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Article

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### THE EXPERIENCES OF REFUGEES IN IDP CAMPS IN BAKASSI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF CROSS RIVER STATE - NIGERIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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#### Abstract

The existing reports and policy documents emphasize the magnitude of displacement, they often overlook the subjective experiences, emotional realities, and meaning-making processes of refugees living in IDP camps. Phenomenological research design, the study focuses on first-person accounts obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and descriptive analysis of lived experience. The scope of the research covers selected IDP camps within Bakassi LGA, exploring themes of survival, trauma, identity reconstruction, community bonds, faith, daily struggles, and hope for reintegration. Philosophically, the study is grounded in existentialism and humanism, emphasizing the refugees' search for meaning, agency, and dignity under extreme conditions, while the ethics of care framework interrogates societal responsibility toward vulnerable populations. The findings reveal complex emotional landscapes characterized by fear, loss, uncertainty, and psychological distress, alongside resilience, communal solidarity, faith-based hope, and mutual support systems. The study contributes to knowledge by providing a nuanced phenomenological understanding of displacement in Bakassi, highlighting psychological, spiritual, and existential dimensions often neglected in conventional humanitarian assessments. It recommends participatory, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive intervention frameworks that integrate refugees' voices into policy and practice.

**Keywords:** Internally Displaced Persons, Phenomenology, Refugee Experiences, Bakassi LGA, Humanitarian Crisis, Trauma, Resilience, Existentialism.

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## **Introduction**

The crisis of internal displacement in Nigeria has emerged as one of the nation's most urgent and complex humanitarian challenges in the twenty-first century. Driven by a combination of violent conflicts, political instability, environmental stressors, and territorial disputes, internal displacement has continued to rise, particularly in regions affected by insurgency and intercommunal clashes (UNHCR 24). Among the many displacement hotspots in the country, the Bakassi Peninsula and its adjoining Local Government Area (LGA) in Cross River State stand out as a focal point of both historical and contemporary crises. Following the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling of 2002 and the subsequent implementation of the Green Tree Agreement in 2008, thousands of Bakassi inhabitants faced forced relocation, generating multiple waves of displacement that continue to reverberate today (Obafemi 141). As a result, Bakassi LGA remains home to a large concentration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in precarious conditions. Over the past decade, recurring boundary conflicts, militarization, and interethnic clashes have intensified the displacement situation in Bakassi. These tensions have produced overcrowded, under-resourced, and poorly coordinated IDP settlements where many refugees struggle to access essential resources such as food, clean water, medical care, and adequate shelter (Okon 112). The living conditions in these camps, often characterized by makeshift tents, insufficient sanitation facilities, and minimal healthcare infrastructure, expose displaced individuals to heightened risks of disease outbreaks, malnutrition, and psychological trauma. Humanitarian agencies have repeatedly described Bakassi's IDP camps as spaces of deep vulnerability where families, including women, children, and elderly persons, navigate daily survival in the face of acute shortages and structural neglect (Human Rights Watch 7).

Despite government initiatives and the involvement of local and international humanitarian organizations, the experiences of displaced persons in these camps remain insufficiently documented in scholarly and policy-oriented literature. Much of the existing research focuses predominantly on macro-level assessments, such as statistics on displacement, policy frameworks, conflict analyses, and the socioeconomic implications of displacement (Adebayo 76). While such studies are important, they often overlook the lived, everyday realities of displaced individuals. The emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of displacement, elements that define human existence and shape coping strategies, frequently receive minimal attention. As scholars such as Smith argued, the absence of phenomenological perspectives limits the depth of understanding needed to develop more humane and contextually grounded interventions (59). Furthermore, the displacement in Bakassi is not merely an economic or political issue; it is a profoundly human one. For many refugees, displacement entails the loss of ancestral lands, livelihoods, communal identities, and social belonging. It disrupts family structures, alters cultural practices, and generates profound feelings of uncertainty and dislocation. The trauma associated with forced migration often leaves lasting emotional scars, including anxiety, depression, and persistent fear (Nwosu 88). These psychosocial burdens shape how individuals interpret their circumstances, form relationships within the camps, and reconstruct meaning in the aftermath of displacement.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of exploring the subjective experiences of displaced persons to uncover how they make sense of their suffering, negotiate identity, and cultivate resilience in challenging environments (Adekeye 103). Through storytelling, communal interactions, religious practices, and other cultural expressions, many displaced people navigate their emotional landscapes and attempt to

preserve a sense of dignity despite their material hardships. These experiential narratives are essential for understanding displacement not merely as a demographic problem but as a lived social and psychological phenomenon. Given the limited availability of studies focusing on the phenomenological dimensions of displacement in Bakassi, the study filled a critical gap by centering the voices and lived experiences of refugees residing in IDP camps. By employing a phenomenological framework, the study uncovered how displaced individuals describe, interpret, and cope with the realities of their environment. This approach prioritizes first-person accounts and emphasizes the meanings individuals attribute to their difficult circumstances. Such a perspective aligns with the view of Van Manen, who asserted that phenomenology seeks to illuminate the essence of lived experience and deepen understanding of human existence in context (32).

