-based upbringing as a buffer against violent ideologies. As one Bauchi priest stated, parents are encouraged to “train up their children in the way they should go, so when they are old they will not depart from it” [quoting Proverbs 22:6] (Participant 1, May 22, 2025). Collaboration with the government is sought for job creation, stabilising education, and sanctioning harmful preaching (Participant 4, May 18, 2025).

It is vital to note that while northern Nigerian religious leaders consider collaboration with the government important, they mobilise resources internally for their activities and do not rely on the government for funds, thereby safeguarding their legitimacy and independence. The major sources of funds are *Fi sabilillah* contributions in mosques and free-will offerings in churches. An imam explained: “*Fi sabilillah*... means helping the prayer House of Allah and people in need for the sake of God Almighty” (Participant 5, May 18, 2025). Similarly, a Kaduna priest emphasised reliance on congregational giving rather than external funding. He said:

It is the standard of the world to go about looking for money [which implies a feature that distinguishes faith-based organisations from other local actors in P/CVE]... The church does not go about looking for money. We are sufficient; Christ is sufficient for us... We only take offering, which is freely given... We don't go to the government and say, 'Help us'... (Participant 4, May 18, 2025).

Regarding monitoring, funds provided to local religious organisations for socio-economic interventions are tracked through internal mechanisms, including oversight by headquarters and local church financial committees (Participant 6, June 9, 2025). Beneficiaries, in turn, are monitored through utilisation monitoring (UM) techniques, which involve visits to their local businesses for those who received microgrants and checks on production outputs for those trained in skills such as shoe-making. The Living Faith Church

pastor in Abuja illustrated this by recounting how they observed that a woman who received a 25,000 naira microgrant had expanded her enterprise from selling roasted yam to operating a full food shop (Participant 6, June 9, 2025). Although this study was unable to deeply probe internal organisational accountability⁹, these examples illustrate everyday monitoring practices.

Equally important to note is the role of women in faith-based socio-economic interventions in northern Nigeria. They (often the wives of religious leaders) play auxiliary but significant roles. In the absence of the religious leaders, they monitor (skill acquisition) training sessions and report outcomes back to their husbands (Participant 7, May 22, 2025).

While these everyday practices demonstrate significant strengths, scholarship on the political economy of faith-based actors also highlights potential governance risks associated with faith-based humanitarian and social services. These include patronage dynamics, favouritism in the allocation of funds and scholarships, limited formal accountability mechanisms (which are often justified through the claim that “accountability is only to God”) and the possibility of proselytising tendencies (Jayasinghe, 2007; Mourier, 2013; Arslan Köse, 2019; Luka & Gofwan, 2025; Owusu & Agyemang, 2025). These concerns are valid to an appreciable extent, but they represent governance challenges rather than inherent flaws of faith-based humanitarianism. No actor operating in fragile contexts is entirely free from governance deficits.

Moreover, as faith-based humanitarianism scholars argue, religious actors possess extensive volunteer networks, diversified and independent funding streams, and often operate from altruistic motivations (Orji, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2022). They serve as gatekeepers in high-risk environments (Wilkinson et al., 2022) and wield unparalleled influence over identity, belonging, and belief (Walker et al. 2012; Rubin, 2025), all of which are domains that basically shape radicalisation trajectories. Excluding them on the basis of the above potential risks creates a vacuum that extremist groups can exploit. The appropriate response, therefore, lies not in exclusion but in strengthening accountability and transparency mechanisms.

⁹ Participants were reluctant to discuss such details.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by studying prevention from the lens of faith-based humanitarianism, which is one area that is under-researched. Within that framework, it argues that the services of religious leaders are not limited to the services of God (like worship). They also work in social and economic spaces and even take advantage of their relationship with God and influence in society to facilitate economic empowerment and education opportunities to individuals and communities that are at risk of violent radicalisation.

