

# **A STUDY ON THE PEACEBUILDING CHALLENGES OF THE CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF ABUJA, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

The quest for durable peace has been a fundamental issue since violence and persistent insecurity became hallmarks of Nigeria's capital, Abuja. This explorative survey examines the key challenges the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja faces in its peacebuilding efforts. Primary data was obtained from participant observation, interviews, and discussions with benefiting community members. Secondary data was sourced from extant literature consisting of books and journals. The study utilises the structural functionalism theory which stresses social solidarity. Findings indicate a strong correlation between the peacebuilding initiatives of the archdiocese and the relative peace in the area. Notwithstanding its successes, the peacebuilding initiatives of the archdiocese are not without several setbacks. The study established that the archdiocese is faced with the key challenges of lack of a unified peacebuilding advisor and vision, inadequate funding, inadequacy of qualified human resources, as well as its peacebuilding initiatives being misperceived as proselytism in some quarters. The paper tasks the archdiocese to establish a central body to coordinate its peacebuilding activities, scale up synergistic collaborations with other faith-based and secular institutions to train peacebuilders, and jointly build projects to erase prejudice.

**Keywords:** Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja, Conflict Prevention, Peace, Peacebuilding

## **Introduction**

This paper was precipitated by the continuous incidences of social violence in Abuja which have necessitated the urgent need to scale up peacebuilding efforts by state and non-state actors. For several years, Abuja has been enduring a rise in open violence engineered by various individuals and groups that take up arms against citizens and the state from time to time. The violent incidences have resulted in fear, injuries, displacements, destructions, and deaths which have reinforced the attention of state and non-state actors to respond to the problem through peacebuilding. The Catholic Church is generally regarded as one of the best-performing religious institutions in peacebuilding in the world today (Powers, 2021; Montevecchio, 2023). Locally, the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja has gained prominence in peacebuilding discourse and practice in Nigeria since it was erected in 1981. The archdiocesan peacebuilding interventions combine different peacebuilding activities to address as many different types of conflict drivers and underlying causes as possible. Moreover, Nwosu (2024) established that the Abuja archdiocese is engaged in peacebuilding and its peacebuilding initiatives are majorly centred on seven core indicators: education, healthcare, environmental protection, relief and economic development, inter-faith dialogue,

humanitarian assistance, and psychosocial care. The initiatives in these sectors have helped to mitigate the risks of violent conflicts and their debilitating impacts in Abuja. Thus, the far-reaching initiatives led Nwekeaku and Christopher (2021) to pinpoint the Abuja archdiocese as one of the best-performing religious institutions in peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Notwithstanding its successes, the peacebuilding initiatives of the archdiocese are not without several challenges. The archdiocese has continued to face various obstacles and limitations in the pursuit of its mission in the peacebuilding field. Four significant challenges were identified by this research. The magnitude of the identified challenges has provoked calls for further strengthening of the archdiocesan social institutions to make them more functional and effective in the face of the dynamic nature of conflicts. Flowing from the above scenario, this paper therefore examines the challenges facing the Archdiocese in Nigeria's capital from 2015 to 2023. The paper is organised into seven sections. The first section is the introduction while the second is devoted to conceptual discourse. The third section focuses on the theoretical framework, the fourth is the methodology, and the fifth section presents the conflict profile of Abuja in brief. Section six is dedicated to the discussion, while the last section is the conclusion and recommendations.

### **Conceptual Premise of Peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding is a very broad field, a subject of innumerable manuals and frameworks, which can mean different things to different people (CRS, 2018). The concept was first introduced in the academic lexicon before it became consensual in the world of policymaking (Cravo, 2018). Coined by Galtung in 1975, the concept of peacebuilding did not take off as a practical concept and did not receive due attention until the 6th Secretary-General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali used it. It was in the year 1992 that Boutros-Ghali in his *Agenda for Peace* defined peacebuilding as a set of actions undertaken "to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992:21). During Koffi Annan's leadership at the UN, peacebuilding and conflict prevention were used interchangeably (Annan, 2014). With the creation of the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2007, the UN has harmonised all its peacebuilding activities under the Commission. Since its establishment, the Commission has been involved in peacebuilding processes in more than 20 countries (De Coning & Stamnes, 2016).