Moreover, a phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of Bakassi refugees is vital for bridging the persistent gap between policy narratives and the complex human realities of displacement. Policies often assume uniformity in the needs and experiences of displaced populations; however, phenomenological findings reveal the nuanced, heterogeneous, and deeply personal nature of displacement (Eze 54). Understanding these nuances can inform more empathetic, culturally sensitive, and effective humanitarian responses that truly address the needs of IDPs rather than imposing generalized frameworks. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of displacement in Bakassi by foregrounding the human stories behind the statistics. By listening to the voices of displaced individuals, documenting their struggles, highlighting their resilience, and analyzing their meaning-making processes, this research underscores the urgent need for interventions that acknowledge both the material and emotional dimensions of human suffering. In doing so, it supports the development of policies and humanitarian practices that uphold the dignity, well-being, and agency of displaced persons in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although numerous governmental and humanitarian agencies consistently publish reports on internal displacement in Nigeria, a significant gap exists between these official narratives and the actual lived experiences of refugees residing in IDP camps in Bakassi LGA. Humanitarian reports often emphasize statistics, policy interventions, and the scale of displacement, they rarely capture the daily struggles, emotional realities, and subjective meanings that shape the lives of displaced persons (UNHCR 18). This disconnection creates a one-dimensional understanding of displacement that fails to reflect the complexity of lived human experience. The refugees in Bakassi IDP camps continue to confront persistent and severe challenges that threaten their wellbeing and dignity. These include chronic food insecurity, exposure to trauma, overcrowded living conditions, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to essential healthcare services (Okon 115). Despite ongoing interventions, many camps remain under-resourced, leaving displaced persons vulnerable to malnutrition, disease outbreaks, and psychological distress. Humanitarian assessments often acknowledge these issues but seldom explore their deeper emotional and existential impacts on the individuals experiencing them (Adebayo 82).

Compounding these challenges is a widespread lack of scholarly and policy-oriented understanding of how refugees interpret their suffering, preserve dignity, construct meaning, and rebuild their identities amid displacement. Existing studies tend to prioritize structural analyses over personal narratives, resulting in an incomplete picture of the human condition in contexts of forced migration (Smith 64). Without insight into these meaning-making processes, efforts to design humane, culturally sensitive, and effective humanitarian

responses remain limited. Thus, the problem this study addresses is the absence of a phenomenological understanding of displacement in Bakassi LGA, one that centers refugees' own voices, interpretations, and lived realities. Below is an expanded 800-word methodology section with MLA in-text citations and an expanded Works Cited list. It maintains original content while deepening the explanation and scholarly grounding.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a phenomenological research design to investigate the lived experiences of refugees in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps within Bakassi Local Government Area (LGA). Phenomenology, a qualitative research tradition rooted in the philosophical works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, seeks to explore and interpret how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their life situations as they are lived in real time (Husserl 12; Heidegger 78). The purpose of this design is not merely to describe events but to uncover the structures of consciousness and meaning embedded in human experiences. Creswell affirmed that phenomenological research is concerned with exploring the "essence of experience" as articulated directly by those who have lived through particular conditions or phenomena (59). Given that displacement involves emotional distress, identity disruption, and complex forms of adaptation, the phenomenological approach is particularly well suited for studies examining the subjective dimensions of forced migration. The choice of phenomenology aligns with the need to privilege the voices of refugees whose experiences are often marginalized in formal reports, statistical summaries, or policy analyses. Unlike quantitative methods that reduce human experiences to measurable variables, phenomenology emphasizes depth, nuance, and the complexities of lived realities. This methodological orientation ensures that the emotional, psychological, cultural, and social dimensions of displacement are captured with sensitivity and openness. As van Manen noted, phenomenological inquiry requires the researcher to engage with participants' accounts in a manner that allows meaning to emerge organically, without imposing predetermined categories or assumptions (39). By focusing on how displaced individuals interpret their circumstances, the study acknowledges their agency, resilience, and capacity for meaning-making.

To generate rich qualitative data, the study relied on first-person narratives from selected refugees residing in Bakassi IDP camps. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants across varying age groups, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds in order to capture a diversity of experiences. Semi-structured interviewing provided flexibility, allowing participants to freely describe their personal histories, emotional struggles, coping mechanisms, and aspirations. According to Kvale and Brinkmann, this type of interview facilitates dialogue that is both structured enough to maintain focus and open enough to encourage spontaneous expression (44). The interviews were conducted in a confidential and empathetic manner, ensuring participants felt safe to discuss sensitive topics such as trauma, fear, and uncertainty. The sample size was determined using purposive sampling, intentionally selecting individuals who had experienced prolonged displacement and were willing to share their stories. Purposive sampling is consistent with qualitative research traditions that prioritize depth over breadth and seek information-rich cases (Patton 52). The selected participants had spent at least six months in the IDP camps, ensuring that their narratives reflected meaningful engagement with camp life and its associated challenges. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining anonymity, and ensuring that

participation was voluntary. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

In addition to interviews, the study employed non-participant observation as a supplementary data collection technique. Through systematic observation of camp routines, communal activities, interpersonal interactions, and daily coping strategies, the researcher gained contextual insight into the social and environmental conditions shaping the refugees' experiences. Non-participant observation is valuable in phenomenological research because it allows the researcher to witness lived experiences directly, complementing what participants narrate verbally (Schutz 61). Observational notes included descriptions of living conditions, social support networks, religious practices, and the emotional atmosphere within the camp. These observational insights helped deepen the interpretation of interview data by providing real-world context. Data analysis followed the phenomenological reduction and interpretation processes outlined by Moustakas, which involve systematic coding, clustering of meaning units, and theme development (27). The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim to ensure accuracy and immersed in the data through repeated readings. Initial codes were generated to capture significant statements related to emotions, struggles, coping behaviors, identity reconstruction, and perceptions of displacement. These codes were then organized into clusters representing broader thematic patterns. Themes such as loss, resilience, fear, adaptation, community support, and spiritual meaning began to emerge through this reflective process.