As the fieldwork findings in five locations in northern Nigeria show, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders engage in practical socio-economic activities, such as vocational training, financial support and charity, educational sponsorship, and youth empowerment. Through the youth forums and counselling sessions they organise, innovative outreach strategies (such as door-to-door outreaches and targeted incentives) they adopt, and the educational opportunities they provide, these leaders reach vulnerable populations and build critical thinking and resilience, teach societal values, promote inclusion, and deal with the issues of frustration, hopelessness and desperation. They also fill the void of a role model in vulnerable communities. They use their influence/network and skill acquisition programmes as a strategy to deal with poverty and unemployment. Collectively, these actions hold significant potential for preventing violent radicalisation in a region where structural deprivation continues to heighten vulnerability.

Further, concerning education, this study shows that to educate is not enough in radicalisation prevention. Instead, what is taught, what is learned and who teaches what matter equally, and religious leaders can be used in the monitoring and reporting of what goes on in education systems in rural, vulnerable communities. Again, the fact that these actors embody compassion, work with a sense of sacrifice and the reverence for God, can mobilise funds easily and independently/internally, and are influential, as evidence gathered from the fieldwork suggests, puts them in a competitive position as socio-economic agents in fighting against violent radicalisation. Therefore, as faith-based humanitarianism demonstrates, to confine them to their traditional theological roles suggests severe myopia and may blind states to their full potential. Policy-makers should consider them in socio-economic activities or

plans aimed at preventing violent radicalisation, especially in local communities. They should also be meaningfully integrated into local development planning, as they have a deep understanding of local dynamics.

Notwithstanding, it is important to re-emphasise that this study could not expressly measure the impact or the effectiveness of the socio-economic activities of religious leaders in the north (or provide numbers where necessary) for two reasons. First, the study follows a strict qualitative method and also focuses on the *hows* of prevention, hence there was little or no room for quantitative evaluation or impact assessment. Second, efforts made by the researcher to obtain quantitative data from the participants proved abortive, as they either said that they lacked quantitative records or requested months to respond to the researcher. They said that the interviews were impromptu and that it would take them months to compile relevant data on their activities. Unfortunately, the period given for this study could not accommodate such a long wait.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the limitations of this study, future research should incorporate the perspectives of programme beneficiaries in northern Nigeria for a better understanding of how the socio-economic initiatives of religious leaders are received and experienced. Further empirical inquiry is also needed into the roles of female clerics and the gender composition of beneficiaries, as gendered patterns of engagement, access and participation may shape the inclusiveness and outcomes of these interventions.

In addition, a thorough examination of accountability structures, particularly how the socio-economic interventions led by religious leaders are monitored, evaluated and held answerable to their communities, is necessary and would provide valuable insights into the sustainability and transparency of their roles in P/CVE. Also, quantitative research that measures impact can help to strongly establish the significance and consequences of their contributions to the prevention of violent radicalisation in the region.

Finally, while researching this topic, the idea of the generalisability of the findings struck the researcher. So, while this study exclusively focuses on religious leaders in northern Nigeria, future research can explore other contexts to see whether the socio-economic prevent

strategies adopted by religious leaders in addressing violent radicalisation in northern Nigeria apply in other contexts.