Over the years at the UN and elsewhere, peacebuilding has continued to gain more attention and traction from scholars and peacebuilding practitioners. The 1992 conceptualisation of peacebuilding by Boutros-Ghali has "stimulated increased discusses that challenge as well as draw out critical issues that depict contending positions among scholars, organisations, practitioners, and donor agencies" (Jarikre, 2016:33). However, fast-forwarding to 2023, with the conditions that shaped the 1992 Agenda no longer in vogue, the 9th Secretary-General of the UN Antonio Guterres on July 20, 2023, launched *A New Agenda for Peace* (NAFP) which outlines an ambitious and extensive set of recommendations that recognises the inter-linked nature of the plethora of challenges and what needs to be done to prevent violent conflicts and mitigate the risks (Gowan, 2023). The NAFP's emphasis on conflict prevention is its most innovative feature. By utilising early warning systems, the Guterres' Agenda aims to detect potential conflicts before they escalate- a noble goal, albeit with significant logistical hurdles. The NAFP is clear-eyed about the magnitude of the 21st Century's challenges and realistic about potential solutions. To effectively address these challenges, the NAFP encourages UN Member States to move

beyond the logic of competition and seek avenues for cooperation and collective action to pursue shared interests. The vision offered by NAFP is grounded in three principles: trust, solidarity, and universality (UN, 2023). Thus, the core principles of trust, solidarity, and universality are the foundations of the UN Charter and of a stable world. It consists of policy recommendations for direct action in key areas for conflict prevention at the global level: “Addressing strategic risks and geopolitical divisions; preventing conflict and violence and sustainable peace; strengthening peace operations and addressing peace enforcement; novel approaches to peace and potential domains of conflict; strengthening international governance” (Gowan, 2023).

Flowing from the leading position of the UN, there is a persistent call for true peace in all corners of the world and Nigeria in particular. Going beyond institutions, Nigerian scholars and peacebuilding practitioners from diverse disciplines have also articulated the concept of peacebuilding from different perspectives to stimulate and project their points. Hence, peacebuilding becomes of paramount interest to policymakers and the academic discipline of peace and conflict studies. For instance, Jega (2018) maintains that peacebuilding need not be reactive; it should primarily be preventive and proactive. It should be aimed at bringing about enduring peace, or to prevent conflicts from occurring ab initio. Earlier in the same token, Orebiyi (2016:18) asserts that preventive peacebuilding efforts include research, conflict resolution training, capacity-building, diplomacy, economic development, social, educational, health, legal and security sector reform programmes that “address potential sources of instability and violence.”

The debate on peacebuilding since 1992 has been influenced by scholars and peace practitioners, and the concept has evolved through continuous interaction between academic studies and real-world field experiences. To further flesh out the ongoing debate, Jarikre (2016) succinctly teases that the concept of peacebuilding depicts an academic license whereby its meaning is derived from the scholar's or practitioner's vintage position, outcome, and understanding of post-conflict interventions. In sum, peacebuilding is any deliberate and proactive effort by individuals, governments, and non-governmental organisations to address the root causes of violence by building enduring structures and institutions that enhance true peace and improve human security. In terms of praxis, peacebuilding has been much criticised because it is too broad a concept and includes many different activities under its umbrella.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research is anchored on structural functionalism – an interesting theory propounded by Emile Durkheim which stresses social solidarity. The theory sees society as ‘a complex system’ whose components work together to promote solidarity and stability. Durkheim wanted to understand what exactly keeps the society together and functional. At the core of structural functionalism is the very simple idea that society is interconnected, interrelated, and dynamic, rather than isolated and static; and all the parts of society work together to create a stable whole. Structural functionalism theory explains what keeps society stable. As an example, one function of the laws of a society is to keep the society from violence. Violent conflicts and disasters happen in society, yet society remains intact because the pieces of our society are interactive, interdependent, and interconnected which creates stability.