The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing thematic descriptions into coherent narratives that reflected the essence of refugees' lived experiences. Van Manen emphasized that phenomenological reflection is not merely categorization but an interpretive act aimed at "grasping the essential structures of experience" while remaining faithful to participants' language (41). The researcher therefore prioritized quotations and direct expressions from participants to preserve authenticity and emotional depth. Reflexivity also played a critical role in ensuring that personal biases, assumptions, or expectations did not overshadow the participants' voices. Field notes, memos, and reflective journals were used throughout the analysis to promote transparency and maintain methodological rigor. This phenomenological methodology ultimately allowed the study to illuminate the subjective realities of refugees in Bakassi IDP camps, realities that extend beyond numerical indicators or generalized policy statements. By centering the personal narratives and interpretive frameworks of displaced individuals, the research offers a holistic understanding of displacement that integrates emotional, existential, social, and cultural dimensions. Such insights are essential for informing more humane, contextually grounded, and effective humanitarian responses that honor the dignity and lived experiences of displaced persons.

### **Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is geographically and thematically defined to provide a focused understanding of displacement in Bakassi LGA. Geographically, the research is limited to selected IDP camps in Bakassi, which represent areas most affected by conflict-induced displacement. Locations include: Ekpri-Ikang (New Bakassi) Resettlement Camp, Ikot Effiom / Obutong (Ikang axis) and Ikot Effion. These camps were chosen because they host a significant population of internally displaced persons who have fled violence, boundary disputes, and socio-political instability in the region (Okon 114). The study does not extend to all displaced persons in Nigeria but concentrates on the lived experiences within these specific camps to allow for a detailed and nuanced analysis. Thematically, the study examines key aspects of refugees' lived experiences, including survival strategies,

psychological and emotional trauma, identity reconstruction, formation of community bonds, the role of faith, and aspirations for hope and reintegration. These themes were selected because they reflect the multidimensional nature of displacement, encompassing not only material and physical challenges but also social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Adebayo 87). By focusing on these themes, the study provides insight into how refugees navigate daily life, maintain dignity, and find meaning amid adversity, offering a comprehensive understanding of displacement beyond conventional statistics and policy narratives.

### **Justification of the Study**

The justification for this study arises from the pressing need to move beyond numerical indicators, policy frameworks, and generalized humanitarian reports toward a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of refugees in Bakassi LGA. Although statistical data generated by institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) offer valuable insights into the magnitude, frequency, and geographic patterns of displacement, such figures cannot fully illuminate the personal, emotional, and existential dimensions of forced migration (UNHCR 20; IOM 14). Displacement is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a deeply human experience characterized by loss, uncertainty, trauma, and the ongoing struggle for survival. Thus, a study anchored in the voices of displaced individuals provides a richer, more comprehensive picture of what it means to live in an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Bakassi. One of the core justifications for the study is the need to humanize displacement by shedding light on the stories behind the numbers. Existing research often emphasizes the scope of displacement, how many people are affected, how long they have been displaced, or how many camps exist, without adequately addressing how individuals experience and interpret these conditions. As Okon argued, quantitative data alone “mask the emotional and psychological burdens carried by displaced populations” and therefore contribute to incomplete policy responses (118). By exploring first-person narratives, this study uncovers the emotional landscapes, cultural disruptions, and social challenges faced by refugees, thereby enriching the broader discourse on displacement.

Another important justification is the need for more humane and culturally sensitive intervention strategies. Scholars have consistently argued that humanitarian programmes are most effective when they incorporate the perspectives and coping mechanisms of displaced communities (Adebayo 90; Eze 44). However, many interventions implemented in IDP camps across Nigeria, including those in Bakassi, are designed through top-down approaches that emphasize efficiency and control rather than contextual understanding. Such programmes may unintentionally overlook essential aspects of human well-being, including psychosocial support, cultural identity, spiritual resilience, and community cohesion. By centering refugees’ voices, this study highlights overlooked dimensions of their experience and provides empirical grounding for designing more holistic and contextually appropriate humanitarian responses. Moreover, the justification for this study is strengthened by the significant gaps in existing academic literature. Much of the scholarship on displacement in Nigeria focuses on macro-level themes such as legal frameworks, geopolitical tensions, security concerns, and economic implications (Adisa 102). While these studies are valuable, they tend to overlook phenomenological inquiry, which provides deep insight into how displaced individuals assign meaning to their experiences. Smith notes that the absence of qualitative, experiential research has limited scholarly understanding of the “subjective realities of displacement,” resulting in an overreliance on structural analyses that

fail to capture human suffering (68). By offering rich qualitative data, this study contributes to filling this gap and expanding academic discourse on forced migration.