Policy Implications and Theory of Change

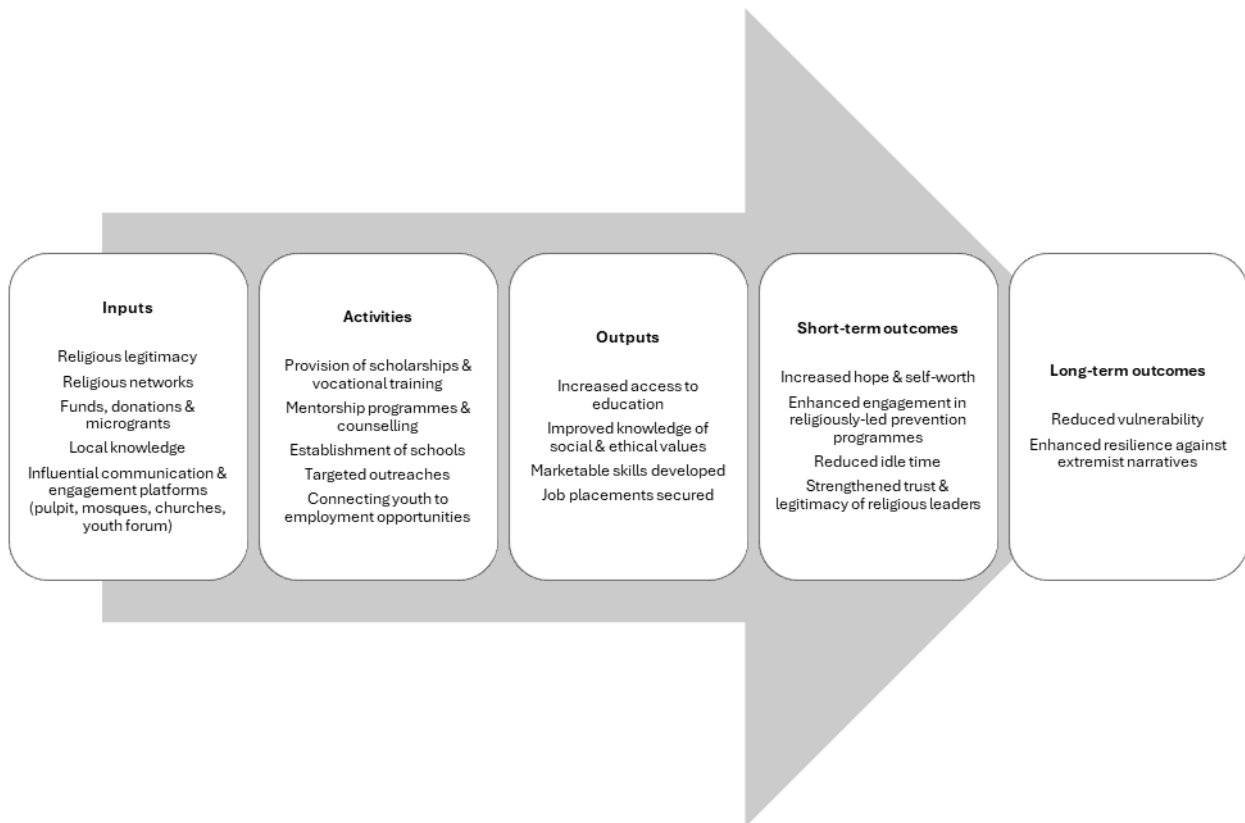
To strengthen the policy relevance of the findings of this research, it is useful to translate the insights into a practical framework that policymakers and practitioners can operationalise. This section captures a brief summary of actionable recommendations for supporting and scaling the socio-economic initiatives undertaken by religious leaders in northern Nigeria. In addition, a simple theory of change is presented, which outlines how inputs such as religious networks and resources translate into activities, outputs, and both short- and long-term outcomes that may reduce vulnerability to radicalisation. These tools offer a structured basis for programme design, evaluation, and future research on faith-based prevention efforts.

Table 2: Recommended Policy Actions

Action Area	Specific Recommendations
Strengthen religious leaders' socio-economic initiatives	Provide targeted financial and technical support to enhance scholarship schemes, vocational programmes, and youth employment networks led by religious actors.
Expand collaboration with formal education and skills agencies	Ensure that youth empowerment initiatives led by religious leaders are integrated with state and NGO programmes to enhance quality assurance, monitoring, and sustainability.
Leverage religious leaders as local education watchdogs	Utilise religious leaders' deep community presence to monitor and report extremist teaching, identify illegal or informal schools ("under-the-tree schools"), and ensure vulnerable youth in northern Nigeria receive safe and appropriate education.
Integrate psychosocial and spiritual support	Incorporate spiritual counselling, values-based mentoring, and hope-building interventions within

	broader resilience and community support frameworks.
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Figure 5: Theory of change for faith-based socio-economic interventions in P/CVE



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