Comprehending how religious institutions are organised and how they integrate with the rest of society helps in understanding how the structural functionalism theory applies to

the peace initiatives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja. Durkheim's theory explains the many ways religious groups promote social cohesion, justice, development, peace and unity in a multicultural society like Abuja. For instance, Catholicism teaches good neighbourliness, that one cannot be reconciled with God before one is reconciled with his neighbour. This is because reconciliation must take place among people before going to God (Cf. Matthew 5:23-25; 18:23-35). By this reasoning, the Church acts as a bridge and reconciliation agent between God and human beings, and human beings with fellow beings. Thus, the Church helps humanity to cross the boundaries of culture, ethnicity, and language that characterise the Abuja population and build social solidarity and peace. Additionally, the Archdiocese also participates in the operation of social institutions like families, hospitals, schools, and financial services. This makes the Church a functional structure crucial to conflict prevention in Abuja.

### **Methodology**

A review of selected relevant literature was adopted for this paper. The paper used both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data was obtained from participant observation and the conduct of semi-structured interviews, conversations, and focus group discussions with the clergy, laity, and community members in the six area councils of Abuja. Apart from the primary data, the researcher also depended on secondary sources for data collection and these included books, journals, and church reports. The paper used purposive random sampling and the snowball techniques to select interviewees and discussants.

### **A Brief Conflict Profile of Abuja**

Abuja is passing through difficult challenges engineered by various individuals and groups that have taken up arms against the state. It has been experiencing outbreaks of high-intensity conflicts and open violence resulting in avoidable injuries, displacements, destructions, and deaths. The conflicts are attributable to violent extremist organisations, herdsmen banditry, sporadic inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, kidnapping for ransom, and sundry criminality across the length and breadth of the territory.

For instance, Abuja as the seat of power and Nigeria's centre of unity has been deliberately targeted on several occasions by Boko Haram and allied terror groups. Some of these have both national and global significance. In the case of the bombing of the UN Building in August 2011, the troublemakers became more confrontational with the government than they had previously been in Abuja. The attacks on the UN headquarters and other symbols of state power, authority, and national security in the city are attacks on hard targets (UN News, 2011). The blue flag had previously been targeted with bombs in Algeria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (UN, 2009; Foulkes, 2023). Also, there have been other attacks in the territory by violent extremist organisations like Boko Haram and ISWAP. For instance, on July 5, 2022, ISWAP carried out a high-profile critical attack on a maximum-security prison in Kuje that allowed about 900 inmates to escape, including over 60 Boko Haram members. Security analysts highlighted the involvement of Ansaru, a rising Al Qaeda-backed splinter faction of Boko Haram in the attack (UN News, 2011). There was also the brutal killing of more than 70 civilians in 2014 in a motor park within proximity of Abuja and the killing signalled critical levels of violence (BBC, 2014). Additionally, there have been recurring violent disputes between nomadic animal herders and farmers. These conflicts over the use of land and water resources, as well as grazing routes, have been exacerbated

by climate change and the spread of the Sahara Desert, as herders move southwards in search of pasture.

One of the scariest threats to Abuja residents is the frequent kidnappings and abductions. Many residents have been abducted from their homes and elsewhere, only to be released after millions of naira are paid as ransom. By every indication, Abuja's lucrative kidnapping industry is thriving and expanding into previously safe areas. Some of the kidnappers are commonly referred to as bandits. The bandits emerged following years of conflict between nomadic herdsman and farming communities (Hassan, 2023). These criminals raid communities, kidnap civilians, rape, kill, loot shops, rustle cattle, and burn down houses. Attacks by bandits have forced thousands to flee their homes and seek shelter elsewhere. The rising insecurity in Abuja and the influx of displaced persons from conflict-affected states surrounding Abuja and beyond, has given rise to internal displacement and the emergence of IDP camps. These issues have negatively affected the peace, rolled back the city's developmental strides, and decreased human security while plunging many of the population into paucity. These litanies of open violence have necessitated peacebuilding more than ever before.