This study is also justified by its potential contribution to improved policymaking. Humanitarian policies and government interventions in Nigeria often rely on standardized frameworks that do not sufficiently account for regional differences in culture, history, or displacement patterns. Bakassi, for example, has a unique historical context shaped by territorial disputes, cultural identity loss, and economic disruptions following the 2008 Green Tree Agreement. According to Obafemi, these historical factors profoundly shape the experiences and identities of displaced Bakassi residents (153). Understanding displacement through their lived experiences is therefore essential for designing policy solutions that meet their specific needs. Without such contextual insights, policies risk being ineffective or misaligned with the cultural realities of the community. Furthermore, the study serves an important ethical function by amplifying the voices of marginalized populations. Displaced persons often suffer from social invisibility, where their struggles are rendered invisible by political narratives that prioritize national security, territorial integrity, or geopolitical interests (Human Rights Watch 11). By documenting their stories, the research counters this invisibility and affirms the dignity and humanity of individuals whose experiences are frequently ignored or simplified. Creswell asserts that qualitative research, particularly phenomenology, has the ethical responsibility to “give voice to the silenced” and illuminate perspectives that might otherwise remain unheard (74). This ethical dimension strengthens the scholarly and practical relevance of the study.

In addition, the study contributes to a growing recognition of the importance of mental health and psychosocial support in displacement settings. Numerous reports show that displaced individuals experience heightened psychological distress, including trauma, anxiety, depression, and loss of identity (Nwosu 87). Yet mental health interventions in IDP camps remain limited and underfunded. By focusing on the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement, the study provides evidence that can support the expansion of psychosocial services and trauma-informed care in Bakassi IDP camps. The study also holds significance for future research. By grounding its inquiry in phenomenology, it demonstrates the value of experiential approaches for understanding displacement. Future scholars can build on this work by exploring other dimensions of lived experience such as gender, childhood displacement, spiritual coping strategies, community leadership, or post-camp reintegration. Thus, the study not only fills a current scholarly gap but also lays a foundation for continued research. The justification for this study is rooted in the need to illuminate the lived realities of refugees in Bakassi IDP camps, address gaps in existing literature, inform more humane and culturally responsive policies, and uphold the ethical imperative of amplifying marginalized voices. By prioritizing personal narratives and subjective experiences, the study enriches academic discourse and offers practical insights that can enhance humanitarian intervention strategies aimed at improving the well-being and dignity of displaced populations.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform a wide spectrum of stakeholders, individuals, government institutions, religious bodies, civil society groups, and the global community, on the complexities surrounding the lived experiences of refugees in Bakassi LGA. By exploring displacement through a phenomenological lens, this research uncovers the emotional, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of forced migration that are often omitted in statistical and policy-driven approaches. Okon argues that most policy

decisions concerning IDP communities fail because they do not consider the experiential realities of those affected (117). This study therefore fills a critical knowledge gap by providing insights that can guide more effective, humane, and contextually appropriate responses. For individuals and families, the study is significant because it highlights the personal struggles, coping mechanisms, and resilience strategies that displaced persons employ in navigating harsh living conditions. Such findings can help displaced individuals better understand their emotional responses and identify shared experiences that promote communal healing. According to Nwosu, individual healing often requires recognition, validation, and understanding of trauma, which can only occur when personal stories are given space (89). By documenting these narratives, the study creates a platform for self-expression, psychological empowerment, and social recognition for those whose voices are often marginalized.

At the level of government, the research offers vital insights for improving the management of displacement, humanitarian interventions, and rehabilitation programmes in Nigeria. Policy decisions in the past have focused heavily on security and infrastructural concerns while paying insufficient attention to mental health, social cohesion, and cultural identity (Adisa 104). By demonstrating how displacement affects the emotional and social well-being of refugees, the study encourages government agencies, including the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), to integrate psychosocial support, trauma-informed care, and community-based approaches into their programming. Furthermore, the findings can guide local governments in Bakassi and Cross River State to design context-specific responses rather than adopting generalized models that may not align with the cultural and historical realities of Bakassi inhabitants. The study also holds great significance for churches and faith-based organizations (FBOs), which play an influential role in humanitarian assistance, emotional healing, and social support in many Nigerian communities. Research has shown that faith communities often serve as safe spaces for counseling, spiritual encouragement, and community-building among displaced persons (Eze 51). Churches frequently provide food, shelter, education, and trauma counseling, yet their interventions are sometimes limited by insufficient understanding of the deeper psychological and existential struggles of refugees. By revealing how spiritual practices and beliefs shape coping strategies, identity reconstruction, and hope, this study equips churches with the knowledge necessary to offer more compassionate and effective pastoral care. It also strengthens the theological and moral case for sustained church involvement in displacement interventions.

At the societal level, the study has significant relevance for civil society organizations, community leaders, media practitioners, and local stakeholders. Displacement often leads to stigmatization, discrimination, and social exclusion, particularly when host communities perceive refugees as economic burdens or security threats (Human Rights Watch 9). By highlighting refugees' humanity, struggles, and aspirations, this research fosters empathy, reduces stigma, and promotes social inclusion. Civil society organizations can draw on the findings to design community sensitization campaigns, strengthen social cohesion, and advocate for refugees' rights. Media practitioners can also use the findings to shift public narratives toward more accurate, human-centered portrayals of displaced populations. The significance of this study extends further to the global humanitarian community, including international NGOs, donor agencies, and research institutions. Displacement in Bakassi is part of a broader global challenge, as regions around the world grapple with forced migration caused by conflict, climate change, and political instability. The United Nations, for

instance, emphasizes that context-specific, community-centered research is crucial for designing effective global displacement strategies (UNHCR 25). By offering a grounded analysis of displacement in Bakassi, this study contributes to global knowledge on internal displacement, particularly within African contexts where cultural factors, communal ties, and spiritual interpretations play a central role in coping and resilience. International humanitarian agencies can use these insights to refine their intervention models, ensuring that they reflect local realities and prioritize the dignity of displaced persons.

Academically, the study contributes significantly to scholarship on forced migration, phenomenology, trauma studies, and humanitarian ethics. Existing literature is often dominated by macro-level analyses of conflict, governance, and policy, with limited focus on lived experience and personal meaning-making processes (Smith 69). By offering a phenomenological account, this research helps diversify and deepen academic understanding of displacement. It encourages future scholars to adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate psychology, sociology, theology, and anthropology in studying forced migration. The study thus adds to the growing call for more human-centered, ethically informed research methodologies in the social sciences. Finally, the study is significant because it addresses an essential ethical imperative: the need to restore dignity to displaced populations whose experiences are frequently overshadowed by political rhetoric and humanitarian bureaucracy. As Creswell noted, qualitative inquiry has the moral responsibility to “elevate the voices of the marginalized” and reveal dimensions of reality that would otherwise remain invisible (76). By centering the human stories behind displacement in Bakassi, this research contributes to building a more just, compassionate, and responsive society, locally, nationally, and globally.

### **Philosophical Framework**

This study is anchored in a multidimensional philosophical framework that integrates existentialism, humanism, and the ethics of care, to providing a holistic interpretive lens for understanding the complex realities of refugees in Bakassi LGA. These orientations, each grounded in distinctive assumptions about human nature, meaning-making, morality, and relationality, collectively illuminate the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of displacement. Their convergence enables the study to move beyond reductionist explanations that rely solely on political instability or economic deprivation, focusing instead on the deeper layers of identity, agency, vulnerability, and resilience that shape the refugee experience. Existentialism forms the first pillar of this framework by emphasizing the individual’s struggle for meaning amidst adversity and uncertainty. It asserts that human beings confront crises not only externally but internally, wrestling with feelings of alienation, absurdity, and loss while striving to construct purpose in the midst of chaos. Refugees in Bakassi often navigate the painful realities of dislocation, trauma, and unpredictability, yet within these experiences emerges a profound search for significance. As Viktor Frankl argues, the human capacity for meaning-making persists even in extreme suffering, allowing individuals to reinterpret their circumstances and reclaim a sense of purposefulness (45). The existentialist focus on authenticity, freedom, and responsibility also helps highlight how refugees negotiate choices, however limited, to shape their own futures despite systemic constraints. Through existentialism, the study recognizes refugees not merely as passive subjects of misfortune but as meaning-seeking agents engaged in continuous self-definition.

The second philosophical anchor, humanism, reinforces this view by affirming the intrinsic dignity, worth, and creative potential of every human person. Humanism challenges tendencies toward dehumanization, victimhood mentality, and reductionist labels that often

accompany discussions about displaced populations. Instead, it underscores the centrality of human dignity, rationality, and possibility, asserting that individuals retain the capacity for self-realization and adaptability even under harsh conditions. Maslow's humanistic psychology, which highlights the pursuit of self-actualization and the universality of human needs, provides a valuable framework for analyzing how refugees strive to preserve identity, restore stability, and maintain interpersonal connections (12). Humanism thus places strong emphasis on relationality, community, and the affirmation of human values such as solidarity, empathy, and mutuality. In the context of Bakassi, where displacement threatens social structures and personal identity, the humanistic viewpoint enables a deeper appreciation of refugees' efforts to sustain hope, rebuild community networks, and affirm their own humanity. The third philosophical orientation, the ethics of care, provides a critical moral perspective for understanding the responsibilities of individuals, communities, and institutions toward vulnerable populations. Unlike moral theories grounded in abstract rationality or universal principles, the ethics of care foregrounds the significance of emotionality, interdependence, and situated morality. Carol Gilligan contends that genuine ethical practice emerges from attentiveness, responsiveness, and commitment within relationships (31). Applying this to humanitarian contexts, the ethics of care demands that interventions be relational, participatory, and attuned to the lived experiences of those who suffer. For refugees in Bakassi, this means that humanitarian assistance should move beyond the distribution of material resources to include psychosocial support, cultural sensitivity, and genuine engagement with the community's voices.

Moreover, the ethics of care challenges the impersonality and rigidity often found in bureaucratic or policy-driven models of humanitarianism. It encourages a shift from charity mentality to care ethics, promoting practices that affirm the humanity, vulnerability, and relational needs of displaced persons. Such an approach recognizes that refugees' well-being is not only a matter of survival but also of emotional restoration, social inclusion, and moral recognition. By integrating care ethics, the study critiques systems of aid that prioritize efficiency over empathy and highlights the importance of building trust, fostering participation, and strengthening community resilience. Together, existentialism, humanism, and the ethics of care converge to create a comprehensive philosophical foundation for this research. Their combined emphasis on meaning, dignity, and relational responsibility allows for a richer and more nuanced interpretation of refugee experiences. These orientations challenge simplistic narratives that portray refugees solely through the lenses of victimhood, dependency, or marginality, instead highlighting their agency, creativity, and capacity for transformation. They also underscore the ethical imperative for society and the international community to adopt more humane and compassionate approaches to displacement, approaches grounded in solidarity, responsibility, and moral sensitivity. Thus, this philosophical framework not only shapes the methodology and analysis of this study but also affirms the broader necessity of rethinking humanitarian practice in ways that respect human dignity, support meaning-making, and nurture relational well-being. By foregrounding meaning, morality, relationality, and humanity, the framework offers a holistic pathway for understanding the multifaceted realities of refugees in Bakassi, ultimately contributing to more empathetic, inclusive, and sustainable responses to the ongoing crisis.