### **The Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja and Peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding is a religious task, a central mission, an obligation, and a vocation of all Catholics, not just the clergy and select laity (Schirch, 2004; Smock, 2001). The involvement of faith-inspired institutions in peace efforts is not a new phenomenon. Faith-based peacebuilding advocates have imagined much richer visions of peace and play a leading role in building peace for the beginning of time (Appleby, 2000). The Catholic Church is the global religious institution at the forefront of the struggle to promote positive peace and justice based on the dignity of the human person (Montevecchio, 2023). It is dedicated to the proposition that a world without violent conflict is possible, practicable, and essential to global security. The Catholic Church in Nigeria is part of the worldwide Catholic Church, under the spiritual leadership of the Pope, the Curia in Rome, and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria. In Nigeria, it has nine Archdioceses with 59 dioceses for administrative convenience. The Archdiocese of Abuja was erected in 1981 and elevated to Archdiocese in 1994 (CBCN, 2019). The archdiocese is shepherded by His Grace, Most Rev. Dr. Ignatius Ayau Kaigama, and operates eight apostolic deaneries.

In consonance with the UN's New Agenda for Peace, the Archdiocese of Abuja adds distinctive values to the peacebuilding enterprise by emphasising conflict prevention, human security, peace, and reconciliation (UN, 2023). This emphasis is further energised by the spiritual and human resources that support growth and transformation in individuals and communities, offering tools for reconciling differences and addressing systemic violence by intentionally working on education and healthcare, micro-enterprise and agriculture, climate change and peace, relief and development, spirituality and other programmes. Moreover, an existing archdiocesan structure allows the seamless connection of the grassroots and the grass tops plus horizontal networking to share experiences, expertise, resources, and learning in line with the Catholic social encyclical tradition and praxis.

The Abuja Archdiocese can promote true peace because it is ubiquitous, has credibility, legitimacy, comprehension of the local context, a wide network of social organisations, a large population of church members, a unique organisational structure, partnerships with governments, the Catholic Social Teaching, access to all levels of authority, policymakers and powerbrokers in the study area and a wide international network with

Catholic Churches in other jurisdictions. More so, the leaders of the Church are regarded by the communities as dependable and upright due to their unbiased approach that seeks the common good.

It is pertinent to affirm that the Abuja Archdiocese embraces a bottom-up approach, involving local peacebuilders, civil society, and marginalised community members in the peacebuilding process. The peacebuilding architecture of the Archdiocese is eclectic and includes development organisations (CAFOD, Caritas, Catholic Relief Services, and Justice Development and Peace Commission); service organisations (Catholic Television, Radio Maria, and the Good Shepherd Newspapers); and specialised institutions (Kuka Centre, Gaudium et Specs Institute, Lux Terra Leadership Foundation, Psycho Spiritual Institute). Others include lay apostolate Catholic organisations like the Catholic Men Organisation, Catholic Women Organisation, Catholic Youth Organisation of Nigeria, *Zumuntan Mata Katolika*; and base community groups for conflict transformation.

Undoubtedly, the Archdiocese intentionally invested a great deal of resources in erecting these multifarious institutions for the common good and to be able to draw from their wealth of experience in fieldwork, multi-sectorial partnerships, context-sensitivity expertise, skills, tools, and research, to deepen the culture of peace, strengthen the population, and promote peaceful coexistence. These institutions have been pivotal in providing opportunities for stakeholders to discuss contemporary viewpoints around indicators such as justice, development, peace, reconciliation, conciliation, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and share and analyse best practices. Schirch (2004) and Jarikre (2018) see peacebuilding as a new way of approaching development with an emphasis on peace stating that increased infrastructure development is critical to peacebuilding activities. Thus, the archdiocesan peacebuilding interventions combine different peacebuilding and development activities to address as many different types of conflict drivers and underlying causes as possible. While further broadening the notion, scope, and scale of peacebuilding, Jarikre (2021) in harmony with the position of Gas-Aixendri (2020) elucidates that peace cannot only be kept (peacekeeping) or made (peacemaking), but can also be built (peacebuilding) by developing a robust architecture, or a strategic framework that integrates development to reduce violent conflict and its debilitating impact.