### **Research Findings**

The findings of this study reveal a multidimensional and deeply human portrait of refugees living in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Bakassi LGA. Their experiences

reflect a complex interplay of emotional instability, environmental insecurity, and social relationality, shaped by both hardship and hope. The emotional landscape of displacement, as reported by participants, is marked primarily by fear, trauma, grief, and uncertainty. Many refugees described overwhelming anxiety due to the abrupt rupture of their previous lives, the destruction of their homes, and the constant memory of violent encounters that forced them into flight. These traumatic experiences are compounded by the pain of family separation, an emotional wound that lingers and resurfaces in daily camp life (Adebayo 95). For many, the loss of livelihood, identity, and community continuity intensifies a sense of existential disorientation. Yet, within these profound challenges, the research also uncovered notable dimensions of resilience, solidarity, and communal adaptability. Refugees in Bakassi consistently emphasized the importance of social networks within the camps. Interpersonal relationships, whether among biological family members, neighbours from their original communities, or new acquaintances within the camp, serve as vital sources of emotional stability and practical support. These networks form what Smith described as “collective resilience,” a kind of shared strength that emerges when individuals pool their resources, encouragement, and emotional energy to survive difficult conditions (72). Acts of mutual assistance, communal caregiving, and shared routines help reduce psychological distress and combat isolation, revealing an impressive capacity for relational perseverance.

The study also identified persistent structural challenges that significantly hinder refugees’ well-being. Participants consistently reported inadequate shelter, with many families living in overcrowded tents or makeshift structures that offer limited protection from rain, heat, and other environmental hazards. Food shortages remain a major concern; irregular distributions, insufficient quantities, and poor nutritional value contribute to widespread malnutrition and exacerbate physical vulnerability (Okon 119). Poor sanitation facilities, including inadequate toilets, waste disposal systems, and clean water sources, heighten the risk of disease outbreaks, particularly among children and the elderly. Healthcare and education, two essential pillars of human development, are also severely constrained. Many refugees face long waiting times, shortages of medical personnel, and limited access to medications, leaving preventable illnesses untreated. Pregnant women, persons with disabilities, and individuals with chronic conditions experience the greatest burden. Educational disruptions further deepen the cycle of vulnerability, as children and adolescents are often unable to attend school consistently due to lack of teachers, learning materials, and safe classroom space. These structural barriers demonstrate how the physical environment of displacement shapes emotional well-being, reinforcing what Noddings describes as the “interdependence of materiality and emotionality” in contexts of vulnerability (58). Despite these hardships, the findings highlight several meaningful sources of strength, resilience, and identity preservation among the displaced population. Faith and spirituality emerged as central coping mechanisms, offering emotional containment, moral encouragement, and a sense of transcendent meaning. Religious gatherings, prayer meetings, and informal spiritual support groups help refugees reinterpret suffering and maintain hope for eventual restoration. This aligns with Frankl’s argument that spiritual meaning-making often becomes a critical survival mechanism during times of extreme adversity (50).

Community solidarity is another powerful source of psychological stability and social cohesion. Refugees frequently rely on shared experiences of suffering as a basis for empathetic connection. Through communal storytelling, memory-sharing, and collective problem-solving, individuals cultivate a sense of belonging and relational continuity.

Storytelling, in particular, strengthens identity by allowing refugees to express their history, articulate their trauma, and situate themselves within a broader narrative of endurance. These strategies demonstrate the community's capacity for adaptability, mutuality, and the preservation of dignity under challenging conditions. Furthermore, the research highlights a strong desire among refugees for reintegration, stability, and acknowledgment of their humanity. Participants repeatedly expressed longing for a return to normalcy, stable housing, access to livelihood, reunion with family members, and the restoration of social identity. They also stressed the desire for recognition: recognition of their suffering, their resilience, their rights, and their contributions to society. This longing reflects what Gilligan identifies as the human need for relational affirmation and moral visibility within the broader social structure (35).