Though the discipline of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution has researched and built extensively on peacebuilding, it has yet to provide a concrete and clear definition for the term (Iyer, 2011). Peacebuilding therefore ends up meaning a lot of different things to a lot of different people. While some refer to it as a set of activities following a war; others view it as a relational and psychological process, and yet others define it as a new way of approaching development. Peacebuilding, in the academic discipline, is best understood as the set of actions that seek to prevent, reduce, transform, and help people recover from violence in all forms, even structural violence that has not yet led to massive civil unrest (Tschirgi, Lund, and Mancini, 2010; Knight, 2003). At the same time, it empowers people to foster relationships at all levels that sustain them and their environment (Schirch, 2004; Lederach, 2014).

### **Some Peacebuilding Challenges of the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja**

Peacebuilding as a complex and multifaceted process of creating conditions for a self-sustaining peace often faces numerous barriers (Nwaka, 2019). The Catholic Church in Abuja is making a distinctive contribution to peace in many different contexts. Notwithstanding its

successes, the distinctive contribution of the archdiocese is not without challenges. Using the framework and variables provided by existing literature, interviews, discussions, and participant observation, four significant challenges were identified during the research. The findings are presented below.

### **Lack of a Uniform Peacebuilding Office and Peace/Conflict Advisor**

There is no central office charged with coordinating the efforts of the church in peacebuilding. Consequently, there is a lack of standardised uniform practices, thus stakeholders have no unified vision for peace and long-term development. As a participant observer, the researcher uncovered that individual Catholic organisations designing projects and programmes with peacebuilding objectives develop and follow their approaches and processes. These fragmented approaches and processes are often isolated and not robustly practised across projects and programmes even within a common context, let alone across the organisation. There seems to exist an uneven or ad hoc nature of practices due to the absence of a policy-mandated peace/conflict advisor to standardise operational methods and skills, as well as make peacebuilding work evidence-based. Individual organisations' efforts are more likely to achieve a more meaningful impact on peace if the organisations work within an institutionalised system comprising other sister organisations. In summation, the process of how peacebuilding should be done should be mapped and widely shared across social institutions.

### **Inadequate Funding**

Peacebuilding is a rigorous, long-term, and expensive engagement that comes at a high cost. Another pivotal encumbrance noted is the inadequacy of financial resources. Qualitative data from several interviewees and respondents indicate that inadequacy of financial resources is a primary challenge facing the peacebuilding efforts of the archdiocese. Catholic organisations greatly depend on donations from individuals, groups and parishes to implement their peacebuilding and community development programmes and projects. This scenario implies that the success or otherwise of their programmes and projects depends on the availability or unavailability of funds. An interviewee from Caritas presented that,

Over the past seven years, we have received dwindling funds to support our community development and peacebuilding programmes. Unfortunately, some of our donors are shifting their focus to supporting other areas.

This challenge of funding is further supported by a Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) staff who acknowledged during a focus group discussion at Durumi that the Abuja JDPC could not upscale its interventions in some instances due to paucity of funds. The staff gave an example of JDPCs inability to sometimes meet the healthcare and education needs of irregular migrants, displaced persons, and some vulnerable communities, while other discussants nodded their heads in agreement that:

One major challenge to peacebuilding in our (Abuja) Archdiocese is insufficient funding. Insufficient funding has limited our capacity to deliver on all fronts. There are many people in need of our interventions and in several areas the JDPC could have intervened if funding was adequate. The reality is that many businesses, companies, and institutions in Abuja should be funding peacebuilding activities but they are not. This may be because

they are not well aware of the importance of peacebuilding and the magnitude of efforts we (JDPC) put in place to make Abuja peaceful.

This position is in line with the finding of Obote (2024:52) that institutions that receive “continuous external funding demonstrate a higher capacity for peacebuilding activities.”

### **Inadequacy of Qualified Human Resources**

Additionally, another prevalent challenge as expressed by most of the study participants is the inadequacy of trained and experienced peacebuilders. Peacebuilding requires competent individuals with adequate training and experience. Implementing intervention projects requires that an organisation has the appropriate expert capacity to do so. As a participant observer, the researcher noted that, unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of qualified and experienced human resources especially concerning expertise in terms of guidance and counselling for trauma victims and survivors. Many actors functioning in the peacebuilding arena are not professionally trained, certified, and skilled enough to execute some interventions. Catholic organisations involved in peacebuilding face challenges in accessing well-trained and experienced personnel. The organisations assume that the clergy are natural trainers and peacebuilders, but this has been proven to the contrary (Schreiter, Appleby, & Powers, 2010). The practice of using inadequately trained, certified, and experienced personnel could lead to improper intervention - thus, may lead to doing more harm than good. For instance, well-trained and practising specialist trauma counsellors are few in Abuja, whereas thousands of men, women, and children are daily experiencing tragic events that often overwhelm the capacity of trauma specialists in the study area to cope.

### **Catholic Peacebuilding Sometimes Seen as Proselytising**

Another major albatross is the resistance of members of local communities who are not Church members who question the real intent of the Church. An example in the case was of a non-Catholic interviewee in Gwagwalada who seemed to see the potable water project executed by the CMO of St. Mary Magdalene Parish in Kutunku Soho as a form of proselytising in disguise. While commending the church for the provision of potable water, which has been a major challenge and source of conflict in the community, however satirically interjected,

Dem don give us free water 247. Na better thing dem do so but dem still never tell us wetin dey for inside dem mind. But make we dey look them with one eye first, maybe tomorrow dem go fit talk say make we come attend catechism before we go fit fetch water.

This albatross of mistrust and misperception by some members of local communities is in tandem with the findings of Orebiyi (2016) who established that faith-based organisations are sometimes perceived to be proselytising, by actively seeking to attract religious membership or conversion. However, such selective perception of Catholic peacebuilding initiatives being interpreted as evangelism in disguise has been severely refuted (Ugorji & Ogun, 2024; Akighir & Akighir, 2024). Nevertheless, the present study found that such claims of evangelism in disguise hold no water because Catholic social institutions, programmes, and projects are open to people of all creeds and ethnicities as most interviewees and discussants attested to during the research. Moreover, the peacebuilding interventions of the archdiocese are based on need, not creed, tribe, race, nationality, or political affiliations



- as the archdiocese prioritises the most marginalised and most vulnerable. However, the archdiocese must continue to address similar perception concerns to secure buy-in from all residents since such concerns if left unchecked, can lead to hate, polarisation, and conflict.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Peacebuilding exists because of the inevitability of violence in the society. From the discussion above, it could be deduced that faith-based institutions are increasingly taking an active role in peacebuilding. This is evident in the efforts of the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja which have significantly deepened peace and translated into tangible benefits for residents and communities. Notwithstanding its laudable successes, the peacebuilding initiatives of the archdiocese are not without challenges. In essence, building sustainable peace can be a challenging endeavour because conflict drivers are characteristically multivariate. In sum, this paper has put forward some of the key peacebuilding challenges facing the archdiocese. These challenges include a lack of a unified peacebuilding advisor and inadequate funding. Additionally, the challenges of the inadequacy of qualified human resources, as well as its peacebuilding initiatives being misperceived as proselytising in some quarters have also been examined and addressed. This paper charges the archdiocese to establish a central body to coordinate its peacebuilding activities, scale up synergistic collaborations with other faith-based and secular institutions to train peacebuilders, and jointly build projects to erase bias.

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