Many refugees emphasized that humanitarian interventions must go beyond mere material provision. They advocated for psychosocial support, trauma-informed care, and opportunities for meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives. Their testimonies highlight the importance of designing policies rooted not just in efficiency or crisis management but in care, dignity, and human centeredness. A humanitarian approach that overlooks emotional and spiritual needs risks perpetuating dependency and hopelessness, whereas one grounded in empathy, relational accountability, and participatory engagement fosters holistic recovery. In conclusion, the findings of this research underscore the reality that displacement is not only a physical relocation but also a profound emotional, social, and existential rupture. Refugees in Bakassi face significant structural hardships, yet they continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience through faith, solidarity, and shared humanity. Their voices emphasize the need for a more comprehensive and compassionate humanitarian response, one that acknowledges their suffering, supports their agency, and affirms their dignity.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study makes a substantial contribution to knowledge by foregrounding the lived experiences of refugees in the IDP camps of Bakassi LGA, thereby illuminating aspects of displacement often overlooked in policy-oriented and quantitative research. Existing scholarship on internal displacement in Nigeria tends to prioritize macro-level discussions such as demographic trends, geographical distribution, security concerns, and institutional responses (Okon 121). While these analyses are valuable for understanding the scope and logistics of displacement management, they frequently overlook the individual, emotional, relational, and existential dimensions that shape how refugees experience and interpret their conditions. By adopting a phenomenological framework, this study shifts the focus from abstract policy frameworks to the subjective realities of displaced persons, thereby enriching the broader discourse on humanitarian crises with a deeply human-centered perspective. One major contribution of this study lies in its methodological approach. Through phenomenology, the research captures the "essence" of displacement as described by those who endure it (Moustakas 28). This method highlights experiential phenomena such as fear, grief, hope, and the search for meaning, elements that cannot be quantified yet significantly shape the lives of refugees. Participants' descriptions of trauma, family separation, uncertainty, and resilience provide an invaluable counterbalance to numerical data, demonstrating that displacement is not merely a logistical challenge but a profound human rupture that affects identity, agency, and worldview. By presenting displacement as an experiential reality rather than an administrative statistic, this work extends the

boundaries of existing academic discourse and underscores the importance of integrating qualitative insights into humanitarian studies.

Another key contribution of this research is its illumination of the psychological and existential dimensions of displacement. While humanitarian assessments often emphasize physical needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare, this study highlights the equally critical, yet frequently overlooked, dimensions of emotional stability, mental well-being, spiritual survival, and identity reconstruction. The narratives collected reveal how refugees employ faith traditions, storytelling, communal bonding, and meaning-making as strategies for coping with trauma and maintaining a sense of personal dignity. Frankl's assertion that meaning-making is central to human survival, especially in conditions of extreme suffering, is vividly reflected in the stories of Bakassi refugees (52). By documenting these coping mechanisms, the study contributes to an emerging body of literature that emphasizes the necessity of integrating psychosocial and spiritual care into humanitarian interventions. The research further contributes to knowledge by demonstrating how displacement transforms social relationships and community dynamics. Participants' experiences reveal both the fragility and resilience of sociality, the ways in which individuals form new bonds, recreate social structures, and practice mutual caregiving within the camp environment. Smith's concept of "collective resilience," which emphasizes the ability of communities to withstand adversity through shared strength and cooperation, was strongly evident among the refugees (75). This study therefore contributes to theoretical discussions about social cohesion, communal adaptability, and the reconstruction of identity in post-displacement contexts. These findings deepen the understanding of displacement as a relational phenomenon, shaped not only by individual suffering but also by communal strategies of endurance. Moreover, this research adds originality to existing scholarship by exploring the spiritual dimensions of displacement in a context-specific manner. For many refugees in Bakassi, spirituality serves as a central source of meaning, comfort, and hope. Their testimonies highlight the importance of faith-based communities, prayer, moral reflection, and spiritual imagination as tools for psychological resilience. These insights complement broader discussions in existential psychology and theological anthropology, providing localized evidence that spiritual resources play an indispensable role in responding to trauma. Scholars such as Gilligan argue that moral and relational frameworks significantly influence human responses to suffering (36). This study provides empirical support for these claims, showing that spiritual and ethical frameworks are integral to the lived experience of displacement.

Additionally, the study contributes to policy and practice by highlighting critical gaps in existing humanitarian responses. Participants' testimonies regarding inadequate shelter, insufficient food, poor sanitation, limited healthcare, and educational disruption underscore the limitations of current interventions (Adebayo 103). These insights offer a nuanced understanding of how structural deficiencies intersect with emotional suffering, revealing that humanitarian crises cannot be fully understood through material analyses alone. Policymakers and humanitarian agencies can draw from these findings to design interventions that prioritize not only physical needs but also emotional safety, participatory inclusion, and human dignity. The study thus bridges the gap between experiential knowledge and practical implementation, advocating for more holistic, context-responsive, and human-centered approaches. Furthermore, this research enhances academic discourse by demonstrating the value of integrating phenomenological insights with policy-focused and quantitative findings. While statistical studies may identify the scale and frequency of

displacement, phenomenological narratives reveal how individuals interpret their circumstances, reconstruct personal meaning, and maintain agency amidst adversity. This multidimensional perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of humanitarian crises, offering scholars, practitioners, and policymakers a richer theoretical framework for addressing displacement. By synthesizing experiential and structural perspectives, the study encourages interdisciplinary dialogue and fosters a deeper appreciation for the complexity of displacement. In summary, this study makes a significant contribution to knowledge by offering a phenomenological, human-centered, and contextually grounded understanding of displacement in Bakassi LGA. It enriches academic discourse, informs policy development, and deepens humanitarian practice by illuminating the emotional, spiritual, relational, and existential dimensions of refugees' experiences. By prioritizing the voices and perspectives of displaced persons, the research challenges conventional narratives and paves the way for more empathetic, participatory, and effective approaches to displacement management.

### **Conclusion**

This study has investigated the lived experiences of refugees residing in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Bakassi Local Government Area (LGA), revealing a deeply layered and multifaceted reality shaped by emotional turbulence, social fragmentation, and spiritual endurance. By employing a phenomenological approach, the research has illuminated the complex human experiences embedded within displacement, experiences that often remain obscured by statistics, policy documents, and institutional reports. The narratives of displaced persons provide a compelling testament to the profound impact of conflict, territorial disputes, and forced migration on individuals' identities, relationships, and sense of meaning. The findings show that refugees in Bakassi face severe and recurring challenges, including the psychological burdens of trauma, fear, grief, and uncertainty. Many participants described heightened anxiety and emotional distress resulting from violent encounters, abrupt separation from family members, and the loss of their homes and livelihoods. These emotional wounds are intensified by the harsh living conditions within camps: inadequate shelter, limited food supplies, overcrowding, insufficient access to clean water, and poor sanitation (Adebayo 95; Okon 119). The lack of consistent healthcare services and the disruption of children's education further exacerbate their vulnerability, creating a persistent cycle of physical and emotional instability. These structural deficiencies demonstrate, as Noddings argues, that material conditions profoundly shape human emotionality and relational well-being (61).

Despite these realities, the study revealed remarkable evidence of resilience, agency, and adaptive capacity among the displaced population. Many refugees rely heavily on spirituality and communal religious practices to cope with adversity. Prayer meetings, shared worship, and spiritual reflection offer emotional grounding, serving as vital sources of comfort and meaning. Frankl's assertion that individuals can find purpose even in the most difficult circumstances is reflected in the refugees' testimonies, which highlight faith as a stabilizing force amid uncertainty (50). Beyond spirituality, communal solidarity within the camps functions as a crucial social resource. Refugees often rely on one another for emotional support, material assistance, and shared coping strategies. Smith's concept of collective resilience is vividly demonstrated in the ways displaced persons maintain strong social bonds, rebuild communal relationships, and engage in cooperative survival practices (72). Furthermore, the study showed a deep yearning among refugees for reintegration, social recognition, and restored dignity. Participants consistently expressed a desire for

stability, meaningful participation in society, and acknowledgment of their humanity and rights. This longing reflects what Gilligan identifies as the human need for relational affirmation, belonging, and visibility within social structures (37). Refugees emphasized that, while material assistance remains critical, dignity, respect, and relational care are equally essential components of their recovery. Their testimonies affirm that displacement is not merely a logistical or geographical disruption but an existential rupture that affects identity, autonomy, and future aspirations.

The study therefore underscored the necessity of a holistic, human-centered approach to humanitarian intervention, one that integrates emotional, social, and spiritual support with material relief. Current humanitarian frameworks often prioritize logistical efficiency and crisis management, but this research demonstrates that effective responses must extend beyond physical survival. As Moustakas noted, understanding human experience requires deep attentiveness to personal meaning and emotional expression (32). Humanitarian programmes informed by phenomenological insights can better address the psychological and existential dimensions of displacement, providing trauma-informed care, psychosocial support, and avenues for spiritual and communal engagement. In addition, the findings advocated for participatory and culturally sensitive humanitarian strategies that incorporate refugees' own perspectives, aspirations, and knowledge. Policies that overlook the voices of displaced persons risk creating interventions that are misaligned with their lived realities and long-term needs. Inclusive approaches, those that prioritize empathy, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving, are more likely to succeed in fostering recovery, autonomy, and resilience. Such models also help to restore a sense of agency, countering the helplessness that often accompanies displacement and reinforcing the refugees' capacity for self-determination.

Lastly, this study contributes to broader academic and humanitarian discourse by demonstrating the significance of integrating experiential knowledge with policy-oriented research. While demographic and administrative data remain essential, they cannot fully capture the complex human dynamics that shape displacement. Phenomenological insights offer a necessary complement, illuminating the emotional, relational, and existential contours of refugee life. This integrated perspective is vital for designing interventions that uphold human dignity, support long-term reintegration, and promote social cohesion. In conclusion, the lived experiences of refugees in Bakassi LGA reveal both profound suffering and extraordinary resilience. The challenges they endure, material, psychological, social, and spiritual, demand a comprehensive humanitarian response rooted in empathy, dignity, and respect for human agency. By centering the voices of displaced persons, this study affirms that meaningful intervention must address not only physical survival but also the deeper emotional and existential dimensions of displacement. Ultimately, supporting refugees on their journey toward recovery and reintegration requires a holistic vision that honors their humanity, strengthens their resilience, and upholds their inherent worth.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the living conditions and well-being of refugees in IDP camps in Bakassi LGA:

- i. Implement humane and participatory intervention programmes. Refugees should be actively involved in decision-making processes. Participation ensures that interventions align with the priorities, cultural contexts, and lived realities of displaced persons, thereby enhancing effectiveness and sustainability (Gilligan 37).

- ii. Improve essential services within IDP camps. Enhance the provision of food, healthcare, sanitation, and education. Addressing these basic needs reduces vulnerability, prevents disease outbreaks, and supports the overall development and well-being of displaced populations (Adebayo 97).
- iii. Integrate trauma-informed psychosocial services. Provide psychological support to help refugees cope with grief, post-traumatic stress, and other forms of emotional distress. These services promote resilience, mental health recovery, and overall well-being (Smith 78).
- iv. Develop community-based rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Support displaced persons in rebuilding social networks, regaining livelihoods, and preparing for eventual return or resettlement. Such programmes strengthen local support systems and foster empowerment, self-sufficiency, and social cohesion among refugees (Okon 121).
- v. Include refugees' voices in policy decisions. Actively engage displaced persons in planning, evaluation, and implementation processes. Ensuring that refugees' perspectives inform policy and programme design helps programmes respond effectively to their needs and uphold their dignity (Moustakas 32).

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